Berlin film festival:

An interview with the director of Zoe, Maren-Kea Freese

Bernd Reinhardt
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Maren-Kea Freese (b. 1960) studied film science, journalism and German studies at the Free University in Berlin. She has worked as assistant director with George Tabori and Rosa von Praunheim, as well as for the local theatre in the town of Aachen. She also worked for the editorial board of "Literature and Art" for the television channel ZDF. In 1990 she began studying at the Academy of Film and Television in Berlin. Her first short films date back to 1983. *Zoe* is her first full-length film.

WSWS: You wrote the script for your film. How did you arrive at your material?

Maren-Kea Freese: Basically I always start from my own emotions. It is about, let's call it ... a feeling of inner homelessness. A feeling that I have partially experienced myself or have witnessed amongst my friends. I sometimes think that this is an emotion typical for our times. I went to the social scene where it is strongest. I researched in the milieu of homeless people. I spoke to many people and, to begin with, I had the idea that it may be possible to find a girl or a woman capable of acting the main part. But then I realised that these people are too badly hurt to work together with them according to a schedule. And then I also realised that I would prefer the figure to originate from the middle class milieu, similar to the one I came from. The film is not a portrait of homeless people, but a depiction of a "zeitgeist." It sort of fits into the context of vagabond film or films about idlers—which have their own tradition. It is a tightrope walk that includes the danger of slipping. But I think Zoe has enough strength to pull herself through.

What did you want to express through your movie?

The main thing was to concentrate on portraying a specific figure, Zoe, but then also to deal with a kind of lack of communication, an inability to be able to develop relationships, which is something tragic in itself, but if you think about it, it also has a funny, easy-going side. It is a kind of mixture. It is a feeling which predominates in contemporary society and which I have experienced myself. I also live here in Berlin and thought that this is what I want to express with the help of my main figure.

Is it a Berlin movie?

No, it is about a person, who leaves a smaller town and comes to the big city. She's looking for a new identity and doesn't want to have anything to do with the past. Her real name is Karola which she changes to Zoe. Her first priority is to be a different person, but she doesn't know exactly what the outcome will be. She is also someone searching for something.

An interesting reaction to the film Nachtgestalten [Nightshapes] *last year was that a number of reviews asserted that the film was about outsiders. It was somehow about these exotic figures standing outside of society. The director responded that the film dealt with ordinary people, they were not exotic, they were part of a growing social tendency.*

That's right, socially speaking, there are more and more, but I also think it is right to speak of outsiders. If you think about it there are increasingly more outsiders, if you look more closely, in actual fact everybody has experienced the feeling of being an outsider. But it is towards these people that I am drawn. When I see them I think that they express and crystallise social questions, the thin line to be tread, and such questions as: Will I make it? Or will I drop out? These questions are becoming more relevant.

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However, if you actually are homeless, and I had many distressing conversations, it is different. There is a kind of barrier, which has to be overcome in order to get out again.... There is no smooth transition for the people breakfasting in shelters. That is something completely different. In this respect they are no longer normal people. Between “normal life” and complete destitution there is a go-between area. Zoe is such a go-between figure.

At the same time people possess a certain strength. Zoe has it. This is what I wanted to show at the end. This is why I think of the end of the film as being positive with an open ending....

The beginning of the film is set in a kind of anarchistic commune. What strikes one is the intellectual emptiness of all the figures. In contrast to the 60s and 70s when this lifestyle was connected with discussions on art, culture, alternative ways of life and a better society. Is there an explanation for this?

It is frightening today how the style of the 70s has become fashionable again—in a superficial sense. Zoe is also dressed a little in this style. The clenched fist of the *Partida Socialista,* an emblem of the '68 movement, is just a fashionable gag for her. This has something tragic about it, it is just something which is worn on the sleeve. There is no real sense of direction, life is just a struggle for survival and boredom. Although there is a sort of feeling of optimism which doesn't have any real content, the main thing is to keep your head above the water. The utopian ideas of 1968 couldn't be realised, and nothing else exists except capitalist-type religions or political programmes.

There is a sentence spoken by Rosi: “Most people I know have become either esoteric or engrossed in the family. But they all are unhappy.” These are kinds of substitutes for religion. Zoe is more or less vague in this respect. She says she wants to do something that has to do with people and music, and it must be beautiful. She wants to participate in life and feel alive, but it is not really concretised. I think that this is a feeling typical for our times. Although there were all sorts of expectations the fall of the Berlin Wall has brought nothing apart from capitalist ideas on how to run things.

Who are the most important influences for your in terms of film?

That's hard. Usually I don't like all films of one director but only a few. If there is anybody I admire then it is [R.W.] Fassbinder. His work radiates an energy even if you just read him. There are a few books with his essays that I read over and over again. I also like a few films by [Werner] Herzog, such as *Stroszek*, which is one of my favourite films. But I do not like everything by him. He is someone who impresses me and has his own unique standpoint. There are some new people trying things out, but somehow they do not inspire me. More so the new French cinema: (...) but also the English cinema. I think Mike Leigh is great—interesting films.

For a whole period in German film, the scene was dominated by trivial relationship comedies set in the middle classes. Recently different films such as St. Pauli Nacht [St. Pauli Night, 1999] , Nachtgestalten *and* Wege in die Nacht [Paths in the Night, 1999] *have appeared. There seems to be a certain development.*

Yes, I think people are becoming tired of watching well-to-do middle class people with their marriage and relationship problems. You can see how the fringes of society are expanding. We can find out more about life and Germany by looking at such fringes. It is also possible to find out a few things if you look at the middle classes, but I think the zeitgeist today is expressed in the tube train where you can encounter homeless people who sell their newspapers. The problem is no longer hidden. I think that is a positive development. German cinema is receiving an impetus from this direction, more so than in past years.

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