

The 74th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

Short films in Berlin: Surreal and realistic depictions of “the absurdity of our capitalist times”

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This is the fourth part of a series on the 2024 Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 21, Part 2 on March 3 and Part 3 on March 7.

Wars, climate catastrophes, social devastation—the state of global capitalism is so advanced and developing so rapidly that it represents a serious challenge to the artist. The events and living conditions for millions of people are so devastating and so painful that filmmakers and others must rise to a higher level in their treatment of life.

Nevertheless, these difficult circumstances, directly or indirectly, are the real basis of many of the short films shown at this year’s Berlin film festival (Berlinale), which only at first glance (and unlike last year) seem to focus mainly on personal matters.

The selection comprises films made last year that raise the question of how humanity should and can proceed in a world coming apart at the seams. The cinematic means range from surreal scenes with 3D computer technology, magical video productions and animations, to sensitive snapshots of friendship, love, family and a child’s longing for security.

It is striking that animals repeatedly play a major or sometimes the leading role, as in the animated films *We Will Not Be the Last of Our Kind* by Mili Pecherer, a gloomy reinterpretation of the biblical Noah’s Ark, which this time provides no salvation for humans and animals, *Les animaux vont mieux (Lick a Wound)* by Nathan Ghali and *Kawauso* by Akihito Izuwara. In *Preoperational Model* by Philip Ullman, a princess and her maid are depicted with animal heads.

In a Berlinale interview, short film section head Anna Henckel-Donnersmarck suggested the many animal figures are to be understood as a “reaction to climate change, human ruthlessness and abuse of power.” She added, these films are not a “call to action, but rather express a feeling.”

In fact, however, the Berlinale Shorts jury awarded its prizes to films that go beyond such emotions and raise awareness of the real world.

The Golden Bear went to the Argentinian film *Un movimiento extraño (An Odd Turn)*, directed by Francisco Lezama. Shot in 2019, the film shows Lucrecia, a young museum security guard in Buenos Aires, who, anticipating an art theft, foresees a sudden rise in the dollar exchange rate. As she is unexpectedly made redundant and receives a severance payment, she indulges in a spree of speculating with dollars and falls in love with an employee of a currency exchange office.

In an interview, the filmmakers refer to the severe financial crisis rocking Argentina since 2018. According to director Lezama, he didn’t want to release his film straight away for fear it would be perceived as too cynical. Now, however, with the brutal austerity policies of the new far-right president Javier Milei, the film is very topical. There is

hyperinflation of over one hundred per cent in Argentina, in a country where around half of the population officially live in poverty. People quickly convert the pesos they earn into dollars to double or triple their salaries thanks to rising exchange rates. “Speculation is like a constant dance with uncertainty,” says Lezama.

The jury justified the awarding of the Golden Bear by saying that the film is “bursting with vitality, ironic humour and nuanced social commentary that gets to the heart of the absurdity of our capitalist times.”

Another film also depicts this absurdity, *Sojourn to Shangri-La* from China. It centres on a fashion shoot on the beach, where the backdrop for the session is swallowed by the sea overnight and leads to a hunt for the prop using a drone.

“The missing installation causes such ambitious people to waver,” explains director Lin Yihan from Shanghai. “The knowledge and order that emerge from a commercial campaign disintegrate into an accusatory, awkward manhunt. In this film, I tried to ask: Where will these people land?”

Remains of the Hot Day

In *Remains of the Hot Day* (directed by Wenqian Zhang), set in the summertime during the late 1990s, little Qi stays home from kindergarten. She lives in a small apartment with her grandparents, her mother, her uncle and aunt and her little cousin Meng. Qi’s father is absent, he works in the Shenzhen Special Economy Zone.

Qi wanders from room to room, sometimes playing with her toys, sometimes lying apathetically on the floor while a cheerful song plays on the radio. Meanwhile, the grandmother cooks and takes care of whiny little Meng. Her mother, Qi’s aunt, cannot calm her down, nor can her father, Qi’s uncle, when they return from work. Meng screams for the grandmother who is more familiar to her.

Qi’s mother, dressed in professional attire and seemingly exhausted, arrives late and joins them. Qi tentatively touches her arm with a finger. The viewer can sense that the child is lonely and wants to connect, but her mother merely sorts papers at her desk and gives her grandmother money for the month. “Mom is currently studying, can you play alone?” Qi is reprimanded. She turns to an English textbook and repeats the sentence “I’m homesick.”

