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Berlin, 17/04/2023

Public statement issued by the Schwarze Filmschaffende Afro-German film collective on the anti-Black films *Measures of Men*, *Seneca* and *Helt Super!*

For the attention of the Minister of State for Culture and Media, Mrs. Claudia Roth.

For the attention of the Chief Executive of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media ("BKM"), Dr. Andreas Görgen.

For the attention of the executive director of KBB, Mrs. Charlotte Sieben.

For the attention of the executive and artistic directors of the Berlin International Film Festival, Mrs. Mariëtte Rissenbeek and Mr. Carlo Chatrian.

For the attention of the directors of the German Film Academy (die Deutsche Filmakademie), Mrs. Anne Leppin and Mrs. Maria Köpf.

Dear Mrs. Roth,
Dear Mr. Görgen,
Dear Mrs. Sieben,
Dear Mrs. Rissenbeek,
Dear Mr. Chatrian,
Dear Mrs. Leppin,
Dear Mrs. Köpf,

In response to our letter of 27/03/2023, in which we first outlined our current concerns, we would like to thank Mrs. Sieben, Mrs. Rissenbeek and Mr. Chatrian for their answer and their kind invitation to a meeting. Unfortunately, we have not yet received a response from the Minister of State for Culture

and Media, who perhaps does not feel directly concerned by our initial letter. As such, we have taken the liberty to reiterate our concerns and demands in this open letter with the aim of initiating an actual conversation with all the relevant stakeholders in order that the necessary joint and concrete steps are subsequently taken and implemented.

We - Schwarze Filmschaffende e.V. - are horrified and stunned by several of the films selected at this year's recent Berlinale, which, as far as we are concerned, beg the following essential questions:

Why are films such as *Measures of Men*, *Seneca* and *Helt Super*, which replicate, fuel, extol, promote and spread anti-Black racist images, tropes, stereotypes and discriminatory narrative forms, financed with European and German public funding? Why indeed are these three films both endorsed by and screened at a German category-A Festival that is itself financed by public funding?

An international Berlin-based festival that proudly proclaims in its outward-facing communications that it is a "place of intercultural exchange" as well as a "platform for the critical cinematic exploration of social issues."¹

In our role as the Schwarze Filmschaffende collective of Afro-German film creatives: our goal is to advocate for the greater inclusion of Black film creatives across the entire German-speaking film industry, to promote, create and exchange opportunities and resources for Black film creatives, as well as to combat anti-Black racism across the industry in all its systemic, structural and institutional manifestations. This includes identifying and preventing the representation, (financial) support, endorsement and valorisation of films that are - in whole or in part - vectors of anti-Black racism in their content, form, aesthetics, narratives or in any other aspect.

As Black Europeans, we are therefore deeply concerned and affected by the selection, endorsement and support of these three anti-Black films, two of which are German (co-)productions, which were (co-)financed by German film funds, nominated by the German Film Academy and finally selected and shown at the latest 73rd edition of the Berlinale. It is our intention with this open letter to not only exercise our right to denounce the existence and handling of these offensive, racist films and their effects, but also to point out the systemic errors and the structural anti-Black racism embedded in the German film ecosystem that have led to this state of affairs, all of which can no longer be ignored. This situation requires accountability and necessitates the demands that we are hereby submitting to the two main entities who carry the responsibility for this situation, namely the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media (BKM) and the Berlinale (including its parent organisation, the Kulturveranstaltungen des Bundes in Berlin (KBB)).

On Anti-Black Racism (ABR)

In the online "Afrozensus" survey, anti-Black racism² was defined as follows:

¹ Berlinale Website: Profile: "The Berlinale: Festival in Motion":

<https://www.berlinale.de/en/festival/festivalprofil.html> - as of 11.04.2023

² In the large Afrozensus online survey, "Afrozensus," the realities of the lives, experiences of discrimination and perspectives of black, African, Afrodiasporic people in Germany were recorded for the first time in 2020. Hereinafter referred to as "Afrozensus."

Anti-Black Racism (ABR) is a specific form of racism that in Europe and Germany dates back to the time of transatlantic slave trade. ABR is the specific degradation, dehumanization and racial discrimination of Black people of African descent.”

