

70th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

My Little Sister, Kids Run, Running on Empty and Sleep* speak to growing social tensions and persisting historical nightmares*Bernd Reinhardt****24 March 2020**

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, which took place February 20–March 1. Part 1 was posted on February 28, Part 2 on March 11 and Part 3 on March 18.

This year's Berlinale featured a number of intriguing German-language films clearly reflecting growing social tensions and, also, in some cases, treating a tortured history.

My Little Sister

In recent decades, a small minority of the middle class have successfully pursued their careers and become wealthy while a large majority live under increasingly insecure conditions and directly confront poverty. This polarisation also applies to the art and film world.

Can love between siblings survive when a brother falls ill and needs care, while his sister enjoys life as one of society's affluent? This is the question posed by the Swiss film *My Little Sister* (Stéphanie Chuat and Véronique Reymond).

Sven (Lars Eidinger) is an actor at Berlin's famed Schaubühne Theatre. His performance as Hamlet is widely praised. Sven, however, is diagnosed with a terminal illness and doesn't have long to live. At first full of hope, he prepares for the resumption of his successful portrayal of Hamlet. His sister Lisa (Nina Hoss) helps him as much as she can and temporarily brings him to Switzerland, where her husband Martin (Jens Albinus) is the director of an elite school. A return to Berlin is planned.

When Martin receives the news that his employers want to extend his contract, he agrees without consulting Lisa. He had no choice, he declares later. The same applies to director David (played by the real director of the Berlin Schaubühne, Thomas Ostermeier). He had to drop *Hamlet*. His primary obligation is to fill his theatre, and Sven is too weak. David also turns down a dialogue piece written for Sven by Lisa: a modern version of the fairy tale, *Hansel and Gretel*.

The apparent lack of alternatives turn out in every case to be socially shaped: David, agonising over his own role, ultimately distances himself from his lacklustre world and its existential problems, which now includes Sven. *My Little Sister* hits the right note in its portrayal of careerists, for example, in one scene where elite parents sip champagne with headmaster Martin and then enquire in a thoroughly stilted fashion whether he has already enrolled his own children at the school.

Lisa and Martin's two children have long been close to their sick uncle.

When Lisa returns to Berlin with the pair, Martin tries to kidnap the kids and take them back to Switzerland (an act he calls "the best for their future"). Martin fails mainly due to the resistance of the children, in particular the slightly older daughter. The children in the film are part of a new generation beginning to rebel against the social inequality and coldness endemic to capitalist society. It is quite fitting that the future according to Martin takes the form of a luxury health resort in Switzerland in the midst of a snowy, cold winter.

Certain circles of artists are examined with irony. Lisa's mother Kathy (Marthe Keller), a slightly demented former actress, opposes Lisa's fairytale text and is only prepared to accept pedagogic "political theatre" à la Bertolt Brecht. Everything else is "petit bourgeois." Her way of life is typical of former radicals of the 1960s, who criticise social contradictions in general, but at the same time ferociously hang on to their self-centered, wealthy lifestyles.

Martin also occasionally makes ironic comments about the rich parents of the pupils attending his elite school. It is the situation confronting Sven that forces him to show his real colours. Suddenly, there is a gulf between him and Lisa that neither would have thought possible under "normal" circumstances.

Lisa's social attitude is influenced by her approach to art, without her being aware of it at first. She longs for something genuinely substantial. Her determination to make the best of her brother's remaining time restores her lost creativity: *Hansel and Gretel*—two siblings clinging together in a dark fairytale forest in an emotionally frozen setting. Together they fight the enticing temptations of the evil, capitalist "witch" and eventually defeat her.

Kids Run

Barbara Ott's debut feature film, *Kids Run*, deals with the world of today's working population. Andi (Jannis Niewöhner), mid-20s, is taking care of himself and his children, Ronny and Nikki. The psychologically unstable mother has lived apart from her children for a long time. Andi moves from one odd job to the next: demolition company, scrap trade, cleaner in a club, security man. He never earns enough to pay off his debts.

Andi hopes to win back his girlfriend Sonja (Lena Tronina) when he earns enough money and can provide some security for them all. He regularly takes care of their child Fiou, who is still an infant. Sonja is

more pragmatic and wants to marry Mike (Rostyslav Bome), who is in a better position financially. Andi's own financial problems mount and he ends up owing Sonja money. When she asks for it back, Andi registers for a boxing match. He has previously given up boxing due to an injury.

