

# Letting Reality Speak in *Apprehension*



Director Lothar Warneke and film historian Erika Richter (also the dramaturg of *Apprehension*) met to talk regularly from November 2001 to March 2004. Among other topics, they discussed Warneke's life and work, his filmmaking philosophy, and the role of art in society. The director then agreed that these extensive conversations be transcribed and published as the book *Die Schönheit dieser Welt* (transl. *The Beauty of This World*). The following interview about Warneke's film *Apprehension* is part of a chapter entitled "Ich schaue die Schönheit dieser Welt, aber meine Augen sind voller Tränen" (transl. "I Look at the Beauty of This World, But My Eyes Are Filled With Tears").

## The Documentary Fiction Film

**E. R.:** In *Die Beunruhigung* (*Apprehension*, 1981) you return to some thoughts, take up reflections on your earlier theories, albeit on another level.

**L.W.:** I had this underlying impression that we had never fully realized our concept of the documentary fiction film and that I ought to try again. In the early eighties, however, elements of documentary fiction film were no longer being practiced at the [DEFA] Studio; this might also have provoked a certain protest in me—psychologically, so to speak. Maybe every director eventually reaches this point. Andreas Dresen obviously did something similar with the film *Halbe Treppe* (*Grill Point*, 2002): no script, no studio. This idea of attempting the other extreme, of letting reality come to expression in the reality of the film, occurred on its own.

**E.R.:** With *Apprehension*, first, you leave the studio, and second, you use a documentary cameraman, Thomas Plenert. Why?

**L.W.:** My original idea had not left me. It was to do a documentary fiction film, or one that was stylistically reminiscent of Italian neorealism or British Free Cinema—one that would allow me to bring as much authenticity as possible to a film that told a fictional story. We wanted to do something like this in a more intensive way. From this starting point, the following deliberations arose. First, if the studio wanted to stamp a certain style onto a movie, then you had to leave the studio, to avoid being placed in a position of dependence upon it, a position in which it could influence you. So the intention was to leave the studio, on one hand, and to avoid financial dependency on the other—i.e., to have as little money for the movie as possible, in order to be forced to deal quite differently with many things.

This meant no big sets, which cost money and which were made by studio craftsmen, who also cost money. Instead, we tried to use as much as possible from the real world, which cost us nothing. We then said: If we want to shoot reality, in the streets, we need a crew that is small and inconspicuous—not fifty people, as was normal when shooting a film at the studio. So the idea, which asserted itself more and more and became obvious, was to employ a documentary cameraman who was used to shooting films in the real world, without big spotlights or floodlights. These considerations also forced us to exercise restraint in the choice of film material. For our purposes, only highly sensitive black-and-white film would work. We therefore had to film in black-and-white—which I preferred anyway, since I always had the feeling that the ORWO color films were somewhat kitschy in all their colorfulness. The story we had in mind would not have tolerated gaudy colors. It is a tough story that deals with life and death. The style of the movie thus demanded black-and-white film. There was colossal opposition to this in the studio because it was no longer standard practice to shoot in black-and-white. They said it wouldn't work, that we'd get no audience. The opposite was the case: we had a large audience, and the film was distributed to many countries on all continents.

I wanted to try once more to realize something of our original idea—whereby I was, and still am of the opinion that in film, both extremes are possible and ambiguity is inherent. You can make anything in a studio, invent anything, reconstruct anything artistically. But, on the other hand, you can also create an awful lot through non-artistic means, build a story from

# Letting Reality Speak in *Apprehension*

authentic elements. Both possibilities exist. In my previous movies, I'd been intensively involved with studio technology. I don't object to that. But when making *Apprehension*, I wanted to give the opposite approach another go.

**E.R.:** I had shown you this story at a relatively early stage, as a film treatment, I think, and you were interested in it. You said later that the story needed to be revised so that both the threat of death and the danger to human relationships were worked out more clearly and dramatically. Subsequently, Helga Schubert wrote a completely different version that you did not like at all. I am glad that version sank into obscurity; it was dramatic in an awkward way. Then you returned to the original version.

