

Berlin film festival officials decide to hold in-person event despite record Omicron infection rates

WSWS arts editors
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Despite a massive increase in the number of COVID-19 infections in Germany, the management of the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) has decided to hold this year's festival from February 10 to 20 as an in-person only attendance event. Unlike, for example, the Rotterdam Film Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival or the Sundance Festival, no online screenings are to be made available for either the public or press representatives.

This decision is a sharp break with the Berlinale's previous orientation, which encouraged or accommodated itself to the general public's participation. The latter are now expected to attend cinema and movie events at great risk to their health and lives. The decision means that the Berlinale management has bowed down to the infamous herd immunity policy of the federal government (a coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Free Democratic Party) and the SPD-Left Party-Green administration in Berlin, which announced the complete opening up of schools, day care centres, bars and restaurants just as the highly contagious Omicron variant began to spread.

Berlinale officials argue they have reviewed hygiene and safety measures and developed a new safe concept. In fact, their policy is the same as the 2G-plus (twice vaccinated plus test) concept that the German government has adopted as its benchmark—a concept that has long since proved its ineffectiveness.

On January 19, the day the festival management presented its programme of films, the number of newly infected people rose sharply in Germany, reaching over 110,000 nationwide. One day later this figure had reached 133,000. In Berlin, the levels of infection are twice the national average. In Berlin-Mitte, where most Berlinale cinemas are located, the seven-day incidence on the day of the presentation was 1,798—the highest in the whole of Germany. Scientific forecasts predict that the Omicron variant wave will peak in mid-February, precisely when the Berlinale takes place.

Festival officials have reduced seating capacity by half and tickets for films are only available online to avoid long queues. All festival parties and receptions have been cancelled. For filmmaking teams, however, there will still be “appearances in a reduced format on the Red Carpet at the Berlinale Palast or other premiere cinemas, in the presence of the press, thereby giving a hint of a traditional festival atmosphere.”

In addition, film screenings followed by the awards ceremony have been limited to the period February 10 to 16, with the remaining four days turned into “public audience days” during which Berlin citizens can see repeat screenings of films in various cinemas for the price of 10 euros per ticket.

But why should a family with children venture to the cinema to see one of the films in the popular “Generation Kplus” or “Generation 14plus” sections? Omicron is currently raging in German schools and day care

centres, with only some older children so far vaccinated. A spread of the airborne virus in cinemas is inevitable.

The festival management and other prominent cultural representatives are trying to present the project in the best possible light, portraying the festival as a gift to the film-going public. According to the festival press release: culture plays “such an elementary role in society,” we want to ensure a “communal cinema experience.”

Announcing François Ozon's opening film *Peter von Kant*, a homage to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), the festival's artistic director Carlo Chatrion asserted that the film was intended to “bring lightness and verve into our dull everyday lives.” In an interview with *Variety*, Chatrion went so far as to describe the decision to go ahead with an in-person festival as an “exercise in resistance.”

Support has also come from the president of the Academy of the Arts, Jeanine Meerapfel: “Films need the cinema and audiences need the big screen. Only then does film come alive. Shared experiences and mindful interaction with one another belong together—perhaps more than ever in current times.”

Such flowery words recall the efforts by politicians to force schoolchildren into poorly ventilated and cramped classrooms on the grounds of their supposed “mental welfare.” How “mindfully” will Berlinale attendees regard their “shared” film experience when they lie ill with coronavirus in quarantine within their four walls at home, from the confines of a hotel room or even from a hospital bed?

Politically motivated

At the January 19 presentation, Berlinale co-director Mariette Rissenbeek stressed that the health and safety of visitors, filmmakers and staff had priority. However, close consultation with the authorities was necessary, she added.

This confirms that the festival officialdom has bowed to pressure from the federal government and its Minister of Culture, Claudia Roth (Green Party), as well as from the SPD-Left-Green Senate in Berlin and its Senator for Culture, Klaus Lederer (Left Party).

Berlin's mayor, the SPD's Franziska Giffey, told one local newspaper: “It is a great wish, also on the part of the federal government, that this succeeds. That everything is done to make this possible.” Giffey continued: “So in this respect there is agreement: We want the Berlinale to take place.”

Culture Minister Roth cheered the decision, saying, “We want to send a signal to the entire film industry and every aspect of culture with the

festival. We need cinema.” Shortly afterwards, the Green politician went into quarantine after contracting the coronavirus.

In fact, the decision to hold an in-person festival is not about the physical or “spiritual” well-being of those attending and members of staff, but is driven by economic and financial interests.

So far, 10 million euros of the Berlinale’s costs have been covered by subsidies from the German Federal Film Fund (DFFF), whose role is to advance Germany’s competitiveness as a production site for cinema and television. Currently, American producers are better able to sell their films on the European market than German and European companies.

The rest of the festival’s costs are covered by ticket sales and donations from corporate sponsors. Over 300,000 tickets were sold for the 70th Berlinale in 2020, which took place shortly before the start of the pandemic.

