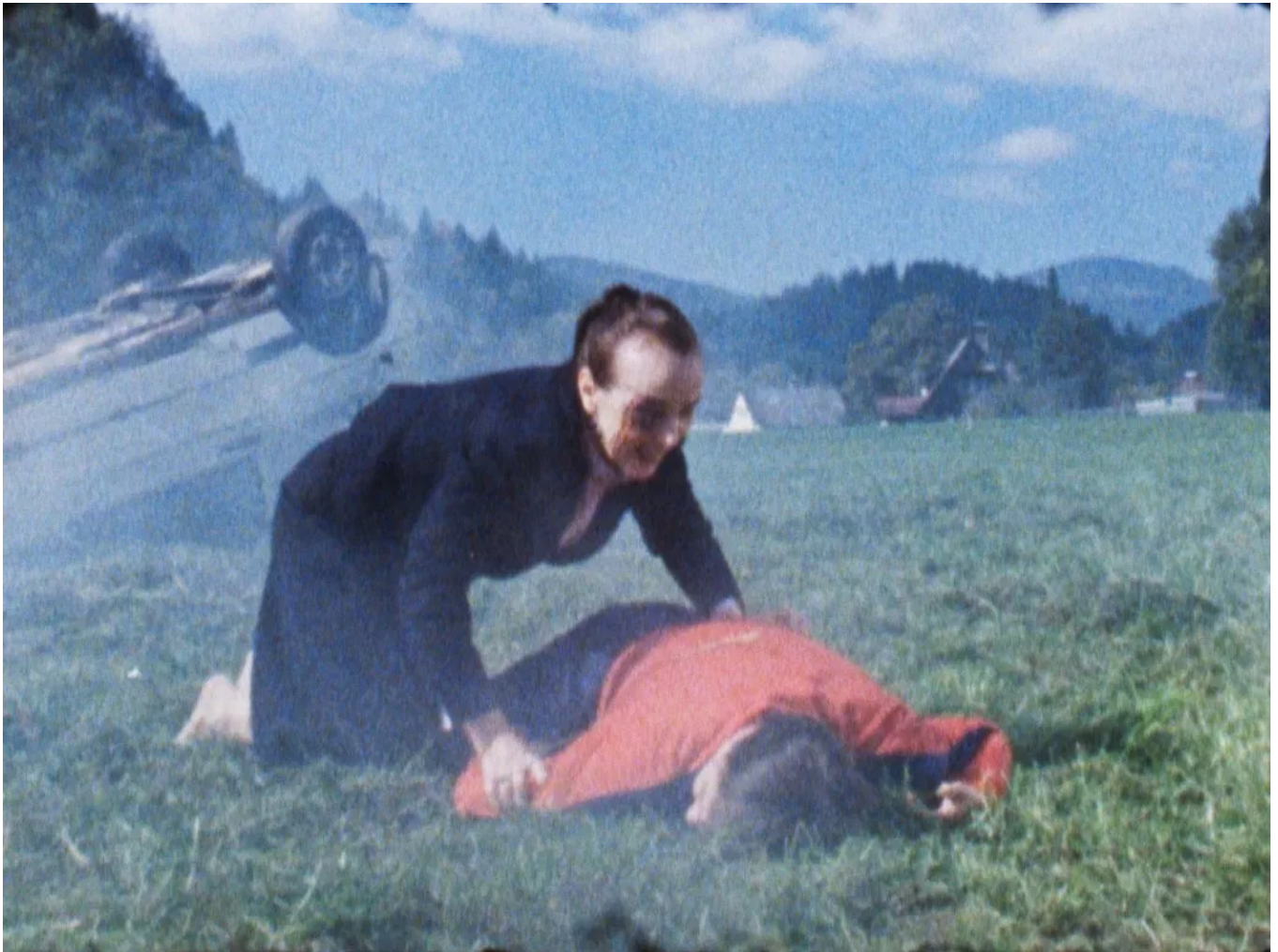


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MACABRE DANCING: 'DIE KINDER DER TOTEN' ('THE CHILDREN OF THE DEAD') – BERLINALE

Elfriede Jelinek's novel *Die Kinder der Toten* [*The Children of the Dead*, 1995], which has yet to be translated into English, tends to be described in forbidding terms: long, fractured, obscure, genre-bending, kitsch, pun-filled, perspective-switching, surreal. I haven't read it, but then neither have Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška, the directors of this adaptation of the same name, who based their screenplay on 100 pages of a rough translation alongside second-hand accounts of the plot. They nonetheless seem to have succeeded in capturing something of the novel's core preoccupations and atmosphere: the film is a darkly comic and deliberately bewildering engagement with the history of fascism in Austria.

The film's narrative begins at the pension Alpenrose, whose beer garden, bathed in sunlight, looks like something from a brochure designed by the Austrian tourist board. A waitress in a dirndl carries trays of beers out to tourists in hiking gear. Inside the restaurant – which serves schnitzel, sauerkraut and heavy-looking lumps of potato – we witness a tense interaction between a mother and her adult daughter. These are Mother (sic) and Karin Frenzel, and this scene immediately feels like familiar Jelinek territory. The mother harshly berates her daughter, who sits next to her looking listless. Although we do not hear the mother's monologue, it appears on the screen in the form of intertitles interspersed with shots of Karin glumly stroking her glass:

You think I hate you.

But you are, as usual, only half right.

I strongly dislike you.

It's nothing personal.

There's just never been any chemistry between us.

You're not my type as far as daughters go.