There are over a million people of African descent living in Germany³. They shape this country in all areas of life. About 200 million people identify as being of African descent in the Americas. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside the African continent⁴.

As the Afrozensus-report clearly states, ABR is based on a complex and interacting set of attributions, dynamics, and behaviours toward Black people. The text highlighted in bold type is indicated by us due to the relevance of these passages for the cases at hand.

Many sometimes-contradictory patterns of ABR emerge from the centuries-long history of ABR in the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany, all of which, however, fundamentally deny Black, African and Afrodiasporic people their humanity. All these patterns of ABR share the fact they define Black, African and Afrodiasporic people as supposedly inferior, dangerous, intrinsic others and that they define the white, German self in contrast to these attributions. **ABR therefore includes some basic attributions and dynamics that are constantly repeated, i.e. which form patterns, and whose consequences can range from a certain predictability of discriminatory dynamics, which is, of course, tiring for Black, African, Afrodiasporic people, to them being traumatised and retraumatised** (Chapters 6.2 and 6.3). In the following description of central aspects of ABR, it is of fundamental importance to emphasise: **these are attributions and projections that are not founded in reality, rather are long established and anchored in everyday culture as well as in the canon of literature and art. Their presence is so widespread that they form the basis of a shared racist normality that is often unconscious in nature.** In short, ABR does not describe the characteristics of Black, African, and Afrodiasporic people, but rather the **projections** that were created to **enforce and justify white supremacy**, racist oppression as well as the global division of labour and capitalist valorisation intrinsically associated with them (Bush, 2007).”⁵

Our analysis and critique deals not only with the nature of these racist images, but also with the European and German ecosystems and value chains that enable, promote and support these films. These films are part of a value chain of racist damage to Black people through their content, which is currently upheld by government agencies and film festivals. We want to prevent and change this. As human beings whose dignity and wellbeing are key to us and should *hopefully* also concern you, and as human beings whose safety also depends on the depictions of us as well as the real-world consequences that such imagery has on our lives, we would like to reaffirm in the context of our German film culture and industry that **Black Lives Matter**. Unfortunately, the behaviours, outcomes, attitudes and measures that we have experienced in your organizations suggest the opposite.

Seneca (directed by Robert Schwentke, 2023)

We are shocked that in *Seneca* Black children are slaughtered arbitrarily, in the crudest sense of the word. After the children are referred to as "slave wogs", they are beheaded, their heads served on a platter, and their organs dismembered in the most gruesome detail. As with many anti-Black

³ Source: Afrozensus

⁴ Source: United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024 : <https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent> The International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024.”

⁵ The various attributions of anti-Black racism are set out in the Appendix under “1. Afrozensus.”

depictions, these children are reduced to the level of animals, a fact that is underpinned by their one-dimensionality since they are, in addition, deprived of the faculty of language and are simply depicted as wild game to be slaughtered for the spectatorial pleasure of a white audience in the film. Seneca is full of juxtapositions and anachronisms from antiquity and other contemporary eras which influence the readings of its imagery: such a reference, which can be clearly heard, is indeed this designation of the boys by the sadistic characters as "slave wogs" shortly before their execution: this highly pejorative term used in the British Empire is directly related to the transatlantic slave trade and the disgraceful, dehumanizing character of these images, which at the same time revel in the very real anti-Black tropes of powerlessness, dehumanization and animalization of Black bodies. An adaptation of the Vodun religion, part of the West African Yoruba tradition, also takes place in the costumes of the white actors, thus a cultural appropriation of the Yoruba tradition and at the same time an abstract blackfacing. These tropes have a long history and we were shocked that they were given a platform at the Berlinale and financed with public funds. This is a cinematic practice, which leads to a desensitisation of white audiences towards Black bodies and renders for Black audiences the viewing experience unbearable and traumatising.

