

54th Berlin Film Festival—Part 4

German films at the Berlin Film Festival: Confused emotions

Bernd Reinhardt
18 March 2004

A German film by Fatih Akin won the “Golden Bear,” the top award at this year’s Berlin film festival. As with Akin’s previous films *Short and Painless* and *Julie*, this film deals with the lives of second- and third-generation Turkish migrants living in Germany.

Sibel and Cahit meet in a psychiatric institution. Both have attempted suicide. The young Sibel, eager to embrace life, feels confined by her family. Her conservative Muslim father is concerned about protecting the family’s honour, while her violent brother watches his sister’s every move. Cahit, who is 20 years older, already has a marriage behind him and wants nothing to do with families. He is a loner, frequents bars, speaks poor Turkish and clears tables in a Hamburg cultural centre.

Sibel wants to escape her restrictions, live life to the full and not just sleep with the same man her whole life. She thinks her only chance to escape the family is through marriage. Cahit, who only wants to be left in peace and drink his beer, eventually and reluctantly agrees to take her as his wife. The deal is that each will live his or her own life and they will sleep apart. Through the quarrelsome interaction of the two, a deeper bond forms without either becoming fully conscious of it. Among their relatives and acquaintances, rumours abound about the strange marriage. When someone jokingly asks whether Cahit is Sibel’s pimp, he unintentionally kills the man and subsequently lands in prison.

Sibel becomes persona non grata with her relatives in Germany. Her cousin in Istanbul, the attractive Selma, arranges a hotel job for her there. Sibel does not feel at home, however. She misses the freedom she had in Germany and slowly sinks into a mire of drugs and alcohol. One night, completely drunk, she is beaten up by several men and receives severe stab wounds. A taxi driver finds her covered in blood.

Following his release from prison, Cahit goes to Turkey to find Sibel, who now has a young daughter and a short modern hairstyle. One never finds out whether there is a man in the picture. Cahit does not want to return to Germany but rather make a life with Sibel. The film ends with Sibel failing to turn up for an arranged rendezvous.

The film has its strong points when it shows, often in a very amusing manner, how old-fashioned traditions, having lost their meaning in modern Germany, live on as empty shells, ostensibly observed but in fact treated with irony.

When he is required to ask Sibel’s parents for their daughter’s hand in marriage in the traditional way, Cahit has absolutely no idea how to conduct himself. A lot seems to depend upon him buying chocolates that don’t contain alcohol. He presents himself as a respectable businessman. Those who recognise his dilemma (and lies) nevertheless play along with the charade. When Sibel’s brother later questions Cahit about why he lied, Cahit replies, “Would you have allowed your sister to marry a dishwasher?” Eventually the brother accepts him when Cahit declares that he really loves his sister.

Appearing repeatedly throughout the film and obviously in ironic fashion is a traditional Turkish folk group, positioned postcard-like, on a large oriental carpet in front of a picturesque view of the city.

Sibel has always admired her cousin from Istanbul, considering her a beautiful, emancipated modern woman. However, as she observes the latter’s life more closely, admiration changes to contempt. The cousin slaves away at the hotel that she hopes to manage in a few years. Selma has paid a high price for her independence and has become embittered by the fact that she has no man and no children.

Sibel seeks to avoid the pitfalls of both conservative tradition and the restraints imposed by modern capitalist life. She prefers an exciting life as part of a social layer where one can do crazy things: drink, dance, take drugs, alternate between moments of passion, then a short time later fight and shout with one another—all with unrestrained energy and passion. Rational thought and conscious behaviour have no place in Sibel’s world.

The film shows the destructiveness of Sibel’s blind emotions (and those of Cahit). In their desire to lead a liberated life, they both run up against an invisible and impenetrable wall. (The German title is *Gegen die Wand*—“Against the Wall.”) The original ending for the film had both characters ending up back in the old alcoholic swamp.

Although the film shows the very evident collapse of Sibel and Cahit’s hopes, it also glamorises to some extent spontaneity and the instinctive. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the elemental power and energy of the main character’s feelings. Cahit is partial to smashing glasses and sweeping them off a table.

