

# Ending A Tradition: DEFA's Last Youth Film

by Sebastian Heiduschke



In the German Democratic Republic, the name Helmut Dziuba was a synonym for youth films that told stories from the point of view of children and teenagers. Dziuba also meant his films to be social commentaries, often on very specific events and points in time. To this extent, *Jana and Jan* (1992) fits seamlessly into his oeuvre: until one takes a closer look. Whereas in Dziuba's previous youth films the protagonists are able to find their place in society, the open ending of *Jana and Jan* leaves the viewer with an array of questions about the future of the young couple and their baby.

Helmut Dziuba studied directing at the Moscow Film Academy (VGIK), alongside acclaimed Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, from 1953 until 1963. Upon his return to East Germany, he worked as Frank Beyer's assistant at DEFA (the GDR's state film company), helping to create *Karbid und Sauerampfer* (*Carbide and Sorrel*) in 1963. His directorial debut was the 1968 children's film *Mohr und die Raben von London* (*Moor and the Ravens of London*), followed by his "proletarian trilogy" of children's films: *Rotschlipse* (*Red Ties*, 1977), *Als Unku Edes Freundin war* (*When Unku Was Ede's Friend*, 1980), and *Jan auf der Zille* (*Jan on the Barge*, 1985). While this trilogy dealt with experiences of young people during the years of Weimar and Nazi Germany, three other films – *Sabine Kleist, 7 Jahre* (*Sabine Kleist, 7 Years Old*, 1982), *Erscheinen Pflicht* (*Presence Required*, 1983) and *Verbotene Liebe* (*Forbidden Love*, 1989) – looked at the lives of children, teenagers, and young adults in East Germany.

For *Jana and Jan*, his last film set in East Germany—co-produced by DEFA (at this point privatized) and ZDF television—Dziuba received the Bavarian Film Award for Best Director in 1993. In a variation on William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* set in the waning days of East Germany, he introduces the viewer to the lives of young adults in one of East Germany's infamous juvenile detention centers (*Jugendwerkhöfe*). Crude acting and unrefined dialogues are trademarks of Dziuba's films. The director preferred an aura of authenticity to rehearsed scenes and long dialogues, and initial takes of conversations between protagonists often ended up in the final version of the film. Apart from *Jana*, all the young adults in the film were inexperienced lay actors who had first-hand experience with the juvenile detention system and could help the director reconstruct a realistic setting.

The film tells the story of 17-year-old Jana and 16-year-old Jan, who fall in love, decide against an abortion after Jana gets pregnant, endure the hazing of the other detainees, and eventually flee the prison-like structures of the detention center to embark on a journey into a Germany that is transitioning toward unification. The story begins in summer or fall 1989. We see Jan being transferred from Torgau, where he had been imprisoned for attempting to escape to West Germany, and arriving at a detention center housed in an aging castle. Watching his arrival is Jana, who declares she will be the one to "make him a man" and accepts a bet with the other girls that sets the events in motion. When Jan challenges "Sir," the punkish leader of the established boys' hierarchy, his chair is kicked out from under him; as in a later scene, in which "Sir" punches Jan, the adult "house master" in charge of the boys observes without intervening, leaving the micro-management of the center to the juveniles.

A few things about the detention center may not be immediately intelligible to a first-time viewer. Many of the young people placed in East German juvenile detention came from broken homes,

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had criminal records, or were otherwise outsiders in GDR society. Some may have had experiences similar to Jan's – either in one of 38 juvenile detention centers, some of which were co-educational as in the film, or in the most infamous high-security juvenile detention center in Torgau (*geschlossener Jugendwerkhof Torgau*), which had prison-like structures and resorted to solitary confinement, harassment and humiliation to discipline non-conformist teenagers. Officially, the juvenile detention centers were designed to educate young people ages 14 to 18 and re-integrate them into socialist society. The reality, as depicted in the film, shows another picture, however. Officially tolerated hierarchic structures among the young inmates, allowed not only hazing, but also essentially self-government, in a Darwinian arrangement that rewarded obedience to authority.

