71st Berlinale: Festival's Summer Special ends with homage to international solidarity

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A film whose first few minutes feature schoolchildren chanting "I love you" in five different languages was the favourite choice for audiences at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale). The winner of the Audience Award, *Mr Bachmann and His Class*, directed by Maria Speth, is an impressive homage to international solidarity.

For three and a half hours, the film documents the way in which a dedicated teacher in a small industrial town in Hesse helps his pupils from many different countries feel at home and become citizens of the world.

An estimated 60,000 visitors attended the open-air screenings of the Berlinale's Summer Special, which ended June 20. Some 8,500 visitors took part in the voting for the 2021 Berlinale Competition Audience Award.

The festival's Golden and Silver Bears had already been decided by juries at the beginning of March following an online screening for film industry professionals and the press. *Mr Bachmann and his Class* also won the Silver Bear Jury Prize on this occasion.

Stadtallendorf, the town in which Bachmann's school is situated, was not chosen by chance: It is a "German town with a long history of exclusion as well as integration," reads the film's programme text. Indeed: this small town in central Hesse, which until the Second World War was still a Catholic village with a small Jewish community, expanded from 1938 onward into the secret hub of Nazi arms production centred on two factories producing explosives. More than 17,000 forced labourers from 20 European countries and the Soviet Union worked in the town. Thousands failed to survive the terrible conditions.

After the Second World War, displaced persons and refugees from Eastern Europe settled here, and from the 1960s onward, new industries emerged employing so-called "guest" (immigrant) workers, mainly from Turkey. Around 70 percent of the town's almost 21,000 inhabitants have immigrant roots, and nine different nationalities are represented in Bachmann's class.

The winner of the Audience Award is, as the WSWS wrote in April, "a powerful antidote to the poisonous nationalism of the New Right" and to all political attempts to divide and set workers against each other.

The Berlin festival this year featured a limited selection of films due to the coronavirus pandemic; 126 of the 160 films featured online in March were shown in the Summer Special, including 15 films from the main competition section. This year's Berlinale offered numerous worthwhile films. A multitude of younger directors' works reflected an unsettling world using fantasy, a diversity of forms, thoughtfulness and also wit.

The beginning of the Summer Special on June 9 set the stage for the event. The opening film, *The Mauritanian* by Kevin McDonald about the notorious Guantanamo prison camp, highlighted the changed role of the US, which long ago shed its mantle as the land of "democracy and freedom" and instead wages murderous wars and massive attacks on democratic rights.

The situation is also worsening in Germany and in other countries, as the WSWS pointed out in its opening article. Millions have come to realise during the COVID-19 pandemic that capitalism, which celebrated its triumph after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, embodies the rule of a greedy minority that puts profits over lives and pumps billions into the military and police for new wars and oppression.

A number of festival films reflected this changed situation and added a breath of fresh air. Italian journalist and Berlin film festival artistic director Carlo Chatrian suggested that many of the works selected were "freer and more experimental," resorting to forms such as fairy tales, science fiction, thrillers and road movies in response to growing social uncertainties. However, Chatrian suggested, it is difficult "to theorise right now because we are in the middle of it."

Disrupted personal communication

It is possible, however, to identify certain tendencies.

A recurring (and understandable) theme of this year's Berlinale was the apparent disruption of personal relationships, which became particularly noticeable during the coronavirus crisis. The months of keeping one's distance and maintaining only virtual relationships with friends, relatives and colleagues have made the longing for real contact, for social cohesion and togetherness painfully palpable.

Significantly, audiences chose *I'm Your Man* by Maria Schrader as their second favourite film. The movie features Alma (wonderfully played by Maren Eggert—Silver Bear for Best Actress), as a research assistant at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. She has been chosen as test subject to spend three weeks living with a robot, Tom (Dan Stevens). The experiment aims to establish whether programmable artificial intelligence can produce the ideal partner.

Alma is reluctant but submits to the test, eventually falling in love with the robot despite her scientific beliefs and expectations. In the end and in a bizarre twist, the robot, whom Alma kicks out of her flat before the test is over, proves to be attached to his real female host. Instead of returning to the factory as programmed, Tom waits outside for Alma on a bench for three days.

The tragicomic film with elements of science fiction addresses an age-old theme, the relationship between humanity and machine. How should humans deal with the artificial intelligence they have created, and can robots replace people? And likewise, the reverse question: do humans already behave like robots in relationships, i.e., mechanically and without emotion?

As interpersonal relationships become more fragile against the backdrop of the social crisis, they assume a more central role. One longs for human warmth and closeness, sometimes expressed in an unfulfilled dream as in the Georgian competition film by Alexandre Koberitze *What Do We See When We Look at the Sky?* or in a gloomy, pessimistic form, as in the

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Vietnamese entry *Vi* (*Taste*) by Le Bao.

In Koberitze's film, a woman and a man meet by chance, arrange to meet the next day and—struck by a magical curse—are suddenly entirely different-looking people. They do not recognise each other at the meeting place, nor later when they work for the same café owner, and not even when a filmmaker portrays them as a perfect couple in her film.