**L.W.:** Yes, you feel certain insecurities; you'd like to have some certainty that the story you choose will make the ideas that you have in mind visible. Later, I understood that these fears were unnecessary because a lot can be communicated through the acting—how sentences are spoken, how gestures are deployed. In this movie, the use of body language became very important for me; for example, in the moment when the woman is feeling very agitated and fearful, but she cannot share it with anyone verbally, she nevertheless basically makes it visible through her body language. For me, the extent to which this body language was recognized by each of her counterparts became important. To what extent are the people she encounters that day, when she is reassessing all her partnerships, sensitive and open enough to her to actually perceive her state of mind? And her state of mind is hardly ever perceived. This means that the relationships she has (or rather examines on that day) are not so great. She undertakes an unwitting evaluation of these relationships.

This has always been my subject matter: awareness of interpersonal behavior. We shot some scenes at a center for sex and marriage counselling in [East] Berlin. The director of the center made me aware of body language again. He said that the people who came as clients had no idea of everything they told him with their gestures—the way they stood, sat, looked at each other and behaved, etc. It became especially clear to me that we have to pay much more attention to these elements in movies, that these visual elements, which contain great drama, clearly convey behavioral patterns to the audience. In my work on film and theology, I later devoted an entire section to the borderline situation, which is so important for us humans. We encounter situations in which we have to surpass ourselves, in which we find ourselves in some kind of ordeal. The place where non-existence [death] threatens absolute meaningfulness, where our existence stands before non-existence—this is our human borderline situation. These borderline situations are essential to our being human.

## The Borderline Situation

**L.W.:** In *Apprehension*, a woman is thrown into just such a borderline situation. She finds out that she may have breast cancer and has to go to the hospital for an operation the next day. If she does indeed have cancer, her breast will be removed on the spot. This woman experiences a life-threatening situation, which we humans also experience (thank God, not in a life-threatening way) when it happens in the movies. Film is a great boon to human existence and enriches human life. By identifying with a character, we give ourselves up to these circumstances and can confront the kind of borderline situations that are part of being human—in this case, the threat of death. But threatening moments about life and death are not the only examples of borderline situations. Love is also a borderline situation in that it throws you out of your previous routine. When theologians talk about borderline situations, they talk about the mini-apocalypse. This was one of the points where I realized that religious thought converges with movies. This woman is forced to completely question her humanity.

**E.R.:** There were many audience discussions after the screenings. I can remember that people repeatedly asked why she didn't say anything to anyone about her situation.

**L.W.:** That has to do with her personality. She is not a chatterbox, not one of those people who immediately impose their worries on others. Especially since she doesn't know exactly what's wrong.

## Letting Reality Speak in *Apprehension*

By the way, here I tried—in particular in the medical realm—to make use of authentic elements. For instance, the medical exam undergone by the actress Christine Schorn is conducted by a real physician. He did the breast exam. This doctor had no idea how she'd react. She has a first outbreak of fear, and now the physician has to react the way he would react with any other patient. He does everything the way he's used to doing it. These are improvisational elements. The other side is that it is not without danger for the actress. After all, it could be that afterwards the doctor says, "Listen, we did this for the movie, but I'd like to give you a proper exam." Something threatening might actually happen. Such possibilities float throughout this movie. Especially in the case of the breast exam. This was something I thought we could really incorporate into a feature film. The doctor is a real doctor and the actress has a real breast. It is nothing violent, but there can be danger.

**E.R.:** I want to return to the questions of some audience members, which I think bespeak an amazing lack of understanding of the situation. I think if you're really in such a situation, you don't want to tempt fate. You don't want to talk about it. Maybe it would be possible to talk about it if the situation were clear. But as long as everything is unclear, there's this feeling that you'll attract evil by talking about it. Of course, such matters were officially ignored for a long time in our very rational society.

