

A Note on the Cinema of Discomfort in

Thomas Arslan's *Ferien*

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Thomas Arslan, an important contemporary German filmmaker and a founding figure of the Berlin School of film,¹ has been releasing films since 1991. Until recently, much of the scholarship on Arslan's films has limited the conversations to issues of identity and the representation of German Turkish characters by Arslan in his Berlin Trilogy.² In order to follow the lead of recent scholarship³ in widening the discussion beyond just these issues of identity and representations of hybridity, I focus in this note on Arslan's 2007 feature film *Ferien*,⁴ which is outside of the trilogy. In this way, I hope to strengthen this scholarly conversation regarding the entirety of Arslan's oeuvre, and to narrow the focus from his participation in the Berlin School, in general, to his individual style and techniques as an auteur director, situating his films in a broader discourse of scholarship regarding film and realism.

In content, *Ferien* follows an extended family of several generations, all of whom stay in the secluded home of Anna, her husband, and their son. Through a close reading of the film, I examine this film's cinematography and consider the relationship between this cinematic style and the film's content. Through this examination, I show that an important aspect of *Ferien* is that Arslan utilizes contradictions and juxtapositions in cinematography and content, in order to create tensions and discomforts through a series of unfulfilled or expressly challenged expectations. These spaces of discomfort, I argue, are unique to Arslan,

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1 | A critics' label used to describe a group of directors who utilize stylistically similar cinematic techniques (some of which are discussed in this note) and sometimes overlap in thematic content.

2 | Arslan's Berlin Trilogy includes *Geschwister – Kardesler* (1997), *Dealer* (1999), and *Der schöne Tag* (2001).

3 | Marco Abel: *Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*. Rochester 2013, p 33.

4 | *Ferien*. Directed by Thomas Arslan (2007). Berlin 2007 [= Filmgalerie 451], DVD.

and are therefore significant spaces worthy of further study and interpretation throughout his oeuvre.

Critics seem to agree that an important characteristic of Berlin School films is their focus on realism, both in content and style.⁵ In order to effectively depict a realistic, genuine experience in their low budget films, the directors often rely on cinematographic techniques to create a »snapshot« of real life.⁶ This snapshot is also reflected in content, as the events of these films »seem to be a part of a much larger world we may never know,« a feeling that Cooke relates to most films of the Berlin School.⁷ This realist aesthetic is often accomplished by utilizing »long takes, long shots, clinically precise framing, a certain deliberateness of pacing, sparse usage of non-diegetic music, poetic use of diegetic sound,«⁸ all of which are used in *Ferien*. Additionally, Arslan in particular sometimes uses stationary shots, without panning or tilting, in his films. This technique, while also used to an extent in his Berlin Trilogy, is used to an extreme in *Ferien*.

In *Ferien*, every shot is stationary, with the exception of three instances. In two of these scenes, Arslan utilizes a dolly shot, in order to follow or precede characters on a motorbike. Even then, the steady camera does not tilt or pan, creating yet another layer to this juxtaposition between movement and stillness. The third time that the camera moves takes place between these two motorbike shots and is part of a sequence of outdoor, natural shots, which have been edited together in jump cuts. In this scene, the camera crawls forward, through the woods, for approximately thirteen seconds. Unlike the dolly shots of the motorbike, the movement in this scene is extremely slow and is much shorter in length. This adds to the overall tension that one feels in the sluggish speed of the movement, because as soon as the audience recognizes that there is movement of the camera, there is a cut to more stationary shots, as if the film intends to prevent the audience from confirming this movement. Interestingly, the spacing of these movement scenes are rather consistent: the first (and longest, at about two and a half minutes) begins a little over twenty minutes into the film; the second (which is the shortest, and most visually indiscreet) takes place almost twenty minutes after the first; the last (the second of the motorbike scenes) happens about twenty minutes later, which is also almost twenty minutes before the end of the film. The fact that the shots that utilize camera movement are so dramatic amidst the strict use of stationary shots in the remainder of the film,

5 | Olaf Moeller/Jason Wood: Vanishing Point. In: Sight & Sound 17 (2007), No. 10, p. 40.

