

# The 52nd Berlin Film Festival

## Part 2

**Stefan Steinberg, Bernd Reinhardt**  
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*In this part we discuss three German films in the main competition at the festival—Heaven by Tom Tykwer, A Map of the Heart by Dominik Graf and Grill Point by Andreas Dresen.*

### **Heaven by Tom Tykwer**

Tom Tykwer is regarded by many film commentators as the most promising new director on the German film scene. His *Run Lola Run* was one of the few German films in the last decade to reach a broad international public. With *Heaven*, Tykwer has been able to acquire US and European backing for a large-scale production.

The action takes place in Italy and the main protagonist is a British teacher, Philippa (played by actress Cate Blanchett). The opening credits feature a flight over fake hills and valleys, courtesy of a flight simulator (and presumably to prepare the audience for its later ascension to heaven). The film then begins with Philippa preparing a bomb that she subsequently plants in the office of a prominent businessman and, as we later learn, drug dealer. Through a chain of coincidences the bomb is transferred into the waste bags of a cleaning lady and transported into a lift. There it explodes, claiming the lives of entirely innocent victims.

We are already in territory which Tykwer has covered in previous films such as *Run Lola Run* and *The Princess and the Warrior*—a sort of chaos theory of the world whereby he speculates over the arbitrary paths that life can take when chance intervenes to turn events in an unexpected direction.

Philippa is shocked to learn that she is responsible for the death of innocent people, but still determined to avenge the death of her own husband who died as a result of his drug habit encouraged by the businessman-drug dealer. Arrested by the police and interrogated for her act of terror, Philippa is overwhelmed and faints. In a scene characteristic of Tykwer's work, she is roused and helped to her feet by a young policeman, Filippo. Their eyes meet and their physical nearness is enough to seal their undying love for one another (Tykwer refers to this process as "catharsis").

Every nonsensical twist that follows is, according to Tykwer's outlook, subordinate to and justified by the unquenchable love between Philippa and Filippo. In Tykwer's puerile presentation of relationships, the couple are additionally fated for one another by sharing the same name—male and female variations of the name Phillip.

The improbabilities in the film continue to mount. In the course of her interrogation, Philippa declares baldly that she just *found* the bomb (which she has expertly assembled in the opening moments of the film). Escaping from the interrogation with the aid of her new lover, the two hide in the attic of a main city police station from where they are able to move seemingly invisibly through the corridors to finalise the assassination of the hated businessman.

In a final pinnacle of absurdity, after consummating their love on an abandoned hill in true Adam and Eve style, Philippa and Filippo, pursued by police, break through a cordon of elite, heavily armed troops—who are all looking in the wrong direction—and steal their helicopter. In a Tykwer film one needs no experience to build a bomb and as little practice at

flying a helicopter. The pair soar upward as the machine climbs into the clouds—the circle to the opening of the film is complete. The winsome pair, purged of their sins by the purity of their love are heaven-bound. The end credits run.

Tykwer has directed a script by the Polish director Krystof Kieslovski (of the "Three Colours" trilogy fame) and his co-worker Krzysztof Piesiewicz. Asked about the religious themes arising out of the script (Kieslovski was Catholic), Tykwer has replied that he regards himself as a "spiritual atheist". Certainly his film calls for a belief in the supernatural. It is perhaps not surprising that Tykwer expresses his enthusiasm for the latest obscurantist film by David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, and declares his agreement with the Lynch thesis that it is more important to pose questions than to provide answers.

Tykwer's film is peppered with analogies and instances that give the film an air of actuality—terrorism, drug dealers spreading their ware amongst schoolchildren, corruption at the heart of the police force. But his main message is quasi-religious, that the ecstasy of love makes everything possible, including a thoroughly implausible plot and thinly drawn characters.

The final scene of *Heaven* recalls previous film denouements by Tykwer—the leading character allowing herself to fall from a high window in *The Fatal Maria*, the skiing instructor that intentionally skied over a precipice in *The Hibernator*. Not only do we have the catharsis of love, but also the catharsis of death. *Heaven* makes clear that Tykwer is operating with a painfully limited number of themes that become more tedious and objectionable with every new work.

