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## ***Constructing Masculinities in Iris Gusner's Die Taube auf dem Dach (1973, 1990, 2010)***

One of only a handful of female directors employed at DEFA Studios in the feature film division, Iris Gusner took an unusual, winding career path<sup>1</sup>. Unlike most GDR filmmakers trained exclusively in Babelsberg, she studied in Moscow for seven years from 1960–67 at the renowned All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) under distinguished Soviet director Mikhail Romm<sup>2</sup>. She worked briefly in GDR television before becoming a directorial assistant for Wolfgang Bartsch's documentary *Gestern und die neue Stadt* (*Yesterday and the New City*, 1969) and Konrad Wolf's *Goya-oder Der arge Weg der Erkenntnis* (*Goya or the Hard Way to Enlightenment*, 1971). In contrast to most filmmakers of her generation who served as assistants for years until they were finally able to work independently, in 1972 at age 31 she directed her first film *Die Taube auf dem Dach* (*The Dove on the Roof*) based on her own screenplay<sup>3</sup>. The film was banned, but she was immediately given a new project directing the church and state drama *Einer trage des anderen Last* (*Bear Ye One Another's Burden*) with a screenplay by Wolfgang Held. The project, however, was terminated one month before shooting began and it would take

<sup>1</sup> Along with Gusner, female feature film directors at DEFA included Ingrid Reschke and Evelyn Schmidt and children's film directors Bärbl Bergmann and Hannelore Unterberg. For an excellent overview of women in the GDR film industry, see Klauß and Schenk, 2019 and Frölich, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of her experiences at VGIK, see Gusner, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the so-called lost generation of DEFA directors, see McGee, 2003.

fourteen years and a different director (Lothar Warnecke) for the material to make its way to the screen. Despite these setbacks, Gusner made nine films in the GDR. Although she worked in various genres, her oeuvre displays relatively consistent themes, largely because she wrote her own screenplays. Her characters try to balance private life and career and are torn between striving for idealism and settling with reality. Relatively little scholarly work has been done on Gusner's films. She is routinely mentioned in film histories for directing *Alle meine Mädchen* (*All My Girls*, 1980) and contributing to the *Frauenfilm* (women's film) with striking depictions of independent working women seeking personal happiness<sup>4</sup>. Leaving aside the problematic term *Frauenfilm* and the common practice of looking at portrayals of women in films by female directors<sup>5</sup>, I suggest we turn the table around and explore Gusner's depictions of men and masculinities in *The Dove on the Roof*. This romantic drama challenges the notion so prominently touted by the SED government that the basic conditions for gender equality already existed in the GDR, and it demonstrates how in the intimate sphere of love and marriage men are so heavily influenced by restrictive gender norms that heterosexual relations fail to produce a happy end.

The production history of *The Dove* is remarkable. The film was banned, never archived, and thought lost until a color copy discovered in 1990 was restored in a black-and-white print and shown publically twice, only to be lost again for two decades and restored a second time for a premiere 37 years after completion<sup>6</sup>. Considering Erich Honecker's famous dictate in 1971 that there were no more taboos for GDR artists if they were firmly rooted in socialism,

<sup>4</sup> Gusner is only briefly mentioned in DEFA film histories by Feinstein, 2002, Berghahn, 2005, and Heiduschke, 2013. For an analysis of female viewing pleasures in *All My Girls*, see Creech, 2016, pp. 141–194 and for a study of *Kaskade rückwärts* (*Bailing Out*, 1983) as a critique of gender normativity in the GDR, see Heiduschke, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> “Jennifer Creech (2016, p. 2), for example, offers an extremely broad definition of the “women’s film” as “the protagonist was a woman, the director was a woman, and/or the film involved romance and therefore, was supposedly intended for an audience of women.”

