

64th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

Age of Cannibals and *Amma and Appa*: Two sides of globalisation

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This is the fifth of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 6-16, 2014. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 February 24, Part 3 February 26 and Part 4 February 28.

One of the best German films at this year's festival was *Age of Cannibals*, directed by Johannes Naber (*The Albanian*, 2010), an accomplished, grotesque work about profiteers in contemporary globally integrated capitalism.

The globe, in fact, is nothing but a lucrative playground for corporate raiders Frank Öllers (Devid Striesow) and Kai Niederländer (Sebastian Blomberg), an arena in which they recklessly plunge firms and entire regions into bankruptcy.

To secure the maximum profit for their clients, the pair of consultants quickly shift hundreds of millions of dollars from India to Pakistan. The swindled Indian businessman is speechless. He can't understand why the company is deserting hard-working Indians in favour of Pakistani Muslims, who are "inferior people".

The sleazy South African businessman, who shows the pair a photo of his father and happy employees, bores the duo. When the businessman storms out in a rage, his female associate stays behind and begs the pair to take her with them. She is highly educated, can speak four languages and wants to go to Germany. She begins to take off her blouse to demonstrate her other assets.

All the various conversations and exchanges take place in an air-conditioned hotel room in Lagos, Nigeria. Outside, the air is thick with smog. From the hotel window the city is a collection of grey cuboids.

From time to time, shots, screams and explosions can be heard. What is going on? The consultants are not concerned.

"Perhaps one of those girls in headscarves has failed her womanhood test and now there is a gang rape or a stoning". Öllers in particular is an insufferable cynic. Neither of them has the least interest in their surroundings. Which country are we in now? It doesn't matter. Bianca (Katharina Schüttler), the new recruit, who is supposed to spy on the pair for the company, is ridiculed for suggesting in all seriousness that they go on a tour of the city.

Bianca displays a certain moral impulse, left over from a time when she worked for an NGO. She then decided she could do more for the environment working for a private company. The other two think alike. They all agree that before a new world can be built, the old one must be destroyed. Threatened with the sack (the company was sold off behind their back by its new American owner), the trio are plunged into misery, drinking and despairing at life's missed opportunities.

Bianca and Öllers reminisce about the good old days of their youth when they were both members of the Green Party. What wonderful times they had building small tunnels under the roads to help toads avoid the traffic. Öllers notes he is still a card-carrying member of the Greens.

The actors clearly had a lot of fun satirising the moral affectations of this group. Katharina Schüttler strikes the right melodramatic, feminist note when she gives Öllers a talking to for engaging in paid sex in the hotel. At the same time, the film makes clear, the career-obsessed Bianca is just as anti-social as her male

colleagues. The milieu of Germany's Social Democrats and Greens has encouraged a special kind of cynicism amongst layers who have climbed the social ladder fast and, in the name of "humanity" or "humanitarian intervention", leave only scorched earth behind. Öllers is theatrically indignant about the practice of female circumcision, and proclaims: "This type of world must be destroyed!"

In this regard, the film hits the nail on the head. This is the language of modern-day colonialism, which reserves the right to destroy everything in its path so as to preserve "civilised" values, i.e., the privileges and wealth of parasites such as Öllers and Niederländer.

Amma and Appa

Some films stress the differences between various cultures to make the viewer aware of the unique beauty of each. Munich-based film student Franziska Schönenberger pursues another approach in her documentary film *Amma and Appa*. She looks for similarities.

In Munich, the young director got to know and fell in love with Tamil art student Jayakrishnan Subramanian. After they decide to marry there remain two hurdles: their parents. Franziska takes the camera along. Her parents are quickly won over to the proposed marriage, while Jay's parents remain firmly opposed.

A marriage based solely on love breaches their traditions. In Jay's home district, the parents look for a bride only within their own caste and not among foreigners. Franziska visits Jay's parents, Amma and Appa, in southern India. They welcome her respectfully, seem to like her, but still reject her. Franziska's parents come along on a second visit.

A discussion takes place between the couples on the subject of arranged marriages versus those based on love. The Bavarian couple can certainly appreciate the Indian couple's arguments. Both mother and father were previously married, only for their respective marriages not to work out. Parents should save their children such pain, argue Jay's parents.

A strong argument for arranged marriage, explain his parents, is the expensive dowry for the bride. New

households include televisions, washing machines and cars. Then possibly divorce, a new wedding and a new dowry? And with several daughters? The well-being of the parents in old age is also dependent on the stability of the marriage. Amma and Appa wish to find a bride for their son close by, so that Jay can look after his parents later on. It is evident that arranged marriages will continue as long as economic pressures endure.

We witness a traditional, Indian wedding. The bride appears tense, visibly determined not to make a false move. Does she accept the tradition as entirely natural? It is hardly likely. We also learn that Amma, Jay's mother, delayed her own wedding as long as possible. When she finally followed the traditional path, her husband forbade her from working as a teacher. One suspects that it is not least her own unfulfilled dreams that enable her to consent to a marriage breaking all the rules.

Schönenberger's direct and compelling film makes clear, sometimes in a very amusing manner, that under modern conditions, views on life, desires and dreams, differing cultures are moving closer to one another. There are no cultural circles entirely cut off from one another. The Indian pop music, which accompanies the film, sings of the desire for true love—one of the songs deals with love between a native Indian and a German.

To be continued



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