6 | Anke Leweke: »The Beginning« in The Berlin School: Films from the Berliner Schule. Ed. by Rajendra Roy and Anke Leweke. New York 2013, p. 15.

7 | Paul Cooke: Contemporary German Cinema. Manchester 2012, p. 77.

8 | Marco Abel: Intensifying Life: The Cinema of the »Berlin School«. In: Cineaste: America's Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema 2008.

as well as consistent in spacing throughout the film, is significant, and a point to which I will return.

The shots in the remainder of the film are rather consistent: there is no movement of the camera, only movement within the frame, and the setting of the frame therefore does not change until the film cuts to another shot, which, again, creates a marked juxtaposition between movement and stillness. Arslan also uses predominantly medium shots, medium long shots, and long shots, which implies distance and disconnect, as the camera is consistently distanced from the characters. Because no one character is regularly given preference by the camera, either in close-up or subjectivity, one could have the sense that the characters are almost un-important, merely wandering in and out of the settings and frames. This culminates in what Cooke deems a »motif« of many of the films of the Berlin School, in that the characters »pass through the landscape they inhabit almost as spectres, unable to make their presence felt,«⁹ and creates tension for the audience in the challenged expectation that the film's focus is the characters it is portraying. Indeed, this sense is exaggerated in *Ferien's* long, stationary shots, as the camera does not even pan to follow characters, nor do shots automatically cut when they leave the frame, but often linger for several seconds after all of the characters have exited or completed the dialogue.

This distancing is also fostered in the plot of the film, in that the film does not seem to have a single protagonist with whom the audience is meant to identify, and the audience is told very little about the lives of these characters outside of their time spent on screen. In fact, through the distancing cinematography, there is actually an effort made to *prevent* an emotional connection with any single character. Other than one subjective shot, discussed below, there are no cuts to establish a point-of-view with any character, and the strict adherence to stationary shots prevents the audience from following the action of any particular character. The audience also lacks any extreme close ups of a character, which might cause one to empathize with a character. Instead, the film seems to remain quite objective in its cinematography, and all of the characters seem not only un-relatable, but also equal in their un-relatability. In this way, the film, at times, *seems* to achieve an objective distance, but, as I will show, also actively works to deconstruct this notion that a film is ever able to be truly objective, continuously juxtaposing these two explicitly contradictory ideas in both content and style.

Aesthetically, the use of a stationary camera, long shots, and long takes is very effective in creating the abovementioned Berlin School realism, culminating in a snapshot of life. Much like a photograph, the frame of these shots does not move, and in some instances is literally framed by a door or a window, adding to this photographic illusion. The inclusion of these visible frames, then, fosters this feeling that the film is objective, that it is somehow »authentic« and

9 | Cooke, *Contemporary German Cinema*, p. 81.

»less ›mediated«¹⁰ through the photographic aesthetic that it creates. Again, this highlights the relation and tension between movement and stillness emphasized in the film; a photograph, which is in nature still, can obviously not be the same as film, which is in nature moving. Thus, this filmed aesthetic of photography, while adding to the realism of the film, is also commenting on the fact that the film is *indeed* not actually real, despite the illusion that the stationary camera and long takes might encourage.

However, this idea that a film is able to represent anything real is problematic, despite these efforts towards a realistic aesthetic, as Cooke reminds his readers that although »reality is the key to the Berlin School,«¹¹ »the notion that any representation of the external world can give an immediate, somehow non-mediated image of reality is illusory.«¹² I would argue that *Ferien* actually *explicitly* problematizes this relationship between film and realism using these same framing techniques of doors and windows that overtly *make* the film appear objective and photo-like in the first place. These visible frames, in addition to creating the aforementioned realism, also draw attention to the fact that the audience is an outsider to what is happening on screen; they explicitly comment on the fact that one is watching a film by placing the viewer unambiguously on the other side of this visible door, keeping the viewer separate from the characters' world and leaving her with only this voyeuristic ability to peer in, through this threshold. These visible doors or windows then force the audience member to consider that what she is seeing is, indeed, not real life at all, and it therefore directly contradicts any aesthetic appeals it is apparently making otherwise. This is reiterated in the lack of subjectivity through the absence of point-of-view shots and the rejection of classical mise-en-scene in preference for the abundance of medium and long shots.

