

## 67th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

# The absence for the most part of the big wide world: German films at the Berlinale

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*This is the third of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 9-18, 2017. The first part was posted March 2 and the second on March 4.*

A good number of the German films at this year's Berlinale portrayed people struggling through life within a narrowly defined personal framework. There was a general sense of discontent in the various films with the painful routine of everyday life, but the world outside was presented sketchily, if at all, and tended to reinforce the individual's feelings of isolation and abandonment.

The dramatic developments of the past several years—the accelerating break-up of the European Union, the return of nationalism, military re-armament and moves towards an authoritarian state—were evidently not high on the German filmmakers' agenda. The social alternatives on offer frequently took the form of some sort of utopia, or a retreat from politics into art.

This was especially the case with the documentary *Beuys*—dealing with the German artist Joseph Beuys, by director Andres Veiel. Veiel has made a number of interesting works in the past dealing with contemporary issues, such as the terrorism of the Red Army Faction (RAF, also known as the Baader-Meinhof group) in *Black Box BRD* (2001) and the extreme right in *Der Kick* (2006).

Now he has turned his attention to the action artist and anthroposophist Beuys (1921-86), who vehemently rejected socialism and class criteria in favour of a theory that supposedly went beyond “capitalism and communism.” Beuys' last political stop before his death was the Green Party. Veiel's film will be discussed in more detail when it is released for general distribution.

Volker Schlöndorff (born 1939) has been one of Germany's leading filmmakers for decades. He was one of the most prominent figures, along with R.W. Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and his former wife, Margarethe von Trotta, of the New German Cinema

movement of the late 1960s.

Schlöndorff has directed a number of serious films, including *Young Törless* (1966), *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1975), *Coup de Grâce* (1976), *The Tin Drum* (1979) and *The Legend of Rita* (2000). His latest film, *Return to Montauk*, inspired by themes from Max Frisch's novel, *Montauk* (1975), which was based in turn on the Swiss author's 1974 book-signing tour of the US, has little in common with these powerful earlier efforts.

The aging Berlin writer Max Zorn (Stellan Skarsgård) draws a sober balance sheet of his life. In many respects he has lived like a leaf in the wind. He is stricken with remorse when he encounters a former flame, Rebecca (Nina Hoss), during a reading in an uptown New York bookshop. She, too, is a leaf, drifting along, having made a career first as a lawyer, then as a prosecutor in the US following the collapse of East Germany (GDR). She moved swiftly up the social ladder and became wealthy through defending corporations.

In front of journalists, the former leftist, Max, who has gone on to support the right-wing Angela Merkel, and then the Green Party, brags about his political history. He offers glib responses to the European crisis, such as “the spirit of Europe will survive.” Schlöndorff has evidently incorporated some of his own biography in the film. A longtime “left” member of the social democratic SPD, he supported the election of Merkel (Christian Democratic Union) in 2005 and 2009.

For Max, life is in flux and largely driven by negative emotions. The same volatility is embodied in the dream-like presence of Rebecca, the spirit from a past that cannot be recovered. According to Max, in the words of his new novel, life is defined by what you did that you regret and what you did not do that you also regret. “The things that come between do not matter.”

The realization of what he has lost hurts Max, but also presents him with a final opportunity. He wants to do all he can to ensure his present wife does not suffer the injury he

once inflicted on Rebecca with his shallow love. The name of the main character, Max Zorn (*Zorn* is German for anger), suggests that Schlöndorff, once a leading representative of an “angry” generation of young German filmmakers, is making a certain personal reckoning. It is difficult to sympathise with the two main characters who take centre stage throughout the film.

The only German film about the disastrous refugee crisis on offer at the recent festival was the 30-minute *Mikel* by film school graduate Cavo Kernich, dealing with a Nigerian refugee stranded in Berlin.

Twenty-year-old Mikel (Jonathan Aikins) is a so-called “illegal.” He survives on the miserable wages he makes as an unregistered worker for a small construction company that renovates run-down flats. Mikel himself is homeless and sleeps in the apartments he renovates with his fellow African, Jonathan (Para Kiala). Mikel is completely dependent on his boss, Norbert (Frank Leo Schröder), who promises to provide him with the documents necessary for him to stay in Germany. But the promised papers never arrive.

The impact of *Mikel* comes from its sober and unpretentious narrative. This may well be due in part to the influence of writer-director Thomas Arslan, one of Kernich’s lecturers. (Kernich was also an assistant on Arslan’s competition film *Helle Nächte* [*Bright Nights*].)

One scene in the film stands out in particular. Expecting to find one of the renovated apartments empty, Mikel intrudes on a meeting between landlord and prospective tenants. The latter, well-to do Berliners, gaze in amazement at the interloper. The scene speaks volumes about Mikel’s dilemma. At a certain point in the film one of the characters observes, “You are still at sea.”

Will Mikel sink or swim in Berlin? Outside he hears raised voices—a demonstration against high rents. The protest is evidently small and what does it have to do with his hopeless situation? In the end, he no longer goes to work—he can’t tolerate any more of the degrading slavery. He buys a postcard to re-establish contact with his family in Nigeria, which he left with high hopes for (and big illusions in) Europe.

Arslan’s own film at the festival, *Bright Nights*, was a disappointment. A leading representative of the so-called Berlin School, the director has more recently focused on genre films, which seek to strip away genre-type myths.

In his attempts at a Western, *Gold* (2013), and his thriller, *In the Shadows* (2010), Arslan stressed the banality and mechanics of everyday life for characters whose lives are often romanticised. His latest film features a man (Georg Friedrich) who travels by car through the vastness of Norway with his son, Luis (Tristan Göbel), who has grown

up with his divorced mother. The conflicts between the pair often find expression in tortured silence. The imposing landscape is the main protagonist in *Bright Nights*. Compared to this vista, the film seems to say, what is humanity with its petty and ever recurring emotional problems?

The German-Austrian film, *The Best of All Worlds*, by Adrian Goiginger, who also wrote the screenplay, legitimately took the prize in the New German Cinema section.

Goiginger’s work explores the world of seven-year-old Adrian (Jeremy Miliker). His young mother, Helga (Verena Altenberger), works during the day in a Salzburg snack bar. She loves her son very much, is full of warmth and generally reveals a feeling for fantasy and pedagogical skill in dealing with children. Everything would be fine were it not for her friends and acquaintances, and especially her boyfriend, who are all on drugs and always around.

Adrian tries to distract his mother with fairy tales to create some sort of normality. The addicts become a group of rebels. A magic potion helps them fight evil. The mother strictly separates the “magic potion” she takes with the other adults from the one she gives to Adrian. But the pull of heroin is unrelenting. When the atheistic mother feels herself deserted by everything and everyone around her, including government institutions that only exert more pressure, she turns to God. She finds the strength to enter a religious anti-drug project and eventually breaks the habit—together with her friend. The director (born in Salzburg in 1991) impressively portrays the dynamics of a community living on the edge. He is describing his own childhood.

*To be continued*

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