

The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

Three valuable films from Palestine and Germany: *Yalla Parkour*, *Köln 75*, *Leibniz*

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 February 27 and Part 3 March 2.

Yalla Parkour is a deeply moving film depicting the vitality, inventiveness and élan of children and young people in Gaza—the spirit the fascistic government in Tel Aviv is intent on wiping out. It was the only film at the recent Berlin international film festival dealing directly with the horrendous situation in Gaza.

The work by Palestinian documentary filmmaker Areeb Zuaiter takes place primarily prior to the current Israeli invasion of Gaza. It opens with a shot of smiling Palestinian children amid the ruins of Gaza with the smoke from what is an apparent explosion in the background. The kids are here to play and exercise. Bombs, explosions and ruins are part of their everyday life, and they are not prepared to let yet another explosion somewhere in the vicinity ruin their day.

The sport of parkour—young people undertaking perilous, athletic leaps and jumps to overcome walls, fences, stairs and other obstacles—is usually associated with the infrastructure of built-up cities. It began as an activity of underprivileged youth in France. It requires no special equipment, entry fees or uniforms. Since most of the sports facilities in Gaza have been destroyed by waves of Israeli bombings, and with the region's youth condemned to poverty, parkour is a natural choice for young people in Gaza bursting with energy.

Zuaiter, the compiler and author of the film, was born and raised in the Palestinian city of Nablus, in the West Bank. She left the city at an early age, moving abroad with her parents, who returned to Nablus once a year. As an adult, Areeb sought to put the situation in Palestine behind her, while her mother increasingly suffered from the separation from her homeland.

Coincidentally, in 2015, Areeb came across videos posted in social medium by a young boy, Ahmed Matar, who had filmed his and his friends' parkour exploits on his cellphone. Through Ahmed's videos, Areeb is able to reconnect with the Palestine she associated with her mother and her own childhood.

In the meantime, Zuaiter yearns to return to Palestine, but is only too aware of all the obstacles. Those include the possible confiscation of her passport at an Israeli checkpoint and other dangers that stand in the way of her return to her homeland and to Gaza, the world's biggest open-air prison.

For his part, Ahmed is understandably desperate to leave. A friend and fellow parkour athlete, Muhammad, was able to obtain a visa and go abroad after videos of his escapades leaping from buildings went viral on the internet. Ahmed hopes he can emulate the success of his friend. Meanwhile we witness Ahmed and his friends undertaking hair-raising, acrobatic feats in a deserted mall, a cemetery and the ruins of the airport in

Gaza, already bombed to bits by the Israeli military.

Yalla Parkour highlights the resilience of the youth in Gaza, their courageous attempts to make something out of nothing. The most tragic element of the film, however, comes with the credits at the end—an *In Memoriam* segment dedicated to the youth appearing in the film who have fallen victim to the most recent barbaric Israeli bombardments and incursions into Gaza.

Köln 95

January 24-25, 2025 marked the 50th anniversary of a legendary jazz concert—the solo piano performance at the Opera House in Cologne (Köln), Germany by the outstanding US pianist Keith Jarrett.

The background to the famous concert, which was recorded and turned into a double album, *The Köln Concert*, is the subject of a delightful fiction film, *Köln 75*, directed by Ido Fluk. Jarrett, a musical purist who regretted having to play before audiences at all, with their predilection for blowing noses and occasional coughing, refused to cooperate in any way with the film production.

Jarrett has said he would prefer to destroy all copies of the 1975 concert recording, which he considers to be an inferior piece of work. The public thought differently, and the recording of the one-hour concert became the best-selling solo album in jazz history. As a result of Jarrett's disapproval none of his music features in the film.

The heroine of *Köln 75* is Vera Brandes (played with zest by Mala Emde), who at the tender age of 18 was the prime mover in organising the event. The real-life Brandes is today one of the best known music producers in Germany.

We first meet Vera in the film when she is just 16. She has defied her strict middle-class father and is attending a jazz concert in Cologne featuring the British saxophonist and club owner Ronnie Scott. Taken by the young teenager's dynamism, Scott asks her to organise a concert tour for his trio. Starting with nothing apart from the illegal use of the telephone in her father's dental practice, teenage Vera gradually acquires all the business skills necessary to function as a concert organiser.

Her father is a typical product of postwar Germany's period of reconstruction. Silent about his experiences in the war, he has built up everything around him with his own hard work and expects his children to do the same. Discovering that his daughter has an interest in the bohemian world of jazz, he fervently hopes she falls flat on her face. Interestingly, the fierce, domineering father is played by the fine German actor Ulrich Tukur, who in his spare time plays piano and accordion in his own raucous and exhilarating jazz band.

Two years on, an increasingly liberated Vera takes on the task of organising a concert in Germany for Jarrett (splendidly played by John Magaro), who is conducting an exhausting European tour. Overcoming all obstacles, including Jarrett's own reluctance to perform because he is

suffering from severe back pains due to his intense, hunched-over playing style, Vera organises a late-night [11:30 pm] concert at the Cologne Opera House.