I would also argue that a comment is actually made at the beginning of *Ferien* regarding this illusory objective distance and the issue of representing reality, when the audience receives one subjective shot from the perspective of the children. In one take, the stationary frame shows, in an extreme close-up, ants crawling on the ground, and then a cut to a medium long shot shows the children looking towards the ground; thus, the shot of the ants was presumably from the subjective perspective of the children. Because Arslan takes such great care to prevent subjectivity in the majority of the film, this scene carries obvious importance. I read this scene as Arslan commenting on the film's entire superficial purpose, especially since this scene takes place so early in the film, namely to create an »objective« documentation of the characters during their stay in this house. Like the children examining the ants, the audience examines the characters in a supposedly objective, almost ethnographic way, in the sense that

10 | *Ibid.*, p. 58.

11 | *Ibid.*, p. 72.

12 | *Ibid.*, p. 55.

it is a completely visual relationship with no physical interaction. However, like many aspects of this film, Arslan seems to actively problematize what appears to be his entire cinematic purpose with these two shots; he is, at the same time, visually depicting the objective, documentary purpose of this film, while curiously presenting it in a subjective way. Thus, I would argue that Arslan is again commenting, through these juxtapositions of contradictions, on the idea that, no matter what steps one might take to create an objective film, no matter how realistic the film might appear and how distanced the audience might feel, in the end, what the audience experiences is *always* going to be a subjective reflection of someone's perspective, be it a character (as in this scene) or the director (in the film as a whole).

Another significant aspect of this film is the idea of imprisonment, which results from some of the camera techniques already mentioned, and is an idea also reflected in plot. Closely related to the feeling of distance created in the film in both cinematography and plot, the characters actually seem to be in a state of imprisonment within their surroundings, which is juxtaposed with the audience's false expectation that that the film's setting in nature creates an abundant landscape through which the characters traverse. Instead, the settings are very limited, and the characters are actually shown as contained within the same places throughout the film, with few exceptions. On the aesthetic level, this is, again, quite evident through the lack of camera movement, which would either show how immense the landscape is, or follow the characters as they perform an exploration within it. Instead, we have the stationary, long takes, wherein the characters are able to move in and out of frame, but the frame itself is entirely lacking in movement. Thus, the audience is only able to see these contained images of the landscape, limited to small, frame-by-frame shots. When Arslan uses medium, medium long, or long shots, especially in the scenes that are entirely composed of natural settings and lacking any human element, nature appears much smaller, more limited, and more controlled than it would in an extreme long shot or panorama. Further, the same settings are often reused throughout the film, wherein the characters and the dialogue change, but the audience member is still viewing the scene from the same location, perspective, and depth that she has seen before. This makes the setting appear not only small and static within the frame, but also a little redundant, as the characters continue to visit the same places and the camera continues to show it in the same way.

Similarly, the emotional separation that the characters feel from one another, which is easily apparent on the level of the plot, is further highlighted in the *mise-en-scène*. Because the camera is almost always unmoving, the static positioning of the props and setting becomes especially significant, as it creates a further division of space within this already stationary frame, and it suggests distance between the characters. One visually striking example of this on-screen, physical separation is during a scene in which Paul and Sophie discuss

the evening plans with Anna and Robert. In this scene, the frame of a door runs directly down the center of the frame, and only once does a character attempt to transgress this visual border, when Sophie barely reaches across it in order to take a shopping list from Robert; even when Anna gives Paul the car keys, she does so by tossing them across this on-screen divide.

