



SPACES BETWEEN BEGINNING AND END: Thoughts on Peter Voigt's Film Essay *Dusk: 1950s East Berlin Bohemia* BY CLAUS LÖSER



Oh, joyful time of beginnings!
The page white and the pencil sketches the overall plan!
First line in nothingness, boldly rising through the void into everything!
Excavate the ground and depth: the building will be tall.
Seeing what has never been seen! Testing the new!
—Bertolt Brecht, "Ach, wie doch einst ich sie sah!"¹

When Peter Voigt's documentary *Dämmerung – Ostberliner Bohème der 50er Jahre* (*Dusk: 1950s East Berlin Bohemia*) celebrated its premiere in the Grüne Salon of Berlin's Volksbühne, only those in the know and especially interested viewers came to the screening. There were very few reviews. A regular theatrical release did not occur afterwards. In a certain sense, the film arrived both too early and too late. Five years earlier, it would have been a sensation. At the time of its premiere, however, the systematic—and still continuing—examination of phenomena of GDR cultural history had not yet begun. Besides, in the early 1990s, many potentially interested viewers were preoccupied with the reorganization of their daily lives that accompanied the fundamental paradigm change of 1989-90. In view of an uncertain future, affected contemporaries had no relevant interest in tracing the peculiarities of a 1950s East Berlin Bohemia, as Voigt's title promised.

The film did not fit the political mainstream either. Because, back then, the history of the GDR was, "above all, interpreted in light of its inglorious end," as film historian Ralf Schenk noted in relation to this film, in particular.² Public discourse focused primarily on clear victim-perpetrator scenarios; perspectives that dealt with differentiated formations located between opportunism and resistance during the SED dictatorship were not in demand. Shades of grey rarely found their way into the debates. But these grey tones are exactly what *Dusk* deals with. It is a survey of room for maneuvering within a totalitarian constellation ultimately intent on obliterating individuality. Behind it stands the old question expressed so pointedly by Theodor W. Adorno, namely: to what extent a right life within a falsehood is even possible.

Voigt's documentary essay reaches us today as a twice-encoded message in a bottle. *Dusk* precisely captures two different moments of historical transition: first, the period in the 1950s when East Germany was between the height of Stalinism and hope of a thaw; and second, the mental and social moment in the eastern part of Germany a few years after unification.³ The film was started in 1992, completed in 1993, and shown here and there in 1994. Then it faded into total obscurity. Its rediscovery is a stroke of luck.

Now already a historical document itself, *Dusk* affords us a multi-layered historical perspective. It deals with moments of individual, political and social history that, at the time of filming, dated back almost forty years. The life plans it presents, as well as the biographical caesurae they convey, prove to be quite contemporary, inasmuch as they represent universal issues. The interviewees remember defining chapters of their lives—at times sentimental or chatting cheerfully, or again sharply analytic and angry. Most of these people, as well as the director, have died in the meantime. Some of them were once very famous; others are forgotten; while still others—who always remained in the background—here take the stand for the first and only time.

Already during filming, in 1992-1993, the film did not have the best prospects for distribution and exploitation. From

¹ "O fröhliche Zeit des Beginns! / Weiß das Blatt und der Stift umreißt die umfängliche Planung! / Erste Linie im Nichts, kühn steigend durchs Nichts in das Alles! / Ausheben des Grunds und Tiefes: hoch wird der Bau sein. / Sehen des nie Gesehenen! Ausprobieren des Neuen!" In: Brecht, Bertolt. "Ach, wie doch einst ich sie sah!" *Gedichte*. vol. X. Berlin, Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1978. 34.

² Schenk, Ralf. "Aufbruch, Schnaps und schöne Frauen." *Berliner Zeitung*. May 8, 2017.

³ German unification was the endpoint of a process that started after the fall of the Wall on 11/9/1989. On 10/3/1990, the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) became part of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany) to form a united Germany.

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a strictly commercial perspective, it should never have been made. It is nevertheless good that the director and his producers prevailed. The backbone of the filmic narrative is formed by conversations with members of Bohemian circles in 1950s East Berlin—almost all of whom were known to the director and some of whom were close companions. When watching *Dusk* again, however, it turns out to be far more than the usual combination of interview passages, archival materials and atmospheric images of the period. Through clever montage and surprising, barbed insertions, the film itself becomes an autonomous piece of art, which has not only weathered the passage of time, but only now also possibly unlocks levels of meaning that could not have been appreciated at its premiere.

