

An Act of Love

A Conversation with Herwig Kipping



This interview with director Herwig Kipping, by Erika Richter and Rolf Richter, was published in Film und Fernsehen (6-7/1991).

*Herwig Kipping, born in 1948, studied mathematics for nine semesters, went into the army for three years, interned at GDR television, studied directing at the Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg, caused a sensation with his final project film *Hommage à Hölderlin*, was fired from GDR television for refusing work and filmed his first feature film with the DaDaeR production group at the DEFA film studios in 1990. Erika Richter and Rolf Richter spoke with him about his debut film, *chaos*, and what he always wanted to say, but no one dared write.*

E. R.: Work on *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (*The Land beyond the Rainbow*) began in 1986. At that time, it was inconceivable that it might really be made into a film. In initial discussions after the film [came out], it was described as a kind of exorcism. The extreme images that can now be seen were surely not what you were thinking of in 1986.

No, but I wanted to go back to the source, to the time when I began to accept socialism. In the beginning, the story was called *Ich–Aufstand der Seele* (transl. *I–Uprising of the Soul*). For me, “uprising” meant something like “resurrection” or “beginning.” I wanted to consciously search for the beginning. What do I believe in? Why did I say yes? Why did I join the Party? Why was I thrown out? That’s what I wanted to find out. This responsibility was already in the air in 1986, because the system had basically collapsed. People still went about with their lives, but life was only repetition.

R. R.: Back then we weren’t in the regular rat race, like most people, with inflexible work schedules, eaten up by everyday details. We sat in our room, reflected and wrote. Also a privilege. Hardly! It was punishment for me to be excluded from everything.

E. R.: It was the privilege of the excluded.

It was being pushed out—but nevertheless I didn’t leave [the country]; I stayed here. I lived as if in a vacuum, like in a bubble, which is also a kind of freedom, of course.

E. R.: Because it was about winning back an un-manipulated memory, the concept “I” was important to you.

A person is not only “I.” The “I” is divided into ten or twenty different people. They control “you,” and your actual “self”—that you’d like to be or could be, which must be protected or filtered out—is the impetus, the driving core, which then wants to investigate, or bring into a kind of partnership, the other “I”s—the many connected “I”s that constitute being human. Added to that is that I abandoned my social class. I was a farm boy and I gave up my home base—the village. I went into something in which I was not accepted—or perhaps only contingently—namely the intelligentsia. Meanwhile, my original goal was certainly not filmmaking, but rather mathematics. But mathematics, as I then experienced it, was not a sacred matter, but rather a profane one. We were trained to serve equipment, to become like equipment ourselves.

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R. R.: If it had been creative, would you have continued in mathematics?

Of course. I met someone who enthusiastically told me about the lectures on Marxism by the chemist Prof. Havemann. We didn't have anything like that in math. I only found it in a small circle of people who philosophized about Nietzsche. A whole world opened up to me then, it was as if I had been stunned. The whole culture headed right for me and pressed me out of mathematics. My life got all mixed up, became chaos. And I lived accordingly, in a totally seedy room, slept all day on a mat, wandered through Berlin at night. I wanted to kill myself, had a rope hanging in my closet. But despite everything, it was beautiful. I got high on Georg Heym, Trakl, Else Lasker-Schüler, Benn, on Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Baudelaire. In this period, I woke up, lightning struck me.

R. R.: So why film and not literature?

I wasn't able to manage life. I dropped out of the university, was an unskilled worker for the post office, after that a mail carrier. I didn't know which way was up or down anymore, because I sensed that the whole hierarchy rested on the unskilled workers. Everything overwhelmed me. I had no apartment, no money. I wanted to return to my studies and went into the army for three years.¹ There, I met someone who was interning at GDR television. This person gave me the impulse to apply there. They took me because of my three years in the army. At the Academy for Film and Television, I was the only one of the TV people who passed the entrance exam; and they had to take me, although I was not delegated. I was lucky.

