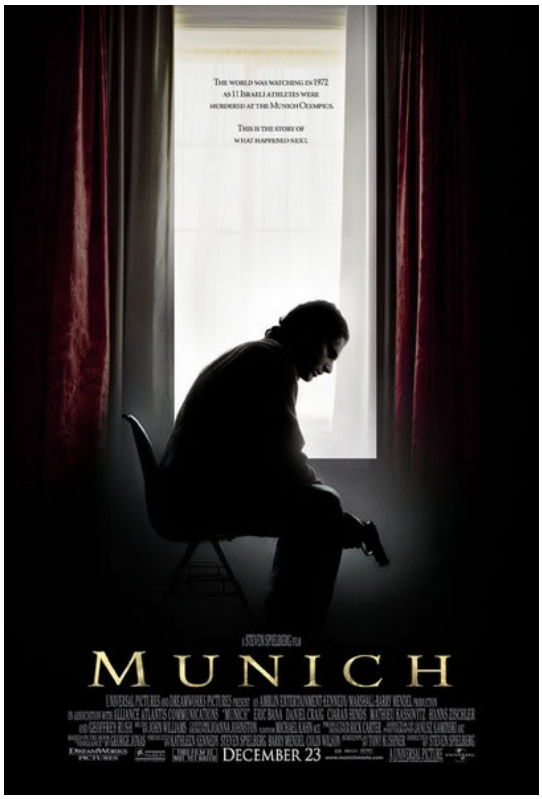

OK, let's get the controversy out of the way right off the bat. There have been many people who have stated, WITHOUT seeing this movie, that it is bad because Steven Spielberg presents the Palestine people and their cause as sympathetic. That it gives equal weight to the point of view of the animals that massacred eleven Israelis in the 1972 Olympic Games as it does the people that hunted down those responsible.

WRONG.

It does nothing of the sort. In about thirty minutes of flashback, the kidnapping and failed rescue attempts are played out in brutal realism, with the terrorists being shown as the evil scum that they were; animals that would shoot a man through the jaw and then laugh at his agony. If you watch this movie with open eyes, you will see that time and time again, the Israelis are depicted as only going after the cretins responsible for the terrorist acts; a moral compass the PLO and Black September completely lacks. Now there is one scene where Eric Bana's character has a discussion with a PLO member (who thinks Bana is ETA, not Mossad), about the Palestinians' goals. He gives the standard "we are without a

home" argument that Yasir Arafat gave for years. And Bana defuses each of his points…mostly by stating "it doesn't give you the right to act like animals". On the other hand, the movie does ask tough questions; foremost being "at what cost?" Even when the actions are out of righteous defense, there are going to be emotional and physical prices to pay for the participants. This movie looks at those costs with an unblinking eye.

So with that disclaimer out of the way; on to the review.

Steven Spielberg has crafted his best work since "Saving Private Ryan". This movie is similar to his masterpiece of the lives of soldiers on an important mission; a fictional account revolving around real events. In this case, it's a study of what it might have been like for the members of one of the teams of Mossad assassins sent to kill those men responsible for the planning and execution of the Israeli Olympians.

The first fifteen minutes depicts the Olympic Massacre as it unfolds. The ease that the terrorists had in accessing the Olympic Village, the initial break-in, and the shock seen around the world when the news broke. Archive footage of the actual ABC broadcasts are used, interspersed with re-created newscasts beamed to Europe, Israel, and Palestine as the drama unfolds.

I was struck, at one point, by Spielberg showing off the contrasting moods of the "average" Israeli and Palestinian by their reactions as the conflict continues. Palestinians are shown rejoicing for the kidnapping, and it reminds me (probably intentionally) of the anger I felt when footage was shown of Arabs cheering at the news of the 9/11 attacks. But no matter how either side first reacted, both later despair as the attempt fails and all involved are dead.

Immediately after, there is a powerful scene that sets the stage. Within a very short time Israeli Intelligence has uncovered names of eleven men responsible for the planning, financing, and execution of the massacre. Spielberg then alternates

pictures; after each dead Olympian is named and shown in a photograph, one of the eleven Black September criminals are shown. There is no subtlety there as the message is clear; an eye for an eye. Prime Minister Golda Meir has made it clear; there will be a response to this tragedy that will be swift and unforgiving. “Forget peace for now. We have to show them we're strong”, she states to her top generals and intelligence minister as she approves the forming of teams of assassins to carry out justice.

She chooses a former Mossad bodyguard, Avner (Eric Bana), to lead the team. A son of an Israeli hero, Avner also has a wife, who is seven months pregnant. He is reluctant to leave her, but his sense of duty demands that he agrees to the assignment. There are four other members on his team; Steve (Daniel Craig, the next James Bond), a South African triggerman with a hair trigger temper as well; Robert (Mathieu Kassovitz), a Belgian toymaker who is also a bomb maker; Hans (Hanns Zischler), a German master in creating forged documents; and Carl (Ciaran Hinds, most recently seen as Caesar in HBO’s ‘Rome’), the other Israeli along with Avner and an expert in cleaning up scenes after the attacks. Their case handler is the zealous Ephraim (Geoffrey Rush), who will have little contact with them once they reach Europe, the only place they are to operate. They are the blackest of Black Ops, officially unknown to Mossad and completely on their own…with the exception of a safe deposit box that contains a never ending supply of American dollars to finance the operation.

Once the team is in place, the movie plays out as a very taut thriller. Cover identities are established, and contacts are made to track down the targets without implicating the Israeli government. And while legal deniability is needed, the executions are still to be “splashy”, with bombings being preferable to guns. Golda Meir wants the Palestinians to know good and well who is responsible, and that there is no place they can hide. Along the way, Avner meets up with the morally ambiguous Louis and later Louis’ father, who supply him information. “No governments” is the only rule, one broken at one point by Avner, much to the dismay of Papa, who nonetheless takes a liking to Avner, and sees through his façade as a German member of the radical leftist group ETA. “The world has not be kind to your tribe”, states the understanding older man.

