

72nd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

We Might as Well Be Dead: An absurdist portrait of a hysteria-ridden society

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This is the fifth part of a series on films available online from the recent Berlin International Film Festival. The first part was posted February 16, the second February 20, the third February 22 and the fourth February 26.

Against the backdrop of war propaganda and anti-Russian agitation in the media, one film at this year's Berlin international film festival (Berlinale) assumed extra significance, *We Might as Well Be Dead*, by the young, Russian-Jewish director Natalia Sinelnikova.

The film is an absurdist drama portraying the hysteria and mendacity of better-off, educated layers of society who shut themselves off from the outside world and react frenetically when external events seem to threaten their insular existence. Their fears rapidly transmute into aggression against all "strangers," as well as alleged internal foes.

"Have you noticed any noticeable physical or mental changes in the last two weeks? Have you ever been excluded from a community because of antisocial, immoral or rash activities?" This is the standard question asked by security officer Anna (wonderfully played by the Romanian actress Ioana Iacob) at the entrance of the St. Phoebus high-rise block.

The housing (based on a similar high-rise in Berlin's eastern Marzahn's district) promises a carefree, secure existence for its residents—with large windows allowing in the light, solar energy heating and the latest technology, palm trees in the bright inner courtyard, swimming pool and a well-tended golf course, and—most importantly—NATO-style barbed wire fencing to protect residents against the hostile outside world.

The viewer is quickly drawn into the building's oppressive atmosphere. A family—a man and woman and their son, all decently dressed—run out of a gloomy forest. Armed with an axe, indicating the terror they have left behind, they hurry towards the gleaming white tower block. As the gilded lattice gate opens, they slow their pace. They adjust and straighten their clothing—after all, they are well-mannered people.

The new refugees, however, have no luck. The man goes down on his knees before Anna, who herself came from Eastern Europe with her daughter six years previously. He pleads that his family is socially engaged, are "polite neighbours," drink only a little wine "from very small glasses" and even keep quiet during sex. Nevertheless, the family receives no mercy from the selection

committee of the house. Why the refusal? Anna points to the man's desperation, but the committee has no interest in accepting desperate people.

Suddenly, the dog belonging to the caretaker Gerti Posner (Jörg Schüttauf) disappears. Fear spreads rapidly among the residents. The dog has probably been killed, they conclude, and "we might as well be dead," agree the panic-stricken residents.

A climate of suspicion develops among neighbours. The young poet Wolfram (Moritz Jahn), who reads and sells his poems in the building's lift but is only allowed to live in the boiler room, comes under suspicion. Anna herself is also suspected because her daughter Iris (Pola Geiger) refuses to sing at a house party and has locked herself in the bathroom.

Events turn increasingly absurd and surreal. Anna talks to her daughter through a slot in the bathroom door; the girl claims she has the "evil eye" because she wished death on the caretaker's dog. At one point, the mother lies down in front of the door and sings a Yiddish lullaby in exasperation.

The exemplary Drescher couple (Susanne Wuest, Knut Berger) suspect they are being watched during their sexual frolics. In fact, it is Anna searching for the dog outside their window. She noisily stumbled over the porcelain figurine of an angel. In a panic, she flees with the broken figurine. Now not only is a dog murderer at large, but also a thief who stole an angel.

Mr. Drescher, sporty and elegant, who is having an affair with the Turkish, single-parent fitness trainer (which guarantees the woman will be allowed to stay in the complex), assembles a vigilante squad from among his fellow golfers. The golf clubs become weapons, the polo shirts uniforms.

The panic increases with denunciations and fears about security breaches boiling over into hatred of the "other," of all things foreign. The poet is beaten up and thrown out of the block after the broken angel figurine is found in his place. Wolfram defends himself against the accusation that he has desecrated the dignity of the church, pleading in vain he is an atheist, does not believe in angels and only wants to sell his poems.

Events come to a head when the caretaker enters with a blanket on which a small black, animal is lying. This is his dog Willi, he claims—now emaciated and dead. Anna urges calm and pleads for sanity: "It's a marten, or a ferret, or a large mouse," she shouts, "but definitely not a dog." The bystanders look at her aghast. The

sense of dread, explains St. Phoebus chairwoman Ursel (?iir Elo?lu), is at least as real as the threat itself.

