

68th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

The Silent Revolution and *In the Aisles*: Life in eastern Germany, before and after...

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This is the sixth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held February 15-25, 2018. The first part was posted March 14, the second on March 16, the third on March 20, the fourth on March 22 and the fifth on March 26.

One of the most interesting German efforts at this year's Berlin film festival was Lars Kraume's *The Silent Revolution*. In *The State vs. Fritz Bauer* (2015), Kraume dealt with the right-wing judicial apparatus that dominated postwar West Germany and the struggle by prosecutor Fritz Bauer to initiate the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials of Nazi officials (1963-1965).

Kraume's new film, *The Silent Revolution*, based on a book by Dietrich Garstka, depicts the courageous struggle of a high school class in East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR) in 1956 against the country's Stalinist state apparatus headed by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED).

In response to the violent Soviet Stalinist suppression of the popular uprising in Hungary in November 1956, the students spontaneously observed a minute of silence. In an attempt to uncover the ringleaders of the action, the GDR education minister himself intervened, but was unable to break the students' solidarity. As punishment, the entire class was then denied the right to take final examinations. A few days later, the majority fled to West Berlin.

The basic story up to the students' flight has been kept in *The Silent Revolution*, although some characters are composites or lose their original names. The drama is told from the perspective of young people seeking to establish the truth in the face of opposed propaganda campaigns.

On the one hand, the East German Stalinist regime denounces the Hungarian revolt as a counterrevolution. Western propaganda, on the other, praises the insurrectionists as freedom fighters wanting to bring back capitalism. The young people have a hard time believing the event is a counterrevolution. Isn't Imre Nagy, the head of the Hungarian state, a socialist? No answer is forthcoming from their parents and teachers.

When Kurt (Tom Gramenz), for example, asks his father, a high-ranking SED member, about the character of the uprising,

the latter avoids giving a clear answer. He replies that the Hungarian situation is something like the supposedly counterrevolutionary events in the GDR in 1953, when workers in Berlin rose up against the Stalinists.

Kurt's father then accuses his son of listening to the West Berlin radio station RIAS and visiting the grave of his maternal grandfather, also in West Berlin, killed while serving in the German army in World War II. In the presence of Kurt's mother, the older man cynically warns his son he may have inherited some of his grandfather's genes.

The only source of information left for the teenagers is RIAS, banned in the GDR. They listen to the station at the house of a cranky old man (Michael Gwisdek) who toys with anarchism.

The conduct of the Stalinist People's Education Minister Fritz Lange (Burghart Klaußner) is so repellent and thuggish that one feels it must be invented. But apparently this is how he acted, according to Garstka's book. One of the highest "people's representatives" of the GDR threatens to beat up the youth, humiliates a Christian student and berates the father of a student as a parasite because he is a veterinarian.

A number of the students learn unsettling truths about the past, bound up with the tragedy and horror of German fascism. Moreover, they uncover a nauseating swamp of lies and blackmail behind the socialist-sounding slogans of the SED.

The Silent Revolution suggests that this "socialist state" reacts so harshly against the youth because the SED leadership fears the Hungarian uprising might spill over into the GDR.

Kraume's film also argues that in some cases the brutal Nazi persecution of former Communist anti-fascists, now SED officials, plays a role. These figures, imagining or fooling themselves into believing they are creating socialism, complain bitterly about the "ungrateful youth" who listen to Western propaganda sent from a country whose judiciary consists almost exclusively of old Nazis.

Both the Stalinists and the imperialist powers made use of the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Both camps claimed the revolt was directed against socialism. In fact, in its general orientation, the Hungarian revolution was a struggle against Stalinism and for socialist workers' democracy. There

were many Communists among the combatants, and workers' councils played a prominent role.

Like his *The State vs. Fritz Bauer*, Kraume's *The Silent Revolution* encourages young people today not to behave in a passive or apolitical way, not to look for the politically lesser evil, but rather to be persistent, even if it means coming into conflict with the prevailing political parties and institutions.

This requires, however, a deeper understanding of the Hungarian uprising than the film is able to give. The putting down of the Hungarian workers' revolt by the Stalinists and the suppression of the 1956 protest in the GDR caused great confusion among workers and young people and helped stabilise the West German and European bourgeoisie. Under today's conditions of capitalist crisis and danger of war, young people need to study this history seriously and reject the great lie that equates Stalinism with socialism.

In the Aisles

In the Aisles by Thomas Stuber is located in modern-day eastern Germany. Eighteen years after the reintroduction of capitalism, the state of Saxony resembles a moonscape. The film is based on a short story by Clemens Meyer, whose novel *As We Were Dreaming* was filmed by Andreas Dresen in 2015.

Christian (Franz Rogowski) committed some petty offences as a teenager. After his release from juvenile prison, he worked under miserable conditions for a construction company, along with Portuguese workers. Now he works at a wholesale market near the motorway, initially on a trial basis. Bruno (Peter Kurth), an older worker, shows him the ropes. Christian soon falls in love with Marion (Sandra Hüller) from the confectionery department. He learns she is unhappily married, but he is unsure how to behave toward her. When he runs into his former, criminal cronies, he begins to drink and loses his bearings.

One evening, Bruno invites him to his home. Bruno and some older co-workers know one another from the former GDR. They worked for the same transport business. When the latter was shut down, Bruno moved from truck driver to forklift driver, just glad not to be unemployed like many others. He misses the road, he confesses to Christian. Trucks are thundering past his apartment every day. When Christian next goes to his job, he learns that Bruno has killed himself.

Filming the wholesale market, reminiscent of a huge Amazon warehouse, and its employees might have resulted in a stilted, dismal portrayal of robotic workers, all pale and suffering. Workers, in other words, waiting for someone to intervene on their behalf. But in addition to winning our sympathy and trust, the workers here appear quite able to fend for themselves. Everything is helped by the outstanding performances.

In the huge hall, which at night seems like a big spaceship, the market workers fight for their space. This is a crew that can confidently master its "ship," given the chance. The film opens with Johann Strauss's "The Blue Danube," used memorably in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in a sort of ballet for forklift trucks. This sounds like making something "poetic" out of what in fact is hard work. But it is not. Instead, *In the Aisles* treats us to life beneath the surface, contradicting our preconceptions.

Christian realises with surprise that everyone here somehow anticipates the moves of his or her fellow workers in what amounts to a sense of joint responsibility, without unnecessary communication, a community spirit that has nothing in common with the so-called tendency of the Ossis (East Germans) to moan and groan. As was the case in the GDR, rules and prohibitions aimed at maximising production are routinely side-stepped. Every day, Christian stands in front of a large mirror with the inscription "This is how the customer sees you" and dutifully brushes down his sleeves over his prison tattoos. In the next scene, his sleeves are rolled up for everyone to see anyway.

The sea, or its stand-ins, plays a special role in this tragic-comic movie. First, we hear the gurgling noise of the coffee machine, near a large poster featuring a beach with palm trees. Is one dreaming or is the department head playing a Bach CD for the night shift? The palm tree motif appears at Marion's home: an unfinished puzzle. "The sea" is also the name of a section of the market hall where fresh fish are kept, still alive, swimming by with gaping mouths. *In the Aisles* is not playing with exoticism, but rather suggesting the desire for fresh air, for freedom. All at once, an African-American work song sounds through the hall, and at the end of the movie we can hear the sound of the sea nearby.

To be continued



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