

# Terminally ill in a sick world?

## Achim von Borries' debut film *England!*

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*England!*, the work with which director Achim von Borries (b. 1968) graduated from the Berlin Film and Television Academy, has won several prizes at film festivals, including the audience prize at last year's Cottbus film festival. The *Berliner Zeitung* described the film as a new "hope for German cinema" and declared *England!* to be "the most remarkable film this year".

*England!* tells the story of Valeri, a young Ukrainian, who dreamt in his childhood of travelling to England with his friend. For the two of them England was a synonym for freedom and happiness, the homeland of the Beatles, an incredible island, inhabited by people who for some reason could not swim. Coming from the Ukrainian cultural backwater this at least was how they imagined things to be.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, they finally have the possibility of travelling to the country of their dreams. Valeri first travels through Poland by bus until he reaches the Oder River, which he crosses, using an inflatable raft, and enters Germany. In Berlin he is in danger of sharing the same fate as his friend before him—stranded as an illegal immigrant. In the search for his friend, whom he had arranged to meet in Berlin, all he finds is a gravestone. It turns out that both men had been contaminated with lethal radiation poisoning during clean-up operations following the disastrous accident at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in 1986.

When asked by a doctor in Kiev what he expected from life, Valeri replied: "The sun shines, birds sing, life is beautiful and exciting. What more could I hope for?" He exhibits a charming naiveté in everyday life. Maria, who loves him, says, "He is a good man," but nonetheless she remains with her husband Shurik, who has both feet firmly planted on the ground.

Like the "little prince", or a good-natured troll, Valeri wanders through the world, in which, as Pavel the painter explains, "Everyone only bothers about their own thing", a world in which job centres are the "cathedrals of modern times".

On the bus Valeri begins a conversation with a young girl who also wants to go to Germany. She shows him an advertisement placed by an older man seeking a wife, a computer specialist in Hannover. "I hate computers," she declares. Valeri is shocked that she seriously wants to marry

this old man, a step which will ruin her life. He attempts to change her mind. Later they meet again by accident in Berlin. She has changed her mind about the older man. The new young man at her side seems to be as much in love and as happy as she is.

Valeri's ability to make other people conscious of their own worth strengthens their longing for a different life. This can also be seen in the development of Shurik. On the one hand, he wants to be a normal father to his son, but at the same time he finds shady types of employment for people coming to Berlin from the former Soviet Union, and he himself always carries a weapon.

For those such as Pavel and Maria who have regrettably resigned themselves to social realities, Valeri seems to be someone both fragile and precious. Although he has been weakened by the progress of his illness, Valeri presses ahead with his trip to England and his friend Pavel agrees to accompany him. They never arrive. Valeri dies in Dover.

The audience is called upon to share the world of these extraordinary characters. The magazine *Cinema* remarked that Valeri could be a character from a Dostoyevsky novel. The notion is worth following up.

Valeri somewhat resembles Prince Myshkin from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (1868), a young noble who leaves a sanatorium in Switzerland, filled with "French ideas", to return to Russia. At first the society schemers in Petersburg, demoralised and lacking morals, are astonished and exhibit a degree of respect for Myshkin. He reactivates their own past feelings and youthful ideals, sparking a kind of nostalgic sentimentality. But in the end all that matters is what has been said behind his back all along: this holy man is simply an unworldly fool, an "idiot."

In the Russian writer's story *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (1877), the main character, fed up with the world and disgusted with himself, contemplates suicide. A dream prevents him from carrying out his plan. During a flight through space, the young man encounters a human society ruled by harmony and love. He recognises that in his heart he has always known such qualities existed and could be realised.

Dostoyevsky wrote during the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time when the euphoria that existed within broad

layers of the population following the bourgeois revolutions, with the humanist ideas they helped spread in Western Europe, had turned into disappointment for many. Old forms of exploitation had been succeeded by new methods, employed by the new wealthy bourgeois elite allied with the old aristocracy. Certain intellectuals came to the conclusion that because of mankind's egoistic nature any notion of changing the world would always end in failure. The only thing left for sensible people to do in this situation was to "cultivate their suffering." The motif of suffering was omnipresent in Romanticism, as well as the motive of "deliverance" by pure love.

