

64th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

Between faith and the striving for truth: German films in competition at the Berlinale

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This is the fourth of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 6-16, 2014. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 February 24 and Part 3 February 26.

German films were well represented at this year's Berlin film festival, with no less than four productions screened in the festival competition programme alone.

Beloved Sisters

The most satisfying German competition entry was Dominik Graf's *Beloved Sisters*, which delves deeply into German history. Set in the era of the German Enlightenment, the film dramatises poet and dramatist Friedrich Schiller's relationship with the Lengefeld sisters, Charlotte (Henriette Confurius) and Caroline (Hannah Herzsprung).

The Lengefelds belong to the poorer aristocracy. After the death of the girls' father, a professional hunter, they find themselves short of money. Only if the daughters marry well can the family be saved from financial ruin. Charlotte's venture into the court at Weimar to find a wealthy husband turns out to be as fruitless as it is humiliating. It reinforces her aversion to the grovelling and hypocrisy she has already encountered in the nobility. She insists on basing her life exclusively on sincerity, honesty and truth; she embraces the contemporary Rousseauian spirit of "back to Nature".

These views are shared not only by her older sister, Caroline; they also strike a resounding chord with the young Friedrich Schiller (Florian Stetter), who becomes acquainted with the two sisters in 1787. The meeting immediately sparks within the trio a fascination for one another. They are united by the idea that the struggle for truth and against falsehood in all walks of life is the fundamental prerequisite for a humane future. The result is a romantic alliance, a bond

of love that is not confined to shared ideas. At this point, however, the film succumbs misleadingly to the temptation of stylising Schiller as an early protagonist of free love.

For the most part, *Beloved Sisters* is a film of ideas. The threesome dream of bringing together a circle of the foremost artists and intellectuals. Schiller is particularly interested in history. He has studied the Inquisition and is in the process of writing a history of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Against the backdrop of a romantic sunset, he explains how earlier generations felt as they witnessed the glowing red sun sinking beneath the horizon: the Swedes (ravagers of Germany in the Thirty Years' War) are coming! The horror of the senseless war lingers in the shape of a frightening nightmare.

Schiller enthusiastically follows the rapid development of printing and is convinced of the possibility of a new golden age of humanity, based on the wide circulation of Enlightenment literature. Not only the bourgeoisie, but also sections of the nobility, experience a spiritual awakening. Layers of the indebted nobility suffer the scorn of the rich when they debase themselves to gain a share of their filthy lucre. The sisters' mother, Louise, and Caroline's much older and unloved husband, Wilhelm Freiherr von Beulwitz, extol Schiller for his knowledge of history.

The highpoint of this enthusiasm for the Enlightenment coincides with the storming of the Bastille in Paris in 1789 and the commencement of the great French Revolution. Schiller is then living in Jena in eastern Germany, where his appointment as a professor at Jena University is well received. His legendary inaugural lecture is: "What Is, and to What End do We Study, Universal History".

The popular assault on the Bastille is a historic turning point. The struggle for a more progressive social order is now being waged in the streets. A number of familiar faces from the period crop up in the film. How will the new era affect each of these people? How much of the old and the new *zeitgeist* is in each of them? Schiller is not the only one

appalled when the Jacobins utilise the guillotine against the aristocracy. What is the difference, they ask, between this barbarism and the Inquisition?

The second half of the film shows how, against this background and under the conditions of social backwardness prevailing in Germany at the time, the widespread enthusiasm for historical knowledge and belief in the realisation of a humane society can ebb and give way to disillusionment.

Schiller is deserted by his students. In 1795, he launches the first issue of *Die Horen* (*The Hours*), a monthly cultural magazine that seeks to promote “true humanity”. Goethe is also involved in the project. Caroline helps Schiller in the writing of a novel, *Agnes von Lilien*, which is published anonymously in *The Hours* (1796-97) and attracts considerable attention. The passages cited in the film, however, seem somewhat banal and the work is widely disregarded in any consideration of Schiller’s work.

The more that ideals lose their force, the more the relationships of the sisters to each other and to Schiller become marked by personal quarrels and jealousy. Their former idealism becomes a victim of everyday life. Society remains the same and Charlotte is now Frau Schiller, mother of several children.

One short scene demonstrates the limitations of the family’s conception of Enlightenment ideas. Louise von Lengefeld, the matriarch of the family, wants to take three things to her grave with her when she dies: the writings of Voltaire (his ideal was an enlightened monarchy), her husband’s “scientific” writings and the New Testament. At the end of the film, the sisters sit to the left and right of Schiller’s sickbed, two dark silhouettes watching over the fatally ill author (who died in 1805 from tuberculosis).

Graf’s *Beloved Sisters* prompts the viewer to want to learn more about Schiller and an era obsessed with inquiring into truth and history. It deserves a wide audience, and not only in Germany.

The three remaining German films in the competition section dealt with contemporary reality, and in different ways indicated a degree of confusion on the part of the filmmakers.

Such is the case with *Stations of the Cross*, directed by Dietrich Brüggemann and focusing on the destructive influence of a fundamentalist Catholic sect on a fourteen-year-old girl. The inevitability of the girl’s fate is charted in fourteen chapters, titled after the fourteen stations along Christ’s route as he carried the cross to the crucifixion. The film won the Silver Bear prize for best screenplay. We will discuss it after its release in cinemas on March 20.

Feo Aladag’s *Between Worlds* deals with the Bundeswehr’s (German army’s) mission in Afghanistan and

received a restrained response from the Berlinale audience. In the film, an Afghan translator, working for the German side of the operation, attempts to communicate “between (two) worlds”. According to the director, this intentionally ambivalent film is designed not to take sides for or against Germany’s military deployment in Afghanistan. *Between Worlds* will be shown in cinemas from March 27 and we will review it then.

The German competition film *Jack*, directed by Edward Berger, is one of those passive realist films that are quite moving, but ultimately are noncommittal and have little to say. Jack is a boy about ten years old assigned to a children’s home because his mother doesn’t take proper care of him. He flees the home and sets out to find his mother, accompanied by his younger brother. The young actor (Ivo Pietzcker) portraying the main character is well chosen. He simultaneously communicates the boy’s determination and inner fragility.

The social environment, however, remains hazy. Weakly evocative tableaux take the place of clearer statements. An example is a scene set in a techno club, where everyone is supposed to surrender to the deafening rhythms and abandon him- or herself to drugs.

And who is Jack’s mother? Is she just an immature, irresponsible young woman? Her character is thinly drawn and unconvincing. One has the impression that the film has indulged in a fruitless brooding on the adult world’s apparent indifference towards children.

Over the coming days, we will review a number of other German-language films, including the Austrian documentary *The Great Museum* by Johannes Holzhausen, plus an interview with the director.

To be continued



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