

## ***Der Krieger und die Kaiserin: Transcript***

Today I will be looking at Tom Tykwer's film from 2000, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin*. *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* is about a nurse called Sissi who works in a psychiatric hospital. She has a complicated relationship with the patients: she's their carer, friend, lover, mother and daughter. One day she is involved in a traffic accident caused by a petty criminal, Bodo, who is trying to escape arrest. He saves her life before disappearing. Determined to find out who the stranger was, Sissi tracks him down only to discover that the man she thinks is the love of her life is battling his own demons following the death of his wife. Chance brings them back together when Sissi inadvertently becomes involved in his life of crime during a bank robbery. The pair escapes and Sissi hides Bodo in the psychiatric hospital at which she works. As their romance develops, the police close in on the pair. When they escape capture by fleeing the hospital, both characters have to face their past to put old ghosts to rest in order to create a new future together.

Tykwer's film is a really interesting film to look at in more detail. It's a fast-paced film which combines action, romance and psychological thriller. The film was a hit in Germany and abroad. It played at several international film festivals including Venice, Toronto and Berlin, and was nominated in five categories at the prestigious German Film Awards and in four categories at the European Film Awards.

*Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* is a film designed to speak to a new generation of Germans and today, I will be examining in more detail how the film reflects German identity in the twenty-first century.

### **Why is *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* an important film?**

*Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* challenges the ideas and expectations of what German film was supposed to be. At the end of the 1990s and start of the 2000s, successful German films tended to fall in to two categories: those made for a domestic German audience and those made with an eye to attracting international audiences. Those made specifically with a German audience in mind were often criticised for showing people and situations which had little to do with normal people's lives. For example, one German critic described these films as: 'Kino, das von Hollywood träumt, wie nicht einmal Hollywood selbst träumt. Es ist, kurzem, ein Kino, das keinen direkten oder indirekten Weg zur Wirklichkeit dieser Gesellschaft zu dieser Zeit finden kann' (Seeßlen and Jung 1997).

On the other hand, films that were made with the aim of appealing to international audiences tended to be weighed down in Germany's past. This was shown largely in one of two ways. Either filmmakers focused on the East German past in an increasingly light-hearted way in a manner that became known as *Ostalgie* in films such as *Sonnenallee* or *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, or they focussed on the National Socialist past (for example, *Aimée & Jaguar*, *Mutters Courage*, *Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod*). The second of these trends – the focus on the National Socialist past – was a particularly good topic for directors who wanted their film to be released abroad. For example, by the year 2000, German directors since unification had received three Best Foreign Film nominations at the Oscars, two of which were for films dealing with the National Socialist past.

Tykwer's film doesn't fit into either of these categories. *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* is a film for the new, post-unification Germany in which Germans can talk about who Germans

are, not who they aren't. By that, I mean the film doesn't feel the need to come to terms with the legacy of National Socialism and the GDR – and what Germans did in the past, but rather talks about who Germans are now.

I am now going to look at how *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* reflects German identity in the twenty-first century. The film does this in three important ways. Firstly, the film depicts a Germany not weighed down by the past. It is set in the present with young, engaging characters and makes no reference to Germany's past. Secondly, the film makes nods and winks to German culture and society which German audiences might well spot, but it doesn't let these examples get in the way of telling the story. If you don't spot these references it doesn't mean you enjoy the film any less. And this brings us on to the final point: the film is also full of references to non-German culture. By making a German film set in the present which non-Germans as well as Germans can enjoy equally, the director shows that Germany in the new millennium is a normal globalised country like any other western country.

So, how does Tykwer do this? We'll start by looking at how *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* uses examples from German culture and society by looking at the film's setting and the character of Sissi. Then we will look at how the film reflects Germany's international identity by showing that German films don't have to match the two stereotypes of German film we saw at the beginning – either utterly detached from reality or only interested with what Germany was in the past. We will do this by looking at the type of film *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* is and by exploring how it draws on examples from non-German films.