**L.W.:** It is also the case that death was so rarely talked about. It was always pushed aside, ignored. So whenever someone was confronted with it, there was this tendency to become totally helpless.

**E.R.:** You also don't know how you'd react if you found out that your girlfriend might have cancer.

**L.W.:** You don't know how you are supposed to react and you especially don't know how you can help, particularly because such situations were pushed aside. But learning how to deal with such things is part of growing up. That was definitely a shortcoming of East German society.

**E.R.:** And now, it seems to me, things have gotten even worse.

**L.W.:** I cannot judge that. But back then you didn't talk about it, and that was wrong.

**E.R.:** In this regard, how was the collaboration with Christine Schorn? I'm asking you about it even though I was present during shooting and witnessed you working. She told me later that she was afraid the whole time.

**L.W.:** This topic affects you deeply because it is not only acting but also real life. Something like this could happen to you at any time. The collaboration with Christine Schorn went like this: When I worked with her the first time, in *Addio, Piccolo Mia* (1978), she was terribly tense. She was afraid of acting in a movie. She was—and is—a wonderful stage actress. I had seen her on stage, too. Her anxiety was where I told myself, as a director: "This is your opportunity, your challenge. Now you need to show what you can do. You have to loosen her up." As I said, the first attempt was in *Addio, Piccolo Mia*. That was followed by *Unser kurzes Leben* (*Our Short Life*, 1980), where I cast her again and where I think she dealt with the cinematic situation in a much more relaxed way. That was when I became aware of her extraordinary talent and thought she should now get a starring role. When I saw this story by Helga Schubert, I was sure that Christine Schorn was the right person for this role. The role was a perfect match, both for her as a woman, and for her personality. She felt that she could show something, that she could contribute something as an actress. She is tremendously present in this movie. The movie basically lives through her. I had no problem of any kind with her, no conflict. Absolutely nothing. It was a wonderful cooperation—not only with her, by the way, but also with the whole team. The film team was small and we all meshed well, I think. After all, we even shot scenes in Helga Schubert's apartment and in the sex and marriage counseling office where she used to work.

**E.R.:** The film is really so authentic—the cancer patient who tells her story in the hospital garden actually died of cancer a few years later.

# Letting Reality Speak in *Apprehension*

## Collaboration with Thomas Plenert

**E.R.:** I find this point worth mentioning: you chose a documentary cameraman, Thomas Plenert, to help you knowledgeably integrate these moments of authenticity. That was successful. However, there is nothing coincidental or journalistic in the film's composition. Rather, the film has a beautiful, precise and concentrated visual language. That's astounding. There are none of those things that you often find when filming reality, no imperfections or coincidences, although these can also have their own beauty. It's as if you and Thomas had a shared sense of the beauty and expressive power of images from the very beginning. Did you make sketches again this time? Did you discuss how you imagined things beforehand? Or did it come about more by chance?

**L.W.:** More by chance. I had become acquainted with Thomas Plenert's work through his diploma films at the film school. I found some of his shots outstanding, and they stuck in my mind. I think, I originally wanted to shoot the film with Eberhard Geick, but it didn't work out because he didn't have time. (He had previously made *Solo Sunny* with Konrad Wolf.) So I suggested to the studio that I wanted to work with Plenert—which was very complicated. People said that so many of the cinematographers were already without work, you can't just bring in another cameraman from outside, and on and on. The cinematographers themselves were indignant. But for once, I showed the obstinacy necessary to persist in my demand. And I believe that this benefited the entire undertaking.

**E.R.:** How did the two of you reach an understanding? Instinctively?

**L.W.:** Instinctively. Especially because we also talked with each other privately, outside of work. I find that important for film crews in general, not to talk just about the movie, but to also have conversations about anything and everything. In the process you notice, oh, this person has this kind of personality, and I have that kind. We're compatible in this area, but not that one. This way, it's possible to reach a level of rapport not only through direct conversations, but also through indirect ones. Of course, we also discussed camera angles, and I again sketched everything.