<sup>6</sup> According to Iris Gusner, the original negative was most likely destroyed years after production during the tenure of Hans-Dieter Mäde, who served as the general director of the DEFA Studios from 1976–1989. She notes that she had access to the colored working copy of *The Dove on the Roof* and showed it to crew members working on subsequent films, including Günter Haubold, the cameraman for *All My Girls* (1980). Cinematographer Roland Gräf found the working copy in 1990, which was likely saved because it was labeled as *Daniel*, the title of her original screenplay. The restored black-and-white version was first shown on October 2, 1990, one day before German unification and fell into the so-called *Wendeloch*, the hole created by the turn of events in 1989, that resulted in public disinterest in GDR culture due to the monumental social change taking place. The colored working copy of *Daniel* and the restored version were again lost until a black-and-white version was discovered in 2009 and restored by the DEFA Stiftung. See Sputh, 2014, reel 1.

what heresy did Gusner commit to have her debut film banned?<sup>7</sup> What made her work unacceptable when contemporary films by Heiner Carow, Siegfried Kühn, and Egon Günter were highly critical of society but still made it to the screen for public consumption and debate?<sup>8</sup> Gusner noted in her diary that the criticism encompassed both her aesthetic choices and her portrayal of the working class: “The film’s style is a complete mistake artistically... attacks against the GDR in every scene... people all in crisis... The portrayal of workers distorted. Iris Gusner has spit in the face of the working class!” (Gusner, Sander, 2009, p. 159)<sup>9</sup>. After various attempts to reedit the film failed, it was shelved and officially categorized as an experiment for a debut director.

Like dozens of DEFA films, *The Dove* is set in a construction site, a hallowed location venerating one of the most cherished myths in the GDR: namely that the socialist state was built on the ruins of National Socialism and that the reconstruction of the country based on humanistic principles wed to modern technology would free the worker from fascist ideology<sup>10</sup>. Gusner’s depiction of the harmful consequences of construction work clearly went beyond acceptable levels of criticism. *The Dove* juxtaposes the ideal of mass housing projects with a reality where all the male figures are homeless and occupy transitory spaces, perpetually seeking attachment but failing to achieve a lasting union. Rather than presenting the typical socialist realist narrative trope of a wayward rebellious hero who is converted to socialism, Gusner populates her film with figures who still believe in utopia but cannot reconcile their individual desires with the reality at hand. While GDR filmmakers in the seventies were situating such criticism of social alienation, resignation, and stagnation in female protagonists, Gusner locates this reproach

<sup>7</sup> Honecker (quoted from Wolle, 2001, p. 239) famously stated “Assuming that one starts from a solid socialist position, then in my opinion there can be no more taboos in the areas of art and literature. This concerns both questions of content and style” (“Wenn man von der festen Position des Sozialismus ausgeht, kann es meines Erachtens auf dem Gebiet von Kunst und Literatur keine Tabus geben. Das betrifft sowohl die Fragen der inhaltlichen Gestaltung als auch des Stils”).

<sup>8</sup> Compare the fate of Heiner Carow’s *Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, 1973), Siegfried Kühn’s *Das zweite Leben des Friedrich Wilhelm Georg Platow* (*The Second Life of Friedrich Wilhelm Georg Platow*, 1973), and Egon Günter’s *Die Schlüssel* (*The Keys*, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> “Der Stil des Films ist der reine Kunstirrtum... massive Angriffe gegen kleinbürgerliche Haltungen... in jeder Szene Angriffe gegen die DDR—wie sieht Iris Gusner eigentlich die DDR?... die Menschen alle in der Krise... Das Arbeiterbild verzerrt. Iris Gusner hat der Arbeiterklasse ins Gesicht gespuckt!”

<sup>10</sup> Setting the action in a construction site suggests an affinity to DEFA films ranging from Frank Beyer’s *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*, 1966/1990), Ingrid Reschke, *Kennen Sie Urban* (*Do You Know Urban?*, 1971), Lothar Warnecke’s *Unser kurzes Leben* (*Our Short Life*, 1981 based on Brigitte Reimann’s *Franziska Linderhand* (1974/1998) to Peter Kahane’s, *Die Architekten* (*The Architects*, 1990). For an overview of the construction site in DEFA films, see Böttcher, 2016 and Scharnowski, 2013.

in her male protagonists as well, and it is her criticism of masculine identities, I maintain, that was a step too far for the time.