## **How does *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* reflect a specifically German identity?**

*Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* shows how German filmmakers can use examples from German culture and society without isolating international audiences. Let's start by looking at the film's setting. Tykwer grew up in Wuppertal and was keen to make a film in his home city. Now, Wuppertal is not an obvious setting for a film. The city is in the south of Germany's industrial region and certainly lacks the glamour and alternative culture of Berlin. Whilst international audiences may not even have heard of Wuppertal before, it is highly likely that German audiences would realise where the film is set very quickly because Tykwer includes iconic images from the city. For example, there is the famous Wuppertaler Schwebebahn, a type of suspended railway, and the Wuppertaler Sparkassenhochhaus, a well known skyscraper in the city.

It's not just clues from the film's setting German audiences are likely to spot. The name Sissi is a very important name in German film history. Now if we, as a non-German audience, can understand the significance of this name, it will let us better understand how the film reflects a new, confident German identity. The most successful film of the 1950s in Germany was a film called *Sissi*. The film is set in the late nineteenth century and is about a German princess called Sissi who marries the Austrian emperor. The film is about fairytale romances and glamorous stories about the past in which what made Germany special is celebrated. In the film, the character Sissi is very much a figure from the past: she lives in a patriarchal society and she doesn't question her place in it.

Sissi is such an iconic name in German cinema history that the decision to call the heroine Sissi in *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* should be seen as a deliberate attempt by the director to

encourage his audience to think of the 1955 film when they see his Sissi. Indeed, by calling the heroine 'Die Kaiserin' in the film's title, Tykwer really stresses this point. Why might Tykwer want his audience to think of a character from another film? Well, the Sissi from the 1950s film was a character from the past and was a celebration of all that Germany was in the past. Tykwer turns his Sissi into a woman for the twenty-first century. To see how he does this, let's look at the two women and the two films side-by-side. The 1950s film aims to show an idyllic past. It is set in the forests and mountains of Germany in a male-dominated society. It looks backwards and is nostalgic for what Germany was. It celebrates what made Germany special and upholds strong, traditional families. Now, Tykwer's film is set in a fast-paced, MTV-style world. It's set in a city rather than in rural landscapes and looks forward rather than backwards, asking not what was Germany or what made Germany special, but rather asks what is Germany and celebrates makes Germany normal. It features broken families and instead shows alternative support networks like friends and colleagues. And, most importantly, its female lead is a strong woman who decides her own fate, and is more powerful than the male characters in the film. By comparing the two characters, we can see how Tykwer reinvents the Sissi character for the twenty-first century. She is a strong woman who decides her own fate. She is not controlled by men and makes her own decisions. The director also shows Germany as a fast-paced, modern country rather than setting his story in the past in a fairytale-like world.

However, we have to be careful when talking about the specifically German aspects of the film. The setting may be Wuppertal and the director may include iconic landmarks of the city, but Tykwer also said that he chose his home city as the film's setting because the high-rise buildings among the hills reminded him of a German San Francisco and the

Schwebbahn reminded him of the elevated railway in Brooklyn. So Tykwer was using Wuppertal because it was both recognisable to a German audience but also because it could quite easily stand for another city. This is important for non-German audiences because Wuppertal could easily stand for a city in any country, so when we watch the film we are likely to see it as an action film, romance or psychological thriller rather than just as a foreign theme with foreign issues. Instead, it is an internationally recognisable story set in an international city. And this is really important for understanding how the film reflects a twenty-first century German identity. The film doesn't deny its German location and it includes shot of specifically German icons. But at the same time the film shows that this city could be anywhere and that Germany has cities just like any other Western country. There's no a trace of National Socialist architecture or the East German past in sight.

Secondly, you don't need to know anything about German film history to understand that Sissi is a strong female character. This doesn't just apply to international audiences: young German audiences may well not have seen the 1955 film either. If you are aware of the connotations of the name Sissi, you can appreciate the film on a different level. But it is important to remember that it's not just international audiences that might not know about the significance of the name Sissi. If you know about German film history, you can understand the point the director is making by calling his lead character Sissi. But if you don't, it doesn't spoil your enjoyment of the film.

## **How does *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* show a new, international German identity?**

We have already seen how *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* uses German film references in the story. But if we take another look at the film, we can see that there are also lots of international references that audiences both in and outside of Germany can recognise.