### **A Map of the Heart by Dominik Graf**

In a number of respects Dominik Graf's new film invites unfortunate comparisons to Tykwer's *Heaven*. *A Map of the Heart* also centres on a dream-like or perhaps nightmarish game of chance. The action takes place on the holiday island of Corsica. Draughtswoman Katrin breaks off her affair with her boss, Jürgen, in the middle of their holiday on the island. Jürgen returns home, while Katrin lingers on until by chance she meets a 17-year-old boy, Malte, who has absconded from a camp for adolescent youth based on the island. The pair take to the mountains in a flight from their respective problems. For both Katrin and Jürgen the film ends tragically.

The red thread running through the film is an old African tradition, practised by small traders to impress visiting tourists to buy their wares. Diverse figures and objects are placed next to one another and then an attempt is made to construct a story that connects and makes sense of these arrangements. The resulting stories are as varied and as arbitrary as the character and histories of those telling the tale.

A voice declares from off-camera that the story of the main figure in *A Map of the Heart* could have taken a completely different form if, on a specific evening, she had taken a different turn in the road. Equally on the way home to his pregnant wife, Jürgen confronts a traffic sign. Arrows point in all directions. How will he decide? We are invited to believe that

his chance decision at the junction will have fundamental implications for the rest of his life.

Various objects reoccur in the film on a seemingly random basis—a bikini, a pistol, a ring. The ring seems to be of particular significance, until Katrin realises that too many women are wearing a copy of it for it to be so. Throughout the film Kai, the brother of Malte, gathers objects left stranded on the beach. When, towards the end of the film, he spreads them out in front of Katrin, she recognises the picture on the postcard that she threw away at the start of the film.

Like Tykwer, who favours long shots and pans of cities, buildings and speeding trains that reduce his characters at times to the dimension of toys in a dolls house, Graf also has a penchant for images of the sea and mountains that overshadow the activities of his characters. They seem to indicate that there are forces at work far more powerful and influential than the wishes and strivings of mere mortals.

Unlike Tykwer, there is no boundless love overcoming all obstacles in *A Map of the Heart*. But both films appeal to an audience that may be frustrated by the seemingly unpredictable and uncontrollable blows of everyday life. Their final message corresponds: life lacks any sense and the best path is to go with the stream and accept one's lot with resignation.

### **Grill Point by Andreas Dresen**

Following an enthusiastic reception from its Berlin festival audience, Andreas Dresen's film *Grill Point* was awarded the jury's second most prestigious prize, the Silver Bear medallion. It was by far the best of the German competition entries in this year's festival.

A feature of all Dresen's films, such as *Night Shapes* and *The Policewomen*, which accounts in large measure for their popular appeal, is the evident sympathy he extends to his characters. In addition to his perceptive eye for personal relationships and social structures, Dresen's latest film also incorporates tragic-comic scenes from everyday life. The laughter in *Grill Point* often sticks in the viewers' throat.

The action takes place in the eastern German city of Frankfurt/Oder on the Polish border and the film begins in a living room, in a dreary estate built during the period of the former Stalinist German Democratic Republic (GDR). The social and cultural decline that has plagued entire regions of East Germany since reunification in 1990 is palpably visible.

Two married couples, well acquainted with each other and in their late thirties, take part in a drinking party while viewing last year's holiday slides. The pictures recall memories, mostly of inebriated escapades, and the quartet fold up in laughter while viewing the embarrassing poses struck.

Uwe is a small businessman and has his own fast-food stall—Grill Point. He works round the clock and the stress is slowly destroying him. He loves his family: his wife Ellen, who sells perfume in a boutique, and his two children. The pressure to earn money hardly leaves him time to draw breath. In the detailing of clumsy minor gestures, Dresen attempts to indicate Uwe's rebellious attempt to steer away from his crass and dull existence. But the pressure of work and everyday life is too overpowering.

