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New Horizons and Disruptions. East-German Female Directors of the DEFA-Studios and from Underground

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In the course of my four-year work as an editor of the publication *Sie – Regisseurinnen der DEFA und ihre Filme / Hers – Female Directors of DEFA and their films* (together with Ralf Schenk as a co-editor published in Schriftenreihe by DEFA-Stiftung, Berlin 2019) I conducted research studies and made interesting observations concerning the perception of those female directors. It became clear to me that film history can and must be viewed and written in a fundamentally new way. The reason for the publication was the fact that only a handful of women directors (Ingrid Reschke, Iris Gusner, Evelyn Schmidt, Helke Misselwitz, Petra Tschörtner) have ever been acknowledged or mentioned in East German film history. Apart from the fact that a certain ignorance of the arts in the GDR still exists in principle, we have identified 64 female directors. The book is an inventory, but also a pioneering work because indeed all the women directors of the DEFA studio were researched and we created their first filmography for the vast majority of them. For such a venture with such thoroughness, an institution like the DEFA-Stiftung is indispensable as support and benefactor. DEFA-Stiftung is a foundation that manages the heritage of GDR-DEFA film in a constructive way. First of all it is the owner of licenses and rights. Through TV broadcasts and sales it finances publications, film restoration and awards.

An important signal from the publication states: Now is the right time and perhaps the last moment to work on the history of East German film, because there is still a chance to meet and ask the directors. Oral history and academic scholarship need each other. To make things easier, the number of 64 female directors is manageable. Some of them have only realized 2 or 3 films, that was the minimum requirement to be defined as a director. Others have made more than 100 short and long documentaries. Of course, the centralist structure of the studios is helpful in gaining an overview. Another chance of the project is to treat all varieties, all genres of film together. Although the short formats, animation and documentary films hardly play a role in cinema, they are nevertheless the breeding ground for further aesthetic developments. Modern imagery is inconceivable without cinematic experiments. This concerns – for example – hybrid forms and the interlocking of the genres of feature and documentary films. So the premise of our publication was therefore not to focus only on feature film, which is usually treated as a “premium discipline”, but to include documentaries, advertising and animated films on equal footing. All of these films were created under the roof of DEFA in various studios. These “smaller formats” emerged in the shadow of major productions and were therefore less observed by censorship. Thus, the often artistically interesting and experimental films could be made, where obviously more woman directors were able to prevail. This point is crucial to me. In projects where smaller budgets were allocated, it has often been easier for the women directors to reveal their themes and their narrative style.

Women in Feature Film

An average of 15 to 20 feature films were shot per year, and about 35 directors were fully employed. On the political level, the “women’s question”, the legal anchoring of equality by law had been solved since 1950. Of all 64 women directors, only 5 were directors of feature film, Bärbl Bergmann and Hannelore Unterberg shot exclusively children’s films. In interviews with these directors, who had once set out to realize feature films they told us about marginalisation and reservations: “Decision makers do not trust them with big budgets... they do not have the necessary authority to lead a large staff... women are basically considered too emotional” – another word for the fact that they were considered politically unreliable. These arguments have not only been voiced by the officials, but also by male colleagues who were trying to pursue their own projects.

Within the studio system, every director had to have each script checked by several agencies on political correctness (the word was not used at the time, of course) and social relevance. Only men made the decisions and were the gate

keepers. Moreover the female directors were in tough competition with male directors like Heiner Carow (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, 1973), Egon Günther (*Her Third*, 1972, *The Keys*, 1974), Konrad Wolf (*Solo Sunny*, 1980) or Lothar Warnecke (*Apprehension*, 1982), who – for a different reason – also put strong female figures in the centre of their films. They had realized that precisely because women were considered politically unreliable, they were more predestined to criticizing living conditions and socialist utopia. The male protagonists usually had to embody the principles of the state.

Director Iris Gusner

The most successful director in the feature film studio with almost 10 movies was Iris Gusner. Along with Ingrid Reschke, who realized only 3 films, and Evelyn Schmidt, who was only allowed to make very few films, including *Das Fahrrad* (*The Bicycle*, 1981), Iris Gusner was the only one who could enforce her mission in some of her movies. It was about women who are strong and sensitive, who find fulfilment in their work, who don't want to accept injustice, who are single mothers and yet not weak, who are looking for a man but would not compromise on a relationship or marriage. Iris Gusner studied at the Moscow Film School WGIK from 1961–1967, emphasizing that she has learned there to think in larger dimensions and that the thaw period in the Soviet Union has planted in her a different image of socialism. With this vision she came back to the GDR, which suddenly seemed very small and stuffy.