The film starts with an end. It shows the funeral of the great actor Wolfgang Kaiser,⁴ who jumped from his apartment window to his death just a few days before his 76th birthday. The thespian found his final resting place in the famous Dorotheenstadt cemetery in Berlin's Mitte district, the German equivalent of Paris's Père Lachaise. In addition to greats of Prussian intellectual life—such as the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) or architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841)—virtually the entire cultural and academic elite of the GDR lie here. To be buried here was the final proof that one had accomplished something in GDR society—which did not necessarily mean, however, that the deceased had held opinions identical to state doctrine. The cemetery gained additional importance because Bertolt Brecht lived next door from 1953 to 1956. From his windows at Chausseestraße 125, he could daily observe where he would one day be laid to rest. The sight of his own graveyard inspired one of his most famous poems.⁵

Wolf Kaiser had achieved almost synonymous fame with his part as Mack the Knife in Brecht's stage production of the *Dreigroschenoper* (*Three Penny Opera*). After his death, while the mourners file past his open grave, a text sounds from offstage: "Funeral of a comedian. The aged Mackie Messer jumped out of his widow. The name Wolf Kaiser will no longer be listed in the next telephone directory. Hang yourself or don't hang yourself, you'll regret it either way." This last sentence is a citation from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard⁶—a commentary one could almost call cynical.

Over the course of the film, however, it becomes clear that it is neither cynical, nor a commentary. Rather, this opening sets the course for an artistic process that will become more and more concentrated over the ensuing 90 minutes. Director Peter Voigt did not choose the first images of his film at random, or for the sake of their macabre or sensational character. He himself is closely tied to this setting and the people who once moved in its orbit. Already in the first minutes of his film, the director—who can briefly be seen at Wolf Kaiser's graveside—settles into his role as the hidden narrator. The following story is autobiographical, although the narration never uses the first-person or identifies personal experiences as such.

This perspective, which at first glance appears to be simple understatement, is a narrative strategy. It enables the circumventing of cinematic conventions. In most documentaries the main point of interest is clearly outlined in an exposé and then, step by step, explored in more detail; at the end, the thesis established more or less from the start is conclusively established for the audience. *Dusk* is entirely different. Here, the conversations, archival recordings and camera angles revolve around a historical moment that, by the end of the film, is still not really explained in a conventional sense. Factual classification and continuous threads that could help one move through the film are not provided. The people interviewed are also not classified according to their importance, by means of either superimposed text or voice-over. They introduce themselves or each other in subsequently recounted anecdotes. Incomplete statements remain as they are; there are repetitions and even contradictory recollections.

⁴ Wolf Kaiser (1916-92) was a stage and movie actor who was brought by Bertolt Brecht to Deutsches Theater and then to the newly-founded Berliner Ensemble, where he performed until 1967.

⁵ "Ich benötige keinen Grabstein, aber / Wenn ihr einen für mich benötigt / wünschte ich, es stünde darauf: / Er hat Vorschläge gemacht. Wir / Haben sie angenommen. / Durch eine solche Inschrift wären / Wir alle geehrt." ["I don't need a gravestone. If you need one for me, I would like you to write on it: He made suggestions. We accepted them. This kind of inscription would honor us all."] Brecht, Bertolt. "Ich benötige keinen Grabstein." *Gedichte*. vol. VII, Berlin, Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1973. 137.

⁶ Droop, Fritz (ed.). *Kierkegaard. Auswahl aus seinen Bekenntnissen und Gedanken*. München: Georg Müller Verlag, 1914. 145.

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Those who speak before the camera and microphone are not the usual experts, whose testimonies substantiate the film's theses. To wit, there are no theses. A plethora of information is disseminated, but from it no message is distilled that might be sent home with viewers as added knowledge. What Voigt is interested in are associations and chains of thought that reach beyond the ninety minutes of the film. He himself, as the artist, has no ready opinion about the events he depicts. He does not want his film to come to a conclusion, but rather to set something in motion. In this sense, he is miles away from the expectations of television networks and consumers.

