

57th Berlin Film Festival—Part 2

Some rumblings in German film

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This is the second in a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival.

Christian Petzold is one of the more interesting directors currently working in Germany, and his latest film *Yella* stood out in the competition selection of this year's Berlinale. In collaboration with his regular scriptwriter Harun Farocki, Petzold has produced a series of films including *Wolfsburg* (2003), *The State I Am In* (*Die innere Sicherheit*, 2000), which combine well-wrought stories with a keen eye for social detail. At the same time Petzold's (and Farocki's own) films begin to blur at the edges when broader political or ideological themes are involved. The strengths and weaknesses of this pair were once again visible in *Yella* (on which Farocki worked as script editor).

The film opens in the eastern German town of Wittenberg. Yella is a young woman who, like many others in the east, is unable to find employment in her town and is forced to move to the west. As she walks the streets between her home and the local train station she is stalked by a man, who turns out to be her estranged husband.

A little later we learn that the husband—also like many young East Germans after German reunification—has invested a great deal of money in a start-up-business which has gone bust. He is ruined, in debt and now the ultimate blow—his wife has left him.

Salvation for Yella comes in the form of a job offer in western Germany—now she can leave her past behind her. On the way to her train she is once again confronted by her ex-husband with traumatic consequences. Nevertheless, determined to make the break, Yella succeeds in travelling to the west and, as the audience discovers, leaps out of the eastern frying pan into the western fire. In the west her new employer has just been fired. His first and only commission for Yella is to smuggle herself into the office from which he has been barred in order to rescue the petty cash box. Somebody has got there first. The small change left is just enough for a good meal.

Yella has made her first sobering experience of life in western Germany. Within the space of hours Yella is looking for another employer. As it turns out her new boss Philipp is a venture capitalist—and involved in even shadier deals than her first employer. Nevertheless Yella is eager to succeed at all costs and we witness a series of amusing and informative “power lunches” between Yella, her boss and would-be business customers.

Petzold's presentation of the unscrupulous Philipp, who is prepared to ride roughshod over his clients in search of maximum profits, and always has the bigger, ultimate deal on the horizon, is

compelling. Petzold and Farocki have evidently spent some time assimilating and getting to grips with the nature, morals and personalities involved in new forms of capitalist money making.

In 2004 Farocki made his own documentary, *Nicht ohne Risiko* (*Not without Risk*), exploring the world of private equity finance. These issues are weaved into Petzold's new film story in a convincing manner. Using some outstanding actors, Petzold is able to create genuinely gripping moments of dramatic conflict, and we witness how the quiet but sympathetically portrayed Yella is able to mutate into a figure just as ruthless as her new boss (and partner).

A recurring theme in Petzold's film is alienation in modern society, and he is able to achieve a palpable atmosphere in *Yella* of estrangement and gloom. This is a world with no happy endings.

At the same time the atmosphere remains nebulous—many questions remain not just unanswered, but not even addressed. Yella's home town is famous as the site of Martin Luther's revolt against the organised church. In 1517 Luther is alleged to have hung his 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg cathedral—an event of crucial significance for the development of the Reformation.

Today the town has a less illustrious tale to tell. Tens of thousands of inhabitants have left since German reunification. Following the closure of the town's industry, Wittenberg now has an unemployment rate of 58 percent. There is a connection between the sort of uninhibited forms of venture capitalism, which flourished in the west in the 1990s and the collapse of the former eastern bloc countries. A huge barrage of propaganda was launched in the West to demonstrate that the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy meant the end of genuine socialism, leaving society free to the ravages of the only type of viable society—the free market.

The consequences of this campaign and free-market capitalism have been disastrous—not only for the lives and living standards of ordinary people in eastern Germany but throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. These issues lie fallow in Petzold's film, the biographies of his characters have no real history. As a result we are left with the suggestion that alienation is an inevitable component of being human, rather than the product of definite social relations which can be understood, combated and overcome.

Der Rote Elvis by director Leopold Grün is a revealing documentary about the short life and career of the American singer Dean Reed, who quit the US at the start of his career to follow his

political beliefs. He ended up in East Germany where, driven to political and artistic desperation by the stifling demands of the Stalinist bureaucracy, he committed suicide in 1986.

Born in 1938, Reed grew up in Denver, Colorado, and as a young man began a career in show business. Like many young people of his generation Reed was radicalised in the 1960s by the social upheavals in America and the Vietnam war. After a brief stint in Hollywood and a recording contract, Reed travelled to South America where his first experiences of mass poverty and the consequences of US imperialist policies drew him towards communism. He spoke out against oppression and poverty and learnt Spanish to be able to communicate better with ordinary people. In *Red Elvis* we see footage of Reed expressing his disgust with US policy and taking part in the burning of the American flag at a US embassy. In 1966 he was deported from Argentina for his anti-US agitation.

