

Truthful, if not yet the whole truth – the NSU trilogy

Wolfgang Kaleck, 18 April 2016

Last weekend I decided I would watch it after all, the ARD film trilogy “*Mitten in Deutschland: NSU*”. In the end I was impressed to find something like this on public broadcasting. Each of the three films sheds light on important issues, not only in connection with the National Socialist Underground (NSU) group, but also on a broader understanding of the reality in Germany and Europe today: unconcealed xenophobia at every turn, political parties based almost exclusively on racism and hundreds of attacks on refugee accommodation in the past few months alone.

The trilogy begins with Christian Schwochow’s “*Heute ist nicht alle Tage*”, a look back at the emerging neo-Nazi scene in the 90’s in Thüringen. The protagonists are Beate Zschäpe, Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt. The film shows above all how the cultural hegemony of the Nazis developed, even in a relatively big city like Jena. Anyone who witnessed these events in East Germany – as I did while working as a lawyer for several victims of Nazi attacks – knows that Jena was no different from Pirna, Magdeburg or parts of Rostock or Dresden. They also know that it wasn’t just the violent skinheads or radical rightwing organizations creating this social climate. A significant role was played by the clueless and powerless teachers and social workers who sympathized with them and the police, parents and neighbors who indulged them, the ignorant police authorities, the legal system and the rest of the Republic that had grown overly comfortable. One seemingly absurd aspect is that some of the extras hired by the director were people who were actually among the first to take to the streets against the Neo-Nazis – the Antifa. In the film these committed anti-fascists are seen with shaved heads, dancing and shouting along to Neonazi music. Odd. What’s impressive is that director Schwochow includes almost no scenes of explicit violence and still clearly sets the scene for the events. In the opening scene he watches Nuremberg flower seller Enver Simsek setting up his wares at his stand, but interrupts the events and doesn’t show Simsek’s killing until the last scenes.

Züli Aladag’s “*Vergesst mich nicht*” is a film that gets under your skin. Following the story of the Simsek family, he shows – in a good example of the one-sided and flawed police investigations – how the Nuremberg police first suspected and hounded the family and then turned to allegations about drug smuggling and “Turkish gangs” extorting money. A classic case of secondary victimization (the victims are subjected to twofold pain and injustice). And not only that: as the director himself so aptly puts it, these scenes are upsetting for many people – not out of pity but because they see themselves and their families reflected in them. It’s clear that this episode is about more than just the fate of the Simsek family: Aladag lays bare the discrimination experienced every day by people who don’t come from families with long German heritage. In a powerful scene he reminds us of the big funeral march following the murder of Halit Yozgat on the 6th of May in Kassel, six years before the NSU was uncovered. Nearly 4,000 people, most of them with a migrant background, marched under the slogan “No Tenth Victim”. At the time there was little interest from mainstream society or even from journalists or antifascist groups.

In “*Nur für den Dienstgebrauch*” Florian Cossen focuses on the conflict between the Thüringen police, portrayed in the film as the ones uncovering the story, and the *Verfassungsschutz* authorities, domestic intelligence agents responsible for protecting the constitution and who, in the film, are mainly concerned with covering up the role of their informers, and thus their own role, in the NSU murders. This has a whiff of oversimplification and conspiracy theory. One sequence – showing a surreal-seeming party at the government agency followed by a scene depicting the simultaneous brutal murder of a black man, in which the agency’s informers were involved – sticks in the mind and is damn close to reality. It might anger some viewers that the secret service is accused of an as-yet unproven murder of an informant. But I think it’s important that Cossen openly addressed something that should really be the subject of serious public debate: this secret service is at best useless and at worse dangerous, and should therefore be abolished.

Anyone looking to know more about the facts should watch Stefan Aust and Dirk Laab’s highly informative documentary “*Der NSU-Komplex*” and not just sit around splitting hairs like some film critics have done. The trilogy’s three directors have since taken part in an interesting debate in *Die Zeit*. Cossen explains why filmmaking makes sense even as criminal proceedings are ongoing and many questions remain open. It’s not just about using a story to stir emotions. He says that after so much research it’s important to take a step back, to stop yourself from getting lost in details and endless lists of facts. He asks: “isn’t it fascinating that even without knowing the whole truth, a film can capture something that is truthful in essence?”

Yes, it is.