Measures of Men (directed by Lars Kraume, 2023)

It is with an equal level of criticism that we view *Measures of Men* that claims to make an important contribution to the re-examining of German colonial history and its crimes, but deliberately does so exclusively from the perspective of the perpetrators, thereby relegating the actual genocide of the OvaHerero and Nama to the background. This cinematic treatment of this historical episode not only renders its victims - the OvaHerero and Nama - as extras of their own history but also retraumatizes their descendants and Black viewers in general, with the film's appalling, disturbing images of desecrated and dehumanised Black people.

Do we really need to remind German decision-makers in film organisations in 2023 that the processing of historical crimes against humanity must never be at the expense of the victims themselves? Or do the achievements and principles of the culture of remembrance and commemorations not apply to the OvaHerero, Nama, all Indigenous nations and Black people in general? The humanisation of the perpetrators is of course a leitmotif of contemporary cinema, but if you humanise the perpetrators without humanising the victims in the same breath, then you simply replicate cinematically the very original sin that the film attempts to portray. *Measures of Men* blunders headfirst into this problematic trap.

The film's perpetrator-perspective regrettably replicates all the mechanisms that it attempts to dismantle through its narrative perspective and focalisation, its script, its aesthetic devices and its narration.

As the critic Vivien Buchhorn emphasized in an excellent article about the film, "In this protection mode, the perpetrator sometimes becomes a victim, the professor sometimes becomes a buddy, the ethnologist in love sometimes becomes sensitive, and the brutal officer in the desert sometimes becomes a contractual partner." In stark contrast to the ambivalent, three-dimensional, fully formed white characters with whom empathy is created, the OvaHerero and Nama characters become largely passive silhouettes of their own genocide. By using a camera that constantly films them through the mostly distant, objectifying colonial gaze, they are denied empathy. Despite the ambiguous attempt

to highlight the only central Black character, Kezia/Kunouje Kambazembi (Girley Charlene Jazama), as the main character of the film through the film's poster, she disappears during long swathes of the narrative and is only allowed to utter a few sentences in total.

Measures of Men not only inflicts on the descendants of the OvaHerero and Nama the pain of dehumanising their ancestors (again) whilst they already have to cope with the intergenerational trauma and effects of genocide, but also actively contributes to the numerous anti-Black representations, which in turn have a direct impact on the behavior of non-Black audiences around the world towards Black people. The racist murders and the brutalization of black bodies in white majority societies are largely due to the circulation of such images which underpin the belief that the lives of black people do not matter, i.e. that *black lives do not matter*.

The German Film Academy (die Deutsche Filmakademie)

The films *Seneca* and *Measures of Men*, which reproduce and revel in racist imagery and language, were nominated by the German Film Academy. This is the very same German Film Academy that “demands diversity in all dimensions and wishes to advocate for a common just, respectful and cooperative coexistence – both internally and externally” but at the same time promotes racism in film as well as enables the possibility of such films to actually receive awards. What values does the German Film Academy actually express when such films, which, of course, reproduce racist imagery and language, can be nominated through its agency? The German Film Academy which, it should be added, is for the most part financed with our tax payers' money.

Helt Super (directed by Rasmus A. Sivertsen, 2022, Norway)

As reported in several press outlets and in the ARTEF statement⁶, the Norwegian animated children's film *Helt Super*, which was selected at the Berlinale section Generation, has been the subject of several complaints due to the anti-Black racist tropes of Blackface and animalization. We agree with and support ARTEF's statement that rightly criticizes the implicit blackfacing of the film. We are also extremely disappointed and concerned about the handling of this film by the Berlinale, not only with regard to the harm sustained by Black members of staff of this organisation, but also to Black children who are already experience numerous forms of structural, systemic and institutional racism in the German school system⁷.

We then observed with great concern the following sequence of events whose mismanagement, insensitivity and lack of awareness has since had far-reaching effects.

