

The 74th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

Herzprung (1992): A sober look at German reunification

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24 March 2024

This is the fifth and final part of a series on the 2024 Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted on February 21, Part 2 on March 3, Part 3 on March 7 and Part 4 on March 10.

The recent Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) presented a series of German films from the postwar period as part of its annual Retrospective with the title: “An Alternate Cinema—From the Archives of the German Cinematheque.”

One of those, *Herzprung* (1992) by Helke Misselwitz (born 1947), contradicts the official image of German reunification, according to which a “peaceful revolution” overthrew a Stalinist dictatorship in former East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) to achieve genuine democracy.

Born in the GDR, Misselwitz reached an international audience with her documentary film *Winter adé*, involving interviews with East German women, which featured at the DOK film festival in Leipzig in 1988. At the height of the Western campaign in favour of the Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev and his policy of *perestroika*, the film was seen as a harbinger of a genuinely democratic GDR. The premiere of her first feature film *Herzprung* in 1992 coincided with a series of xenophobic attacks in a now reunified Germany.

In the East German village of Herzprung, near the Polish border, almost everyone is made unemployed after the introduction of the capitalist free-market economy in 1989-90. The female cooks pluck geese in the company kitchen of the state-owned agricultural co-operative (LPG) in order to sell feathers and meat. The LPG’s former retail trade has collapsed.

One of the cooks, Johanna (Claudia Geisler), has lost her job. In despair at the situation, her husband Jan killed himself. He had tried to save the LPG’s cattle farm and run it independently. He failed and became addicted to alcohol. During the day, Johanna’s old schoolmates drive around in

improvised uniforms, cynically jeering: “Socialism wins!”—mocking the slogan of the former Stalinist leadership of the GDR. Among the group is the “young man Soljanka,” who is in love with Johanna.

Shortly after Jan’s death, Johanna gives a lift to a young Afro-German, simply listed in the credits as “The Stranger” (Nino Sandow), who has just traded for a warm coat from soldiers of the departing Soviet army. He stays in the village and starts working in a new snack bar on the motorway, nicknamed “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” after the colour of his skin. The shop is a success.

The “stranger” (who remains unnamed throughout the film) looks for Johanna. By chance, he meets her father Jakob (Günter Lamprecht) in front of a memorial plaque commemorating the herding of concentration camp prisoners through the village shortly before the end of the Second World War. Now, graffiti daubed on the memorial calls for foreigners to be sent to concentration camps. Are you a Communist, the stranger asks Jakob, who is standing silently in front of the memorial. No, Jakob replies, there weren’t just Communists at that time. He was one of the prisoners, a 15-year-old Pole, bravely taken in by Johanna’s mother. He stayed with her and they got married. She died, however, giving birth to Johanna.

The graffiti was done by a youthful gang in the village. Where did it come from, we went to school together? Johanna asks her father, perplexed.

Jakob warns Johanna against a relationship with the stranger, whose restlessness recalls his own. He also wants to protect her from the growing mood of hostility. As a former “stranger” himself in the village, he has a keen sense of the changes taking place. He has not forgotten that, at first, only Anuschka, Johanna’s mother, stood by him.

Johanna, however, is in love with the young man. She knows he is also eyeing other women and will probably leave her at some point. “You can comfort me when the time comes,” she says. Johanna is as straightforward as her

mother, and will not comply with the village's backward pressures.

Johanna doesn't care that she fails to get the kitchen job in a monastery when it is suddenly discovered she is leading "an immoral life" as a young widow in a relationship with a half-black man. She also turns down the owner of the local chocolate factory (Hanns Zischler), who considers himself irresistible as an entrepreneur and imagines he can get her into bed with a vague job offer.

The centre of attraction in the village is the hairdressing salon run by the attractive Lisa (Tatjana Besson). Old Jakob observes her beautiful legs from his window. Johanna admires Lisa's self-confidence and worldliness, and has her hair coloured just like the other woman. One day, Lisa realises her longtime dream and travels south to the sea, never to return.

The images of railway tracks and the sound of the sea on the video cassette that Lisa sends to the village recall Misselwitz's film *Winter adé*, where they stood for the longing to escape the stifling confines of the GDR. The cold "winter" has not passed for the farm labourers in *Herzprung* after Germany's reunification. They are trying to make the best of it.

Music plays a key role in the film as a projection screen for suppressed longings: the cook Elsa (Eva-Maria Hagen) sings "I dreamt all night," which reappears later in the form of an international swing tune à la Fats Waller, combining ecstatic Eastern European sounds with English-language lyrics. The departing Soviet army orchestra plays a wistful old tango instead of the expected hackneyed official repertoire of "German-Soviet Friendship" songs.

The film ends with an arson attack on the stranger's snack bar by the village gang responsible for the graffiti. At the end of the film, Johanna, fleeing her burning car, is accidentally killed by a knife that Soljanka blindly throws towards the tree where the gang has tied up the stranger.

While far-right radicalism was present in the former GDR, it was by no means a mass phenomenon. The film clearly shows this, thereby refuting official Western propaganda which maintains that racism and the influence of the far right were exclusively products of the Stalinist East. Alongside petty village gossip, backward prejudices, personal weaknesses and jealousy were no doubt present, but were not so prominent as long as everyone had a job and a livelihood. Even the social catastrophe following the reintroduction of capitalism in 1989-90 was not followed by generalised growth of extreme right radicalism in former East Germany.

The young people in the village gang in *Herzprung*, with their ridiculous military garb and camouflage-coloured Trabant auto, are the caricature of a vigilante group from the

past. Their incitement against cheap Polish labourers and formerly privileged Soviet officers' wives, who are now taking away "our" jobs, resound hollow. The same people also respect the Polish Jew Jakob, Johanna's father, who has established himself over time in the village.

Misselwitz's film, which premiered in October 1992, not long after a vicious racist attack on a hostel for foreigners in the town of Rostock, provides no explanation for the aggressive behaviour of the village gang.

First and foremost, it reveals the huge shock for young people robbed of their futures—the sort of young people featured in *Winter adé*. The film's title, *Herzprung* (the name of a town, but also literally "leap of the heart") makes this point too. Both Soljanka and Johanna's husband Jan, who not only shoots himself but also all of his cows, are played by the same actor, Ben Becker, thereby emphasising their joint lack of prospects.

The film suggests that their generation was doubly lied to at school: first, about the character of the Stalinist GDR, which was portrayed as the embodiment of victorious socialism, and then later about the unlimited opportunities allegedly available under the capitalist free market. The xenophobic attacks in the East, which also increased in West Germany after reunification, were linked to these lies and the associated disorientation.

The West German government headed by the Christian Democratic Union chancellor Helmut Kohl did all it could to promote the slogan "Germany, a united fatherland!" prior to reunification, all with full support of the last premier of the GDR, Hans Modrow and the GDR Stalinist regime. Jan and Soljanka had somewhat naively believed the promises of genuine economic aid for the East from their "brothers and sisters" in the West—in fact the reintroduction of capitalism has brought with it a revival of German great power politics, now manifesting itself so alarmingly in the form of warmongering and the promotion of fascist forces.

In contrast to a number of films that depict the collapse of the GDR in a theatrical, self-pitying manner (one example is *Last out of the GDR*—Jörg Foth, 1990), *Herzprung* presents a sober picture of the prevailing mood in the East, a feeling of confusion and growing helplessness. On the morning after the fire, the snack bar is still burning as lines of cars drive past.

Concluded



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