

Talk about the film "17 YEARS LATER"

With Kathleen Morgeneuer, Miriam Bliese, Hendrik Reichel and Volkmar Umlauf



The conversation about the movie „17 years later“ took place in Berlin, in May 2010 between the two protagonists Kathleen Morgeneuer and Miriam Bliese, director Hendrik Reichel and Volkmar Umlauf (filmmaker and lecturer in film acting), who led the conversation.

Divided German history

V.Umlauf: Why were you so interested making a movie about this German topic?

H.Reichel: I was born in the GDR and still experienced what life was like then as it was my whole childhood. Now, many years after the Change, I still feel that there is some sort of wall. People from the East and the West sometimes feel disconcerted when they meet. Prejudices and stereotypes remain on both sides and in the heads of people. I wanted to dedicate a story to that topic. I certainly know that these borders are gradually disappearing which is good. Therefore Mandy's development throughout the three parts of the movie is focused on a positive view into the future.

The Plot

V.Umlauf: I find it most interesting that the topic of the movie is not reflected in the plot. Rather trivial events form the plot, events which are important in the protagonists' lives like travelling, visiting each other, starting a new job in another country. The actual theme of the movie is reflected in situations which result from the trivial plot. One character for example says: "So what was life like in the GDR?" and the other says "It was like this and that." It's unusual and therefore thrilling, that the movie deals with the topic in such a direct way. It's not about metaphors or that something stands for something, it's about the things that are seen and heard.

M.Bliese: Normally when writing the screenplay the writer already thinks how to communicate certain things; where does the character come from and why Berlin. In "17 years later" it's just like that: The two protagonists meet, one says: "I'm in Berlin, before I was in Madrid. ", the other one says "I'm from the East, from Karl-Marx-Stadt." Just like that.

V.Umlauf: Exactly. The moment the characters in the movie talk about facts or what they think or where they come from you take a closer look. You start being interested in what you actually see.

M.Bliese: You don't search like a private investigator for hints in order to find out where they come from and where they are going to - it's obvious. You have time to concentrate on other things like: What does the house in the background look like?

V.Umlauf: That's exactly the point. You start getting interested in what the pictures tell you. You have the right to just look around and that's what you have to do because you aren't led to a certain plot. The cuts don't have a dramaturgic function in the sense of the plot. The movie just tells in quite a frank way what it's all about.

Screenplay

V.Umlauf: When you see the movie unprepared, because of the way it is made, you ask yourself how it is made or what effect will it have, if really everything was planned or mostly improvised or invented while acting. Nobody really thinks there is a proper screenplay.

H.Reichel: That's a very nice compliment when somebody feels that way. What we really wanted was that everything appears real and authentic. Nevertheless we had screenplays with complete dialogues, scenes etc.

V.Umlauf: You wrote the screenplay with a co-author.

H.Reichel: Yes, Eva Reinegger, from Karlsruhe - the West. Without her I wouldn't have been able to write the screenplays.

V.Umlauf: You wrote the screenplay for the people who would act?

H.Reichel: Yes, from the beginning I knew who will be acting.

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Trilogy

V.Umlauf: Was it planned from the beginning to have three parts?

H.Reichel: No. But already while shooting the first part we were thinking about it.

K.Morgeneyer: Yes, the idea was born while shooting the first bit. We were walking around in Berlin thinking that we need to continue - the two girls had to meet again in another city.

H.Reichel: Only with the second part it became clear that there will be a third part to finally have a movie of 90 minutes. The locations would be Chemnitz and Düsseldorf. We wrote the screenplays one after the other: After the first part we wrote the second, after the second the third.

V.Umlauf: In what timeframe did you make the movies?

H.Reichel: "The red Hour" in 2006, "A visit from the West" 2007 and "By the Rhine" in 2008.

The protagonists` identity-change

V.Umlauf: Was it a conceptual decision that Miriam from the West plays the woman from the East and Kathleen from Chemnitz the woman from the West?

K.Morgeneyer: Yes, it was a great idea! As if I would be looking at myself. If I had been the one from the East and Miriam the one from the West, then you would put exactly the stereotypical questions that are always in your head. This way we just put them the other way round.

V.Umlauf: The altered perspective is extremely important regarding the way the movie is made, how the story is told and what effect it has on the audience.

M.Bliese: It really helped us, especially because it was all about us being human beings. Due to the fact that we changed perspectives we wouldn't have to take care the whole time that we would reveal too much of ourselves.

H.Reichel: If we would have done it the "right" way round I would have felt like filming stereotypes all the time. This way I never had that feeling.

V.Umlauf: On a very plain level some sort of alienation effect is embedded which for the movie, which in fact deals with stereotypes, is extremely important. The fact that you dared to let the woman from the East propose the Pudzys-song "*Alt wie ein Baum*" only works because the woman from the East was intentionally casted with a woman from the West. This way she can say it in a way which I can deal with, not so clichéd. In any case I haven't heard it that way before. Another example is the part about the Nazi-story in a café in Chemnitz. The amusing effect results from the fact that it is told by someone who comes from East, acting as someone coming from the West. The stereotypes are told from another perspective generating a distance. Without the change of perspectives it would have been hard work to gain this distance.

