

In Search of Today's Stories

Erika and Rolf Richter Speak with Heiner Carow



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[Werner] Heiduczek's novella, written in the early eighties, was published in '86. When did you think about making a film?

Even before *Coming Out* and *Paule Panke*. In the scenario, there was the scene with a gay man, and someone said, as long as there is a gay character, why not do a real story? This made sense to us, and we prioritized *Coming Out* and put *Verfehlung (The Mistake)* on hold. Anyway, it was impossible to talk about this east/west story, as the topic was completely taboo. If you began to speak about it, no one would react. It was more difficult to write *The Mistake* than *Coming Out*. If someone had anything against *Coming Out*, people would immediately suspect them of being against gay people. We had problems when we began to work on *The Mistake*, after the *Wende*. Above all, I felt that what we wanted to show in the film wasn't an issue any more.

When you came back from America in the summer of 1990, you said that there you had had serious doubts about the story.

I always imagined the people to whom I was telling this story. I could not comprehend the story of the increasing isolation of this woman. When I came back, we created a more dramatic version.

You searched a long time and there were several versions, especially of the film's ending.

We looked for a new approach to the film. It now begins with the flight over the demolished landscape; we show a village that's barely alive. This is meant to be metaphorical. Life in a village resembles life in a country. The ending emerged from what was, for me, the terrifying experience of the 40th anniversary celebration when everything was already destroyed; people were beaten up on side streets, and a ghostly atmosphere ruled.

There were versions that did not end in the shooting of the mayor, but rather with a reunion in Hamburg after [German] unification.

That was too small for me. In one version, the man owned a brothel in Hamburg. Nothing worked . . . until we found the image of ordinary people, who have been liberated, but still walk in circles like in a prison. In my opinion, this image was the most representative of the times we were living in: liberation, and yet no liberation. Everything else that would transition from one time into another—into a unified German time—was, in contrast, undetermined. This concerned the future, and that's something we couldn't talk about yet in this film.

Having a woman shoot a man dead is, on one hand, a fact taken from real events and offers the opportunity to dramatically deal with a psychological process; on the other hand, it also allows closure on the story and, indeed, the epoch.

We took pains to push the woman's psychological state far enough for her to shoot him. It didn't interest me whether or not somewhere a woman had actually shot an official.

But in this act there is the consequence of protest, of a resistance that one sometimes wished would take another form and was rarely capable of oneself. Hidden there is a sort of utopia . . .

But thousands upon thousands of people took to the streets and said: "We are the people." The people crossed the borders and killed this regime with their protest. And now here we are, and it has

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become something different. The huge Leipzig demonstrations were for the reform of socialism and not the re-installation of a capitalist society. Then it tipped over, and they said: "We are one people."

Metaphors also create distance from the events. In any case, they are an attempt to get away from a mere sequence of observations—such as we do not only see in a series of documentary films—and get to deeper levels of problems.

Some critics accuse us of using clichés. Of course the woman needs these two different sons—at least in our opinion. That's part of her. We wanted to create this family universe. And the metaphorical appears from the start. The viewer recognizes this at the New Year's celebration, at the latest, where the game with the streamers becomes aggressive. I would still do that the same way again, because I want to describe my own situation, in which I am and was. I noticed in conversations that the memory is brought forth by the images and then shock emerges. People sensed that their lives had taken place among all of these things and they hadn't noticed the tastelessness or absurdity. Now it came out. I always tried to capture my own dismay in the images. I was concerned about whether I could distance myself enough to make this film. Now I'm happy that I did.

The most interesting figure—the one that seems the most concentrated—is that of the mayor. This figure discloses a lot about what once was—and I think it will continue to do so for a long time. He is immediately present as a differentiated character, whereas the image of the woman comes together gradually.

He is directly involved in political events from the outset, he is active. She is more passive and stands on the margins. The woman takes on stature only when he gives her a hard time and she defends herself. We had our problems with that at the editing table and came up with the framing plot so the film takes off.

At the beginning, she seems somewhat naïve and untouched by public things, a kind of good person. But this is exactly what interested us—that this woman, an agricultural worker, wasn't touched by the things taking place around her, that so much just went over her head.

Did you both think about [*The Legend of*] *Paul and Paula*? Did it help or make things difficult? I always tried not to think about *Paul and Paula*, although it did happen that I quoted *Paul and Paula*—like in the paper-streamer scene.

If you know the film, of course, you see it parallel, at the same time. One thing that stands out right away, in contrast to *Paul und Paula*, is that the love story is much less intense and central. You get the feeling that the woman in *The Mistake* wants something different from the man, different from what he can give her. The love remains unfulfilled.

That remains an unsolved problem. In addition, she is closer to her younger son than to her lover, who comes in from outside and who she really wants in her life, but doesn't get. That characterizes one of the difficult and intractable problems that existed. Her environment closes in on her time and time again. Perhaps it also has to do with their age.

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But the love that the mayor has for her—a quite distorted love—is immediately clear within a network of relationships. He feels that if he does not get her, then he's lost everything; but he doesn't have the energy to make a change.

The figure is exactly like this in Heiduczek's novella. It was immediately convincing. When I met Gudzuhn in the dressing room to talk to him about the role, he got dressed, put on this strange hat, and straightaway we agreed: That's the man. He knew at once what he was playing. Perhaps I should have shown more strangeness with the other male figure—the difficulty of understanding one's self. But I didn't want to fight that out.

It seems to me that these are normal challenges in narrating the stories that pester us and for which we try to find forms. Some things remain sketchy, fragmented. You can see that everywhere today – with the Russians, the Hungarians, the Poles. They are experimenting. Szabo even adds the word "sketches" to the title of his film *Édes Emma, drága Böbe – vázlatok, aktok* (*Sweet Emma, Dear Boebe – Sketches, Nudes*). You are already very close to a coherent form; for me, *The Mistake* is among the most insightful films about the GDR period made to date. Here it is no longer about explanations, about reasons, but rather about the experience of a time, about the inner soundness of the images, about an existential experience, about the identifying one's own affliction. Perhaps a time is coming, in which the stories will only emerge from this individual source. But who wanted to make a rule?

Perhaps one should actually go back to the beginning, back to childhood and adolescence. How did we get involved? When did we begin to set aside our true feelings? We actually knew in some cases that it would go awry, that it wouldn't work—and that's in fact what happened, but we still got involved. Those are things that concern everyone. How do you find yourself again? One thing I know is that I cannot continue telling my stories the way I have been until now. My question is really what the stories I want to make will look like.

There is a big tension between a film like *The Mistake* and *Paul and Paula* – in the form as well. I don't like it when the two films are compared to one another. Despite the death of Paula, *Paul and Paula* is a story of great hope. *The Mistake* is the saddest, most pessimistic film I have ever made. At the moment that's my problem—that I only come up with sad films. I have a story in mind that is even sadder. After *The Mistake*, I made *Begräbnis einer Gräfin* (*Funeral of a Countess*) for television and, with it, let off all the steam that had built up in making *The Mistake*. The *Countess* is much more pleasing, but also much more distant from me.

Translated by April Huffines, DEFA Film Library

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