



# THE BERLINALE AT THE FOCAL POINT

Dossier of the Berlinale conference  
"What now after all the bad reviews?"  
held by the German Film Critics Association  
on October 13th 2011 in Berlin

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# INTRODUCTION

It started with all the bad reviews. Annoyance and derision seemed more and more present in the reporting about the Berlinale in 2011, even though some of the year's best films were shown there. But did any of that reach Dieter Kosslick, whose contract was just renewed for three years until 2016?

At the conference held by the Verband der deutschen Filmkritik (German Film Critics Association) this past October, and the voices from which we've gathered here, the association wanted to look at the future of the festival by asking, "What now after all the bad reviews?" That was meant seriously, but it was taken as a provocation. The relationship between German film critics and the Berlin Film Festival was already highly strained. No common vision in sight far and wide, no shared discourse. The Berlinale doesn't allow any discussions, neither about the work of the selection commission nor about the inner structure of the institution or the missing cinephile aspirations. And where is the reflection about how the fragile films that have no lobby can come to their own, how they can be protected, promoted, and brought to the public, to promote the cinema as an aesthetic source of friction and as a social focal point?

At the conference of the German Film Critics Association observations and concerns were voiced, countless curious questions were asked with a great thirst for knowledge. The dialog though never took place, since just before the event, Dieter Kosslick cancelled, he feared that he was going to be placed before a "tribunal" to read the exchange of letters visit [www.vdfk.de](http://www.vdfk.de). A regretful misunderstanding and deplorable cancellation, which also caused us financial damage, for it ensured that the promised funding by the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg for the event was withdrawn. Beside this entanglement, it was equally revealing how few conversational partners from the film industry were willing to speak openly about the Berlinale. At the very last minute, we also received the cancellations of both Alfred Holighaus, the managing director of Deutsche Filmakademie and former employee of the Berlinale, and the producer Stefan Arndt from X Filme. Our publication offers therefore a cross-section of analysis and background about the most important German Film Festival from the perspective of the observers only the specific point of view of the makers is missing. The controversy that already took place prior to the event indicates that the association struck a nerve with its intention. The discussion will have to be continued.

Frédéric Jaeger, Hanns-Georg Rodek

# TO HEAR THE GRASS GROW



## *Voices from the Conference*

Collected by Wilfried Reichart

I don't know if it really makes sense that the Berlinale continues to expand by adding more and more sections, for at the same time that gives the impression that a clearer artistic vision or perspective is lacking.

Cristina Nord

I think it's very positive that the trench fighting between the different sections has stopped with Kosslick at the helm. But at the same time, the profile has gotten a lot more vague. Achim Forst

Something needs to come about, something needs to change, and that can only happen with people who can defend a vision with passion and have a cineastic charisma, people well informed in world cinema who can hear the grass grow. Ulrich Gregor

The Berlinale missed out on the developments in Eastern Europe entirely, what's going on in Poland, what's happening in a small country like Estonia. The Berlinale has a huge problem there: too few contacts. Katharina Dockhorn

Before 1989, it was easier for the Berlinale to have a sharper profile. As a French critic said, Cannes has the sea, Berlin has the wall. We travelled to Warsaw, Budapest, and Moscow. For us they were not only our neighbors, but also the neighbors who had suffered under us. At the time, Cannes wasn't so interested. This division of the world in two no longer exists, and things have become much more difficult. Erika Gregor

### **Dignity in the Supermarket**

For me, the positive thing about Cannes in comparison to Berlin was that the curatorial management was passionately interested in film and well informed about it. I don't really get that feeling at the Berlinale Forum, and in the competition I don't get that feeling at all.

