

Maren Ade's award-winning *Toni Erdmann*: Slaves to modern global business

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The German film *Toni Erdmann* (written and directed by Maren Ade) won the 2016 European Film Award. The film was lauded at the Cannes Film Festival and is the German nominee for the 2017 Academy Awards.

The film's main characters are a 37-year-old business consultant, Ines Conradi (Sandra Hüller), and her father, Winfried (Peter Simonischek). The latter is an eccentric, shaggy-haired music teacher with a predilection for Green Party nostrums, who lives a reclusive, idyllic life with his dog in Aachen (a city in western Germany). He often embarrasses people with his anti-authoritarian, quasi-anarchistic practical jokes, dressing up as the grim reaper or showing up as his brother with false teeth.

Ines is the opposite of her playful father. She is fully a child of the new global economy and has seen the "world," i.e., the dull and regimented world of modern business. Her life is dictated by her appointment calendar. She has virtually no private life. For the moment, she resides in Bucharest where her consultancy firm is assisting a Romanian oil company to become more competitive.

Winfried recognizes that his daughter is unhappy and decides to show up unexpectedly in Bucharest. With his arrival, her sterile environment descends into chaos. Winfried creates a number of awkward situations. He cheerfully claps Ines' dreaded boss on the shoulder and asks if he is prepared to finance a replacement daughter since he (Winfried) sees so little of his own. Later, Winfried appears in bizarre garb and takes on the persona of businessman and personal trainer "Toni Erdmann"—a disguise that convinces no one, but everyone goes along with.

In a series of vignettes, Ade (born 1976) convincingly paints the business milieu as out of touch, socially callous and deceitful, concealing the stupidity and

meaninglessness of many of its activities with hustle, bustle and bluster. Like everyone in the firm, Ines knows that her work isn't really aimed at helping Romania's "development," only the company's bottom line. To this end, the firm's employees run day and night like hamsters in a wheel.

And what does the so-called modernization of Romania look like? We see a useless luxury shopping mall in Bucharest replete with American-style advertising. No ordinary Romanian can afford to buy anything there. A lonely couple skate in circles on an artificial ice rink. Not far from Ines' office, a high wooden fence abruptly separates this affluence from the slums. The oil workers come from the country's poorest areas and are due to be laid off thanks to Ines' efforts.

Modern Romania is home to a narrow layer of social climbers who have been taught to have faith in the free market during their studies abroad and now serve global corporations. The parents of Ines' Romanian colleague run a BMW dealership and her Romanian assistant asks Ines constantly whether she is happy with her "performance." Ines herself sometimes reveals a cynical, neocolonial mentality, for example, when she bosses around a Romanian employee who has given her all for the firm.

Sandra Hüller wonderfully represents Ines' painful, contradictory emotional state: always on the go, ever ready to perform, tough, but also on the verge of panic when she injures her foot. Call in sick? No, forget it. Everything human is a disturbance here, even if on the surface relations are amicable and team spirit prevails.

Ines asks her coach how she can better control her body language. He advises listening less to her partners in conversation. Drug use and one-night stands do nothing to reduce the constant tension. "Are you still

human?” Ines’ father asks his daughter directly at one point.

The considerable international success of *Toni Erdmann* certainly has something to do with frustrating and bitter experiences. The international economic situation has had a significant impact on layers of the middle class, or those who previously considered themselves to be middle class. Many traditional high-income earners, often highly qualified, must prostitute themselves in worthless service jobs, as freelancers or in small start-ups. Precarious forms of work, which leave hardly any time for family and personal lives, increasingly prevail.

Ade’s earlier film, *Everyone Else (Alle Anderen)*, awarded the Silver Bear at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival, deals with a young architect whose dream projects have all crumbled. On a trip to Italy, he meets a successful former classmate. Although he cannot stand the careerist, he finds himself taken in by the man. His down-to-earth girlfriend cannot bring herself to adapt to the superficial milieu. She is appalled by the chasm that suddenly opens up between them, as her boyfriend grows increasingly embarrassed by his “annoying” companion.

The motto of *Toni Erdmann* could be “preserve your dignity and do your own thing.” The fictional “Toni Erdmann” refuses to recognise any authority. In his ridiculous disguise, he radiates a weird sense of security that also fascinates. He gives Ines the power to wipe the slate clean. She spontaneously declares her birthday party to be a nude affair, causing most of the guests, her coworkers and friends, to flee. Later father and daughter embrace. It appears Ines is redeemed. She is human again, ready to take her life in own her hands.

One of the strengths of the film, however, is the lack of a happy ending. Ines moves from her current job to a McKinsey subsidiary in Singapore, a company even more notorious than her last. The final shot shows Ines in her father’s garden. Her gaze is disillusioned. But it is not the gaze of someone who regards herself as a loser. It combines a certain resignation with simmering unpredictability. That is not a bad picture of the insecurity and volatility affecting some layers of the erstwhile middle class.

Nonetheless, there is a lack of overall sharpness here. Fighting for his daughter, Winfried, alias Toni Erdmann, is presented as a positive counter-figure, who

opposes the system of modern service industry slavery with down-to-earth humanity. He is disrespectful to the company officials, but must look on helplessly when his thoughtless comment causes an oil worker to be fired.

The German satire *Age of Cannibals* (2014, directed by Johannes Naber and written by Stefan Weigl) was closer to the mark. *Age of Cannibals* also features a global consultancy firm and many of the asocial main characters have a past linked to the Green Party. Ines, the daughter of the bearded music teacher Winfried with his typical eco-baggage (excellently played by Simonischek), would have got on with these characters like a house on fire.



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