

German Film Award in Silver for Dominik Graf's *Fabian: Going to the Dogs*

Bernd Reinhardt
12 November 2021

The new film by director Dominik Graf, *Fabian: Going to the Dogs*, had a successful run at this year's Berlin International Film Festival and in German cinemas. Graf's work recently received the Film Award in Silver at the German Film Awards in the feature category, along with two other awards. Maria Schrader's *I'm Your Man* and Johannes Naber's *Curveball* also received prizes.

Like Graf's earlier film *Beloved Sisters* (2014), *Fabian: Going to the Dogs* takes place during a period of social upheaval. The former movie took place in the 18th century, when the initial enthusiasm for the French Revolution and hopes for a better society based on reason held by German artists such as Friedrich Schiller turned into disillusionment and scepticism, following the radicalisation of the revolution and the execution of the Louis XVI in 1793.

The new film is a free adaptation of Erich Kästner's novel, *Going to the Dogs* (1931). It is set in the year of the book's publication, two years before Hitler came to power, a period in which the revolutionary upswing in Germany following the Russian Revolution in October 1917 ended in a series of defeats for the labour movement, thanks to the betrayals of Social Democracy and Stalinism, and in economic devastation. Moods of pessimism became widespread.

Kästner (1899–1974) is known to the German public through his children's books such as *Emil and the Detectives* (1929), *The Flying Classroom* (1933), *The Animal Conference* (1949) and his biting humorous poems. His novel *Der Gang vor die Hunde* (*Going to the Dogs*) shows him to be a critical chronicler of the late Weimar Republic. Only in 2013 did the novel appear in a form corresponding to Kästner's wishes. The first edition was subject to editorial changes (including the title, to simply *Fabian*) and the deletion of certain socially critical and erotic passages and was eventually published as *Fabian. Die Geschichte eines Moralisten* (*Fabian: The Story of a Moralist*—republished as *Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist* by New York Review Books Classics, 2012).

Fabian (Tom Schilling), aka Dr. Jakob Fabian, is a 32-year-old student of German language who listlessly ekes out a living as an advertising copywriter in Berlin. At night, he wanders through pubs and cabarets observing the nocturnal manifestations of moral decay with a mixture of amusement and disgust. He takes notes (maybe it will be a book?) and arrives late for work the next morning. He has no plans for his future.

He meets Cornelia (Saskia Rosendahl), a graduate in international film law. She, too, somehow manages to get by. Their romance ends when he loses his job and cannot find a new one. He encourages Cornelia to try her hand at acting. Without talking much about it, they both know that success does not depend solely on talent. When she then succeeds in getting a role, he takes it badly. They break up.

Fabian is also hit hard by the suicide of his friend Labude (Albrecht Schuch). Along with their love of literature, the two were united by the cruel experience of World War I. The sensitive son of a wealthy judicial councillor was Fabian's conscience, constantly urging him (in vain) to

become socially involved. The apparent rejection of his habilitation thesis on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the great critic, philosopher and playwright of the Enlightenment whom he admired, drives Labude to commit suicide. The penniless Fabian then returns to live with his parents in Dresden. Just as contact with Cornelia is re-established, he drowns while trying to retrieve a small boy from a river.

From the outset, the film establishes a relationship to contemporary society. The camera sweeps through a modern underground tunnel, follows the escalator upward—and lands in 1931 Berlin. The clubs Fabian visits at night are cheaply improvised hangouts. In the Cabaret of the Anonymous, unemployed amateur “artists” allow themselves to be ridiculed by the wealthy public out of necessity, in exchange for a few pennies and drinks. Prostitution is omnipresent, as in the studio of the perpetually drunken artist and dissolute baroness Ruth Reiter (Anne Bennent), whose studio masquerades as an institute for social relations.

The type embodied by the unstable *Professor Unrat* in Heinrich Mann's famous 1905 novel (the basis for Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*, 1932) is widespread among the affluent professionals, who are quite prepared to trade their humanistic education for the gutter without any fuss, while adopting the ridiculous pose of non-conformity. The rich lawyer's wife Irene Moll (Meret Becker) prostitutes herself in cheap dives with her husband's approval. The two have drawn up a special contract to this end. Their “enlightened” posturing about equality, however, has nothing to do with the existential problems of the poor women in the film.

The strongest scene in Graf's adaptation takes place at Berlin University. Fabian confronts the person supposedly responsible for Labude's suicide. The elderly literature professor (Michael Hanemann) is surprised because he admires Labude's work. The letter rejecting the thesis on Lessing turns out to have been a “joke” by a far-right student, but the professor refuses to hold him to account. He accuses Labude of being a political troublemaker who provoked the right-wingers. The post-war chaos must finally end, order must be restored. He cynically describes Labude's suicide as a necessary sacrifice. “Things have to change for the better.” Right-wing students in the stairwell applaud.