I really tried over and over to find love in my heart for you.

But there's nothing.

You are unlovable.

The mother complains to the waitress about her schnitzel and demands another, despite having already eaten half of it. Soon after, Karin – who wears an unglamorous red fleece throughout – is killed in a road accident. Her mother yells at the corpse, furious at her daughter for having the temerity to die. When Karin returns in undead form, strange things start happening.

Shot on Super 8, the graininess of *Die Kinder* lends every scene a rough, blurry quality, adding to the general atmosphere of queasiness, disorientation and unease. These landscapes never feel expansive or sublime. The opening shots show cows being herded through the fog that hangs ominously over the dirt roads, obscuring the trees. This countryside is nothing like a Caspar David Friedrich painting, but more like an Austrian version of *Twin Peaks*, stripped of its humane aspects. Even the mountains feel cramped and sinister. At one point, undead Karin in her signature fleece is chased across a hillside by her undead fleece-

wearing double. They stumble across grass shrouded in fog that further blurs the already out of focus shot. These mists and fogs seem not to belong to the sky but rather to emanate from the ground like exhalations of the buried but still breathing past.

Die Kinder has no dialogue, but it isn't exactly a silent film.

Intertitles are used to striking and sometimes hilarious effect; diegetic noises often intrude into the non-diegetic brass band soundtrack. Indeed, the evocative and sometimes visceral sound design is one of the most interesting aspects of the film. Spoons scrape on plates; meat squelches in mouths; ageing lips smack against one another sloppily; feet trudge through mud puddles – the hills are alive with the sound of slurping, chewing, burping and scratching. Except these hills are not alive at all, but swarming with the undead.



This is because among other things, *Die Kinder* is a zombie movie.

The mother-daughter relationship glimpsed in the opening scenes could be compared to the mother-daughter dynamic in Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, but Michael Haneke's adaptation of the book, crystalline and taut, bears little aesthetic resemblance to this film. Instead, *Die Kinder* has a charmingly shambolic and punkish aesthetic, as if John Waters re-made an Ed Wood film and set it in the Austrian mountains. Copper and Liška have a background as theatre directors with the Nature Theater of Oklahoma and claimed in a post-screening Q&A that the performers, non-professionals cast locally, did their own make-up. A glimpse of zombies on motorbikes and of zombies roaming around a grocery store seem like cheeky nods to George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

But however loose this adaptation is it remains faithful to the substance of the Jelinek material that inspired it. The film's undead figures are not generic zombies in the Hollywood mould. Here, the zombies represent Austria's fascist history rising from the grave. The undead are Nazis and their victims, a parade of famous Austrians – figured by the children of a traditionally dressed woodcutter buried in the forest. When the zombies are shown attending a screening of memories in a factory building owned by a former Nazi, the implication is that fascism was never properly consigned to the past. The repressed returns precisely because it never really went away. In a 2004 interview, cited in an essay by Maria-Regina Kecht, Jelinek is quoted as saying:

Just as in Austrian society itself is one of the undead. Its history is

dead and buried, and at the same time, it is storied with life. The deeper the drive to bury it, the harder it is for us to escape from beneath it.¹

Austria's brutal history, unfronted, continues to haunt the hillsides.

In the Q&A, Copper and Liška discussed their decision to insert a sub-plot involving a group of Syrians into the narrative: one of the director's family members had consistently mistaken the Austrian region of Styria for Syria and they also recalled that news of the arrival of Syrian refugees in Austria had been on the television throughout their stay in Styria. This sub-plot is absent in Jelinek's novel, but her play *Die Schutzbefohlenen* [*Charges*], first completed in 2013 and updated multiple times between autumn 2015 and spring 2016, consists of a dialogue between Europeans and refugees. So these plot additions seem consistent both with Jelinek's current preoccupations and with her practice of revising work in the light of [on-going political events](https://theconversation.com/how-the-refugee-crisis-is-playing-out-on-the-german-stage-76449)(<https://theconversation.com/how-the-refugee-crisis-is-playing-out-on-the-german-stage-76449>). In *Die Kinder*, a group of Syrians first appear at the Alpenrose saying they've been told it serves Syrian food. Later they encounter a woodcutter in the forest and tell him that they are poets. A tour bus of peroxide-wigged tourists encounters a hungry Syrian woman staggering towards them shortly after it has been announced that zombies are on the rampage. They feed her potato chips. It is unclear at this point if she is a zombie or if they only mistake her for one, with the


implication being that they would be as confused and horrified by a Syrian person as they would be by a violent supernatural monster. This subplot underlines the continuities between past and present by demonstrating the persistence and recent upsurge of racism and xenophobia in contemporary Austria where the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria, the first leader of which was a former Nazi, is now in power.


For all its engagement with these themes the film is not chilling or didactic but chaotic, bawdy and even, finally, exuberant. The film ends with a wild party at the pension: the brass band is bleeding, the Syrians are cooking, undead Karin and her mother have a final confrontation. This climaxes in what the intertitles greet as 'a flamboyance of pink flamingos' – a cluster of bubble-gum pink feather-clad humans who emerge from a cloud of pink glitter. The undead crowds flee the Alpenrose.

¹ Maria-Regina Kecht, 'The Polyphony of Remembrance: Reading Die Kinder der Toten [The Children of the Dead]' in Matthias Piccolruaz Konzett and Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger ed., *Elfriede Jelinek: Writing Woman, Nation and Identity, a Critical Anthology* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), pp.189- 220, p. 189.


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