The 76th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 7

Berlinale Retrospective: A look back at the fall of the Berlin Wall—“Lost in the 90s”

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It is no coincidence that this year’s Berlinale Retrospective was titled “Lost in the 90s.” The burning problems of the present day, genocidal wars, dictatorship and increasing social decline, bring to mind the claims made in the period immediately following the end of the Cold War.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union were accompanied by a deafening triumphal cry about the supposed historic and final victory of capitalism. Socialism and class struggle were declared dead, while capitalism, it was predicted, would lead to peaceful, democratic, social development. Few could have imagined back then that a fascist politician like Donald Trump could rise to the top of world politics—and, of all places, in the country that presented itself as the embodiment of freedom and democracy.

Looking back at the films from that era casts the 1990s in a different light. The Berlinale, along with the Berlin Zeughaus cinema, had already screened, in 2009, a series of films about the fall of the Berlin Wall under the titles “Winter Ade” [“Farewell Winter”] and “Scheiden tut weh” [“Parting hurts”].

While the films from that era demonstrated illusions in “democratic” capitalism, this year’s selection was characterized by pictures of life highlighting the *negative* effects of the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall—social insecurity, existential anxiety, skepticism and pessimism about the future. The title “Lost in the 90s” can also be interpreted in terms of a loss of orientation and perspective.

To emphasize that this not only affected the countries directly involved in the transition, this year’s program included several international films from that era. For example, the American films *Slacker* (1990, Richard Linklater) and *Party Girl* (1995, Daisy von Scherler Mayer) help capture the mood of Generation X, while the New Black Cinema’s *Boyz N the Hood* (1991, John Singleton) and *Bamboozled* (2000, Spike Lee) attempt to address the prejudices and social problems faced by black people in big US cities.

Germany 90, Hour Zero, 1991 (*Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*), by Jean-Luc Godard, who died in 2022, is marked by panic-stricken images, as if a revival of the Nazi Third Reich was imminent in Germany. Godard cynically blends in the Nazi slogan “Arbeit macht frei”(“Work makes Free”) and shows images of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Werner Herzog’s documentary *Bells from the Depths—Faith and Superstition in Russia* (1993, *Glocken aus der Tiefe–Glaube und Aberglaube in Rußland*) shows how, after the dissolution of the USSR, certain people, in religious resignation, slide on their knees around a lake instead of rising up against the social catastrophe. Herzog exaggerates such developments to extremes, only then to interpret them as emanations of the “Russian soul.”

The documentary *Orange Vests* (1993, *Oranzhevye zhilety*), directed by Yuri Khashevatsky, screenplay by Ella Milova, Irina Pismennaya), depicts the catastrophic social situation in the USSR shortly before its dissolution, particularly for working-class women. The atmosphere is taut to the breaking point, on the brink of civil war. Previously, there had been massive protests in the USSR against the Perestroika “reform” program, which failed to improve the situation of workers. Following major miners’ strikes, Mikhail Gorbachev had resigned. The film by Helke Sander ultimately shares the widespread illusions regarding Gorbachev’s successor, the free-market crusader Boris Yeltsin.

Another non-fiction work, *Berlin, Friedrichstraße Station 1990* (1991, Konstanze Binder, Lilly Grote, Ulrike Herdin, Julia Kunert), shows the once heavily guarded train station connecting Stalinist East and capitalist West Berlin. As the fronts established in the Cold War collapse, a journalist naively remarks that it would actually be nice to disband the armies now—a futile pacifist wish for everlasting peace.

The return of nationalism and Yugoslav films

Two films from Yugoslavia dealt with the return of nationalism and the breakup of the country. *Gorilla Bathes at Noon* (1993, Dusan Makavejev) is a satire about a Soviet major wandering through Berlin after the withdrawal of the Soviet army. “It wasn’t I who left my army,” the major bitterly emphasizes at one point, “but the Red Army that left me.” Makavejev, a well-known Yugoslav dissident in the 1960s and 1970s (1971, *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*) is considering the legacy of the October Revolution and its fate. At the end of the film, the major sits on a truck next to a stone head of Lenin—removed during the demolition of a monument in 1991—and ponders where to take it.

