



FILM: **AFIRE**

FDG RATING: 3.4 ☺☺☺○○

Christian Petzold: *director*
Thomas Schubert: *actor, Leon*
Paula Beer: *actress, Nadja*
Langston Uibel: *actor, Felix*

DATE: January 21, 2024

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **AFIRE**

The 2023 German film, *Afire*, is a slow, thoughtful story that might make some people quickly lose interest. But for those who were immediately drawn in by the underlying tension that begins with the first scene, the film never lets go of the ominous feeling that something is about to go very wrong.

Felix is driving with his friend Leon to Felix's mom's vacation house in the woods near the Baltic Sea for a working holiday since Felix needs to finish his art portfolio of photographs and Leon is working on his next novel after experiencing the success of his first one. The two couldn't be more opposite in appearance and personalities. Leon is brooding, uptight, unexpressive, self-absorbed, while Felix is lively, lean, spry, and aware. In the first scene, the car makes a noise, unnoticed by Leon, while Felix immediately looks worried and says, "Somethings wrong."

The car breaks down, they head by foot through the woods to the house, again creating tension as Felix says he is pretty sure he knows the way. This is when we see the red sky in the distance, the result of out of control wild fires, but the news has assured them the fires are far enough away. Still the over arching tension of the wild fires lingers over every scene.

They are surprised to find a very pretty young woman, Nadja, already staying at the house, a point that Felix's mom forgot to tell him. This sets in motion an interplay of characters with the addition of a handsome lifeguard who Nadja has been sleeping with and then the arrival of Leon's publisher to review his newest draft. There is little "action" but the inter-dynamics are extremely intriguing especially how each character interacts with Leon, the insecure artist, but also how they interact with each other, and how things are not what they seem to be. At the same time, there is the layer of a horrific climate/environment event while people not directly affected are living their sweet lives as if it wasn't happening.

Thomas Schubert, as Leon, was outstanding with his brooding glares and self-absorbed personality but also shots of him peering from behind a door trying to stay out of sight while wanting to see what is happening. Paula Beer was perfect as Nadja, (she was also the nymph-like girlfriend in *Undine*). She radiated a breezy, just slightly flirty personality. A favorite scene is when they were all eating at a table in the yard, listening to Devid tell a story, and Nadja is grinning almost giggling while Leon is completely perturbed. Surprising twists in relationships underscore the message that things are not as they seem. Where does "the Russian", as Leon calls Nadja, go off to every day on her bicycle? He follows her to discover she sells ice cream from a cart at the beach. When she offers to read his manuscript in preparation for his publisher's arrival, Leon dismisses her request assuming she wouldn't understand or appreciate a writer's work. When his publisher, Helmut, arrives, and they are eating together, Devid proudly remarks that Nadja, has earned an acclaimed literary scholarship for her PHD studies at Marburg. Leon is visibly shocked and embarrassed.

Most dramatically, the raging fires which they thought would not disturb them, are getting closer, ashes are falling all around them, they need to evacuate. Devid brings a tractor so he and Felix can tow the car back from the edge of the woods. They are all forced to face what they had ignored, and Devid and Felix suffer tragic consequences. An interesting tie-in is the poem that Nadja recites twice when speaking to Helmut, about a tribe whose people die when they love. One published reviewer noted the mutability of love and desire as an underlying theme.

The film is layered in so many details that enrich the underlying message that the climate-environment-crisis should not be ignored. The details create interesting parallels to what's happening on a bigger scale. In one of the first scenes, Felix says the car is "mis-firing."

The main storyline that follows Leon's struggles as an insecure artist, and his angst and insecurity in his attraction to Nadja, often comes across as pathetically humorous. Some film discussion participants lost patience watching so much attention on the brooding, self-absorbed writer while the other characters were not developed. It was odd that the publisher spent so much time talking to Nadya and Devid and advising Felix on his photography portfolio, commented another discussion participant. Others disagreed. One discussion participant especially liked that Nadja's character unfolded slowly. Actually, each character is purposely slowly revealed to be different from what you might have expected.

The cinematography is beautiful with scenes of the Baltic coast. The close-up studies of Leon's face show him expressionless, but you can tell he's thinking...always in his mind-head, as he looks at the things in Nadja's room and watches her out the window as she hangs sheets and then rides off on her bicycle. The eerie night time cinematography of the glowing neon lighted rackets & balls, reflecting the eerie light of the red sky at night is especially effective. Also, the sea is glowing in the dark from algae.

Another unexpected twist at the end is the seamless transition to the narrator who is reading the story of what we have just experienced from Leon's manuscript. Growth out of crisis anchors the film, according to one reviewer.

An unpredictable, meaningful, intriguing, psychological study drama, *Afire*, lit up with a heated score of 3.4 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!
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