R. R.: You ended your time at the Academy with the *Hölderlin* film.

In the second year they wanted to get rid of me because I had made this surreal film with the mail carrier.

R. R.: It was screened in Leipzig and was noticed there.

Yes, but after that it landed in the cellar. It was the time of the *Solidarność* (*Solidarity*) movement in Poland and the film was seen as implicated in that. It couldn't be shown for nine months because, as they said, our workers don't dream. This is reminiscent of the Polish worker, who wanted something that socialism didn't have: freedom. By the way, it was exactly at this time that I joined the Party. At the Film Academy, I saw films by Dovzhenko, especially *Zemlya* (*Earth*), and I was fascinated by Tarkovsky. He referenced Dovzhenko, though. For me, that was a thread; for me Tarkovsky was the successor of Eisenstein and Dovzhenko. At that time I didn't yet know that Tarkovsky had practically been thrown out already. That was '82, when I was working on *Hölderlin* and had already written my thesis about Tarkovsky. I believed in this tradition – Tarkovsky, Dovzhenko, Eisenstein – and that the Revolution would still occur in the GDR sometime. This belief got me through the craziness; it led me back to the sources. Not to be against it, but rather to find the real socialism, the human approach – where socialism is something human, something that comes out of the hardship of human existence, out of the human experience of being thrown out into the world.

¹ In order to enter university in East Germany, one was required to serve three years in the army.

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E. R.: This longing is recognizable throughout the film *The Land beyond the Rainbow*, although the conflicts and frictions have now become much stronger.

The longing is everywhere: there, where the grandfather is hammered on to the cross and a Christian dimension of his life becomes visible; or in the closing image, Marx in the desert. This also means: Marx, the redeemer, who could lead us out of the desert into which he sent us, in which we are failing.

R. R.: The image is ambivalent; you could also say he was abandoned in the desert. Another level in the film is that of innocence, which is represented through the children.

That is the only thing we have: the innocence of the children.

R. R.: But this innocence is not an achievement.

No, they are innocent like animals. If they were to think, they would no longer be innocent. We aren't either.

R. R.: They are at an age where innocence breaks open.

The beginning always occurs where something breaks open. The source comes out of the earth. Something else is abandoned there that is deeper. Childhood is not interesting to me in itself, but rather where the incursions into it show that which is called "sin" in the Bible, what one can call "evil," or the awareness of evil, or a certain way of thinking, something inhuman. We don't think purely and innocently; rather, we think committed to a goal, egotistically. Our consciousness is poisoned. We think, above all, about ourselves.

R. R.: In the film, incidents of adapting oneself are shown again and again, making arrangements, reacting to the adult world, taking on its values.

Yes, and it's in order to fit in as well as possible, to be successful, to go along, to be accepted and get a relatively big slice of the pie that's being handed out and that amounts to life: namely power, money, assets.

R. R.: So not life, but at best a violated life.

Moments of real life are rare. They only exist as particular cases of luck, as love.

The longing for this actual life is great. I believe the difference between how we could really live and how we often just vegetate, between what we could actually be and how we are often tomfools, was never so painfully great as now. Today we feel this contradiction between ideal and reality—at least in industrial countries—most blatantly, most oppressively, most awfully.

R. R.: Our life is, so to speak, a negative Paradise, determined by a system of instruments, technology, which apparently facilitates our life. We give it no, or not enough, human inflection.

We notice it is not enough for us. We are constantly conscious of being unhappy, clearly know that this is not happiness. That reality only begins after this. If we could make ourselves free of it. If we were finally free. If we could live our dreams.

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E. R.: It's also difficult for the characters to make something out of this longing. You bring that into an image once, when the children, the father, the mother, Heinrich, etc. climb into the big barrel and marvel at the miracle of the rainbow—for me this is the symbol of the film. You don't rise above these people, but are rather with them.

How should I rise above them? I'm one of them. Everything—even the most dreadful crime—always took place in the name of the oppressed, the lowest of the low. That generates a feeling of solidarity, but also a huge amount of pity. We were promised that through the revolution salvation would come to us all in the long run. So, not the kingdom of heaven in the afterlife, but rather the mercy of this life, and not hell.

