

changing political tides, but *Wood and Water* suggests that even the most seemingly permanent things are always changing, and that the only way not to drown is to drift with the flow.

Wood and Water
by Amy Taubin

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In Hong Kong, sometime before the Chinese government's total crackdown, Anke, a 60-year-old widow from a small town in Germany's Black Forest, hopes to rendezvous with her expat son. It's the first time she's been abroad, and it's liberating for her to wander alone in a strange city. The Hong Kong we see through her eyes is nothing like the glamorized metropolis of Wong Kar Wai's movies or gangster dramas. The streets are crowded, but people are never rude or unkind. It's the time of the Umbrella demonstrations, and Anke sometimes catches sight of them just around a corner. Shot on celluloid, the film's images have a richness of detail and a sense of already belonging to the past. However brief, Anke's trip is freeing for her. Perhaps she's aware, as we certainly are, that the Hong Kong she is visiting will soon be gone forever. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

With seamless grace, shooting on 16 mm, and underscored by a soundtrack from Brian Eno, German director Jonas Bak moves from the tall spires of the Black Forest to the teeming skyscrapers of Hong Kong in his tranquil, deeply moving feature debut.

Anke retires from her job at the church in a small town in the Black Forest. She looks forward to reuniting with her children over the summer holidays by the Baltic Sea, at a place where they used to live as a young family, and where she lived her best years. At the last minute, her son Max is unable to join them because of protests that are bringing Hong Kong, where he lives, to a standstill. She has been out of touch with him for many years and after an otherwise uneventful summer and facing the void of retirement, she decides to visit him.

A mother wants to check in on her children every now and then, but Hong Kong is also her adventure, her escape. She must spend a few days there by herself until Max returns from a worktrip. Protest-ridden Hong Kong is an enigmatic new world to her through which she moves carefully. Through conversations with strangers, she gradually settles in. A young woman who is sad to leave Hong Kong, Max's doorman, a psychiatrist, a fortune teller and a social activist. These encounters and her experience of the city help her to break down the inner walls she constructed years ago and make way for a new chapter in her life.

79 min. | Germany | 2021

Wood and Water by Jake Cole

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Writer-director Jonas Bak's semi-autobiographical *Wood and Water* is a gentle depiction of modern alienation. The film unfurls through a series of echoes across time and space, starting with Anke (Anke Bak, the director's mother), an elderly widow, walking around her beach house on the Baltic Sea reminiscing about the past before a montage of old photographs illustrates what she's reliving. Pointedly, the most meaningful difference between the film's present-day shots of the house and its grounds and the old photos is that Anke's adult children dot the latter while the former are bereft of people.

Anke, who's just retired from her career as a church secretary in her small town in the Black Forest region of southwestern Germany, is a taciturn and reflective woman. To commemorate her retirement, she plans a getaway to the family beach house that will serve as a reunion with her children, only to receive a last-minute text from her son, Max, that he's trapped in Hong Kong because of the government crackdown on pro-

democracy protests.

Though external factors clearly play a role in detaining him, Max's siblings make grousing, vague references to his unreliability, and though Anke doesn't clearly express any disappointment, her already withdrawn body language tells no lies. Using his mother as something close to a Bressonian model throughout *Wood and Water*, Bak mostly explores Anke's reaction to her son's latest absence through elegant compositions and editing that communicate the depths of her feelings lurking just beneath the placid surface of her life.

Those aforementioned echoes across time and space reverberate further when Anke resolves that, if her son cannot come to her, she shall go to him. The early emphasis on long shots of Anke and her hometown, which highlight the heavy intrusion of trees and foliage into all aspects of her surroundings, soon give way to no less patient glimpses of Hong Kong's stark urban landscape. Her figurative loneliness in her usual environment becomes more literal when she roams the dense streets near the protests, with the woman forced to speak English with the mostly older locals who offer her guidance and companionship.

The degree to which Anke's changing surroundings are both radically different and functionally similar is most arrestingly illustrated when Anke first leaves Germany. As she gets in a taxi to the airport, the camera moves into a not-quite-POV position in the backseat with her, the lens pointed out the rear window and tilted up toward the sky. As the car drives out of the town, the trees that line the streets disappear when the cab heads into a tunnel, the open sky and forest replaced by an inky darkness punctuated by dots of overhead lights that scroll by at the edge of the frame and vaguely resemble sprocket holes.

Suddenly, the yellow, circular tungsten lights lengthen into strips of fluorescent white before the car emerges from a tunnel into the concrete jungle of Hong Kong, trees replaced by looming towers. The obscured cut between locations, and the tunnel being equated to a giant film strip, makes an abstract, metatextual gesture of cinema's ability to bridge distances.

And yet, *Wood and Water* never falls into the trap of using an exotic locale to give its protagonist a false sense of "finding herself." Bak's reliance on long shots over close-ups consistently places Anke as just one figure among many, and the way that she's always near the protests but never finds herself among the marchers highlights the film's shrewd refusal to exploit very real political turmoil as a springboard for personal betterment.

Instead, Anke's arc is one of learning to accept her feelings of disconnect and to seek moments of humanity as mundane, unremarkable interactions. Throughout, the film stresses the transience of things, as when Anke stays one night at a hostel and speaks with a woman who notes of Hong Kong: "They say it's going to be quite different here in five years' time. I don't really know if I want to be here for that." She, of course, refers to