

The 51st Berlinale: Part 3

Unresolved historical questions

German feature and documentary films at the Berlin Film Festival

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A young film student, Branwen Okpako, presented her graduation film at the Berlin Film Festival: *Dreckfresser (Dirt-Eater)*, a documentary dealing with the first black policeman to be recruited in the former East Germany following German reunification. The film throws light on forms of racism cultivated in the former Stalinist German Democratic Republic (GDR). In discussion following the showing of her film Okpako declared that the film was merely her own personal opinion: "I do not agree with films which attempt to tell the truth. That is not possible, because a film is something you make." This is a revealing comment.

Of the 20 films I saw at this year's Berlin Festival, most of which featured in the Forum *Young International Film*, only a few were prepared to deal with contemporary or historical issues in a serious way. One came away with the impression that directors were attempting to compensate for uncertainty or lack of knowledge of recent historical developments by adopting a subjective yardstick and concentrating on immediate experiences which ultimately lead to questionable generalisations. Some of the filmmakers had evidently come to the conclusion that their "own subjective eye" and objective reality constituted two entirely independent realities that barely interact.

The feature films

That was certainly the case with *My Sweet Home*, the only German entry in this year's main competition, and a film which never rose above the level of banalities. This film—the first work by Greek director, Filippos Tsitos, who studied film in Germany—concerns itself with young people in their mid-twenties who up till now have lived their lives quite impetuously and spontaneously. Thrown together by chance, a group of such people get to know one another at a madcap party the night before a wedding. Coming from all over the world, they find themselves stranded together in Berlin. They have in common their longing to be uninhibited, unrestrained; to get far away from it all (because being anywhere is better than being at home); to be uncommitted.

But money suddenly means everything: either they get hold of some or they face being thrown out of the country. As the result of a wager, some end up telephoning their parents. Suddenly they experience a feeling of release; now they can finally admit to themselves that their dreams have been shattered. They respond to an inner call: "It's time to go home."

Apparently, the viewer is supposed to learn from the film the importance in today's world of interpreting life's defeats as victories. In order to make this easier to swallow, a Czech gypsy band plays wonderfully passionate and wild music throughout the whole film. At the end, the protagonists will be able to return—content and self-confident—to the boring existences they once sought to exchange for another kind of life. In order to cover up the hollowness of the film's message the director tries, in the film's final scene, to insist that spontaneity would continue to play a role in their lives. After all, the young Californian and his German bride-to-be have known

each other for only a few weeks before they set out for America.

Directed by Angela Schaneleck (born 1962), *Passing Summer (Mein Langsames Leben)* could be seen as a continuation along the lines of the theme of *My Sweet Home*. It deals with the lives of young people in their twenties and early thirties. Most of them are self-employed and have fairly good incomes. They have known each other for a long time, meeting regularly to swap stories about their work, families and professional plans. However, none of them is really interested in the others any longer because each of them is dissatisfied with his or her life and wants to conceal this fact from the rest of the group.

Everyday life is characterised by routine. Habit dictates their effusive greeting kisses and farewell clichés as well as their cosy little chats, so skilfully diverted or brought to an end as soon as a subject is broached that touches or frightens them all. Life goes on in the same recurring circle. They desire change, but at the same time there is nothing they fear more than change. The main character, a young female student of architecture living alone, is only able to release her repressed longings and passionate nature when she dances.

What is unsatisfactory about the film is that it merely evokes compassion for the psychological torments of the characters without raising more important questions about the source of their suffering. Nevertheless, in concerning itself with the fact that many young people in our times regard their lives as empty and meaningless, the film is not dealing with a insignificant issue. This is evidenced not least by the international success of *American Beauty* a few years ago—even though it was a very flawed piece of work.

