

68th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

Central Airport THF: In Berlin, the end of the road for many refugees

By Verena Nees
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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held February 15-25, 2018. The first part was posted March 14, the second on March 16, the third on March 20 and the fourth on March 22.

Karim Aïnouz, the Brazilian-Algerian director of *Central Airport THF (Zentralflughafen THF)* explained that he was motivated to make his film by “the contrast between the massive military architecture of the [Nazi] Third Reich and the shabby tents for incoming refugees.”

Aïnouz’s impressive documentary about the mass housing of refugees at the former Berlin Tempelhof Airport (first officially designated as an airport in 1923 and closed in 2008) was awarded the Amnesty International Film Prize.

The Berlin-based director (born 1966 in northeastern Brazil), originally an architect, was commissioned by the Berlin Senate to make a film about the city’s new airport (BER). Instead, he turned his attention to the Tempelhof airport when it became clear that there was no definite opening date for the BER project and flight operations continued at the city’s Tegel airport.

In the fall of 2015, as Aïnouz was preparing to shoot his film, tens of thousands of victims of the fighting in Syria and other war zones in the Middle East and Central Asia fled the regions to seek refuge in Germany and Europe.

In October 2015, the Berlin Senate, a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the Social Democratic Party, turned the old hangars of Tempelhof Airport (THF) into an emergency shelter, where around 2,000 people lived in inhumane conditions. At first, the refugees were put in tents, then into small cabins, lined

up like boxes in a row, open at the top and with curtains instead of doors. They resembled bee hives, which some beekeeper kept on the former landing strips of the airport. It was a “mass camp in the middle of the city,” observed director Aïnouz, something that had never previously existed.

At the start of *Central Airport THF*, a tour guide informs a group of visitors of Hitler’s plan to build a monumental airport during the Nazi era, in line with his plans for world domination. The grounds of the airport were the site of the first official concentration camp in Berlin. During the Second World War, slave labourers worked there for armament firms. Their barracks resembled the rows of containers that recently sprang up in front of the main hangar to accommodate refugees. During the Cold War, American planes landed at the airport in the famous Berlin Airlift in 1948-49.

Visibly shaken, Aïnouz and his camera crew capture the wretched conditions for the thousands stranded in the confines of Tempelhof following their flight from war and death. They are exposed to constant noise and cold neon light, while utter darkness prevails in the evening when the lights are switched off to the sound of loud clicking. Out of the darkness, children’s voices can be heard.

Then there is a change of scenery: it is daytime and the area used as a parking lot following the closure of the airport is bathed in bright light. Before the eyes of the refugees, thousands of Berliners spend their free time relaxing or pursuing sports on the green fields surrounding the airport. We see people jogging, flying kites and organising barbecues—a peaceful scene, a thousand miles away from war.

This painful contrast is in the foreground throughout *Central Airport THF*. The main protagonist is Ibrahim, a young man from a Syrian village. A second, Dr. Qutaiba, comes from Iraq, is an experienced doctor, but is mainly used as a translator for new arrivals who are examined in the hangar's medical tent. The film crew accompanied the men and documented their lives over the course of an entire year.

Ibrahim is hoping for a new life in Germany and wants to study. But his village and his family are never far from his thoughts. When he arrives at the airport for the first time he sees an old plane from the time of the American airlift, and is shocked. He is afraid he will be sent back to Syria on the next plane. Then begins a time of waiting—he turns 17 after he arrives, and is still there when he turns 18, fetching his pre-made meal and sitting alone on a bench.

Ibrahim is an ordinary young man like millions all over the world, with his yearnings and hopes. We see him with his buddies, rolling cigarettes, engaging in small talk, shooting photos with his cellphone of New Year's Eve fireworks, which in turn remind him of the war in Syria.

Eventually, Ibrahim has luck and receives a three-and-a-half year residency permit that allows him to study. Dr. Qutaiba has received no response from the asylum authorities and must continue to wait. "Like passengers," Karim Ainouz says, stranded at an airport and unable to proceed further. At the end of the road!

Again and again, Qutaiba helps traumatized fellow refugees who have gone through horrific experiences. He made cuts to his film, the director admitted, out of consideration for the feelings of the refugees. During shooting, for example, there were loud screams in the hall—a refugee had just learned his sister was killed in a bomb attack.

Refugee helpers, interpreters, doctors and neighbours do their best to make life more bearable for those forced to reside in the hangars. They organize German courses and even a Christmas party with two Santa Clauses and music that quickly turns from German Christmas carols to popular Arabic rhythms. Their efforts pale in the face of the unfeeling asylum bureaucracy that treats people like mere numbers.

There is little dialogue in the film, which places much more emphasis on cinematography. The Christmas party is filmed from the perspective of the top of a

staircase at the other end of the gigantic space. The festivities appear somewhat ridiculous and lost within the huge, high hangar walls. Then there's a cut—Ibrahim and his youthful refugee friends meet in front of the hangar and make jokes. "This is supposed to be a party?" says one. "It's just for kids."

At one point a friend tells Ibrahim: "Wherever they send me, I will always come back to Tempelhof. At least I know my way around here." At the end of the film, Ibrahim has returned to the airport. He sits on a bench in front of the hangars and silently watches the frivolity taking place in the surrounding fields. The camera follows from behind the slow movement of his head, from left to right, and right to left. He remains an outsider to what is going on.

Central Airport THF deserved to win a prize. It shows in a very sensitive way the brutality and lack of prospects facing refugees in the German capital. Although it does not openly indict the city's cruel refugee policy, the film's haunting images speak for themselves and stay with the viewer for a long time.

To be continued

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