

Young Goethe in Love: In fact, just another love story

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Directed by Philipp Stölzl; screenplay by Stölzl, Christoph Müller and Alexander Dydyna

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832), poet, novelist, dramatist, philosopher, naturalist and physicist, was a towering figure in German and world culture. His major works, including *Götz von Berlichingen*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Egmont*, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *Faust* and *Elective Affinities*, as well as his vast body of verse, hold their power and influence to this day.

Goethe's thought and work were nourished by, and nourished, in turn, some of the most critical artistic and political currents of the modern epoch: the Enlightenment, *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress), Romanticism. He experienced the influence of the American and French revolutions and the Napoleonic wars, as well as the restoration of various European monarchies in 1815.

In 1774, during the so-called *Sturm und Drang* period, Goethe wrote *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which captivated the literary world and deeply influenced a generation of European youth. One of the great love stories in world literature, in critic Georg Lukács' view, "Werther's tragedy of love is a tragic explosion of all those passions which occur in life, in a divided, partial, abstract way; but in *Werther* they are fused, in a fire of passionate love into a homogeneous, glowing and radiant mass." (*Goethe and His Age*.)

German filmmaker Philipp Stölzl has attempted to tell the story of how *Werther* came to be created in his latest movie, *Young Goethe in Love*. The film's German title is simply *Goethe!*, which brings to mind a carnival barker introducing one of his attractions. Indeed, Stölzl lays claim to having directed the first feature film about the legendary artist.

This is a lofty and serious undertaking, whose execution, unfortunately, leaves much to be desired. Stölzl reduces the drama of Goethe's life to its lowest common denominator,

that of a tormented poet in love. But in creating a timeless cliché, the director has knocked out the concrete, specific and historical personality. The question then is: why film this *particular* story?

The film's storyline proceeds largely according to a template. When the movie opens, in 1772, the 23-year-old Goethe (Alexander Fehling) is an aspiring poet and playwright who has just flunked his bar exams. He is rebellious, irreverent and not interested in a legal career, treating the law faculty with disdain. Disapproving of his son's proclivity for the impractical world of art, Goethe's father (Henry Hübchen) banishes him from Frankfurt to the rural outpost of Wetzlar to work as a county clerk and earn his keep.

There, he befriends a stuttering, sensitive colleague named Wilhelm Jerusalem (Volker Bruch), who brings him to a ball where he meets the vivacious, independent-minded Charlotte Buff (Miriam Stein). After an initial mutual cold-shouldering, Goethe and Lotte give in to love and passion in a sexual romp in the rain and mud. But Lotte's kind and respectable father has fallen on hard times. To ensure the future of his large brood of motherless children, he arranges a marriage for Lotte with Goethe's supervisor, the hard-working, emotionally stiff Albert Kestner (Moritz Bleibtreu).

After his friend Wilhelm commits suicide over a failed love affair, the distraught Goethe and jealous Kestner face off in an ultimately bloodless duel that lands the former in jail. Miserable in his incarceration and despairing over losing Lotte, Goethe writes *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in the form of letters. The *Sturm und Drang* novel captures the public's imagination and launches him as a literary celebrity, much to his own amazement and that of his proud papa, now convinced that art has its merits.

Young Goethe in Love is not completely bereft of charm. There are the energetic performances of its attractive leads, especially the talented and entertaining Fehling as the poet. The film is appealingly shot in soft, earthy colors and manages a fast-moving tempo. In short, it is a pleasant

movie experience. But it is not, in any meaningful sense, an experience concerning Goethe.

In the film's production notes, Stölzl writes: "Goethe is Germany's most famous and important poet and philosopher, yet there has never been a relevant feature film about this extraordinary personality. There's a reason for this, too: Goethe could do everything and was everything! He was handsome, came from a wealthy family, wrote successful novels, theater plays and poems, was an accomplished horseback rider and fencer, invented roller skates and discovered the pharyngeal bone, and he was a natural scientist, privy councilor, traveler, artist, minister, lawyer, and much, much more—all in all, a universal genius and thus a completely non-dramatic character for a feature film."

If such a Renaissance man is not the right stuff for cinematic rendering, then naturally Goethe has to be reshaped, or rather cut down to size—the right size for the film's creators, which is that of a mortal modeled on their own likenesses, by and large. As a veteran maker of music and corporate videos, Stölzl has prepared himself to introduce a younger generation to Goethe via this simplifying operation.

Goethe lived through some of the most titanic events in modern history, coming to artistic maturity in the midst of the two greatest bourgeois revolutions. But there is nothing in the film that pinpoints its historical location. As is often the case, sets, costumes and hairpieces stand in for a genuine engagement with history. Rather than trying to dramatize the artist as a man of his period, Stölzl opts to knock him down a peg or ten.

In *Young Goethe*, Goethe's most digestible quality is that of a love-sick poet, or as Stölzl puts it, the writer "achieved his greatest artistic success as a result of his greatest love pangs." It should be pointed out that the real-life story of Goethe and Lotte is more complex than that presented in the film. The translator's preface to Thomas Mann's novel, *Lotte in Weimar: The Beloved Returns*, observes that "Goethe, Kestner, and Lotte spent an idyllic summer, Goethe falling in love first with the mutual love of his friends, then with Lotte herself, lastly and most of all with his own emotions as poet and lover."

That is not to say that his friend Jerusalem's suicide, as well as his feelings for Lotte, did not figure as impulses for *Werther*. But for the cosmopolitan Goethe, there was never a simple line from point A to point B. Through the medium of genius, the creative process involved absorbing and translating into fiction many critical details of life, the dialectical filtering of a revolutionary era.

Again on *Werther*, Lukács wrote that Goethe portrayed the everyday life of his age with a deep "understanding of its

driving-forces and its fundamental contradictions ... The enthusiastic reception of *Werther* throughout Europe shows what the inhabitants of countries at a more advanced stage of capitalism [than Germany] must have experienced immediately in *Werther's* fate: *tua res agitur* (This is your concern)."

Instead of attempting to tackle such a rich and textured perspective, the film employs simple categories as its main device. Therefore, Lotte can say towards the film's end, "It is more than truth. It is poetry." But truth is not facile, nor is its poetic expression.

Perhaps it is worth citing what Goethe himself wrote in *Werther* about those trying to quash the artistic spirit: "Why does the stream of genius so seldom break out as a torrent, with roaring high waves, and shake your awed soul?—Dear friends, because there are cool and composed gentlemen living on both banks, whose garden house, tulip beds and cabbage fields would be devastated if they had not in good time known how to meet the threatening danger by building dams and ditches." *While Young Goethe in Love* does not build dams and ditches, nor is it maliciously made, it does dampen "threatening dangers" with a large dose of mediocrity.

Goethe understood something about the relationship between the artist, his or her time and the quality of his or her work. Johann Peter Eckermann, in his famous *Conversations with Goethe*, cited the writer as saying, "[O]ne must *be* something in order to *do* something. Dante seems to us great; but he had the culture of centuries behind him." And furthermore: "More than mere talent is required to become a proficient. The person must also live amid important circumstances."

When it comes to the serious deficiencies of *Young Goethe in Love*, one has to hold culturally retrograde and stagnant times chiefly responsible.



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