R. R.: But from the beginning the film shows how incapable of this everyone is.

I show it as a bitter experience. It's how I experienced it, when I think back on the village. When I think of my grandfather: he proclaimed all sorts of things and repressed what he could—like everything he had stashed away and the privileges he had. He acted as if he were the greatest idealist; but if you look closer, everything was only self-serving and little and pathetic. They aren't big enough to accomplish what they say and proclaim. They are not true people.

R. R.: You portray negative variations on the idea of redemption. What would be your alternative?

I believe one has to start with oneself. In the end, one is only redeemed through oneself. You may not be arrogant, not so megalomaniacal as to imagine that you are a better person than the others. You have to tell yourself daily: I too am only a pipsqueak, given what I do and what I should do.

If you always begin with others and want to organize the world accordingly, you kill it. You do exactly the opposite of what you pretend to do, and you become an executioner. The status of the intelligentsia contains a debt—because you always got ahead at the expense of others, whom you crowded out and who went under. In this way, I try to discover the truth about myself and about what happened to me in the last forty years: this ambivalence—revolution and non-revolution, treason and self-deception—this being torn apart, this chaos, this insanity in failure.

R. R.: The figures in the film are parts of you? They constitute your universe.

Universe is too much. Many are always involved in what one has experienced, and one hasn't stayed the same, but rather became another. What is "I"? Surely not just this piece of flesh, but all of my encounters. I am perhaps only that which remains—a small spark of hope of what was, for example in regard to love. Naturally love is the most important, the overcoming of hate and of the destruction of others.

R. R.: In the film, the most meaningful element is the female—most often absolutely abused, but who also lets herself be led the most easily. The women offer only limited resistance, are compliant or enslaved.

It is my experience that women are more compliant, that they accept relationships, meet them, let things be as they are. For this reason they are gifted for love, more capable than us men.

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R. R.: Do you mean that in a positive way?

I absolutely mean that to be positive.

E. R.: I feel that's contradictory. Liesbeth, for example, is abused and lets herself be abused; but, at the same time, for me she is an independent person with great strength.

The men abuse themselves repeatedly, to no avail.

R. R.: Women have no power, no influence on events . . .

Only influence on personal relationships. But this influence is often a question of life and death. Important for the female characters in the film is that the conventional family relationships—the patriarchy—are destroyed. Neither love, nor life, has any foundation. If you look at history—both world wars—we're actually standing on nothingness. None of these things function; marriage, the family is broken.

R. R.: A sort of framework remains, though; there are still arrangements that are respected. Trust is not always abused.

In my experience, it works with mothers. Love is the only thing that helps in times of need. Love is the only chance for survival. But even then, only for a short time. Then even love becomes futile. We are in a trap from which we cannot escape. Love overwhelms us as people. We are not big enough for it. We can't live it. Love has no value. Love, whatever the society, was always only secondary. That's why I think we're at the end. When love dies, we also die. Life is becoming chaotic. But the chaos is also an opportunity—like death—because it is followed by the resurrection.

R. R.: Would that be your interpretation of the film: that it portrays an image of individual, as well as societal chaos?

Chaos is only a synonym for the unconscious. The film tries to remind us of this unconscious, to regain a piece of basic life truth. Naturally, I have the need to be a good person; but this "good" is related to aesthetic, not ideological, social norms. From this a selection of archaic images develops. In this way I try to reach the unconscious, to scratch at it. I want to get at the creatural—that which is elementally given to our dark soul from the animals.

R. R.: What in your film is archaic and from before laws were invented?

The desert is archaic, as is a tree on which corpses hang instead of leaves. Then there's the water, the earth, children, love-making, the chaos of feelings, and the film ends with the desert; in between there's the whole misery on the social level. But it begins and ends with pre-hierarchical apocalypses. It is the attempt to connect to such elemental things, which radically destroy and save us.