The director skillfully conveys the atmosphere of that summer day in small details, the wind of a fan blowing through hair, shifting shadows on the wall, the sounds of the grandmother’s cooking. The camera often lingers even though nothing much happens. *Remains of the Hot Day* ends on a shot of a fish that bumps against the glass wall of its aquarium and seemingly disappears, followed by the words “For those fading memories...”

There is a trend among young Chinese filmmakers to portray family dynamics affected by economic conditions and generational disagreements about “life values.” The themes include the disconnect between parents who made sacrifices for the educational and material well-being of their children with an eye to their future, and the actual social conditions young people confront.

Wenqian Zhang’s 24-minute film certainly expresses a nostalgia about childhood but also a yearning to understand the times one grew up in. In the film’s press notes she declares that looking back “on the turn of the century I recall a sense of hearing and unease that silently permeated the members of my family.” It was the period after the end of the Soviet Union, when the Chinese leadership pushed forward the introduction of capitalist methods of exploitation.

We do not learn much about the factory where the father works, the mother’s occupation or the rest of the world outside the family home. What is palpable, however, is the extreme tension and stress that prevails in all sorts of Chinese workplaces.

Atomic bomb, heartlessness and the end of the poets

A number of films deal directly with war. These include the animated films *Tako Tsubo* and *Kawauso*, as well as the story *City of Poets*.

Kawauso (meaning “river otter”) is directed by Akihito Izuhara, with the script written in collaboration with the illustrator Ikuko Mizokami. The short film is just 15 minutes long and features a pencil-drawn, traditional animation style in black and white. It opens on the face of a little girl who is holding her hands over her ears.

The girl opens her eyes and we see her slowly walking, past a bus stop, a convenience store and a book shop. There are no people around, but a river otter appears and hops after the girl, chirping. Their interactions lead nowhere—when the girl opens her mouth to speak we hear nothing and the otter looks at her quizzically. It seems just as confused when the girl presents it with a ball.

At one point the girl and the otter standing in front of her turn towards the viewer. The girl places her hands on the otter’s head, perhaps protectively, and they both stare silently, their dark eyes strikingly similar. She removes her hand and reveals a small origami bird which spreads its wings and flies towards the sky. Rain starts to fall and the girl and the otter resume their walk, past derelict cars and an open field.

Little by little, everyday objects fall from the sky, a fork, an alarm clock, a chair. We hear a low rumble and a painful screeching sound, as the innocuous objects are joined by a handgun, a cannon, a bomb, planes, a grenade and finally, the biggest object, an atomic bomb falls to the ground. We cut back to the face of the girl who has placed her hands over her ears again and shut her eyes. The last scene is of the river otter walking through a debris-covered field and disappearing into the forest to the sound of a pop song grieving the extinction of the Japanese river otter. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to protect your home” is one of the lyrics.

Born in 1964, Izuhara has shared works by a Palestinian political cartoonist on his personal blog, criticizing the one-sided media coverage of the Ukraine war and the consequences of the Fukushima disaster. He wrote the following about his short film:

The process by which the Japanese otter became extinct overlaps with Japan’s history from the Meiji era to the post-war period of high economic growth as a modern nation. Behind the scenes, there were many wars, environments and lives lost, and species destroyed. I drew an otter as a symbol of this lost nature, and I

believe that the eyes of the girl looking at it may become a perspective from which we can face our past history.

The intense look of the girl and the otter towards the viewer, in a film from the land of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, calls for action against the destruction of nature and the threat of nuclear war.

Tako Tsubo (or takotsubo cardiomyopathy), also known as “broken heart syndrome,” is an acute heart failure following a severe emotional or physical trigger.

The very opening of this German-Austrian animated film by Fanny Sörgo and Eva Pedrova sends shivers down the spine. A minute-long view of a deep dark green forest, across the entire screen, quiet rustling and crackling, a few trees swaying in the wind. Then a cut to a single naked man at the edge of a small pond.

Shortly afterwards, he is sitting in a doctor’s room, he has decided to have his heart removed. What ailments does he have, the doctor asks. If he knew, it would be “easier on his heart,” he replies. It’s like “on the one hand, there’s a beautiful sunrise, and then there’s war.” The doctor responded with a sneer: “Do you realise that this is a phenomenon of our time? The heart is just a burden.” Removing the heart is no problem these days.

What follows is bloody in the truest sense of the word. The man holds the bleeding heart that has just been removed in his hand for a while. Mr Ham, as he is called, imitates Hamlet in Shakespeare’s famous work, who holds the jester’s skull in his hand. Then parodying the famed monologue “To be or not to be, that is the question,” Mr Ham mumbles: “Subject—object—subject—object.”

