

*Berlin?* Is there a way to penetrate to the inner sanctum and share a revelatory vision or participate in some salvific *Daseinszweck* with Niko and his congregants? Absent such access, can we at least scope things out with a literary lens to bring some ideology into focus or illuminate a telling trope or discern some type of emplotment or manner of argumentation? Or can we simply employ a technical approach and poke the film with an analytical probe to stir up whatever tricks of camera and lighting and editing have been deployed?

*Leider*, with Niko and his progress, it seems that no approach, whether ecclesiastical or mystical or visual or verbal or otherwise, will provide us with any real interpretive traction or emotional glue. Not even a desperate *Sprung des Glaubens* will allow us to land on an answer when there is no question from which we can launch ourselves. There is no guiding metaphor to embrace us and no dramatic curve or big idea with which we can spar. The film eschews technical tricks and avant-garde jiggery-pokery, and neither is there any ambition to thrill us with illuminating illusions or privileged moments. So if there is merit in minimalism, then we should applaud this film, because it is nothing if not ruthlessly reductive.

Niko's progress through this enervating expanse of confessional crosstalk *is* the plot, and the anguished apathy issuing in the wake of such tangential encounters *is* the explanation. Despite the fleeting raids on lyricism, which are lovely, and the occasional snatches of infectious humor, there is no dramatic ascent, no bang to this story, not even an epistemic whimper. Accordingly, there is no dying fall that takes us down easy in any particularly cathartic direction. In lieu of all the foregoing, we can only continue trudging along with Niko.

Yet perhaps there is a point, albeit an inadvertent one. It is just possible that we are being shown something utterly unintended by the thirty-something *Regisseur/Drehbuchautor*. A blurb for the film called it a love letter to Berlin. A suicide note might be a more convincing construal, given a certain perspective. Perhaps what we are being shown is a European culture that is dying because it has abandoned its cult. The mood of the film is bereft of any sense of the possibility of a transcendent spiritual horizon. There is, rather, only a teleological vacuum, a lurking *Nichts* which snuffs out everything, including the lyricism and the humor and even the pleading sorrow in Niko's eyes.

Whether love letter or suicide note, what we *are* given in this film is one beautiful scene into which is crammed all the plot and argument and theme and ideology and theology we are going to get. The atmospheric of the bar interlude, wherein we hear the haunting soliloquy of the old man, are nearly perfect. The old man is the one character in the story who gets it done. He speaks of things that are gone and of things that remain and says his goodbye, and then he dies.

The next morning we end up with Niko in a clean, well-lighted diner. Niko and his fellow communicants are always heading for this place. It is where they go to avoid themselves and avert their eyes from that lurking *Nichts*. But Niko does finally get the good cup of coffee he has been seeking all day and all night. He sips and gazes at his dearly beloved and entirely mortal Berlin as a train slides past, heading for the dawn of nothing.

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

### *Friday Film Fest Series*



## A Coffee in Berlin

By Jan-Ole Gerster

March 19, 2017

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

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## A Coffee in Berlin (2012)

**Director:** Jan-Ole Gerster

**Producer:** Jorg Himstedt, Marcos Kantis

**Screenplay:** Jan-Ole Gerster

**Cinematography:** Philipp Kirsamer

**Music:** Cherilyn MacNeil; The Major Minors

**Release Date:** November 2012

**Spieldauer:** 83 minutes

**Cast:** Tom Schilling (Niko Fischer); Marc Hosemann (Matze); Friederike Kempfer (Julika Hoffmann); Justus von Dohnanyi (Karl Speckenbach); Katherina Schuttler (Elli); Arnd Klawitter (Phillip Rauch); Martin Brambach (Jorg); Steffen Jurgens (Ralf); Michael Gwisdek (Friedrich);

**Commentary:** A. Krumm

### *A Clean Well Lighted Place...*

When we encounter Niko Fischer early one morning, we find him already untethered and adrift, quietly attempting to abscond from his girlfriend. His soon-to-be *ehemalige Freundin* knows he is untethered and adrift and suggests they have a chat. She tries to toss him an emotional lifeline, but he does not grab it. He seems to be signaling to her that (to quote a Fassbinder character from a previous generation) "it is a bad time for emotions".

