69th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 7

German films: Economic and social tensions on the rise

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This is the seventh in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held from February 7 to 17, 2019. The first part was posted on February 15, the second on February 22, the third on February 28, the fourth on March 5, the fifth on March 11 and the sixth on March 13.

An ever broader swath of life is subject to naked profit interests and state-imposed austerity programs. Unrelenting pressure in the form of demands for cost reduction, hyper-efficiency and increased productivity is reflected negatively throughout the sphere of social life and in families. Some of the German films at this year's Berlinale point to the consequences.

The satirical film *Music and Apocalypse* by Max Linz addresses the aggressive takeover of universities by the private sector. Students and lecturers are used in an experiment centring on nutrition, aimed at increasing their productivity. In the end, the university's boiler room is filled with steam from a leaky pipe, a metaphor for the build-up and eventual explosion of social tensions. The subsequent crash leads to a type of Last Judgment.

The documentary *Progress in the Valley of the People Who Don't Know* by Florian Kunert seeks to explore the background to the emergence of the xenophobic Pegida movement in the eastern German city of Dresden, Kunert's birthplace. Why did it emerge here? The film recalls the dismantling of the biggest manufacturer of agricultural machinery in the former East Germany (GDR) following German reunification in 1989-90. The Dresden company had previously supplied Syria with combine harvesters and trained Syrian workers.

Kunert brings together current Syrian asylum seekers, who are housed on the premises of the former factory, with some of the German workers who once worked in the plant. Kunert raises the question as to whether these latter workers have also lost their homeland due to something resembling a war, during a period in which thousands of former East German factories were closed down to make way for the capitalist free market. We will review the film more fully upon its theatrical release.

System Crasher

The competition film *System Crasher* by Nora Fingscheidt, quite rightly won the festival's second prize, a Silver Bear. "System crasher" is the name given by social workers to children and young people with severe behavioural problems, problems that fall out of the remit of the normal measures deployed by schools, youth welfare, social workers and psychologists.

Nine-year-old Benni (Helena Zengel) continues to wet her bed and is prone to sudden explosions of aggression. She deliberately breaks every rule. Psychologists diagnose an early childhood trauma. The child's overwhelmed mother (Lisa Hagmeister) lives alone with Benni and her little brother. Various male suitors seek the mother's attention.

Benni is sent to one unsuccessful therapy after the other until she is sent off to live for three weeks in a primitive forest cabin with a carer named Micha (Albrecht Abraham Schuch). The absence of the harmful influences she is accustomed to, which are dismissed (and accepted) as "normal everyday life," and the close contact with Micha lead to Benni gaining confidence and changing her behaviour. When the therapy is over, she returns to her old routines and feels (quite correctly) displaced. Her symptoms return. She shows up at Micha's home, grabs his baby and locks herself away with the child. She has taken one step too far. Is she about to become a danger to the public?

The viewer also asks him or herself what will happen to Benni, in particular in light of the scenes in *System Crasher* featuring discussions about the efficiency of certain measures and the necessity for cost reductions in such a sensitive social area.

Benni is teased by her classmates as a "psycho" and many of her teachers would secretly like to see some heavy-handed treatment meted out to this particular "system crasher." Finally, the young girl is sent off to Africa to join a social project with other children like her. At the last moment, she attempts to flee the airport. The film ends with her taking a leap into the sky with a look of joy on her face. The sky turns out to be a glass wall, which shows a crack "in the system." It is an ambiguous conclusion that somewhat mitigates the bitter content of the film, as if the director has drawn back from spelling out the obvious. There is unlikely to be a happy ending for Benni.

The more cuts are made in the sphere of social policy, the more pressure mounts on children like Benni. A recent German television documentary, "The Fairy Tale of Inclusion" (ARD-Mediathek, available until January 21, 2020), pointed out that the legally prescribed policy of inclusion in Germany, i.e., joint lessons for children with special educational needs and "normal" children, is hardly ever implemented. The main reason given: the insufficient provision of funds to create the necessary conditions for such children.

In the Third Reich, children like Benni were declared "maladjusted" and "asocial" and a danger to the "national community." Their "anti-

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social" behaviour was also alleged to have stemmed from racial or genetic defects. They were confined to children's concentration camps, so-called "youth protection camps."

System Crasher is a warning against the return of such policies. For example, the former Berlin Senator for Finance, Thilo Sarrazin (Social Democratic Party, SPD) has openly used arguments based on eugenics to maintain that immigrants and families receiving Hartz IV social payments breed too many children.