The actresses meet

V.Umlauf: Kathleen, had you met Miriam before the shooting?

K.Morgeneyer: No, we met the first day of shooting for the first time. You can say we met in the movie.

M.Bliese: Even during the first scene, where I am still on my own I hadn't met Kathleen.

K.Morgeneyer: Exactly. Right in the first scene where we meet in the movie we met in real life.

M.Bliese: We both were quite skeptical.

K.Morgeneyer: Really? Were you? Why?

M.Bliese: Yes, you too, weren't you?

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K.Morgeneyer: No, I wasn't.

V.Umlauf: It actually would have been Kathleen's part to be sceptical as she being a professional actress had to work with an amateur.

K.Morgeneyer: No, during the shooting I actually didn't feel like an actress.

Shooting

V.Umlauf: Regarding that the movie has quite an open structure and the actresses appear so real; how did the shooting go?

H.Reichel: While shooting the first two parts we always pretended filming what happened that moment. We, for example, really spent the night in that youth hostel, just like Mandy and Katja.

M.Bliese: Yes, Kathleen really slept in the bed she chooses in the movie.

K.Morgeneyer: It was exactly like that: Shooting, end of shooting, brushing your teeth, going to sleep. I thought it was wonderful.

H.Reichel: You can use that consciously in order to have a nearly 100 percent covering of real life.

M.Bliese: Which is a bit frightening at the same time.

K.Morgeneyer: But I think that's good, depending on the movie. When making other kinds of movies, it's nice to go to some hotel after shooting. But in that sort of movie where there are no clear lines what is fiction and what is reality, I think it's important to live exactly the way that is represented in the movie. Especially during the part in Chemnitz the feeling was something very special as we all spend the whole time together – night and day. Life mixed with the shooting, for me there was no difference at all.

H.Reichel: That was only possible because of the low shooting ratio, which was consciously chosen meaning the movie time is real time. "The red hour" we started on a Friday and finished Sunday – just the time the two women spent in Berlin. We could never have done this by shooting lots of takes.

M.Bliese: We always filmed in chronological order.

V.Umlauf: I think that's an important quality of the movie. You sure get the feeling these people aren't real and they don't exist as they are presented in the movie. However, you recognise the people behind their characters, they put a lot of their real life into the character at the same time. The people are characterised by their names and circumstances, everything else depends on the actress. That's fascinating.

Rehearsal

V.Umlauf: Did you rehearse a lot?

K.Morgeneyer: No.

H.Reichel: I think we did. The music scene in "The red hour" f. ex. Other scenes on the other hand we just rehearsed very quickly like the forest scene at the end of "A visit from the West", other scenes we didn't rehearse at all. I just had the feeling nothing more needs to be done because it just works. However, the first rehearsal for the scene in the Neanderthal in the third part was perfect, afterwards we didn't manage to repeat that.

V.Umlauf: You always rehearsed with the camera?

H.Reichel: No. Always without camera. Only the last one before shooting with the camera.

K.Morgeneyer: When acting – if you want to call it that way – we altogether had a lot of freedom. Sometimes we didn't get the point 100 %, then Hendrik told us it had to be this or it had to be that way.

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A visit from the West

V.Umlauf: One of my favorite scenes is when Katja gives the book to Mandy and Mandy say it used to be her favorite book once. Some sort of disgruntlement is caused here and this mood is present in the whole second part. Mandy doesn't say: "That's a very good book." but "Thanks. It used to be my favorite book once." It's also very honest.

K.Morgeneyer: The whole part 2 is quite hard for Katja. She comes to visit Mandy and everything is just bad.

V.Umlauf: I must say as spectator I'm sort of undecided. I think Mandy is quite annoying; on the other hand Katja really is a bit too weepy.

M.Bliese: I find myself extremely dislikeable and constantly annoyed. Every time I see that part I'm surprised. Of course I was meant not to be a very nice person regarding the screenplay but I'm surprised how outrageous I am.

V.Umlauf: It seems that in the second part Mandy has got a problem which she doesn't want to talk about. Katja doesn't come to visit in the very best moment and it's Mandy's mood that characterizes the weekend. I find her aloofness very exciting. In the third part you get the feeling Mandy feels a lot better. Maybe it's because she's leaving the country. However, something has happened to her.

Shooting schedule

V.Umlauf: Did you have a shooting schedule for all three parts?

H.Reichel: No. That depended on the part. We didn't have a shooting schedule for "The red hour" as we didn't know before where we would do the filming. We just started walking and decided where to shoot.

V.Umlauf: You just waited what's going to happen?

H.Reichel: Yes, I wanted to try that out. I thought it could influence the pictures in a negative way, I feared authenticity might get lost. Now I think different. And because in "A visit from the West" as well as in "By the Rhine" the locations were defined before we had a shooting schedule.

Teamsize

V.Umlauf: How many people were in the team?

H.Reichel: Very small. Just the three of us: camera, sound and camera assistant. Plus the two actresses of course.

M.Bliese: The thing is that only five people fit in a car which was an important point. This way we were flexible and could just get out of the car when we caught eye on something that seemed interesting to us.

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