

## The 73rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

# “How do people manage to live in this world?”—Youthful voices in short films at the Berlin film festival

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*This is the sixth and final article on the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival, held February 16 to February 26. The first was posted on February 22, the second on March 2, the third on March 6, the fourth March 9 and the fifth March 20.*

It is often the case that first film attempts by young directors reflect the upheavals of the present more directly and immediately than is the case in mature film projects by already established directors. This was also the case at this year's Berlinale.

Particularly impressive were a number of contributions from France that sought to portray the current attitudes of a young generation in a refreshingly open and honest manner, occasionally using surprisingly experimental means.

### **White Nights**

*White nights (Nuits blanches)* are for partying, dancing, fun and youthful dreams. This film, however, shows the opposite. The 30-year-old director, Donatienne Berthereau, transports the viewer to a politically polarised Paris, in the middle of the presidential election campaign in April 2022. It is the period between the two planned ballots, shortly before the run-off.

As the camera pans over the torn and defaced posters of the two candidates, the viewer gets a sense of the mood in the country. Voters can only choose between plague and cholera—either the hated “president of the rich” Emmanuel Macron, or the neo-fascist candidate Marine le Pen.

Then a change of scene. An almost baroque image, two young women, naked, one holding the other in her arms like a mother. It is the protagonist Solène (Solène Salvat) with her girlfriend and lover (Léa Schweitzer), but the indifferent expression on her face does not add up. Solène, addicted to cocaine, breaks away from the embrace almost unwillingly, only to show up later at a rally in Paris and then washing up glasses in an all-night club. Alongside, a heated debate about the run-off election takes place between some young bar-goers. “You have to be drunk to vote for Macron,” says one. “Macron or Marine are the same.” “You have to stop Le Pen,” retorts the other. “Macron is a fake fascist, Le Pen a real fascist.”

Solène is not interested, she goes to the back of the bar and snorts cocaine. Later she is seen in a drug frenzy in a techno club and then in bed with a young man. Her indifference extends to physical contact and sex. She is reproached about this by her girlfriend, who eventually leaves her. Solène ends up wandering the streets alone, sitting on the banks of the Seine, hoping for a mobile phone message from her friend, musing, “How do people manage to live in this world?”

When an anti-fascist demonstration passes by with loud chants, whistles and drums, evidently a protest by the movement “La France insoumise” (France Unbowed) led by the pseudo-left politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon,

she joins in briefly, but without commitment. The film ends in gloomy fashion, and without a perspective: heavily armed CRS police officers (French riot police) have planted themselves in front of a monument daubed with an Antifa slogan.

Solène's lack of perspective and indifference are the negative expression of explosive tensions in the young generation. Two right-wing candidates, both unsupportable, a hopeless protest by pseudo-left groups and the threat of the police state—this is the gloomy reality as Solène perceives it. She does not see the real social alternative, the working class, which is now taking to the streets in France and is being propelled into mass strikes and protests.

The environment in which Solène moves, corresponding to that of the director, is strongly influenced by the period since the 1990's, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, a period during which individualism, concepts of “self-realisation,” “self-discovery” or “searching for one's own identity” were widely propagated. A period when broad layers of students, young cultural and film workers, and self-employed people rushing from one project to the next, were largely cut off from the working class.

Young people in the artistic milieu in particular, keeping their heads above water with precarious, short-term jobs like Solène as a bar waitress, are especially susceptible to pseudo-radical, semi-anarchist ideas. This is a dead end, however. Drug addiction and depression are common, as the director herself laments. The only progressive alternative rests in linking up the renewed struggles of the working class in France and worldwide.

In her statement for the Berlinale, the director explained the motive for her film: “I think the character of Solène, who may seem unsympathetic or socially negative, challenges us around the increasing difficulty of “finding one's place” in a world where the mechanisms of social violence and political absurdity make a vital horizon seem unimaginable.”

The director speaks out against apathy, and stresses: “If the world we share doesn't seem to be taking care of who we are, if the proposed future seems as terrifying as it is revolting, can we live without taking care of ourselves and each other? Can we find a place where we belong if all we're doing is curling in on ourselves?”

### **Les Chenilles**

The Golden Bear for Short Film was deservedly awarded to the French film *Les Chenilles (Caterpillars)* by Michelle and Noel Keserwany, two sisters from Lebanon whose music videos led them to become famous and popular among young people in their home country. The film tells the story of two young women from the Levant who, in search of a better perspective, end up in the French industrial city of Lyon, where they work as waitresses in a café. The filmmakers link the friendship that develops

between the two women to the history of the Silk Road and the exploitation of female workers in the silk factories in the 19th century.

Asma (Masa Zaher), from Syria, has been living in Lyon for five years and is already an experienced café employee. Sarah (Noel Keserwany) arrived only recently from Lebanon and lives in a shared accommodation. Initially the relationship between the two women is tense. Sarah makes mistakes at work and is evidently still traumatised by her flight to France. Asma, on the other hand, is experienced and well-integrated. Gradually she begins to help the new waitress against harassment from the café boss and its customers.

After an all-night stay on a bench by the river Saône—Asma has lost her flat key and Sarah has no desire for her shared accommodation—they become friends. As Asma leans comfortably against Sarah's shoulder, she looks at the statue in the centre of Lyon in front of the Palace of Justice, designed by the artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. Entitled “The Weight of Oneself,” the sculpture shows a naked male figure holding another male figure with an identical face in his arms. The women interpret it with the words, “When you support someone else, you support yourself.”