The documentary *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* (1994, *Tito pro drugi put me?u Srbima*, Želimir Žilnik) shows an actor walking through the streets of Belgrade impersonating Marshal Josip Tito and talking to passersby about the civil war that began in 1991.

“How was that possible? We fought together as partisans against the Nazis and lived together peacefully afterward”—this is a question repeatedly posed to the costumed “Tito.” A passerby shouts that “the Germans” are to blame, referring to the fact that in 1991 the German government recognized the secession of Croatia and Slovenia from Yugoslavia despite warnings about the consequences.

In the Splendour of Happiness

The German documentary *In the Splendour of Happiness* (1990, *Im Glanze dieses Glückes*, Helga Reidemeister, Johann Feindt, Jeanine Meerapfel, Dieter Schumann, Tamara Trampe) reflects the confusion and uncertainty in the face of the impending reunification of Germany. The

film consists of interviews with East German citizens prior to the last People's Chamber election in 1990, in which there is much talk of morality and the end of the "socialist utopia." One interview delves extensively into the inner state of mind of a former Stasi [secret police] psychologist.

When a filmmaker interviews two workers at an auto plant and asks, almost accusingly, why they continue to work rather than resisting the Stalinist SED dictatorship, one of them remarks gloomily that he had always championed socialism. But the GDR (East Germany) had not achieved higher labor productivity compared to its capitalist neighbours—a necessity Marx had already addressed.

The worker raises a question that actually lay at the root of the GDR's demise: the fact that the globalization of production had rendered futile the attempt at a nationally limited planned economy based on nationalization. The role of Stalinism and its reactionary nationalist policies—pursued by the SED regime as well as in Moscow and the Eastern European states, and directed against Marx's international socialism—is not, however, addressed in the film.

Andreas Dresen (*With Love, Your Hilde*) belongs to the last generation of film directors in the GDR and, even while at university, chose subjects that dealt with the everyday life of the East German population. Such as in the short film *What Everyone Must…* (1988, *Was jeder muß...*) about military service in the GDR. The retrospective film *Shortcut to Istanbul* (1991, *So schnell es geht nach Istanbul*) is his graduation film, which, drawing on motifs from a story by Jurek Becker, responds to the fall of the Wall with pragmatic humour. What does the open border mean for everyday life?

The 43-minute film addresses the phenomenon of those crossing borders, which had contributed to the closure of the border and building of the Wall to West Berlin in 1961. Such people lived in the cheap East and worked for hard currency in the West. Thanks to the unofficial exchange rate, they had an income that far exceeded that of the average GDR worker and, according to the SED, caused "serious damage to socialism." When the SED itself opened the Wall in 1989, the cross-border commuters were back.

In the spring of 1990, Niyazi, a young Turkish snack vendor from West Berlin, wants to seize the moment: get rich now, buy the long-awaited house in Turkey, and then return home—not like his father, who had to slave away in West Germany for 17 years. An acquaintance introduces him to Klara, an introverted young nurse from East Berlin. She is lonely, yet curious, and after a meal at a hotel, she hesitantly takes him back to her apartment. She has no idea of his plans.

The "sunny" boy and the taciturn young woman with negative experiences about men can't seem to connect at first. He raves about the low rents in the East. Klara was only briefly impressed by colourful West Berlin. Without money, she'd feel like a beggar. She asks Niyazi about his family in Turkey. Like most GDR citizens, Klara wants above all to get to know the world. Above her bed hangs a romantic poster featuring the sea, a sailboat and a sunset.

Despite their contrasting personalities and the fact that Niyazi isn't terribly interested in Klara, there is mutual respect between them: people like these have to work hard on both sides of the border to make ends meet. Ultimately, Klara keeps his exchanged money safe. Niyazi trusts her.

In his film, director Dresen sympathetically highlights reunification from the grassroots. The gateway to the world has been opened—Istanbul begins in Berlin. It's about solidarity on a small scale, because ultimately, the big decisions are made by others. In the summer (the film is over by then), the introduction of the unified German Deutschmark brings an end to the border crossers' activities.

