

72nd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

A revolutionary German Film: Werner Hochbaum's *Brothers* (1929)

Bernd Reinhardt
22 February 2022

This is the third part of a series on films available online from the recent Berlin International Film Festival. The first part was posted February 16 and the second on February 20.

A silent film with orchestral accompaniment can be a breathtaking experience. Those who attended the world premiere of the original version of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) with orchestral music by Edmund Meisel at the Berlin film festival (Berlinale) in 2005 will never forget it.

A highlight of this year's Berlinale was the world premiere of the newly restored German silent film *Brothers* (*Brüder*, 1929) directed by Werner Hochbaum (1899-1946), inspired by Eisenstein's classic in terms of both content and visually. *Brothers* was previously screened at the 2018 Berlinale Retrospective, but with poorer image quality and just piano accompaniment.

The German director and screenwriter Hochbaum was for a time close to the Social Democratic Party (SPD). His film *Brothers* centres on the dock workers' strike of 1896-97 in the port city of Hamburg. It was Kaiser Wilhelm himself who ordered the brutal suppression of the strike by police. The "brothers" of the film's title find themselves on opposite sides of the barricades—one is a strike leader and the other a police officer.

Hochbaum's *Raidin St. Pauli* (1932) is also set in the Hamburg port milieu and features the well-known singer of proletarian songs, Ernst Busch. Hochbaum's psychological study *The Eternal Mask* (1935) received international recognition.

The new film music for *Brothers* was performed by 12 members of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

under the direction of Raphael Haeger. The score was composed by Martin Grütter, known for his experimental approach. The instrumental variety—string and wind instruments, grand piano, flanked by percussion and harp—allowed for richly contrasting timbres and dynamics. Everyday noises—from the harbour, seagulls, factory sirens—are mixed with the instrumentation.

The music, rich in dissonance, gives the film a sombre, on occasion even leaden character, or, as the Berlinale text asserts, it "evokes (...) the hopelessness, dreariness, exhaustion and violence of a class society whose unsparing reality of life is hardly imaginable for us today." The passing of time, symbolised by a pendulum clock, provides an occasional rhythmic-musical impulse.

In the most emotionally powerful scene, the strike leader's family gathers on Christmas Eve. The little daughter is delighted by the family's decorated tree with its Christmas angel. The father is not really in the mood to celebrate the "festival of peace," and he is no fan of angels. But he does take pleasure in his daughter's joy. At one point, the music undergoes a surprising change. Festive baroque music (perhaps Bach) is softly heard.

The police abruptly and brutally disrupt the idyll, bursting in to arrest the father. The Christmas tree is damaged in the scuffle. The scene is striking due to the contrast between the uplifting music and the forced entry of the police. Something precious emerges that is suppressed in the course of the arduous day-to-day struggle for existence—the longing for a harmonious life.

When it comes to the strike, the music is less

convincing and barely reflects the dynamism of events. We see images of heightened militancy and unity, but the music proceeds as if there were just a lot of people in the street. There is much movement, but a lack of direction and power. Even the workers' call for a strike seems rather hectic and almost comical due to simultaneous, strident trumpet phrases. When the popular workers' song "Wer schafft das Gold zu Tage?" ("Who Brings the Gold to Light?") is heard, a slightly ironic glissando escapes from the trombone.

One realizes in the course of the film, with its well-played, contemporary music, that a great deal of time has passed since the premiere of *Brothers*, nearly a century. Today the presence of a ruthless police force is evident, but not yet a revolutionary mass movement.

Brothers is no mere agitprop film.

The 11-week Hamburg dockworkers' strike of 1896-97 was one of the longest strikes during the period of the German Empire (1871-1918). Together with the textile workers' strike in St. Petersburg the same year, it initiated a wave of international mobilisations that developed into unprecedented mass strikes and culminated in the Russian Revolution of 1905. This process led in turn to the fundamental discussion in the SPD known as the "mass strike debate."

In that controversy, SPD leader Rosa Luxemburg declared that a new era was opening up, which put socialist revolution directly on the agenda. Developments proved her and other Marxists such as Lenin and Trotsky right. The period was characterised by violent class struggle and crisis. The slaughter of the First World War was finally only ended by the Russian Revolution of 1917. One year later revolution broke out in Germany and other countries.

Against this background, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* was historically correct in proclaiming the opening of a revolutionary epoch on a world scale. There is also something of this spirit in *Brothers*, albeit clouded by the defeat of the German revolution of 1919 and the murders of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the betrayal of the working class by the reformist SPD and the political inability of the Stalin-influenced German Communist Party (KPD) to unite workers in the struggle against fascism.

Hochbaum's film about the Hamburg dock strike and two very different brothers expresses something

important about the reality of 1928. In the Reichstag elections in May that year, the SPD emerged as the principal winner (Hitler's Nazi Party received just 2.6 percent of the vote). In a grand coalition with four conservative and right-wing parties, the SPD took over the posts of chancellor (Hermann Müller), plus the finance and interior ministries. Yielding to pressure from business and banking circles, the coalition more and more openly directed its policies against workers and met with resistance from within the SPD's own ranks.

The turbulent atmosphere explains how a film could be made in the political milieu around the SPD, which Hochbaum cautiously described as an attempt "to create a German proletarian film with simple means." The content of *Brothers*, however, cannot be compared to other "proletarian films" of the time, which usually concentrated in a more limited fashion on depicting the social misery afflicting workers.

The end of *Brothers* is the famous "Despite Everything!" uttered by Liebknecht, who proclaimed the socialist republic in November 1918 before both he and Luxemburg fell victim to the counterrevolution, presided over by the SPD. As in *Battleship Potemkin*, the red flag of world revolution flies at the end of *Brothers*.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact