Artists organise against artistic censorship in Berlin

Our correspondent
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Filmmakers and film producers, journalists and publishers held a benefit evening at the Berlin Academy of Art on December 17 to protest against censorship of the arts and in particular to express their solidarity with the Videodrom video lending library, which was recently subjected to a massive police raid.

Videodrom is a long established centre for film hire in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. Entering the premises one sees rows and rows of videos representing the most important films and directors. The selection of films in English and other foreign languages means that over the past 10 years Videodrom has become a meeting point for film enthusiasts from many different countries. On November 23 fifty police officers raided the premises, including the video warehouse and an adjoining shop.

The Sittenpolizei (German morality squad) and criminal police combed the premises for over seven hours. Despite possessing only a search warrant, they confiscated over 700 videos and DVD discs, 11 computers and files containing the names of 20,000 customers. Phones were also spiked and made unusable.

The search warrant was issued on suspicion that the video shop was distributing texts (which in German law can include videos) glorifying violence and which could endanger children. Among the videos confiscated were the well known European hit *Underground* by Yugoslav director Emir Kusturica (presumably selected because of its subversive title!), *Wild at Heart* by American director David Lynch, *Scream*, an American mainstream horror film, Luc Besson's *Léon* (USA title, *The Professional*), and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The American Soldier*. Also confiscated was a prize-winning documentary film by German director Erwin Leiser about fascism: *Adolf Hitler—Mein Kampf*.

The police action was initiated by the local Economics Office of the Kreuzberg district, which is run by representatives of the German Green Party. The district mayor is a member of the Greens.

Following the raid Kreuzberg officials demanded the shop's closure. It took two weeks for the Economics Office to lift the ban and permit Videodrom to reopen on December 13. Having failed to find any evidence to justify a prosecution, the authorities insisted on an agreement by which Videodrom agreed to more carefully check its stock of videos in future.

Immediately following the raid, the Videodrom proprietors organised a campaign against the closure. They quickly reported that their appeal had found a strong response. In addition to spontaneous offers from members of the public to replace confiscated computers, prominent German artists, film actors and actresses and film directors condemned the police action.

Declarations of solidarity were received from directors Tom Tywker (*Run Lola Run*), Detlev Buck and Peter Lichtefeld, from actor Jürgen Vogel and actress Franka Potente. Veteran German director Volker Schlöndorff sent a short, acerbic message condemning the raid and drawing a parallel with the attempt by authorities in Oklahoma to ban the video of his own film *The Tin Drum*. Well-known jazz musician Fuasi Abdul-Khaliq also added his voice.

At the meeting at the Academy of Art Thomas Klein, a spokesman for Videodrom described the circumstances of the raid and outlined Videodrom's continuing problems. Computers and customer lists taken by the police have still not been returned and Videodrom is on the brink of bankruptcy. In Klein's view a likely cause for the police operation was a knee-jerk reaction by some local politicians to a series of

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violent acts carried out recently by young people in Germany. In general, speakers at the rally defended the right of filmmakers to make avant-garde works and also works with a sexual or violent content under circumstances in which such films reflect, in their own way, developments or problems in present-day society.

Claus Löser, an expert in East German film, also condemned the efforts to censor Videodrom. He explained the problems that confronted filmmakers in the former Stalinist-run East Germany, where they were subject to continual observation by the secret police and prevented from showing films that were “too pessimistic” and failed to express an “open recognition of socialism.”

A reporter from the *WSWS* asked Thomas Klein to what extent Videodrom's closure was bound up with the current political climate in Germany.

Klein: It is not necessarily an expression of definite party politics. The action was organised by the self-appointed squeaky-clean brigade and apostles of moral standards, petty bourgeois types, people who interpret culture and art in a very narrow sense and live according to a conception of art which basically says: photo-realistic pictures of landscapes are good and very abstract avant-garde presentations are bad. They do not understand such things. This is happening everywhere.

I think such people in the SPD and Greens are also by and large former '68 radicals, who at that time and in some way raised the banner for freedom and equality, who advocated a certain sort of social and cultural freedom. Today they have a type of tunnel vision with a very limited horizon and lack any flexibility when it comes to understanding modern art. And when it is not understood then the tendency is to ban it, to cut off sponsorship. Such developments are taking place everywhere, in every country and in every political system. Perhaps that is inevitable. Perhaps that constitutes the sounding board in a global discussion out of which culture emerges.

WSWS: How do you account for the fact that it is precisely the generation of 1968 who resort to such measures?

Klein: There is no simple answer. What I can imagine is that it is bound up with the process of making a career in the establishment. Somebody like Clinton, someone like Schröder or Blair, these are people who have worked their way to the top in very hierarchically organised parties. It is necessary to make compromises. At some point a certain form of rebellion or revolutionary spirit, whether it's bra-burning or anything else, is no longer of any use. It is not possible to get to the top in a political system with an uncompromising attitude. One is required to find the least common denominator. And concretely in relation to us, that means that horror films are evil and should be banned.

It is a real political problem that there is no particularly liberal, free-thinking political leadership. The political climate is such that Mr. Cleans are on the order of the day—a conservative or at least a very bourgeois morality dominates. The raid against Videodrom fits into such a picture. Maybe they want to clear up Berlin before all the decision-makers arrive [a reference to the present move by the German parliament from Bonn to Berlin]. But that is all very vague. It is difficult to say if that is the reason or not. If we knew the real reason then we could cope with the whole thing much better, but as it is we are just hoping that we will survive the day and emerge healthy.

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