



BOWIE: STARMAN AND THE SILVER SCREEN

Christiane F.

Christiane F., Kai Hermann's biography of a teen junkie and sex worker, caused a scandal on publication. As a recovering cocaine addict and father, Bowie was shocked at witnessing teenagers getting their smack money from pick-ups at Berlin Zoo and so became interested in this film adaptation. Within the film, Bowie's live show, tonally perfect *Station to Station*-era soundtrack and omnipresent image – on streets, subways and on vinyl albums passed from hand to hand – positioned him as a brooding god for the alienated youth of 70s West Berlin.

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In the 70s it was up to rock stars to create urban legends for Berlin. Bowie's album *Heroes* – recorded in the summer of 1977 at the Hansa studio then adjacent to the Berlin wall – followed in the footsteps of Lou Reed's melancholic and disturbing 1973 *Berlin* in finding in the divided city an urban analogue for fashionable pop nihilism. 'Berlin,' said Bowie at the time, while apparently dealing with his drug problem in Neuköln, 'is a city made up of bars for sad, disillusioned people to get drunk in.' Bowie's status as patron saint of a doomed city of post-punk lovers kissing under the guard towers to the beat of German techno rock was confirmed by Uli Edel's remorseless 1981 adaptation of *Christiane F.*, which used his music to evoke the mood of the city. The film's source – an autobiographical reportage by an anonymous 13 year-old heroin-addicted prostitute – created an indelible impression of West Berlin as a city of degradation and squalor when it was serialised in *Stern* magazine, and Edel's film became a phenomenal box-office success. Its mode of confessional naturalism, with a concomitant quotient of *nostalgie de la boue*, allowed such films as Frank Ripploh's *Taxi zum Klo* (1981) to build a bridge into a decade in which queer issues would place themselves centrally on West Berlin's agenda.

Richard Falcon, *Sight and Sound*, November 2001

A contemporary review

A best-seller for nearly two years in West Germany, *Christiane F.* is a bleak, unsensationalised account written up from 'confessions' Christiane F. originally made to two journalists from *Stern* magazine. Respecting this origin, Ulrich Edel's feature adopts an austere semi-documentary style in which colour is drained from the images, performances are underplayed almost to the point of blankness, and locations are emptied of their intrinsic attractiveness. In a limited sense, therefore, this may be the ultimate Berlin movie, the flip side of the familiar image (confirmed in a recent film like *Asphaltnacht*) of the city as a 'beacon' of Western values flashing out over the 'greyness' of the GDR. Decadence, *the* traditional Berlin characteristic, here takes on a chillingly new inflection that almost escapes the romantic tinge the city's chroniclers invariably indulge.

Yet even in this movie, one sequence manages to echo earlier Berlin films (such as Wenders' modernist homage *Summer in the City*). Christiane's friends from Sound gather on the roof of an office block after raiding a

shopping precinct and watch the police searching for them far below; directly overhead, a huge circular Mercedes symbol constantly turns its illuminated face on the city, a sign which simultaneously evokes the Nazi war machine and the post-war 'economic miracle' (whose indifferent inheritors are caught in its glare on the rooftop).

For the most part, however, the movie's aesthetics are a direct product of the circumstances of its making. The area around the Zoo station is under East German control and Edel's unit was apparently refused permission to shoot there. The sequence was therefore shot on the run, using only available light. The resulting raw 'documentary' footage featuring the prostitute pick-ups and the dope dealers in the street is endowed with an authenticity that serves as a keynote for the rest of the movie. Thus, on the whole, Edel prefers to compose in long shot on location (watching Christiane streetwalking from the viewpoint of a prospective client, or capturing her dilemma outside the Bowie concert in a series of shots that isolate her from the vast crowd pouring out of the concert hall).

Close-ups, it follows, have a specific function in the *mise-en-scène* beyond the conventional usage, pointing up the reality of the fix and the horrific changes in the addicts' features. After her initial reluctance to inject herself with heroin, Christiane is soon searching her body for spare veins. Edel pulls no punches out of consideration for needle-shy viewers, and in a later sequence has an older addict inject a vein in his neck after all the others have been exhausted. All the iconography of dope movies – the plastic packets, the hidden syringe, the blood spilling on white toilet enamel – scarcely prepares the viewer for the 'cold turkey' sequence which, for all its incongruity (how has Mrs. F. found Detlef and why would she leave them alone to withdraw together anyway?), is perhaps the film's most persuasive argument against heroin. With a sparing use of slow motion and a soundtrack composed largely of groans and retching, this scene makes Gene Hackman's cold turkey in *French Connection II* seem like a mild attack of indigestion.