**E.R.:** Did you show these sketches to Thomas?

**L.W.:** Some of them. Though I never insisted that everything be executed the way I had drawn it; instead, I sketched it so that everyone knew what was going on in my mind: oh, that's how he's imagining it. It didn't always have to be done that way, though—because sometimes it's not right or it's not expressive enough. But they know the general direction. It's nearly impossible to describe in words what goes on in the human mind.

**E.R.:** As I mentioned before, *Apprehension* has a strict, almost classical, visual language. It's totally compact and without any flourishes. You don't see something like that very often.

**L.W.:** The image always had to focus on the characters because it was their body language that communicated the actual message. The challenge for the cameraman was in seeing the extent to which the message made it into the image via the character.

**E.R.:** I remember there being a mishap with the film stock early on.

**L.W.:** Yes, we had to start all over again. The footage from five or six days of shooting was not alright.

**E.R.:** The word was that the film laboratory was no longer even capable of handling black-and-white film.

**L.W.:** I can't remember the reason. In any case, there was a technical problem with the film stock.

**E.R.:** Can you still remember setting up the conversation with the cancer patient who tells her story to the protagonist, Inge Herold?

**L.W.:** I can't remember the concrete circumstances anymore. But I don't impose on anyone or put anyone in a coercive situation. I had talked with her and asked her if she could tell her story in the movie. She was willing to because she also saw

## Letting Reality Speak in *Apprehension*

it as a matter of her own courage. She found out about her illness from a pregnancy-related blood test, which revealed that her blood levels were not right. There were so many elements of courage. People have developed a passionate will to prevail against this deadly disease. By the way, [director] Günter Reisch was also battling a similar situation at the time. I wanted to encourage people who found themselves in this situation and did not know how to handle it.

**E.R.:** I can still remember that some of the plot details came from the actors.

**L.W.:** Yes, for example, at night Inge tells her son the story of her bicycle; that was Christine Schorn's own story.

**E.R.:** Was that something out of the ordinary in this film? Or did you do something similar in other films, leaving the scenes open to suggestions from the actors?

**L.W.:** Yes, if the story could handle it. It's not always the case that you can open up the story beyond its actual frame. Here it was possible to open up the story, and we exercised that option. I did it in other films, too, but not to the same extent, more minimally. Here it forms part of the film's stylistics.

**E.R.:** With regard to its structure, *Apprehension* is related to *Leben mit Uwe* (*Living with Uwe*, 1973). Both movies deal with a single day on which much depends, during which an examination of the protagonist's life takes place.

**L.W.:** What some critics reproached me for had to do with the framing story. They said it wasn't necessary. I think, however, that it had a role to play. Because that's how the viewer finds out that Inge has pulled through, at least so far.

**E.R.:** And especially the fact that the mastectomy took place. That's the problem. You see that her breast was removed. That's what used to be done for breast cancer. Now it's handled a bit more carefully; if possible, only the diseased parts of the breast are removed. In addition, the framing story shows that she has effected a change in her own life, that she has broken up with her boyfriend and entered a new relationship.

**L.W.:** I sincerely hope that eventually, maybe through genetics, etc., some ways to recover from cancer will be developed.

**E.R.:** You said on many occasions that you were actually not as interested in the threat of disease and death—although that too, of course—but rather in the threat of leading a false, meaningless life.

**L.W.:** This is the real apprehension. You notice that the life you have led so far has not been right, for example in regard to a relationship. That is the deeper purpose of this movie: to make you think, to make you reflect on your own life. That need not always happen because of a life-threatening situation. However, when a situation is life-threatening, it naturally forces you to question yourself in a completely different, much more intense way. Cinema makes that possible without your being personally threatened. That is, a psychotherapeutic role of film becomes possible. You are cast into situations in which you get scared to death and you start to reflect, but without actually being physically threatened.

