

70th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Some tantalising glimpses of social reality

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This is the first of a series of articles on the Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, taking place from February 20–March 1.

The 70th Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale), the world's largest film festival open to the general public, began on February 20. Before it concludes March 1, the festival will have featured a total of 342 films from 71 countries, including 18 films competing for the main prize, the Golden Bear. Hundreds of thousands of filmgoers will attend the various screenings.

This year's Berlinale is taking place under the new festival leadership of Executive Director Mariette Rissenbeek and Artistic Director Carlo Chatrian, who previously headed the Locarno International Film Festival. Rissenbeek and Chatrian have taken over from longtime director Dieter Kosslick (2001-2019).

Innovations at this year's festival include the introduction of a new competitive section, "Encounters." In addition to the traditional sections, "Competition" and "Berlinale Shorts," for which Golden and Silver Bears are awarded, "Encounters" is intended to provide a platform for aesthetically and formally unusual works by independent filmmakers, with three prizes—best film, best director and a special Jury award.

The 70th Berlinale offers an interesting program. A significant number of films deal with the current, tense social situation embedded in stories revolving around such themes as love, happiness, grief, death, and simple everyday concerns. Chatrian commented, "If there is a predominance of dark tones, this may be because the films we have selected tend to look at the present without illusion—not to cause fear, but because they want to open our eyes."

Social inequality, unbearable working and living conditions, state oppression, racial discrimination and violence against refugees are featured in a number of films.

For example, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Afghan-German director, writer and actor Burhan Qurbani (*We are Young, We are Strong*, 2014) transposes Alfred Döblin's classic 1929 novel about the unfortunate Franz Biberkopf, caught up in poverty and crime, to modern Berlin and the odyssey of an undocumented African refugee.

The French film *Night Shift* (*Police* is the French title), directed by Anne Fontaine, deals with the deportation of a Tajik refugee, who faces being sentenced to death in his home country.

Kids Run by German filmmaker Barbara Ott focuses on a young man, made redundant and threatened with eviction if he does not

raise thousands of euros, who has to fight for the woman he still loves and his children.

In the documentary *Automotive*, German director Jonas Heldt examines the harsh working conditions prevailing at Audi's giant car factory in Ingolstadt in Bavaria, Germany. Another documentary, *Strike or Die* (*Grève ou crève*), by French filmmaker Jonathan Rescigno, filmed in the Alsace-Lorraine region in northeastern France, draws connections between past militant miners' strikes and the present day through scenes of youngsters being prepared for new struggles by a former miner and boxing coach.

A number of films deal with the wave of uprisings across the globe, including *Nardjes A.* by Karim Ainouz about the mass protest movement in Algeria last year. Other films take up the themes of militarism and war—among them *Curveball* by Johannes Naber, about the launching of the Iraq war on the basis of fake intelligence. *Sisters Apart* (the German title is *Im Feuer*), directed by Daphne Charizani, follows a female Kurdish soldier looking for her sister in Iraq. And *Irradiated*, directed by Cambodian-born Rithy Panh, treats the physical and psychological effects of war and radiation poisoning.

Over the past two years the reactionary #MeToo campaign has had some success, particularly in the US and France, in enforcing bans on films, directors or actors following allegations of sexual misconduct. So far the movement has failed to make a significant impact on the Berlinale.

A warning shot was fired, however, by daily newspaper *taz* [*Die Tageszeitung*] and the chairman of the German parliament's Committee on Cultural and Media Affairs, Katrin Budde (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who accused the new Berlinale team of a "false decision" in choosing British actor Jeremy Irons as the festival's jury president. In the past, Irons has made some rather foolish or backward comments about sexual harassment and gay marriage. To his credit, Carlo Chatrian defended his decision to appoint Irons, noting that the actor's comments were made years ago and that Irons had expressed his regret.

Chatrian also rejected calls to adhere to more of a gender quota system in the selection of films for the Berlinale. The selection, he told a press conference, should primarily be made on the basis of artistic criteria.

The right-wing character of the #MeToo campaign was most recently revealed in France, where the entire board of the César Academy collectively resigned after coming under attack for

nominating the latest film by Polish-French director Roman Polanski, *J'accuse (An Officer and a Spy)*, for 12 awards.

In a number of ways, this year's Berlinale has been the occasion for key historical issues to come to the surface. First of all, there was the revelation at the start of the festival that the Berlinale's first director, from 1951 to 1976, Alfred Bauer, had an extensive Nazi past. An article in *Die Zeit* January 29 revealed that Bauer was not a lowly employee of the Hitler regime's Reich Chamber of Film [Reichsfilmkammer] from 1942 to 1945 and a secret opponent of the Nazis, as he himself had claimed and had been portrayed in authorised accounts of the Berlinale.

