

Verfehlung (*The Mistake*)

This film review by Hans-Jörg Rother

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With *The Mistake*, his thirteenth film, Heiner Carow succeeds in saying his own farewell to the socialist social system, for which he had great hopes into November 1989. He declared this and staged the story of Elisabeth Bosch in such a way that no doubt about this could arise. The ceremonial parade to celebrate the 750th anniversary of Bubenau bears characteristics of a comical-desperate *danse macabre*, within which the depleted subjects of a leadership dutifully pay homage one last time. The filmic drama culminates in this episode. The mayor, having descended from the stage, rapes Elizabeth and unintentionally drives her to take due revenge upon him, the representative of power, for decades of humiliation and the destruction of a last dream of happiness.

The feeling of despair shapes the film from the first shot—the flight over an uninhabitable landscape, destroyed by the ruthless exploitation of lignite coal mining. The opening of the plot's framework—the prisoner Elisabeth enters an enclosed prison yard—anticipates the terrible outcome, so that all new beginnings—such as the viewer experiences in her love for Jacob—bear a stamp of futility. Despairing gestures mark the leading actors' performances. Jörg Gudzuhn agitatedly enters the mayor's office—bleak-looking, despite the housekeeping—and stares empty-faced at his employee. The first act of the mayor on this morning is to banish the stranger, in whom he cannot yet recognize his romantic rival. This detail appears symptomatic. Order tolerates no foreign body that defies control or, even more dangerously, carries another spirit into a seamlessly-surveilled little world.

Angelica Domröse can express residues of inner freedom, even a zest for life. Yet her smile never quite drives away the dark shadows. She plays that mixture of fear and rage that buffeted many people in the GDR, in particular women of the middle generation. Zest for life sparkles in Elisabeth's rather intentionally arranged, rural bath with her grandchildren, in the tub in front of the house. In with her little shock at the brazen spectator is mixed the unacknowledged hope that this stranger might be the prince, for whom waiting has become ever more difficult. Only an outsider could play the role of liberator in this closed country. All its residents suffered, so it would seem, from an existential paralysis. How typical are the waiting scenes in the film: the aging woman in her well-furnished apartment, or later in a room in Berlin on Christmas Eve, where the hostess pretends to await someone in a ceremony that unfolds like an annual wishful dream. Waiting becomes a homelike feeling, when little depends upon one's own actions. Carow condenses these scenes into an expression of a systemically-determined existential orientation.

Gottfried John resisted playing the figure of the Hamburg dock worker as naïvely and without contours as the screenplay and director wanted him to. There is a logic to both his protest, and the insistence of the authors on their view. A West German, even feigning well-roundedness, could never experience himself as unproblematically as his East German hosts—who needed a fairy-tale world to compensate for their misery—wanted to see him. As long as paradisiacal conditions exist, there is hope, despite the gravity of one's own situation. Doesn't this mythic construction currently hinder many Eastern Europeans and people of the third world from



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reaching the sobering recognition that no one can help them except themselves? And is it not responsible for the rude awakening of many East Germans from the illusion, nurtured for decades, that you can get something for nothing?

As in all previous films by this director, Carow's thirteenth feature film, based on a script by Wolfram Witt, undeniably represents an existentially-felt work. That the attempt to portray a symptomatic story involved a few kinks is a remnant of that past, which deformed aesthetics as well. Art became mixed with journalism because the artist belonged to the few who were able to at least hint at the unpleasant facts of life—softened by a fictive framework. (The shifting of the boundary between feature film and report belongs, of course, to the accepted sins of film history.) The film sets the careerist role of one son against the oppositional voice of the other, although this is not necessary for the development of the fable and does not garner special meaning as a Cain and Abel conflict. Merely showing the alternatives hardly tells the audience anything new. Additionally, a few scenes slide into pathos (solemn departure in the church) or into an ostensible indictment (misuse of psychiatry).

The film accrues essential effects from its stylistic build-up. The story is performed in authentic images, whose changing tempo indicate and spark excitement. Boisterous movement follows the paralyzing still life of waiting: Elisabeth knocks open the door to the street as if the apartment had become unbearably stifling. Later she foils the seemingly civilized farewell under the eyes of the rail station police, rides with Jacob into the village and announces her engagement—her coming out—at the New Year's party. Such unexpected, abrupt turns in the story are characteristic of Carow; therein lies a good part of the effectiveness of his filmic narration.

Toward the end of the film, the realistic scenes take on metaphorical characteristics. The mayor's tumbling, senselessly brisk speech and the grotesque parade of mobilized people that turns into a can-can, capture the death throes of the GDR in its final months. If the surreal moments in *The Legend of Paul and Paula* (197[2]) once reminded us of buzzing happiness and hopeful beginnings, now they describe the barely controlled despair of the heroine and director. His thirteenth film became his most bitter one. Not that he hadn't described terrible conditions before (*They Called Him Amigo*, 1958; *The Russians Are Coming*, 1968/1987). But their world had always lain opposite his. Now his own world—admittedly as it existed in concept more than reality—is being carried to the grave, and Carow allows neither himself, nor his public any consolation or perspective. Angelica Domröse returned to DEFA one last time with *The Mistake*. The role of Elisabeth stands at the end of a constricted career—in terms of cultural politics—with the Babelsberg producers. But the actress gives us the feeling of a vitality that is put in shackles, but might break out at any moment. Her performance is a question of the remaining ability to defend oneself.

Translated by Timothy A. Dail, DEFA Film Library

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