One gets the impression that the filmmaker finds their lifestyle more attractive than that of the cousin. However, the one strength of her cousin, which to Sibel seems particularly compromising and petty bourgeois, is Selma’s ability to act in a conscious and thought-out manner. Selma has decided to take an active role in society and is not personally responsible when things go wrong. Sibel and Cahit, despite their hectic activity at the periphery of society, allow themselves to be passively pushed around and are never in control of any significant aspect of their lives.

The director has made a film about a milieu with which he is very familiar. He grew up in such an environment and shows it—probably not without good reason—as being hermetically sealed. There is the Turkish barber and the Turkish disco. Both are only for Turks. Only a Turkish husband would be acceptable to Sibel’s parents. These are pressures that the filmmaker has no doubt experienced. The work fails, however, to prompt the viewer to even the least critical questioning of this isolation and the stubborn survival of conservative traditions in many Turkish families in Germany.

The director has observed that among today’s youth, a strong tendency exists to observe traditions. Is this trend merely due to cultural conservation, or is it also bound up with the particular development of

German society? In Turkey's large cities, such as Istanbul, as the director shows, people seem to live in a more modern manner than in Germany.

In fact, the German Turkish population still largely belongs to the most oppressed of social layers, with a very large proportion of unemployed and welfare recipients. This process is associated with social marginalisation, gradual social decline and difficulties encountered at school. The continuing destruction of social services sharpens this situation considerably. These factors create a fertile ground for national and religious conservatism and all kinds of emotional-aggressive outbursts, which many still consider to be the outcome of the "southern temperament."

There is a certain public that is very susceptible to the glorification of blind emotion. As a general rule, these are well-to-do people who regard such feelings as a sort of social bond along the lines: money is not so important, what counts is what is in one's heart. While they are often concerned about the cultural identity of German citizens of Turkish origin, they give little thought to their social identity. *Head On* will have an especial appeal to precisely such layers.

Following his *England!* (2000), this is the second feature film by director Achim von Borries. *Love in Thoughts (Was nützt die Liebe in Gedanken)* is also a film dealing with powerful emotions and people running mindlessly against a wall.

The story takes place in 1927, during Germany's Weimar Republic (1919-33), and is based on an actual event. Günther, the son of wealthy parents, and Paul, an impoverished poet—18 and 19 years old, respectively—intend to live life without compromises. They read the works of expressionist poets such as Georg Heym and Jakob van Hoddis.

The young men belong to the generation marked by the social consequences of World War One, revolutionary upheavals and the attempts by Weimar politicians to rule bureaucratically during a period of growing social polarisation. Theirs is an outlook that seesaws between a determination to taste every pleasure before the inevitable decline, on the one hand, and the hope of a new better society, on the other—between apocalypse and socialism.

Since the external world is "out of joint" and they don't understand it, the only option for them appears to be to turn inwards, into their own souls, and concentrate on the feelings of love. They strike a deal: they make a suicide pact and agree to depart from a world in which love appears to play no role. Love is the only thing that is really worth dying and killing for. A garden party with friends at the home of Günther's parents becomes the occasion for the tragic event to take place. In the end, two young people are dead.

What the director makes from the material is pretty wretched. Not wanting to make a 1920s film with the usual clichéd décor and fittings, the director has attempted to remain faithful to the historical facts. At the same time, he has evidently compared the events of the 1920s with his own youthful experiences from the 1980s, and then sought to establish a "timeless" expression for such elemental feelings.

Everyone has his or her own experience of first love and first disappointment. Every school has its most popular student, like Hilde, who later on appears not quite so likeable; and its wallflower, who then turns out to have been underestimated. Everyone has felt at some point in his or her youth that life should be more than just having to make compromises. The drugs have changed, and in the 1980s John Lennon might have perhaps assumed the role of Jakob van Hoddis.