The Golden Glove

Fatih Akin's *The Golden Glove* repulsed many spectators and critics with its scenes of unchecked violence. The film is based on the 2016 "non-fiction novel" of the same title by Heinz Strunk, which tells the story of serial killer Fritz Honka (1935-1998). Honka murdered four women from poor districts in Hamburg between 1970 and 1975.

Honka came from a large, poor working-class family in Leipzig and experienced brutality and oppression at an early age. His father landed in a Nazi concentration camp for (according to Honka) supporting the German Communist Party. Released a broken man, the older man succumbed to alcohol and died at an early age, a year after the end of World War II.

The son tried to live a normal life. He succeeded in stopping drinking for a while after finding work as a night watchman in Hamburg, but them had a relapse. He suffered from serious mental illness. There are a few scenes in the film where this is made clear, but they are overwhelmed by the portrayal of Honka (Jonas Dassler) as a monster, shuffling through the night like Quasimodo, hiding body parts of his victims in his apartment, creating an unbearable stench.

The film avoids providing any genuine social context, unlike renowned works devoted to serial killers such as Fritz Lang's *M* (1931—based on the case of Fritz Haarmann from the 1920s) and Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947—inspired by "Bluebeard" killer Henri Désiré Landru). Claude Chabrol's film *The Murderer of Paris* (1962), which also deals with the Landru case, inserts documentary images of fighting from the front during World War I.

The real Fritz Honka was heavily affected by the war horrors and the immediate postwar period in Germany, which propagated the ideal of a strong man, an ideal he could never live up to. In Strunk's novel, he regards himself as a man driven by a powerful will, who is justified in humiliating and enslaving his victims who lack any discernible will of their own. Honka regards his victims, who stand below him on the social ladder, as human trash, leading unworthy lives that he takes it upon himself to end.

The social aspect of the pathological murders is reinforced in the novel by Strunk, who describes in parallel the world of the so-called "cultivated" upper class. The wealthy shipowner family featured in the book, bows down—teeth clenched—before those higher up the ladder while ruthlessly treading on those below.

Akin's film does not pay attention to such things. Among the few enlightening scenes is one that points out that even in the 1970s in Germany victims of Nazi rule could unexpectedly encounter their former tormentors. The former SS man "Soldier Norbert" (Dirk Böhling) and the former prostitute Frida (Martina Eitner-Acheampong) meet in the local inn, the Golden Glove. Honka takes the woman home, confessing that his father was also in a concentration camp, only to brutally gag her a few moments later. It is the only point in the film where the issue of concentration camps plays a role, although Honka, as a child, had himself been confined by the Nazi regime in a children's concentration camp.

In the event, the movie, with its scenes of hideous violence, ignores the social conditions that contributed to Honka's development into a murderer.

I Was at Home, But

The German-Serbian film, *I Was at Home, But* by Angela Schanelec, was awarded the Silver Bear prize for Best Director. Schanelec belongs to the so-called Berlin School, which seeks to provide a cinematic alternative to Hollywood-influenced "narrative cinema." Instead of the rapidly edited succession of sequences characterising commercial films, the Berlin School prefers long, drawn-out shots to supposedly achieve a naturalistic effect and counter prevailing cinematic clichés.

Thirteen-year-old Phillip (Jakob Lassalle), whose father has recently died, has reached adolescence, is becoming curious about the world and developing a sense of responsibility. In the eyes of his pessimistic mother Astrid (Maren Eggert), the world outside is dominated by an emotional deep freeze. Even in the theatre feelings are played out, she complains to a young director (Dame Komljen). Astrid herself is a bundle of nerves.

A parallel strand of the film features youthful students, including Phillip, performing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, reciting the play's lines in an unbearably crude manner. Drawing a connection between the internal anguish of Hamlet and the emotional state of an adolescent is an original idea.

The disappearance of Phillip and a subsequent blood poisoning trigger the first visible feelings on Astrid's part: anxiety for her son. Phillip's brief immersion into reality opens his path to genuine feelings. Hamlet's cardboard crown lands eventually in the street. The emotional triggers have thoroughly social implications. What is currently driving parents and teachers to protest is fear and concern for the future of their children.

Astrid's own coldness is clearly related to the prevailing capitalist business ethic. However, this driving force behind personality disorders remains in the dark here despite a number of hints. Emotionless, monotone dialogue dominates the movie and eventually becomes unbearable. Salvation, the film suggests, is only possible by turning to "naturalness." Lengthy, meditative scenes in the forest calm the mind—the fox is just a fox, not a metaphor for anything else, the donkey who gazes at us "ironically" is just a donkey. Take a deep breath, the film says, live for the moment—and forget about anything like Hamlet's futile pondering.

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