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Multinational Forces at the Berlin Film Festival

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Associated Press/Berlinale

From left, Sotigui Kouyaté and Brenda Blethyn in Rachid Bouchareb's "London River." [More Photos >](#)

By DENNIS LIM
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BERLIN — The unofficial theme of this year's Berlin International Film Festival was hard to miss, and not just because it was spelled out in the title of the opening-night movie, "[The International](#)." A Hollywood action spectacle by the German director [Tom Tykwer](#), this tricked-up tale of a worldwide financial conspiracy has a whiff of accidental topicality. In a news conference last month, the festival's director, Dieter Kosslick, declared the film a virtual documentary of the current economic crisis, which is sexier, if less accurate, than calling it a clichéd, paranoid thriller in which the villains happen to be bankers.

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Trailer: 'The International'

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Renée Zellweger at the premiere of "My One and Only." [More Photos »](#)

Still, this flamboyantly jet-lagged movie — which kicks off in front of the Hauptbahnhof, Berlin's gleaming main train station, before whizzing off to Milan, New York and Istanbul — was an apt curtain raiser for a festival full of national and linguistic border crossings.

Film after film in the 59th Berlinale, which began on Feb. 5 and concludes on Sunday, has sounded some version of an internationalist message — the world is shrinking, the world is flat, we are the world — as if filmmakers were measuring the worth and seriousness of their work in terms of geographic scope.

There was no display of globe-hopping more portentous, or more poorly received, than the Swedish director [Lukas Moodysson's "Mammoth."](#) (Boos drowned out applause at the press screening.) This offspring of "[Babel](#)" and "[Crash](#)" cross-cuts aggressively between first world privilege and third world despair. On the one hand, there is a charmed Manhattan couple ([Gael García Bernal](#) and [Michelle Williams](#)), with a precocious daughter and a SoHo loft; on the other, there is their sad Filipino nanny (Marife Necesito), pining for her young sons halfway around the world.

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Several other globalist co-productions were more overtly political. In the somber courtroom drama "[Storm](#)," the German director Hans-Christian Schmid shuttles between Sarajevo and Berlin and goes behind the scenes of the [United Nations](#) war crimes tribunals at The Hague. In her quest to convict a Serbian Army general, a prosecutor (Kerry Fox) must reconcile her idea of justice, her career ambitions, the backroom deals of her superiors and the safety of her witness, a Bosnian rape victim (Anamaria Marinca of "[4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days](#)").

MOVIES

Anatomy of a Scene: 'The International'

Tom Tykwer, the director of "The International," discusses the Guggenheim Museum shootout scene from the film.

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With "[London River](#)," the French-Algerian director Rachid Bouchareb ("[Days of Glory](#)") enacts a lesson in cross-cultural understanding in the wake of the London suicide bombings of July 7, 2005. The set-up is rigidly schematic: a churchgoing English widow ([Brenda Blethyn](#)) and an African Muslim man (the Malian stage and film veteran Sotigui Kouyaté) learn that their grown children, who have disappeared in the attacks, were lovers. The film takes shape as a quietly affirmative portrait of an unbowed, multiethnic city.

The appetite for seriousness was not

confined to the fiction films. The more ambitious documentaries, in looking for the long view and the big picture, were practically state-of-the-world addresses. [Michael Winterbottom](#) and [Mat Whitecross](#)'s "Shock Doctrine," screened as a work in progress, is an adaptation of the [Naomi Klein](#) best seller of the same title. It does not illustrate so much as expose the gaps in Ms. Klein's thesis on "disaster capitalism," which connects political repression with the spread of free-market economics.

A more sophisticated attempt to bring related ideas to cinematic life, "Encirclement," by the French Canadian director Richard Brouillette, enlists a host of economists and intellectuals to trace the rise of neo-liberalism, and, for the most part, to argue the case against it.

"[Double Take](#)," by the Belgian video artist Johan Grimonprez, may be the most intellectually agile of this year's crop of essay films, and also the least classifiable. Inspired by [Jorge Luis Borges](#), this fiction-documentary hybrid, stuffed with film clips and archival footage, combines Hitchcockian dread and cold war paranoia in a wry meditation on the rise of the image and the commodification of fear.

A different notion of globalism emerged from the intensely local, even ethnographic dispatches throughout the Forum section, home to the festival's more experimental fare. "Sweetgrass," by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash, scrutinizes the lives of sheep ranchers (and their sheep) in the Montana mountains.

Cong Feng's "Doctor Ma's Country Clinic" spends three and a half hours of screen time in the offices of a rural Chinese doctor. And in "[Mental](#)" the Japanese director Kazuhiro Soda observes the patients and staff at a mental health clinic.

While there was plenty of rewarding work tucked away in the noncompetitive sections, critics and buyers were quick to write off this year's Berlinale as a dud. It's true that it was not a good year for business. Sales were sluggish at the European Film Market, which takes place alongside the festival, and it has not helped the mood that the more commercial movies (that is, the ones with the biggest stars) were widely seen as flops, including [Rebecca Miller](#)'s "Private Lives of Pippa Lee," with [Robin Wright Penn](#) and [Alan Arkin](#), and [Sally Potter](#)'s "[Rage](#)," a fashionista satire starring [Dianne Wiest](#), [Judi Dench](#) and a cross-dressed [Jude Law](#).

Amid the high-concept bids for relevance of the higher-profile titles, some of the festival's most complex and satisfying films were deceptively modest character dramas like "Everyone Else," the second feature by the young German director Maren Ade, whose debut film was "[The Forest for the Trees](#)." A depiction of an imploding romance, the film offers a clear-eyed view of the myriad forces, from within and without, that can conspire to unsettle a relationship.

Two strong American independents that had bypassed the [Sundance Film Festival](#) last month to make their world premieres here were Bradley Rust Gray's "Exploding Girl," starring [Zoe Kazan](#) and Mark Rendall, an atmospheric story of teenagers losing and finding love over the course of a summer in New York City, and "Beeswax," the third feature by [Andrew Bujalski](#), the D.I.Y. auteur whose critically beloved "[Funny Ha Ha](#)" and "[Mutual Appreciation](#)" earned him — or perhaps saddled him with — the role of mumblecore godhead.

"Beeswax" centers on twin sisters in Austin, Tex. (played by the real-life twins and nonprofessional actors Tilly and Maggie Hatcher), not so much adrift as actively fumbling their way from uncertainty to a kind of clarity. Like many of the highlights of the 2009 Berlinale, Mr. Bujalski's intimate and unassuming film is, among other things, a reminder that the most specific visions are often the most universal.

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