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Friday April 1st, 2016, 7.30pm

## West

(Germany 2013. Cert 15)

dir: Christian Schwochow

starring: Jördis Triebel, Jacky Ido

sponsors: Paul and Helen Hancocks

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It's often been remarked that, when it came to setting up an all-seeing surveillance society, the Germans proved far more efficient at it than the Russians. In East Germany, the Stasi left the KGB standing: it's been estimated that 12 - 15 percent of the population may have been Stasi informants. We've seen this chillingly paranoid state depicted in films such as *The Lives of Others* (2006). What's been rather less frequently noted, on film or anywhere else, is how over the 44 years that Germany was split down the middle, the persuasive paranoia on the east of the divide created its mirror image on the western side, poisoning both societies. It's this malign symbiosis that Christian Schwochow's film vividly conjours up.

Based on Julia Frank's 2005 novel *Lagerfeuer* (literally, *Campfire*), and scripted by Schwochow's mother Heidi, *West* repeatedly play up the parallels between the two regimes, supposedly so different. When Nelly Senff (Jördis Triebel) quits the GDR with her young son Alexei, the border guards force her to submit to a humiliating strip search before they'll allow her through to West Berlin. And there, in order to be accepted for citizenship, she has to strip again, more than once. "Hmm, no creepy crawlies", comments the woman doctor examining her, as if anyone coming from the East can be assumed to have them. And when, after days of interrogation by a West German official and his CIA colleague, Nelly is asked for the umpteenth time why she wanted to leave East Germany, she snaps "Because of questions like these."

Given the squalid refugee camp where Nelly and Alexei are obliged to live, with its hostile glances, unappetising food and nights constantly disturbed by drunken shouting from along the corridor, it's not surprising that Alexei complains, "I want to go back home." Some do just that, leaving the supposed consumer paradise to head back behind the Iron Curtain: towards the end of the film, Krystyna the young Polish woman who befriends Nelly in the camp, boards a coach with her senile father to return to Poland. More damaging than the camp conditions, though, are the suspicions that are sown in Nelly's mind. Repeatedly she asserts that she left the GDR because she "wanted to forget", but that's the last thing she's allowed to do. John Bird (Jacky Ido) the CIA agent who interrogates her and eventually beds her, persistently reminds her about Vassily, her supposedly dead Russian lover who was a high-powered physicist, speculating that his death may have been faked, and warning that Stasi agents may be keeping an eye on her on Vassily's account.

These insidious ideas poison Nelly's relationship with Hans (Alexander Scheer), the reclusive camp inmate who's evidently drawn to her and Alexei, and by extension they also damage her



relationship with her son, since he has taken to Hans - he even gives him the fluffy white sweater that is his sole memento of Vassily, his dad. When Hans is brutally beaten up by other East German refugees, it's as though Nelly's suspicions have infected the entire camp, and Alexei's grief-stricken comment as they survey Hans's battered body ("This is how I imagined Dad in his coffin") only compounds her sense of guilt.

The final scene hints at the possibility of reconciliation. It's a strength of the film, though, that Schwochow avoids easy closure and ready answers. Vassily may still be alive somewhere. Hans may really be a Stasi agent - we, along with Nelly, are left guessing. Uncertainty and insecurity are built into both side of the Curtain. There's a major autobiographical element to *West*: both

**Synopsis:** East Berlin, 1978. Nelly Senff, a chemist in her early 30s, gains permission to leave the GDR for the west with her 9-year old son Alexei, Alexei's father Vassily, a Russian physicist, reportedly died three years earlier in a car accident in Moscow. The GDR border guards humiliate Nelly by strip searching her, but let her and Alexei leave.

Nelly finds lodgings in a refugee centre in West Berlin, and makes friends with her Polish neighbour Krystyna. Unable to get a job until she is accepted as a West German citizen, Nelly is subjected to medical examinations, followed by days of interrogation by secret service agent Fleischmann and his CIA counterpart John Bird. Bird suggests that Vassily's death may have been faked by the Soviets. At the refugee centre, a fellow East German, Hans Pischke, befriends Alexei. Bird meets Nelly in a cafe: they go to a hotel and have sex. Bird hints that Vassily may have been working for the west and is now in hiding: he wants Nelly to beware of Stasi agents. She starts to suspect Hans and tells Alexei to keep away from him, but when street kids break Alexei's glasses he goes to Hans for help. Hans tells Nelly that he was jailed by the Stasi for two years, but she still mistrusts him. Rumours about Hans circulate in the centre and he's badly beaten up by some of the other East German refugees. Nelly and Alexei take him to hospital. Nelly realises that her suspicions may be unfounded. She gets a job and she and Alexei move into a flat. On Christmas Day, Hans comes to the flat and Alexei lets him in.

### Credits

<b>Nelly</b>	Jördis Triebel	<b>Director</b>	Christian Schwochow
<b>Alexei</b>	Tristan Göbel	<b>Screenplay</b>	Heidi Schwochow
<b>John Bird</b>	Jacky Ido	<b>DoP</b>	Frank Lamm
<b>Krystyna</b>	Anya Antonowicz	<b>Editor</b>	Jens Klüber
<b>Krystyna's dad</b>	Ryszard Ronczewski	<b>Music</b>	Lorenz Dangel
<b>Gerd Becker</b>	Andreas Nickl		
<b>Jelena</b>	Polina Veskresenskaya		
<b>Hans</b>	Alexander Scheer		
<b>Fleischmann</b>	Tom Zahner		

Germany 2013. 102 mins

Julia Franck and Schwochow himself were born in East Germany and moved to the west at about the same age as Alexei, and their experiences - and those of their families - lend a telling sense of emotional authenticity.

