



FILM REVIEW

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Ballon: Fly to Freedom

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Ballon

2018

Directed by Michael Herbig

Written by Kit Hopkins, Thilo Röscheisen, Michael Herbig

Run Time: 2 hours, 5 minutes

Original Language: German

More Information: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7125774/>

“Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!” In response to the cries, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany at the time, answers, “Those who wait will finally be able to get to the Federal Germany by train!” The Minister tells the news to the people who are waiting to cross the wall and move to the West, that is, to freedom. The 2018 German film *Ballon* (*Balloon*) comes to an end with exactly this moment. The plot of the film is based on the true story of a group of people desperate to escape from East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR). It is the story of two families fleeing from the GDR state of Thuringia in 1979. The two families plan to escape with a hot air balloon.

The film is directed, written, and produced by Michael “Bully” Herbig, a German comedian, actor, entrepreneur, screenwriter, director, voice actor, and producer. The award-winning Herbig became known for, among other things, the television show “Bullyparade” and the films *Der Schuh des Manitou* (*The Shoe of Manitou*) and *(T)Raumschiff Surprise—Periode 1* (*Spaceship Surprise—Period 1*), which are among the most-watched



German productions of all time. *Ballon* is Herbig’s first non-comedy directorial work; it belongs to the thriller genre.

The film begins with the depiction of a person trying to cross the border in East Germany and being shot and stopped by soldiers. This scene is accompanied by a song performed by the youth choir:

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*Our homeland is not only towns and villages,
our homeland is also the trees in the woods.
Our homeland is the grass on the meadow, the corn
on the field
and the birds in the air and the animals on earth.
And the fish in the river are the homeland.
We love our beautiful homeland
and we protect it because it belongs to the people,
because it belongs to our people.*

The film is set in Pößneck, Thuringia, in the summer of 1979. The Strelzyk and Wetzel families develop a daring plan to flee the GDR to West Germany in a home-made hot air balloon. About to attempt an escape in perfect wind conditions, Günter Wetzel decides it is too dangerous. He thinks the balloon is too small for eight people, and his wife Petra is afraid for their two children. Therefore, they stop trying to escape for a short time. However, Doris and Peter Strelzyk want to escape alone with their two sons. One of the son's named Frank has fallen in love with Klara Baumann, the daughter of his neighbor Erik, who works for the Stasi.

The Strelzyk family fails in their first attempt to escape, for reasons they could not foresee, and they fall to the ground very close to the border. Unfortunately, the Stasi soon finds the fallen balloon and starts to discover the attempted escape under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel Seidel. So a large investigation begins. The investigators narrow down the radius in which the balloon could have originated. For the next few weeks, both families live in constant fear that the Stasi might link them to the attempted escape. However, Peter wants to try again. Before that, the Strelzyk family travel to East Berlin, where they hope to be able to get out of with the help of the East Berlin US Embassy, but this attempt also fails.

After a while, Peter convinces Günter to make another balloon to escape. Meanwhile, the Stasi publishes photos in the press of the items that the Strelzyks had to leave behind at the landing site of their first attempt. After Günter finishes the second balloon to escape, the Stasi work out the identities of the Strelzyk and Wetzel families and break into their house, but the families are already on their way. This time, the start is not as auspicious as

on their first attempt, and when the gas runs out, they have to land in a forest after half an hour's flight. At first, they did not know whether they had successfully crossed the border. Peter and Günter then meet a police patrol car. When the police tell them that they are in Upper Franconia, that is, West Germany, the families rejoice. At this point, the policeman's question, "How many more people will come?" is like an expression of the desire of the people to escape from East Germany to the West.

The main theme of the film is escape. The idea of escaping from East Germany is dominant in most scenes of the film. More widely, the theme is common in almost all films that deal with the border between West and East Germany. In this sense, it may have been more realistic to add scenes about the "new life" beyond the border, in terms of understanding the sociological effect of the border. Another point of the movie is that authoritarian states turn to the Foucauldian panopticon to control their society. Today, for example, China's surveillance of social activity by equipping cities with cameras is an important indicator of borders built without great walls. On the other hand, as conveyed in the movie, the Berlin Wall was built to prevent people from crossing inside to outside. While today's walls physically resemble the Berlin Wall, their purpose is to prevent the passage of people from outside to inside. This situation makes the Berlin Wall an outlier for border studies, and also shows the importance of exploring the wall in film.

There is a word in German to describe the longing for home: "*heimweh*". Early in the film, one of the characters trying to escape to the West uses the term to express that she will miss her home. Though the entire film is based on escaping to the West, the sadness of "*heimweh*" is often expressed throughout the film. Therefore, even if the reward for crossing the border is freedom, leaving home has always been a painful process.

As a final word, *Ballon* makes us realize that although it narrates the events of 40 years ago, what is happening today in many parts of the world is not very different. The walls, which were overcome with hot air balloons at that time are overcome today with ladders, tunnels, and dangerous circuitous routes. The lesson then as now appears to be that walls don't work.