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Beyond the Multiplex

How guilty is the Western world? The film "Bamako" reaches a verdict -- and Iraq vets share their thoughts. Plus: The hidden treasures in McSweeney's DVD magazine.

By Andrew O'Hehir

Feb. 08, 2007 | It's a week of riches here at Your Home for Thought-Provoking Entertainment (TM), what with the arrival of two of 2007's most-anticipated foreign [films](#), and yet another reminder that there's a war going on over there, somewhere, which remains a political abstraction to most of us but is entirely too real to those sent to fight it.

First on the list is the Oscar-nominated German film "The Lives of Others," which I'll just bounce off briefly. ([Stephanie Zacharek](#) will review it on Friday.) As director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck observed during our phone interview last week, his movie is a huge long shot to win the foreign-language [Oscar](#). London bookmakers, he says, are offering 7-to-1 odds for bets on his picture, while a winning \$100 wager on "[Pan's Labyrinth](#)," the consensus favorite, will return you a whopping \$16 or so.

So much for the racing form. The film itself is a compelling and complicated fable of heroism and tragedy, set in the mid-1980s in East Germany, when the power of the Stasi, that socialist paradise's notorious secret police force, was unchallenged. You don't need much background in German history or Marxist studies to appreciate the nuances and multiple layers of irony in "The Lives of Others," which combines a Cold War thriller, a love story and a Dostoevskian tale of sin and redemption. Go see it. I'll have more on the film, and my conversation with von Donnersmarck, during our Oscar-week coverage.

There's also a grim little documentary companion piece to von Donnersmarck's film opening this week at New York's Film Forum, and I'll get to that below. First let's move on to the week's other major foreign-language release. It's an African film called "[Bamako](#)," by the Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako (I [covered it](#) last fall at the [New York Film Festival](#)), that violates pretty much all the conventions of standard moviemaking. A defiantly political and borderline experimental work, it's definitely not for everybody. Those with the appetite for this kind of thing will find it to be a profound emotional and intellectual challenge, and one of the most original cinematic achievements of this decade.

"Bamako": The Western world goes on trial -- and Africa finds itself guilty

You can criticize "Bamako" for all sorts of reasons, but good luck finding any that it doesn't cover itself. Do you find this movie's central premise -- a trial in which African civil society accuses the Western world's major financial institutions of impoverishing and enslaving millions of Africans to pointless, dead-weight debt and disastrous neoliberal reforms -- boring and dogmatic? So do the guys playing dominoes in the square outside the Bamako, Mali, courtyard where the trial takes place. "How long is this going to last?" they groan, disconnecting the loudspeakers so they don't have to listen to their fellow

Africans complain.

Do you think films should be entertaining, and avoid theoretical economic and political discussions? Well, "Bamako" also features a corrupt cop, a stolen gun and a mysterious murder. Then there's the sudden interruption of a violent mock-western called "Death in Timbuktu," starring Danny Glover (and several of Sissako's filmmaker friends), which is shown on Malian television, after a botched newscast, and briefly takes over "Bamako." Do you find the Africans' argument against market-based economic reforms simplistic, sentimental and anecdotal? So does the defense lawyer representing the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (played by real-life French attorney Roland Rappaport), who makes an eloquent closing argument.

One stream of "Bamako," without question, is a defiant and angry political screed. Sissako's parade of witnesses, who range from peasants and refugees to prominent African intellectuals, accuse the late capitalist world order of enforcing a deadly new form of colonialism on their continent. Public services have been destroyed, infant mortality has soared, and healthcare and education have all but evaporated, they tell us, all in the name of servicing an enormous debt that was squandered on counterproductive development projects or embezzled by corrupt local officials.

But this "trial," while conducted in deadly earnest -- and largely improvised by "actors" who are genuine lawyers and judges -- is at the same time an intentionally ludicrous spectacle. It's not happening in a courtroom but in a courtyard (a little joke, perhaps) of an ordinary house in Bamako, probably a middle-class dwelling by African standards. People who live there come and go, doing their best to ignore the robed judges and attorneys, the rows of somber-faced witnesses in folding chairs. Chickens and goats wander through. Children fetch water from the pump and women do laundry. The court must recess when a wedding party enters, complete with video cameraman and a woman in traditional dress who is paid to ululate a song of praise to the newlyweds.

At the beginning of each day's proceedings, Sissako's cameras, mikes and other equipment are clearly visible. Yet even as "Bamako" exposes its own artifice in classic Brechtian fashion, it also encloses this theatrical show-trial -- as the IMF/World Bank attorney laments, the deck is surely stacked against him -- in a low-key, naturalistic portrait of African life. Sissako captures numerous incidental scenes on the fringes of the trial, and there's also a kind of bracketing narrative about Melé (Aïssa Maïga), a beautiful, vain and hedonistic nightclub singer who lives in the compound and is drifting away from her long-suffering husband, Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré), for reasons we never completely understand.

By any logical assessment, this mixture of apparently incompatible ingredients should collapse into an incoherent hash. But "Bamako" is so ferociously intelligent and cannily constructed that its warring elements all support each other. As we watch Melé singing an infectious Afro-pop number in a half-empty nightclub, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she's not weeping just for the husband and child she may be abandoning. She's crying for the eviscerated society described by witness after witness at the near-comical trial. She's weeping along with the elderly peasant whose testimony is a chant of lament in a language no one in court can understand.