Engineer Linda Hinrichs is a construction site manager, who enjoys her job and wants to continue her studies, but she recognizes that by devoting herself exclusively to work she is missing out on love and the prospects of a family. She becomes romantically involved with two men, middle-aged foreman Hans Böwe and university student Daniel, but the love triangle is never fully resolved, since neither man is ideally suited to her needs. As the title implies with its reference to the folk saying “better a sparrow in the hand than the dove on the roof,” Linda must choose between an imperfect reality and an unobtainable ideal. The two main male protagonists represent modes of hegemonic masculinity still prevalent in the GDR in the early seventies, *Held der Arbeit* (Hero of Labor) and *Held der Technik* (Hero of Technology). I argue that Gusner’s disparagement of outdated and progressive masculine heroic identities contributed to the film’s censorship, disappearance, and near elimination from film history.

The film opens with footage of cosmonauts floating weightlessly and rockets launching into outer space followed by the title credits and then a young man gyrating on a 360-degree swing while his father comments that his extraordinary son, Daniel, will one day break his neck. With a sharp cut to a construction site, the two main male characters are introduced. Daniel, a student working on his summer vacation is doing manual labor but quickly gives up, and brigade leader Hans Böwe quietly picks up the shovel and takes responsibility for the work. Daniel complains: “I’m interested in the year 2000 and you have me shoveling sand.”<sup>11</sup> The contrast between two modes of masculinity is evident from the start. The men differ in age, education, work experience, and behavior, and their distinguishing features resemble well-established and highly recognizable paradigms for socialist heroes.

Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries have compiled the stories of individuals belonging to the pantheon of socialist heroes in Soviet bloc countries. They examine how the GDR government promoted formulaic stories of people who achieved extraordinary success for the collective and systematically distributed these stories in the public institutions of the party, workplace, education, and media to win the population over to socialism. Sympathetic role models acted as “real existing promotional figures for socialism” throughout the fifties and sixties, but by the seventies the GDR was “bereft of heroes, a heroless time,” in which outdated archetypes continued to circulate but no new heroes were born

<sup>11</sup> “Mich interessiert das Jahr 2000 und ihr lasst mich Sand schippen.” Film dialog, Gusner, 2010.

(Satjukow, Gries, 2002, p. 11, 27)<sup>12</sup>. Since work was considered essential for an individual to become emancipated and to level out social, gender, and class differences, the hero of labor was the most significant role model in the years of reconstruction. Although the GDR constitution already in 1949 guaranteed women equal rights and the SED encouraged women to be employed in all fields of the economy, 90% of the recipients of the honorary title hero of labor were men and the discourse relies on a habitus culturally defined as masculine (Brandes, 2002, p. 184)<sup>13</sup>. The standard narrative for the hero of labor starts with a proletarian everyman learning his moral purpose from the party. In a singular heroic feat, he surpasses the norm through strength and endurance for the good of the collective and the nation. His virtues include being selfless, modest, skilled, resourceful, vigorous, assiduous, and taciturn (Scholz, 2008, p. 16). Along with a veneration of physical strength, the hero of labor was admired for his hearty and enthusiastic consumption of large quantities of food and alcohol (Brandes, 2002, p. 183). Gusner's depiction of Hans Böwe follows the conventional paradigm in order to criticize this antiquated model of masculinity as detrimental to individual happiness and family life.

Böwe is the brigade leader and unmistakably the dominant male figure, admired by both men and women. The minor male figures, the silent Bernd and the foreigner Kerim, notably serve him as he dresses, bringing clothing and toiletries to the esteemed male who has numerous medals ready to be fastened to his lapel. Beyond his commendable work ethic, Böwe is the idealistic socialist worker who is always concerned about the welfare of others. He has spent his career traveling from one construction site to another, building large apartment complexes across the GDR but never build-

<sup>12</sup> The hero of labor functioned as a figure of identification and integration but reached its apex of popularity already in the 1950s. The turn in the seventies and eighties to smaller versions of heroes, *Jedermann-Helden*, was indicative of the failures of heroes to compensate for the growing consumer driven desires for housing and products. Gries (2002, p. 100) maintains that the move from great heroes to smaller ones was one indication of the failure of the state: "They reveal not only the defeat of the concept of hero but also the defeat of the socialist political system already taking place" (Sie offenbarten nicht nur den Niedergang des Heldenkonzeptes, sondern den bereits laufenden Niedergang des sozialistischen Staatswesens).

