

## 72nd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

*The Silent Forest*—Ghosts from the past

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*This is the sixth 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, the fourth February 26 and the fifth March 16.*

The debut feature by Saralisa Volm, *The Silent Forest* (*Schweigend steht der Wald*), was one of the most intriguing contributions to the “Perspectives on German Cinema” section at this year’s Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale).

Volm’s film was one of a number of recent movies directed by younger filmmakers attempting to combine important social issues with popular film genres such as crime dramas and/or thrillers.

As in *Sleep*, the film by Michael Venus, the woods—a longstanding symbol in German Romanticism—become a place of horror. At the beginning of *The Silent Forest*, thick earthworms burrow through the forest floor, in reality the dark, tough soil of history—all the way back to the Nazi era.

The story takes place in 1999: Anja Grimm (Henriette Confurius) from Munich is undertaking her forestry internship in the village where she used to spend her holidays and where her father, a nature-loving teacher, disappeared without a trace two decades earlier. Anja wants to find out what happened.

When she goes to the glade where he was last seen, a man with a gun threatens her. It is the psychologically unstable Xaver (Christoph Jungmann), who was suspected of the murder 20 years ago, but was quickly released. Shortly after meeting Anja, Xaver kills his mother Anna and then tries to kill himself. Did Xaver also murder Anja’s father?

When it becomes clear to the villagers that Anja is intent on finding out the truth, she is given the cold shoulder. Conflicts also arise among the villagers, including between a police detective Konrad Dallmann (Robert Stadlober) and his father Gustav (August Zirner), the original detective in the case. Gustav covered up the murder of Anja’s father, which was committed not by Xaver, but by his mother Anna, in order to conceal an earlier, far more serious crime. This is

revealed by Xaver’s sister Waltraud (Johanna Bittenbinder) to her son Rupert (Noah Saavedra).

1945 was the year of Nazi-organized death marches by concentration camp prisoners—including by prisoners from the nearby Flossenbürg camp. Many prisoners died of hunger and illness, others were shot by Nazi troops while trying to escape.

A portion of the local civilian population joined in the hunt for the victims, who were callously described as “zebras” because of their striped prison clothing and as though what was taking place resembled a safari. Sometimes children from the village joined in, like Xaver—“for educational reasons,” Waltraud told her son Rupert. The slain prisoners were buried in a pit in the forest. Anja’s father, who noticed unusual features in the condition of the forest soil, was on the verge of uncovering the mass grave.

*The Silent Forest* only hints at what actually took place in 1945—an old family photo on the wall, a father in uniform, a photo of a young woman with a swastika. In Xaver’s flat, Anja finds a child’s drawing of prisoners being beaten bloody and a handful of gold teeth.

First and foremost, however, Volm’s film addresses the question of how subsequent generations deal with this dark legacy in a village where everybody knows one another. Grass cannot simply grow over such a monstrous crime. Under the surface, it poisons relationships right up to the present, spreading fear and guilt. Threats and blackmail continue.

Retired inspector Dallmann defends his 1979 cover-up as a necessary action for the economic survival of the impoverished village. Discovery of the mass grave—Italian President Sandro Pertini had just visited the Flossenbürg concentration camp in a highly publicized visit along with right-wing Bavarian premier Franz Joseph Strauss (Christian Social Union)—would have sealed the fate of the entire district.

The fact that publicising the truth could result in financial disaster affects Rupert, who wants to attract tourists to the economically desolate region by exploiting the local woods

as a “Hansel and Gretel” fairy-tale forest, with a witch’s house and a treetop path. After Xaver kills his mother, Rupert is no longer creditworthy at the bank. No one will want to visit the woods where a mass murder has taken place.

Rupert played with Anja as a child and is attracted to her now, but does not join her relentless search for the truth. He believably plays a social type from the younger generation, horrified by the crimes of the past, but who ultimately adapts to the widespread view that it is better “to move forward,” focus on one’s own interests and let sleeping dogs lie.

Konrad, the current policeman and Gustav Dallmann’s son, agrees and provides the appropriately cynical gloss. The truth, he says, would ruin everyone.

Then Konrad explains how two years earlier the director of the Flossenbürg concentration camp memorial had accompanied him to visit an old woman on a remote farm who was about to die. She had wanted to find peace and “confess” to the fact that a concentration camp prisoner had collapsed and been shot during a death march in front of her farm. She had buried the corpse on her property and her family had tended the anonymous grave for fifty years. Before dying, the woman wanted the victim’s bones to be removed and buried in a concentration camp cemetery, and his relatives informed.

“And what did you do,” Rupert asks. “Nothing,” answers Konrad: “Some things have to be endured in silence. Is there not a kind of atonement in the agony of such a silence?”

Konrad’s father is the only one who appears relatively unbroken. He presents himself so confidently as a martyr that at a certain point suspicions arise that he could have had a Nazi background. One is reminded of the film *The Conference*, where the Nazi elite refer to the psychological strain on German soldiers conducting mass shootings as “sacrifices” they have to endure. In the end, Dallmann is ready to commit another crime. The film leaves open whether he succeeds or not.

The concrete to be poured over the countless bones of the concentration camp dead to bury them forever under the silent fairy-tale forest has not yet hardened. A living woman, Anja, has slipped into the mix ...

The film ends like a shock video, as if the filmmakers wanted to cry out to the audience: “Watch out, the story’s not over, it is urgent to act!”

Wolfram Fleischhauer wrote the screenplay based on his novel of the same title. Fleischhauer has also combined history with contemporary life in other novels (*The Purple Line*, *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled*, *Three Minutes with Reality*) seeking to bring the issues to a broad reading public. In 2003, he was nominated for the German Crime Prize for *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled* (English

translation of *Die Frau mit den Regenhänden*).

*The Silent Forest* vividly conveys the manner in which former concentration camp employees, who tortured and committed mass murder, were able to live a completely ordinary life for decades in rural seclusion—mere kilometres away from the site of their former crimes, and how the police and justice system covered up for them—until someone emerges, like Anja, who seeks the truth and will not be fobbed off with myths and legends, like the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel.

One of Germany’s principal post-war fairy tales was the “zero hour”—the clean slate with which Germany was to commence its post-war development. In reality, a host of top West German politicians were former Nazis, occupying leading posts in the state, secret services, judiciary and police. One of the so-called fathers of the Basic Law was the business lobbyist Paul Binder (Christian Democratic Union), a former Nazi specialist in the “Aryanisation” of Jewish property; Hans Globke, commentator on the Nuremberg Race Laws, became head of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s office. Figures like Dallmann were part of the driving force behind the “economic miracle” of the 1950s.

Franz Josef Strauss, whose visit to the Flossenbürg concentration camp in 1979 figures in the film, played a key role. As defence minister, Strauss promoted the rearmament of the German military and argued in favour of a nuclear capability. For his “Psychological Warfare” department, he appointed as adviser the former Nazi jurist Eberhard Taubert, who, among other things, wrote the script for the viciously anti-Semitic film *The Eternal Jew* (1940). Taubert worked as a top official in the Propaganda Ministry under Joseph Goebbels from 1933 to 1945.

These are widely known facts that have been the subject of many films. Volm’s *The Silent Forest*, however, directs our attention to the present in a compelling manner using haunting images.

In this context, the title of the film takes on a deeper meaning. The woods usually radiate peace and quiet, but the silence here is deceptive. On the surface, things are shrouded in mist and new life fills the treetops, but the forest’s roots reach deep into the past.

In other words, the problems of the 20th century were only temporarily obscured—under a thick layer of lime that has once again broken up. The old ghosts of war and fascism are returning. And the outcome remains open.



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