63rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 8

No holds barred: Two German documentaries— *I Will Not Lose* and *Metamorphoses*

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This is the eighth and last 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,* part 5 *on March 6,* part 6 *on March 10 and* part 7 *on March 13.*

There were virtually no German films at this year's Berlinale that addressed social issues in an important manner. None of the films on show dealt with the current economic situation, the suffering of the population or social life in general.

Unlike previous years (for example, *Night before Eyes* [*Nacht vor Augen*], 2008, *Day of the Sparrow* [*Der Tag des Spatzen*], 2010) there was an absence of films dealing with the highly controversial issue of Germany's expansionist military policy.

Instead, many of the German films at the festival seemed to imply that the fate and happiness of the individual had little to do with broader social and material questions, but was rather simply—and directly—a matter of how individuals related to one another.Two documentary films provided the exception.

I Will Not Lose by Sandra Kaudelka

The hype about the widely publicised trials held in Germany in 2000 over doping in sports may have created the impression that athletic achievements in the former East Germany (GDR) resulted solely from systematic drug use. Sandra Kaudelka, a former world champion diver, disputes this view in her documentary *I Will Not Lose* [*Einzelkämpfer*]**.**

A number of sporting legends from the Stalinist GDR speak in the film. Marita Koch's world record in the 400 metres remains unsurpassed today. Udo Beyer was an Olympic champion and held several world records in the shot putt, while Brita Baldus was an East German and European diving champion. Also present is Ines Geipel, a former leading sprinter, who has been campaigning on behalf of victims of forced drug-taking in the GDR for some years.

Drug-taking, however, is not the central concern in *I Will Not Lose*. Instead, the comments of the sportsmen and women offer insight into the contradictory role of sports in East Germany. The promotion of sports certainly had its socially progressive element. The search for talent was wide-ranging, reaching even the kindergartens in the smallest provincial towns. No talent was overlooked. Beyer came from a working class family of six children.

At the same time, the strict focus on high performance at any cost served the state and its attempt to promote patriotism. Sports was supposed to demonstrate something that the East Germany economy could not—the superiority of the GDR's Stalinist system.The social privileges that the elite athletes enjoyed were derisory compared to today's global standards—for example, they were provided fruit from southern Europe all year round. Many saw competitive sport as an opportunity to see something of the world.However, the price was high. The regime viewed top athletes as its property. For those with real talent, according to Kaudelka, it was almost impossible to quit sports. She succeeded in doing so only after the break-up of the GDR. The state responded harshly to anyone regarded as "ungrateful".

When it emerged that Geipel intended to move to West Germany, she was brutally damaged during an operation supposedly to remove her appendix. The reason for her recurring stomach pains were only recently discovered.

The state's ruthlessness with regard to its athletes found expression in the policy of compulsory drug-taking. The danger of potential medical complications and side effects was deliberately concealed. Child athletes were also victims, unaware of the consequences of the "vitamins" they were given to consume.

We see photos from the 2000 trials of those chiefly responsible, including the former head of sports in the GDR, Manfred Ewald, and sports doctor Manfred Hüppner. Both received only suspended sentences. Ewald failed to express a word of regret.The director does not prompt the interviewees to discuss doping. *I Will Not Lose* concentrates on the difficult training, and one gets an idea of how competitive sports means enormous discipline and the sacrifice of a normal life, but also the satisfaction in striving for new heights of achievement.

Geipel agreed to having her name struck from the record books, but Beyer sees no reason to do so. He admits to having knowingly taken drugs, but they were not a magic potion: “You can give an knackered horse as many drugs as you want, he will never win the race”.

In a noteworthy scene in Kaudelka’s film, Beyer compares the pressure to perform on athletes in the GDR with the demands of modern-day capitalist society. The performance principle propagated in the GDR was “capitalism within socialism”, he notes. The self-satisfied pronouncements from Beyer, who has established himself as a businessman, make clear that he feels very much at home in German capitalism. But he is right. The traditional socialist movement with its Olympics for workers was opposed to the dog-eat-dog performance principle in sports.

It should be added finally that the constant domestic media attacks on doped athletes from the GDR was aimed, among other things, at distracting attention from the less-than-successful state of post-reunification German sports, “where there is also drug-taking”. For Beyer, the important work at the grass-roots level is lacking in Germany today.

Former leading GDR athletes such as Roland Matthes—who entered the international swimming hall of fame in 1981 and has been the only athlete to be inducted into the German sports hall of fame since reunification in 1991—have made their criticisms of the German system public. Birgit Fischer, the leading canoeist in the GDR and the most successful German Olympic athlete of all time, has called for the selection system that existed in the GDR to be re-established.

***Metamorphosen* by Sebastian Mez**

Sebastian Mez’s last film, *A Letter from Germany* (2011), achieved international acclaim. That work, about eastern Europeans forced into prostitution in Germany, won the main prize for best medium-length film at the Visions du Réel, an important international documentary festival held in Nyon, Switzerland. In his latest film, *Metamorphoses*, which he shot without the permission of the Russian government, Mez has made a memorable work about ordinary people forced to live under unbelievably harsh conditions.

Beyond Chelyabinsk in the southern Urals there is a highly radioactive region of some 20,000 square kilometres. From 1948 onward, this was the site of the Mayak plutonium factory. The plutonium was used in nuclear weapons, and since the 1980s, the area has been used for reprocessing nuclear materials.The water supply was contaminated following a series of accidents at the plant in September 1957 that led to the escape of nuclear material into the surrounding rivers. The region is considered the most highly uranium-contaminated in the world. The Kyshtym nuclear accident (named after the nearest known town) is the third largest in history, behind only Chernobyl and Fukushima. Some 270,000 people living in the area were exposed to a vast increase in radiation. Because of specific meteorological conditions, European warning systems did not pick anything up and the accident remained a secret for more than 30 years.

In Mez’s film, an old man tells how he used to bathe in a highly contaminated river. Doctors concealed the fact that many physical complaints were the result of the radioactivity. The stories from the people affected implicate the former Soviet government, as well as the current Russian authorities. The plant remains in operation and is contaminating the surrounding area, even as people continue to live there. Attempts at evacuation have been totally inadequate, as shown by a case where people were only moved 2 kilometres away.The eyewitness account from a worker of a near catastrophe in 2000, when the power supply to the factory shut down for 40 minutes, is one of the high points of *Metamorphoses*.

The residents of the area attempt to lead a normal life in spite of the radioactivity. There are some animal rights activists. The children of the local kindergarten seem healthy as they laugh and dance, but are they really? A man claims he can rid his body of radiation by sweating in the sauna. We experience the difficulties for people living in the area to start a family. Many relationships break down when it is found out that one of the partners comes from the region. We see a boy with deformed ears.Along with its content, which includes text that unfortunately moves too quickly, the film contains remarkable imagery. It seeks to make the invisible radiation a visual experience. On the surface, the region appears no different from any other. The film was shot in black-and-white. Long shots underscore the area’s forlorn and timeless character, as it will remain contaminated for a very long time to come.

Many of the images make use of stark contrasts, including close-ups of human faces that appear almost abstract. This gives a suggestive impression of the destructiveness of the “invisible”. One knows that the sheep, that have just been slaughtered, should not be eaten. Pictures of fish gasping for air are a metaphor for the human predicament in the region. It is a vast social tragedy. *Concluded*