For many years, socially oriented films have often concentrated on depicting tragic-comic characters, good-natured (sometimes simple-minded) losers who are defenceless and armless. Protagonists in documentary films are poor but exhibit some sympathetic characteristics. Andi is different. He is rough and aggressive all of the time, including towards his children. At the same time, he is fighting for his right to have a family. The depressing, uneasy atmosphere of *Kids Run* seems to contain a message: what happens when frustration and anger turn into unbounded violence? Repeatedly we see Andi flexing his muscles.

The film depicts the types of poverty that exists in innumerable German cities today. Many of those afflicted come from eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, such as the Russian Sonja. Andi's surname suggests the former Yugoslavia. A young German-African babysitter appears in the film and Andi loses his boxing match to an Albanian. The scrap trade across the border is a German-Polish concern. The world of such lost souls, where everyone is fighting for personal survival, is international. None of the conflicts portrayed has a nationalistic or racist background. The manner in which these diverse characters seek to eke out their lives contains a spark of hope.

Running on Empty

The Austrian documentary *Running on Empty*, directed by Lisa Weber, also explores the problems arising from poverty. We participate in the uneventful, everyday life of a Viennese family stuck in a vicious circle.

Claudia, 20 or so, has a son, Daniel, around 5 years old. They live together with Claudia's mother and her brother Gerhard in a cramped Vienna apartment. Claudia has no proper school certificate and no training. She sends off applications for jobs for which she lacks the necessary qualifications. She would like to make up for what she has missed out on—but in reality nothing changes.

The mother receives a small disability pension. Gerhard also seems to have no proper job. In almost a physical sense, the film conveys the dire consequences for those who have been "left behind," those for whom society has no need. Meagre social measures merely compound the feeling of being exploited and fail to lift the family out of its lethargy. Appeals to "pull oneself together" are worthless, as are the penalties handed out after the failure to attend a bureaucratic appointment.

Gerhard is the member of the family who spontaneously shows compassion when the conversation turns to the topic of refugees. In the course of the discussion, a petty dispute arises about whether Muslims should receive a Christmas bonus—after all, Muslims do not celebrate the holiday. One sees the impact of the external world on this family, who give the impression they hardly leave their apartment. We realise that the vile anti-Islamic campaign waged by successive right-wing Austrian governments has left its mark.

The director is obviously sympathetic to a family that at first glance seems to correspond to every media cliché. Weber met Claudia when the latter was still a child—a chance acquaintance on the street. Weber sometimes pops up in front of the camera, and becomes part of her own film. *Running on Empty* speaks to broader efforts by artists to develop closer ties to the working class and oppressed.

Sleep

Michael Venus' debut feature film, *Sleep*, deals with the nightmare of German history.

Marlene, a flight attendant (Sandra Hüller), lives with her 19-year-old daughter Mona (Gro Swantje Kohlhof) in Hamburg. Marlene has nightmares. The search for their source leads to a remote hotel in the woods near the village of Stainbach. Here her dreams become so traumatic she falls into a state of shock and has to be hospitalised.

One immediately notices that something is wrong with the couple running the hotel. Mona, who anxiously follows her mother, learns of mysterious suicides in the past. How is her mother involved?

The trail leads back to the period in Germany's past dominated by the Nazis. Hotel owner Otto (August Schmörlzer) had a lover at the time, the Polish slave worker Trude (Agata Buzek). When he concluded she was too burdensome, he killed her. Her daughter, Marlene, witnessed all this as an infant. Otto is still obsessed by Nazi ideology, but is overwhelmed with feelings of guilt at night. His wife Lore (Marion Kracht) has to strap him to his bed to ensure he doesn't harm himself.

According to *Sleep's* director, the ruins in the forest that feature in the film are the remains of an explosives factory in the Harz Mountains during the Nazi era, in which slave labourers toiled and died—events that everyone in the village would have noticed. In such small, idyllic places there remain many dark secrets to be uncovered.

The film becomes truly frightening during the opening ceremony for a new hotel annex, which becomes a meeting place for various generations, with Otto playing the role of would-be Führer (leader). His son Christoph (Max Hubacher), who has fallen in love with Mona, departs angrily, telling his father to hold the "Nazi Party conference" on his own.

Mona and Christoph are confident the curse of the Nazi era can be overcome. They belong to a generation that was not involved in the crimes of that period and therefore have the strength to confront them.

A weakness of *Sleep*, described as a "homeland horror film" in production notes, is its tendency to excess. Of course, nightmares are chaotic, but the inclusion of pre-Christian myths and mystical erotic fantasies appears forced and confusing. Why should such elements play a role in the collective unconscious of the 21st century regarding the crimes of the Nazis? The development of the modern horror film as a genre has also been influenced by concrete collective-traumatic experiences such as two world wars and the atrocities of the Vietnam War.

To be continued



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