Someday a Child, Kleptomania, Souls of Fouta, An Accident

Berlinale short films: A search for social cohesion and direction in a world full of war and disasters

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This is the first of two articles on short films at the recent Berlin International Film Festival.

This year's Berlinale Shorts programme featured 21 short films from 21 countries, all of them world premieres. As in previous years, it was mostly younger directors who sought to address contemporary issues. The selection, which also included animations, offered some whimsical pieces, many focused on individual emotions, as well as thoughtful explorations of social and historical issues.

"Magic and quiet defiance" is how long-standing section head Anna Henckel-Donnersmarck described the visual language and underlying tone of many of this year's films. She said it was "moving to see how even the heavy themes are tackled with such care, warmth, humour and openness."

This applies in particular to the winner of the Golden Bear, *Someday a Child* (*Yawman ma walad*) from Lebanese director Marie-Rose Osta, which centres on an 11-year-old boy (Khaled Hassan) with magical powers.

He lives with his uncle (Antoine Daher) in the ruins of his family home, over which Israeli bombers roar day after day. With his friends from the village, he roams between cellars and sections of concrete walls while trying to test his special powers.

One of his tests involves walnuts. He opens them simply with his gaze, without cracking them, carefully removes all the kernels and collects them in a jar. When his uncle discovers this, he reacts gruffly, making it clear to him that a world in which one cracks nuts with gentle magic does not exist. He takes a nut from the jar, "This is your dream," he says sternly, and then demonstratively crumbles it. "And this is reality." The boy protests: "Your reality is rubbish."

The uncle wants to protect the boy, who clearly longs for his deceased mother, and raise him to adapt to the prevailing social circumstances under the constant threat of war. However, when the boy apparently uses his magical powers to bring down two fighter jets, the confrontation comes to a head.

The uncle accuses him of having conjured up a dangerous situation: "You're scared—I'm not," the boy retorts defiantly. To which the uncle replies: "You'd better use your brain."

In the end, flames rise on the horizon, screams ring out in the village, cars pull up outside the house and two men, clearly security agents, confront the uncle. The boy lies on his back, gazing questioningly at the sky.

Director Marie-Rose explains that *Someday a Child* draws on a personal memory from her teenage years:

> In July 2006, I was a teenager in Beirut, bored in my bed, not following politics and not understanding what was about to happen. I heard a fighter jet overhead—something so rare at the time that I paused—and a strange unease welled up inside me, as if something were coming my way.
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> Almost without thinking, I said out loud: "Boom." A second later, an explosion went off nearby. For a terrifying moment, because of the timing, I felt as though my voice had summoned the explosion, before I went outside, heard the news and realised that this was the start of the Israeli attack on Lebanon.

Her grandfather's unfinished house, where she played so much as a child, and that moment in Beirut "when the war entered my room as sound and shock," became the motive force behind *Someday a Child* and raised the question: "What happens when a child's inner strength encounters a world determined to discipline them into submission and silence?"

At the Berlinale awards ceremony, Marie-Rose Osta herself expressed the inner strength of her child protagonist as she accepted the Golden Bear. Despite attempts by the government and the media to suppress any protest against the genocide in Gaza, she said to applause:

> In reality, children in Gaza, throughout Palestine and in my Lebanon have no superpowers to protect them from Israeli bombs.

In the days following the Berlinale, her film has become dramatically more relevant in light of the Israeli army's savage bombing of Beirut.

Search for solidarity

A longing for human cohesion and solidarity in the face of official prejudice and social indifference lay at the heart of a whole series of short films, including *Kleptomania* (*Di san xian*) by Jingkai Qu from China, which won the Cupra Filmmaker Award.

The 24-minute work is set amongst dreary apartment blocks in Harbin (population 10 million), a socially decaying industrial city in northernmost China, where a boy wants to sell his trading cards. However, an older schoolboy forcibly takes them from him, whereupon the boy begins to take revenge on those around him. A spiral of violence ensues.