In 1974 she directed her debut film *Die Taube auf dem Dach* (*The Dove on the Roof*). The film begins with visionary images from outer space and in contrast with conflicts in the reality of a construction site where instability of production rules the daily routine. A female construction manager tries to survive in this male domain. The opening sequence could be read as an anticipation of her own situation: Iris Gusner was influenced by the spirit of the Nouvelle Vague, she narrates the story in fragments, playfully and freely, the film composes itself through single motifs, and denies a simplistic narrative. The film asks what the price of emancipation means. Why was the film banned by censorship? The reason for the ban was: The main protagonist who can't make decisions isn't a role model. The construction workers would be characterized as negative bums. She was accused of handicraft mistakes (an accusation never made to male colleagues, there were always political objections asserted). Literally, the director Iris Gusner would spit in the face of the working class. As a result, the negative print was destroyed. Today a black-and-white reconstruction based on a working copy was found by chance. The film,

actually shot in colour, is considered a great discovery and now is often and even internationally shown.

Iris Gusner has never created again such a formally extraordinary film. She had to “rehabilitate” herself with working for East-German TV and with a children’s film. But in 1979 she achieved a great success with the comedy *Alle meine Mädchen* (*All my Girls*, 1979).

A dictum of socialist realism was to depict the world of labour. Iris Gusner knew how to transform this propagandistic demand into a virtue. The movie *All my girls* is about a film student who researches a very self-confident women’s brigade in a lightbulb factory that wants to stay together because it is precisely out of this cohesion that they get their strength and resistance to grievances in the factory. In any case, filmmaking in GDR was recommended to look back and build on East German history. In Gusner’s movie it is obviously which narrative and visual potentials are in the environment of labour, how the protagonists are characterized and individualized. Tensions and hierarchies are told “casually” and the lightbulb even ironically anticipates erotic entanglements. Iris Gusner always proclaimed, that she wants to know what women do during the day – how they earn their living¹. In the final scene, one can still experience how Gusner works very cleverly with a pseudo-documentary intervention. One of the workers holds a monologue that oscillates between longing for a man who is a dropout and a concrete critique of the employment conditions. The private and the political critique are so cleverly intertwined that censorship is undermined. Iris Gusner has pursued consistently a strategy for not working with the same star actresses that were cast by her male colleagues, in order to defend her cinematographic vision. Instead, she always opted for actresses who expressed above all some toughness from real life – for example Marion Wiegmann in *Kaskade rückwärts* (*Bailing Out*, 1983) or Monika Bielenstein in *Wäre die Erde nicht rund* (*Were the Earth Not Round*, 1981).

Female documentary film directors

The history of documentary films of DEFA is far from being well researched. Here we were able to “recover” something new because most of these films were very rarely screened, some of them even banned. Remarkable is that one finds often no heroic figures in the struggle for socialism, but documents of everyday life revealing the problems of society. It is about the question of whether a career and children are compatible with each other, why women work mainly in

¹ Iris Gusner in conversation with the author on occasion of the screening of her film *The Dove on the Roof* at the opening of the retrospective “Self-Determined”, Berlinale 2019.

low-paid jobs, why they earn less than men for equal work, then the sometimes scandalous working conditions in various industries, along with that the issue of environmental pollution. These issues are clearly addressed, but only in some cases they really point out to the reasons as a systemic question. But one should take into consideration that the audience in the GDR could read between the lines and recognize all the allusions.

Among the documentaries are some examples of auteur films. The directors often wanted to develop and express a personal access to their subjects. They were less interested in “objective” journalistic formats, leaving this field to the propagandists. Rather, it was about asking questions, introducing oneself as the presenter of research, trying out essayistic narratives. One example is *Winter adé* by Helke Misselwitz from 1988, a seminal film and one of the few examples that is consistently told from the author’s perspective. The full-length documentary begins with the birth of the director in 1947 in Zwickau at a railway barrier, following as a road movie from the south of the GDR to the north to the Baltic Sea. Accidental and arranged encounters take place with various women who freely talk about their experiences: For instance, about the fact that so few women are in a leading position. A hundred-year-old woman is talking about her life. The woman is portrayed as the one responsible in her company for knocking the dirt out of the pipes. At home, this single mother has a disabled son. All that is shown unvarnished, shot in black and white. Instead of conducting interviews, she talks, builds confidence, so that the women report very honestly and critically about their circumstances. There is an episode with two punk girls which is exceptional. Being Punk and the corresponding music was of course taboo. In addition, the two speak incredibly openly and critically about other taboo topics such as illegal emigration for the West. For the last sequence the team is on the ferry to Denmark, with the score the song *Summertime* by Janis Joplin in the background. Everyone in the audience understood that the political ice age will soon be over.

