

56th Berlin Film Festival—Part 4

Back to Basics?: The Elementary Particles by Oskar Roehler

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One of the four German films to feature in the main competition selection at this year's Berlinale was *The Elementary Particles* by Oskar Roehler. The film is inspired by the 1998 novel of the same title by prominent French author Michel Houellebecq.

In his work as a whole, Roehler exhibits a fascination for thoroughly unstable characters combined with clumsy sideswipes at the post-1968 generation. One motive behind his readiness to film Houellebecq's bleak novel was his supposed realisation that his own generation had to pay a price for the ideals of those active in the social and political movements of the 1960s. When asked by a journalist from *Die Zeit*, "Just like Houellebecq, you make the libertine life-style of your mother responsible for her inability to live and develop relationships?" Roehler replied, "Absolutely. That is exactly what I accuse my mother of. One never recovers from the emotional deprivation of those years."

Roehler's mother was the writer Gisela Elsner, who was born into a wealthy family. Her father had an important job with the Siemens Company. She sought to break free from her parent's values and live a radically different life, traveling the world, joining the Stalinist German Communist Party and writing books critical of capitalism. At the age of 4, her son Oskar was delivered into the care of his grandparents and later went to boarding school—very similar to the childhood experiences of Houellebecq himself. Gisela Elsner committed suicide in 1992, two years after the collapse of Stalinist East Germany.

In *The Elementary Particles*, the half-brothers Bruno and Michael grow up with different sets of grandparents. The brothers were abandoned by their egoistical, hippie-type mother. As a result of their mother's emotional withdrawal, the two boys grow up as mental wrecks, unable to make any profound social relationships. This deficit is expressed in Bruno's overdeveloped sex drive.

Bruno, by occupation a teacher, finally loses control and molests one of his pupils. He ends up as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. Following a divorce from his wife, he also fails in his relationship with Christiane, whom he met at a camp full of former political and lifestyle radicals now seeking spiritual renewal. When Christiane becomes incurably ill, Bruno leaves her in the lurch. In hospital, he finally finds fulfillment for his egoistic, infantile desires: He is cosseted and protected around the clock by motherly sisters, while medicines eliminate his aggressive sexual drive.

Michael is the counterpoint to Bruno. He is able to control his

feelings, which find expression in his exaggerated drive for rational thought and explanation. Characteristically, the talented molecular biologist is working to develop a new means of perfectly controlled future reproduction freed from any sexual contact. In this way, aggressive sexual impulses can be defused. At the same time, genetic manipulation is planned to provide for a powerful extension of erotic feelings, enabling humans to live in a state of constant intoxication.

Since his youth, Michael has been fascinated by Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel, *Brave New World* (1932). He is convinced that Huxley's frightening, soulless "World State" is the type of totalitarian structure that society as a whole desires. While in his work Huxley warned against such a world, Michael, on the other hand, seeks to realise it. At the end of the film, we learn that Michael has received the Nobel prize for his efforts. His research has been confirmed, and scientists have found evidence that there is a connection between monopoly formation in big business, the striving for dominance, the eruption of wars and aggressive sexual impulses.

According to Roehler, *The Elementary Particles* was a major find for him. He would have dearly liked to have written the book himself—a book that allegedly deals with around 200 years of west European customs and morals. Roehler shares the standpoint of the author—i.e., "that interpersonal relations and basic economic conditions have gradually declined, because mankind made a decision in favor of knowledge and research and thereby departed very far from religion."

Roehler's obvious distaste for the basic core of scientific ideals that constituted the European Enlightenment may be one explanation for his specific cinematic work. What is certainly missing in his films are any honest efforts to fathom the feelings and motives of his characters in any variety and depth. The patterns of behaviour of his characters are generally banal and correspond to a recurring schemata. At the heart of his figures is very often a disturbed sexuality. This is accompanied by a preference for contrived situations and conspicuous provocations.

In *The Elementary Particles*, Jane, the mother of the half brothers, is merely autocratic and hollow—as if not belonging to this earth. When she tries to embrace Michael, he shrugs her off in a manner that makes clear that their relationship is deeply disturbed. However, even in the most superficial of personalities,

contradictory feelings and motivations can be detected. Roehler exudes little interest in plumbing these depths.