Then comes a turning point: after Anna has a loud argument with her daughter during the night, the “polite neighbours” show up at her door with golf clubs. Suddenly her 16-year-old daughter Iris, who has never been seen before, appears and, using her “evil eye,” hurls curses in Polish at the gang led by Drescher.

The image in the final scene is telling: behind large glass doors, members of the vigilante committee wave their golf clubs threateningly. Anna and her daughter, who have been locked out, look at the mob from the outside, before running into the nearby forest with their heads held high and axes in hand.

A biting social satire

Sinelnikova’s debut film, which was made as a graduation project, may not be perfect in every respect, as some film critics note, but it is a successful absurdist drama about today’s fragile society. It’s sharp, satirical portrayal of the upper middle class in Germany is proving prophetic.

Only a few days after the film was shown at the Berlinale, the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, unleashing a war frenzy and a pogrom-like atmosphere against Russians led in many cases by individuals from complacent, well-to-do circles who regard themselves as educated, decent and possessing a social conscience. Russian-born migrants and artists must once again worry about their situation.

We Might as Well Be Dead works on several levels and contains a number of apt metaphors for the current situation. The name of the high-rise, St. Phoebus, refers to Apollo, the Greek god of light (Phoebus Apollo, “the shining one”), the god who also brought the plague to the Greeks with his arrows during the Trojan War.

The lullaby “Shlof mayn feygele” takes up Jewish themes. The broken angel refers to the corrupt morality of the church. The “evil eye,” with which one can supposedly harm other people, was historically part of popular belief and widespread on all continents.

The director also relates these issues to the current generation, which feels left out in today’s society. In an interview, she mentions the Japanese phenomenon “hikikomori,” i.e., young people who lock themselves in at home “because they are overwhelmed with the meritocracy and don’t want to be part of it.”

Anna’s daughter Iris also feels she does not fit in. She locks herself away and thereby thinks she is protecting the community, Sinelnikova says. She is not really afraid of the world but feels herself to be an outsider.

The film also treats the plight of refugees. The oversized gate to the park surrounding the high-rise building evokes the exclusion policy of Germany and the European Union, which have closed their doors to hundreds of thousands of desperate people from the war zones of the Middle East and Africa, consigning many to death in the Mediterranean.

The family in the film is one of the many who migrated to

Germany from former Stalinist Eastern Europe to escape poverty and oppression after the reintroduction of capitalism. The director’s own experience as a refugee flows into this. Natalia Sinelnikova was born in a high-rise housing estate on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, in the Soviet Union, and came to Germany with her family in 1996 as a Russian-Jewish refugee.

“My parents wanted their children to grow up in a safe country, free from a corrupt government, from mafia structures, from anti-Semitism and above all, free from fear,” says the director. As soon as she set foot on German soil at the age of seven, she wanted to belong “to this country full of the white curtains and vases I begged my mother for, with fences and green hedges.” She wanted to become German with all of her being, but the feeling of being foreign and the fear of exclusion haunted her for a long time.

At its most profound, *We Might as Well Be Dead* offers astute social criticism. In response to questions from journalists about whether her film sought to address the COVID crisis, and the psychological fears caused by isolation, Sinelnikova replied that although she herself later found surprising parallels, her main concern was to make a socially satirical movie.

Her film makes no secret of the fact that it is not about general psychological fears, but rather the reaction of different social classes. It is precisely the educated, upper circles who, full of hypocrisy, declare themselves to be socially responsible—embodied in the figure of Ursel—and ultimately react hysterically and aggressively against threats from outside when they consider their privileges to be in danger.

The few “foreigners” and poor people in the Phoebus building, on the other hand, literally have to prostitute themselves in order to be allowed to continue living there: including the impoverished artist Wolfram, the Turkish fitness trainer, who sexually serves the upstanding Mr. Drescher and uses her underage daughter for delivery services, and a single mother who cleans the stairwell with a baby in her arms. They are the first to come under suspicion.

When Anna, who has long resisted getting kicked out, is finally chased away, she sheds her submissiveness and decides to follow a self-confident path alongside the young people. Mother and daughter turn their backs on the wretched Phoebus community.



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