**E.R.:** I remember that many people who felt that way had had some connection with cancer. They could experience it more intensively. They either had cancer in their family or were affected themselves. Audience members had to have a certain connection to it in order for the film to be really cathartic.

**L.W.:** The problem is that anybody can be vulnerable to it. There are no selection criteria. Supposedly people under stress get sick more easily. However, that's not something that can be claimed definitively, with certainty. It is possible for every human organ and every human being to be threatened by this disease. It is a subject that affects everyone. I already touched on the topic in *Dr. med. Sommer II* (*Dr. Sommer II*, 1969). In this respect, it was not unimportant for me to explore how doctors deal with this topic. Should the patient be told or not? I have discussed this with many doctors, and there is no clear opinion. Some are for it, and others are strictly against it. This is an area that leaves many issues open. In this regard, it is also something important for society to be led to think about.

# Letting Reality Speak in *Apprehension*

**E.R.:** In recent decades, the tendency to tell people has become stronger. After all, in the beginning they withheld everything.

**L.W.:** There were already doctors before who believed that patients should be told, so that they could live out the rest of their lives in the most meaningful way possible.

**E.R.:** Did this film provide closure for you, as far as documentary fiction film is concerned? Or did you feel, afterwards, that you would like to develop this principle further? Or was it not important for you anymore?

**L.W.:** To be honest, I am a bit stumped about how I felt about it at the time. I did employ some elements of it in *Eine sonderbare Liebe* (*A Strange Love*, 1984). But I also realized that major difficulties arise as far as technology is concerned. Just imagine shooting in a person's apartment! If a cloud drifts by outside, there's suddenly different light inside. In the studio, it's possible to prevent those sorts of things. There you can create a consistent lighting structure. If someone can build an apartment in the studio in such a way that you don't notice that you're not in a real apartment (that depends on the set designer), then, in my opinion, it's doable. However, I do believe I tried to continue with certain elements of acting, of body language, in my subsequent films. In the process, I found it interesting when the documentary cameraman came into the studio; he still dealt somehow differently with the necessity of lighting the studio set than the usual cameramen did. That was striking. Especially because he sometimes felt uneasy and tried to learn to deal with the new conditions in his own way. These were elements that brought something new to the visual design.

**E.R.:** You were determined to continue working with Thomas Plenert?

**L.W.:** Yes. After all, I ended up making a total of three movies with him.

**E.R.:** Even though the conditions under which you originally chose him were no longer there.

**L.W.:** In a certain sense, they were no longer there. I still wanted to continue this collaboration a little longer, however, just because of the way he created visual imagery. And aside from that: it's not as if you really have such precise definitions in your mind that tell you, "Now I want to continue with this style or a different one." Instead, you just tell yourself, yes, maybe he'll incorporate a few elements that are reminiscent of documentary fiction film, even though you aren't making a documentary fiction film anymore. But not everything for *A Strange Love* was shot in the studio either. We did a lot of shooting on location—for example, the kitchen in the factory and the rooms there; everything that takes place in the factory was actually shot in the factory.

*Translated by Sigrít Schütz and Kate DeVane Brown.*

**Erika Richter** studied drama theory at the Deutsche Hochschule für Filmkunst from 1956 to 1960. After receiving special training at the Moscow film academy, VGIK, she was an editor for the film journal *Filmwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen*. Between 1975 and 1991, she worked as a dramaturg on fourteen productions at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films, collaborating with important directors, including Rainer Simon (*Jadup and Boel*, 1981/88), Lothar Warneke (*Apprehension*, 1981), Evelyn Schmidt (*The Bicycle*, 1982) and Heiner Carow (*Coming Out*, 1989). In 1992, after the death of her husband, the film historian Rolf Richter, she took over his work publishing the magazine *Film und Fernsehen*. From 2003 to 2005, she co-edited the DEFA Foundation's book series *apropos: Film*. Erika Richter was awarded the Berlinale Camera at the 2003 Berlin International Film Festival for her important contributions to German cinema. She lives in Berlin.

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