Chris is the moderator of a local radio station. His morning programme is geared to getting people out of bed and preparing them for the day with cheerful pop-songs, perky jingles and horoscopes. His facial expression—always set to accord with his optimistic wake-up call of "Hi!"—changes as soon as he lays down the microphone. His frown indicates his own personal dissatisfaction and emptiness. Unable to partake in the optimism he is forced to radiate every day, he is bereft of ideals and burnt out.

In order to add spice to his dull and empty life with Katrin, who works in a motorway service area, Chris begins a relationship with Uwe's wife. With Chris, Ellen seeks a cultivated and cultured atmosphere that is completely absent in her home life—Uwe stores greasy lumps of pork for his fast food stall in the bath. When she realises, however, that Chris is an

intellectually sluggish and disillusioned individual, incapable of making any serious decision of his own, she leaves him. As the film closes Uwe takes her back, beaming with joy and hiding a surprise. As he presents her with a brand new kitchen, which he has specially installed and utters the words: "New kitchen, new happiness," she despairs at the prospect of a life tied to the sink and the stove and packs her bags for good.

It is via Ellen that Chris becomes aware for the first time that his daily dose of hollow phrases actually has an effect on the consciousness of his listeners. He is flabbergasted when she explains that they orientate themselves according to the horoscopes he randomly composes. Chris can hardly believe that people take his waffle seriously. From this point on his comments on the radio begin to change and become gloomier, with his horoscopes taking on an increasingly apocalyptic tone. His airwave appeals to the wife he wants to win back become a moving plea to his audience not to hold back from pursuing their own dreams, to be prepared to burn all bridges—to travel. For the first time Chris lets his audience know he is on their side, encouraging them to change their lives and have the courage of their convictions.

It is at this point that the film loses some of its edge. Through the figure of Chris, Dresen makes an appeal against resignation but the alternative on offer is weak and hackneyed—think positively, broaden your horizons and express sympathy for your fellow man—after all we are all suffering under the same burden.

Music plays an important role in the film. It serves to evoke a general sense of restlessness and a yearning for a harmonious, fulfilled existence. Happy to have found a spot to play where he is not immediately driven away, a solitary busker in front of Uwe's fast food shop quickly becomes part of a small orchestra of musicians. Their music follows Uwe back to his house. Rather than turn them away, as one first suspects he would, he finally invites them to play in his shop.

Amidst the frenzy of the polka rhythms, an unkempt, black-bearded unemployed man, sitting at the table and reeking of alcohol, seems to change into one of those peasant figures from the Balkans where, as the cliché has it, there is much dancing and drinking, and music is the cure-all.

Dresen's prescriptions for combating the evils of everyday life invite comparison with forms of protest that became commonplace in the later years of the GDR. Andreas Dresen grew up in the GDR and studied in Badelsberg, Potsdam, under Lothar Bisky, head of the film academy at the time and, until recently, chairman of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany.

At the beginning of the eighties a wave of enthusiasm for folk music swept over the GDR and a layer of youth, repulsed and frustrated by the greyness and limitations of everyday life in the Stalinist state, sought to retreat into a dream-like world extolling the virtues of an "ideal" peasant life close to nature. On occasions this movement took quite ridiculous and embarrassing forms.

At the same time, under conditions where East Germany was palpably not in a position to be able to offer a standard of living corresponding to that available in the West, the bureaucracy extolled "moral values" and an abstract solidarity which clouded over the crisis generated by the narrow-minded, nationalist outlook of the ruling caste.

Andreas Dresen's evident empathy for the characters he portrays is entirely laudable and stands in sharp contrast to the cynicism that predominates in much of today's popular cinema. However in film as in life itself, empathy is not enough. The danger remains that Dresen's intimate, unscripted film, made with a small budget and limited technical resources, appeals to an audience which prefers to dispense with any constructive intellectual analysis of contemporary and future society, in favour of a hazy humanism and the celebration of spontaneity.



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