<sup>13</sup> Silka Scholz (2008, p. 15) argues that this model of hegemonic masculinity was directly related to the ossified grip on power men exercised in the GDR: "Through this pantheon male rule was immediately legitimized, in that hegemonic masculinity was created by means of these hero figures" (Über dieses Pantheon wurde zugleich auch die männliche Herrschaft legitimiert, indem mittels dieser Heldenfiguren hegemoniale Männlichkeit kreiert wurde). Women held few leadership roles in the party and there were no women with full membership in the politburo. Five women, Elli Schmidt, Edith Bauman, Luise Ermisch, Ingeborg Lange, and Margret Müller, reached the status of candidate to the politburo in the GDR, but were never granted full membership with voting rights. For an in-depth analysis of women in the GDR, see Harsch, 2007.

ing a home for himself and his family. As a result of his selfless devotion to communal needs, his marriage ends and he rarely sees his two grown daughters. His itinerant lifestyle is not depicted as an individual choice to gain freedom from the restrictions of domestic life. Indeed, being homeless and unable to perform the provider role of husband and father is a sacrifice he desperately wants to relinquish. This tough but sensitive man is a father figure who routinely shows respect for motherhood but it comes at a cost. A vivid portrayal of his tragic position occurs when he helps a mother put a stroller on the bus and then shepherds the other women and children safely on board only to have the bus drive off without him. He ends up a loser because he plays by the rules, and he routinely drowns his sorrows in alcohol and melancholy. Böwe's status as a tragic figure reaches its zenith when he goes to the record store to listen to the "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" from Verdi's opera *Nabucco*. Living in a dormitory with no permanent home let alone a record player, he must repeatedly ask the salesgirl for permission to listen to a song of slaves lamenting the loss of home. Grateful for the one minute of music she grants him, he finds the strength to continue on. The dominant male figure reveals his inner pain and identification with dispossessed workers subjugated to a malevolent power. Portraying the hero of labor deprived of his strength and vigor and implying that workers felt enslaved, Gusner's film symbolically emasculated both hero and state.

As a spontaneous, adventurous, and future-oriented young man, Daniel tries to emulate the new hero of the sixties, the cosmonaut and hero of technology. Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space in 1961 followed by the first woman Valentina Tereshkova in 1963, were heroes whose life stories signaled the victory of science and technology over nature as well as the victory of the Soviet Union over the United States in conquering new territory. Daniel's attempt to conquer his immediate environment, however, is routinely unsuccessful, even laughable, if endearing due to his youthful zeal. For example, he moves into a dormitory room with Lebanese worker Kerim and immediately takes over the space. Arabic music playing on the radio and posters of Palestine decorating the walls establish Kerim's position as the primary resident and serve as reminders of his foreignness and homelessness. Without asking, Daniel unpacks his bag on the bed Kerim was preparing for himself. Silently they exchange a glance to gauge the effects of their action on each other in a competition for spatial supremacy. Daniel then hangs a map of the heavens next to photos of children in a Palestinian refugee camp. The juxtaposition of heaven and earth, ideal and reality, but also Daniel's marking of his territory demonstrate how different the two men are. This unskilled laborer who imagines himself traveling through

outer space cannot make a bed and gives up in defeat. The revelation that Daniel is no hero of technology is substantiated at the construction site where he demonstrates even less technical acumen. He is unable to stop the tractor he is driving and must be rescued by Böwe and he cannot operate the crane until the female crane operator Erika teaches him to caress the machine like he would a woman. Daniel also tries to conquer Linda's space. In their first encounter, she shoos him out the door and cuts him down to size by remarking that he can go through the wall if the door is too small. Later he climbs through her office window instead of using the door as convention would dictate. Moreover, he lets himself into her apartment without a key or invitation, makes a meal as if he lives there, and moves his clothing and toiletries into her home, taking over her bathroom and closet on the way to her heart.