Shortly after German reunification, unemployment was rampant in the former GDR. *The Border Guard* (1995, *Der Kontrolleur*, Stefan Trampe) is a bleak film about Hermann, an unemployed GDR customs officer. While his colleague Rolf sells vacuum cleaners, Hermann continues to go to the abandoned facility, performing his old job every day, making his rounds, noting down unusual occurrences and necessary repairs (which are increasing). After "work," he sometimes stops by a bar where the red-haired waitress, Inge, reminds him of his late wife.

One day she curiously tags along; he proudly shows her the old movie theater, where they watch old training films and get drunk. The next morning, Hermann suddenly arrests and interrogates her. He also arrests a young man who has stopped his car due to engine trouble, drawing his gun. He is clearly mentally disturbed. In the end, he burns his uniform and walls himself in at his old workplace.

The film's most compelling protagonist is the abandoned, ruined environment that had once been his work location. It is a former border facility. The images evoke associations with the ruins of the large GDR industrial complexes that were suddenly shut down and left to rot. Workers had spent decades here, performing useful work. Within a very short time, everything that had made up their lives crumbled into worthless scrap. The film is also a document of the bewilderment that prevailed at that time.

Sunny Point

Wolf Vogel's satire *Sunny Point* was made in 1995 on a shoestring budget by East and West German film enthusiasts. It criticizes the self-serving profit motives behind the "aid" for East German "brothers and sisters" and challenges the official narrative of a "Peaceful Revolution." After its premiere, the film disappeared into the archives for decades.

The story takes place in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell. Victor's advertising firm "Sunny Point" in West Berlin is on the brink of ruin. So the former East German refugee decides to flee to the West once more, using a different name (his real one), to shake off his creditors and try to start over. Unfortunately, he chose the day the Wall fell, and is met with laughter when, after crossing the river Spree, he shows up soaking wet in a West Berlin pub as a "refugee." He also has bad luck with the financial frauds he uses to oust his employees and make a clean getaway. In the end, Victor should be grateful he doesn't end up in prison.

The sarcastic depictions of the small advertising firm's struggle for survival are the most compelling. The employees, who would rather be filmmakers, must endure daily humiliating treatment from stingy, brazen clients and the bank.

In the freedom of the market economy, Victor is no freer than he was in the GDR. When he once refers to the German Basic Law in frustration, an acquaintance, amused by Victor's naïveté, remarks that the Basic Law is an illusion; only contracts are real.

Following this lesson in capitalist reality, Victor sneers at the illusion of GDR citizens who had perhaps believed they had torn down the Wall themselves. "Special offers" lurk everywhere, their exorbitant prices amounting to exactly the 100-mark welcome bonus. East Berliners, who left everything behind at home, ride in taxis full of anticipation toward "freedom." There, however, only primitive emergency shelters in gymnasiums await the new citizens.

The idea for the film, Vogel explained in a Q&A with the audience, came about shortly after the fall of the Wall, when he lost his job in the theater in the GDR. The experiences of the advertising agency were essentially his own, and the commercials used in the film were the real ones from that time. What makes the film special, he said, is that it resonates equally with audiences in both the East and the West and does not share the official euphoria over the fall of the Wall.

In the hyperactive adventurer Victor from the "socialist" GDR, who wants to show the West what a real capitalist is and who fails, Vogel presents a character whom the film pokes fun at but, unfortunately, does not examine more closely. Thus, with its very fast-talking main character, the film sometimes slips into pure silliness.

One scene that sticks in the memory shows former GDR citizen Victor ranting at the “Zonis” from the East. He claims they swarm West Berlin department stores like locusts, causing shortages. He speaks contemptuously of the masses in the GDR who, he says, merely submitted to the collective and whined instead of changing anything.

Here one senses the reactionary ideological atmosphere of the 1990s, in which socialist ideas and class solidarity among workers were devalued, while individualism, self-importance and selfishness were brought to the forefront.

The foundation for this was laid by the decades-long claim that Stalinism was the same as socialism. This lie was also espoused by the GDR opposition, which supported the reintroduction of the capitalist market economy with vague democratic rhetoric. In this year’s films about the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, there is a lack of critical scrutiny of this so-called “civil rights movement,” whose illusions were shared by many artists.

Victor, who unsuccessfully strives for success in capitalist Germany after reunification, would find his malicious laughter stuck in his throat in light of today’s developments—incessant wars, the return of fascism and the destruction of the welfare state.