The scene shifts to the cityscape that we will see again at the end of our sojourn with Niko, a tableau of urban geometry exuding a crowded emptiness and featuring a soulless soundtrack of indifferent *Innenstadt* din. The only thing demanding our attention is the clamor of an emergency vehicle. And again, the scene shifts, and Niko is climbing the stairs to his new apartment, accompanied by the lonely muffled echo of his own footsteps. Thus, the disaffected tenor of the story envelops us as we begin to tag along with our chronically disenchanting and exponentially anomic protagonist.

Niko is drifting, but, as we find out a bit later, he has been thinking a lot. For a good two years, in fact, ever since he dropped out of law school. We arrive just in time to accompany him as he recapitulates his own 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Leopold Bloom's Dublin peregrinations, with Nikko traversing one day in the life of Berlin. But Niko is no Leopold Bloom, and neither is he Camus's Meursault. The best we can do is to claim that perhaps there is a good bit of Beckett's *Molloy* in him. Maybe his intention is to find a way to "speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying".

Indeed, Niko does somehow defy categorization. We cannot really locate him at a given coordinate like Dante located his man in the middle of the journey of his life. Niko seems to be stuck in neutral, impaled on the cutting edge of here and now, and his gaze suggests that there is no going back and no going forward either. Neither continuity nor change is in the ascendant. Perhaps Niko summarizes himself best, noting at one point that he is not a finished product ("kein Fertiger").

But Niko's detachment does at least allow him to see things from a very particu-



lar, yet thoroughly dispassionate, perspective. We could call him a weatherman of sorts, keeping an eye on the prevailing climate of Berlin, noting how the current denizens cope with conditions. During our *Bummel* with Niko, we encounter an ensemble of characters who are ostensible parishioners of *The Church of What's Happening Now* in Berlin. Actually, there are two sects within this congregation.

The first sect, essentially Beckettian, does not seem to think there is much left in life, yet none of the members seem to have the courage to face the consequences and say goodbye and finish dying. The core tenet of their communion is a noncommittal nihilism. This group includes, among others, the punctilious salaried shrink overburdened by a raging *Minderwertigkeitskomplex*; the cynically effusive *Lohnsklav*in barista who can at least gin up some emotion when it comes to bums, and the hysterical husband faithfully pursuing his life of quiet desperation.

Other congregants of this sect include the former fat girl and classmate who apparently believes in redemption through retroactively therapeutic *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*; the drifting bohemian actor friend who has squandered the great promise of his youth; a pair of extremely *verklemmte und verdrängte U-Bahn-Gestapo*; and the self absorbed auteur/choreographer artiste, who has no time for mainstream *Scheiße*, nor for anyone who cannot ascend to and engage with his level of *Kunst*. His heated exchange with the gifted Bohemian is the one belly laugh-inducing sequence in the film.

The second sect encompasses parishioners who embrace a more ecumenical theology. The core tenet of their shared faith is a consensual carpe diem stoicism. They have a bit more courage and are willing to take life for what it is as it comes. Most of them would likely be willing to go to the beach with Meursault. Niko's ex-girlfriend, for instance, does know how to say goodbye, in contrast to Niko's slinking retreat. Niko's blunt and pragmatic father reincarnates all the virtues of the *Wirtschaftswunder* and only wants Niko to *sei ein Mann*. After Niko's bracing chat with his father, we are treated to a lyrical piano piece that lets us know that Niko has not succumbed to his father's proselytizing.

There is also the sweetly befuddled Oma who seems confused about what is left, but is in no hurry to depart. She sensibly prizes eating when you are hungry and having a comfortable chair to sit in. Then, there is the professional actor who charmingly still believes in Art. And there is, sui generis, the grizzled old man who is a ghost from the past.

To be sure, the score of this movie, with its cheeky, peppy jazz competing with the melancholic instrumental commentary, is often enchanting and a couple of the pieces (*Look At the Mess I've Made* and *Mo(u)rning*) threaten to take on lyrical lives of their own. The black and white photography compellingly captures the close loneliness of urban space and never lets us linger too long in any one moment while these parishioners pour out their existential hearts to Niko, who, like Garbo, would rather be left alone. He seems to provoke a need for people to confess to him, to bare their souls, and all this psychological nudity makes him thoroughly uncomfortable.

But can we hope to gain membership in this *Church of What's Happening Now In*