Official documents revealed that Bauer was, in fact, a zealous member of the SA [Sturmabteilung, the Nazi Party's original paramilitary wing] and the Nazi Party itself. Moreover, after 1942, Bauer was the "second man in the Reich Film Directorate," i.e., the right-hand man of Propaganda and Culture Minister Joseph Goebbels. According to files in the federal archives in Koblenz, Bauer controlled and monitored the personnel involved in feature film production in the last years of the Nazi dictatorship, deciding who should be released from the war effort and who was to go to the front.

The previous Berlinale leadership, under the Social Democrat Kosslick, never raised or seriously explored Bauer's life and career. Through 2019, the festival's second prize was officially known as the Alfred Bauer Silver Bear awarded for "new perspectives in the art of film." The "Alfred Bauer Prize" has now been suspended, and instead the international jury will award a new prize—this year, the "Silver Bear—70th Berlinale." In addition, the new festival management commissioned the Institute of Contemporary History (IfZ) in Munich to examine the festival's history in light of Bauer's Nazi past.

At about the same time, new material emerged regarding the Nazi past of Werner Haftmann (1912-1999), who played an important role in the *documenta*, the influential and famed modernist art exhibition held every five years in Kassel, Germany. Haftmann played a leading role in the first three editions of the World Art Show starting in 1955 and was the founding director of Berlin's New National Gallery in 1967. He kept his Nazi membership secret, although incriminating documents have long been available in federal archives.

The cases of both Bauer and Haftmann were addressed by the German television culture program "Titel, Themen, Temperamente" ["Titles, Theses, Temperaments"]. Rainer Rother, artistic director of the Deutsche Kinemathek and director of the Berlinale Retrospective since 2006, explained that a "zero hour," i.e., a postwar clean slate regarding the activities of leading Nazis, was a fiction. "We could have, and maybe we should have known," he admits. The Berlinale, however, founded in West Berlin in 1951, with all its international stars, was intended as a showcase and a "democratic" political statement against the "dictatorial, Communist" East. Rother promptly canceled a planned book presentation of a new Bauer biography during the Berlinale.

Regarding Haftmann, art historian Julia Friedrich noted in the television program that in the catalogue for the first *documenta* exhibition in 1955, he had described the period dominated by the

Nazis as a "minor episode" in the success story of European civilisation. She added, "And if you listen to some of the rhetoric today, there are once again tendencies seeking to minimise the Nazi era and play down the crimes committed."

Against the background of growing popular opposition to the rhetoric and activities of far-right tendencies, such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), many surviving myths surrounding alleged opponents of the Nazis can no longer be upheld. Last year's Emil Nolde exhibition, which clarified the real role played by the painter, who portrayed himself as a victim of Nazi persecution, was an important step in this respect.

A number of films at this year's Berlinale directly addressed the Holocaust and the role played by former Nazis in the postwar period. In addition to *Persian Lessons* (Vadim Perelman), the three-hour Romanian film *The Exit of the Trains* (Radu Jude and Adrian Cioflânc?) will be shown, along with *Speer Goes to Hollywood* (Vanessa Lapa), which deals with the way in which Albert Speer, Hitler's unscrupulous chief architect and Minister of Armaments and War Production, sought to revise his role during World War II.

This year's Berlinale also took a look back in history in another respect. Not only did it celebrate 70 years since its foundation, but also 50 years since the founding of its Forum section. The 1970 Berlinale (still under Bauer's direction) ended in a scandal. Director Michael Verhoeven's German competition film *o.k.* about the Vietnam War led to the jury resigning and the Golden Bear award ceremony being canceled after the film was accused of anti-Americanism. Bauer and Walther Schmiederer, the then head of the umbrella organisation Berlin Festspiele GmbH, also announced their resignation—Bauer, however, only temporarily.

o.k. depicts in gruesome images the rape and murder of a girl by a group of soldiers. Verhoeven relocates the plot to a Bavarian forest, but the film makes clear that he was reconstructing an authentic case that took place in 1966 during the Vietnam War ("Incident on Hill 192") and featured in the world press. The murdered woman was a young Vietnamese woman, the perpetrators were American GIs. As a highlight of this year's Forum, the Berlinale presents the first showing of a new version of *o.k.* that has been restored and digitilised by the Munich Film Museum.

To be continued



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