

The 76th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

More Berlinale short films: *Cosmonauts, With a Kind Regard, Graft Versus Host*

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This is the second of two articles on short films at the recent Berlin International Film Festival. The first part was posted March 20.

As we noted in the first part of this article, the recent Berlinale Shorts programme featured 21 short films from 21 countries, all of them premieres. As in previous years, it was mostly younger directors who sought to address contemporary issues. The selection of films, which also included animations, offered some whimsical pieces, many focused on individual emotions, but also thoughtful explorations of social and historical issues.

Excess and decay—a portrait of our times

Cosmonauts is Leo Žernić's first animated film since graduation. He studied film and television directing at the University of Ljubljana and animation at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Turin. The 14-minute film is a Slovenian-Italian co-production that emerged out of a complex production process.

The film is set aboard the “Pompelmo Express,” an intergalactic cruise ship for singles, animated in a comic-like, caricatured, exaggerated 2D style. On board: Delfino, a man in a fetish outfit who longs for genuine affection and ultimately finds it in a talking flower; Rita, a cleaner who tidies up after the wild parties; a scientist chasing after his beloved comet.

They are all searching for the same thing. Žernić describes his starting point: “I am deeply moved by how strongly we strive to love—and what we are all willing to do for it.”

His favourite moment in the film is the after-party scene: After a climax of sex, dancing and drugs, all the cosmonauts fall asleep together, cuddled up against one another. Žernić describes this moment as the very heart

of the film—it shows “that unconventional sexual practices and love can coexist, but also the deep sense of loneliness that often arises from simply being different.”

Žernić has deliberately dedicated his film to outsiders, supporting characters, average and lonely people—those whom a society that glorifies extraordinary achievements and extraordinary people systematically overlooks. Pointing the camera at them, says Žernić, is not only fair, but necessary.

The film was entered into the competition for the Teddy Award for queer films—but what it depicts goes far beyond that. The loneliness that a hedonistic sex party fails to dispel is not a queer peculiarity. It is the product of a society that offers intimacy as a commodity, thereby destroying precisely what people truly need.

In this respect, *Cosmonauts* is also a critique of capitalism: of an order that transforms even the most intimate human needs into consumption and renders the majority—the weak, the lonely, the average—invisible.

The fact that this film was made in 2026 lends it additional weight. The Golden Twenties in Berlin were a time of excessive self-indulgence—as escapism in the face of political instability and impending catastrophe.

German artist Otto Dix (1891-1969) painted that society: the cabarets, the dissipations, the garish colours—and beneath them, decay and looming violence. In form and content, *Cosmonauts* recalls this tradition: caricatured, exaggerated, garish, exuberant. It is a portrait in part of our times.

A new perspective on the end of the Soviet Union

This year's selection of short films include some remarkable works that take a historical approach to the

current social upheaval and look back at the period of the reunification of Germany and the end of the Soviet Union 35 years ago. They share common ground with the Retrospective section, which featured films from the 1990s.

In his new short documentary *With a Kind Regard*, director Pavel Mozhar, born in Minsk, Belarus, depicts an East German (GDR) factory that was closed down following German reunification in 1991. In black and white, the camera slowly pans across the building, which the viewer can initially see only upside down, reflected in the river.

Simultaneously, a voice reads out in a monotonous tone over 400 job applications and rejection letters from the years 2004 to 2008 found in a dusty basement. With empathy, the film quotes from accounts of living conditions, professional experience and acquired skills contained in the applications. This makes the recurring phrases in the HR department's replies sound all the more curt and impersonal; officials inevitably reject the applications "with regret" and conclude their letters "with a kind regard." Despite the film's dry, sober presentation, the director succeeds in making palpable the drastic upheaval that the privatisation of firms meant for the working class of the former Stalinist-ruled GDR.

Particularly striking and thought-provoking is a 31-minute video essay on the end of the Soviet Union: *Graft Versus Host*. Georgian director Giorgi Gago Gagoshidze intertwines his own battle with cancer with the final stages of the USSR's dissolution under Mikhail Gorbachev. His diagnosis of a rare form of cancer, T-cell lymphoma, which leads to the failure of the immune system and the body's own defence mechanisms, is linked to the end of the Soviet Union's own immune system in 1991.

Medical treatment takes place in three phases, as former Charité doctor Dr. Igor Wolfgang Blau explains in the film: 1. Elimination of the cancer cells; 2. Immune transplantation; and 3. Adaptation to a new immune system. The film uses these three phases as a framework by which to present the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of capitalism. As with his own cancer, Gagoshidze argues, the so-called adaptation process has caused chronic side effects and ushered in an uncertain future, as the "new immune system" too is threatening to fail.

Graft Versus Host portrays the beginnings of privatisation in a documentary clip, when First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party Eduard Shevardnadze—who later became Gorbachev's Minister of Foreign Affairs—visited the village of Abasha and allowed the collective farmers to keep part of their surplus harvest or sell it at a profit.

This was the first attempt in Georgia to introduce a limited form of private property, the director said in an interview with the *Guardian*. The initial success, driven by increased agricultural production, at the same time "paved the way for the collapse of the Soviet Union," because it encouraged the emergence of illegal enterprises and a shadow economy based on corruption.

"When the Soviet Union collapsed, everything collapsed," Gagoshidze continued. He recalled how, later on, his mother went to the supermarket with him and "had to ask the staff for something to eat, because the shelves were empty." And at home, there was "no gas, no hot water, nothing" left.

In *Graft Versus Host*, this development is grotesquely exaggerated. In the final scene, Gorbachev sits at a large desk, drops the pen with which he is about to sign the Soviet Union's dissolution document—and finds help from one of his "Western friends," namely Donald Trump, who triumphantly hands him the lost pen.

In a medical context, the term "graft-versus-host disease" refers to a "donor-versus-recipient reaction" following stem cell transplants, meaning that the newly transplanted immune system begins to fight against that of the recipient. In the interview with the *Guardian*, the director speaks of an "ongoing civil war within the body," referring to the current situation in Georgia and the other successor states of the Soviet Union.



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