



More or less constantly, ever since the Fall, Oskar Roehler has filmed the shifting, promising, perilous grounds of Berlin. From his 1995 *Gentleman to Tod den Hippies, es lebe der Punk* in post-production right now; from *No Place to Go to Elementary Particles* and *Sources of Life* among many others: Roehler films as he writes, honestly, daringly, sensitively. Visceral, but witty, he tells us layered tales of half-familiar people, who find themselves in complex places and incredible times. On the phone fresh from the set, he speaks of family, literature and politics, of John Waters and David Lynch, of his own destructive '80s, uplifting '90s, and the hopeful freedom that lays ahead for years yet to come.

by Silvia Bombardini / photography Miron Zownir

1. Silvia Bombardini: Ever since *Symphony of a Great City*, Berlin has basked in the spotlights. She was in your firstborn *Gentleman* twenty years ago, and shines now in your latest *Tod den Hippies, es lebe der Punk*. What in the film does Berlin stand for, to the eyes of lead character Robert?

Oskar Roehler: This is a movie about the beginning of the '80s. It was a completely desolate place, haunted by the war, a ruined city. And we all went there because we were fed up with West Germany and all of its bourgeois bullshit. In Berlin you could make jokes, very good jokes about it. A cynical culture arose, like in London, against all those lies that you heard on radio and TV, and that none of us who were then in our twenties were really into. We were interested in art, and in our own very dark view of the future. We all thought, "Ok, let's go on, then the atomic winter will come and everything will be destroyed so let's just have fun," you know? It didn't matter what the next day would bring.

2. SB: Looking back at *Gentleman* now, how would you say your work has matured over the years — or has it? If your younger self could watch your more recent films, would he think that you've softened a bit?

OR: It was a very destructive time, and *Gentleman* was about destruction. I wasn't interested in showing the world the way it's usually shown by the entertainment industry — to please people when they look at it. I wanted to show the audience some bad vices. My work has changed a lot, but I've just made this new movie that is very anarchic and very back to my roots. Maybe it now has more of a dark sense of humor, but the John Waters kind. There's a lot of shit going on, both in the minds of the characters and in their attitude, and what happens to them is quite disastrous, but I think it's funny. People laugh when they see it because the characters are driven by their own kind of weird ideas, and they have no real sense of reality because in Berlin it didn't exist, there was no sense of reality, reality didn't exist there.

3. SB: Before stepping behind the camera you were already an accomplished screenwriter — most notably you worked on Schlingensief's *Terror 2000*, and *The 120 Days of Bottrop* — both of which were shown at MoMA this summer as part of a huge retrospective of his work. But is this where these films belong, in a museum? Won't this make them a bit elitist?

OR: Well, I think they are extreme arthouse movies, so where should they be? I think it's an honor if that happens to you. Christoph was very much in the art scene in the last years of his life. He was much more connected to the art scene than to the film scene, so he had friends there, and they protected him, and wanted to give his work some kind of duration. I have no idea whether the films are so great that they belong in a museum; I have no idea whether that's cool or not. But they were very extreme.

4. SB: And it's true that satire, especially in German theaters, hardly ever receives an unanimously warm welcome. How can German cinema respect history, please the audience, and not come off as almost shockingly boring at the same time?

OR: I have no idea, and I'm fucking not interested

in these issues anymore. I please the people who like my movies, you know? And I'm quite free to say what I want. They all want to please all the time and I'm very, very bored by that. Because in Germany, this is always bad conscience. When they try to be politically correct and none of it is true anyhow, why should I go with it? It's just the same attitude as 70 years ago, if you look at all those TV movies made by the Nazis in which these young Germans have their conflicts with Jewish people yet they try to be nice or whatever: all they wanted was to divert the audience's awareness from what was really happening in the country. There is never a time when entertainment could be said to reflect the political situation in any way. It's always bullshit entertainment. The jokes are the same, the kind of petit bourgeois attitude is the same, the characters always stupid, they're the same as in the Nazi era. It hasn't changed at all.

