

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Vier Minuten

(“4 minutes”)

By Chris Kraus

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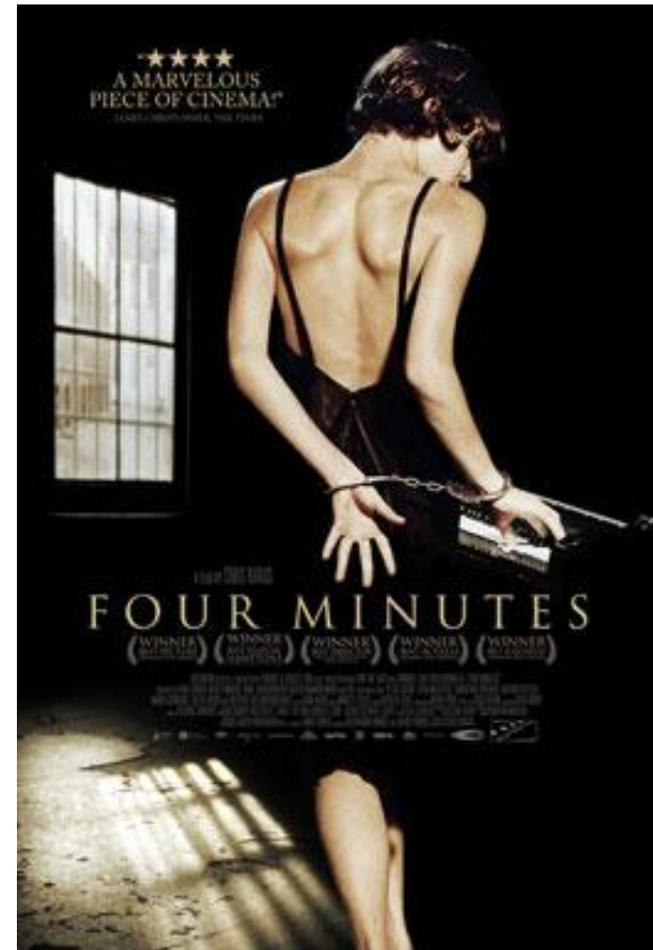
Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

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Vier Minuten

Director: Chris Kraus

Producer: Alexandra Kordes

Drehbuch: Chris Kraus

Cast: Monica Bleibtreu (Gertrud 'Traude' Kruger); Hannah Herzsprung (Jenny von Loeben); Sven Pippig (Mutze); Richy Muller (Kowalski); Jasmin Tabatabai (Ayse); Stefan Kurt (Direktor Meyerbeer); Vadim Glowna (Gerhard von Loeben); Nadia Uhl (Nadine Hoffmann)

Cinematography: Judith Kaufmann

Music: Annette Focks

Spieldauer: 110 minutes

Commentary by A. Krumm

Hopelessly hoping ...



What we are given in this story seems straightforward enough. A young woman in prison for a horrendous crime comes under the tutelage of an aging master piano teacher. Both were *Wunderkinds*, both have pasts and secrets from which each suffers enduring agony. Yet there are intimations that deep within neither seems quite ready to give up or give in. So we have reason to hope that in the end, there will be hope.

Vier Minuten makes a fair bid to be a remarkable film, but the hard glint on its surface makes it painful to watch. Beneath the surface the hardness only grows, and you struggle to delve sympathetically into the story. Everything is overloaded with this unrelenting harshness. But like it or not, the film certainly does drench you in a distinctive sensibility, a *Zeitgeschmack* seeking promotion to *Zeitgeist*. For what it's worth this sensibility lends the movie the virtue of offering up a specimen for dissection.

Chris Kraus's work defies straightforward *genrefication*. Most German films since reunification can be fairly easily categorized: there are the *zeitgeschichte* films, where a new generation of directors has explored Germany's recent history (*Der Untergang*, *Das Leben der Anderen*); another species might be termed *neo-Heimat*, where directors have sought to re-invoke that traditional exploration of the local and particular in contemporary ways.

In addition, there is diaspora cinema, exemplified by Fatih Atkin's works, which explores the immigrant/minority experience in Germany. And then there is the largest category: the broad spectrum of films which have utterly submitted to the commercial ethos of Hollywood, being transnational and pop-culture oriented (*Lola Rennt*, *Kein Ohr Hasen*, *Männer*, *Der bewegte Mann*, *Bella Martha*, etc).