Daniel's non-conformist behavior appeals to Linda, but it is in the dance club that he starts to win her over. Critics often note that Daniel's "spontaneous" call for solidarity with Vietnam demonstrates his idealism, but I contend that it is equally a masculine performance to impress Linda and draw her attention away from Böwe's swagger. When Linda gets up to buy a bottle of wine, Böwe sweeps her off her feet, carries her to the bar, buys two bottles, and triumphantly kisses her before returning to the table where Erika also kisses him and proclaims: "What a man!" Daniel watches this masculine courting ritual emphasizing physical strength, generosity, appetite, and ability to be a good provider and presents an alternative performance. He goes on stage to recite a poem by Ho Chi Min and calls for an impromptu donation for Vietnam to demonstrate international solidarity. The call is met with cynical comments by nearly everyone in the room and leads to a fist fight (which unsurprisingly Böwe breaks up), but it produces the desired results, because Linda rewards Daniel by asking him to dance.

*The Dove* presents two alternative constructs of masculinity, represented by the figures Bernd and Kerim, who are othered and rendered in visual terms that confuse, disrupt, or contradict. The silent Bernd finds a lover who looks like him and is likewise mute and they adopt a gender-bending partner-look. Their matching outfits demonstrate belonging and shared emotions, but their visual mirroring without language is unexpected and potentially subversive. Bernd's refusal to speak to his mother and explain dropping out of school to become a construction worker rather than a medical doctor like her, implies a refusal to participate in social expectations,

to stop playing by the rules and instead embrace an insular lifestyle<sup>14</sup>. The lookalike partners also produce a surreal effect when they unexpectedly appear on a bicycle-built-for-two riding through the construction site. Speechless but conspicuously visible, present in shared space but not participating in communal activities, these doubled outsiders draw attention to the existence of alternatives and their placement between Linda and Daniel encourages viewers to question acceptable norms for heterosexual relationships. Kerim, by contrast, is a highly romantic male figure, but he is never actually depicted with a woman, so viewers may look upon such romantic notions with suspicion. Kerim relates the story about Beruit's infamous Dove's Nest, where star-crossed lovers leap from the cliffs and he is shown arranging roses in preparation for his lover's visit, a visit which is never seen. More than romance, Kerim's masculinity is called into question when contradictory verbal and visual cues force viewers to reexamine the obvious. In a tight shot, Kerim is shown moving his things (and feminine things including low-heeled shoes and flowered bags) from his nightstand. He assures Daniel that no one else has been sleeping there, despite evidence of a female guest - or evidence that the foreigner is effeminate - but minimally that overblown romanticism is suspect.

Neither the hero of labor nor the hero of technology exhibits the qualities Linda seeks in a partner, and she cannot imagine a future with either one of them. While Böwe's work ethic and tenderness are appealing, he is a middle-aged man who drinks excessively, lacks an education, and seems unable to change. Daniel's playfulness and interest in the future are attractive but his inability to respect boundaries and possessiveness make him an undesirable partner. When Daniel professes his love and demands that Linda conform to his expectations, she lashes out: "Am I your property? My woman, your woman, you are a philistine just like all the others. Did you buy me, did you pay for me? Who gives you the right anyway? I don't want to be forced into decisions by external circumstances. You guys get drunk and play the tragic hero"<sup>15</sup>. Linda conflates both men in this monolog – the jealous, controlling lover and the drunken tragic hero merge into one undesirable suitor. Keenly aware that his

<sup>14</sup> Günter Gaus famously defines the GDR as a society of niches: "preferred space in which people there leave everything – politicians, planners, propagandists, the collective, the grand objective, the cultural heritage – behind... and spend time with family and friends watering the flowers, washing the car, playing cards, talking, celebrating special occasions. And thinking about how, and with whose help, they can secure and organize what's needed, so that the niche becomes even more livable" (Quoted from Maier, 1997, p. 29).

<sup>15</sup> "Bin ich dein Eigentum? Meine Frau, deine Frau, du bist genau so ein Spießler wie alle anderen. Hast du mich gekauft, hast du mich bezahlt? Wer gibt dir überhaupt das Recht? Ich will mich nicht von äußeren Situationen zu Entscheidungen zwingen lassen. Ihr besauft euch, spielt den tragischen Helden." Film dialog, Gusner, 2010.



identity has been erased, Daniel silently leaves Linda's apartment and disappears from the film.

