

The 76th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

A warning against dictatorship: Berlinale's main prize winner *Yellow Letters*—and more government censorship at the festival

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6 March 2026

The German-Turkish-French co-production *Yellow Letters* by Ilker Çatak (*The Teachers' Room*, 2023) received the main prize at this year's Berlinale, the Golden Bear. The film is a powerful warning against the threat of censorship and state oppression, including in Germany and other countries.

Derya (Özgü Namal) is an established actress at the Ankara State Theatre dedicated to her profession. After a politician's mobile phone rings irritatingly several times in the middle of a performance, she refuses his later request for a photo together and doesn't allow herself to be persuaded by the theatre director.

The situation in the country is tense, with the Turkish army fighting alleged terrorists from the Kurdish minority. Anti-government activists are denounced as supporters of terrorism. Nevertheless, a peace demonstration attracts a large crowd. Derya's husband Aziz (Tansu Biçer), a scientist, lecturer and playwright, allows the few students who attend his lecture to leave. Sometimes, he says, you learn more outside the lecture hall.

Shortly afterward, he and a number of colleagues are dismissed on flimsy grounds. His play at the State Theatre, which deals with Kurdish identity among other things, is also cancelled. Fellow actors blame Derya for rejecting the politician's photo op. Events pile up in quick succession.

The couple's landlord tells them he is concerned about his reputation. The police have inquired about terrorist activities in the building. Later, Derya receives a "yellow letter" in which the theatre informs her it is complying with her request to terminate her contract (in fact, she has never resigned). The university files a lawsuit against Aziz. There are also difficulties with a bank loan. In a short time, the family is isolated and destitute.

To enable their teenage daughter Ezgi to make the transition to secondary school, the family moves to Istanbul

to live with Aziz's mother. But things are troubled here too. On the first day of school, a petition is launched by students, which Aziz immediately signs. Ezgi, however, wants nothing to do with it.

The court date is not set for another seven months. Aziz, an atheist, follows his brother to Friday prayers at the mosque, where his brother introduces him to a taxi company owner. He takes a job as a driver. On one of his trips, Aziz ends up in front of a small theatre and finds a place there. Derya takes the lead role in Aziz's new play *Yellow Letters*, which deals with the events of the last few months.

The court ruling comes as a shock. Aziz receives a sentence of eight years in prison for allegedly spreading "terrorist" ideology. The defence appeals. Until the new decision, the family must continue to fight for their existence. Shortly before the premiere of the play, Derya suddenly pulls out of the role.

Instead, she takes a lead role in a television soap opera, deleting some of her earlier critical posts on social media. Ironically, it is on a conservative television channel that previously panned her theatre work in Ankara. Aziz accuses his wife of betraying her ideals. Their daughter can no longer bear the tension in the family and flees to a musician friend...

The sensitivity to the various conflicts and questions of conscience, right down to the question "What can art do?" testifies to the director's strong sense of empathy.

According to Çatak, around 2,000 artists and scientists were suspended and brought to trial between 2016 and 2019 after signing a peace petition in response to government purges in Turkey. Among the signatories was Emin Alper, whose film *Salvation (Kurtulus)* won the Silver Bear at the Berlinale.

Yellow Letters is a thoughtful film without pathos, but also without dark fatalism. The daughter, overwhelmed by the

situation, is proud of her parents' maxim that an artist must stand on his or her own two feet. Derya's alleged "betrayal" is a futile attempt to protect her daughter's future—school must be paid for.

When her husband accuses her of "betraying" her ideals, she counters that Aziz is hiding behind his pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-feminist plays. In the end, he takes over her role at the premiere.

A critical tone is also struck towards protest actions solely aimed at waving flags and merely persevering. A dismissed colleague accuses Aziz of betrayal because he does not participate in a "University on the Street" protest action. The fact that Aziz is facing serious charges in court does not seem to bother his colleague with a radical bushy beard and a face constantly contorted by indignation.

At the end, Aziz, Derya and their daughter Ezgi meet and arrange to have dinner together. Derya criticizes the shallow series about a marital crisis, telling the family with a meaningful look that she still has to get rid of her blonde wig. Aziz waits for her and lies down on the back of a van. He stares at the ceiling and thinks. The ending is left open and poses the question: how can one conduct a serious fight against state censorship and oppression, which goes beyond mere protest?

Two years ago, Andreas Dresen's film *In Liebe, Eure Hilde* (*With Love, Your Hilde*) about the left-wing resistance fighter Hilde Coppi, who was executed by the Nazis, warned of the danger of a right-wing dictatorship in Germany. The avoidance of Nazi flags, uniforms and the usual clichés gave the film a haunting immediacy. Something similar is detectable in *Yellow Letters*.

The film is set in Turkey. However, Berlin and Hamburg were deliberately chosen as shooting locales and named in titles as the two places where the action takes place: Berlin is Ankara, Hamburg is Istanbul. German words such as "taxi" appear, as do a German police car and a demonstration featuring German placards.

Çatak emphasized in an interview: "If you look at our globalised world, 'a problem over there' is rarely just a problem 'over there.' ... Trump launched his campaign against universities, and the Israel-Palestine debate showed that even here, as academics and artists, we have to be careful what we say. Suddenly, *Yellow Letters* was no longer a story that only takes place 'over there.'"

Meanwhile, Çatak has also inevitably been drawn into the Berlinale's own "drama," as the German government relentlessly pursues its efforts to censor the festival and prevent critical films, especially those that expose the Israelis and their genocidal policies, from appearing or receiving awards.

The government has "permitted" festival director Tricia

Tuttle to stay on, after threatening her because of pro-Palestinian displays by certain filmmakers at the Berlinale's awards ceremony, but under increasingly onerous and politically repressive conditions.

According to *Variety*, the Berlinale confirmed Tuesday

that Tuttle would remain as director following a supervisory board meeting during which the board—which finances the festival—issued a series of recommendations, including the creation of a code of conduct; training for staff dealing with politically sensitive content; as well as the launch of an independent advisory forum representing diverse social groups, including Jewish voices.

In fact, this extraordinary and unprecedented proposal envisions Zionist outfits having veto power over the film selection process at one of the world's leading film festivals. It is unlikely that a good number of the films already reviewed by the WSWS would have been shown at the Berlinale if these reactionary conditions had been in place. Tuttle will keep her position only as long as she does what German culture minister Wolfram Weimer tells her to do.

In a statement to *Variety*, Çatak commented that an "international A-list festival like the Berlinale ... must never be subjected to 'recommendations' or any form of external directive."

"Filmmakers and guests must also be free," he went on, "to express everything they wish ... Anything else would constitute blatant state interference in the autonomous exercise of art. We would have to call it what it is: censorship."

Previously, in response to reports that Tuttle would be fired, Çatak remarked: "Do they even realize that all of us—and I certainly include myself in that—would never submit another film to the Berlinale?"



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