"A DEFA-Film of International Stature": *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser* (1957)

Abstract

Films about the problem of juvenile delinquency, or "tough kid" films ["*Halbstarken"-Filme*], became a mainstay of international cinema in the 1950s. Although films about youth crime were being made before the 1950s, the 1950s era of juvenile delinquency films stood out because they defined juvenile delinquency as an urgent social problem that required examination and remedy. In the following article from *Neues Deutschland*, the official daily newspaper of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), Horst Knietzsch asks whether *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser* is a "tough kid" film, but concludes that the East German film handles the topic of youth crime and juvenile delinquency more deftly and responsibly than other films in the genre, so much so that he argues it may not fit into the genre at all. Instead of capitalizing on the growing fear of youth crime by making a film, as he argues filmmakers from the West did, *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser* seeks to understand the root causes of juvenile delinquency, approaching it through a "responsible humanist" lens. In East Germany, Knietzsch argues, they simply did things differently (and better) than the West: they took an irresponsible film genre, pioneered by the West, and turned it into a responsible film genre that offered thoughtful meditations on a problem and its causes instead of sensationalized fear.

Source

Where We Are Not . . . *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser*, a DEFA Film of International Stature

Have films about tough kids become fashionable in the international movie business? Cayatte in France, for example, created *Before the Deluge*, America contributed *Blackboard Jungle*, a film that exported rock'n'roll to the world, the West Germans made *Teenage Wolfpack*, the Poles *Five from Barska Street*, the Hungarians *A Half-Pint of Beer* (*Julika with the Turned-Up Nose*) and *Two Confessions*, and now DEFA has produced *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser*.

"Tough kid" films? Yes and no. Most of them, made by responsible artists, are not the expression of a psychosis among carelessly judgmental people who cling to words and like to label a segment of the younger generation who have not yet found the proper attitude towards life. Two of the titles mentioned here, however, are "tough kid" films. With these films, both American and West German, one doesn't get the feeling that they were made out of concern for endangered young people, but out of a need to capitalize on a controversial issue of our day. By doing so without artistic responsibility and consistency, they contribute in their way to cultivating a widespread sickness among the young.

It goes without saying that the DEFA picture is not a film in this mold, let alone a "tough kid" film. This theme, addressed in our cinema, means not only bringing up a sore topic of our time but also looking for some of the root causes. Essentially, this is the only way a responsible humanist artist can approach this topic.

Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser is a work of what might be called DEFA's Berlin collective. Themselves Berliners, the writer Wolfgang Kohlhaas and the director Gerhard Klein created the films *Alarm at the Circus*, *A Berlin Romance* and now this one, doubtless the best of the three. Cameraman Wolf Göthe has belonged to this collective since *Berlin Romance*. What they have always showed us is genuine, undiluted Berlin, the people we encounter when we look around our own building or stick our nose outside the imaginary

Iron Curtain (Made in USA) into the Western half of the city. How they have done this can rightly be compared to the works of the masterful portraitist of Paris, René Clair, and Italian directors. Of course, the film's deftly painted milieu is an important prerequisite, but other criteria are needed in order to label it "artistic". Even if we pick *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser* apart, shake it and apply the much vaunted and demanded yardsticks, we are ultimately compelled to doff our hats and offer thanks for so many meters of intelligent and courageous celluloid.

What the film offers us is one side of our everyday life, and we therefore do not have to describe the plot in detail. We need only enter a streetcar any evening and ride from Friedrichstrasse Station to Pankow via Schönhauser Allee and we can meet the heroes of this film on every third corner. There they stand with indifferent faces, silly and insolent, gathered around a portable radio playing hot music. The hands buried in their pockets emerge only to refresh their hairstyles, which emulate James Dean, the Hollywood heartthrob. Although they are sometimes annoying, they may be counted among the harmless but endangered.

Others have deeper-seated problems. Often, they already have a criminal record, which frequently holds them back, making it hard to pull themselves out of the mire. All of them are susceptible to the dangers of the divided city. And then there are a few other protagonists, namely you and I, who also bear responsibility for "the kids on the corner."

If the overused phrase "mirror of life" still has any meaning, please watch this movie. The picture it shows us is real and thus not without blemishes. This, and the persistence with which the creators repeatedly ask why things turn out badly, constitutes much of the film's value and importance.

Wolfgang Kohlhaas and Gerhard Klein have not shied away from portraying fierce conflicts. We might point in this context to our review of *Berlin Romance* last year. We wrote that "The clear and well-structured plot could have contained more moments of tension and placed more emphasis on the vital issues facing people in the divided city." At the time, perhaps because it was too briefly put, not everyone understood what we meant, as was evident from a polemic published in this connection under a pseudonym in the *Junge Welt*. *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser* has largely overcome the artistic weaknesses that were present and criticized in *Berlin Romance* and is thus in many respects a model for the film makers in our Republic.

For reasons of space, we cannot demonstrate in detail why Gerhard Klein is already one of DEFA's leading directors, not least because he is a man with his own artistic thumbprint who, along with his screenwriter, has dedicated himself to films about contemporary life. In the interests of our cinema, we can only hope that he continues to work with Kohlhaas and Göthe. In the film industry, long-term collaboration is of inestimable value, as films made by quickly assembled production teams prove.

The actors in this outstanding film were well chosen, above all Raimund Schelcher as the understanding police officer. Because of his excellent performances in numerous recent DEFA films, most notably *Castles and Cottages*, this artist is probably one of the most promising candidates for the film awards established by the ministry of culture.

The young actor Ekkehard Schall was cast as the lead. Schall does not make things easy for himself, or for the audience. His expressive, theatrical and often stylized performance is unsuited to this film genre. It is doubtless thanks to the director that the manic quality of the actor's performance, which often veers towards the pathological, is kept to a minimum. Nevertheless, Ekkehard Schall's casting for the film is welcome, since it expands the range of our performers to include an interesting type.

Once again, Gerhard Klein has cast amateur actors. Ilse Pagé was an apt choice for Angela, and since the screenplay does not demand more of her than she is able to give under the guidance of an experienced

director, this small and slender person is persuasive in many respects.

We should also mention Ernst Schwill, Harry Engel, Helga Göring, Erika Dunkelmann, Hartmut Reck, Siegfried Weiß and Manfred Borges, who contribute significantly to the film's success.

Where we are not, that's where our enemies are. This is one of the main ideas (needlessly) expressed at the end of the film. It would be a logical continuation of the three films created by this collective if the next were to draw its set of issues from the areas of our life "where we are." The creation of such a film in the same artistic manner would not only benefit the development of our cinema, but also mark a higher stage in the oeuvre of Wolfgang Kohlhaas, Gerhard Klein and Wolf Göthe.

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