According to the director, the impetus for his film was the question of social conditions and childhood experiences, and "why violence takes root." The extreme exploitation in China since the reintroduction of capitalist conditions in the early 1980s forms the unspoken backdrop to the events in the city of Harbin.

The 18-minute *Les âmes du Fouta* (*Souls of Fouta*) by Alpha Diallo from Senegal explores the conflict between strict religious rules and human behaviour. In the end, the desire for humane and supportive existence prevails.

The young Dembe has left the confines and poverty of the village and sought his fortune in the capital, Dakar. He returns as a corpse, having died of a drug overdose. His father refuses to have him buried in the village cemetery because his drug addiction has "defiled" his soul. Dembe's mother cannot accept this, and even the village elders advise the father to allow the burial, arguing that God is capable of forgiveness.

The final scene is striking: Dembe's mother begins to dig a hole in the ground at the cemetery with her hands. Gradually, other villagers join in. For several minutes, the camera remains almost static, looking down from above at the backs of the neighbours shovelling together around the grave, huddled close together—an image of human cooperation and equality, beyond any religious, or in a figurative sense, state regulation.

The debut film *An Accident* (*Ein Unfall*) from Austrian director Angelika Spangel deals with events in a rural village that appear to be unrelated.

Three teenagers pass the time by staging a car accident. They observe how passing motorists react to it.

In a pig farmer's barn, the animals suffocate as a result of a short circuit, and this loss drives a wedge between father and son.

Schoolchildren play with a man with a disability, giggling and keeping their distance–smirking, fearful, never really close. Once, they playfully shoot at him with a toy gun. When he tips over onto his side on a park bench and lies motionless, the real question arises: the next morning, on the way to school, he is still lying there. The two boys who played with him stand there indecisively—they are ashamed, don't dare to approach. Only when the other children call them cowards do they finally go over to the bench—and discover that the man is as fit as a fiddle.

The camera remains conspicuously still, observing, almost documentary-like. Wide fields, flat landscape, a village in the middle of nowhere. The viewer sees what the villagers see. The editing weaves the three stories together so that they interlock like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, without ever being brought together in terms of content. Three facets of village life.

Spangel herself cites the moped crash as her favourite moment in the film. A boy rides off on the moped, crying, then a hard cut: the moped crashes down an embankment. The first impulse is shock—an accident! But it then becomes clear that the boy destroyed the moped on purpose. For Spangel, this moment leads "to the film's central theme: guilt and shame." In doing so, she argues against the morality of individual guilt and shows how the villagers react to the "accidents" by working together to repair the damage and restore their sense of community.

The father, the pig farmer, is dejected and angry because his animals have died. He even lies down to sleep in the barn. Yet he bears no blame for this: he was out with his son to buy him a moped. The joy of this gift and the death of the animals are inextricably linked—one made the other possible in the first place.

The boy is confused and helpless. He can neither ease his father's pain nor bear it himself, so he reacts with the only way out he can find: he destroys the moped, the symbol of this innocent chain of events. Yet the film does not end with this helplessness. Towards the end, the boy fakes an alarm—another supposed accident. He creates a shared task, a moment in which father and son once again stand together.

And he embraces him. It is one of the film's most touching gestures, profoundly human in its simplicity.

One might compare the film to Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*—a village, a community and how people interact in 1913. The WSWS wrote at the time that Haneke's film was a "pessimistic social study" and depicted a "brutalised" society whose internal violence logically led to war.

Spangel, who studied under Haneke, turns this perspective on its head. Her characters do not become brutalised; the children do not abuse a disabled person as in Haneke's film–they seek closeness, awkwardly and indirectly.

This is no small matter. *An Accident* is also set on the eve of a catastrophe: not in 1913, but in 2026, in a world moving with eyes wide open towards a third world war. That a film set in this era depicts humanity, rather than brutality, as the true response to guilt and harm is an important political stance, even if the film never spells it out in black and white.