In the Vietnamese film *Vi*, which won the Special Jury Prize in the Encounters section, an African footballer, who is released from the team because of a broken leg, and four elderly women join forces and live together in poverty in the slums on Saigon's waterfront. They cook and sleep together while mostly naked in primitive basement vaults, practising a kind of return to the primordial state of humanity.

How does one experience history?

There have always been interesting films dealing with historical and political events at previous Berlinales and this was the case again this year.

These include a number of East European films critically examining the situation in their countries thirty years after the reintroduction of capitalism. This applies to the winner of the Golden Bear, Radu Jude's social satire *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*, which denounces the obscene conditions in Romanian society. It also applies to some extent to the Hungarian anti-war film *Natural Light* by Denés Nagy about the country's collaboration with the Nazis, which the current Hungarian government has justified.

In Georgian director Salomé Jashi's debut film *Taming the Garden*, a super-rich Georgian oligarch has ancient trees uprooted in villages to be transported by ferry to his privately owned park. The documentary *Keep Moving* focuses on dancers at the Komische Opera House in East Berlin in the late 1980s, which lost half of its members during the course of performances in the West. The interviews with those who left and those who stayed behind recall the period shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But also conspicuous in this year's Berlinale were new ways of dealing with history—sometimes not yet perfect but refreshing and surprisingly effective.

One example is the competition film *Memory Box* by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, which deals with the Lebanon war of the 1980s. A 16-year-old girl discovers the history of her mother's youth in Beirut in a box full of photos, diary pages, love letters and cassette recordings. She transports herself back to this time of war, interweaves it with her own youth and in so doing forgets the Instagram chats she used to hold with her friends.

A more formally innovative approach is taken by Christophe Cogne in his film *From Where They Stood* featuring photographs of concentration camp prisoners, which Cogne describes as "an act of resistance." He presents them in such a manner one has the feeling that things are moving, and the victims are present.

The Thai black and white film *Come here* (Jai jumlong), by Anocha Suwichakornpong, is about four young drama students who visit a World War II memorial of the "Death Railway," a railway line built by the country's Japanese occupiers using tens of thousands of forced labourers between Bangkok and western Thailand. Most of the workers lost their lives.

Again, history overlaps with the present, in the form of a scene featuring a migrant woman in the forest who has fled modern forced labour in Thailand. As she washes her face in a stream, another person's face appears as a reflection. The director is concerned with "our inability to be someone else," Suwichakornpong explains in an interview, about the lack of empathy for the suffering of other people.

Some short films also proved interesting: *Your Street* by Güzin Kar is a harrowing reminder of one of the first racist attacks following the reunification of Germany, the arson attack on May 29, 1993 in Solingen, which claimed the lives of most of the members of two Turkish families. We learn this only gradually as the camera roams over a barren street in a Bonn industrial estate, while a narrative voice (Sibylle Berg) monotonously reports that this street was named after the youngest victim, four-year-old Saime Genc. "Sleep well, little Saime Genc," she says at the end of the cinematic requiem.

In another short film, *One Hundred Steps* (Bárbara Wagner, Benjamin de Burca), visitors to a castle in Ireland and a city palace in Marseilles—both now open as museums—connect the past with the present by filling the sumptuous chambers with singing, playing music, playing cards and, like children, even lying down on a four-poster bed.

The growing interest of a younger generation in history is visible, yet question marks and confusion remain. *Memory Box* ends with a drive in present-day Beirut, where the mother shows the new house built on the ruins of her parents' home. After her friend's funeral, we see a boisterous dance party, and finally the daughter watches the sun set over Beirut. Life goes on, the present gains the upper hand over history? A somewhat romanticised short-circuit.

Capitalism and class struggle

Another interesting tendency was on view during the Berlinale 2021: capitalism exposes itself as a class society plagued by increasingly violent conflicts. Already in the previous Berlinale, which took place shortly before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, there was a "new interest in the lives of workers," as the WSWS wrote at the time.

This year the class struggle returns to the screen, the time of class compromise is over. At the same time, the ruling class is showing its true, brutal face. Here are just three films worth seeing, which the WSWS will cover in more detail.

In *The Seed* by Mia Maariel Meyer, a construction worker experiences how only the profit of the real estate speculators counts, and how many years of work for a family business no longer signify anything. The result is violent resistance.

The film *Azor* by the young Swiss director Andreas Fontana deals with the collaboration between Swiss banks and the Argentinean dictatorship in the early 1980s, which provided finance capital with lucrative business deals involving goods looted from murdered political opponents.

The social satire *Bloodsuckers* by Julian Radlmaier wittily shows that it is not "Chinese fleas" (a reference to COVID-19), but rather the aristocratic major shareholder and multimillionaire Octavia who is the source of the bloody bites appearing everywhere. It turns out that Octavia finds herself in cosy harmony with a fascist.

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