The tension comes from all directions in this movie. A phone with a bomb inside targeting a Palestinian financier is instead answered by his young daughter, leaving one of the oldest members of the team to race down the street to stop it. On another occasion, Avner steps in front of and gently disarms a thirteen year old Palestinian boy so that the Israeli soldiers that just killed his parents do not also kill a boy who is no real threat to them. Again, these scenes are designed to show the real differences between the two groups, as the continued terrorist attacks against innocents are also shown in newscasts.

Eventually, the hunters become the hunted, and are forced to not only track their prey, but avoid assassination themselves. Some of the Palestinian terrorists have allied themselves with the KGB and the CIA, vowing not to kill Soviets or Americans in exchange for money and some protection. Avner is unable to return to Israel for any reason, although he does sneak back for the birth of his daughter, and convinces his wife to take the baby and flee for New York for their own safety.

Some of Steven Spielberg's greatest achievements on film are in showing how individuals react to stress and circumstances beyond their control, whether it is Oskar Schindler, Captain John Miller in "Saving Private Ryan", John Anderton in "Minority Report", or young Jamie Graham (a 13 year old Christian Bale, for those of you that forgot) in "Empire of the Sun". In this film, the focus is squarely on the noble and duty driven Avner. He does not truly question the validity of his mission, but as the killings progress and tragedies occur, he does want to be re-assured by Ephraim that his targets are indeed guilty. The stress of always being in danger is overcoming him, and he needs to have that knowledge of righteousness as a security blanket to keep his sanity. As the paranoia grows, his pain and desperation become more apparent. In one poignant scene, Avner's fears overtake him. Earlier, the team had laughed at an antidote from Carl about an agent that became so worried about bombs that he always slept on the closet floor. Flash forward to later in the movie, when Avner, nearly hysterical and drenched in nervous sweat, re-creates in his mind all the places where his team had left bombs for terrorists, and dismantles the bed, television, and phone before finally crawling into his own closet to try to sleep with his eyes open.

Eric Bana's acting is incredible throughout the movie. He shined as the brightest spot in an otherwise campy "Troy" as the tragic Hector, and here he once again brings depth, pathos, and intelligence to a very complicated role. Daniel Craig shows an underlying menace and intensity as Steve that bodes well for the upcoming 007 movie. Ciaran Hinds also excels as Carl, the pseudo mentor to Avner, and the voice of cynicism for the mission who nonetheless is completely dedicated to the cause and the team. Michael Lonsdale creates a very intriguing character as "Papa". He is not what you'd think of when picturing a shadowy figure willing to sell information to radical causes. His speech to Avner about the importance of family, given at his large estate filled with children and young grandchildren, serve as inspiration to Avner. Not just towards his own family, but his team as well.

Just when you think you're about to see Avner change and become more sympathetic to those he's killing, Spielberg dispels that with a 10 minute scene showing the final moments of the Olympians' lives, at night at the airport in Germany as the attempt to kill the terrorists failed. You cannot fail to be overwhelmed with sadness at the looks of fear and sorrow in the eyes of the bound captives as their kidnappers mercilessly execute them. It is a scene every bit as powerful as the depictions of Kristalnacht in "Schindler's List" or the Normandy Invasion in "Saving Private Ryan".

A lot of reviewers have stated that Spielberg was being very detached and neutral in this movie, and I completely disagree. The last scene I described clinches that for me; the shame and horror of the senseless killings are thrown in your face like cold water. Yes, Spielberg does show that these terrorists are human beings that did have what they felt were legitimate grievances, and they did leave behind families that loved them. But that does not excuse what they did, and the treatment they received from the Israelis was completely justified.

Spielberg also brings up the point that these killings did not stop terrorism, and perhaps even led to additional terrorist attacks. However, you can also see that he's conveying the message that barbarous deeds cannot go unchecked. Avner correctly noted once in despair that the eleven men targeted would be replaced by others just as bad…but even so, that should not deter the Israelis from doing

everything in their power to continue to seek out and punish those responsible for those reprehensible acts.

This is certainly not giving away the ending, but the final scene takes place in Brooklyn. As the camera pulls back, it leaves a final picture of the New York skyline with the World Trade Center in clear view. The symbolism is clear: the battle with terrorists continues long after the planners of the Munich Massacre were given their just reward. As of yet, we do not seem to have found an answer for stopping it. But we cannot forget, and we cannot allow those responsible to escape.

Another Steven Spielberg piece of cinematic magic. And he owes this to us after the slice o' crapola he gave us earlier in the year with "War of the Worlds". I had never cheered for blood sucking aliens before…but given that the other side was Tom Cruise, I felt no guilt at all.

My rating: With my first full review, I give out a very rare ***Otto Graham***. (#23 on my Top 100 List)

Review Key:

Otto Graham: Over 4 Footballs. HOF quality movie

Bernie Kosar: 4 Footballs. Excellent

Brian Sipe: 3 ½ Footballs. Very Good

Frank Ryan: 3 Footballs. Good

Bill Nelsen: 2 ½ Footballs. OK. Well worth seeing.

Kelly Holcomb: 2 Footballs. Disappointingly inconsistent but some bright spots.

Tim Couch: 1 ½ Footballs. Poor. Had potential, but lack of support led to an overall stinker.

Jeff Garcia: 1 Football. Horrible. All hype; no performance.

Mike Phipps: ½ Football. “We gave away Paul Warfield for THIS?” level of suck

Spergon Wynn: No Footballs. UberSuckitude personified.