

A yearning for genuineness

## A review of Oskar Roehler's film *Die Unberührbare* ("The Untouchable")

By Bernd Rheinhardt  
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Director Oskar Roehler's film *Die Unberührbare* is an unusually engaging film for the present times—and one that is well worth seeing. “Other [German] directors,” said Roehler in a recent interview, “are making the kind of ‘humorous’ movies that were prevalent in West Germany's post-war economic-miracle period. I wanted to continue a different tradition.” From a very early age, he was deeply impressed by films like Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Merchant of Four Seasons* or *Fear Eats the Soul*. “I was about 12 or 13, and after seeing those films, I would just walk through the park and think about them.” *Die Unberührbare* is a fitting continuation of this tradition.

Roehler's black-and-white film recounts the personal breakdown of a West German writer, a woman who was regarded as a left-wing radical from the 1960s on, and someone who, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the GDR (East Germany), lost her last hope of a more humane social alternative to capitalism. Roehler based the story of Hanna Flanders, the character in the film, on the life and death of his mother, Gisela Elsner, a well-known German writer.

Elsner's first novel *Riesenzwerge* (“Giant Dwarves”) was a popular success in 1964. She later joined the Stalinist DKP (the West German Communist Party). As sixties radicalism went out of fashion, she was increasingly snubbed by West German publishers. Elsner, whose father was an executive board member of the giant Siemens corporation, kept up an elegant exterior, professing disdain for cheap mass consumer articles. Her life came to an end in 1992, when, addicted to alcohol and pills and with her last books only having been printed in the now defunct GDR, she committed suicide.

As the Wall comes down, we see a distraught Hanna Flanders sitting in her Munich apartment. On TV, the East German population is celebrating jubilantly, waving sparklers and fraternising with the West Berliners. The writer holds cigarettes and the telephone receiver in her trembling hands, talks excitedly of “betrayal”, says “I'm going to kill myself.” She is stunned and cannot understand why the population is celebrating the end of the Wall and enthusiastically throwing itself into the arms of capitalism. For her, the GDR was always

an “intact world”, a country that published her socially-critical books, where values other than consumerism and the market seemed to count. “Now consumer society will devour us all,” she says bluntly to a journalist in another scene, revealing not only indignation, but also naive astonishment at the behaviour of the East German population. “They're not fighting for truth in the spirit of Lenin, they're fighting for candy bars!”

Her spontaneous subsequent move to East Berlin consumes the last of her wealth. And she can't move back to her old apartment in Munich because she can no longer afford it. All of a sudden, Hanna no longer has a home. This exterior situation corresponds to her inner turmoil. Taken completely unawares by political changes she was in no way prepared for, she becomes flotsam that is tossed to and fro by the unleashed forces. Although Hanna defends herself, she has neither the powers of resistance nor the social adaptability with which to find solid ground again. With the source of her former strength gone, she has nothing left to hold on to.

Next, Hanna visits her son Viktor, an occasional writer who lives in West Berlin and who is noticeably displeased at her arrival. He used to take drugs, and even supplied his mother with “speed” every now and then. Now he scuttles about in East Berlin all the time, and thinks it's “cool”. His girlfriend has just gone out for a run to work off her aggression. Nervously, he explains that the two of them have made their own particular sacrifice for the new beckoning world—they've both stopped smoking since the Wall came down.

Things are in a state of emergency at the East German “Volk und Welt” publishing house, which used to publish her books. For several days now, the people there have been trying to come to terms with the new reality, mainly by drinking a lot. When Hanna turns up there at a very strange party, one of the employees tells her she was a “spoiled cow from the West” who never understood the political conditions in the GDR and who only believed in the GDR because her books were published there. Even her former mentor, Joachim, assures her with bland nonchalance that the “times have changed dramatically”. Not too long ago, he had assured her that, should she come to East Germany, he would get her a place to live right away.