The rationale for this last category is as follows: If the cold war is over, and history is over, well then we live and move in a *Spaßgesellschaft*; there is nothing more to argue about, so let's have fun. Ironically, many such films failed commercially outside of Germany because, although there really wasn't much indigenous about them anymore, they still seemed too "German." *Hollywoodisierung* is not necessarily a linear, guaranteed process.

Vier Minuten will never be accused of letting anyone have fun, nor is it overly "German". And it doesn't seem to fall into any of the other aforementioned categories either. But if there is a genre for despairing existentialism proclaiming the hope of redemption through art, then *Vier Minuten* would be in contention for an Oscar. Within this context, Kraus gives us a cast of devout Sartreans – the leading characters seem to share a conviction that hell is other people. There is a sign visible to both those on the inside

and those on the outside of the foreboding *Frauengefängnis* which reads "No Exit!"

There is also little reason to keep going, but Kraus's characters soldier on, ricocheting back and forth within this enervating framework, assaulting us with a jumbo variety pack of human nastiness. Sustaining this dark mood with such relentless consistency is no small accomplishment and lends the story a sort of negatively beautiful cohesion. But just because of this it lacks narrative traction and makes it difficult for us to find any spot where we can hang our sympathy. Through much of the story, one feels like a non-consensual viewing victim, strafed by scene after harsh and hopeless sequence.

The algorithm which derives from the existential premises in play is fairly straightforward: the here and now is all there is; society makes us what we are, social conditions are often bad, therefore life is often terrible, ergo there is no meaning except the meaning we create (and by the way we usually fail at that). Wrapped around these uplifting conclusions is the unspoken but unshakeable conviction that it is escapist or even delusional to ever consider turning to religion to find meaning. If *Heimat* films were condemned for screening nostalgia and promoting kitsch as culture and if the films of the New German Cinema were controversial because they fixated on polarizing ideological themes, the most specific charge that can be leveled at films of *Vier Minuten's* ilk is that they tend toward unwitting dogmatism and are reductionist by nature.

Since in the beginning one was hoping there might be hope, the question gets begged as to what might be the fruit of the potential redemption being proclaimed? Is it that Jenny's gift will pull her back to the precincts of human decency, that the beauty of art can make her whole? Or is it that her gift can touch others and turn all those noxious Sartreans into nice neighbors? Or is this a parable about a master / disciple relationship that can save both the master and the disciple from the resident demons left over from their past lives. Choose your sermonette. Amidst the rampant morbidity it is hard to tell exactly what cathartic endpoint is intended.

There are individual scenes where Kraus stumbles on to something compelling in spite of the surfeit of ugliness, where the visual converses with us seemingly independent of the script, as in the opening scene where the wedge of geese passes over the wire-wreathed walls of the prison, or in the scenes where Monica Bleibtreu as Frau Krüger shuffles about with infinite weariness, enveloped in her old woman's cocoon. We can see the present and the past jostle for ascendancy in her soul.

Hannah Herzsprung calibrates Jenny to the limit of detection and sends her barreling straight through the lens at us; simmering with enraged apathy, greeting the world with leering sneering despair, creating unbearable tension with her terrifying unpredictability. Sven Pippig's Sad Sack rendition of Mütze is captivating and potentially hilarious; he needs to be unleashed to function as a sort of Falstaff. Instead, Kraus portrays him as a wannabe disciple rendered peevisly impotent by his utterly unrequited devotion to Frau Krüger.

Oddly, the potential for some great humor is spread throughout the film. Some of the scenes actually are funny, or could be, but the humor is stillborn since you are so wrung out from the surrounding emotional barrenness. Even the ever-present piano, a sort of *über* Hitchcockian MacGuffin if not the objective correlative of the Art to which Frau Krüger has dedicated her life, is not enough to rescue the story from sinking into its own black hole of hopelessness.

Done in by that hopelessness, *Vier Minuten* never delivers any redemptive resolution, whether expected or implied. But maybe that is Herr Kraus's intent, since we are all apparently supposed to be despairing existentialists now. There is a nice touch at the end, when Frau Krüger throws a drink back, and then another and another, as Jenny indulges in her frenzy of *Un-Music*. That an audience would applaud after listening to such a cacophony is unbelievable. That a music teacher would need a stiff drink is.