Wanting to show "universal youth," and "youth as they really are," the director has stripped down his characters to such an extent that nothing remains of them as individuals, and they are entirely removed from their social environment. The viewer is led to a very banal conclusion: whether such events took place in the eighteenth century during the time of Schiller's *Love and Intrigue*, or Goethe's "Werther" (which in its time produced a wave of suicides), or during the 1920s; the 1960s or the 1980s,

the issue has always been the same—and it always boils down to sex.

That's the way things are portrayed in the film. The cynical homosexual, Günther, wants to pair up Paul—the young poet from his school—with his sensuous sister, Hilde, in order to separate her from his own love, Hans. The sister plays along but still doesn't want to tie herself down. The jealous Günther shoots Hans and then himself.

Much of the film is devoted to shots of a weekend drinking orgy held on property owned by Günther's parents at the romantic, wooded seashore. To emphasise the universality of it all, somebody "scratches" a gramophone record (as in hip-hop), and somebody else sings an American song by a campfire evoking moods of the 1960s. Present-day party drugs did not exist in the 1920s, but there was absinthe. The gun that Günther finally points at his temple is threateningly present during the entire film. It is constantly played with at the party and pointed here and there.

The meditative music serves not to deepen the inner content of the film but only drags it out. The attempts at poetry, as well as Paul's diary—inevitably beginning with, "Dear universe"—appear as the overblown, dreamy scribbling of a high school student who has never slept with a girl. The genuinely beautiful, lyrical shots of landscape only emphasise the lack of coherent character construction. Missing are the specific qualities that might make them living individuals, and the feeling of their time, which would make them historically credible.

Before turning to filmmaking, Achim von Borries had, for a number of years, studied history, politics and philosophy. This seems astonishing upon seeing such a crude and dreary film that so effectively excludes any sort of historical or political references—but it is unfortunately a sign of the times.

It is worthwhile to compare *Love in Thoughts* with the treatment of the same theme in another German film dating from 1960. Society was different then, as was the society of the 1920s, as is society today. In *Painted Youth (Geschminkte Jugend)*, one senses this immediately.

Painted Youth by Max Nossek portrays the individual yearning for love in a social context, as a yearning for a harmonious life within society. Love is depicted in the film as an intense expression of social community—the focal point of a universal yearning for harmony and beauty compresses to a unity. Art appears as a vehicle for this love.

In *Painted Youth*, another Günther wants to break out to new, broader artistic horizons. His problem is that he is fully disillusioned with life. It bores him, it appears banal to him and it has made him cynical. This young man with a Christian background grumbles not only at God. What blocks him and prevents him from reaching a higher ideal, such as the belief in love, is precisely his turning away from real life, which is expressed in his revulsion towards the broad mass of the population. He wants nothing to do with them. They appear to him as an uncouth herd, vulnerable to manipulation and uncultivated. How would it be possible to realise selfless love in such a society? Fully isolated and brimming with self-loathing, he finally shoots himself in front of his friend.

The dimensions of the thoughts and feelings expressed in this film are deeper and more widely embracing than those of the other Günther, in Achim von Borries's new film. Nossek made a film that successfully and concretely captures the mood of the 1920s and in so doing revealed issues that remain relevant for young people today. One does not get the impression he wanted to show "a universal youth."

The flaw of the characters depicted in Nossek's film is not their youthful immaturity. In his work, Günther's hazy notion of an all-embracing love is clearly linked to his turn away from a reality that only leaves him confused and frustrated. He is unable to pursue his ideal in any realisable fashion and remains trapped in a haze of romance and myth.

There is a certain tradition in Germany, during periods of profound social change, to shift emphasis to an internal world of feelings. The Romantic movement of the first half of the nineteenth century was a reaction to the eventual eruption of bourgeois society in Germany. The

turn towards the mystic and inner feelings was also an intrinsic element of the expressionist movement that emerged on the eve of the First World War.

Today's world also poses huge challenges and problems for contemporary artists. Clarity about the past helps in focusing on the present and can help break down the walls that prevent filmmakers from seeing and creating in a genuinely innovative manner.

Concluded



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