Christoph Hochhäusler

I think it's undignified when films that have already played in the US and arrive here in the cinema a few days later are still included in the Berlinale. You get the feeling that it's not a curatorial but a marketing decision. There's been a lot of that happening recently. Christoph Hochhäusler

The competition at an important A-festival should not be a supermarket where every one just picks something out. I have no problem with the critics doing that, but what are the curators up to? Dana Linssen

Why do we need made for TV movies like "Hilde" or "John Rabe" screened at Friedrichstadt-Palast, which seats more than 2000? What do we need a Perspektive Deutsches Kino, which this year showed three feature films, some documentaries, and otherwise mid length or short films, and de facto is an expanded festival for the film schools? Why do we need a section on "culinary cinema?" These films can be shown elsewhere: this section is totally unnecessary, other than for the fact that food gets sold there. Rüdiger Suchsland

### **Sit out the Competition**

Critics have to free themselves from the competition. I've done this now for years, just watching films according to my appetite, mood, and my interest. I've also sat through the competition years on end, and I know—it's horrible. But it's also horrible in Cannes or in Venice. Volker Günske

I want to come back to a keyword that's very important: film availability. We read—in Variety for example—what films are finished that will run this May in Cannes or in September in Venice. And each year we ask, why aren't they running in Berlin? How could we make the competition more prominent, more demanding, so that it could exude a certain attraction? Cristina Nord

The programming, the rhythm created, the dialog created by the films screened together in a section is often infelicitous. I can think of a few films that have been unsuccessful just because the audience was in a bad mood. We're moving in a jungle, and the people running the festival who know all the films have to carve paths through it for us.

Rüdiger Suchsland

### **Dual Leadership?**

Dieter Kosslick is wonderful when it comes to appearing before the press, representing the festival, stepping out on the red carpet, and the like, but we need a separate artistic director, someone who actually curates the competition.

David Hudson

I don't think that dual leadership divided between a head and an artistic director can work. Unless they become enemies and wind up in a struggle with one another, each one working on their own vision. [Ulrich Gregor](#)

It's easy to blame the festival, but we also contribute to the situation with our own reporting. As long as there is no change on the level of curatorship, we critics have to take on that responsibility. We should suggest new ways of choosing the program and curating the festival, and a new, active tradition of cinephilia, be it political or aesthetic. The issue must be regaining the festival as a space of cinephilia and critique. [Dana Linssen](#)

#### **Lightheartedness and Frustration**

Cannes has an entirely different feel to it. And Kosslick did the right thing: he didn't try to build up a second Cannes, getting Almodóvar and the like. He planned his festival as a friendly event that people enjoy attending. The atmosphere isn't as sacred as in Cannes. Berlin is even sometimes fun, something that foreigners never associate with Germany. As a whole I call that well placed. [Roman Paul](#)

The entire mid-range of experts is systematically frustrated by the Berlinale. It's extremely exasperating to wait in line for tickets at eight o'clock in the morning and never get what you want. [Claus Löser](#)

What's missing is a place to meet, a heart for the festival. What's needed is a place where one likes to meet and chat, and decide to skip a film. In the basement of Arsenal, there's already a little bit of that happening.

[Dana Linssen](#)

#### **The Retrospective**

One thing hasn't come up yet, and that's the retrospective. That used to be the most important part of the Berlinale for me. [Christoph Hochhäusler](#)

Here's one thing I'd like to happen at the Berlinale: that the retrospective is made smaller and gets more of a focus. Looking at our spectators, the awareness of film history is becoming less and less each year. We need to bring in film history in a more targeted fashion, to make sure people know that film doesn't start with Tarantino.

[Erika Gregor](#)

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# A DISTANT THIRD PLACE

## *International Views on the current state of the Berlin Film Festival*

by David Hudson



These are excerpts of the answers to a survey I made in the beginning of October. Of those quoted here, three are American, one is a South African who's been living in London for a number of years and one is Norwegian. Most are critics, programmers and/or distributors and some dabble filmmaking as well. So these are views from the outside.

**When you scan your festival calendar, how does the Berlinale rank? Below Cannes, surely, but above...? And why?**

**Jonathan Marlow** is head of acquisitions for Fandor. GreenCine. Cinematographer, executive director of the San Francisco Cinematheque. "I have an affinity for Berlin that has little to do with the festival.... For the sake of the programming, I'd much rather go to Rotterdam. I am far more likely to see something I'll truly adore at that event.