In the film we see that the rules set by the young adults are cruelly enforced. Jana's fate is a case in point. As she transgresses the unwritten rules of the center by falling in love and then deciding against an abortion, she becomes increasingly marginalized. We learn that for the girls at the center, pregnancy is merely an unwanted side-effect of sex, to be dealt with by abortion. Abortions in the first trimester were legal in East Germany; "Lady," the leader of the girls' group, boasts about having had three abortions and several women are awaiting the procedure in the hospital scene. As Natter, the "house matron" for the girls, predicts, the girls punish Jana: they make her stand on the bus to and from work at a poultry plant; they hang a doll dressed in baby clothes inside her locker, where they also draw an erect penis underneath Jan's photograph. The culminating punishment is the humiliation of Jana in the girls' shower, when "Lady" decides to shave her pubic hair and expose her genitals as a sign of dishonor. In a scene resembling a gang rape, a group of naked girls grabs Jana, holds her down, shaves her, and then leaves her behind on the bathroom floor.

Meanwhile, the historical events of 1989-1990 in Germany, the *Wende*, provide the political backdrop for the story. Throughout the film, references to historical events position the plot chronologically. On the TV set in the detention center's common room, we recognize West German televised images of the Monday protests that took place in Leipzig and other East German cities starting in September 1989. A later scene shows temporal progression through televised images of West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl celebrating the opening of the Wall, on November 9, by singing "Such a day, as wonderful as today." Changes indicating the approaching unification of Germany also come in the form of the appearance of a FRG flag atop the old castle tower, and campaign posters for the March 1990 elections that sealed the fate of the East German state.

Politics do not interest the young adults at the juvenile detention center much, however. The teenagers seem indifferent to the raising of the East German flag in the courtyard, although they all wear the blue shirts of the national youth organization (the Free German Youth, or FDJ). As far as we can tell, their main interest in watching the fall '89 demonstrations on West German television seems to be the assertion of power over their adult supervisors. When the director and Bulling switch the channel to the GDR children's program *Sandman*, "Sir" turns back to the news, saying "It's what we agreed upon." We don't get the feeling that the revolution is going to spill over into the detention center, but rather that the hierarchical status quo is their central concern. Even the fall of the Wall seems to leave them relatively unfazed. Other than Jana and Jan, who seize their chance for escape in the turmoil of political change, it seems only the quiet, dark-haired Julia is affected by the events of the *Wende*. Julia is in the detention center be-

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cause her mother fled to West Germany and left her daughter behind. Perhaps Julia has a premonition of her own future as a lesbian, when Jana is harassed and becomes marginalized by the other girls because of her pregnancy. The opening of the Wall gives her the hope that she will be reunited with her mother; but when her mother writes, saying she is unable to take her, Julia commits suicide.

When Jana and Jan flee from the center, nobody comes after them. As Jan says, "They've all got their own problems;" Jana replies, "When nobody's coming after you, you feel real lonely." Indeed, the two teenagers are able to travel unchallenged as far as the border region between East and West Germany. The final scenes of their escape, through a wasteland of rubble and demolished sections of the wall, harken back to the rubble films of the early postwar DEFA films. The irony of their hideout—an abandoned border guard tower—is perhaps less their spatial and temporal position in the no man's land between East and West, than the fact that the two juveniles never clearly cross into the West. This, along with the Soviet soldier baking potatoes on a makeshift campfire—the "liberator" turned traffic controller, as indicated by his reflecting vest—and ironic juxtaposition of Western commodities—for example, in the video store poster of *Running Man*—helps Dziuba refocus the viewer's perspective and write a non-dominant history of unification through the eyes of the disenfranchised. The final scene of the film leaves the ending open: Jana is in a hospital bed, in pain, perhaps giving birth, without Jan in sight. For the first time, one of Helmut Dziuba's films does not guarantee a successful reintegration of the protagonists into society. The GDR and its films, he seems to say, have come to an end, and it is impossible to predict what the future may hold.

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