The official reason put forward for the cancellation of the film's premiere on February 20th was due to “technical reasons,” and although several of our members attended the subsequent screenings of the film, which were “mysteriously” only half-filled, those very same screenings were listed as sold out on the official website. In addition, the festival changed the listing of the film on the website which previously showed a picture of the film's protagonist in a blackface mask to one which didn't. Before

⁶ <https://www.artef.org/statement-helt-super-artef>

⁷ See “Black Experiences in Education: Discrimination, Resilience and Empowerment” under 1. Afrozensus in the Appendix.

the screenings, the heads of Generation took to the stage to point out to the audience that they had the opportunity to approach the awareness team if they felt offended by the content, and no further context was given. The following content notice appeared at the venues where *Helt Super* was screened:

German version:

“SOWAS VON SUPER – Hinweis

Nach der Einladung wurden wir darauf aufmerksam gemacht, dass dieser Film Bilder und Darstellungen enthält, die von marginalisierten Gruppen als verletzend empfunden werden. Wir bitten darum, dies bei der Entscheidung den Film zu sehen zu berücksichtigen.”

English version:

“JUST SUPER – Content Note

After selection we were made aware that this film contains imagery and depictions that have been deemed offensive to historically marginalized communities. Viewer discretion is advised.”

An article entitled "*Berlinale premiere of Norwegian animation ‘Just Super’ pulled over Blackface allegations but further screenings go ahead*", which appeared in Screen International on 23 February, included the following statements by the Berlinale's management:

“A statement from the festival says it was made aware of “images stereotyping people of color”, and shared these concerns with production company Qvisten Animation and the Norwegian Film Institute.

“The film's representatives disregarded these groups completely” according to the Berlinale statement. It goes on to say that the Monday 20 screening “did not take place in agreement with the production company”; and that a message has been added for all subsequent screenings “contextualising” the Blackface concerns “so as to avoid potentially harming any viewers”, with a disclaimer at the entrance of each cinema showing the film.”

The international jury of Generation itself stated, on their Instagram channel, at the closing ceremony of Generation KPlus:

“For this reason, we stand in support of the Anti-Racism Taskforce in European Film, ARTEF, in their attempt to invite open discourse and communication and we are disappointed by those that meet their attempt at open and free dialogue with a failure to engage.”

This additional, following statement by the heads of Generation was published on social media:

“The heads of Generation take responsibility for harmful content within the program, the International Jury call out those who fail to engage with anti-racism work.”

This reckless, racist and completely inconsiderate handling of the film is constitutive of a catastrophe. Instead of openly acknowledging and owning the problem - and despite the attempts of the leadership of Generation to do so, albeit too late - the festival's management chose instead to take a series of covert measures, to engage in minimal communication on harm reduction, to offer the public no further contextualization of the images and their tropes, to speak only of concerns in their

communication, to never mention the term racism, and even less to refer to the specificity of anti-Black racism, and to falsely identify the problem as one that is relevant to "People of Colour."

By not openly owning the errors, by not properly naming anti-Black racism, and by completely decentering the harm that these images cause to Black children, this reductive, trivializing, and disdainful behaviour only shows how deeply anti-Black racism is embedded in the structures of this organisation. As a leading international film rendezvous, the Berlinale could and should have set an example! The Berlinale could have sent a message to the industry that anti-Black racism is not acceptable and is being combatted in its own ranks.

Instead, the Berlinale's bungling and inadequate attempts at communicating the problem, or not, led an already biased press to question the racist nature of the images, whilst revelling in belittling and insulting invaluable anti-racist organizations like ARTEF. These actions not only side-line Black voices, but also totally delegitimise the very necessary work of European organisations who combat racism and discrimination in the film industry.

We are also dismayed by the tactics of harassment, threats and intimidation that some ARTEF members were exposed to following their actions, and the way in which this was considered acceptable by the wider industry, which did not intervene.

Helt Super - possible violations of the law

Our initial and ongoing research on the subject also suggests that the screening of the film, its handling and effects could potentially constitute multiple legal infringements.

In particular, this research pertains to the employees, the awareness team, film creatives and audiences who have been harmed by the screening of these films, the handling of criticism and the (missing) references to anti-Black racism. The injured parties have at least the right to an apology.

