

'SKY WITHOUT STARS' (Himmel Ohne Sterne) Germany, 1955, sub-titled in English. 110 minutes. (Following notes by Barrie Pattison) Production Company. N.D.F., Direction and Script; Helmut Kautner. Photography; Kurt Hasse. Music; Bernhard Eichhorn. Art Direction; Hans Berthel.

Cast: Karl Altmann (Erik Schumann), Anna Kaminski (Eva Kotthaus), Willi Becker (Georg Thomalla), Mischa Bjelkin (Horst Buchholz), Otto Friese (Cammilla Spira), Father Kaminski (Erich Ponto), Mother Kaminski (Lucie Höflich) and JOCHEN (Rainer Stangl).

This is the story of the factory worker Anna Kaminski, who lives in the East Zone of Germany, and the frontier guard Karl Altmann, who lives in the West Zone.

It never actually happened ... But it could happen - even today - for there is a dark line that runs through fields and villages - a boundary that divides not countries, but one people.

A strip of dead earth runs from the Baltic Sea to the far corner of Bavaria - land that is cleared, and plowed, and harrowed, but whose only yield is a harvest of discord and hate.

In the autumn of 1952, when our story begins, this dividing line is not yet clearly evident. It seems to be only a temporary arrangement, seems to give fair promise for the future. And so the line is all the more jealously guarded - from the East Zone and from the West Zone.

Few films have dealt with contemporary issues with the power of this film's picture of the Berlin wall. The divided city was in ideal situation for the contrast between two communities that is central to most of Kautner's major work. The film maker's range of sympathy shows in the way he has made a film without real villains. The blackmarketeer who was nasty in FILM OHNE STERNE, Kautner's earlier film, is here a friendly chap living by his wits. The border guard assists Schumann, rather than dealing out the expected brutality. The Russian, Mischa (a particularly likeable performance which was a major step in the career of Buchholz) actually wants to help the girl, even in the revelation scene triggered innocently by the cowboy suit her child wears.

This use of everyday objects to give heightened significance is the mark of the film. The old people who must leave their home of a lifetime for their daughter's happiness, squabble about the key they will never use again. The film is striking for its lack of conventional qualities. The old couple are treated without sentimentality. The lovers are shown without sex. The leads both give remarkably intelligent performances, though neither had any great subsequent success. Schumann can be glimpsed in Stuart Rosenberg's anti-communist tract QUESTION 7 and if you're quick you can see Eva Kotthaus in THE NUN'S STORY. She did have one other major role as the nurse in the East German film JARANG 21. Erich Ponto, who worked regularly with this director, was the second of Harry Lime's three men. Musician Eichhorn is also a standard member of the production team, and the craftsmanship of the film is testament to their skill.

The film's faults are Kautner's faults and they are minor against e.g. the decadent formal passages of Losey, the knockabout of Ford or the unhealthy detail of Lang. His argument - that dividing a country with a line that splits families, traditions and industries is an act of senseless infamy - is made both intellectually and emotionally with the tragic finale, the scenes of the farmers hiding their produce in the station, and the misunderstanding of the young Russian - the hand torn on the barbed wire.

The film was not only Kautner's greatest achievement but also his