

The 76th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Increasing social criticism in Berlin and a new, committed tone of film realism: *The Red Hangar* from Chile

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1 March 2026

Many of the 278 films from 80 countries shown at this year's Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival) remained at the level of personal relationships and family stories, without revealing social background. The issues of gender, ethnic identity and queer problems, already present in previous festivals, were also prominent this year.

The festival's opening film *No Good Men* was in this respect a negative example. It has a feminist theme—"no good men" to be found except for one!—and completely ignores the real background to the war in Afghanistan and the military intervention of the German army alongside US imperialism. It even portrays the German army as a humane force that ultimately rescues a woman and child from the evil Muslim men of the Taliban.

The film makes no mention of the fact that the German government is still leaving Afghan families stranded in Pakistan, despite having promised them entry. Nor does it refer to the unpunished massacre in Kunduz with over 100 civilian victims, ordered by a Bundeswehr colonel in September 2009, the subject of Raymond Ley's notable film *A Murderous Decision (Eine mörderische Entscheidung, 2013)*, starring Matthias Brandt.

The tendency towards self-centred film subjects reduced to personal sensitivities, however, is increasingly coming into conflict with social reality. This was the positive news from this year's Berlinale: an increase in socially critical cinema and a new, committed tone of filmic realism.

A growing number of younger filmmakers are turning their attention to history and the current threats to human relationships posed by war, state repression, fascist violence and extreme exploitation. In so doing, they are responding to the global rebellion of young people and workers, which they allude to through cinematic means and metaphors, and thereby moving beyond the pessimistic mood of many films of past decades.

These include İlker Çatak's *Yellow Letters*, which rightly won the festival's main prize, the Golden Bear, and is a fitting response to the media and political attempts at the beginning of the Berlinale to suppress statements on the genocide in Gaza. Similarly, Farat Shariat's feature film *Prosecution (Staatsschutz)*, won the audience award in the

Panorama section and is a highly topical commentary on the shift to the right in German politics.

Several socially critical films also stand out, such as *I Understand Your Displeasure (Ich verstehe Ihren Unmut)*, about extreme exploitation in the cleaning industry with the help of criminal subcontractors—and *Enjoy Your Stay* about the exploitation and abuse of Filipino women in a luxury ski resort in Switzerland, which inevitably brings to mind the terrible fire disaster caused by criminal profiteers in the Swiss ski resort of Crans-Montana.

The feature film debut *The Red Hangar (Hangar rojo)* by young Chilean director Juan Pablo Sallato had its world premiere in the Berlinale 'Perspectives' category. It will be shown at the 29th Festival de Málaga in Andalusia in early March, released in Spanish cinemas and then, in the autumn, in Chilean cinemas.

This relatively short drama, lasting just under an hour and a half, is a Chilean, Argentinian and Italian co-production. It brings back to life the fascist military coup in Chile in 1973 and conveys to viewers the necessity of taking up the fight against dictatorship, war and fascism before it is too late.

The central character is a real person: Captain Jorge Silva (brilliantly played by Nicolás Zárate), a supporter of the overthrown government of Salvador Allende, former head of the Air Force Intelligence Service and, until the military coup, head of the Air Force Academy, where he trained cadets. He died in London in 2024, where he had fled with his wife Rosa after spending two years in the torture prison of the fascist Pinochet dictatorship.

The screenplay for the film by Luis Emilio Guzmán is based on the autobiographical work by Fernando Villagrán: *Shoot the flock—Secret chronicle of the crimes in the FACH* [Chilean Air Force] (*Disparen a la bandada: una crónica secreta de la FACH*). Villagrán himself was among those arrested on the day of the coup and was one of two activists whom Silva interrogated but ultimately saved.

The film is not a docudrama in the sense of describing the individual stages by which General Pinochet overthrew the Allende parliamentary government, causing the latter's death,

abolishing democratic rights and imprisoning, torturing and murdering hundreds of thousands of people, mainly young people and workers.

However, the directing team succeeds in bringing the event frighteningly close to today's audience. Shot in black and white and without a soundtrack, the camera follows Silva's facial expressions, head posture and militarily disciplined movements closely and with great depth of field. In the background, the viewer sees or hears shakily filmed scenes, mass arrests, screams and acts of violence.

