In Between Worlds: A conformist view of the German military

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Two television films on German military operations in Afghanistan have been aired in the past several years. Both films, each in its own way, were aimed at undermining the widespread popular hostility to war. *Foreign Assignment* (2012, Till Endemann) justifies the deployment of German armed forces for war purposes. *A Murderous Decision* (2013, Raymond Ley) makes it clear that as far as the filmmakers are concerned, mistakes and civilian casualties are a normal occurrence in the course of such operations.

The film *In Between Worlds* directed by Austrian-born Feo Aladag (*Die Fremde*, 2010), which has been showing in German cinemas for some time, and which featured at this year's Berlin film festival, poses a question in the context of the planned withdrawal of the German armed forces from Afghanistan in 2014: will the much-advertised humanitarian goals of the operation be achieved?

Captain Jesper (Ronald Zehrfeld) is in Afghanistan for the second time. He returns to the area where his brother was shot by the Taliban. Jesper's command has the task of protecting a village from the Taliban and providing support for the *arbaki* [local militias] that are active there. This is where the first conflict between Jesper and the militia leader—a former Taliban fighter who views the German soldiers as undesirable intruders—takes place. Only the skilled "translation" by the Afghan interpreter Tarik (Mohsin Ahmady) diffuses the situation.

Tarik worships Western culture, especially, so it seems, European culture. When his cell phone rings, it plays music by Franz Schubert. He teaches children in English while he continues to learn it himself. His sister Nala (Saida Barmaki) goes to the university near her workplace. By many Afghans, however, Tarik is considered a traitor, who works for the foreign occupiers. When it becomes dangerous for Nala at home, Tarik takes her to the German army base. On the way, she is shot. Nala survives only thanks to Jesper. Defying an explicit order, he brings her, severely injured, to the nearest military hospital. On the way back, Jesper's truck is attacked and his second in command killed. He then has to appear before a military court. The conclusion of the film shows him as a civilian.

Aladag's film draws up a sobering balance sheet of the German military operation to the present moment. Nothing, it seems, has improved for the Afghan population. The situation, chaotic and full of misunderstandings, can escalate out of control at any moment.

The film's critical attitude reaches its high point with Jesper's sentencing. Ultimately, he was punished because he behaved in a humane way toward an Afghan civilian. This does not fit in well with the official claims that the German army is an army of liberation. *In Between Worlds* depicts that contradiction, as well as the overall catastrophic condition of the country, as an unacceptable state of suspension "in between worlds."

Aladag says that the film is an appeal to the solidarity of the world community not to lose sight of Afghanistan after the troops are withdrawn. Along these lines, *In Between Worlds* presents neither a consistently critical picture of the German military intervention nor argues in its favor.

The film was made at the time that a foreign policy shift was being prepared, which involved the German government abandoning its former policy of "military restraint." Aladag's feature was shot almost exclusively on location in Afghanistan with the support of the German government and the Afghan authorities.

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It criticizes the inadequate aid measures, without leaving any room for doubt that the latter require military protection.

By way of justifying future "humanitarian" military interventions, *In Between Worlds* presents a largely fantasized type of soldier. Jesper, a "citizen in uniform," who always has the humanitarian goal in his sights, works to build trust instead of escalating conflict and concerns himself with the wellbeing of the civilian population. This brings him into conflict with the cumbersome, ineffectual military bureaucracy.

According to Aladag, the film should contribute to efforts to overcome the negative public view of soldiers, whose work is not respected even though their operations are sanctioned by society. The German government, according to Aladag, has shown great interest in the project of conveying a different outlook on the soldiers. The armed forces reportedly trusted the filmmakers so much that they did not once display an interest in the concrete details of the script.

The pseudo-realistic concept of the film precludes the exploration of deeper questions from the outset. None of the characters has any significant doubts about the neo-colonial operation in Afghanistan. Aladag's soldiers act in a "closed system," whose narrow frame of action even allows them to appear as victims. "What remains of the ideal of human dignity in the everyday struggle for survival?," reads the film's press release.

In this fashion, the film presents the brutality of war as no doubt undesirable, but something which ultimately has to be accepted by the general public.

In Between Worlds is not a crude war propaganda film, like Till Schweiger's *Guardian Angel* (2012). The film is meant to encourage thought and speaks to a certain helplessness. That does not make it any less conformist—a film that corresponds to the interests of the state. It takes for granted that the goal of the German army operation in Afghanistan is indeed the victory of progress and democracy. It is quite clear that Aladag cannot imagine the solidarity of the "world community" outside of the framework of official imperialist world politics.

The orientation of this film is very much in line with efforts by the German government and the defense ministry to weaken opposition to foreign military operations. Aladag's declaration that the Germany army operation is "sanctioned by society" says something about her serious underestimation of this opposition.

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