

The Dove on the Roof

Introductory Essay

By Sebastian Heiduschke

It was “the film that was not meant to exist,” wrote the Berlin daily, *Der Tagesspiegel*, about the September 2010 premiere of *Die Taube auf dem Dach* (*The Dove on the Roof*). It took Iris Gusner’s film 37 years to get to theaters, having survived being banned in 1973, its probable destruction – sometime between 1977 and 1989, while Hans Dieter Mäde headed the DEFA Studio for Feature Films – and being lost again after merely two public screenings in Berlin in 1990-1991. The film’s fate was no accident, but rather a consequence of taking the slogan, “No more taboos in the arts” – promulgated in 1971 by Erich Honecker, head of the East German state – too literally. When the censors found fault with an allegedly distorted view of the working class, the sober depiction of 1970s East German society through the eyes of a female engineer was shelved by the DEFA film monopoly (Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft), which perhaps also interpreted the story as a self-referential allegory about the status of women directors at the DEFA film studios. The film’s protagonist is torn between two men, while she struggles to reconcile her work and personal life, as dictated by political considerations, thereby embodying the rather bleak role of women in a supposedly emancipated East German society. The result is an intricate plot structure, which is only augmented by the fascinating story of the film’s résumé from ban to rediscovery.

The Dove on the Roof is set at a construction site in the southern German Democratic Republic (GDR), the future location of a huge *Plattenbausiedlung* – a group of pre-fabricated high-rise buildings that were going up all over East Germany to address its persistent housing shortage. Similar to Frank Beyer’s *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*, 1966), this film also puts a female engineer in charge of the construction site; like her female counterpart in Beyer’s film, Katie Klee, Linda Hinrichs (played by Heidemarie Wenzel) is also stuck in a complicated love triangle with the student Daniel (Andreas Gripp) and the foreman Hans Böwe (Günter Naumann). Unlike in *Trace of Stones*, however – where the carpenter and social pariah Hannes Balla competes with Party secretary Werner Horrath – the roles of the three protagonists in *The Dove on the Roof* remain ambiguous. In fact, all three are trying to find their place in the social order without relinquishing their idealism. Linda feels attracted to the daydreams of Daniel, the nonconformist student who is spending his vacation on the construction site, as well as to the idealistic and nomadic Hans, who has moved from one jobsite to the next since his divorce. Unsure about committing to one or the other, Linda focuses on her career; but then she begins to question her dedication to a workplace that is threatening her individualism—and thus essentially challenges the entire concept of socialism. Although the film ends with Linda and Hans Böwe exiting together, director Iris Gusner refuses to answer the challenges facing individuals in East German society categorically.

In its failure to resolve the problems it poses, *The Dove on the Roof* reflects Iris Gusner’s experience as woman and female director in a male-dominated society claiming to have accomplished gender equality. Gusner was one of only five female directors employed at the DEFA studio for Feature Films. The hierarchy in the DEFA Studio was like the situation faced by many of her heroines, who struggle to rise socially. Most

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women employed in the East German film industry were dramaturgs, scriptwriters, film editors, costume designers, or make-up artists . . . despite state-supported programs and laws meant to raise the number of women in technical positions. Iris Gusner and other female feature-film directors at DEFA – such as Bärbel Bergmann, Evelyn Schmidt, Hannelore Unterberg and Ingrid Reschke – as well as fewer than ten female directors employed at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films, attempted to raise the quotas for women in both the studio and society by using their own experiences to make films that addressed gender disadvantages in a variety of scenarios, often expressed in dichotomies. Maintaining a balance between work and personal life, struggling to stay independent while working in a male-dominated profession and the problem of excelling – especially in terms of career, family and motherhood – are themes that appear again and again in various configurations.

During the 1970s, when DEFA cinema turned to everyday contemporary issues, a number of so-called *Gegenwartsfilme* looked at the role of women in East German society. Early iterations, such as Ralph Kirsten's *Netzwerk* (*Network*, 1969), Horst Seemann's *Liebeserklärung an G.T.* (*Declaration of Love to G.T.*, 1971) or Helmut Dziuba's *Laut und leise ist die Liebe* (*Love Is Loud and Soft*, 1972), looked at idealized socialist heroines. This approach then gradually morphed into a more nuanced, critical view of East German women, as can be seen in Egon Günther's *Der Dritte* (*Her Third*, 1971) and the Heiner Carow cult classic, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, 1972). Along with these latter examples, *The Dove on the Roof* forms a corpus of films that depict the realities of being a woman in East Germany – and thereby contradict the official discourse of an emancipated society that had resolved the issue of gender differences.

As was often the case in East Germany, such idealistic concepts differed significantly from the reality of the “double burden” experienced by many women. While political measures, such as the introduction of daycare centers at the workplace, aimed to eradicate gender barriers and almost accomplished employment equality, with women comprising close to fifty percent of the workforce, gender hierarchy remained, and women were still expected to be the primary caretakers of children and manage the household. Most professions employed women in the lower ranks that reported to men in directorial and other leading positions; the role of women in politics was similar, and not a single member of the Politburo – the chief political and executive committee of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) – was female. Thus, although women might have been emancipated to a greater degree than their West German counterparts, problems abounded.