You might have spotted the first reference: it's to the 1997 film *Titanic*. When Bodo leans over a bridge and pretends to fly, it seems like the director is restaging a scene from *Titanic* when the lead character Jack shouts 'I'm the king of the world'. The second example in which Tykwer uses an iconic image from a well-known film is when an exhausted Bodo sits in a chair with a towel round his neck. He looks like an exhausted boxer, just like in the iconic 1980 film, *Raging Bull*. Then there's the film's very setting. The way both the hospital and the patients are depicted, especially in the group scenes, has clear echoes from a well-known 1975 film called *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Finally, the scene towards the end of the film in which Bodo gets on a bus in the middle of the countryside is copied from a famous scene in the 1959 film *North by Northwest*.

Now, there are really interesting discussions to be had about *why* Tykwer recreates scenes from these films and puts them in his film. We don't have time to look at each individual example in this presentation, but if you're interested in thinking about this some more, have a look at the discussion questions accompanying this presentation. For the purposes of this presentation and the discussion of German identity in the film, we can just concentrate on the question of why Tykwer might have included so many international film references.

By making nods and winks to international films from different periods, Tykwer lets a wider audience (by which I mean a wider age range and wide national background) appreciate the

film's play recreation of famous scenes in film history. To go back to the start of this presentation, we looked at how German films that were successful abroad at the end of the 1990s were generally films set in either East Germany or Nazi Germany. But Tykwer avoids referencing Germany's past. He chooses a story that international audiences can easily relate to – there is nothing particularly German about Sissi and Bodo's story – and includes lots of references to international films which also downplays the film's Germanness. He tries to include the widest audience he can and show that German film doesn't have to include foreign references or be set in the past to seem familiar.

### **How can we understand *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* as a film exploring a new German identity?**

So, let's bring all these points together. Tykwer is very clever in how he presents his film. On the one hand, there's no hiding the fact that *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* is a German film. It's made by a German director with a German cast and the dialogue is in German. It's set in a German city and includes references to an iconic German film. On the other hand, however, you could say that *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* is an international film that just happens to be in German: it uses international cultural references, universal storylines and, if you didn't know the film was set in Wuppertal, you could think that it was an American city.

This sense that the film presents Germany as just the same as any other globalised country is really important in understanding how the film deals with questions of national identity. The film shows that Germany is a normal country and no different from the UK, France or the US for example. This emphasis on 'normal' is key to understanding the film's significance as a

film that discusses German identity in the twenty-first century. For decades, Germany was defined by what made it different: its National Socialist past, the East German dictatorship, the Berlin Wall. All of this is absent in *Der Krieger und die Kasierin*. Instead we see a normal city with characters who could easily appear in an American or European film. The director is able to make specifically German references to the film's setting or German film history, but he does this in a confident way that doesn't let the uniquely German aspects get in the way of telling an internationally accessible story. Most importantly, the film doesn't get bogged down in the German past. Indeed, as the character of Bodo shows, being haunted by the past can stop you living in the present. When Bodo is able to start a new life with Sissi, he doesn't forget his wife or what happened to her, he just comes to terms with it. It happened, it was traumatic, but that belongs to the past. In a way, the film does the same with the German past.

In November 1998, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder delivered a speech to the Bundestag in which he stated:

Unser Nationalbewusstsein basiert [...] nicht auf den Traditionen eines wilhelminischen „Abstammungsrechts“, sondern auf der Selbstgewissheit unserer Demokratie. Wir sind stolz auf dieses Land, auf seine Landschaften, auf seine Kultur, auf die Kreativität und den Leistungswillen seiner Menschen. Wir sind stolz auf die Älteren, die dieses Land nach dem Krieg aufgebaut und ihm seinen Platz in einem friedlichen Europa geschaffen haben. Wir sind stolz auf die Menschen im Osten unseres Landes, die das Zwangssystem der SED-Diktatur abgeschüttelt und die Mauer zum Einsturz gebracht haben. Was ich hier formuliere, ist das Selbstbewusstsein einer erwachsenen Nation, die sich niemandem über-, aber auch niemandem unterlegen fühlen muss, die sich der Geschichte und ihrer

Verantwortung stellt, aber bei aller Bereitschaft, sich damit auseinanderzusetzen, doch nach vorne blickt. (Schröder 1998)

*Der Krieger und die Kaiserin* can be said to embody this very spirit. It is a film that doch nach vorne blickt.

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