In several scenes, this literal divide of space creates a figurative wall between the characters that no one seems capable or willing to breach, since the characters are often unwilling to touch one another. This fact is made more explicit through these visible divisions. In this way, the loneliness that the characters seem to feel in the plot is reflected on screen, and the spaces that the characters occupy become somehow smaller, as they exist within not only the fixed space within the stationary frame, but also the even smaller fixed space within their separate on-screen boundaries. The audience, too, becomes accustomed to these boundaries, and it begins to feel strange when the characters attempt to physically touch or negotiate the limits of the boundaries within the frame. This further exaggerates the feeling of imprisonment, stillness, and order within the frame and, I would argue, forces the audience to empathize with the characters, who are often also clearly uncomfortable with these transgressions. This forced empathizing directly contradicts the objective nature of the cinematography and the distancing effects of the camera, discussed above, and adds yet another layer to the tension created in this film through these contradictory juxtapositions in cinematography and plot.

This idea that the setting of the film is comprised of small places that the characters seem unable to escape is also reflected in the plot of the film: the characters, despite being noticeably unhappy, do not attempt either to leave this place nor to explore more places within this rural setting. Further, the constant recycling of setting seems to prevent the viewer from focusing on the external world that is outside of the setting of the film, and instead forces the viewer, too, to become imprisoned within the shot and setting, again encouraging the audience to empathize with the »imprisoned« characters. In fact, this audience component is actually fostered throughout the film; often one has the feeling that, because she is explicitly an outsider witnessing the drama unfold, she lacks any agency in this witnessing act, a fact that, while true of all films, is made overt in Arslan's realistic and objective filming techniques. Because there is often no change in the positioning of a camera within a scene and no movement of the camera, the audience lacks a »renewal of perspective« and is instead passively stuck within the single, static perspective of each scene.¹³

This passivity in voyeurism is especially evident in the scene in which the family is sitting around a table and a fight erupts over the fact that Anna has invited her daughters' father to the dinner. From the beginning of the scene, the audience is made to feel like an outsider; similar to the visible doors and window

13 | *Ibid.*, p. 22.

frames in some scenes, the camera, for this scene, is positioned directly behind an empty chair. I would argue that the presence of this empty chair encourages an awareness of the fact that the audience member is disconnected from this on-screen dinner party, and that this chair also comments on the fact that what the audience sees is not reality, because of the unrealistic feeling created by the artificial staging of the scene. That is, there is no closure within the frame, no character whose back is to the audience, and instead the setting of the scene explicitly allows for a camera, similar to the way that a stage allows for an audience. In this way, the audience is again encouraged to remain aware of the fact that they are witnessing a staged film, despite the realist, objective aesthetic otherwise encouraged by the cinematography, in yet another contradiction created in the cinematography of this film.

As the tension in the scene increases among the characters in the plot, the audience remains imprisoned in this passive, distanced spectatorship; because the camera is stationary, the audience is not afforded the opportunity to look away from what is happening nor to leave the room, which the characters, one by one, continue to do. This lack of agency and, by extension, imprisonment, is also fostered in the long takes throughout the film, when shots linger on the setting of a scene for a few seconds after the characters have left the frame or completed their dialogue. Although nothing directly related to the plot happens in these final seconds, the audience is still imprisoned within this scene, perhaps with the unfulfilled expectation that something further is going to happen, until a cut moves us to another stationary frame. Through the tension in this particular scene, the audience is again encouraged to empathize with the characters, which *again* contradicts what the cinematography encourages in its intentional and explicit distancing. This tension allows for the audience to become emotionally *involved* in the film, to feel in a way that reflects what one might believe the characters themselves are also feeling: tension and discomfort. Thus, again, the significance of the various tensions in *Ferien*, created through unfulfilled expectations and contradictions on the level of both the cinematography and plot, is made explicit, and, as a closer examination will show, is actually consistently fostered throughout the film.