In an earlier film, *The Untouchable* (2000), Roehler depicts his own mother in the figure of the radically left-wing, tablet-addicted writer Hanna Flanders, whose personal collapse coincides with that of Stalinist East Germany.

Behind her glamorous bewigged exterior (she ostentatiously removes and replaces her wig on a number of occasions), Roehler locates a thoroughly immature and egotistical woman who deserted her child and was incapable of providing for herself. Confronted with financial difficulties, she turns to her parents for a handout, even refusing any health insurance coverage, sure in the knowledge that her parents will always pay her exorbitant doctor's bills.

A number of figures in the film accuse her of inhabiting her own self-made world and refusing to confront reality: her rich parents; her alcohol-addicted ex-husband, who still mourns for the anarchist terrorists of the Red Army Fraction; a cynical history teacher from East Berlin; and former "comrades" from her East Berlin publishing house.

In an interview, Roehler declares that the radicalism and egoism of his mother stem from her psychological condition: "She was completely unstable with an inclination to hysteria." The general conclusion of the film is that notions of and attempts to better the world are grounded in a psychological failure to confront reality.

In his film *Agnes and Her Brothers* (2004), Roehler depicts a Green Party politician who brings to mind the former Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin, whose greatest achievement was the introduction of a European-wide deposit on cans and bottles. The pettiness of his achievements corresponds, according to Roehler, to the pettiness of his egoistical nature. Naturally, the film also features a neglected son who aggressively pursues his father throughout the house with a movie camera.

To underline the disturbed relationship of the father to the generation of 1968 radicals, he keeps a shepherd dog called Joschka, named after Germany's former Foreign Minister and ex-radical Joschka Fischer. Roehler is a great fan of such overstatement, which gives him room to concentrate on other things that are more important to him. As we observe the father during a frustrating telephone conversation with Joschka Fischer over the bottle-deposit issue, he suddenly reverts to an infantile condition and throws up on a piece of paper—all of which is diligently filmed by his son.

Anyone who represents any sort of ideals, who in any manner takes up social issues, is depicted as a neurotic. Michael's strong urge for scientific truth is also diseased, and the racist lampoons that Bruno presents to a publishing house are dismissed as merely the result of an inferiority complex and sexual jealousy. According to the producer of the film, Bernd Eichinger, "What finally motivates us is an aggressiveness in life that has a great deal to do with sex."

Such stress on the role of drives and aggression recalls the "God is dead" pronouncements of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in the last third of the nineteenth century. Away, says Nietzsche, with all the props and crutches—including scientific thought—that prevent us from acknowledging that the true nature of

man lies in his animal drives, which are of an essentially egoistical nature. Nietzsche regarded all those who advocated a more socially just and equitable life as sick—too weak to bear reality. Mankind has to develop its own individual values: "The profoundest laws of preservation and growth demand the reverse of Kant: that each of us should devise his own virtue, his own categorical imperative."

One can certainly make justified criticisms of many of those active in the radicalisation of the 1960s, their superficial treatment of the significance of fascism, their naïveté towards or adaptation to Stalinism. Roehler can also accuse his mother of egoism. But his narrow-minded approach means that he will never arrive at more than a fragmented understanding of her behaviour and personality. The way in which people respond, whether they are neurotic or not, why they defend certain ideals, is closely bound up with the social, cultural and ideological realities of their time, and the period preceding. Such a principle also applies to the director, but he chooses to ignore such considerations.

It is appropriate to criticise the 1968 generation for the inadequacy or wrong-headedness of their ideals and perspective, but it is entirely misplaced to criticise them for having had an ideal *in the first place*. Houellebecq, whose grandmother was a member of the French Stalinist party, has gone so far in his own disdain for social revolutionaries as to approve the mass murders and purges conducted by Stalin in the 1930s, because, as Houellebecq maintains, they also resulted in the killing of many anarchists.

The Elementary Particles begins in typically provocative fashion with a quote by Albert Einstein to the effect that it is more important to be able to orient oneself in the world than understand it. The film returns to this notion at its conclusion. Michael and Bruno sit with their two wives in beach chairs and gaze in contemplation at the sea. In reality, one of the beach chairs is empty because Christiane has committed suicide. But she still exists for the deranged Bruno.

The final message is that the nature of the world and how one makes sense of reality are essentially unimportant; more important is that one somehow struggles through—an alarmingly irresponsible and narrow-minded perspective.



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