This film is not about gender, as the Berlinale jury claimed in explaining its award. Despite its focus on women characters and their desires, *Caterpillars* is not about the battle of the sexes, but rather about the class contradictions in the process of capitalist production that underlie discrimination against women.

Asma and Sarah's friendship grows on the basis of solidarity, as it did among women workers in the silk factories. It did not develop on the basis of their female bodies, in which “the consequences of colonisation are inscribed,” as the film jury states in its absurd justification for the award. Nor does their friendship lead to the fact that “when the third person becomes an ‘I’”, they are “no longer objects of exploitation” but are rather “transformed into subjects.”

The fact is that Sarah and Asma continue to be exploited in their jobs, earning little money. In this respect, the flowery image of the titular silkworm, with which the film begins and, according to a Japanese prince, prefers to live between a woman's breasts, is an ironic metaphor for the fact that millions of women produce silk without being able to buy silk—and figuratively still do so today.

The surreal and fantastical film *Huit* (8), also produced in France, follows a child (Fatime Coulibaly), daughter of a caretaker, who “learns to dream in a sleepy world.” She tries in vain to catch a laser beam, which flickers by her sleeping mother, disappears into the air-conditioning system of the high-rise building where her father works. When the girl sends her dreams on slips of paper into the system, it is suddenly blocked and starts to drip.

“Money, fame, success—they are tempting, but I'm not interested,” is the attitude of a group of boys in the dreary housing estate who answer the film crew's questions. Their attitude is shared by three young girls sitting in front of their screens. “If you are bored in the world like it is, you can create your own story,” is their motto.

One of the three girls looks directly at the audience but still only sees the screen in front of her. She tells of a presentation video on TikTok where a woman promises to “make dreams more real.” With her method, one can “listen to a heartbeat” for hours. She'd rather not do that. “You have to pay merely to sleep and rest” the girl says. She is also captured by a laser dot and tries to swallow it.

“This film is post-apocalyptic in a way,” says French-Chilean director Anaïs-Tohé Commaret, who describes her cinematic method as “magical realism.” “Instead of showing a universe devastated by an atomic bomb, it shows an apocalypse caused by capitalism, i.e., isolated individuals who have difficulty communicating with each other, trapped in endless boredom, depressed.”

She said she chose the film title 8 deliberately because the two loops of

that number never meet. She explains that she wanted to create a depressive feeling in her film using sound and images. “In today's capitalist society, we are under so much pressure to be successful, to become famous and richer, to find our own voice, it really weighs us down or even crushes us. And in 8 we see this happening to the most vulnerable, young people and children. I wanted some of the characters to be portrayed just horizontally, as if they were being crushed by this pressure. Especially the character of the mother, who had to work all her life. Today she is crushed by it all, so she lies down. The characters have a hard time staying awake. So they start dreaming.”

#### **Climate, gender and identity politics and Ukraine**

Overall, the short film selection, in common with other sections of the Berlinale, suffered from the tendency to judge everything, wherever possible, from the standpoint of gender and identity politics. The content and the film crews involved focused predominantly on female actors, as well as members of ethnic minorities and populations from the south of the globe.

Three of the short films dealt with the climate catastrophe. In *Veiled City* by Natalie Cubides-Brady, the mood is one of end of times gloom. Archive films and images from the great smog in London in 1952 accompany an emotionless voice of a time-traveling young woman addressing her imaginary sister. The situation is “man-made”, according to the letter writer, and will lead to a “world without us.”

*Waiting*, an artistically interesting German animated film by Volker Schlecht, uses the extinction of frogs, researched by a biologist, as a symbol for the destruction of nature and humanity itself. The latter is depicted as a struggle between wrestlers, accompanied by a commentary on social inequality. There are only a few who become powerful and rich, most are just left behind.

*Terra Mater* is set in Africa, where demonstrating residents protest against neo-colonialism in front of a huge mountain of plastic rubbish on which vultures forage for food. The film calls upon the people of other countries to “show more respect” for their lives.

Complementing the short film selection this year was the five-minute Ukrainian film, *It's a Date* by director Nadia Parfan (*Heat Singers*, 2019 et al.), which received an honourable mention from the jury. Based on Claude Lelouch's 1976 *C'était un rendez-vous*, it consists of a fast-paced car ride through the big city, in which the viewer is also seated, albeit not in Paris but in war-torn Kiev. It conveys a world turned upside down. Even Orthodox churches built for eternity shake massively as the car speeds past.

Nadia Parfan describes herself as a Ukrainian patriot and feminist. Unlike Lelouch's original, Parfan's film features a female driver in military uniform who gets out at the end of the drive and hugs her girlfriend. Regardless of its intentions, the film could just as well be set in other cities where mainly US-led, and not Russian bombing raids, have caused immeasurable suffering and misery—Baghdad, Tripoli, or Damascus, where Israel has just bombarded civilian houses with US and German weapons, or, back in 1999, when NATO, aided by German army reconnaissance jets, bombed the city centre of Belgrade, Serbia.

The three short films from France, where a massive working class upsurge is currently developing, show that in addition to tendencies influenced by the establishment, there are now also more serious voices among young directors who are not content with superficialities. Confronted with war, police violence, neo-fascist terror and social decay all over the world that are shattering youthful dreams, their cinematic works create space for thoughtfulness and the realisation that the existing world cannot and must not remain as it is.

#### *Concluded*



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