5. SB: In your case though, the auto-biographical fil rouge that links most of your leads could almost point towards a therapeutic, cathartic kind of filmmaking. Is this how you see it?

OR: Ah, I know what you mean. But I don't think so. See, I can only write autobiographical stuff anyway — I can't invent stories, I don't have a talent for it. I would like to, but I can't do it. I'm a writer too — my second novel is being published now and the first one was quite successful; the German title was . I write about my family, and the incredible things that happened to them. Even my father, who was still traumatized by the war. He went to war when he was 15, and he never got over this trauma, but nobody knew about it. I have so much to tell about what happened in my life, but there's always an abstract idea, a moral behind it. It's never just going back to my biography because there's nothing else to say. It's always about bigger issues. And then I break them down to the people I know and the characters I know, because everything I do is character-driven and I have to know the people I write about.

6. SB: Your much-praised *No Place to Go* in fact outlines the last days in the life of your mother, before her suicide. Did the film perhaps provide you with a better understanding of her choices, a glimpse from her perspective through the filter of Hannelore Elsner's performance?

OR: Not really, I mean, this was a movie in some way about an historical moment. She was a very lonely figure, politically and humanly lost, at a time when everything went down. It was like a maelstrom. *No Place to Go* was a drama about one woman of that generation, when the political ideals she believed in were suddenly not true anymore. It was not only about my mother, it was a film about the time. And about loneliness, you know? I used my mother, the knowledge I have about her, because she was the perfect person to personify this. She did things that time has enlarged, has made much bigger than they would normally be.

7. SB: For Hanna Flanders in the film, the fall of the wall is a catastrophe: her self-perception and credibility are demolished along. How about you? What unforeseen effects did the fall have on both your life and work back then?

OR: For a start, that I could make this movie!

[Laughs]. Well, oh, a lot of things. It was a completely new time. Everything good came from the opening of the wall for me. For my mind, my life... I met my wife back in the '90s, I started to work, to have some kind of success with what I do, it was the best ten years. We'd have these big parties day and night without all those really uncool drugs I took in the '80s. In the '80s my behavior was very self-destructive, but in the '90s we were very open-minded towards other people, we were breathing fresh air. In a way it was the same at the very beginning of the '80s, people settling in Berlin like it was a new landscape, but in the '90s it was different because it was a positive one. You would hug everybody and love mankind. Berlin was like a school in positive thinking.

8. SB: Let's move on to *Elementary Particles*. You've mentioned how complex it was to film it, due to the structure of Houellebecq's novel: the "beauty in the abyss," that literature may uproot, doesn't easily translate on camera. As both a writer and a director, why do we so often try to bring books to the screen?

OR: Other people do it and will always do it to be more successful, or because they don't have enough ideas of their own. I've tried to do it twice: first with *Elementary Particles*, and I didn't succeed, and the second time it was with my last film, *Quellen des Lebens*, which was based on my own novel that I wrote 4 years ago. I think I did a good job there. I don't know why, but I think it was much, much better. But I am not a big fan of movies adapted from novels. I think they're often quite boring.

9. SB: Is there one in your mind though, or a director perhaps, who could pull it off nonetheless?

OR: Mhm, yes, there were some. Wasn't Forman's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* after a novel too? Yes it was, and that's a fantastic example. I think it sometimes happens, but my favorite movies are not based on novels. For me the most impressive director of the last thirty years for example is David Lynch. No doubt about it. He can show that beauty in the abyss, for sure.

10. SB: My last question is about the future: what are you working on at the moment, what shall we expect?

OR: There's my new movie which I've finished now, *Tod den Hippies, es lebe der Punk*, and I'm almost done polishing my novel. I also wrote a TV series, based on a 1940s German novel actually, but one that was really very good for film. It's about the rise of the bourgeoisie in Germany, the beginning of anti-Semitism and the fall of the aristocracy. There are three plotlines, two love stories and a friendship that touch on these matters and interweave. But I'm not so much connected to the industry or making phone calls all day. I want to be really free. I'm very free in my mind and I need a lot of space for myself, to create what's important to me, and that's the best thing I can do.