Everywhere "Bamako" has been shown, it has provoked panel discussions and debates, both formal and otherwise. I don't think one viewing is sufficient to appreciate the complexities of its argument, or the extent to which Sissako and his witnesses are judging African society for its corruption and amorality, its internalized racism and self-hatred. If there can be little doubt about the verdict Sissako expects in his court case, no viewer -- Western, African or otherwise -- will come out of "Bamako" unindicted. A barrel of laughs, this ain't. But it's a fearless high-wire act, grim and witty, confrontational and self-mocking. Its message may be dire, but "Bamako" is a feat of intellectual and cinematic daring that will leave your brain buzzing.

"Bamako" opens Feb. 14 at Film Forum in New York. Other cities should follow.

"Operation Homecoming": Iraq vets write a new chapter in the history of war literature

Every new documentary about the [Iraq war](#) faces the same conundrum: We may support or oppose the war as a matter of political opinion -- that is, I assume there are still people outside the White House who support it -- but most of us want to ignore it as much as possible. I don't suppose that Richard E. Robbins' film "Operation Homecoming," based on a [National Endowment for the Arts project](#) encouraging [soldiers](#) to write about their experiences, will be immune from this problem, but it does go at it head-on, in deeply moving fashion. For those with a literary bent and an open mind, it's highly worth seeing.

As acclaimed memoirist and Vietnam vet Tobias Wolff tells Robbins' camera, a civilization that asks young people to go overseas and fight a war, and then doesn't want to know what they actually do, see, feel and think, is in advanced decay. In literary terms, the work by soldiers assembled in "Operation Homecoming" is a mixed bag, ranging from MFA-grade poetry to humorous essays to technology-laden combat scenes to basic, unadorned prose. Some of it is overly ambitious and some is not ambitious enough, but all of it captures the daily boredom and terror of warfare, an experience completely divorced from the political and policy disputes that lie behind it.

Given the pseudo-scandals surrounding the NEA in recent decades, Robbins has to steer the film clear of opinions about the war's purpose and morality, but that actually serves the film's central purpose. He introduces us gracefully to the soldier-authors in brief interviews, and then finds ways to illustrate their stories or poems, without resorting to dramatic reconstructions or similar cheeseball tactics.

Former military blogger [Colby Buzzell's](#) high-octane tale of a street shootout is accompanied by still-frame, comic-book-style animation, while Marine Lt. Col. Mike Strobl's simple story about escorting a dead Marine's remains back to his Wyoming hometown is set against peaceful, unpopulated footage of the locations, ending with the dead soldier's grave. On the evidence, I'd guess that Buzzell is a war critic and Strobl is a gung-ho patriot, but I can't be quite sure and it doesn't much matter. Hearing their stories in their own words -- something few of us, pro- or antiwar, bother to do -- is the entire point. (The material is read aloud by various actors, including Beau Bridges, Robert Duvall, Aaron Eckhart and Blair Underwood.)

Lending a tragic context and depth to the proceedings, Robbins also interviews war writers of older generations, from historian Paul Fussell (a World War II vet) to Korean War veteran [James Salter](#), Vietnam vets like Wolff, Tim O'Brien and poet Yusef Komunyakaa, and Gulf War I vet [Anthony Swofford](#). "Operation Homecoming" at first seems like a modest enterprise, a document of a few guys' paths to personal catharsis. But the sense of damaged intensity found in all these men's writing -- and found in war lit since the classical age -- builds to a powerful crescendo, and the haunting poem that ends the film (by infantryman cum academic poet [Brian Turner](#)), in which the ghosts of American and Iraqi dead confront each other on the banks of the Tigris, is a showstopper.

"Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" opens Feb. 9 at Film Forum in New York. Other engagements should follow. The literary anthology "Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families" was published by Random House last September.

Fast forward: The Stasi regime and its "Decomposition of the Soul"; McSweeney's new DVD magazine

After seeing "The Lives of Others," the aforementioned new drama about life under East Germany's communist regime and its notorious secret police, Cold War history buffs may need to catch Nina Toussaint and Massimo Iannetta's documentary "[Decomposition of the Soul](#)," a meditation on the dreary, paranoid world of the Stasi. Based on interviews with two long-imprisoned East German dissidents and the memoirs of the late Jürgen Fuchs, one of the Stasi's most famous literary victims and critics, this movie can only leave you asking unhappy questions.

These include: How did an allegedly civilized country come straight out of a dictatorship based on murder and physical terror and straight into another one that was based on psychological terrorism and brainwashing? "Decomposition of the Soul" can't answer that, and it might be too slow and morbid for

American viewers without an existing interest in the subject. I suppose it's meant as a curative to trendy young Germans' nostalgic attitude toward the fake modernist furniture, fake Western pop music and fake Coca-Cola of the East German period. (Now playing at Film Forum in New York.)

In livelier news, McSweeney's Press has been publishing its DVD-only magazine [Wholphin](#) for almost a year now, and the third issue just hit my mailbox. It's a highly enjoyable treasure trove of rare or completely unseen short films, including a 49-minute mini-feature made by [Alexander Payne](#) before "[Election](#)," "[About Schmidt](#)" and "[Sideways](#)"; a half-hour documentary about a 13-year-old Yemeni girl who refuses to wear the veil; cult fave Bob Odenkirk's new "A Bee and a Cigarette"; a five-minute performance-art piece from Dennis Hopper (truly!); and acclaimed Swedish animator Jonas Odell's "Never Like the First Time." There's also a bonus disc featuring the second half of Adam Curtis' controversial "[The Power of Nightmares](#)" (the first episode is available on Wholphin No. 2).

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