

# Evil Germans? Rightwing Violence in Light of Recent German Films

by Kraft Wetzel



*The essay from which this text is excerpted was written by Kraft Wetzel and published in Film und Fernsehen (3/1994) with the following introductory note from the journal's editors:*

*The following piece was written to accompany a Goethe-Institut film package. The responsible parties at the Goethe-Institut could not decide whether to publish this text, however; it was also rejected by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Die Zeit. We are pleased to print this because, for us, it is essential to the public discourse about our films and our society.*

In her first feature film, East Berliner Helke Misselwitz would like to hold her creatures to her heart—even the violent youths who at the end burn down a diner, the workplace of a dark-skinned outsider.

At first Soljanka and his two friends are portrayed as three youths who are in the same boat as most of the other people in Herzsprung, a village in the Prignitz area of Brandenburg, after the collapse of the GDR. The agriculture business keeps laying off more people, and there are no other jobs.

The three youths are superfluous, don't know what to do with themselves, drive around in a decommissioned jeep. Soljanka would like to flirt with his former schoolmate, Johanna, who has lost not only her job, but also her husband; he was laid off from his job at a dairy farm because the milk was no longer marketable, started gambling and drinking, then shot all the cows and finally himself. Instead, beautiful Johanna falls in love with a "Negro"—a dark-skinned outsider with a golden earring and an accordion, on which he plays wistful songs. He comes to the village to find her—and also immediately finds work at a new fast-food diner on the highway, which the owner quickly christens "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

But the graffiti "Out with Foreigners—Off to the Camps!" is already scrawled on the Sachsenhausen commemorative plaque on the day the stranger arrives on the bus. A while later, the three youths have their heads shaved in the salon where Johanna is meanwhile working. Johanna wants to know why they spray-painted that phrase. "To make a point," Soljanka asserts self-importantly: foreigners are taking jobs from us. The director has him play it in such a way that it is clear that these are sayings he picked up somewhere and hopes will someday make him somebody whom people are compelled to take seriously. After getting their heads shaved, the guys horse around in front of their vehicle and stage a martial arts fight from a kung-fu movie; in these poses too, Helke Misselwitz constantly brings to the forefront the difference between games and life, between stray emotions and their social forms.

The youths' compulsion to act creates its object: the "Negro." Soljanka sees Johanna in love, dancing with him in the disco: "Tomorrow I'm painting myself black!" he jokes as an aside; but he knows he has no chance with her. So he converts his narcissistic resentment into an attack. While buying cans of soda at "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (and ostentatiously refusing to be served by the "Negro"), his friend dangles a black doll with a noose around its neck outside the window. And in the morning, "Nigger-Lover Whore" is written on the window of the hair salon. The woman who delivers the mail advises Johanna to be "a bit more cautious" and tells her that she was refused a job she applied for because of her "reputation."

Herzsprung – A DVD Release by the DEFA Film Library

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The conflict culminates on New Year's Eve. Johanna slips on her mother's wedding dress, gets made up. Her father warns, "He'll leave you," but she already knows that he's a rover and does not like staying put. "You'll console me when the time comes," she replies and goes to her new love. She is as unsurprised as we are when she finds him flirting with the waitress at the diner. "My body belongs to me, but you have my heart," he explains, and puts his dark hand on her breast—a gesture that should represent intimacy, but primarily establishes distance.

He takes the trash out to the dumpster and meanwhile she dances, entranced, to the music from the cassette player: emotion-laden rock ballads by the group *Poems for Laila* that cause Johanna to lose herself in graceful, sweeping movements. Meanwhile, Soljanka and his cronies attack the stranger, gag and bind him to a tree, and set the diner on fire. The blaze is already raging when Johanna comes staggering out, and runs into the knife that was meant for her boyfriend. She collapses before the young men: glowing virginal whiteness of new snow in the darkness of night. The shock runs through all three—they hadn't meant for things to go so far. "She's dead! I didn't want that!" Soljanka screams in horror. They flee the scene as the camera pans to the diner, burning to the ground, and further to the highway which continues to race by, untouched: The End.

So Misselwitz did not make it easy on herself, avoided the usual clichés of "rightwing violence." What criminal statistics would refer to unambiguously as a "xenophobic assault," she dissolves into its heterogeneous biographical and affective elements. And she was careful to avoid melodramatic excesses—rejects making Johanna and the stranger into a perfect couple, that would be happy if only the evil environment would let them be. Ever-present in her portrayal of these youths is that these are still just children, who "throw stones for fun" (Erich Fried). But most of all she understands them as children who want to be loved—like all the other figures in her film. And thus the film remains a "love story," even in its portrayal of three "rightwing criminals."

Translated by Timothy A. Dail, DEFA Film Library

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