Last year, the Berlinale was divided in two. In the spring, professional audiences and representatives of the European Film Market (EFM), as well as journalists, were able to view films online. Then, in June, a so-called Summer Special screened a large number of films for the public outdoors, in parks and squares. The festival’s opening ceremony, official awards ceremony and the presentation of audience prizes also took place in the summer, when COVID numbers were comparatively low.

This meant the Berlinale seemed to be adhering to its tradition as one of the world’s biggest festivals for the general public. The public should be “the star,” was once the motto of former Berlinale director Dieter Kosslick, who retired from the post in 2019.

For their part, the film industry, cinema associations and the German government have complained about financial losses due to postponed cinema and television releases, extended contracts and reduced revenues, and hoped for increased revenue this year with an in-person festival. In the form of a subsidy, the Culture Minister held out the prospect of an additional “low two-digit million [euro] sum” for the festival, a pittance compared to the billions currently being proposed to re-equip the German military, or distributed to the big corporations and financial elite at the beginning of the pandemic. Such a miserly subsidy will do nothing to relieve the plight of smaller producers and cinemas in particular.

Commercial interests and Germany as a centre for film production

This year’s priority is to promote the European Film Market, which takes place alongside the associated Co-Production Market as part of the Berlinale. The EFM is regarded as the world’s third most important film marketplace after Cannes and the American Film Market in Los Angeles. The EFM brings together not only actors and film devotees, but also, and primarily, industry professionals, salespeople who sell licences, distributors who buy rights for their respective national markets and representatives of the banks who provide interim financing for films and series.

A major focus is now on the production of television series in Germany, where pressure from streaming providers such as Amazon, Sky and Netflix has increased during the pandemic.

The decision to hold the Berlinale in person in February must be seen against this background. The festival management, in consultation with the Berlin Senate and the German government, has decided to put commercial considerations first.

It is therefore insisting on the date in February so that the film industry can profit throughout the coming year and exploit a time advantage over the markets in Cannes and Los Angeles. In addition, and unlike last year, cinema-goers must also attend cinemas, despite the current pandemic, so that sales and distribution interest, for example, in the case of world

premieres, is boosted by a corresponding public resonance.

Hence the decision to deny online participation for the public, while commercial agents can safely conduct their distribution and sales negotiations in that manner.

Retreat from the concept of a festival for the general public

The decision to hold an in-person Berlinale has unleashed a wave of protest, incomprehension and disappointment in the social media and in editorial offices. The lack of online access has had a particularly damaging impact on international visitors, who are currently cancelling their attendance in droves. Due to travel restrictions and national differences in vaccination regulations, journalists from Eastern Europe, for example, are prevented from coming to Berlin, thereby excluding much of the festival’s international audience.

The *Münchener Abendzeitung* wrote: “In person under strict conditions. But is that enough to save a public festival like the Berlinale?” RBB film critic Fabian Wallmeier tweeted: “It really amazes me how stubbornly the Berlinale is sticking to a presence-only festival in the face of Omicron and now explicitly excludes online screenings for media representatives.”

The *taz* blog *Filmanzeiger* writes with bitter sarcasm: “The last one with a negative test gets to interview all the prize winners exclusively. And if they are all positive before the end, coverage will be discontinued due to a lack of digital viewing options...”

Many listeners to RBB radio expressed their outrage in the station’s comments blog after the decision was announced. “This is irresponsible considering the incidence rates in Berlin and completely lacking in solidarity with all caregivers and all those whose operations have been cancelled because of Omicron,” wrote Kai on January 12. “Unfortunately, social solidarity is being more and more undermined. Everyone only looks after themselves and do not think outside the box. I would have liked to see more responsibility from those active in the sphere of culture in particular.”

And so it goes on: “In view of the exploding numbers at the moment, it really is madness! Is it really necessary?”—“Unbelievable, the high numbers clearly speak against it!!! I’m at a loss for words, these absurdities in this pandemic are completely beyond me! Action should also finally be taken in schools...”—“Crazy! Individuals are not allowed to meet with more than 10 people and they are given a get-out-of-jail card? It’s going to be a super-spreader event, I tell you. Better to enforce a lockdown for everyone!”

The decision of the Berlinale management is clearly directed against the health, lives and cultural interests of the population. It represents the beginning of the end of a festival oriented to the public in favour of an event thoroughly dominated by the film industry and the festivities and glamour associated with the wealthy upper class.

It is also a disservice to the many young filmmakers who seek to artistically capture the disturbing reality of capitalist society, which is ruining the future prospects of billions, those filmmakers prepared to express growing public anger against the official policies of the super-rich.

What is required to promote a young, lively film culture is not an “Omicron-Berlinale” (headline in the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper), with the attendant numbers of sick and dead, but rather establishing solidarity between filmmakers and the broad population via a danger-free online festival enabling millions to participate.

The WSWs has been covering the Berlinale for over two decades to bring lesser known films especially to a wider audience of workers and youth worldwide. We protest in the strongest terms against the decision of

the Berlinale management to hold the film festival in person and call upon all other editorial offices and the public to do the same.



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