

The Teacher's Lounge [12A]

2023 Germany 98 mins

UK released	12 April 2024
Director	Ilker Çatak
Screenplay	Johannes Duncker; Ilker Çatak
Cinematography	Judith Kaufmann
Music	Marvin Miller
Cast	Leonie Benesch (Carla Nowak); Michael Klammer (Thomas Liebenwerda); Rafael Stachowiak (Milosz Dudek); Anne-Kathrin Gummich (Dr. Bettina Böhm); Eva Löbau (Friederike Kuhn)

Ilker Çatak's *The Teachers' Lounge* falls into a category of films best described as 'everyday thrillers' - films in which characters fight not for their lives but for their livelihoods - desperately working to keep their jobs, their families and their integrity intact.

Leonie Benesch is terrific here as Carla Nowak, an idealistic young teacher frightened of her own courage and overwhelmed by the snowballing events that a moment of exasperation has set in motion. Frustrated by her colleagues' ham-fisted handling of a spate of petty thefts, Carla takes matters into her own hands by setting a trap and secretly filming the culprit in the act. But the thief turns out to be a much-loved member of the school community, and Carla's video is a possible act of entrapment, violating human rights policy. The headteacher involves the police, and the unfortunate situation metastasises horribly. Soon Carla is contending with a backlash from students, staff and parents, and every time she opens her mouth she seems to make things worse.

A maths teacher, Carla likes to make the unpredictable predictable, insisting time and again on the mathematical principles of algorithm, evidence, proof. She should be in her element amid the geometrical architecture and arrangements of the school, but her rigid shoulders and brusque, overly professional demeanour suggest she is ill at ease even before the environment becomes openly hostile.

Certainly, something seems rotten about the institution from the outset. The school's zero-tolerance policy is enforced by a good cop/bad cop duo of male teachers: it hardly seems a coincidence that their suspicions first alight on a child of immigrant parents ("You know the father's a taxi driver?", one sagely nods, as if that were incontrovertible proof of criminality). Carla herself was born in Poland and is understandably keen to avoid the topic of her heritage. The film is very good at evoking the glittering malevolence of children: it calls to mind Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (2009), Laura Wandel's *Playground* (2022) and Maren Ade's underseen debut *The Forest for the Trees* (2003), films that, like Çatak's, cast the classroom as a place in which adults are outnumbered and ultimately ineffective. Where those films succeed, though, and Çatak's does not, is in their setting out of the stakes. For Carla's fate to matter to us, something must be in the balance, and here it's not clear quite what that is. Since the school is understaffed as it stands, we know she's not likely to lose her job; there's no real threat of violence; her personal life is a closed book.

The film is so busy skewering everything that it becomes unfocused, baggy. A misjudged surreal sequence undercuts an otherwise rigorous realist aesthetic, and the closing shot is a non sequitur. It's just possible these elements are deliberately intended to undermine Carla's own commitment to making order out of chaos, suggesting that humanity lies in the loose ends that can't be neatly tied up. Unfortunately, it's the audience who are left with a sense of unfinished business.

Catherine Wheatley, *Sight and Sound*, 9 April 2024 (abridged)

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