Also far more likely to see something truly awful. Which is to say that they're far more inclined to take risks (even in the post-Simon Field era) whereas the selections at the Berlinale are largely "safe" (and, more often than not, uninteresting)... Berlin is great for meetings but still is a distant third after Cannes (of course) and Toronto. As far as events I actually want to attend based on its programming, I don't believe it would fall within the top twenty festivals."

**Guy Lodge** is a classic example of a new breed of film critic. He's come up through the blogs and now freelances for the *Guardian*: "In recent years it's definitely lagged within that elevated trio, as Venice's smart programming (and more awards-season-relevant position in the calendar) has made it a far feistier rival to Cannes than Berlin. But it retains its status, and not just because of history and reputation—recent festivals have wound

up looking more significant in retrospect than they did at the time, because they've focused on discovering films that gain in stature as more people see them, rather than entering the festival circuit with big-name buzz.

("A Separation" is a perfect example.) Perhaps it's becoming Europe's answer to Sundance."

**Would you agree or disagree with the Association's assessment of the Berlinale's international reputation, that is, that it's been suffering in the past few years? If you agree, in what ways is the Berlinale stumbling? If you disagree, where do you think that overall impression comes from?**

**Guy Lodge:** "I'd agree that it's stumbled in recent years, principally because I don't think Kosslick's programming is very astute or imaginative—the Competition, in particular, is padded out with drab arthouse miniatures that aren't rigorous enough for critics or grabby enough for audiences. (When Berlin does nab such a title, meanwhile, they often don't seem to know what to do with it: why on earth wasn't "The Illusionist" in competition last year?) True, Berlin can't compete with Cannes or Venice for major auteur titles, but the answer is to become a forward-looking festival of discovery, focusing on vital new/rising filmmakers, and the festival has only half-committed to—that brief. Not helping is the fact that the program is so vast and diffuse that worthy selections often get lost in it—it's very hard to tell what distinguishes Forum from Panorama, for example, so everything begins to blur. Still, I think this year's fest got more right than previous ones—the Competition was still spotty, but excellent films like "A Separation" and "Sleeping Sickness" were strong examples of the next-generation talent that should be Berlin's niche, while "The Turin Horse" and "Pina" are the kind of higher-profile (but still appropriately avant-garde) auteur titles that can be used to bait journalists into visiting."

**Karsten Meinich** is a writer and co-editor-in-chief of the Norwegian publication *Montages*; he's also film editor and an aspiring documentary filmmaker: "Since Panorama and Forum consistently have brought great, challenging films, I've never bothered too much with being "disappointed" with the Competition. And I'd also say that looking at some (not all) of the Golden Bear winners from the last ten years, I can say that some of the finest films from the decade (in my view) are represented there."

**Andrew Grant** is president of Benten Films, a DVD distribution company, and he's done some programming in Berlin in the year since he moved here. "The festival's reputation has been slipping—no question about it. However, it seems to be an opinion shared locally as well as internationally. Berlin is one of the hippest, coolest cities in Europe. It boasts a film festival of not insignificant size, so why does it have SUCH a hard time in securing better films and premieres? Yes, the Cannes factor is huge, but surely there can be a greater effort to seduce filmmakers

to premiering in Berlin. Create an environment that makes the festival appealing to "serious" film folks, and tone down the red carpet madness."

**Anonymous** "(works for several festivals): "I'm not sure how accurate or helpful that is, but enthusiasm, at least among my acquaintances, seems scarce.... Artistic directors at the more prestigious fests are in the unenviable position of having to please the industry (which wants to showcase its films and/or make acquisitions), the ticket-buying public (which wants to be entertained but also challenged and stimulated), and the critics and cinephiles who make pilgrimages to see what they won't be able to see elsewhere (at least not for a while). It requires vision and stamina and determination. But the job of an artistic director is also to codify and communicate the festival's essential identity."

