

## Berlin film festival, part 3

# The successful depiction of a zeitgeist

## Zoe, directed by Maren-Kea Freese

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Twenty-six-year-old Karola has come to Berlin from a small town. She assumes the name Zoe, lives from hand to mouth, sleeps at various friends' places and wants just one thing, to avoid a life like her parents'. She carries her entire possessions in a handful of plastic bags and comes and goes as she pleases. No one can tell her how to live her life, no one tells her what music she should listen to—music which she occasionally plays when she helps out as DJ at a dive of a club. If it turns out she's the only one who likes the music, then she doesn't mind dancing alone. When asked why she likes playing records, she says its fun to “get people off their backsides”. No one, however, wants to listen to her music.

She has only the vaguest of ideas about her own future, she wants to do something involving people and music ... “And it has to be beautiful,” she explains to the older Rosi, who is disappointed by life and has no big expectations. There is an unemployed guy who has a place where everybody makes themselves at home, they tease him and owe him rent—at least he's good enough for the purposes of getting beer. A young pregnant woman uses him for her own purposes. For ages Zoe's closest friend has been talking about a trip to London that he plans to make with her. The guy who runs the club wonders about the chances of his completing his doctorate if he can get a grant.

Somehow they all just float along. They're all suspended in mid-air and don't really have anything to say. Everyone knows the day-to-day problems of the others. Taking care not to probe too deeply into the sources of their mutual frustration, they all swim lethargically along in a river of alcohol tinged with romanticism. Whoever doesn't play the game comes a

cropper.

Zoe, a source of disturbance in these quarters, is merely tolerated. At first her gruffness seems affected. She lacks the usual charm of the youthful rebel, seems clumsy, reticent, her abrupt manner is foolish. It takes time for the viewer to get closer to Zoe. Her father has been a shadow of a man since her mother's death. The mother worked as a maid in a hotel and also for the family: “She was always there for the others.” The high point in her life appears to have been a step-dancing class. Not only is Zoe seeking to hold her ground against the fate of such sad figures, she is also permanently struggling with the group of unstable and egotistical friends around her. In this she is led less by concrete ideas than surging emotions.

Rosi says that throughout life one carries one's feelings around like a collection of plastic bags. One never really knows what is in each bag and at some point, over time, one loses track of them, one by one. Towards the end of the film, following a drunken night in the open and seated on an escalator, Zoe spreads her possessions out on the moving stairs and allows them to disappear into the abyss. Mumbling “Clearing out sale! Everything free!” she abruptly puts Rosi's maxim into practice. Then she runs after the teenager who grabs one of her bags.

The film deals with the difficulties confronting young people seeking to find their own ways in life and their own paths to themselves. The problem is not just social insecurity, which is becoming more and more widespread. For young people such things are often of secondary importance. They enjoy risk. When society, however, is no longer able to offer ideals worth striving for, then youthful dreams remain unfulfilled, the

striving for self-realisation can turn into self-isolation, enthusiasm and pride into mere dogged determination, romanticism into alcoholism. Feelings that can serve as valuable and powerful catalysts build up until they explode in an uncontrolled way and contribute finally to the process of self-destruction.

The director has made a film that does not romanticise the sort of youth subculture from which one returns to normality when one pleases. She shows a process of decay. After a while, the viewer notices that Zoe is not just testing out new possibilities, but that she is in great danger—in a condition which threatens to end up in collapse and homelessness. The film depicts the tightrope she treads in an unvarnished manner, without sentimentality, and leaves a powerful impression.

At the last Berlinale, in his interesting film *Nachtgestalten* ( *Nightshapes*, 1999) , young German director Andreas Dresen presented a young homeless pair whose freshness and vigour appeared somewhat curious. The viewer had the impression that two ordinary young people had merely exchanged their clothes with two of the homeless. Dresen's aim was to show normal people who had become homeless. But life on the streets changes the behaviour and personality of those affected. The value of *Zoe* is that it shows convincingly the various stages involved in the descent into complete rootlessness. At the same time the film presents a social situation in which any ideals or moral standards that could brake the process of decline are lacking.



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