63rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

Gold by Thomas Arslan: Always on the move—but why, and where?

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This is the sixth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 7-17, 2013. Part 1 *was posted on February 21,* part 2 *on February 27,* part 3 *on March 1,* part 4 *on March 4 and* part 5 *on March 6.*

German filmmaker Thomas Arslan has made a number of interesting films in the past. His Berlin trilogy, consisting of *Geschwister* (*Siblings*, 1997), *Dealer* (1999) and *A Fine Day* (2001), dealt with some of the everyday problems confronting youth in Berlin whose parents had immigrated to Germany.

Lately his main interest appears to be demonstrating his opposition to Hollywood cinema through the use of traditional film genres--one of the aims of the so-called Berlin School with which he is associated. After making the unconvincing thriller *In the Shadow* (2010), he completed his first Western, *Gold*, for this year's Berlin competition. *Gold* is Arslan's first film dealing with the German past, or Germans in the past. In the 19th century there was a wave of impoverished Germans who sought their luck in America, some 6 million of them, in fact, between 1830 and 1900. The director, who also wrote the screenplay, explains that the inspiration for the film came from old photos and diaries.

The year is 1898. During the great Klondike gold rush, a group of seven German immigrants, lured by gold fever, are struggling to negotiate the Canadian woods, heading north. The group's leader has promised an easy journey, but it doesn't work out that way. In the middle of the wilderness they are collectively forced to take stock. The would-be prospectors still face an arduous journey, with almost 1,500 miles left to their destination. None of them arrive there. The one

who gets farthest is the former maid, Emily (Nina Hoss). *Gold* dispenses with genre clichés such as breathtaking panoramic shots, rushing rivers and the legendary pioneering spirit. The music, which brings Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) to mind, assumes an ironic function for long stretches. Arslan's documentary-type approach concentrates on the everyday and the banal. We witness the daily hardships, detours going nowhere, a covered wagon breaking down, a horse dying of exhaustion.

The dialogue of these poor devils seeking to escape poverty is reduced to a minimum. Energy is preserved for what is essential. Their relations to one another are strictly determined by the need to survive.

Arslan's earlier film *A Fine Day* took an ironic view toward dreams of a better life. When Deniz (Serpil Turhan), an aspiring actress, is dubbing an emotional scene from an Eric Rohmer film, her somewhat monotonous tone of voice lends the sequence an unintentionally comic effect. In another scene, a leftist history professor informs Deniz that unlike in the past, conditions exist today where love can flourish. Deniz is sceptical. Her life has taught her the opposite. Nevertheless, she stubbornly continues looking for true love.

Such dogged attempts to attain an ideal despite difficulties are absent in Arslan's more recent *In the Shadows*. Here movement is everything. The world of Trojan (Misel Maticevic), a petty criminal, is severed from everyday life. Arslan prefers to concentrate on the sober presentation of the crime to be committed, which requires its own clockwork precision.

The film is inspired by the late, increasingly pessimistic films of French director Jean-Pierre

Melville (1917-1973). But Arslan asserts that even Melville's stark films were overly moralistic. In Arslan's criminal underworld there is not a trace of romance. Trojan undertakes his work with precision free of any sort of moral or psychological considerations. We have no idea what motivates him. Like the hero of some computer game, he runs down long corridors and streets, always on the move.

In an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, Arslan explained his rather limited conception: "I love showing people searching for something and the physical process resulting from that, without knowing where it might lead…To show people in movement, trying to conquer a trail of some sort, and to find a way to convey it in rhythm and form, that's cinema for me."

In *Gold* the immigrants' dream of wealth comes to an abrupt end in the wilderness. Their motion takes place at a snail's pace compared to Trojan, but at a certain point it is equally aimless. One after another, the settlers succumb to their weaknesses. The group's leader falls victim to his greed. The sleazy travel journalist who takes over as leader steps in a bear trap; a third goes crazy, yearning for his family.

Emily holds out longer than all the others. She is similar to Trojan, which gives her all the charisma of a Prussian army officer's daughter. Both characters are essentially artificial, not taken from life. Arslan has adapted them to his simplified version of reality that leaves no room for dreams and human frailties. To act rationally in this world means adapting completely to the prevailing conditions. Human interaction is based on immediate needs. The only glimmer of hope comes at the end of the film. Emily decides to plough on alone following the death of the man she loved.

Commercial and Hollywood cinema are full of examples of fraudulent feelings, hypocritical morality and sentimentalism. But dreams of a better future, ideals and morals, based on the possibilities offered by existing conditions, have always played a major role in social development. They are responsible for the very steam engine that roars through Arslan's film. Ideals associated with conceptions of social justice have inspired entire generations.

The current generation of artists is well aware of the fact that many of those active in the social upheavals of the late 1960s have junked their ideals as though they were mere sentimental fantasies. In *Gold* one observes

that this process has not left Arslan unscathed.
To be continued

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