

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Winterschläfer

Credits:

Director: Tom Tykwer

Producer: Stefan Arndt

Screenplay: Tom Tykwer and Anne-Francois Pyszora

Camera: Frank Griebe

Music: Arvo Pärt (Fratres), Sussan Deihim & Richard Horowitz, Tom Tykwer

Cast: Heino Ferch (Marco), Floriane Daniel (Rebecca), Ulrich Matthes (Rene), Marie-Lou Sellem (Laura), Josef Bierbichler (Theo)

Based on the novel *Expense of the Spirit* by Anne-Francois Pyszora

Precis – Brian Conboy

As the title (translated to hibernators) suggests something is lying dormant in the souls of the film's characters and is struggling to get out. And indeed we are given numerous metaphors of the idea in the form of sleeping and waking characters. The story takes place in wintertime in a picturesque town in the Bavarian Mountains and the ubiquitous snow and majestic mountains are vital components of the film's mood and concept. The narrative structure takes the form of a triptych: three different but constantly interweaving plots all with their own special quality and meaning. Two of the stories are embodied in the tempestuous romantic relationships of two young couples.

The blond and stunning **Rebecca** and hunky ski instructor **Marco** are constantly quarreling, often over Marco's petty jealousies, and their overt sexuality, symbolized by Rebecca's ever present red robes and dresses, is ultimately seen as a destructive force. The dark and mysterious **Laura**, Rebecca's friend and roommate and a nurse in the local hospital, meets the quiet and reserved **Rene**, a projectionist in the local movie theater. Their relationship is characterized by cautious and considerate exploration, honesty, tenderness and ultimately love. Add to this romantic mix a tragic auto accident on a snowy mountain road that Rene has with **Theo**, a local farmer. Theo's young daughter is gravely injured in the accident and subsequently lies in a coma in the local hospital, attended to by, of course, Laura. In a fascinating twist Rene does not remember the accident because, due to brain damage suffered in an army training accident, he lacks short-term memory or the ability to form new memories. Lest he should forget everything that happens to him he is constantly taking and collecting photographs to compensate for his impairment.

Tykwer, ever the conceptualist, explores profound philosophical problems in *Winterschläfer*, although they are addressed more overtly in *Lola rennt*. Specifically, why

do things happen as they do and why is it so important to know, are the issues explored. Certainly to the befuddled, enraged and anguished Theo, perplexed and obsessed with finding out how and why the accident happened, it's important to know. In Tykwer's world of absurdity the *chance* phone call from Theo's playful children while driving and the subsequent momentary distraction might form the reason for the accident. In Tykwer's own words "*I wanted a film where everything that appears develops randomly and insignificantly and, little by little, the necessity of events conditions the characters that were hitherto standing on unknown ground.*" And certainly to Rene the problem of how do we know things and literally how to know are a daily struggle. His predicament shows us how fragile and meaningless all of existence would be without the basic elements of memory and knowledge.

Tykwer's style, perhaps more so in *Lola rennt*, leaps off the screen and dazzles us with its sophistication and cinematic eloquence. Moving camera shots often seem as though taken from an F-16, other shots are taken from impossible angles, shots and scenes are sometimes juxtaposed with jarring contrast coupled with conceptual perfection and timing and pacing are amazingly dynamic. Far subtler but no less exceptional is Tykwer's ability to draw real and living characters. Dramatic impact, modesty and inventiveness of characterization and dialogue are uniquely combined to form a high level of realism and credibility. A common criticism of Tykwer's films is their frequent tendency toward obvious contrivance of narrative choices. Although this is a valid criticism, it is fraught with complication since the contrivances are often central to the plot and/or interwoven with his ideas and philosophical explorations.

The three triptych stories, so cleverly and incessantly interwoven, each symbolize some essential aspect life. Theo's misfortunate tale is life is a state of turmoil and confusion due to his lack of knowledge concerning his daughter's tragedy. Rebecca and Marco's relationship represents life in an anguished struggle for meaning hindered by bitter obstacles and their own foolishness. And Laura and Rene's relationship, so uniquely indicated in the

last, and quite jarring metaphor of rebirth through death, is the renewal and confirmation of life and the characters' quest for meaning through the other: dare we say through love. They only have shaken off the sleepy bonds of hibernation and have awoken.

Director:

Tykwer is considered one of the preeminent young directors in Germany. Among his many novel approaches to film is a penchant for experimenting with our perceptions of time. Tykwer is noted for his use of a wide variety of techniques in filmmaking, such as slow motion, flashbacks in black and white which alternate with the main narrative in color, mixing animation sequences into live action, and including 35 mm and video in the same film. He refers to such techniques as "visual decisions." Tykwer has emphasized that whatever the technique, he always wants the audience to be very clear about the story being told.

In the relatively few films he has made, Tykwer has demonstrated a willingness to experiment with the possibilities of telling a story on the screen. But his main goal is as he says, about people, about how to understand them, and perhaps grow fond of them. ("*Ich mag es, wenn die Aufgabe des Films darin besteht, die Menschen zu verstehen, ihnen zu folgen, sie ins Herz zu schließen.*")