*England!*, in common with a number of other recent films, notably Lars von Triers' *Dancer in the Dark*, evokes such Romantic motifs. The times we live in are characterised by disappointment and disillusionment within certain social layers. The collapse of the Soviet Union 10 years ago, the dismantling of welfare states, their replacement by unrestrained global speculation and more recently by intensified military conflict, confirms the beliefs held by some that, despite scientific progress, mankind is organically incapable of organising any form of harmonious coexistence.

All that is left, according to such superficial people, is for the artist to imitate those who enthusiastically derive the truth of mankind's nature from the elementary drives of animals, and pay homage to a kind of world-weariness, sweetened with a little religion.

A look back at Dostoyevsky's time shows that this kind of intellectual depression wasn't the general intellectual tendency in Europe, and it certainly was not the most advanced. These were also the times of the growth in the influence of the socialist movement. The Paris Commune marked the first time in history the oppressed took power, albeit briefly. The materialist method of analysing society developed by Marx and Engels won a wide audience. Under their influence, those who were no longer satisfied with utopian forms of socialism recognised that the basis for building a new society was bound up with the growth of a revolutionary movement, consciously based on a rational explanation of capitalist contradictions.

Dostoyevsky, whose own utopian form of socialism was later to lead him back to religion and ultra-nationalism, wrote:

"One's attitude to one's past life and former ideas must not be naive, but historical. Mankind has lived and suffered torment in the search for beauty. If we understand man's former ideals and what he has paid for these ideals, then ... we shall express exceptional respect for the whole of mankind, and such sympathy will ennoble us, we will comprehend that this sympathy and understanding of the past guarantees us—and especially us—the existence of humanity, of vitality and the capability to develop and progress."

As a perceptive witness of his times, Dostoyevsky analysed the milieu of his figures, their relationships, their complicated psyches, their inner struggles and their condition of being torn in different directions. This is what makes his figures so vivid

and credible to this day. On the other hand the humanism in Achim von Borries' film is a form of humanism fed by naive dreaming. The figures are only roughly sketched, their changes in character seem to be mechanical. And a childlike hero is in the foreground.

The film only hints that there are other issues that plague this one-dimensional saint as least as much as his illness. Among the items that his dead friend has left him Valeri finds old articles from Soviet newspapers, which play down the nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl and reassure the public that the Party is doing its duty "night and day".

Any complexity in Valeri's character remains hidden from the audience. Everything that doesn't fit the picture of him as a fur-hatted, goblin-like, fantasy creature is suppressed in the film. Valeri suffers quietly and inconspicuously, smiling as long as he can. Finally the camera increasingly points to his pillow, stained by his nosebleeds. At the end Valeri acts in a rude manner, something which appears affected because no inner development of the figure has taken place up until now.

An essential element of the film is the diffused melancholic aura that surrounds Valeri, despite his friendly optimism. It is implied that this melancholic state is a worldwide phenomenon. Is the world itself not terminally ill? Sequences when Valeri recalls his youth and friends are nostalgically transfigured and shown in a golden-yellow light. The Russian folk-rock music in the film arouses associations with the 1970s. Were those better times, when one's thinking was still childlike and innocent, and one was kept in ignorance and free from Western influences?

The success of this film at various festivals indicates a desire for material that deals with profound, honest feelings, beyond the hypocrisy, corruption and mendacity which dominate social life today. The type of cynicism which characterises sections of today's middle class intellectuals is completely alien to Valeri.

Sadly, the film is incapable of bringing the vague yearning for social warmth and harmony to a higher, more conscious level. The touching figure of Valeri, someone who is obviously too good for this world, is not so foreign to a cynical and opportunist culture in which the fate of the despairing individual can be celebrated and ritualised; most importantly, because of the state of the world, we know he can never expect to reach his beloved "England!"



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