

WEST
(Westen)
a film by
Christian Schwochow



MONTREAL WORLD FILM FESTIVAL
Best Actress Award for Jördis Triebel, FIPRESCI-Prize
GERMAN FILM PRIZE Best Actress, Jördis Triebel

Germany 2013 / 102 mins / German, English, Russian, Polish with English subtitles /
Cert tbc

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SYNOPSIS

East Germany, late 70's.

When Vasily leaves, all he leaves behind is a white jumper he wraps around his son's shoulders when he is cold. Is to be just another short separation? Nelly's boyfriend Vasily Batalov is a Russian physicist and attends many conferences. This time, however, he will not return.

Three years later a car stops in front of the house in East Berlin, where Nelly and Alexei live. Nelly, 30 years old, obviously very nervous with her exit visa in her bag, is leaving her home, the GDR. She has pretended to get married to a man from the West while in truth she wants to start a new life together with her son and leave everything behind. The grief, the suffocation, the memories and the probing questions by the Stasi.

But her country doesn't make it easy for her to leave. Her hands tremble when the border guard takes her son into the back room. Shortly afterwards, Nelly has to follow another border guard into a flat-roofed building. She has to answer questions, undress, let them examine her – for the hundredth time.

But they finally cross the border into West Berlin.

The Emergency Refugee Centre is Nelly's sole shelter in the West, where she doesn't know anybody at all. All the same it is the place of her hopes. Nelly believes she will be able to find a flat and a job in West Berlin, and start anew with Alexei.

But in the Centre everything starts from scratch: The examinations, the questions, the completion of forms and the hunt for stamps for the residence permit – which can only be achieved by "cooperation", by reporting from the other side.

The Allied secret services are asking about Vasily. At home Nelly was told he was dead. A car accident. However, John Bird, a CIA agent, who interrogates her, doubts this. Suddenly Nelly has to ask herself if she has ever known the man she thought to have loved. Was he a spy? And if so – is he still alive? Instead of freedom, the feeling of suffocation and the Cold War continue to haunt Nelly in the West – and in her head. Suddenly she sees Vasily – or did she?

Torn between the hope for a better life, which so far she cannot even imagine and a deep mistrust towards institutions, Nelly struggles with the hauntingly long wait in the transitional world of the Centre. Together with thousands of others, who share a similar fate, Nelly and Alexei wait for a change.

Between bunk bed camps, interrogations and the queue for food they try to preserve their dignity, which is not easy, as there is fear and distrust. There are Stasi informants everywhere in the Centre, or so they say. Who is Hans, who so often looks after Alexei? Why is he always there when she is in need of something? Why has he been in the Centre for already two years and has never made it out of there? Over and over again the paranoia catches up with Nelly. Only when she is about to lose the bond to her son she realizes that she has to face the decision: Will she continue to let her past rule over her present? Or will she dare a completely new beginning, together with her son?

More details and downloads at www.newwavefilms.co.uk

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CREW

Director	Christian Schwochow
Script	Heide Schwochow Based on the novel "Lagerfeuer" by Julia Franck
Editor	Jens Klüber bfs
Director of Photography	Frank Lamm
Original Sound	Jörg Kidrowski bvft
Original Music	Lorenz Dangel
Sound Design	Rainer Heesch
Production Design	Tim Pannen
Costume Design	Kristin Schuster
Makeup Design	Wolfgang Böge BvM
Casting	Uta Seibicke
Production Manager	Andreas Jupe
Line Producer	Tassilo Aschauer
Producers	Katrin Schlösser, Ö Filmproduktion Thomas Kufus, zero one film Christoph Friedel, Terz Filmproduktion
Co-Producers	Helge Sasse, Senator Film Produktion WDR, Barbara Buhl SWR, Stefanie Groß rbb, Cooky Ziesche ARTE, Georg Steinert

Germany 2103 102 mins

CAST

Nelly Senff	Jördis Triebel
Alexei	Tristan Göbel
Hans Pischke	Alexander Scheer
John Bird	Jacky Ido

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Christian Schwochow was born in 1978 in Bergen on the isle of Rügen (GDR). He worked as author, reporter and videojournalist for German television and radio before studying at the renowned Film Academy Baden-Württemberg. In 2007 he graduated with the movie NOVEMBER CHILD, which was a big success in cinemas and which won a dozen awards. In 2011 his second long feature film CRACKS IN THE SHELL (Die Unsichtbare) followed. For both movies he wrote the screenplay together with Heide Schwochow. In 2012 he directed the adaptation of the best-selling novel THE TOWER for German TV.

FILMOGRAPHY

2014 Bornholmer Strasse TV
2013 Westen
2012 Der Turm TV
2011 Die Unsichtbare
2008 Novemberkind
2007 Terra X - Expedition ins Unbekannte TV Series documentary, 1 episode
2006 Marta und der fliegende Grossvater
2005 Tantalus Short



INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN AND HEIDE SCHWOCHOW

How did you come across the novel “Lagerfeuer” by Julia Franck?

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: I stumbled over it in early 2000, when a number of books by young writers from the East were published, dealing with the times of the GDR and its aftermath. What fascinated me about “Lagerfeuer” was that it featured people who had left one life, yearning for another, yet they were somewhat stuck at a strange, transitory place. I felt this was somewhat connected to my family history.