Director Juan Pablo Sallato, who studied at an art college, uses elements of expressionist painting and explained in an interview that for him, "black and white, light and dark contrast, and shades of grey" are visual metaphors for the moral dilemma at the heart of the story.

The Red Hangar focuses on the first hours of the coup and follows Silva's initial reactions as he refuses to believe the fascist threat when, on the eve of September 11, a friend in the army calls and reports suspicious military activity. At first, he accepts discipline and military duty when the new fascist commander of the academy, Colonel Jahn (Marcial Tagle), draws him into the terror against those arrested. Finally, we witness his decision to resist when he rescues two young left-wing activists from torture and execution during a transport of prisoners to the Santiago stadium.

Again and again, the camera rests on Silva's fine, controlled facial features, which contrast sharply with the brutal face of the new academy chief, Jahn, also shown in close-up, and credibly illustrate the internal conflict between military discipline and abhorrence of the coup plotters.

Jahn triumphantly declares that he has just returned from America. This remark not only refers to the fact that the CIA played a key role in organising the Chilean coup in 1973. It also indirectly reflects the current threatening situation in Latin America following Donald Trump's arrival in the White House, which is coming to a head these days with military provocations against Venezuela, Mexico and Cuba.

Colonel Jahn leads Silva to the aircraft hangar, which he had left the night before as a deserted, silent hall. From now on, he will call it the "Red Hangar," Jahn says with a malicious grin. Because now it must serve as a detention and torture centre for the 'Reds,' 'Marxists,' 'communists and socialists,' who are finally to be 'wiped out once and for all.'

'Yes, sir,' says Silva with a frozen expression. He participates in the arrest of a group of young people who arrive in a truck at that moment and who later lie bound on the floor. At the same time, he supports a young cadet who drove the truck and who has to vomit when a fleeing boy is shot from behind.

Silva also does nothing to prevent the arrest and torture of other Allende supporters by the army, such as General Bachelet, the father of the future Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, and finally he even accepts the order to interrogate young activists from a left-wing group whose torture and execution has already been planned. One of them is Villagrán, who tells Silva to his face that he will not cooperate with a traitor.

The final scene shows Silva, his hand trembling, with his wife

Rosa, whom he has been unable to reach all day and who, as a university lecturer in history, has witnessed the terror in her student seminar. Silva rejects her plea to flee. He returns to the academy, where he is soon led through the gate into the Red Hangar as a prisoner.

Director Sallato explains one of the principal motives for his film in an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, saying, "In many parts of the world, we are witnessing the erosion of human rights and international agreements with an alarming normalisation. Inevitably, this reminds us of some of the darkest moments of the 20th century."

For him, in such a situation of upheaval, in which someone comes under enormous pressure, it is "important to ask how far our own responsibility extends. I hope the film raises this question for the viewer: What would each of us do in a similar situation?"

However, this important appeal to individual responsibility to decide in time to fight against the fascist threat leaves a question mark. The fact that Silva ultimately resists, rescues two arrested people and risks his own life in the process was a sign of humanity amid barbarism, but it could not end the fascist dictatorship that continued to oppress the Chilean people for another 17 years. And, as Sallato himself notes, today the fascist threat is returning.

The personal decision to resist also required a realistic perspective in order to combat the causes of this danger, the capitalist system as a whole. The lesson to be learned from the coup in Chile in 1973 and from the resurgence of today's coup plotters, such as Trump's right-wing clique, is also that a bourgeois-democratic parliament, as under Allende, cannot offer protection from dictatorship. Allende's 'government of popular unity,' based on the Unidad Popular (UP) electoral alliance, an alliance of reformist parties and the Stalinist Communist Party, lulled the population into the mistaken belief that the army would protect democracy, thus paving the way for disaster.

This is also the experience of the "darkest moments of the 20th century" in Germany in 1933 and in Spain in 1936. Bourgeois democracy gives way to fascism when capitalism enters a deadly crisis because it is backed by the same capitalist interests. In Germany, Hitler was famously appointed chancellor in 1933 on the basis of the Weimar Constitution, and in Spain, the Stalinist-backed Popular Front government opened the door to the dictatorship of General Franco.

The Red Hangar is highly topical and serves as a warning in the current world situation, in which an American president is terrorising the population with Gestapo-like methods, destroying democratic rights and using criminal methods against neighbouring states and former allies, and in which other states in Europe and around the world that call themselves democratic are also threatened with the establishment of dictatorship.



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