The urban space captured in the documentary spans a radius of scarcely one hundred meters. The historic Ganymed am Schiffbauerdamm restaurant,⁷ chosen as the location for conversations in the film, had closed a few weeks earlier. The chairs were already missing, but other furnishings—mirrors, coat hooks and the bar—were still there. In this setting, Voigt found an ideal site for his film, which was directly linked to the stories of his protagonists. He uses the darkened rooms as a cave, in the Platonic sense—installing flickering television sets and projecting archival footage on one of the walls. This footage is sometimes directly related to verbally debated events, but in part functions contrapuntally to them. Visual contradictions to concurrent statements are repeatedly presented. While Brecht's son-in-law, the actor Ekkehard Schall, talks about the zest for life and relaxed atmosphere of those years, for instance, images of a ritually frozen communist party meeting screen in the background. Elsewhere, Voigt brings sculptor Igael Tumarkin,⁸ who lives in Israel, back to Germany via interviews filmed in Israel. Photographs by Ulrich Wüst, which the photographer himself presents to the camera, as well as the closing credits are seen on a television screen.

Almost all the anecdotes that are shared over the course of the film took place in the immediate vicinity of the shooting location. Between reports, the camera repeatedly goes out in front of the Ganymed, as if to ascertain how the nearby places being discussed look today. Right across the Spree River from the Ganymed are the tracks and buildings of Friedrichstraße Station, from where it was easy to reach the western part of the city, until August 13, 1961. To the right and then immediately right again on Albrechtstraße, is where, on the lefthand corner, the famous Trichter Pub stood—where the famous actor Heinrich George socialized starting in the 1920s. Only a few steps further, at number 11, you would have found the Hajo Bar, one of the culminating points of East Berlin nightlife, where most of the events described in the film took place. To the northeast, it's only a few steps to the Berliner Ensemble, the professional domain of many of those who get a chance to speak in the film. The Möwe, the Koralle, the Deutsches Theater, the Esterhazy Keller and the Presse Café were all within walking distance. Where the Hajo Bar once stood, there is today a huge billboard with the Marlboro cowboy. Even the walls surrounding the Dorotheenstadt cemetery have not been spared—they have also changed into advertising space.

The excursion to these historic quarters that Christian Lehmann's camera undertakes is, once again, not presented like a report. Information is not simply illustrated. Instead, a psycho-geographical technique is applied⁹—a mediatized, constantly self-reflective stroll that, rather than reconstructing reality, works out a new way to access to it. The comparison of the retrospective statements and current conditions forms an active tension in the film that points to inevitable change and, thus, to the Here and Now. This method is further emphasized by the use of pictorial delays and the playing of recorded music and texts. The metamorphoses of the cityscape, however, are not staged as a polemical opposition between a previously better and currently worse time. All conclusions are left to the audience's willingness to connect the dots.

This understated, revolving process refers to the secret center of the film: Bertolt Brecht. The then world-famous author

⁷ The restaurant Ganymed am Schiffbauerdamm was a meeting place for East German intellectuals and officials alike. Well-known artists, including Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel, were regulars there. The restaurant closed after the fall of the Wall, but then reopened in 1996.

⁸ Igael Tumarkin was a set designer at the Berliner Ensemble from 1955 to 1957. His father was the film and theater director Martin Hellberg. His mother Berta Gurewitsch and his stepfather Herzl Tumarkin emigrated to Palestine in 1935. After Brecht's death, Tumarkin left the GDR; he settled in Israel in the 1970s.

⁹ A method that was developed in the mid-1950s by the French Situationists around Guy Debord (1931-94) for the complex appropriation of urban spaces. According to this concept, there are inner—psychological—city maps that are more useful than strictly topographical ones.

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comes up repeatedly, but only in asides. His name is mentioned several times, but he never explicitly becomes the center of statements. Occasionally, it seems as if all those being interviewed tacitly assume that everything is actually always about him—as if this were self-evident—and to such a degree that it no longer needed to be said. Brecht's overwhelming significance was, already for the next generation of East Germans, not quite comprehensible; and today it requires explanation even more. Because Brecht's importance for the self-concept of young intellectuals in 1950s East Germany cannot be overstated. Everyone appearing in the film belonged to this group, not least the director himself.