In what way?

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: We left in 1989, when the wall had already come down, yet there was still the question if we had to go to a camp like that as well. In the end, we didn't have to, but for a few months, the three of us lived in the small living room of my grandmother's friend.

You gave the book to your mother. How did you like it, Mrs Schwochow?

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: For me, it worked like an undertow. I also liked the idea of this transitory world. Let me compare the condition to a pregnancy: Somehow, there is a baby inside you, yet it is totally abstract. It was the same with our wish to go to the West: We didn't know what it would be like but the great yearning to go was always there.

What exactly fascinated you about the “Lagerfeuer” story?

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: This very special place: We knew that those kind of emergency camps had existed, but not what it meant to live there for such a long period of time. To me that was totally new and exciting. Also, I realized that nobody is aware of this part of German history. Hardly anyone knows that the secret services were in those camps, interrogating people. And that the people had to more or less strip naked, before they were accepted.

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Before our emigration, the West was like a phantom for us. We had not looked into how the procedure of immigration actually went forth, never thought about it. Neither did we know one had to say sentences like: “I was politically persecuted”.

How did you imagine leaving and your arrival in the West?

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: It was somewhat blurry and it was mainly the leaving that played a role in my mind – and not for political reasons only, mind you. Julia Franck managed something extraordinary in her novel: A character, who in her interrogation states that she hadn't left for political reasons but that she “wanted to get rid of memories.” I was impressed by that. Because in the West there is only the notion that one would leave for political or economical reasons – nothing else occurred to the public mind.

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: My ideas were far more childlike. I was eleven, when we left. My school was at Falkplatz, at Prenzlauer Berg, right where the wall was. When somebody could get his hands on a “Bravo” (Teen Magazine) or we could exchange some stickers for our collection – to me, that was the West. Later I thought: The moment of leaving is comparable to a separation. When you're in a relationship, which suffocates you, you will eventually think: I want to split up. But that doesn't necessarily mean there is already an alternative for this relationship. You don't

immediately know what kind of a new relationship you want to engage in – or what kind of life you want to live.

Those who left the GDR, had to begin a completely new life from one day to the next.

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: This is why the novel as well as the movie is a metaphor for many people. Emigration held a lot of hope for many, yet the new beginning turned out to be a lot harder than expected – especially on an emotional level. They entered this transitory space. Some have remained there, until today.

Did you have difficulties, settling in?

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: First, going away was more of an adventure, the yearning for a different life. I also remember, however, that it took us quite a while until we knew how to behave. For example, in school I was told: “You’ve got to be relieved to have escaped from this shitty country.” That’s when I realised that I felt different about it. Especially those first months were difficult. Sitting alone in the flat, in this small room, knowing that my parents were out of work. Dad roamed the streets like a mad man. And I found it unbearable that we had no money. I had no experience with being poor.

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Yet, it was actually quite easy for us, in comparison. Those, who went to the West when the wall was still up were not allowed to see their families for months, for years even. And if they couldn’t settle in there was no way to go back, to say: It was a mistake. That would have been interpreted as a defeat by the East. That’s what it’s like for Nelly Senff and Hans Pischke in the movie. Going back was hardly an option.

Instead, Nelly tries to make it in the West – also by resisting the questions, the interrogations.

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Yes, in the GDR we also tried that strategy and suddenly we were expected to conform to the West. And to be grateful at the same time! But Nelly insists on her scepticism and asks: Why should I deliver information? I was forced to give information to the Stasi and now that I’m here, I am to deliver information again? I’m not prepared to do that and that’s the end of it. That is in fact a great attitude.

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: But it wasn’t easy to communicate this kind of attitude in the West. One day at school I tried to explain that not everybody in the East had a terrible life and the teacher said to me: “Well, why don’t you go back to your damn Honecker, then!”

The film also works with overtones and ambivalence. Many questions remain unanswered for quite some time. For example, if Hans Pischke really is a Stasi informer or if Nelly Senff is in fact unaware of the fate of Alexei’s father, Vasily.

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: Yes, Hans Pischke is a shifty figure. He is unattached, has been living in the camp for two years now. Suddenly he’s a suspect, Nelly even asks him: “Why are you still here?” It might be, he’s trying to befriend Alexei in order to gather information about Vasily, yet he might actually be telling the truth. We leave many of those questions unanswered because we believe that this lack of certainty describes the interpersonal relationships of that time pretty precisely.

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Nelly can only see: How does this person behave as a human

being. In those days, there is no proof. In the script, we worked very hard on getting this point across. Because the most interesting aspect is: Nelly can only make her first step into freedom if she learns to trust again.

Nelly's motivation is to leave things behind. To get rid of the memories.

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: And this is totally detached from the East/West issue or from other asylum stories. It is something everybody has experienced at some point in his or her life, when the time had come to decide for a completely fresh start. And I believe that's what makes this story universal.

How long did you work on the script?

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: All in all: three years.

Did you meet often with Julia Franck, the author of the original novel, in the context of working on the script?

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Yes, especially in the beginning we met often and I asked her to simply tell me a lot of stories, which she can do very beautifully and very sensually. Once, we visited the Emergency Refugee Centre in Marienfelde together. Later on I sent her the different drafts, regularly. It was very important to me that she likes the movie.