

# CHRISTIAN NICCOLI

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Christian Niccoli's works rarely comply with our usual expectations of a film narrative. It would be more accurate to call them imagery reflecting reality in metaphorical or abstract terms and illustrating the artist's thoughts about complex themes and relationships. These include reflections on patterns of relationships within families, the way children are socialised, and the limbo in which young Berliners find themselves. These thoughts are often triggered by Niccoli's own experience or that of his friends, making them the result of observations within his personal social environment. Sometimes, however, the artist extends that radius: for example, when he works with interviews, drawing on them for quotes to use in his films.

In Berlin, where Christian Niccoli has been living since 2002, he is primarily interested in a younger generation, from their twenties to late thirties, who have chosen different occupations from their parents. They have left the places where they grew up and they lack both financial security and a stable web of emotional relationships. If we compare them to the above-mentioned works on families and children, these works show how the artist was prompted, by his own change of residence and personal situation, to explore a number of questions. Following his move to Berlin, freedom and self-fulfilment are themes which have played a central part in his work in recent years. This suggests that we need to read Niccoli's films as visualisations of his own psychological exploration of himself and his generation.

*Escalating Perception / The Gaze (2004)*  
Conceived originally as a trilogy, *Escalating Perception* is a study in the thoughts, feelings and social behaviour of people who cross paths in the public space. In all the films in this series, a key role is played by questions such as how they respond to each other and what they are thinking as they meet. The setting for *Escalating Perception / The Gaze* is an escalator at Potsdamer Platz, a station on Berlin's public transport network. The split screen shows different people, some travelling up and others down. Movement not only highlights the cut in the middle, but provides the steady motion from which the film derives its flow. As the situation suggests, the performers are not actually moving themselves, but are carried past the camera as they stand on the escalator. Just as their movement is beyond their control, so too the

comments they successively make about the things that are important to them in their choice of partner or about the way they flirt are not personal statements. In fact, they are quotes from interviews that Christian Niccoli conducted with single men and women aged 30 to 40. With the help of these interviews, he tried to establish how flexible people of this age group are about choosing a partner and what methods they use to pursue their target. The gravity and sincerity in the words of these passing figures contrasts strangely with their brief appearance. The staccato of their comments makes these fragments of aspiration and desire appear transient, and often they betray how much a person's ideal partner is rooted in an image of themselves.

*Planschen (2008)*

In *Planschen* [splashing about], Christian Niccoli tries to find a metaphor for the occupational and financial instability facing so many young, mostly creative people, especially in Berlin. To this end he equips his protagonists with inflatable rings and has them drift about in the sea. At first, the focus is on the looks these individuals exchange – sometimes distrustful, sometimes envious – as they float on the water without any real communication taking place. Then the camera zooms further and further out across the surface of the sea. This new perspective is sobering, as it shows that drifting is not just some personal accident. Here we have a veritable shoal of drifters on the high seas, without a sandbank or shoreline in sight. The hopelessness of this image expresses a tragedy which we might read as a universal metaphor for the precarious conditions in which the younger generation live today.

*Der Weg zur Freiheit (2010)*

Picking up where *Planschen* left off, the relatively abstract video *Der Weg zur Freiheit* [The Way to Freedom] seems to be trying to lend structure to that sense of letting yourself drift without direction. With a simple experimental design, a grid that lends shape to billows of smoke, Niccoli encourages the viewer to ask philosophical questions. He alludes in particular to our notion of freedom of action, and whether not being under pressure from any external pressures or ties really makes people happy. The core question in Niccoli's exploration is whether people are actually able to manage freedom. His personal views on the matter are therefore as much a part of the work as the question itself: only when we experience constraints, the artist

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believes, is genuine freedom - or at least  
a bearable, limited sort of freedom -  
possible.

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