

Berlin Film Festival, part 7

An onlooker in a world falling apart

Paths In The Night (Wege in die Nacht), directed by Andreas Kleinert

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15 March 2000

Film director Andreas Kleinert belongs to the last generation of filmmakers that emerged in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Born in 1962, Kleinert's attitudes were shaped by the late 1970s, and particularly by the 1980s—a period of increasing disillusionment. He wrote his thesis on “Levels of Consciousness in the Film Poetry of Andrei Tarkovsky,” the late Soviet film director who made a name for himself in the pre-perestroika years with bleak films such as *Stalker*.

As Kleinert completed his film academy studies with his graduation film, *Leb' wohl, Joseph* (*Farewell, Joseph*, 1989), the Berlin Wall fell, heralding the collapse of the GDR. The works he made after that were entitled *Verlorene Landschaft* (Lost Landscape, 1992), *Neben der Zeit* (*Out of Time*, 1995), *Niemand's Land* (*No-Man's Land*, 1995) and *Im Namen der Unschuld* (*In The Name Of Innocence*, 1997), respectively. Perhaps it is his experience with the gradual demise of the GDR that makes him, like Andreas Dresen (director of *Nachtgestalten* [*Nightshapes*, 1999]) and others, keenly sensitive to today's social decline.

Paths in the Night did not feature in competition at the Berlin film festival and has already been on release in Germany for some time. It could be seen at the festival, however, and is certainly one of the best German films to emerge over the last year. It deals with the personal decline of an unemployed man. Formerly, Walter (Hilmar Thate) had been a works director in the GDR. Then the end of the GDR came and his factory was closed down. A man who was used to actively intervening, Walter still feels a sense of responsibility for society. But lacking all his former means of exerting influence, he is now a powerless onlooker in a world that is falling apart.

Birds have built their nests in his old factory which he still frequently visits at night. In contrast, he sees the new, young, dynamic social climbers driving down the streets in

their expensive cars with loud music blaring. He feels only contempt for his former works co-directors, now trying to carve out a niche for themselves as businessmen or in private security services. The only word he has for them is “opportunists.”

Joined by two young people he seems to have picked up by chance—René, a youth who has already spent time in jail, and his half-sister Gina—Walter goes out on patrol at night to personally establish order. When foreigners are molested in a commuter train or the seller of a magazine for homeless people is insulted—all it takes is a signal from Walter for his two companions to launch a sudden and savage beating of the guilty party.

The culminating point is a scene in which Walter forces a young culprit to jump off a moving commuter train. Later, we see Walter (who otherwise never drinks) in a stupor, muttering: “He actually jumped off.” It is not just the strident drum beats from Gina's borrowed Walkman that reverberate in Walter's head. This energetic man in his mid-fifties is driven by feelings of powerlessness, rage, fear and the conviction that “nobody else is doing anything.” When a management type looks on in dismay as the young man jumps off the train, but doesn't do anything about it, asking instead, “Was that really necessary?”—Walter roars at him “You're all empty—with no future!”

But it is Walter himself who is completely losing his grip. His wife (Cornelia Schmaus), who found a job as a waitress after the end of the GDR, cannot help him anymore. The little strength she has left is just enough to keep herself going by seeking solace in the little things of everyday life—organ music in a church, a fleeting smile returned by a young bicycle messenger. Following the loss of his job, Walter also now loses the second mainstay of his life, his wife. What awaits him is a bottomless pit.

Walter's dream of a just world “that will come one day” is

now merely a straw at which he clutches. “They will need people like us then,” he explains to Gina, “people who know how to get a grip on things.” For a moment, Gina’s face takes on a dreamy expression. Walter is convinced that he has pulled René and Gina “out of the gutter” for a just cause and has given their lives meaning. But René’s shocking brutality is not driven by high moral standards, rather by deep-seated rage against everything and everyone. And Gina is young and immature.

Ultimately, Walter himself slides into crime. In the end, no longer capable of any rational thought, he decides to break into a jewellery shop so he can give his wife “a really big present.” And the long-anticipated catastrophe unfolds.

Almost on a daily basis, the tabloid press carries reports of suicides, people throwing themselves in front of trains, jumping out of windows or killing their entire families, then killing themselves. For many people, the spectacular rampages that have occurred over the past years in Australia, the US and, more recently, in Germany are shocking and incomprehensible. *Paths in the Night* shows the psychological and social components at work when an individual is pushed over the edge.

In an interview with the newspaper *Freitag*, director Kleinert said: “For me, the most important aspect was the self-esteem of a human being. What happens when someone no longer feels needed, is no longer capable of finding a place for himself in society?” Although the film’s setting is eastern Germany, Kleinert is not concerned with specifically eastern German problems, but rather with “existential problems, ... I believe anyone can identify with this story of the loss of love in a marriage or relationship.”

Paths in the Night has been shown at several international film festivals, including Montreal and Cannes. Despite its universal approach, the film portrays an unemployed man whose character was largely shaped in the GDR. Walter was no ordinary GDR citizen, he was a man who held an elevated position in society. His social reaction to the loss of his job reveals more about the political nature of the GDR than any number of lectures crammed with “totalitarian” terminology.

Walter’s reaction to adversity is to withdraw entirely into himself. He does not seek solidarity and allies in his struggle “for a just world”. Instead, he commandeers a couple of people who are at an even lower level than himself, people he can lead, raise up to his level and, if necessary, then reject. He allows no familiarity from them, forbidding them to address him in the familiar form of “you” in German. His rage is directed not against those who are responsible for the decline of society, but against those who in actual fact have been marginalised in much the same way as he has been.

Walter’s view of the population as a passive entity that will

never take the initiative on its own, that needs to be led, even forced to attain its own happiness, is not just something that emerged only after reunification. Once political change has swept Walter from his former position of power, the underlying pessimism on which the concept of “socialism” in the GDR rested becomes visible in its entirety. In a political context, Walter’s suicide is the end of the road for a man who is in the end completely isolated, bitterly waging his struggle with no real belief in the possibility of change.

After wounding Gina with a gun in an emotional crisis, he forbids René to take her to a hospital. From behind Walter’s facade of high-minded morality emerges an attitude that is in reality cynical and misanthropic. He risks her life to avoid trouble for himself. His vision of a just society reveals itself to be a yearning for a philistine, petty-bourgeois “oasis” in which the state ensures with Prussian-style thoroughness that the “good citizens” of the land are not troubled with dirt and filth of any kind—be it paper littering the sidewalk or a drunken teenager in a commuter train.

Actor Hilmar Thate succeeds impressively in giving a very human portrayal of Walter’s character in all its contradictory nature. He is all the more successful in that Walter is by not merely paraded as a negative figure. Despite all his unpleasant traits, the viewer cannot help feel a certain sympathy for Walter. Cornelia Schmaus is very convincing as his wife.

Many intense, poetic images in this black-and-white movie linger on in one’s memory: the factory ruins at night, the factory’s demolition, Walter’s rinsing apples he has picked in an enamel bowl with great deliberation, and the moment he sends away a little girl smiling at him, then winds up the car window—for the last time.

Paths in the Night presents an unrelentingly bleak view of today’s reality. It lacks mediating, light-hearted moments. And yet the film does not leave the viewer with the impression of an affected or simplistic indictment of society; instead we are encouraged to think more about the Walters of this world.



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