

71st Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

Je Suis Karl and Herr Bachmann and His Class: The “New Right” and a powerful antidote

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This is the second of a series of articles on the 2021 Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, which took place March 1–5. The first part was posted March 15.

Director Christian Schwochow and screenwriter Thomas Wendrich have produced some of the most engaging and significant work in recent German cinema.

Schwochow, frequently working with Wendrich, has an impressive list of films to his credit, including the first part of a trilogy made for German television, *NSU: German History X* (2016), which examined the roots and development of the neo-fascist trio who carried out 10 murders and a series of bank robberies with assistance from undercover intelligence agents.

Other films to Schwochow’s credit include the feature film *Paula* dealing with the life of the prominent expressionist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker; *The German Lesson* (2019), a cinematic adaptation of Siegfried Lenz’s classic novel; and the first season of the television series *Bad Banks* (2018), which effectively chronicled the nefarious wheeling and dealing in the ruthless world of modern finance.

Schwochow’s latest film *Je suis Karl (I am Karl)* deals with the emergence in Germany and throughout Europe of ultra-right movements, which seek to slickly repackage fascism for a new generation. The title of the film recalls the slogan “Je suis Charlie” (“I am Charlie”) and the right-wing, anti-Islam campaign by the media and leading political parties following the terror attack on the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, the satirical weekly, in January 2015.

In an interview for *Je Suis Karl*, Schwochow notes that, in the course of researching for the film, he noticed that a new generation of right-wingers, with a “new look,” was coming into being. He comments: “It sufficed to look at the externalities, things like the manner of dress of those attending court during the NSU trial in Munich. Then came the Alternative for Germany [the anti-refugee, ultra-right AfD is the main opposition party in the German parliament], the refugee crisis, and suddenly there was turmoil and a whole new mood in Germany.”

Schwochow is referring to young, well dressed, multilingual men and woman often educated at some of Europe’s best universities

and who peddle their far-right ideology as a modern, patriotic lifestyle. Wendrich adds, in the same interview: “And they’re not just up-and-coming, they’re here already! Some of them have important jobs, are on committees, in city parliaments and in police stations.”

Je Suis Karl opens with a German man and woman smuggling Yusuf—a migrant fleeing his homeland and stranded in a European camp—into Germany. Driving the car is Alex, accompanied by his wife, his teenage daughter Maxi, (Luna Wedler), and twin boys. The pair are jubilant when the car containing their hidden passenger crosses the border without problems.

The scene later shifts to Berlin where Alex accepts, on behalf of a neighbour, a parcel delivered by a mysterious delivery man. The parcel contains a bomb which explodes in Alex’s flat, killing his wife and their twin boys. The mysterious delivery man is in fact Karl (Jannis Niewöhner), a suave, good-looking young man—and militant far-rightist.

As neighbours and passers-by place flowers to commemorate the victims, stills show the bombing of the Berlin Christmas market in 2016 by 24-year-old Tunisian Anis Amri, who like the NSU terrorists, carried out his terror attack under the noses of German intelligence agencies and the police.

In *Je Suis Karl*, the German gutter press takes the bait and predictably publishes sensationalist articles blaming migrants and Islamists for the bombing. A witch-hunt of immigrants commences although there is a lack of evidence about the perpetrator, apart from descriptions based on the disguise donned by Karl.

Having obtained exactly the reaction he hoped for, Karl moves on to the next part of his plan—recruiting the thoroughly distraught daughter Maxi for his pan-European fascist movement. The scene shifts to Prague and a meeting of Karl’s co-thinkers at an international Re/Generation “summer academy” of the far right. The attendees are young, media-savvy and attractive. Karl addresses the audience in the manner of a high-tech guru speaking to his fan base. His message—the necessity for a new European movement of radical youth to overthrow the old political elites and protect national cultures from the threat posed by immigration, or, in the poisonous phraseology of the New Right—“The Great

Replacement.”

In one key scene, a member of the audience shouts out *Sieg Heil!* [*Hail Victory!*—the Nazi salute] to indicate her agreement with Karl’s message. He responds immediately and chides the young woman: direct invocations of Hitlerism are out of place, he makes clear. “That was yesterday, get over it.” We plan to do it differently, he proclaims.

