

Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen ***(The Land beyond the Rainbow)***

A film review by Ralf Schenk



This review by film historian Ralf Schenk was published in Film und Fernsehen (8-9, 1991).

Larvae and lemurs stumble through the valley of the ignorant. On the tree of wishes hang dozens of corpses, and a serpent wraps around the head of the crucified Messiah. Fog swirls, children in white robes – a girl and boy – hide and touch each other, innocently, while nearby two men brutally slaughter a rabbit. The heralds of heaven are among us, as well as the emissaries of hell. Archaic images out of the art history album. Bosch and Fellini, Breughel and Dovzhenko, the Bible and the Brothers Grimm.

After the fairy-tale and allegorical entrance into the film, Roland Dressel's camera flies over a desert. How frequently an ambivalent motif appears in this film: it could be that this land has been unfruitful from the beginning; it could be that it is still unworked and open to many possibilities. At any rate, smoke swells from factory smokestacks in the village of Stalina, and smoke symbolizes life, and it is red and black . . .

Herwig Kipping's DEFA debut, *The Land beyond the Rainbow*, which I count among the most important discoveries at the end of "old" DEFA, is dominated by painterly tableaux; canvasses awakened to filmic life; contemporary history bundled together in close-ups. The red star on a shriveled tree over the dung heap is the center of the bizarre events. On top of that, an outhouse with an image of Ulbricht and a Soviet pennant, in front of which the District Committee secretary announces his decisions. Obvious metaphors. Out of the ruins creep red flags—the sign of hope for a better existence. Despite booming words and sweeping gestures, however, everyday life is marked by dullness, dirt and egotism. These will never disappear from our present.

The Land beyond the Rainbow is composed of only the vestiges of a fable. Not all the connections between figures and events are accessible at first, some hardly at second glance. An eruption of emotions: unbridled, sometimes banal, also redundant, always of deep-rooted violence. An amalgam of wrath and sorrow, love and hate. Herwig Kipping describes the collapse of one of many ideas, that were conceived of as humanistic, into dogma and perversion, and of hope into catastrophe. A series of painful realities that Kipping wants people to understand as an opportunity to lead the wounded soul onto the path to healing.

The figures are stripped of any kind of psychology; this characterizes them. The grandfather, with flowing white hair and a machine gun on his arm, the mayor of the village, armed against all attacks by the class enemy. Franciszek Pieczka embodies the deepest religious variants of the practicing Stalinist: praying to the divine, swinging the holy water before his monument makes one blind and deaf to all the nuances of reality. The grandfather actually believes what he preaches in his sonorous bass: the new doctrine is optimism. The children are created by the Party. Socialism is accomplishing the miracle of turning the world into a Garden of Eden.

Pieczka is a sensual, scene-dominating actor. His speeches promise a sense of security; his face is not yet distorted by the idea he represents with such emphasis, eyes illuminated. Even when he exhorts the children to denounce their parents, in a scene that marks the incursion of the demonic into the announced idyll and brings the pathological delusions of persecution and

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security obsessions to a head. At the end, the old man is nailed to a black, red, and gold border post, the crown of thorns adorns his head. Another failed Messiah, the dung heap is his Golgotha. And the villagers go into the desert, far, far away from a monument to Marx, the 1990s have overtaken events.

Despite angry sarcasm, Kipping's view of the grandfather is also veiled in grief; even with all his aberrations, he is still the most honest, the least opportunistic in the adult world presented here. Far cooler is the perspective on the next generation: on the grandfather's son Franz-Werner (Winfried Glatzeder) and his rival Heinrich (Axel Werner). Both are crude, dense, addicted to alcohol. Using their wives as sleep-, cook-, and boot-servants, while the radio talks about people being "free from exploitation." Kipping's animalistic images expose the official rhetoric as empty phrases: an evil reckoning with the language, that followed the *lingua tertii imperii* [language of the Third Reich].

Franz-Werner and Heinrich: brittle figures in the maelstrom of the times, thrown back and forth between nightmares from the war and the demands of the new leaders. Conformists out of lost honor. The most clearly and ironically broken character is Glatzeder's. In one of the first scenes of the film, he falls through the floor of his hellhole into the deep and breaks his arm; the doctor (Rolf Ludwig) splints the arm to look like the fascist salute—a sarcastic metaphor for the repressed past. In a marginal gag, the wife (Swetlana Schönfeld) has the same name as one of the most beautiful figures in DEFA film history . . . which animates Glatzeder to yell "Paula!" in memory of his shining role in Carow's film.

And then the children. The girl Marie, with her utopian-romantic visions of the country where milk and honey flow. A clear, undisguised look into the camera, lyrical monologues, the poetic principle. And innocence only a few moments before the catastrophe begins. Because there are two boys by her side: Franz-Werner's son, the Rainbowmaker, and Heinrich's offshoot, Hans. Into both, Herwig Kipping projects himself and reflections of his own childhood: a soul, split between hope and despair, the promise of happiness and the longing for death. The Rainbowmaker, who loves Marie with childlike affection, invites family and friends into a big washtub, where he conjures up the colors of the rainbow on the surface of the water: a brief moment of harmony. Hans, however, with a black hood and still preferred by Marie, sprinkles bits of broken glass in the cattle troughs, crushes a chick, sets the stalls and barns on fire with his father, who has been stripped of his post as chairman of the LPG [collective farm], and finally blows himself up on a barricade. So many victims, so much guilt.

With expressive cinematography and a lyrical-mystical set design (Peter Wilde), *The Land beyond the Rainbow* plunges into the year 1953. This is recognizable from specific dates, like Stalin's death and the June 17th uprising. But the film means much more: the history of the GDR, the whole history of communism, the ordeal of a doctrine-abused humankind. Insanity — as one monologue goes—jumped from house to house. That the music of Gustav Mahler overlays the bizarre as well as the dramatic, the poetic as well as the naturalistic—the melancholic *Kindertotenlieder*, for example—seems just right to me. Because it brings the generally melancholic tone of this remarkable film full circle.

Translated by Delene White, DEFA Film Library

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