The scene, depicted in *Fabian* more pointedly than in the novel, speaks to omnipresent phenomena today. As then, it is the opportunism on the part of layers of the academic, educated bourgeoisie that today encourages the far right at universities, exemplified in the case of the extreme right-wing professor Jörg Baberowski, whom the Humboldt University administration (formerly the Berlin University) defends against his critical students.

Fabian, convincingly played by Schilling, also seems contemporary. His coolness and disillusionment, his cynical distance from society, bring to mind someone who no longer trusts anyone after bitter political experiences. At the same time, there is a longing on his part to become involved and a pronounced sense of social justice. He generously entertains a beggar, a homeless former employee, in a restaurant. Cornelia explains to Fabian that she does not think much of his footloose existence,

she anticipates that he has always waited for an opportunity to be true to himself. Socially speaking, one could say he is waiting for a strong positive headwind. But nothing comes.

Neither Labude's idealistic moralising nor the newspaper report that thousands of metalworkers are about to go on strike triggers anything in Fabian. He comments sarcastically on the daily violent clashes between Nazis and Communists. They frighten him and evoke memories of the world war. Basically sharing the pessimism of Labude, he suspects that the seemingly aimless, social "train journey" will end with the "victory of stupidity."

This says something about Kästner, whose Fabian has certain autobiographical traits and who more than once in his literary work blames "stupidity" for social ills, referring to dumb Nazis, stupid Germans, and so on. The voiceover that features from time to time in the film quotes a passage from the novel where the fights between Nazis and Communists are compared to dancehall brawls. Like many other intellectuals, Kästner underestimated the danger of the Nazi movement. After the war, he admitted that they should have been fought earlier, because "threatening dictatorships can only be fought before they have taken power."

The novel provides a vivid impression of the feverish and threatening atmosphere of the early 1930s. Today especially, Graf told the film magazine *Filmdienst*, "the world is spinning explicitly politically in the same coordinates, longitudes and latitudes of mentalities as in the twenties: totalitarian leaders everywhere, stupid politicians everywhere, and war—both mental and real war: 'The world is out of joint.' There are so many quotes from 'Fabian' that refer to things that can all be transferred exactly to the present time." At one point during filming, he said, far-right youths were shouting in the street "as if we had called them in as extras."

Its pressing topicality was one reason why Graf decided to film Kästner's novel even though there was a 1980 adaptation directed by Wolf Gremm (*Kamikaze 1989*, 1982). The images reveal an untenable, unstable, sometimes nightmarishly, warped society. Alongside workers, layers of what used to be called the "better society" are plunged into social and moral misery. *Fabian* conveys the overarching expectation of the period that only violent upheaval would change things. In the end, Labude, Fabian and also Cornelia "go to the dogs" from lack of perspective. They do not want to live selfishly and asocially, as the daily struggle for existence demands. They also reject hedonistic partying ("dancing on the volcano") and see through the hollowness of moral appeals.

Fabian and Cornelia both come from humble backgrounds. She grew up in Wedding, an old Berlin working class district. Fabian's parents are small shopkeepers. In the novel, Fabian explains to a young Communist lying wounded on the ground after being shot by a Nazi that he is on the side of the workers, "because we have the same enemy, because I love justice. I am your friend even though you don't give a damn about it." (The Communist had called Fabian a bourgeois.) Fabian adds pointedly, "One is not yet good and wise merely because one is poor."

Evidently, despite Kästner's sympathy for the "biggest interest grouping," he distrusted the present desolate state of the workers' movement. And there are also disoriented workers who support the Nazis. "They bring me two politicians" says the doctor ironically to Fabian, looking at the two wounded men. "Tonight a total of nine people have been brought in, one with a serious bullet-wound in the stomach. All are workers and clerks." Many like Fabian and the doctor react by telling themselves the little people are fighting while the bigwigs laugh all the way to the bank. It is significant that the workers' movement plays no significant role in Kästner's novel.

Fabian, despite his sober and critical qualities, ultimately remains an idealistic-romantic individualist, jumping into the water without hesitation

to save a boy, even though he himself cannot swim. Cornelia's sense of everyday reality saves her from impending social misery, but she is unhappy about the price to be paid for her ascent.