In another sequence at the Prague meeting, a woman participates in a propaganda video shoot for the new European movement. Facing the camera, she relates her haunting experience of being raped by an immigrant. When she goes off camera, Maxi seeks to console her. Don’t worry, I was never raped, the woman says, but these things happen and this is the type of propaganda the movement needs. No lie is too base, no provocation too extreme to further the ends of the fascist movement.

The action then moves to France and a meeting of far-right co-thinkers, strongly resembling the French *Génération Identitaire* (Generation Identity), founded in 2012, and which has close links to Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (formerly the National Front). Borrowing from the vocabulary of Germany’s reactionary radical thinkers and writers of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933), Karl reveals to Maxi his most heartfelt wish—a meaningful death!

The film ends with a terrorist provocation in Strasbourg, in eastern France, aimed at provoking a far-right putsch. The parallels between the confrontation at the end of *Je Suis Karl* and the fascist putsch attempt in the US on January 6 are striking.

Other elements of the film recall real events. A fascist member of the German armed forces—identified as Franco A.—planned—like Karl in the film—to pose as a refugee in order to carry out a terrorist attack that would “electrify” the population and create the conditions for a far-right coup. The fake rape incident in *Je Suis Karl* recalls the hysterical reaction by politicians and the media to allegations of mass sexual assault by migrants on New Year’s Eve in Cologne in 2015.

In interviews related to the film, Schwochow has explained he wants *Je Suis Karl* to be taken as a warning. History can repeat itself and huge dangers result from any underestimation of far-right figures such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson and/or new fascist movements, parties and governments across Europe.

After examining the ideologies and operations of the New Right movements, Wendrich and Schwochow chose to try and “square their artistic assertions with real life.” This is a welcome and positive approach to filmmaking. Based on this approach, the storyline of *Je Suis Karl* is both convincing and moving, Schwochow’s new film deserves a wide international audience.

Mr. Bachmann and His Class

A deserving winner of the Silver Bear prize at the Berlinale was the 217-minute documentary *Mr. Bachmann and His Class*. The film is a tribute to all those educators in Germany and elsewhere who dedicate themselves to enriching and expanding the lives of the children they teach. In press notes for the film, shot over a

period of a number of years in the course of repeated visits to the classroom by filmmaker Maria Speth, Dieter Bachmann is described as an “ex-revolutionary, drop-out, folk singer, and sculptor.”

Bachmann teaches children 12 to 14 at a school in a small industrial town in the German state of Hesse. Some 70 percent of the town of 21,000 inhabitants have immigrant backgrounds and the mix is reflected in Herr Bachmann’s classroom with nine different nationalities in attendance.

The film opens with the weary children assembling early morning for the start of a new week. Noting their fatigue, Herr Bachman, wearing an AC/DC T-shirt and his inevitable woollen cap, invites the children to “take a dive”—i.e., five minutes to snooze and collect themselves with heads resting on their desks.

Then work begins for Herr Bachmann who teases responses from the class, part of an effort to make his subject matter as engaging and relevant as possible to the children’s lives. Ten minutes into the film we are taught by the kids in the class how to say “I love you” in five languages. Not far away from Bachmann’s desk is his guitar and he is ready and willing to jam and sing along with his class at the drop of a hat.

Herr Bachmann imparts a necessary sense of discipline to his charges, but much more important are praise, encouragement for the students and a genuine interest in their histories and backgrounds. In meetings with other school staff, Bachmann passionately argues on behalf of the members of his class, seeking to create the best possible chances for their further advancement.

Mr. Bachmann and His Class was filmed before the coronavirus pandemic. Now, in the midst of the current crisis and the third wave of the pandemic, the film draws attention to the real essential workers in society who deserve the broadest respect and support under conditions where they are being sent back to work and risk infection for a political and social elite that prioritises profits over lives. The broad solidarity on the part of teachers for children coming from very different cultures and backgrounds is also a powerful antidote to the poisonous nationalism of the New Right so graphically evident in *Je Suis Karl*.

To be continued



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