In 1954, at the age of twenty-one, Peter Voigt broke into Brecht's most trusted circle, thanks to the recommendation of Brecht's close collaborator Ruth Berlau¹⁰ and director Wolfgang Böttcher. He quickly gained the trust of the master. He was given his own key to the apartment on Chausseestrasse, where he applied himself to the extensive library. He became "The Favorite."¹¹ At Brecht's behest, for example, he searched for passages in books and then replaced the books on the shelves after use. During the two years he assisted Brecht, Voigt was considered to be the dramatist and poet's youngest and favorite disciple. It is understandable that this closeness to an internationally celebrated theater reformer was a formative influence on the young man. Their direct contact lasted only two years, before abruptly breaking off when Brecht died on August 14, 1956. Voigt returned to this period repeatedly until the end of his own life. He wrote texts, gave interviews and made movies about it. *Dusk* must be understood in the context of Voigt's intensive, retrospective preoccupation with Brecht's impact on him and on the reality surrounding him.

In 1933, Brecht's exile had led him—via Czechoslovakia, Austria, Switzerland, France, Denmark and Finland—to the USA, where he lived from 1941 to 1947.¹² On October 31, 1947, one day after his compulsory hearing before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), he left for Paris. From there, he moved on to Zurich, Switzerland, where he sounded out a possible return to Germany. Initially, it was not at all certain that he would take up permanent residency in the Soviet Occupation Zone; he apparently felt uneasy about the sway that Stalin had over this part of Germany.¹³ He therefore tried first to get a permanent residence permit in Switzerland, and then Austrian citizenship—both without success.¹⁴ As early as October 1945, Herbert Jhering, at the time chief dramaturg at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin, had invited Brecht to work at his theater. In fall 1948, Brecht accepted Jhering's invitation. The newly-founded DEFA Studio in Berlin also offered Brecht a film project. In early 1949, before the founding of the GDR later that year, the Soviet Military Administration—represented by the Kulturbund (GDR Cultural Association) and top-ranking political and cultural officials—offered Brecht the prospect of establishing his own theater, to which Brecht agreed.¹⁵

Brecht worked in the GDR from 1949 until his death in 1956, without ever becoming a citizen or a member of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). During these seven years, the Berliner Ensemble (BE)—first as a guest in the Deutsches Theater building then as of 1954 at its own Theater am Schiffbauerdamm—became the powerhouse of Berlin theater life. Brecht and Helene Weigel—who officially functioned as the theater's manager—strove to recruit as many former colleagues as possible, from their time in exile and the Weimar period, to work with the BE. This only succeeded to a certain extent. Their relationship with composer Kurt Weill and actor Lotte Lenya had cooled prior to this; actor Peter Lorre declined. At first the core of the newly-founded theater company included only participants in the legendary production of *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*, January 1949); aside from Weigel, these included actor Gerhard Bienert, composer Paul Dessau and director Erich Engel. Later, actors Ernst Busch and Erwin

¹⁰ In 1933, the Danish writer Ruth Berlau (1906-74) brought Brecht and his wife, Helene Weigel, to Copenhagen, put the couple up and subsequently supported them for many years. At times, Berlau and Brecht had an intimate relationship.

¹¹ *Der Bevorzugte* (2005, *The Favorite*) is also the title of a documentary about Peter Voigt by Alexandra Czok (a bonus on this DVD).

¹² Brecht visited the Soviet Union in 1935. He passed through the country again in 1941, to board a ship that would bring him from Vladivostok across the Pacific to Santa Monica, California.

¹³ Brecht had backed away from an exile in the USSR for a reason. Some of his close collaborators and colleagues—Carola Neher (1900-1942), Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1874-1940) and Sergei M. Tretyakov (1692-1937)—had fallen victim to the "Great Terror."

¹⁴ He actually did receive Austrian citizenship in October 1950.

¹⁵ See: Hecht, Werner. *Brecht Chronik, 1898-1956*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997.