The Dove on the Roof translates these troubles into one of the testosterone-laden domains – the field of construction and engineering. This helps Gusner reflect on the issue of emancipation via Linda Hinrichs's life and the dichotomies women were attempting to work out, including between socialist idealism and reality, the workplace and the domestic sphere, profession and family. Linda's quest for professional fulfillment collides with established gender roles; she must work harder and make more sacrifices to master the balancing act of succeeding in her job and private life and reach a status similar to her male counterparts.

Linda Hinrichs becomes Iris Gusner's alter ego in this and other respects. Throughout the film, one can detect a number of issues of semi-autobiographical nature that left a permanent imprint on Gusner's directorial decisions. A preference for casting foreign actors to bring different points of view and a cosmopolitan atmos-

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phere to the set is obvious, for instance. The lack of a comprehensive worldview in DEFA cinema frustrated Gusner, especially since she had experienced a beneficial international environment during her Moscow studies and often felt held back in her aspiration for internationalization. For *The Dove on the Roof*, Gusner selected the Lebanese national Simon Harik for the role of Kerim from among a number of international students that were in East Germany at the time; Harik was studying at the Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg.

Striking are also rare references to the Middle East in Gusner's DEFA films; in fact, this film and *Wäre die Erde nicht rund...* (*If the Earth Were Not Round*, 1981) appear to be the only two DEFA feature films containing Middle Eastern topics. The only other example is a film project, entitled *Vietnam oder Die Kunst zu heiraten* (*Vietnam, or The Art of Getting Married*),⁽¹⁾ by Helga Schütz and Egon Günther, which never made it beyond the script stage and was shelved in the aftermath of the newly repressive SED cultural policies of 1965-66. (In this film about a female sound engineer, Katharina Lessing, her circle of friends consists of Achmed and Yussuf from Jordan, as well as others from Syria and Guinea.) Gusner's *If the Earth Were Not Round* even features a love story between an East German woman and a Syrian man – both students in Moscow, as Gusner had been – to incorporate different “colors” in her desire to include the “world” and internationalize her films. In general, Gusner strives to make differences of all kinds visible; this is evident in the way she looks at differences in age and education, but also in national and cultural backgrounds. In addition to the Palestinian-Lebanese character Kerim, who shares a room with Daniel in the dorm, posters of the US civil rights activist Angela Davis and the Fatah movement appear in *The Dove on the Roof*. These elements attest to Gusner's commitment to configuring her films to include an international atmosphere. Numerous scenes and cinematic stratagems dispersed throughout the film break up the ethnic monotony, while they underscore the director's dedication to bringing attention to issues of peace, equality and social justice. Pictures taken in a Palestinian refugee camp, for example, stop the plot and force the viewer to take a stance towards international solidarity. We are confronted with Daniel's recitation of a poem by the Vietnamese leader Ho-Chi-Minh and how his impromptu fundraising for Vietnam disturbs the festivities of the construction workers. But we also see an Indian couple dining at the upscale *Interhotel* restaurant and hear Kerim's story about Raouché, seaside cliffs in Beirut, also known as Pigeon's Rock, which are infamous for the desolate lovers who leap to their deaths. The film even strives to be international aurally: Kerim's musical theme is a Middle-Eastern song that plays in both a diegetic and non-diegetic form and marks him as foreigner. This song reappears later, when the inebriated, lovesick Daniel climbs the crane—a metaphor for Raouché. The multiplicity of these impressions both stimulates and challenges the senses, while East Germany becomes a part of global society: here, Brechtian alienation technique meets artistic emphasis to create an idealized picture of East German society.

Although Erich Honecker proclaimed the end of all taboos for the arts and literature and encouraged artists to engage in open, constructive and creative controversy, as part of the new agenda following his election as the head of the SED in 1971, Iris Gusner's progressive attitude eventually turned out to be too liberal for the censors. When the film came up for final approval in April 1973, the DEFA Studio leaders refused to authorize it, in the face of a predicted change in policy of the SED Central Committee that promised a return to a more restrictive stance towards critical art. Gusner tried re-editing the film and changing the

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order of scenes, but the film was eventually shelved in the DEFA vaults and later disappeared. Presumably due to mislabeling, a color editing print of the film marked *Daniel* – the original working title for *The Dove on the Roof* – survived. It was discovered sixteen years later, in 1989-1990, by a team working on releasing the DEFA films banned during the *Kahlschlag* years of 1965-66. A black-and-white negative and print of the damaged color material were produced and screened before they were lost again. In 2009, the black-and-white duplication negative of the film was rediscovered by the DEFA-Stiftung and used for digital restoration of the film.

The Dove on the Roof finally opened in Berlin theaters in September 2010. Only some still photographs attest to the amazing visual quality of the color version; while the original film has been lost forever, one can imagine the rich composition of vibrant colors. “*Ein Spatz in der Hand, ist besser, als eine Taube auf dem Dach,*” goes the German version of the adage, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Ironically, Iris Gusner’s film title, which borrows the second part of the proverb, suggests that sometimes losing it all is worth the risk. In the case of her own film, the sparrow turned into a dove. While the film is a striking example of an unknown *nouvelle vague* that might have influenced East German filmmaking, its history is a unique testament of film censorship in East Germany.

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¹ Agde, Günter, *Der lange Schatten danach: Texte nichtrealisierter Filme der DEFA 1965/66*, DEFA-Stiftung Berlin, 2011