

# On Ulrich Weiß' *Miraculi*

by Erika Richter



Ulrich Weiß' *Miraculi* is one of the most important and deepest films of the *Wende* period. But more than anything, it is the most mysterious. Its filmic conception is at once radical and audacious, cryptic and naked, visually clear and dreamy; it stands like a solitaire in the landscape, does not give a damn about conventions, ideologies or public favor. With its deeply unique form and free spirit, this film could have come into being neither in the years before, nor since the *Wende*. On the contrary, it only became possible in the immediate *Wende* period—a transition time that was opportune for art—and even then only probable at DEFA, in the East, where the historic rupture was immediately apprehended as an existential crisis. It is the unique creation of the artist Ulrich Weiß, created precisely *during* and *about* this historic transition and the implied future, which has since become our present. If we can develop antennae for its encrypted signals, then *Miraculi* is also a film about us today.

In *Miraculi*, Ulrich Weiß handles motifs with which he had been working for a long time. The first version of the screenplay was presented in 1978, with no hope of being realized. During the *Wende*, however, the scenes had to be developed for a completely different time and society.

It is the story of a young man, Sebastian Müller, who draws the short straw among his friends and must steal some cigarettes. He gets caught and, in addition to paying a small fine, he undertakes a moral penance: he becomes a volunteer streetcar conductor. Very soon Sebastian realizes that checking the tickets of his fellow man is not a satisfying occupation. In order to give his occupation some meaning beyond the banal, he dresses up as Christ and, after summoning the fare dodgers he has caught, offers them absolution for the sin they have committed. He becomes famous in his city and is invited to seminars and social gatherings. At a party he learns that he ruined the only excitement in a girl's otherwise dreary day—as he tactfully never checked her ticket. How is one to behave, if one wants to be humane? What would alternatives look like? In the end, the only option for the two young people—who still want to try new things—is to simply disappear. No one knows where. Apparently there are no clearly recognizable ways to be alive, only the wish and longing for it.

The complex image-world of this film certainly poses riddles. On one hand, it has similarities to places of our daily life, which we think we recognize in the film; on the other hand, we immediately sense—through the presentation of the spaces, the light and the slowly moving camera—that it is not a simple reproduction of reality. Everything seems more like a dream. The young people's billiard game in an inhospitable space that recalls ruins, the muteness of the players, the slowness of the motion which causes things to collide and knock the cigarettes into the beer, which is the ultimate reason that Sebastian must break into the cigarette kiosk—all this seems like an unraveling, a numbingly slow dream sequence. It is real and yet not real. The intermediate realm in which the film resides creates irritation; but at the same time it arouses intense concentration and never lets attentive observers doubt that they are implicated and that they are dealing with a curiously distorted mirroring of their own world and existence. Ulrich Weiß presents this world to us as paralyzed; interestingly, this paralysis has only partially to do with the GDR. It is much more a universal paralysis that has gripped all aspects of life: Sebastian's friends, as well as his family; the mechanisms of control in the streetcar; an adult-education presentation on psychology; and a party at the home of affluent people who move like sleepwalkers through a wonderful garden resembling a paradise. Weiß ends the portrayal of this

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world—which has obviously come to an end—with a fantastic portent: suddenly, overnight, the great lake beside this paradise is gone. It has disappeared. A landscape of slime stretches as far as the eye can see. The lake is gone and the two young people are gone—into what other world? The feeling of an apocalypse, in which substance is no longer the issue, is both underscored and distanced by certain textual passages. As Sebastian takes part in a psychology class, we hear: “Don't you know that you're living in a trial period?” His response: “Yes. Yes, I do. That's what I'm saying. We're going crazy.” [also, in German, “displaced”] And later someone says: “A parlor game. Nothing more.”

These images of a universal uncertainty correspond to the collapse of a familiar world that was not only experienced in the GDR—or even the East Bloc as a whole—but rather took place worldwide. Because the old capitalist world, as we understood it and as people in the Western nations experienced it, also collapsed. Uncertainties—not only in the tangible sense, but also spiritually—escalated worldwide. The film gives us images for this.

*Miraculi* was shown in a special program during the 1992 Berlin Film Festival at the Zoopalast and elicited the same reaction as all of Ulrich Weiß' prior films: namely, extremely split opinions and much alienation. Except now the expression of negative opinions was more direct and blunt, more aggressive and primitive. But there were also contemplative voices, which did not find it bad that it took a great deal of patience to decode the film and that its chimera of images precluded quick interpretation. With his enthusiasm, critic Reinhard Wengierek came very close to capturing the film when he wrote:

A film that is childlike and playful, as dreamy as it is alert, thoroughly comical, deadly serious Full of absurd punchlines in which truths are revealed like on scratch cards . . . And one of the last DEFA films, created in the German transitional period, planned for an entire decade. It probably won't win a prize or turn a profit; but it was a breath of fresh air in this competition dominated by commerce and perfect surface polish.<sup>1</sup>

Both skeptical and wise, critic Heinz Kersten took the thoughts of his colleague further, opining that: “Probably it is not only at the Berlin Film Festival that Ulrich Weiß will remain an outsider; even in unified Germany he'll hardly have it easier. Thought-provoking films are in short supply, but they are needed.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, society is certainly in need of these unsettling mirror images, which retain their artistic power beyond topical issues of the day. And this confirms what Ulrich Weiß said in a conversation in 1992: “*Miraculi* is not only oriented to the current moment; I am certain people will still watch it in a few years. We will see this when we find historical distance to these events.”<sup>3</sup>

*Translated by Timothy A. Dail, DEFA Film Library*

**Erika Richter** is a freelance film historian living in Berlin. She was a dramaturg at the East German DEFA Studio for Feature Films from 1975 to 1991, where she worked on over 20 films, including *The Bicycle* (1981), *Jadup and Boel* (1981), *Coming Out* (1989) and *The Land beyond the Rainbow* (1991). From 1992 to 1999, she published the journal *Film und Fernsehen*. For her outstanding contribution to German film, she was honored with the Berlinale Kamera in 2003.

<sup>1</sup> *Neue Zeit*, 20 Feb. 1992. <sup>2</sup> *Tagesspiegel*, 19 Feb. 1992. <sup>3</sup> *Film und Fernsehen*, 2 (1992).