For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates in *Article 2: Respect for the Rights of the Child* a prohibition of discrimination, according to which the contracting states (including Germany) must ensure that children grow up free from discrimination on the basis of, among other things, racialized attributions. In the case of *Helt Super*, Black, female-read children are directly affected by the images in the film. In addition, it is stipulated within the framework of the German Child and Youth Welfare Law from the Social Code III that every young person has a right to promote their development and, on the other hand, that children and young people should be protected from dangers to their wellbeing. This is not possible to the same extent for all children in the case of the reproduction of anti-Black racism.

The General Equal Treatment Act (AGG) and Article I of the Basic Law stipulate that human dignity is unimpeachable.

We know that the Berlinale has several Black employees. Accordingly, as an employer, the Berlinale also violates the duty of care towards these employees under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Here, Article 4 also explicitly mentions mental health and paragraph 6 "special hazards for vulnerable groups of workers shall be taken into account." Reproducing and dealing with anti-Black racism leads to psychological distress and (re-)traumatization in the aforementioned victims. Since the Berlinale is financed by public funds, failure to comply with the law to protect against discrimination is particularly painful and unacceptable.

The right to artistic freedom and the inalienable right to harm

Since we have had many situations of such experiences in the past, we reject the misuse of the term **artistic freedom** in connection with any forms of racism and discrimination in film, as so-called “artistic freedom.” These cinematic abuses have nothing to do with our humanistic arguments of dignity, preservation and protection against symbolic, psychological violence, but rather are based on a filmic pathology of harm that is regularly perpetrated, maintained and defended by mainly white, cis-gendered men. Inalienable artistic freedom at all costs, regardless of who is disturbed or harmed. Underrepresented voices are regularly confronted with this falsehood, thereby denying them the right to simply exist. Art has never been separated from its context or audience, its reception has never been neutral, as even the most basic understanding of reception theory or contemporary history of the 20th century shows. As ARTEF clearly stated in its statement on its interactions with the Berlinale's leadership:

"Imagination is not a neutral space. It is a domain of history and culture that has real life impact. And minority representation does not mean minority worth."

We urge you to truly embrace the meaning of this sentence.

For anyone who deliberately separates the context of production from the work of art itself and its effect on the audience is guilty of an outdated, elitist thinking and is disconnected from the current debates and practices centring on ethics and curatorial justice.

Our demands

With this letter, we – Schwarze Filmschaffende – are calling for a paradigm shift in the film and media industry as well as for all German festivals.

BKM, the Berlinale and the German Film Academy are mandated to represent our diverse German society in all aspects of media, both in front of and behind the camera, intersectionally, as well as in narratives, without reproducing or promoting racist imagery and language or discrediting and negating underrepresented voices.

In this context, we also refer to the UN social pact signed by the German government - to ensure non-discriminatory access to cultural rights and participation in cultural life. Article 2 (1) of the Social Pact provides for a progressive implementation of these rights: the signatories must make their best efforts, in order to progressively ensure that these rights are guaranteed for all.

1. We demand a public apology from the Berlinale's leadership for your misconduct to the injured parties.
2. We demand unrestricted participation in the areas of personnel, programme, audience and access. Of course, Schwarze Filmschaffende, should be part of the amendment to the Federal Film Subsidy Law (FFG/Filmförderungsgesetz).
3. We demand the reappointment of the BKM's feature film jury (screenplay and production). Within the context of the appointment of the feature film jury members, the inclusion of persons belong to marginalized gender identities, with a disability and belonging to visible, racialized groups should be taken into account and promoted. Discriminatory and racist

imagery and language in film, in front of and behind the camera, as well as in narratives should be prevented.