Reed was personally acquainted with Salvador Allende and was deeply affected by the brutal US-sponsored coup which brought an end to the Popular Unity government in Chile in September 1973. After a brief spell making “spaghetti westerns” in Italy, Reed eventually moved to East Germany in the same year.

Red Elvis features a US right-wing radio commentator who accuses Reed of “opportunism” and “careerism” in choosing to associate with the communist movement. At the same time the film makes clear that Reed’s espousal of the poor and oppressed in South America brought him little in the way of material benefits. Instead after his move to East Germany (GDR) Reed was ruthlessly exploited by the bureaucracy for its political purposes. *Red Elvis* features footage of the last leader of the GDR, Egon Krenz, frankly declaring: “We used him. We told him what to do.”

Reed was regularly rolled out at party functions of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) to entertain between speeches and inject some life into the squalid and utterly stage-managed conference proceedings. At the same time the singer featured in a series of trashy cowboy films popular at the time in a number of eastern bloc countries.

We witness a string of singing and film performances by Reed at different stages of his career. In 1984, the *New York Times* described him as “the Johnny Cash of Communism.” Reed had the good looks of a leading man and his singing voice was pleasant, but limited. Reed gave no indication of being particularly ambitious in terms of his artistic repertoire—he was certainly no Johnny Cash—but *Red Elvis* does make clear that towards the end of his life, Reed was increasingly suffocated and frustrated with the artistic and political persona thrust upon him by his political masters in East Berlin.

The film features footage from 1985. Reed had returned briefly to the US and made an appearance on “60 Minutes,” in which he defended his political convictions with the words: “There was a time in American history when revolution was not a dirty word.” In the same programme he invoked the ire of the right-wing (and no doubt his mentors in East Germany) by comparing Ronald Reagan to Stalin. Hate mail following his appearance contributed to his decision to return to the GDR, where he committed suicide one year later.

Confronted with the death of one of its most prized cultural

possessions, the GDR bureaucracy denied the facts pointing to Reed’s tragic suicide and reported his death as an accident. Grün’s film backs away from probing in any depth Reed’s political and ideological motivation. Instead we are presented with figures—such as Krenz and right-wing radio jockey Peter Boyles—who are uncritically presented as figures with something authoritative to say about Reed.

Nevertheless, despite its weaknesses, *Red Elvis* provides a fascinating glimpse into the way in which an American idealist who espoused communism was driven to frustration and ultimately to his death by the despicable opportunism and narrow-mindedness of the Soviet and East German Stalinist bureaucracy.

The Counterfeiters, currently on release in German cinemas, is an engaging and thoughtful study of inmates at the Nazi concentration camp in Sachsenhausen, who during the Second World War were forced to help the German war effort by printing forged currency in a counterfeiting workshop.

The story is based on a true account of the forgery workshop as told in Adolf Burger’s book *Des Teufels Werkstatt (The Devil’s Workshop)*. The film follows the fortunes of Salomon Sorowitsch, who had won a reputation in Germany in the 1930s as a notorious counterfeiter. In 1944 he is transferred as a Jewish prisoner to the Nazi death camp at Sachsenhausen. Sorowitsch fears the worst, but in fact the superintendent of the camp has a mission for him: Sorowitsch and a group of hand-picked professionals are to produce fake foreign currency. To this end they are given privileged conditions inside the camp to carry out their work.

There are evident dangers involved in making films about fascist Germany. The film *Sass* (2001), for example, was also based on a real life story—that of the Sass brothers, siblings from a working class background who carried out a series of robberies culminating in a spectacular robbery of Nazi money from Germany’s supposedly safest bank. In the case of *Sass* the rise of fascist Germany and the deprivations of German society in the 1920s and 1930s become the quirky backdrop for a tale of personal advancement and retribution. Issues of political and moral values are largely excluded from the film.

For his part, the director of *The Counterfeiters*, Stefan Ruzowitsky, does not shrink from addressing the political and moral dilemmas which confront the team of counterfeiters in their work. Success in their project means assisting the war aims of the hated enemy responsible for the mass deaths of their fellow prisoners. At the same time any refusal to cooperate on the part of the counterfeiters would lead to immediate reprisals for the entire team by their Nazi jailors. This conflict of conscience is dealt with in the film in an intelligent and gripping manner in the form of a series of discussions/disputes between Sorowitsch and the Communist printer Adolf Burger.



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