

MOVIES

'The Ground Beneath My Feet' ('Der Boden unter den Fuessen'): Film Review | Berlin 2019

7:00 AM PST 2/9/2019 by Boyd van Hoeij



Courtesy of the Berlin Film Festival

THE BOTTOM LINE

An impressively controlled feature about the messy nature of contemporary life. [🐦](#)

Austrian director Marie Kreutzer's Berlin competition title looks at the incompatible professional and private lives of a female restructuring expert in Germany.

A talented business consultant specialized in saving companies from bankruptcy through drastic measures has a harder time keeping her private life from going under in *The Ground Beneath My Feet* (*Der Boden unter den Fuessen*), the striking fourth feature from Austrian director Marie Kreutzer (*The Fatherless*).

This handsomely staged and impressively acted feature starts off as a coolly detached observational film about Lola, a thirtyish businesswoman whose entire m.o. is based on coldly calculating costs and facts without letting her feelings interfere — as she suggests to a single mother who risks being laid off. But her responsibility for her older sister, who's mentally ill and suspects she's being treated and held against her will, and Lola's complicated relationship with her boss-cum-lover, inevitably start to cause hairline fractures in the protagonist's impeccably groomed façade.

This is at once an accessible arthouse drama about Lola's emotionally frayed sisterly and amorous ties and a clinically observed portrait of a 21st-century woman trying to stay afloat in a ruthlessly profit-oriented economy where feelings are the enemy of efficiency. These two lives are of course mutually incompatible for Lola, though Kreutzer has done a superb job of fusing them into a complex yet tonally coherent work that should be a solid seller for sales agent Picture Tree International, especially in Europe. *The Ground Beneath My Feet* will be released in Austria in late March and in Germany in May.

Lola (Valerie Pachner) isn't afraid to pull a "48" every now and again at work, a 48-hour shift without any sleep. Her colleagues, all also as young and driven as her, don't seem at all surprised by their co-worker's dedication to her job, especially because they know she's single and an orphan, without any family to look after or even just hang out with. The truth, however, is a little more complex, as she's actually the legal guardian of her 40-year-old half-sibling, Conny (Pia Hierzegger), who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia and who has suicidal tendencies, a fact Lola tries to deny ("she was dopey and had a dosage problem," she tells herself when Conny has swallowed 120 pills and ends up in the hospital).

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Further complicating Lola's care for Conny is the fact that her work mostly takes her to Germany even though she lives in the Austrian capital, Vienna. When the film opens, she's involved in trying to save a company in Rostock, on the Baltic Sea, about as far from Austria as one can be in Germany. Since no one is aware of her family situation and the attention her sister requires at the most inconvenient times, she has to disappear for long unexplained phone calls and meetings "at the airport," where prospective clients are supposedly between flights (it has to be noted that Rostock Airport isn't exactly a European transfer hub, though her colleagues are either too busy to notice or simply don't care).

Kreutzer, who also wrote the screenplay, does a deft job of suggesting how Lola tries but increasingly fails to keep her professional and private lives separate, even though her personal life is in one country and her professional one in another. Troubling the waters even more is Lola's relationship with her immediate superior Elise (Mavie Hoerbiger), though the two women seem more interested in physical rather than emotional closeness, with even Elise initially buying Lola's "orphan" routine. In the dialogues, Kreutzer drops hints that suggest something about the many contradictions in Lola's life. For example, the consultant tells herself and the doctors that her sister isn't suicidal — which would be a much more convenient reality for Lola — but the first thing she asks a doctor when he unexpectedly calls is: "Is she dead?" which betrays what she's really thinking.

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Similarly, the odd relationship between Lola and Elise, which they have to keep a secret from their colleagues, becomes more multifaceted and fascinating when Elise finally does find out about Conny. Instead of simply rejecting Lola for lying to her or giving her the unconditional moral support she would need, Elise turns inwards. Could the affliction be something that runs in the family? Or, even if that's not the case, can Lola still deliver the necessary 48s that the job requires? Elise, who needs to make a decision about who to promote from her team, is then faced with the impossible intersection of her love and professional lives as well in a kind negative image of her lover and member of staff.

In the end, though, *The Ground Beneath My Feet* is very much a portrait of one woman, and Pachner shines in her first collaboration with Kreutzer. The Austrian actress recently caught people's attention in the biopic *Egon Schiele: Death and the Maiden* and was also cast in Terrence Malick's upcoming *Radegund* and it's easy to see why, as every internal tug-of-war between opposing feelings fully registers on her face.

She's always perfectly dressed for her job, with costume designer Monika Buttinger capturing the kind of soulless chic that defines much of today's power wardrobes. Lola's blond 'do is also always perfectly coiffed but it does have much darker roots, which suggests not only how her professional appearance is really just a semi-permanent mask but also how, even though she might try to hide it, she's clearly related to her half-sister, also a brunette.

Kreutzer and her regular cinematographer, Leena Koppe, do a fabulous job in terms of composition and mise-en-scene, with the horizontality of the widescreen images often broken up by the vertical figure of Lola, as if she's disrupting a kind of harmony she struggles to be a part of. Editor Ulrike Kofler, also a Kreutzer regular, smoothly toggles between the different story strands while ensuring the tempo always matches Lola's state of mind. Especially some of the subplots in the midsection aren't fully resolved, which feels appropriate for this story about a woman whose state of mind has become one of such stressful overload that there are constantly small things that escape her attention. With this in mind, the narrative's brutal ending isn't all that shocking, as Lola needs a rude awakening so she can finally concentrate on herself rather than on the people and the work in front of her.