**Berlinale director Dieter Kosslick usually responds to criticism by noting, first, that ticket sales are up, and secondly by listing the programs he's introduced since he took on the job: the Talent Campus, the World Cinema Fund, Culinary Cinema, etc. How relevant are these accomplishments to what you value in a film festival?**

**Anonymous:** "Film festivals and the cultures around them need to evolve and experiment or they will cease to be relevant. A festival is a living organism, not a machine with replaceable parts. It needs to be fed and nurtured constantly so it can grow. Pointing to box office sales is not the same thing as advancing a vision for the future. I do think the programs Dieter is in the habit of ticking off as his accomplishments are relevant to what I value in festivals, even if I don't personally participate or take advantage of those events. The Talent Campus, for instance, has set up shop in Durban, Sarajevo, and Buenos Aires, which lends the Berlinale additional cachet overseas, beyond the red-carpet glitz of its February activities. (Educating film professionals and the general public about cinema and film history should be the mission of any major festival.)"

**Whether you think the Berlinale's in trouble or stronger than ever, there's always room for improvement. What do you think needs fixing most?**

**Karsten Meinich:** "The Berlinale should show a more public support of the role of the director, through how they program the Official Competition and how they give space to discussing the work of filmmakers."

**Andrew Grant:** "Bring in new blood each year—at least a handful of guest programmers. Take more chances. Look to festivals like Rotterdam or Toronto for inspiration. Figure out ways to attract bigger and better filmmakers to the festival. Cut down on the typical "festival" titles that litter the competition section."

**Guy Lodge:** "Reorganize the program so it's more streamlined and user-friendly. For the press, simplify the currently bewildering system of rules and conditions about which screenings we can attend."

**Jonathan Marlow:** "Large festivals serve many different audiences. Toronto and Cannes (along with SXSW, IFFR and the Independent Film Festival of Boston, among others) have figured out how to manage the inherent disconnection between the assorted threads and still find a way to make the event seem unified. It's as if there is one overarching vision at work in these other events. I've never felt that way about Berlin. It seems like many different events all happening at the same time. ..."

**Finally, a question that isn't necessarily related to the Berlinale specifically. Very broadly speaking, a possible model for the film festival of the future is emerging: Films premiere in festival venues and, all but simultaneously or very soon thereafter, they are presented either online or in venues in other cities in the festival's network. The idea: the festival carries on thriving because people will always want to attend an event, while at the same time, filmmakers will be able to take advantage of broader exposure of their work while it's still associated with that event. Thoughts?**

**Jonathan Marlow:** "I am obviously biased on this topic. With festivals currently representing an ersatz (or, in the case of Tribeca, Sundance and a handful of other festivals, literal) distribution system for far too many films, it is essential to coordinate the opportunity for audiences to see a particular film when the awareness of that film is at its highest."

**Guy Lodge:** "Already, this sense of a never-ending festival arguably exists in film journalism/industry circles: there are so many festivals now, many of them programming

the same titles, that the conversation feels virtuously continuous.... Still, this makes it an insular conversation: well-travelled films on the festival circuit are old news for insiders once they finally open to the public, and that's not good. So the more publicly permeable the structure of the film festival becomes, the better—and shortening the distance between a film's appearance in the blanketed festival environment and the "real world," so to speak, the better."

**Anonymous:** "This is the future, no question. Look at the new distribution models that Sundance and Tribeca are experimenting with: traveling select films to Middle American cities during the festival, debuting others on YouTube or another platform (for a fee). The more that festivals become events film lovers around the world can participate in, virtually or otherwise, the more they will thrive, the more a certain kind of cinema can be advocated. I have never been to Jeonju, but looking at their slate every year makes me salivate like an idiot. If they hosted screenings at a rented theater in New York City, the way that opera houses and symphony orchestras have been doing with such great success in recent years, I would be the first in line, and I bet cinephiles would pack in, too. Tribeca has been experimenting—also successfully—with selling a limited number of tickets to online world premieres of official selections available to stream via their website. None of this diminishes the central event in the host city, because part of festival-going involves the excitement of being in a packed movie theater with the filmmakers and actors present on the night the world sees a new work for the first time, not to mention all the receptions, meet-and-greets, panels, random encounters, and big-time hoopla. It's still a party. I'm just riffing—but the upshot is, I think the future of the film festival is already here, even if it's still in an embryonic stage. That's exciting to me."