

68th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

The 2018 Berlinale and the #MeToo campaign

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This is the first of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 15-25, 2018.

The Berlin Film Festival, the Berlinale, whose 68th edition ended February 25, is one of world's largest film festivals open to the public.

This year, the festival was marked by a clear contradiction: on the one hand, hundreds of thousands of people once again took time off to travel to Berlin to discover new, potentially stimulating films dealing with important issues of life and society, most of which are never likely to appear in local cinemas.

On the other hand, political circles and the media intervened in a concerted and aggressive manner to promote the #MeToo campaign. This campaign, which has publicly pilloried prominent cultural and artistic figures for alleged sexual harassment, starting with the Harvey Weinstein affair in Hollywood, has been gaining momentum in Germany since January.

The festival management under Dieter Kosslick jumped on the bandwagon a few weeks before the start of the festival and organised a series of events at which #MeToo supporters and political figures, including former Social Democratic Party (SPD) Family Minister Katarina Barley, loudly pledged their allegiance to the campaign.

Amongst the festival audience, young directors and scriptwriters, these attempts were greeted with considerable scepticism and found relatively little response. At the centre of the discussions in the ticket queues were the more than 400 films from home and abroad, on show over 11 days.

With 330,000 cinema tickets sold, the record figures of 2016 and 2017 were once again exceeded. In addition, there were 21,000 accredited applicants from more than 130 countries, 10,000 trade visitors from 112

countries at the European Film Market and thousands of participants at the Berlinale Talents programme, first introduced in 2002, where 250 young film talents from 80 countries exchanged their work with famous filmmakers in workshops.

The Golden Bear, which the international jury led by Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*, *Cloud Atlas* and others) awarded to the Romanian film *Touch Me Not* (Adina Pintilie) on the subject of physicality and sexuality, found a mixed echo. The Silver Bear was awarded to Wes Anderson's animated film *Isle of Dogs*, and the Jury Grand Prix to the Polish film *Twarz* ("face" or "mug"), directed by Małgorzata Szumowska.

A variety of films treated the current political and social situation, such as the cruel fate of refugees, growing racism and the return of fascist and nationalist tendencies, wars in the Middle East, and social inequality.

The Panorama Audience Award, which enables audience members to vote for their own favourites, went to the film *Profile* (from Russian-Kazakh director Timur Bekmambetov), dealing with ISIS and the war in Syria, with a second place for *Styx* (Wolfgang Fischer), which featured a dramatic attempt to rescue refugees.

Best documentary honours were won by *The Silence of Others* (Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar), focusing on the atrocities committed by the Franco dictatorship in Spain. The Amnesty International Award went to *Central Airport THF*, a documentary directed by Brazilian-born Karim Ainouz about a large refugee camp in the middle of Berlin. We will discuss some of the films in future articles.

The media also played their part in promoting #MeToo. On the first day of the festival, the *taz* newspaper (traditionally linked to the Green Party) devoted its entire front page to the #MeToo movement

with the headline “BerlinaleToo.” A montage photo turned the festival’s traditional red carpet into black, the preferred colour of the #MeToo movement. A comment on the same page of the newspaper advocated guerrilla action by visitors to the festival, who were advised to purchase their own black paint should the festival not succumb to demands for a black carpet.

A plethora of organisations including Speak Up, Pro Quote, and Time’s Up held meetings during the festival demanding, among other things, so-called “Gender Monitoring”—i.e., the vetting of film roles or setting of quotas according to gender. For the first time, the press statement released before the start of the Berlin festival contained a detailed breakdown of films featured at the festival by the director’s gender.

The SEP (*Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*) distributed hundreds of copies of WSWS articles on #MeToo at the festival and was able to intervene in the debate. SEP members and supporters pointed out that the #MeToo campaign had ruined entire careers on the basis of unproven accusations and had also led to attempts to censor works of art and literature in the US, Germany and across the globe. Many festival goers responded positively, expressing their scepticism about the motives of the movement and their opposition to any form of censorship in the arts.

There is no evidence to indicate that the festival’s top prize-winning film, Pintilie’s *Touch Me Not*, was made with #Me Too in mind. It doesn’t fit the bill of the type of sexual “puritanism” associated with the latter, but the work was nevertheless hailed along those lines by some journalists (i.e., the *Deutsche Welle* reviewer called it a “more than politically correct choice in the #MeToo era”).

The young Romanian filmmaker worked on her “experimental study” on sexuality for four years. In other words, Pintilie began long before the emergence of #MeToo, and she called her film a “work of love” after winning the Golden Bear. It appeared to discuss the question “of fearing to touch someone” as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote—or “proximity and distance” (*Zeit online* citing the filmmaker). In addition to an elderly woman who orders “call boys” to fulfill her sexual fantasies, the film features a severely disabled man. He looks so terrible to others that people fear coming into contact with him.

What clearly emerges in the efforts to promote

#MeToo is a concerted action by well-paid, privileged layers of the film industry and media in accordance with prominent politicians to distract from films on present-day social reality, on the dangers of war, nationalism and attacks on democracy. It is aimed at pushing the cultural climate to the right and suppressing the democratic character of the Berlinale festival.

To be continued



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