R. R.: Is film something like philosophy for you?

What is philosophy? Reflection about the meaning of life. I believe film, art, has no other meaning than to exhibit in sensual, graphic form, how absurd we are when we don't live in accordance with life.

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R. R.: In the film there is a linguistic layer, which is clearly separate from the optical. It seems to me that the linguistic element in the girl's texts becomes independent. And when the grandfather spins out his speeches, language becomes a gesture.

Language is secondary, the images are primary. For this reason film is also better than philosophy. One has to be suspicious of people, even of what they say. They don't act like that. I don't either. But images don't lie. Only images are true. They tell us something about ourselves—what we aren't and what we are—even without wanting to be. Death is an image that is right or is not right, just like life.

R. R.: Despite this you place so much value on certain textual passages?

Even with language you can express things you don't understand (how true, grappa + *Säzzer* 0:18 o'clock), images that are fundamental, biblical so to speak.

R. R. How precisely were the images determined before filming, or did you also improvise?

The scene in which the grandfather speaks to Lenin, I wrote on the bus an hour beforehand. The one on the terrace I made on the spot. You can't plan such things; you're in a certain inner disposition, ready to create. All others either empathize or don't. You love or don't love what you make. Fantasy lends you wings and you fly, like with a true union, up and away. Actually, it is an act of love.

E. R.: But five years' reflection flowed into the images.

It's crucial to make a bed for the spirit, where it can take effect. You can do that anywhere that two people meet, two worlds in the big bang. These are religious activities. Film also has a religious aspect because it has to do with community, with love for the highest ideals, out from the abyss. Naturally one prepares for years, so that the ground within oneself is prepared. Otherwise it doesn't work. When everyone is appealed to from within—to think of something oneself, to produce a thought to feel involved—to a certain degree one becomes an initiate, experiences an inner opening, enlightenment . . . and the outcome is what arises in me: an ordered chaos.

R. R.: When did you get the idea that the outhouse is the center and that everything plays out in a barnyard? It's the image of a monstrous place as the center of a world, trivial, grotesque, cursed.

In the beginning I had the idea that the grandfather always carried the outhouse around with him. This met with rejection, however; I couldn't convince them, everyone found it too absurd.

E. R.: The soundness [of the image] is astounding; you immediately accept it as the power center of the village. The district secretary announces his decisions when he comes out of there: you are deposed, and you are excluded.

R. R.: Did you have the music of Gustav Mahler in mind from the beginning?

I felt that this music has something to do with German, with our, with my history. A feeling that we perhaps can't deal with ourselves, with our own productivity, our own dogmatism, our own strength, our own delusions, our own identity, our own afflictions and misdeeds.

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R. R.: With Mahler there is also something like a tension between utopia and corruption.

And this enormous longing, which goes almost as far as insanity, but then this recurring requirement, this pushing into totality, into the whole, which we Germans have, this addiction to standing for everything or nothing.

E. R.: I think that the music in connection with the images—there are the most differentiated layers of refractivity between the two—give the whole thing something secular. It's a film that goes far beyond the problems of the GDR. It's not even simply a film about the collapse of socialism.

I didn't only want to talk about socialism. What we experienced in socialism—which was always more than just socialism, an experience of good and evil as well, of being human and being inhuman, of tragic greatness, of inner need—it was an experience of humanity for everyone. That is our opportunity.

R. R.: Perhaps. If experiences are embraced.

There was a moment when the East German population was extremely clever. When we were all on the street on November 4 [1989], we were so light, so imbued with spirit, so full of love and tenderness for one another, so open.

R. R.: . . . And full of reconciliation.

We shouldn't forget that. Not just whine that it's over, but also be happy that it happened and that we were there. It is an exceptionally rare thing in human history that captures such a mass of people. I am a child of the *Wende*. At the same time, there are so many people who are now suffering and having the same experiences that I had before: the experience of not being needed. I feel sorry about that.

Translated by Delene White, DEFA Film Library

The Land beyond the Rainbow – A DVD Release by the DEFA Film Library