But the patient’s heart is already independent, and a vibrating, high-pitched female voice sounds from the twitching organ, stammering and insulting its previous owner: “It thunders and rumbles inside me, the taste is bitter ... I am in a thunderstorm ... Mother ... Pity,” and finally a stream of blood pours out onto the floor. The doctor comes with a floor mop: “That’s a mess. The bloodshed must slowly come to an end. You’re organising almost the same tragedy in this room that you want nothing more to do with.”

The surrealistic reflection ends at the same pond, but now it is red with blood. Mr Ham is sitting naked on the bank again when a woman appears, with bloody holes instead of lungs. A grotesque dialogue follows: “Why didn’t you stop smoking instead of having your lungs removed?”—“Why didn’t you stop loving instead of having your heart removed?” Ham replies that it is harder to stop loving than to stop smoking, to which she replies: “But I love smoking.”

To counter those who might infer an amused shrug or fatalism from this, the final image of the forest is set to the song “Sweet Charity” by musician Mary Ocher: “Will you come on down when I’m on my knees?” “Sure I will!”—an appeal for mutual human help.

City of Poets by Sara Rajaei is a montage of images and film clips, many from the director’s own family, accompanied by sounds and a spoken autobiographical narrative.

We learn that the city of poets was built two decades prior to an unknown war to accommodate refinery workers and university tutors.

The city’s streets were named after Iranian poets. We get an almost utopian impression of residents’ lives, people are smiling, children laughing and playing.

“The residents made up riddles and games for the tourists, reciting poetry instead of giving addresses.”

Then the calls of the mosque, the birds and other city sounds are replaced by sirens and a warning that an airstrike is about to happen. The narrator explains that when more and more refugees arrived to the city new neighbourhoods were built and the planners ran out of poets’ names. As the war continues, streets are named after writers, then national heroes,

scientists, mountains, flowers, athletes. People forget about poetry. By the end of the war, the streets are named after martyrs and the citizens become lost amidst the unfamiliar streets.

The women in the images, previously wearing bright and varied clothing, are now frequently covered up, their faces sullen. The children wear serious expressions. We are told that the mulberry tree in the family's garden has acquired a symbolic character. It bears red mulberries, which is seen as a bad omen by some. The mother becomes frightened and decides to dance every day to appease potential evil spirits.

On the day the regime forbids dancing, the family burns down the tree. Then music is forbidden by the regime and all sounds in the movie cease. "One night we all gathered in the garden. We made a large bonfire and burnt all the music, all the photographs and all our books." At this point the movie ends.

Although we see no violence, no corpses (only one soldier features in the film), and the narrator does not elaborate on these subjects, the horror of war and dictatorship is effectively transmitted through the expressions on the protagonists' faces and the progressive loss of their freedoms. The omission of specific details regarding the country, the timeframe or the political figures lends a universal character to the story. This is all the more powerful considering that the whole region of the Middle East has been embroiled in conflict for the past three decades. It will doubtless resonate with anyone who has been affected by war as well as those who wish for an end to all wars.

Sara Rajaei was born in 1976 and emigrated to the Netherlands in 1998. Her lifetime was marked by the Iranian Revolution, the treacherous role of the Stalinist Tudeh Party, which had a large following among intellectuals, and the Iran-Iraq war that lasted from 1980 to 1988.

Animals and people

At a time when the old, familiar social order is disintegrating, loneliness and a longing for human cohesion are intensifying.

Maybe animals are doing better? This is suggested by the film *Les animaux vont mieux* (*Lick a Wound* is the English title, but literally, *The Animals Are Doing Better*) by Nathan Ghali. The film uses 3D-animated objects added into real environments. We follow various animals who live in the basement of an abandoned church, away from humans who do not feature in the film.

The animals' thoughts are conveyed through wall projections of words and images. They seem to live peacefully amidst dilapidated furniture, taking care of each other, big and small.

A raccoon sifting through a mountain of energy drinks, affirms that he hates humans, who see him as a pest. The raccoon vows to take revenge and later on sets fire to an abandoned car with Molotov cocktails.

A small bird dreams of flying inside a natural history museum. The stuffed animals inside the exhibit come to life and the museum collapses.

Not all humans are hated. A cat remembers the time when he lived with his family. The mother always drowned her litters, but the little son, who saved some kittens, is dear to her. When photos of the boy are projected on the wall, she sits quietly and watches.

The animations are painstakingly detailed at times, right down to the fur, a testament to the care and effort that went into the low-budget short film.

The film certainly contains a good deal of doomsday sentiment and perhaps also a certain romanticization of the past. But it also takes aim at the failed capitalist social order. Based on Mephisto's words in Goethe's *Faust*—the animals appear more human than people themselves.





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