

61st Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

Dirk Lütter's *The Education*: what today's youth face

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This is the fifth and final part of a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 10-20, 2011. Part 4 was posted April 9, Part 3 on March 11, Part 2 on March 7 and Part 1 on March 3.

German director Dirk Lütter has made a compelling debut work about the depressing situation confronting today's job seekers. His film, *The Education* (*Die Ausbildung*), won the "Dialogue en perspective" prize, which is awarded annually by an international jury of young people.

Twenty-year-old Jan is a young man in the final year of a job-training scheme. If all goes well, he would like to become a salesman, his father's profession. He also hopes to get a job at the small firm where he is training.

The firm, however, turns out to be little more than a coldly functioning machine. The working climate is entirely oriented to the attainment of maximum efficiency. Relations between workers in this "machine" are distant and formal, as impersonal and disingenuous as their behaviour towards customers on the telephone. They regard each other suspiciously, casting furtive glances when backs are turned.

Jan is unnerved by the atmosphere. But he learns to behave in precisely the same manner, because he wants to get employment in this particular field. The personnel manager with his flashy car and convivial chat becomes the youth's role model, and Jan begins to serve him by spying on a department head, suspected of being responsible for frequent interruptions to the workflow.

Later, he is distraught to learn that the recently sacked department manager is a single mother with a handicapped son. Jan's tentative love for a young temporary worker is shattered before it ever really begins. The firm finally takes Jan on...but in Munich, far away from the girl, who is only able to find work in her own

hometown. Jan is a modern slave, forced to subordinate his personal life to the immediate profit interests of his employer.

The film certainly strikes a nerve. The director (born in 1970 in Neuss), who has worked primarily as a cinematographer, is familiar with the inhuman pressure on people to adjust to the workplace and the great stress involved in holding down a job. "These days", he says, "you always get the feeling there are plenty of people ready to take your job if you don't want to do it". Now over 40, he can begin to think of starting a family, but he admits that "Earlier, I was too worried about my prospects of financial security to take this step".

Researching the film, Lütter investigated companies where many employees told him of similar incidents of spying on the part of fellow workers. He says: "It reminds me of the Stasi [former East German secret police]. There are certain parallels to the situation today—only in other contexts, under different circumstances. It's not something that should have anything to do with a free society. I'd really like to see a broad discussion of the issue in our society". According to the director, social criticism is "the only reason for making films".

The film shows clearly and convincingly how every aspect of the business operation—including its strictly hierarchical organisation—is subordinated to the brutal demands of profit-making. Under such management, individuality within the workforce is not required, as images of the employees queuing at the firm's automated entry gate emphasise. The rhetorical, formulaic tone of the employees' speech is part of the film's aesthetic concept, as is the use of the chorus between scenes, reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's technique.

Of particular interest are the contradictions revealed in the film. Jan's mother is an active trade unionist and

member of the works council. This militant woman can always find a clause in the regulations to aid her in arguing against the boss. She fights, for example, for the right of temporary contract workers to pay the same low price for lunches as full-time company employees. On the other hand, she does not get up in arms when the company makes the much more important decision to replace its entire cafeteria staff with cheap foreign labour. Suddenly, one day, the new personnel are there.

Sensing his mother on the lookout for privileges from the management, Jan begins to have doubts about her integrity as a delegate for the workers. These doubts vanish when the company suddenly fires her on trumped-up grounds. However, it remains a mystery why there is suddenly nothing left of the mother's fighting spirit. She leaves a final impression only of weakness and helplessness. It is also intriguing that Jan, who has, after all, grown up in the home of a union militant, adapts himself so completely to the working atmosphere that he is even prepared to act as a management spy.

These contradictions are worth considering, especially because the film itself either cannot or does not want to resolve them. It merely suggests that capitalism today is so aggressive that even subservient unions are getting into difficulty. The film's director thus calls rather lamely for the better training of trade unionists and works council representatives so they can withstand the pressure exerted by financially powerful companies.

The possible positive impact of such a measure is extremely doubtful, to say the least. The opportunist policy of fighting for one's own job or factory, at the expense, if necessary, of every other worker (and at the expense of one's working conditions and wages), is official union policy. It has helped transform the unions and their officials into stooges of big business who reject and suppress any serious struggle in favour of worthless symbolic gestures.



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