

FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE

An experimental science fiction short film by Bjørn Melhus

Germany, 2014, 4K digital video, colour, sound, running time: 15 min.

LIMBOLAND productions, Berlin

FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE confronts neoliberal elitist thinking using generic media fragments of religious prophecies about the end of time in the setting of a privatised habitat marked by architectures of megalomania. It is a tour de force using elements of fairy tales, musicals, comedy and horror films to scour our global psyche for ingrained promises of salvation, childhood traumata and the work ethic as it is affected by our desire for self-improvement.

FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE – plot and background

We fly over Manhattan at night towards the newly-built Freedom Tower that today replaces the former World Trade Center. An English-speaking narrator in the uniform of a private Turkish security service talks about the cultural climate and explains that the current conflict is not just the result of politics or economics but first and foremost of morality and philosophy. According to him “there is only one power that determines the course of history, just as it determines the course of every individual life. The power of man’s rational faculty, the power of ideas, the power of freedom, the power of independence and the power of faith”. Apart from the power of faith added by the security guard this quote is taken from the writings of the American author Ayn Rand (1905–1982). She provided a philosophical foundation for neoliberal capitalism. In her much propagated concept of objectivism, individual happiness trumps that of the community and the path to salvation lies in the privatisation and complete deregulation of the economy. Alan Greenspan who as head of the US Federal Reserve (1987–2006) had successfully campaigned for the deregulation of markets, was one of her most loyal supporters and allies. According to a study by the Library of Congress in 2009, Ayn Rand is one of the most influential political authors in the US. To date, she has sold around 30 million books, including three million copies distributed to schools by the Ayn Rand Institute, a think tank financed by the neoliberal lobby. The security guard adds the “power of faith” to the introductory elitist thoughts and thus joins the ranks of one of the many neoliberal religious ideologies of today. The American Tea Party movement is one of them as is the Islam-friendly AKP in Turkey. During their ten years in government the number of private security services grew from 29 to more than 1,500.

Ayn Rand herself rejected all forms of religion and placed the egoistic individual at centre

of everything. "The future has not been written, there is no fate but what we make for ourselves", as the security guard puts it in FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE before he witnesses a bizarre ritual. Out of the dark comes Randi, a larger-than-life representation of Ayn Rand and starts whipping capitalism into a psychic medium who is mumbling about god. In a trance-like state the figure starts singing a Christmas carol, unifying consumerism and religion. The scene is reminiscent of spiritual séances in the late 19 century. It finishes with a gush of ectoplasm which envelops the medium completely, turning into a sphere and moving up in the ceremonial space. After the plasm bubble has split we travel with two new cells, a blue one and a red one above gated communities and land in a beautiful new urban world. The two cells morph into the two main protagonists of this film, Freedom and Independence.

The terms are taken from the apocalyptic film „Armageddon“ (1998) in which two space ships with the same names save the world from the impact of a deadly meteorite. Privately hired oilrig workers avert the disaster as government and NASA lack the necessary specialist knowledge. With a total box office of 553.7 million US dollar "Armageddon" was the commercially most successful film of 1998. The same year saw the release of "Deep Impact", a film with a similar plot and strong religious connotations where the space ship that saves the day is called "Messiah". Morgan Freeman plays the American president who sees prayer as the last resort. "Deep Impact" also did quite well at the box office with a total take of 349.4 million US Dollar and both films foreshadowed some of the ideological tendencies of the upcoming new millennium.

The two characters Freedom & Independence, dressed in tight sportswear, are happy about free markets, declare ownership of their surroundings and insist that the future of civilisation lies in privatisation. During an orgy of self-improvement using sports equipment, the Ayn Rand quotations are increasingly replaced by the rhetoric of Christian religious movies. In a nightmare sequence the clouds that have been cloned by some form of higher order hint at the start of the Apocalypse. When they awake from their dreams in a hotel room, Freedom & Independence talk about their religious feelings and their fear of death which essentially lies at the heart of all religious concepts. Feelings should not interfere with rationality says Randi who joins them on the phone. The Apocalypse cannot be stopped. The world implodes.

FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE morph again into the original ball of ectoplasm and then are transformed into the psychic medium who enters the speaker system of a morgue and starts voicing his beliefs, using Morgan Freeman's voice from "Deep Impact". Randi insists on rationality and wakes several masked corpses and asks them for a proof of God. The answer is the first sentence of the American national anthem and the start of a musical that

discusses issues of identity, destiny, freedom of choice, the free market, capitalism, religion, hopes for saviours and the omnipresence of death. Randi is convinced that when she dies, it is not her life that finishes but that the world as a whole comes to an end and so does the film.

FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE has a dreamlike associative structure and tackles fundamental issues of the present. When the curator Beral Medra described the situation of Turkey at the start of 2015 she stated that the rapid growth of neoliberal capitalism and religious fanaticism could lead to “neofascism of the 21st century” if they are merged. Istanbul as an outdoor set serves as a prime example in FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE. The spectres of privatisation are global as the current secret negotiations on free trade agreements like TTIP and particularly TISA suggest. They are advancing – amongst others – the privatisation of primary services hitherto provided by the state (like drinking water) to the point where it cannot be reversed. Under the guise of freedom and independence the provision of services to a dependent population will lie in the hands of only a few free individuals. The solution lies in the ideal of egocentric and self-optimised consumers who recognise their own death merely as the end of the existence of the world. Meanwhile, the fictional Apocalypse is booming in mainstream cinema. The American cultural critic Gore Vidal already stated in 1961 in Esquire Magazine that

„Ayn Rand's "philosophy" is nearly perfect in its immorality, which makes the size of her audience all the more ominous and symptomatic as we enter a curious new phase in our society. Moral values are in flux. The muddy depths are being stirred by new monsters and witches from the deep. Trolls walk the American night. Caesars are stirring in the Forum. There are storm warnings ahead.”

Further Information: www.melhus.de