

***Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser* – A DEFA Film about Young People (1957)**

Abstract

In East Germany, the SED viewed its youth as both a foundation for and a threat to the future of the GDR as they constituted both hope for the continuation of the socialist state, but also fear of its destruction. The party attempted to control young people and their free time with the Free German Youth [*Freie Deutsche Jugend*], organizing activities, concerts, and events, but were often undermined by the popularity of subcultures, usually predicated on popular trends imported from the West. The “uncontrollability” of German youth led to frustration and anger on the part of many older people in the GDR, who believed that East German youth were not sufficiently grateful for the sacrifices that they as a generation had made. But, as this piece from the GDR newspaper *Neue Zeit* suggests, the DEFA film *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser* implored the older generation and the regime to attempt to understand the youth, and to meet them where they were—instead of portraying them as the future or downfall of the socialist utopia that they hoped to build, they should understand them as people, and address the root causes of their rebelliousness, mistrust, and insolence.

Source

They Meet on the Street . . .

Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser. – a DEFA film about young people

A film about young people, about those whom the thoughtless often call tough kids. A film about those who stand around on corners in the evenings and seem not to know what to do with themselves. A film of our time! *Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser.* . .

Dieter, Karl-Heinz, Kohle and a few others meet at this corner. And the girl Angela.

Elevated trains, automobiles, street cars. It is evening, night falls. Neon signs, echoing steps and scraps of music from somewhere. They stand and wait. For what?

There is work and the desire to come to money without working. There is hot music at the Pratergarten dances and parents who feel their children are only in the way. There is mistrust of the world of adults and the police in particular, and there is what they call running away: the road to the refugee camps of West Berlin. And there is love, a love with unsentimental tenderness.

And there are mistakes, temptations and dangers. You can become a criminal quicker than you think: Karl-Heinz. You can die a senseless death because you try to imitate a gangster film: Kohle. You can make many errors before finding your way back to yourself after bitter experience: Dieter. Dieter, whom Angela is waiting for . . .

Wolfgang Kohlhaas, the author of this new DEFA film, has not taken the easy way out. From the outset, he dispensed with idealization: Look at our splendid youth! He also avoided the easy path of accusation: Ugh, we have done so much for these kids and look how ungrateful they are! Instead, he tries to understand why so many young people are this way: rebellious, mistrustful, insolent.

There was the war that killed their fathers; the parents who are terribly indifferent to their children. The

West as a great temptation for the weak in character, the uncomprehending functionaries . . . Wolfgang Kohlhaas sometimes attempts almost too much of a good thing, overloading the film with problems that render the plot needlessly complicated. He tries too hard overall to explain some things precisely. He wastes tensions only loosely connected to the plot, for instance when he tries to prove at the beginning that Dieter is a decent guy after all and has to use a leftover bomb exploding at a building site, a noise that is completely unnecessary in dramatic terms. But the way he builds dialogue is wonderful; it is remarkably real, cheeky and disrespectful. And his portrayal of the psychology of young people is equally fantastic.

Gerhard Klein's directing is as sober and realistic as the screenplay. In many passages, he succeeds, with the help of Wolf Göthe's camera work and Günter Klück's music, in creating a highly atmospheric picture of a milieu. Using the most economical means and dispensing with any "meaningful" pathos, he lends an oppressive inner tension to some scenes, while imbuing others with a wholly unromantic emotional restraint. There are only a few places, where the script is less successful, that are too conventional and pale. The cast of young actors is excellent: Ekkehard Schall as the introverted Dieter, Ilse Pagé, a new face, as the sad, dissatisfied Angela, Harry Engel as the weak, disoriented Karl-Heinz, Ernst Schwill as the dumb, good-natured and somewhat agitated Kohle—all of them possess that nonchalance that is one of the marks of young people today, beneath which they conceal insecurity and a thirst for life. Under their deft director, they are very convincingly real urban youth in their movements, manner of speaking and gestures. Of the other actors, Raimund Schelcher stands out. His policeman is pleasantly lacking in dash, but is more of the quiet, fatherly type.

Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser ... This film is a plea for youth who are sometimes so different from what adults expect of and wish for them, who are sometimes truly unpleasant and—with a few exceptions—still much better than their reputation. We simply need to try to understand them.

Source of original German text: H.U., "Die sich auf der Straße treffen . . . 'Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser . . .'- ein DEFA-Film von jungen Menschen," *Neue Zeit*, no. 204, September 3, 1957, p. 4.

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