The new *Fabian* has a special, added feature: unlike the novel published in 1931, it includes the Reichstag elections of 1932. Anyone who watches the apocalyptic sea of flames at the end of the film, both a symbol for the book burning of 1933 and the mass murder of Jews, will be surprised by the fact that in November 1932 the two biggest workers' parties, the Communist KPD and the Social Democratic SPD, together received more votes than the Nazis. They may ask themselves: How is this possible?

Contradicting the persistent claims after the end of World War II that the German people were simply blinded by Hitler, the 1932 election result testified to the broad anti-Nazi sentiment among workers and the unemployed. Their united struggle could have stopped the Nazis, but this was prevented both by the leadership of the SPD, which preferred to trust Reich President Paul von Hindenburg rather than join forces with the Communists, and by the leadership of the latter, who denounced the Social Democrats as "social fascists" and strictly rejected a united front.

The same year Kästner's novel appeared, many of Leon Trotsky's invaluable writings on National Socialism were published, in which he analysed in detail the issues facing millions at the time and propagated the necessity of the united front.

Kästner, much more aware of the dangers than his literary creation, signed at that time the Urgent Appeal of the International Socialist Fighting League (ISK), a split from the SPD, which called for the "building of a united workers' front" and for an electoral alliance between the SPD and the KPD. The physicist Albert Einstein and artists such as Heinrich Mann, Käthe Kollwitz, Ernst Toller and Arnold Zweig all supported the appeal.

In the figure of Fabian, Graf's film presents a highly topical figure who, against his will, is set in motion by the conditions of social decay. These increasingly collide with Fabian's own humane demands on life. Secretly, he admires Labude's sense of social responsibility and is distraught at his suicide. When this sensitive person, of all people, is driven to his death, something must be fundamentally wrong. Fabian erupts with pent-up rage that can find no outlet in a progressive social movement.

But his rage is not aimless. In the novel, it ends up being directed against the state-paid warmongers who sent Fabian's generation to their deaths. Back in Dresden, there are his old teachers and former instructor (now a civil servant), whom Fabian painfully kicks on his corns in a tram. Kästner also bitingly criticises the Church, which justified the carnage of war with divine providence.

Fabian's rage in the novel corresponds much more to today's opposition to militarism and warmongering—most recently directed against the deplorable torchlight procession held in Berlin for German soldiers who died in Afghanistan, which recalled similar processions held by the Nazis. In the film *Fabian*, a traumatised victim of war, trembles in panic when he hears a gunshot.

Another of the film's weak points is its concentration on Fabian and Cornelia's love story for much of the three hours. While the film, for what feels like an eternity, dives into the nether world of underdogs, Kästner's novel delves much more deeply into society and its conflicts. Thus, the author describes with biting humour how the so-called white-collar proletariat, even when unemployed, is embarrassingly keen to distinguish itself from the ordinary unemployed. When Kästner lists the everyday harassment by the government labour office in his novel, every social welfare recipient in Germany today will feel he or she is being addressed.

In 1933, Erich Kästner's books were also among those burned, in the Nazi-organised atrocity, in Berlin by university students. Kästner remained in Germany and continued to write under a pseudonym. In the early 1940s, he wrote the screenplay with Hans Albers for the film *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1943). (Hitler is said to have had a fit

of rage when he learned who was hiding behind the pseudonym Berthold Bürger).

From 1941 onwards, Kästner began to keep a diary. After the war, he placed his hopes in the new federal republic, West Germany. His children's book *The Animal Conference* shows that his hopes were not merely naïve. In the book, animals take responsibility for society because humans seemed incapable of doing so. In the 1950s, Kästner publicly spoke out against rearmament. Former right-wing forces had regained the upper hand. Once again it was said: "Things have to change for the better."

Hardly any of the Nazi murderers were punished. Had "stupidity" won out again? Apart from personal issues, his disappointment with post-war social developments probably contributed to the drying up of Kästner's productivity. His intended great novel about the Nazi era did not materialise. Kästner stated tersely: "The Thousand Year Reich does not have what it takes to be a great novel." His war diary was published in excerpts. It was not until 2018 that a complete edition, *The Blue Book—Secret War Diaries 1941–1945*, was published. (Included are notes on his planned novel).

Graf's film with its outstanding actors should inspire readers to rediscover the full extent of Kästner's work, including *Fabian: Going to the Dogs*, his poems and his war diary. In light of the renewed danger from the extreme right, Trotsky's writings from the Weimar period are particularly recommended. Running through them like a common thread is the struggle for a workers' united front and the resolution of the crisis of working class leadership. They powerfully refute claims that irrationality, human error, stupidity or a special tendency towards dictatorship in the "psychology of the masses" were responsible for the rise of Hitler and the Second World War.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)