While her former “political friends” make it clear to her that she, a West German, has no right to criticise the GDR and its path to capitalism, Hanna's experiences with ordinary East Germans are quite different. “Finally, we are united!” they tell her. When a drunken history teacher insults her, they come to her aid. Roehler very accurately captures the prevalent mood of the East German population at that time, a feeling of warmth, cordiality and exuberance, a desire to communicate these feelings to everyone else and let them take part in them. A culture journalist who lost his job under the old regime says with great emotion that he never would have thought it possible that something like this could happen in the GDR—“this urge for freedom”. His young wife adds: “The truth simply erupted out of us.”

Hanna's former completely naive attitude towards the GDR regime finds its match in the all-encompassing cockeyed optimism with which the GDR's population now envisages its future under capitalism. As Hanna tells an extended East German family of her own travails and suffering under capitalism in the West, she is met with bemusement and finds herself looking at unbelieving, uncomprehending faces. She inquires critically whether they think this binge will go on forever—the disarmingly unconcerned reply is “Oh, sure.”

Hanna doesn't want to stay in the East. “They're completely different people. I have no relation to them. I don't stand a chance there.” She is insecure and helpless. Suddenly, everything seems to be upside down. “I'm at a complete loss.”

She flees to her rich parents who live in a villa in the West to borrow money from them. But, for the first time, she is rejected there as well. “Are you still taking all those pills?” her mother asks harshly, and threatens not to pay for her next detoxification treatment. She tells Hanna to get health insurance because she and her husband are fed up with paying “astronomical bills”. Hanna's parents, who always rejected their daughter's political views, now see their own opinions confirmed by the demise of the GDR. It's about time Hanna (now around 50) grew up, says her mother, and then rubs it in: “We were going to phone you to see if you had finally woken up to reality.”

Hanna leaves her parent's house the same day, deciding to travel somewhere, anywhere, on the spur of the moment. At the train station, she bumps into her ex-husband Bruno, Viktor's father, by chance. She travels with him to the city of Darmstadt. Bruno is trying to survive by simply ignoring the present and living in the past—a stale, pallid remembrance of a long gone world. For a brief moment, Hanna feels transported back to the time they spent together. But the more liquor they drink, the more the gap between them and their inner exhaustion become apparent. Bruno is embittered about the course his life has taken over the past decades. He still loves Hanna, and has not ceased to mourn the death of the “girls” in the RAF (the 1970's German terrorist organisation, also known as the “Baader-Meinhof Group”). Bruno has aged, appears

sickly and bloated from drinking.

Director Oskar Roehler has crafted a highly astute psychological portrait. Actress Hannelore Elsner (not related to Gisela Elsner) is outstanding in her ability to make the various aspects of Hanna Flanders' character visible to the audience. In an interview, she said that there is much of her own character in this figure. Without lapsing into shallow didactics, the film shows in the figure of Hanna the disillusioned balance-sheet of a whole stratum of artists and intellectuals who were drawn spontaneously and with great enthusiasm into the radical movement of the 1960s.

Often enough, they confusedly latched onto the most diverse ideologies as long as these took a verbally radical stance against the Establishment and against the former Nazis who frequently became “pillars of society” in West Germany. Like Hanna, many of the young students and artists of that time came from wealthy families. Many a daughter with a church background exchanged her belief in god for a belief in Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung—for instance, Antje Vollmer of the Green party, who today is the vice-president of the German parliament. Others took the path of armed struggle and became terrorists.

Hanna, like all of them, has “lost a dream”. But unlike many others she does not in the end return to the fold to further her personal career. As she says herself, she is one of those who, when she is old, will stand in the street selling flowers. She sees a “parasitic mob spreading itself through society”, a bleak future in which “disfigurement and distortion is the order of the day”. Given this perspective, suicide is the logical choice for an exhausted, once strong personality who remains true to herself, true to her “yearning for genuineness”, as actress Hannelore Elsner puts it.

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