Production company: Novotny & Novotny Filmproduktion

Cast: Valerie Pachner, Pia Hierzegger, Mavie Hoerbiger, Michelle Barthel, Marc Benjamin, Axel Sichrovsky, Dominic Marcus Singer, Meo Wulf

Writer-Director: Marie Kreutzer

Producers: Alexander Glehr, Franz Novotny

Director of photography: Leena Koppe

Production designer: Martin Reiter

Costume designer: Monika Buttinger

Editor: Ulrike Kofler

Music: Kyrre Kvam

Casting: Rita Waszilovics

Sales: Picture Tree International

Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Competition)

In German, English

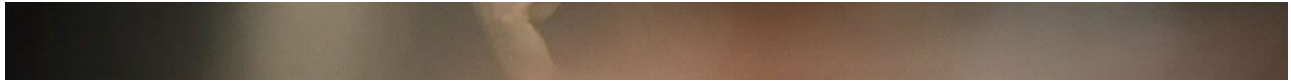
No rating, 108 minutes

MOVIES


'A Dog Called Money': Film Review | Berlin 2019

3:46 PM PST 2/9/2019 by Stephen Dalton





Courtesy of Berlinale

THE BOTTOM LINE
Lacks bite. 

Director Seamus Murphy's unorthodox music documentary records his collaboration with PJ Harvey on her 2016 album 'The Hope Six Demolition Project.'

Revered British alt-rocker Polly Jean Harvey is the elusive subject of *A Dog Called Money*, a mongrel mix of music documentary, war-zone travelogue and multi-media art project. A key collaborator on Harvey's last two albums, Irish photojournalist turned director Seamus Murphy recorded the unorthodox creation of her 2016 opus *The Hope Six Demolition Project* from start to finish. World premiered at the Berlin film festival today, this impressionistic film is his belated record of their bold shared experiment.

Murphy's documentary – or dogumentary, if you will – is full of arresting imagery but lacks narrative shape or journalistic rigor. While the talent and ambition behind the duo's collaboration is hard to fault, *A Dog Called Money* is a freewheeling visual collage which unearths little of substance from a potentially fascinating mass of material. Harvey's devoted global following will undoubtedly help it find an audience, but Murphy's film is less than the sum of its parts. It has also taken a suspiciously long time from gestation to completion, losing any timely bite it might have had when its sister album was still topping charts and winning Grammy nominations.

Murphy first worked with Harvey on her hugely acclaimed 2011 album *Let England Shake*, taking photographs and directing short films to accompany each track. For *The Hope Six Demolition Project*, the duo made a strategic decision to work in tandem from the start, drawing on the same shared first-hand experiences to fashion an album with a globalized political outlook. They began with a series of exploratory missions to Kosovo, Afghanistan and the poor, mostly black neighborhoods of Washington D.C. While Murphy took photos and shot footage, Harvey recorded her impressions in a notebook, which she later drafted into poems and lyrics.

Once the songs were ready, the second part of the project involved Harvey and her band recording the album in a specially zoned-off studio space beneath Somerset House in central London, their working process visible to public spectators who observed from behind darkened one-way glass. Once again, Murphy was on hand with his camera to gather fly-on-the-wall footage from this bizarre rock-star version of *The Truman Show*.

Given its rich mix of source material and potential story angles, Murphy's film is a disappointingly mundane, unrevealing affair. He edits down his globe-trotting adventures with Harvey into scrappy soundbite clips, cutting between time zones and continents with little guiding logic. Random Afghan, Kosovan and African-American characters make fleeting cameos, sometimes discussing past traumas or tragedies, then are quickly forgotten as the film zips elsewhere.

Harvey pops up in extraordinary settings – the only white face in a black church in wintry Washington, the only woman at a ritual circumcision ceremony in the sun-baked Kosovan hills – but with little or no context to make sense of these images. At times the whole experience feels dangerously close to the kind of voyeuristic tourism once derided by punk godfather Johnny Rotten as a cheap holiday in other people's misery.

To his credit, Murphy has a keen eye for visual detail: looming children's faces, stunning snowy valleys, the hair-trigger body language of heavily armed U.S. soldiers on patrol in Kabul. And Harvey has an easy magnetism on screen, especially in the studio clips when she shifts register from shy country girl to howling, growling, otherworldly siren. But she is also notoriously private, and Murphy never presses her into sharing even basic interview details about herself or the Hope Six project. As a result, Harvey sometimes feels like a minor character in her own documentary.

Murphy's free-ranging choice of material is also baffling at times. Clips of Syrian protesters marching against Assad or refugees massing on the Greek/Macedonian border were clearly shot with no input from Harvey, and have scant relevance to her album. The footage of rowdy Trump supporters is particularly odd, considering the album was recorded in 2015 and released in April 2016, all before Trump formally launched his presidential campaign. There are teasing glimpses of artistic genius in *A Dog Called Money*, but eccentric choices and muddled intentions too. A talent as strong and singular as Harvey deserves a more probing, less indulgent film than this.

Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Panorama)

Production companies: Pulse Films, Blinder Films, JW Films

Cast: Polly Jean Harvey, Mick Harvey, John Parish

Director, screenwriter, cinematographer: Seamus Murphy

Producers: Isabel Davis, Katie Holly, James Wilson, Seamus Murphy

Editor: Sebastian Gollek

Music: Polly Jean Harvey

Sales company: Outlook, Vienna

90 minutes

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