

THE BAVARIAN AL CAPONE

film reviews

Already a legend in his own lifetime: Theo Berger is not the hero, but the main character in Oliver Herbrich's film. The Munich director wrote the script together with Berger, so as to keep this cinematic portrait of the ace burglar and escape artist as close as possible to reality. So criticism of the justice system is inevitable. Relying on the power and magic of his authentic images and characters, he achieves nearly thriller-like suspense.

(Frauke Hank, TZ)

Another brilliant young prospect is Oliver Herbrich, who shot *The Proud and Sad Life of Mathias Kneissl* (Hof Film Festival, 1980) at age eighteen. He has now examined the subject of the criminal as a folk hero, in his documentary film *The Bavarian Al Capone*. This intense portrait of ace burglar and escape artist Theo Berger was conceived in close collaboration with Berger himself. (Berger would soon wind up back in prison.) His German lawyer needed an interpreter to communicate with him (in the film Berger is subtitled in High German). The true-blue Bavarian faces the camera on his parents' farm to tell of his youthful criminal offences. The result is a universally valid depiction of the conflict between a hothead, offended by society, and a justice system that makes little attempt to understand.

(Stephen Locke, epd Film)

Among the German films I have seen, there were three that were able to satisfy my curiosity: ... *The Bavarian Al Capone* by Oliver Herbrich, a documentary about an ace burglar and escape artist feared by the police and secretly revered by the common people; a tragic comedy, also the story of a legal scandal.

(Robert Fischer, zitty)

... Oliver Herbrich, whose documentary film *The Bavarian Al Capone* was screened in a marginal festival slot, yet garnered a lot of applause. It is the story of the robber Theo Berger (a political commune in Berlin once named itself after him), whose ties to his Bavarian home were so strong he committed his first bank robbery a mere five hundred

meters from his parents's farm. It is a film about Southern German provincial stubbornness, about desperado romance, but also about the tragic fate of a "fossil" trapped in the machinery of the modern justice and correctional system. ...

(Alfred Holighaus, TIP)

The Hof Film Festival audience was presented a film that takes the myth out of the "Theo Berger phenomenon". *The Bavarian Al Capone* neither glorifies its protagonist nor demonizes him as an unwavering, brutal criminal. Director Oliver Herbrich draws the picture of a man whose life could take almost no other course. As Theo Berger sits in his parents' Ludwigsmoos home, talking about his childhood and youth, the audience can understand much of what made peasant boy Theo become one of West Germany's most wanted criminals.

(Cornel Faltin, Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung)

Whereas Theo Berger's countless break-ins and breakouts gained him a certain recent crime-history celebrity and ambivalent yellow-press popularity, Oliver Herbrich's documentary *The Bavarian Al Capone* strips away his legendary gangster myth. The laconic soberness with which Berger narrates his own biography constitutes the actual quality of this document.

(Hans Günther Pflaum, Süddeutsche Zeitung)

So there he sits beside his daughter, yet unable to hold her in his arms, because twenty-two years in prison have taken it out of him; because he no longer has the strength. Yet he has instinctively preserved his caliber and dignity. You don't often see that in German films. No one ventures that much reality today.

(Michael Althen, Münchner Stadtzeitung)

The court should have watched this film before it started to evaluate the defendant's character. Not that Herbrich transfigures Berger into some martyr, for whose crimes society is to be held responsible. Herbrich refrains from such banal assignment of guilt. Aside from the fact that a man like Theo Berger wouldn't stand for any of that, as hard and self-critical as he is toward himself.

(Andreas Friedmann, Münchner Merkur)