4. We demand the creation of visible measures in the Cultural Film Funding of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media (BKM) for diversity and inclusion on an intersectional basis, which actually bring about and ensure measurable progress. These measures should be directed at underrepresented voices and Black filmmakers in the areas of production, authorship, directing and narratives.
5. In the announced evaluation and hopefully reorganisation of the “governance structure of the Berlinale”⁸, we demand that the inclusion of persons belonging to marginalised gender identities, those with a disability and of racialized persons should be taken into account and fostered, and that an external advisory board be established and staffed to promote and finance diversity and inclusion on an intersectional basis.
6. We demand the creation of visible measures taken by the Berlinale's leadership for diversity and inclusion on an intersectional basis which actually make measurable progress and enable access for underrepresented German voices as well as Black German voices to the Berlinale's festival sections *Encounters* and *Official Competition*.
7. We demand the provision of additional financial resources for the creation of various employment position regarding anti-discrimination, diversity, inclusion and accessibility.
8. We demand the creation of a Berlinale mission statement for the D&I, which contains and anchors values, guidelines and an inclusive and ethical philosophy for curatorial and all other activities of the Berlinale. We demand that the principles of curatorial justice are taken into consideration in the selection and curation of films, projects and staff. This should involve internal as well as external advice, guidance and support.
9. We demand the archiving of films by underrepresented and Black film creatives and access to film archives for underrepresented and Black film creatives.
10. We demand that the above considerations as well as our analysis outlined in this public statement and the ensuing-conversation are taken into account regarding the contractual extensions of the Berlinale's leadership currently under discussion and/or the appointments to these posts in order to minimise racist and discriminatory incidents as much as possible and to exclude them by all means necessary.
11. We demand regular awareness-building measures on anti-discrimination, on white supremacy, on the different manifestations of the different types of racism and

⁸ See “Together with artistic director Carlo Chatrian, Ms. Rissenbeek will prepare and perform the 74th Berlinale 2024. The Supervisory Board has instructed the Chairman of the Supervisory Board, Minister of State Claudia Roth, to hold talks with Carlo Chatrian about a contract extension and to evaluate the governance structure of the Berlinale.” in the BKM press release Mariëtte Rissenbeek leaves the Berlinale 2024 of 30.03.2023.

discrimination, on intersectionality for all film funding bodies, festivals, the German Film Academy and for their respective entire staff.

12. We demand empowerment workshops for the staff belonging to underrepresented groups at all film funding bodies, festivals and the German Film Academy.
13. We demand criteria that take into account and foster the inclusion of underrepresented people when hiring new staff.
14. We demand greater outreach to and the involvement of the communities of Berlin, a global city, in the form of a better connections with organizations such as ourselves and all other representative organizations and interest groups at Berlin, German, European and international levels, following the example of many other festivals around the world, whose actions are embedded in the activities of their cities, cultural scene and communities.
15. We demand an anti-discrimination clause in every contract. This clause is intended to protect employees who enter into a contractual relationship with an institution from racist statements and discriminatory acts. The clause also serves as an offer to reflect and exchange ideas about the joint approach to be adopted as part of a partnership. Should racist remarks or actions nevertheless occur, then the relevant institution undertakes to carry out workshops, awareness-building and educational work. In the worst case, employees are granted the unilateral right of termination.
16. We demand a state-funded task force against racism and discrimination in film which can identify racist and discriminatory content in film and can expressly prevent the public screening thereof.
17. We demand that nominations and prizes for films by the German Film Academy and the Berlinale can only be awarded to films that meet the criteria of diversity and inclusion on an intersectional basis and do not transport, reproduce and extol racist and/or discriminatory imagery, language and content.

These demands aim at preventing racism in film. They aim at stimulating interest and awareness around lived realities of Black people as well as lived realities of underrepresented voices and their contributions to society. They require the willingness for long-lasting change, they can be determined by reliable and verifiable rules, and are then binding on all parties involved. Only then do Black voices and all underrepresented voices have a chance to demand their rights.

The intention of our demands is to send a clear signal for social cohesion in all areas and to unequivocally advocate for a cosmopolitan consciousness. Identification, role models and the motivation to participate in all areas of German society's life is thereby not only possible for Black people, but for all members of German society. This public statement should be understood as a call to action by the individuals and organisations placed in cc of this letter. It should call for solidarity and, above all, for support in the fight against racism and discrimination in film. Public discourse on racism and discrimination in film should be encouraged and seen as an opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Schwarze Filmschaffende e.V.

About Schwarze Filmschaffende e.V.

Schwarze Filmschaffende e.V. is a network of Black film creatives from German-speaking Europe, with and without a migratory background. Together we advocate for equal opportunities and diversity, in front of and behind the camera as well as for discriminatory-free education at film schools and other educational institutions.

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