Triebel eloquently reflects Nelly's emotional shifts in her face and in her eyes, now open and playful (we see her and Alexei scuffling together like two kids), now closed and resentful, almost sulky, as suspicion starts eating away at her. Her performance, awarded Best Actress prize at Montreal, embodies in itself the lasting trauma that Germany, whether divided or uneasily reunited, has yet to recover from.

#### **Another View**

*German cinema and the protagonist of Christian Schwochow's movie have one thing in common - they cannot quite let go of the past. But West, which is based on the novel Lagerfeuer (Campfire) by Julia Franck, tells a story quite different from those we are used to. No WWII or German Democratic Republic drama, no comedy about the latter either. West starts where other stories end - with a successful escape from the GDR to the West.*

*Nelly Senff (Jördis Triebel) and her nine-year-old son Alexej (Tristan Göbel) manage to leave the GDR, but what awaits them on the other side of the wall is far different from the freedom and prosperity they had expected. Nelly soon realises the American allies are not so different from the system she just fled and starts to feel even more paranoid than before.*

*West shows us something we have hardly ever seen on the screen - the story of a GDR refugee trying to adjust to life in the West. To our surprise, Nelly and Alexej face similar bureaucratic problems as asylum seekers in Germany today. Without bureaucracy there is no citizenship, without citizenship there is no work, without work there is no chance to start a new life. But in contrast to today's refugees they cannot be sent back. Nelly is facing a different challenge though, because dealing with bureaucracy means being questioned in just the same way as before in the GDR.*

*Who is her son's father? Did he really die in a car accident? When did she last talk to him and what did he say? Being forced to go through all this over and over again, Nelly starts to consider her ex might actually be alive and that the secret police is still observing her to find out about his whereabouts.*

*Whereas the novel by Julia Franck tells this story from multiple perspectives, the adaptation by the director's mother Heide Schwochow focuses on Nelly and her son. The camera supports this narrative focus by being very close to the heroine, narrowing the visual gaze accordingly, often blurring backgrounds in order to direct the viewer to look at nothing but Nelly. The sometimes super-shaky handheld camera from cinematographer Frank Lamm and the substitution of cuts with fast camera panning unfortunately are a bit too much. Christian Schwochow obviously wants to provide proximity to his protagonist, but as a side-effect he also nauseates his audience.*

*On the one hand, West is all about Nelly, her experience and her feelings. On the other hand, Schwochow breaks with this concept to show scenes in which she is not present. Seeing beyond the heroine's limited vision, we cannot fully relive Nelly's paranoia.*

*We are not seeing things with her eyes but with our own. It is a pity that with this inconsequential storytelling Christian Schwochow wastes quite a bit of the story's potential.*

*A lack of consequence is the core weakness of the movie. We get a realistic drama of a woman trying to deal with humiliation by a system that she hoped would finally free her. There is a love story hinted at between Nelly and a CIA agent (Jacky Ido). In a third subplot Schwochow blurs the line between Nelly's subjective paranoia and the objective reality. Drama, love story, psychological thriller – in its attempt to combine all three genres, the film fails to fully work out at least one of them, denying the audience a satisfying conclusion to all three storylines and posing questions about the narrative aim of the story. What is this movie trying to tell us? About the need to let go of the past and tackle the future?*

*If that was true, Schwochow doesn't follow his own advice. West seems to stay in the German cinema comfort zone, reflecting on the past – a less talked about chapter certainly, but the past nonetheless – instead of dealing with issues of the present.*

*But there is another way to read this movie, interpreting it as a story set in the past, but telling us something about today, about a refugee who is facing the same humiliation and deprivation of liberty she just fled. A movie telling us, that we as the West – which can also be read as the Western world altogether – are no better than those we look down on if we do not live up to our own ideas of democracy, freedom and humanity.*

*I'm not sure if this makes Schwochow's movie any better, but it certainly makes it more interesting.*

*Sophie Charlotte Rieger (Eye for Film)*

#### **Membership 2016-17**

Membership rates for next season have been announced. They are

- Single - £35
- Joint (2 people) - £64
- Concession (senior citizens, students) - £32
- Guest - £5

Membership will be available from May 1 - 31 and is open to anyone interested in joining the Society. The form will be emailed shortly to existing members, all on our email contacts list and will also be available for download from our website.

#### **Our next screening - Friday April 8th, 7.30pm Me and Earl and the Dying Girl (USA 2015. Cert 12a)**

Greg comes from a family of bohemians, while his friend Earl's family life is less rosy (he lives in the bad neighbourhood). Greg's family's DVD collection provides hours of entertainment for the boys and they spend much of their time bonding over their inexplicable affinity with world cinema, remaking the classics ("A Sockwork Orange": "Pooping Tom") and finding a particular place in their hearts for the one and only Werner Herzog. When his mother's asks him to visit his childhood friend Rachel (Olivia Cooke) who has just been diagnosed with leukaemia, Greg finds himself presented with a challenge he feels he's not really equipped to meet.

A sincere and amusing depiction of the deep bonds of platonic friendship between teens across gender, class and race, the film became a word of mouth hit on its release.