

09/1999 "Back to the historical debate" - Andrew Graham-Yooll, BUENOS AIRES HERALD [Garage Olimpo]

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Editorial - Back to the historical debate

By Andrew Graham-Yooll

The debate about how to face up to history and narrate its political parts is back with us this week. A remarkable film opens today in Buenos Aires and it probably ranks as a small masterpiece. Garage Olimpo, directed by Italian-Argentine film-maker, Marco Bechis, will take viewers back to Argentina's 1970s and to an experience that many people would prefer to put out of sight and out of mind. It is not often that an Argentine production is so well filmed, efficiently directed and tightly edited, to show a chapter of recent political history in its full and stark complexity. Garage Olimpo -which takes its name from one of several clandestine detention centres- forces the public's attention to return to events during the dictatorship, and tells the story of the terror and the horror of the time in a compact and economical fashion. This means that it avoids scenes that are purposely grotesque or that terror is made into a form of pornography, a thing the media and the press are often prone to do to grab attention. This dark side of journalism was most obvious in the reporting on the civil war in El Salvador during the 1980s. Marco Bechis's film prompts a revision of recent history and how to come to terms with events. The question of how a society digests the crimes of the past and decides to take or shed responsibility is one of the sidelines of Garage Olimpo. Bechis, 43, is a survivor. He attributes the fact that his life was spared to being an Italian passport holder. He was arrested, or "disappeared" on April 19, 1977. His detention was made legal ten days later, and he was deported on fourth of July, without any charges being pressed. Since then, and in the last year, he sat in, unidentified, on an interview with a former torturer to try to know if he could identify his tormentor. He did, by marks on the man's hands, which Bechis had glimpsed through a chink in his blindfold. The setting for the film is brilliantly and soberly constructed. The director's apparent regret was that he had to film the death flights over the sea out of San Francisco. Having knowledgeable aviation experts in his production crew, Bechis was irked that he had to film planes that were different from those used for the killing flights over the South Atlantic. As with Germany after the Nazis, or Malaysia after the "Emergency", or Algeria after the OAS, etc. Argentina has yet to find a way to talk itself through much of the history of the twentieth century, and specifically that of the 1970s. This need to talk is salutary while it can avoid excess. But for now it is almost impossible to ask the debaters to be no-partisan. There are too many questions unanswered about recent years for this to be a society at ease with itself. However we must accept that works of fiction and films, with the quality of one made by Marco Bechis, help to promote debate, and debate helps to explain.