Women in the Animation Film Studio, a special feature of the GDR

Just as most of the GDR industries was handled by the Treuhand-Commission in the 1990s, a federal trust to administrate large East German companies and real estate, the Animation Film Studio was dissolved without comprehensible reasons. This Studio was founded in 1955 in Dresden and produced mainly short children’s films – and thus a unique film tradition was given up. The Animation Film Studio employed an astonishing number of female directors like Katja Georgi, Sieglinde Hamacher, Marion Rasche, etc. Some of them had grad-

uated from the art school Burg Giebichenstein in the city of Halle, which was marked by the Bauhaus tradition. They transferred its understanding of austerity and clarity to the cartoons. It wasn't a cinema of overwhelming impact, but of poetry and slow storytelling, the images were intended to leave space for the children's imagination. There were close connections to the Prague Animation Studio and Jiří Trnka was an important influence. The animators had the freedom to experiment with different techniques and materials in stop-trick with objects, but also silhouette film. In some cases there was collaboration with painters, so that some very artistic films were created that could be appreciated far beyond children's films, rather from the point of view of the visual and fine arts. I want to emphasize one short animation: *Vogel der Nacht / Bird of the Night* (1986) by Christl Wiemer, with artistic design by Walter Rehn. The figures are made of porcelain, of real china, and thus create their very own cool beauty. Walter Rehn was a painter who worked several times with Christl Wiemer. Many of animated films of the studio were prized, awarded and sold well worldwide. It is very bitter that this knowledge and tradition has been lost.

Women's Experimental Films from Underground

At this point, I must mention that the scope of our book had defined its limits. It covers "only" the female directors who worked in the official film studio DEFA and thus within the institutional boundaries. Here's another opportunity for this project: If we talk about who made images for the cinema in the GDR, then the films of the artists who shot on Super-8 beyond the DEFA are missing. But the high proportion of women in this scene, especially female painters, is striking. These works belong to the context of experimental films. Their access to filmmaking was denied, so they decided to make „a virtue out of necessity“ and shot on the amateur-material that was easy available on Super-8. They work with a small budget and very limited technical means - the sound, for example, had always to be recorded separately during screenings. Restrictions on one hand, freedom on the other. Their works were created without any commercial pressures and without interference from censorship. The problems started only after attempts at public screenings. Because these films had no permission, they could only be shown underground and therefore remained only known to a small group of people. There were hardly any contacts between DEFA and the independent artists' films. In my opinion it is important to define the underground filmmakers as part of a national cinematography. They reflect the subconsciousness, create metaphors and abstract images for fears, repressive conditions and violence. A recurring theme is the confrontation with one's own body, the attempt to regain autonomy. These films are much more contemporary in their design than

other films, they are experimental and daring, and they were perceived more in the context of visual arts.

One example from this field can be Gabi Kachold-Stötzer. She was born in Erfurt and studied German language and literature and art education. In 1976 she took part in the protest against the expatriation of the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann and was arrested by the Secret Police; she was sentenced to one and a half year in prison for “defamation of the state”. During her time in prison, she had extreme experiences with the inmates. 30 women in a cell, women who enter into lesbian relationships, scratch and mutilate themselves, become aggressive or depressed. This experience becomes Gabi Kachold-Stötzer’s artistic initiation. After her release, she refused to leave for the West. She founded a gallery that was banned, she founded a group of female artists and began to make super-8 films. It’s about trying out collective forms of life. I quote from her: “The most important trick for me was always to go public, to make everything public, not to remain alone. Because the Stasi’s tactic (Secret Service) was to disintegrate the groups, then isolate the people, make them feel insecure, drive them into loneliness” (Löser, 2011, p. 292). She works with mythological references (*Veitstanz / Feixtanz*, 1988), she uses various materials like felt, stones and eggs (*Trisal*, 1986), nudity becomes a symbol of independence, fertility rituals point to a connection with female prehistory that reaches far beyond the horizon of the GDR.

Conclusion

We are just beginning to find and bring together the films of female directors. This includes further research into the field of students’ films. Under the shelter of the Konrad Wold Film University of Babelsberg, defiant, playful films emerged. Their narrative style and aesthetic concepts hardly compare to the works that were then produced by DEFA. Also on television some interesting directors could explore their field – but most of them weren’t valuable. The whole field of films for children deserves more research for its subversive allusions. In the next step, films must be digitalized and screened. We have to start to make corrections on the Internet, in Wikipedia and film portals. How often names are missing, especially from women in the crew, or are names misspelled or wrongly credited. Internet is now a memory storage and a kind of co-writer of film history. The cinemas, which could do much more than just screening movies, also create the canon. They, as well as film schools, must be encouraged to include women’s films in their programs and classes as a natural contribution to film history. And thus, also East German history needs to be rewritten.

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Abstract

On the occasion of a publication *Sie – Regisseurinnen der DEFA und ihre Filme*, Berlin, Schriftenreihe der DEFA-Stiftung, 2019, all female directors who worked for the DEFA studios in the GDR were identified for the first time. More than sixty women directors worked for DEFA between 1946 and 1992. They made feature films and documentaries, worked in advertising film and in the animation studio. Particularly among the smaller formats, there is a striking number of female directors who were able to accommodate their preferred themes in the slipstream of the major productions. They problematized the official reading of equal rights and created counter-images in their figures and portraits. To be added to the canon of female filmmaking are also the independent women filmmakers, who were only allowed to realize and show their works outside the official media structures. These were female artists who discovered the film medium for themselves and made Super-8 abstract films with elements of performance on very low budgets.

Key words: DEFA Studio; Frauenfilm; women's cinema; GDR film history