Berlin is in Germany is a film in which a young director (Hannes Stöhr, b. 1970) starts off with what seems a basically sound idea that he is unable to develop. The story involves a man who begins a prison sentence just before the collapse of the GDR and is released 10 years later to confront a completely changed world. This is material for a really good film. But the director flounders when it comes to the historical questions directly related to his theme. The result is a film that owes a lot to those hackneyed comedies in which a country-bumpkin arrives in the big city for the first time only to be confounded by automatic ticket machines and startled by the ringing of mobile phones coming from all directions.

On the other hand, *One Fine Day*, by Thomas Arslan (b. 1962), does well to distance itself from all this superficiality and navel-gazing. This film will be discussed separately at a later date.

Documentary films

Bucharest-born Thomas Ciulei directed *Asta e*, a German documentary film that provided a quite moving picture of the poverty in the Danube delta region. Asked a question by an audience member after the screening as to the political views of the people in his film, Ciulei explained that he had intentionally avoided encouraging them from expressing themselves

on this issue. Everyone could see from the images the film presented that they were in a bad way. What more was there to say or to question? The terrible poverty in Rumania was supposed to be a consequence of “communism” and “post-communism”. And even worse was to come because now the “communists” were once again in power. Appropriately, the film’s translated title is *Just the Way It Is*.

The Polish-French co-production, *Gods of the Hammer and Sickle* evidently shared a similar fundamental attitude. For the director, Jurij Chaschtschewatskij, the course of history seems to be a chain of meaningless events and absurdities that cannot be understood but only laughed over.

The film considers how it has come about that such an powerful turn to religion is taking place in Russia at the moment—an interesting question, certainly. The documentary begins with a meeting between the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the president of (former Soviet republic) Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko. Fired by indignation at the evident pact between church and state, demonstrators are shown being truncheoned by the police. Intentionally harking back to the opening scene encounter, the film closes with a meeting between Lukashenko and Boris Yeltsin. The director leaves no doubt that he regards both politicians for crooks.

Between these opening and closing tableaux, the film tries to function as a sort of historical bridge showing how various rulers—beginning with the “Little Father,” Czar Nicholas II, then Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and up to the present—have all supposedly exploited the faith and religion of the people for their own purposes. No distinctions are made. Throughout all this, a gravedigger—who buried almost the entire Soviet politburo over the years—philosophises about God and the essential nature of the Russian people. We learn that, despite their self-proclaimed materialist world view, some high-ranking Stalinist officials allowed church masses for their deceased relatives. The director takes his investigations no farther than this.

The German documentary film by Hubertus Siegert, *Berlin Babylon*, also alludes to the apparent meaninglessness of human history. Accordingly, Siegert focuses on Berlin’s major construction sites where ostentatious new buildings are rising up, which are supposed to represent the Berlin of the new millennium. The film shows that everything is transient. This is evidenced from historical footage of the demolition of the former Lehrter central railway station and other edifices of the past—all of which, at one time or another, seemed built to last forever. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “Everything is in a state of flux.” But the film’s central idea is better expressed in a quotation (cited in the film) by the German writer and philosopher Walter Benjamin, according to which history consists merely of a series of catastrophes—an eternal oscillation between construction and destruction.

Similar philosophical platitudes are to be found in Hartmut Bitomsky’s documentary, *B-52* about the bomber that was first used in the Korean war as well as in the Vietnam, Gulf and Kosovo wars. Young American air force recruits explain technical details about their aircraft which remains to this day the backbone of the US Airforce. This is followed by comments from the man who led the first air attacks on Hanoi and from the head of the Vietnamese defence forces at the time. Memories of an American bomber-pilot are compared to those of a former soldier from the Vietnamese air defence corps. The viewer sees how the B-52s are reduced to scrap in a desert, how use is made of their last component parts and how a modern Boeing 777 is built in a vast hangar where the work of thousands of people is coordinated—an achievement possible only in a highly developed society.

The film finally comes to the conclusion that advanced civilisation and violence accompany each other as if by natural law; that the one is not imaginable without the other. The film ends with the dubious comments of an American artist who makes sculptures out of the scrap remains of B-52s and who seems to like painting bombers. His banal views run along

the following lines: in America one has the right to choose from 40 different kinds of corn flakes; but it should not be forgotten that this achievement was only achieved and retained through violence.