At the moment when the kids come back on the street after withdrawal, the film reaches its most overt formal crisis, unsure of its next move and having to choose between following the unstructured life-style of the 'blank generation' it has so successfully depicted earlier, or pursuing the convention of the Christiane/Detlef love story to some kind of conclusion. From this point, the movie revolves more round the theme of prostitution and strays dangerously close to moralising. Thankfully, it eschews a straight happy ending and leaves the situation open, simultaneously hopeful (Christiane's 'escape') and cautious (Detlef's continuing struggle).

Given the extraordinary nature of the undertaking, the 'lived-in' research, and the casting of unknown, first-time actors, Edel may have been grateful for 'the participation of David Bowie' as some kind of advance box-office guarantee (although, in the event, Bowie contributes only a few numbers from his super-Aryan 'Heroes/Helden' era). Edel, a first-time director from German TV, has impressively mounted an anti-heroin movie that neither sensationalises nor patronises.

Martyn Auty, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1982

CHRISTIANE F. (WIR KINDER VOM BAHNHOF ZOO)

Director: Ulrich Edel
Production Companies: Solaris Film, Maran-Film, Popular-Film, Hans H. Kaden, CLV Filmproduktion
Producers: Bernd Eichinger, Hans Weth
Production Managers: Peter Rothkopf, Edgar Hinz
Production Supervisors: Harald Muchametow, Sabine Eichinger
Assistant Directors: Petra Materne, Babette Kirchof
Screenplay: Herman Weigel
Original book: Kai Hermann, Horst Rieck
Photography: Justus Pankau, Jürgen Jürges
Assistant Photographers: Achim Poulheim, Hans-Günther Bücking
Editor: Jane Seitz
Props: Udo Gaidosch
Costumes: Myrella Bordt
Wardrobe: Christel Braake
Make-up: Colin Arthur
Title Design: Sickerts
Music: Jürgen Knieper
Sound Recording: Lothar Mankewitz, Hieronymus Würden
Sound Re-recording: Hans-Dieter Schwarz

Cast

Natja Brunckhorst (*Christiane F.*)
Thomas Haustein (*Detlef*)
Jens Kuphal (*Axel*)
Rainer Wölk (*Leiche*)
Jan Georg Effler (*Bernd*)
Christiane Reichelt (*Babsi*)
Daniela Jaeger (*Kessi*)
Kerstin Richter (*Stella*)
Peggy Bussieck (*Puppi*)
Kerstin Malessa (*Tina*)
Cathrine Schabeck (*Linda*)
Andreas Fuhrmann (*Atze*)
Lutz Hemmerling (*Bienenstich*)
Uwe Diderich (*Klaus*)
Lothar Chamski (*Rolf*)
Christiane Lechle (*Christiane's mother*)
Ellen Esser (*Kessi's mother*)
Stanislaus Solotar (*Max the stammerer*)
Eberhart Auriga (*other drug addict*)
David Bowie (*himself*)

West Germany 1981
131 mins

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The Prestige

Sat 1 Jan 17:30, Tue 11 Jan 20:30

Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence

Sat 1 Jan 20:30, Sat 8 Jan 18:20, Thu 20 Jan 20:30

Christiane F. (Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo)

Sun 2 Jan 15:00, Fri 21 Jan 20:30

Absolute Beginners

Sun 2 Jan 18:00, Fri 14 Jan 20:40 (+ Inside Cinema: David Bowie),
Fri 28 Jan 20:45

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me

Tue 4 Jan 17:50, Mon 10 Jan 20:20

Basquiat

Wed 5 Jan 18:10, Sun 16 Jan 15:20 (+ Inside Cinema: David Bowie)

Bug Special: David Bowie

Thu 6 Jan 20:50, Fri 7 Jan 20:50

Labyrinth

Sat 8 Jan 12:00, Sun 9 Jan 13:00, Wed 26 Jan 18:10

BFI Course: David Bowie: So I Felt like an Actor

Sat 8 Jan 15:45

The Man Who Fell to Earth

Sat 8 Jan 20:10, Mon 17 Jan 14:30, Sun 30 Jan 18:10

Cracked Actor + Oddities + Inside Cinema: David Bowie

Sun 9 Jan 16:10

Ziggy Stardust & The Spiders from Mars

Sun 9 Jan 18:10 (+ Inside Cinema: David Bowie), Mon 24 Jan 20:30

The Hunger

Mon 10 Jan 18:10, Sat 22 Jan 20:50

Baal + extended intro by Adrian Wootton

+ Pierrot in Turquoise or The Looking Glass Murders

Wed 19 Jan 18:00

Bowie at Glastonbury 2000

Sat 22 Jan 18:00

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Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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