From the very beginning of the film, the audience experiences tension in the unmet expectation that the camera will occasionally move, zoom, or pan, especially since Arslan adheres to other technical approaches of classic cinematography, in which movement of the camera would be natural. However, the audience experiences, for the first twenty minutes of the film, only the stationary shots. As soon as this tension might logically threaten to resolve itself, as the audience becomes accustomed to Arslan's style, the film visually destabilizes these new expectations with a dolly shot of two characters on a motorbike, a shot that lasts for several minutes. Then, again, the tension is re-created by reverting to the earlier, unmoving camera, when the audience might now have the expectation that the camera will again move. After another twenty minutes have lapsed in the

film, in which the audience sees only stationary shots, the second moving shot is introduced, again undermining any re-negotiated expectations the audience might have after the first time that this happened. Yet again, the film reverts to stationary shots, only to then play with these expectations a third time before the film's end. It is for this reason that I believe that the consistency of the spacing of the movement shots is important, and why this second movement shot, sandwiched between the two obvious dolly shots, is both so slow in movement and so short in length. The result, then, is that *Ferien* consistently creates tension and discomfort for the audience in these constant re-negotiations of expectations at regular intervals throughout the film.

Similarly, when the tension created by the aforementioned visual division and physical separation within the frame becomes nearly familiar to the audience, Arslan has his characters bridge this gap (for example, when Anna holds hands with her daughters in the scene in which she learns of her mother's death), which re-calibrates the expectations of the audience and thus re-initiates the tension, since the film then returns to this rule of physical (and visual) separation. The film also creates tensions in the audience's aforementioned unmet expectation that there will be a cut once the character has left the frame or the dialogue has stopped. One can also find tension in the various contradictions and juxtapositions in style and content, discussed in this note, such as the large spaces contained within small frames, movement of characters and nature within a frame of absolute stillness, and, notably, in the lack of empathy and distance that the cinematography urges juxtaposed with the forced *feeling* of empathetic tension that it creates.

Thus, a close examination of the cinematography and content of Thomas Arslan's *Ferien* not only situates it within the broader context of the Berlin School, but also highlights the style and techniques unique to this particular auteur director, in his reliance on contradictions and unfulfilled expectations, which are used to create tensions and discomforts. In this way, in addition to Abel's argument that Arslan's films exist in a »counter-cinema« that emphasizes »strangeness,« which he attributes to the Berlin School, as a whole,¹⁴ I would argue that this strangeness is uniquely performed in Arslan's films through his *cinema of discomfort*, which he actively creates in these spaces of unfilled expectation and contradictions. These tensions, then, work throughout the film to actively problematize the issue of reality in film. This is significant in a film of a founding member of the Berlin School, because in the dialogue regarding the films and directors of this school, critics and scholars seem to agree on little more than the fact that an incredibly important Berlin School marker is *precisely* this realist aesthetic.

More broadly speaking, since the advent of film studies and theory in the 20th century, and drawing on much earlier discourse regarding other media,

14 | Abel, Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School, p. 64.

there has been an ongoing dialogue regarding reality and realism, and how (and how effectively) this is performed. Though the debate continues across disciplines and decades, I would urge that Thomas Arslan's *Ferien* be closely read within this discourse for the reasons outlined in this note, namely that *Ferien* distinctly addresses the challenging relationship between realism and film through juxtapositions and contradictions, which create the spaces of discomfort highlighted in this paper. I would further posit that, by seeking and interpreting these spaces in other Arslan films, one could read Arslan's entire oeuvre in a larger, ongoing discussion¹⁵ regarding the *problematic* relationship between reality, realism, and film, instead of just accepting these films as realistic.

15 | Abel, for example, shows the broader issue of realism versus real Germany in Berlin School films, without focusing on Arslan (22 January 2007. In: *A New History of German Cinema*. Ed. by Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson. Rochester 2012, p. 606).