This film testifies to the way in which a criticism of civilisation—which at first seems merely ridiculous—can suddenly take on an extremely reactionary import. What in *Berlin Babylon* seemed hollow and trivial is put forward in *B-52* as a “philosophy” quite capable of serving as an ideological justification for an aggressive American foreign policy—although this is something the director certainly did not have in mind when he made his film.

The Hungarian documentary film *Children, Kosovo 2000* also shows that a superficial approach to historical and contemporary issues can have serious consequences. It deals with the devastating effects of the war in Kosovo on the children—the most innocent victims of the war, as the editor Ferenc Moldoványi (born 1960) explains. Albanian and Serb children relate their experiences. Some of them witnessed the killing of their parents, brothers, sisters or other relations. The film is like a requiem, its music reinforcing this effect.

After the screening, the director explained that he regarded NATO’s intrusion in Kosovo as being essentially justified; in relation to the ethnic conflict, the international community had been mere onlookers for far too long. To the question of whether it might have been the NATO attack that first really stirred up the conflict, he replied in the negative and referred to a 600-year long tradition of violence that was merely continued after the death of Yugoslavia’s President Tito in 1980.

This allusion to centuries-old traditions corresponds precisely to the war propaganda of all sides in the Balkan conflict. All of them attempt to use such myths in the same way: to “prove” that each of their nationalistic wars is justified. After the NATO attack in March 1999, the fact that many artists internationally made public pronouncements either defending NATO’s war propaganda or positively advocating its intervention, highlights how necessary—and at the same time how poorly developed—critical thinking is in our times.

This is also reflected in the fatalistic attitude expressed in many of the festival’s films. In the above mentioned quotation from *Berlin Babylon*, Walter Benjamin alludes to the consequences of progress: “The angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.”

Some time after writing these lines, Benjamin, fleeing the Nazis, took his own life in 1940. His personal situation was desperate, stranded on the French-Spanish border, he anticipated his own immediate arrest by the Nazis. On the one hand, the pessimistic viewpoint expressed in that citation stemmed from personal despair. At the same time it was nourished by confusion arising from unresolved questions concerning the rise of fascism in Europe and the political degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalinism.

Benjamin, who was familiar with Trotsky’s writings, knew that Stalin had murdered almost all his left-wing opponents and had formed an alliance with Hitler. Nevertheless, for broad circles of intellectuals, some sort of support for Stalin seemed to be the only chance of averting the emergence of a fascist Europe. The extension of Stalinism into Eastern Europe after the war helped thwart layers of the intelligentsia from coming to grips with this issue.

How this affected the following generation of intellectuals in East Germany—whose opposition to the regime never exceeded definite limitations—can be gleaned to some extent from the film, *Open-air Concert*, by Jürgen Böttcher. This film, too, will be discussed in a subsequent article.

The fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union—the overture to even more dramatic changes to come on a world scale—“the angel of history” is again seen to be conjuring up its eternal catastrophes demonstrates that a

sense of shock sits deep in artists, only a few of whom could have believed possible, let alone predicted the events of 10 years ago.

Afterwards it should have been wonderful, by Karin Jurschick, was an interesting documentary at the festival and struck a different tone. The film starts on a highly personal note. The director pursues the question: Why did my mother commit suicide in 1974? Jurschick is seen in conversation with her father who was a few years younger than his wife when he married her—something which he now regards as a mistake, although he feels no personal responsibility for her death. The film comes to the conclusion that there was no single or direct reason for the tragedy—and if there were, then this should be seen as only a small part of the greater truth. The director raises the fate of her mother from a personal to a social level, and presents her father—now over 90 years old—as a figure whose personality is to be understood in the broader context of the society he lived in.

Spiegelgrund from Austria is an excellent documentary film which deserves its own review.



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