

## Film, Media, and Museum Reviews

*One Day in September (1999)*. Directed by Kevin McDonald. Produced by Arthur Cohn and John Battsek. Original music by Alex Heffes. Passion Pictures. 94 mins.

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Everyone knows (or ought to know) that the Olympic Games celebrated in Munich in the late summer of 1972 were supposed to be the light-hearted games (*heitere Spiele*). They were supposed to be the Olympics that enabled the Germans and their guests to put behind them all the horrific memories of what Germany was like the last time it was entrusted with the games. For that reason, security officers, dressed in pastel green, were unarmed. They smiled benignly and looked away when athletes returning from a night in town clambered over the fence of the Olympic Village. Everyone knows what happened. Before dawn on September 5th, eight Palestinian terrorists climbed the fence, made their way to the rooms of the Israeli team, and began their bloody work. They knew the lay of the land because members of the East German team had smuggled them into the village in order for them study it.

They murdered Moshe Weinberg, who tried to resist them, and they took ten other Israeli athletes hostage. There were demands, including the release of some two hundred Palestinians in Israeli prisons, there were deadlines, and there were negotiations with foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, with Munich's police chief Manfred Schreiber, with Olympic Village mayor Walther Tröger, with everyone whom anyone thought might influence the hostage-holders. Word came from Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in Tel Aviv that there was to be no release of Palestinian prisoners and that the games should go

on. Although the Germans had no S.W.A.T. team, they refused Israel's offer to send one. They planned a surprise rescue by policemen whose main skill seems to have been directing traffic. The planned attack was cancelled at the last minute because the terrorists knew of it—from the television sets.

After great confusion, the IOC suspended the games and invited the grief-stricken to a memorial in the Olympic Stadium. The German government offered the terrorists a helicopter ride to a Boeing 707 that would take them and their hostages to whatever Arab destination they wished. It was, of course, a ruse. Five marksmen were posted at Fürstenfeldbruck airport and other policemen disguised as crew members were stationed in the 707.

The police in the 707 decided, however, that heroism was not their forte. They departed. Police in the Olympic Village counted the Palestinians as they moved their bound hostages into minibuses and then into two helicopters, but the police failed to tell the marksmen at the airport that there were eight Palestinians rather than four or five. The marksmen were unable to communicate with one another. The ambush was to begin when any one of them opened fire.

The Palestinians arrived, inspected the 707, and realized immediately that they had entered a trap. The marksmen opened fire. The nocturnal battle lasted for hours. The armored vehicle that the police ordered, after the battle began, was unable to reach the airport in time to be useful because the roads were too crowded with journalists and others desperate to reach the scene of the action. When the firefight was over, all the hostages and five of the Palestinians were dead. The Palestinians who survived were briefly imprisoned, then released after a Lufthansa flight was successfully hijacked. Two of the three released terrorists were hunted down and killed by the Israelis.

That, in skeleton form, is what happened. *One Day in September* brings it all back. Jamal Al Gashey, the sole Palestinian survivor, is one of the two principal speakers. Ankie Spitzer, the Dutch widow of the slain fencer André Spitzer, is the other. Although there are many interviews with others who played various roles in the drama—Genscher, Schreiber, Tröger, Munich's mayor Hans-Jochen Vogel, General Ulrich K. Wegener, Mossad chief Zvi Zamir, British TV journalist Gerald Seymour—the story is told as if it were a dialogue between Jamal and Ankie, neither of whom actually meets or speaks with the other.

Ankie speaks first. She describes how she met André and fell in love with him. There are scenes from their marriage. Then Jamal tells his story, how he was born in Palestine, how his family fled to Beirut, how he joined the ranks of those fighting for the recovery of their homeland. In the course of the film, each of them speaks several times. It is one of the film's considerable achievements that Jamal becomes—almost—a sympathetic character. (And this, presumably, is the reason why Juan Antonio Samaranch refused to allow the film to be shown at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.)

Visually, there is repeated back-and-forth movement between action shots of the competing athletes and eerie images of the hooded terrorists who appear briefly in windows or doorways and then withdraw. This cinematic technique is predictable, even stereotypical, but it is nonetheless powerful—especially at a time when all of us pause from our humdrum routines in order to stare at images of war. As W. H. Auden noticed in "Musée des Beaux-Arts,"

even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life  
 and the torturer's horse  
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

The film's music is hard to describe. It is a mix of electronic sound that seems to be influenced by Philip Glass and signature songs from the sixties. The electronic music is chillingly effective. The songs inject an element of nostalgia into the film.

Jim McKay, who covered these Olympics for ABC, appears many times in the documentary as he provided what seems to have been nearly nonstop commentary. These scenes are profoundly shocking. The film seems to reveal that ABC television reported every step of the German plan to free the hostages by means of a surprise attack from above and below the Israeli rooms. It seems that the terrorists, simply by turning on their television sets, were able to learn about the details of the plan and even to observe the police as they prepared for the assault. The film is not entirely clear about this. It may be that East German cameramen transmitted the images of the police as they took their positions.

Towards the end of the film, there is another revelation. Germany's Chancellor, Willi Brandt, colluded with Palestinian terrorists to allow them to hijack a nearly empty Lufthansa jet. He was then able publicly to bow to their demand for the release of the three imprisoned terrorists. In return, Germany was spared whatever act of terror might have been committed on behalf of the imprisoned. The secret deal was a dismal moment in the career of a great statesman.

The interviews conclude with final statements by Jamal, who is proud to have bought the Palestinians' plight to the world's attention, and by Ankie, who says that the fifteen months of her marriage with André were the happiest of her life.

*One Day in September* deserved the Academy Award it received as the year's best documentary. Although it is not as directly concerned with sports as David Wolper's beautifully constructed *Visions of Eight* (1973), which presents eight different directors' interpretations of the 1972 Olympics, *One Day in September* is worth ninety minutes of student attention in any course that explores the political context of the modern games.

