The 51st Berlinale: Part 7

Just how important is ethnic identity?

A beautiful day directed by Thomas Arslan

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A beautiful day is the final part of a trilogy by German filmmaker Thomas Arslan (b. 1962), following *Brothers and Sisters* (1997) and *Dealer* (1999). Arslan's latest film deals with people of Turkish origin who have grown up in Germany. The film's central character is a young woman who is not depicted in typical fashion as a mere victim, but is instead a self-confident, independent person. The discussion of a generation usually described as culturally torn between two identities is given an unusual treatment in the film.

The action takes place in Berlin during one day in summer. The young actress Deniz, who keeps her head above water as a dubbing artist, breaks with her boyfriend after their relationship has become routine. She asks Jan why they are together and doesn't get an answer. Meanwhile he has also broken off his studies. He is always wavering in life, and only knows what he doesn't want.

Deniz also is still uncertain. But when it comes to love, she is certain that it has to do with strong and honest feelings. Where and how can such love be realised. Is it at all possible?

A lecturer in the history of everyday life, from whom Deniz scrounges a cigarette in a cafe, ruminates positively about love. She explains that in earlier historical epochs people had little appreciation and time for it. Everything used to be resolved in working relationships because the first priority was material survival. Today, she explains, there is enough leeway to take feelings seriously. Although she then qualifies this by adding that it is necessary to effect an compromise between love and work.

Deniz is well aware of the results of such compromises. Many of her friends' relationships have broken up. Only her older sister Lydia is living together happily with her boyfriend. But now, having become pregnant, she too is at a loss and depressed. With a child she is sure to lose the well-paid job she enjoys. Deniz's laconic comment is: “If you two are in love, you'll manage it all somehow.”

The camera accompanies Deniz throughout her day—through the streets on her way to the subway, on a visit to her mother, as she meets her sister and in the down-to-earth, friendly atmosphere of the studio where she works.

The uninspiring everyday atmosphere has left its mark on Deniz. She is caught in the same orbit as all the other characters in the film, which is, in the long run, dulling their emotions. The way Deniz talks is somewhat sluggish and monotonous, her way of walking lacks spring. She meets up with a young man, whom she had noticed several times before, standing at the underground station, on her way through town. When she asks him if he is pleased that his girlfriend is coming back the following day after studying in America for a year, he isn't sure. His whole noncommittal manner reminds her of Jan.

When Deniz herself is asked during an audition what she has done recently or which film has especially impressed her, she doesn't know what to say for a long time. Only after a silence does she haltingly speak of a film dealing with the break-up of a couple that coincidentally she has seen on television.

Deniz is not a passive person, someone who is merely thrown this way and that by fate or coincidence, but someone who wants to take her life into her own hands. She has a certain power, something shines from behind her reserved expression that is seeking something

different. She continues to search. And then she finds another young man.

That she herself is of Turkish origin, while Jan is German and her acquaintance from the underground station, Diego, is Portuguese, is dealt with as a matter of little consequence in the film. After seeing the film it seems extraneous to ask about issues of ethnic or cultural identity. It is too apparent that Deniz's problems have little to do with the problems of ethnic minorities.

The director Thomas Arslan, who himself has a Turkish father, told the *WSWS*:

"There are very many elementary questions connected with how one should live. Indeed in this case I was not interested in dealing with the supposed conflict between two cultures. I didn't want to define what is 'alien' or exotic about Deniz, but first of all to treat her as an independent person.

"The problem of not knowing where one's home is, or if one feels more Turkish, more German or whatever, has been sort of 'stuck' onto her generation.... But the lead actress playing Deniz, Serpil Turhan, and Selda Kaya who did the music for the film are among those for whom such surroundings are more natural, and for whom other everyday problems are more important than those concerning ethnic identity."

The strength of this subdued film is a result of its extreme artistic economy. It refuses to put feelings on display, as is so often the case in modern cinema, where feelings become a sort of independent entity, are puffed up and lose every connection to surrounding life. When certain individuals in the audience at the Berlin showing criticised the fact that Deniz appeared to be merely an "object," thus losing her subjectivity, the director explained that the very restrained acting is supposed to help the audience "de-psychologise" the characters depicted. Indeed Deniz never leaves the area of conflict formed by her surroundings. But it is precisely in this way that the correlation between her subjective, contradictory personality and the objective world around her becomes visible. Arslan remarked: "I'm stimulated by fiction, which opens up room for documentation. Bringing the two together is what I'm interested in."

In *A beautiful day* Thomas Arslan has placed unspectacular characters at the centre of his film, but by treating them seriously he has given them power and dignity. At the current time this is anything but a typical approach in German cinema.

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