Promised a half-ton Bösendorfer Imperial piano, Vera discovers the only instrument available for the concert is a rehearsal piano, half the size of the Bösendorfer, with a poor tone and a non-functioning pedal. Jarrett takes one look at the piano and rules out any chance of his playing the concert.

After emergency repairs have been made to the piano, Vera desperately appeals to Jarrett's conscience as an artist, and he relents. Astonishingly, all the tickets for the late night concert have been sold following a very brief publicity campaign. Forced to play primarily in the piano's mid-range due to its technical defects, Jarrett gives an outstanding performance, which at the end is cheered to the rooftops by the predominantly youthful audience.

Intercut with Vera's trials and tribulations as concert organiser, including her turbulent relations with boyfriends and family, we are also treated to a compressed history of jazz performance in the 20th century by a music critic (Michael Chernus) seeking an interview with Jarrett.

All in all, the film provides a real taste of the spirit of youthful rebellion in the 1970s, which found a productive outlet in the embrace of new forms of musical expression. As noted above, Jarrett's music does not feature in the film, but the first task of anyone interested in jazz and who enjoys *Köln 75* is immediately to get hold of a copy and listen to the concert in full.

Leibniz—Chronicle of a Lost Painting

It is no easy task to make a feature film about a philosopher—a man or woman whose activity, according to general opinion, consists primarily of thinking and then communicating his or her ideas. Ninety-two-year-old veteran of German film Edgar Reitz, whose work includes the mammoth television series, *Heimat—A Chronicle of Germany*, has taken up the challenge in his latest film, *Leibniz—Chronicle of a Lost Painting*.

Polymath (mathematician, philosopher, scientist) Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz presents special problems for a visual presentation. Leibniz (1646-1716) had a degree in law from the University of Leipzig and was never employed as an academic philosopher. Before the age of 30 he had constructed the first mechanical “step” calculator capable of multiplication and division; a watch with two symmetrical balance wheels; a device for detecting the position of a ship at sea without a compass or observing the stars; a compressed air engine to propel vehicles; and a series of other machines only brought into production decades or even centuries later.

Independently of British scientist Isaac Newton, Leibniz invented both differential and integral calculus, and in 1679 he published his paper on the principles of binary numbers, the same system that is the basis for modern computer science. Repeatedly involved in practical technical tasks for his masters, Leibniz is better described as a universal genius.

Many of his ideas and inventions, noted down on thousands of pieces of paper, remained unfinished and he never completed a text presenting his ideas in a systematic fashion. Nevertheless, at the heart of all of his work was his firm conviction that the systematic development of science and expansion of human knowledge were the keys to all positive social progress.

Reitz has selected one incident in Leibniz's life to illuminate his character. Leibniz established close personal relations with Sophia Charlotte of Hanover, the first Queen consort in Prussia as the wife of King Frederick I. He served her as Court Counsellor and she was one of the few people with whom he could really share his thoughts. In a tribute to her counsellor, Queen Charlotte commissioned a portrait of Leibniz so she could continue her dialogues with him even in his absence. Using this one incident, Reitz takes up a key aspect of Leibniz's thought.

The first artist to take up the portraiture challenge is pompous French

court painter Pierre-Albert Delalandre (Lars Eidinger). The preening Frenchman arrives with an entourage of assistants and a series of readymade canvases consisting of elaborately garbed general features in a variety of colours with the face left blank. For Delalandre the most important thing is to ensure that the court costume and massive wig are impressively painted, work he has already carried out—the face of his subject is almost an after-thought.

Delalandre bombards his sitter with a series of requests to change his facial expression, much to the bewilderment of Leibniz (Edgar Selge), who responds with enquiries as to the painter's own conception of his work. In his rush to complete the face on his readymade portrait, Delalandre goes so far at one point to request that Leibniz “stop thinking.”

Leibniz responds by asking how it would be possible for Delalandre to paint a true portrait if he does not properly know his subject. Frustrated by the questioning, the exasperated Frenchman breaks off his work and leaves in a huff. It is up to his replacement, the Flemish painter Aaltje van de Meer (Aenne Schwarz), to establish over time a genuine empathetic rapport with the philosopher and complete a portrait to their mutual satisfaction, as well as that of Queen Charlotte. We never see the portrait of Leibniz in the course of the film, and in fact the actual portrait completed by Aaltje van de Meer went missing and has never been seen.

At the heart of the exchanges in the film is the notion that true art and science cannot remain at the level of surface appearances, but must penetrate to essence. This notion was comprehensively elaborated by idealist German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel over a hundred years later and summed up by the materialist Karl Marx, who wrote in his third volume of *Capital*, “If there were no difference between essence and appearance, there would be no need for science.”

For decades, the Enlightenment, which commenced in the 17th century and provided the progressive ideological basis for the overthrow of feudalism and the transition to capitalism, has been under continual attack from the exponents of ideologies such as structuralism, postmodernism, post-colonial theory and the Frankfurt School. To his great credit, Reitz has selected a central Enlightenment figure, Leibniz, as the subject for his latest entertaining and thought-provoking film.

To be continued



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