The final scene in a Christmas ornament factory where the director (who is ironically Daniel's father) gives Böwe, his daughter, and Linda a guided tour suggests that there is a possibility for the hero of work to build a relationship with the engineer. Filmed in tight shots that feature the father, daughter, and potential step-mother as a happy united family unit, the discontinuity between domestic bliss and the socialist workplace is blatantly highlighted through the family's interaction with the factory director. As workers decorate glass bulbs, the director oddly muses: "Every Christmas is as colorful as we want it. People buy our manufactured bulbs, and they only have the freedom to distribute them on the Christmas tree"<sup>16</sup>. How can individuals maneuver their own course in a world governed by prescribed happiness and restricted freedoms? The potential family follows the director through a hall filled with bulbs hanging from the ceiling, a surreal interlude suggesting that in the GDR individuals have little to no agency and must be led through a manufactured heaven filled with sparkling celestial bodies. The film ends with a final long shot of Linda and Böwe walking along a train track heading nowhere accompanied by the high-pitch outer space buzzing sounds from the film's opening, which merges with the familiar low reverberating sound of the train rumbling down the track, a fitting metaphor for the ultimate incompatibility of utopian dreams and everyday reality.

*The Dove of the Roof* focuses on characters, who, despite failed love affairs, continue to believe in the possibility of future happiness. Gusner's film is thus a form of subjunctive realism. It is attentive to real social conventions that prevent people from reaching their ideals, but it is also conjectural and hopeful that the *wish* for what seems impossible can one day be fulfilled. *The Dove* portrays heterosexual relations as doomed to failure in a world where women want both career and family and men are governed by hegemonic masculine identities that pose unsurmountable obstacles to stable unions. Like the unreachable dove on the roof, the ideal of building a happy, enduring home is portrayed as currently unobtainable but a reachable goal *if* seemingly invisible gender roles are recognized and overcome. The *what if* of this film also applies to Gusner's career and DEFA film history. Gusner laments: "The ban of my first film interrupted my tentative attempt at individual expression and style. After the ban, for years I fell back into conservative narrative patterns. Only later did I understand that this

<sup>16</sup> "Jede Weihnachtsfeier ist so bunt, wie wir sie wollen. Die Leute kaufen unsere fertigen Kugeln, und ihnen bleibt nur die Freiheit, sie auf dem Tannenbaum zu verteilen." Film dialog, Gusner, 2010.

was the worst consequence” (Gusner, Sander, 2009, p. 168)<sup>17</sup>. We are left with the nagging questions, if *The Dove on the Roof* had been released in 1973 in GDR cinemas, would Gusner have developed a more daring artistic signature that could have influenced DEFA filmmakers of her generation and beyond, and what exactly would that cinema have looked like?

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<sup>17</sup> “Das Verbot meines ersten Films hatte meinen tastenden Versuch nach eigenem Ausdruck und Stil unterbrochen. Ich fiel nach seinem Verbot für Jahre zurück in konservative Erzählmuster. Erst später habe ich verstanden, dass das seine schlimmste Folge war.”

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## Abstract

One of the few female directors employed at DEFA Studios, Iris Gusner directed *Die Taube auf dem Dach* in 1972. It was banned and thought lost until rediscovered in 1990, only to be lost again and restored a second time for a premiere 37 years after completion. My essay reviews the remarkable production history of *Die Taube* and explores what made Gusner's work unacceptable for public consumption and debate. Attentive to discourse analysis and gender studies, I argue that *Die Taube* was censored largely because it assaulted the core ideal of selfless socialist construction and revealed the unsuitability of the hegemonic modes of masculinity for building successful heterosexual relations. I argue that Gusner's disparagement of outdated and progressive masculine heroic identities contributed to the film's censorship, disappearance, and near elimination from film history.

**Key words:** DEFA Studios; German Democratic Republic; Women Film Directors; Hegemonic Masculinity; Hero of Work; Hero of Technology; Censorship