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Geschonneck also joined the theater troupe; in addition, Brecht gathered around himself an amorphous group of, in some cases, very young men, called "students": Benno Besson, Peter Palitzsch, Egon Monk, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Peter Voigt, among others.¹⁶

At this point, we must turn to the title of the film. The German word *Dämmerung* describes an interim situation between day and night, although in German the word does not specify whether it is the transition in the morning or the evening. The people interviewed in *Dusk* also did not yet know, at the time of the experiences they talk about, whether it was dawn or dusk. The historical moment in question is relatively short, and its beginning and end cannot be perfectly defined. Approximately, it spans the years from 1950 to 1957. Incredibly much was happening in the small country called the German Democratic Republic during these few years. It had been founded under international law as a result of negotiations between the victorious Allied powers in the fall of 1949; but it was clear from the start that it would only be viable under the auspices of the Soviet Union. Initially, the occupying powers left it open as to whether the existence of two states under diametrically opposed political systems solved the German Question or not; as the Cold War intensified, however, the situation became increasingly entrenched. What was pivotal for intellectual life was the adoption of Socialist Realism from the Soviet Union as the authoritative criterion for all creative activity in literature, visual arts, music, theater and film.¹⁷ Censorship was tightened at the same time. When Stalin suddenly died in March 1953, the GDR was in the middle of transforming from a dictatorship transitionally clad in cultural policy, to an openly Stalinist dictatorship. In the context of these historical experiences, it becomes clear that the half-light of the title describes the transition from day into night. Indeed, Voigt takes up Hegel's metaphor of the Owl of Minerva, which "spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk."¹⁸

Just as the spatial movement of the film involves only a few streets of Berlin's old Friedrich-Wilhelm-Stadt, the historical period under discussion proves equally limited. Time and space reach far beyond these areas, however. The film deals with no more or less than globally relevant events. The Cold War was becoming manifest at this time. Brecht, his theater and the young people around him literally stood at the interface between two systems. Historically radical changes broke on the waves of the Spree River, before the doors of the Berliner Ensemble.

The euphoria in which the recollections of the speakers are grounded is not aggressively challenged in the film. We know from ensuing historical developments, however, that the strength they experienced back then was illusory. Ultimately, it was impossible to escape historical momentum. Knowing that Brecht stood behind them gave these aspiring poets, filmmakers, actors and bon vivants an enormous boost and bestowed them with a feeling of invulnerability. When their patron saint suddenly died in 1956, they were thrown back onto themselves. Their camaraderie dissolved bit by bit and continued to exist only in the anecdotes of the years from 1950 to 1957.

Although Voigt was part of the circle, in his film he nevertheless undertakes a gentle dismantling of the tenacious myth. This is done, in particular, by means of interview technique and montage. By juxtaposing contradictory statements, Voigt qualifies the reliability of memories. Like in Akira Kurosawa's classic *Rashomon* (1950), it becomes apparent that the reconstruction of truth is impossible: everyone has carried different certainties with them through the past years and has distorted, adjusted, dramatized or downplayed them. This multi-perspectival dissolution is demonstrated by means of a banal, mischievously integrated detail: As the conversation turns to the Dadaist and photo-montage artist John Heartfield (1892-1968), several of the speakers remember his dog; one recalls a dachshund, another is sure it was a very big animal.

¹⁶ Benno Besson (1922-2006) and Peter Palitzsch (1918-2004) became well-known theater directors. Egon Monk (1927-1007), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (b. 1935) and Peter Voigt (1933-2015) became film directors.

¹⁷ This transformation can be seen, for example, in DEFA films. Previously there had still been films made with benign content or pacifist, even bourgeois leanings. Now the screw was tightened. The pinnacle of ideological pomposity was Kurt Maetzig's two-part heroic biopic about German Communist leader Ernst Thälmann, who was murdered by the Nazis in 1944. It was released into East German cinemas in 1952 and 1954 and became mandatory viewing for workers' collectives, party groups and school classes.

¹⁸ See: Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004.

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Voigt edits in an archival photo of the artist and his pet, which shows neither a dachshund nor a big dog, but rather a dainty little cocker spaniel. Thus, *Dusk* in no ways gets lost in creating legends or even glorifying the past. “Ostalgia” is entirely foreign to Voigt.

Apart from espousing a generally analytic—or, even, a downright deconstructivist—attitude, the film also relativizes the myth of Brecht and his time in the GDR in several instances. Once more, Voigt does not approach this directly, through polemic, but rather in a roundabout way. In the process, the fates of several people in the film—as well as others who are only indirectly mentioned—speak for themselves, although they are never exposed to the rolling camera. Sculptor Igaël Tumarkin, for example, talks about the open racism he experienced as an “foreign-looking” person—and this at Brecht’s legendary theater, where he worked as a set designer. Painter Horst Strepel is mentioned several times—who created a mural in the Friedrichstraße train station, which was first commissioned and then fiercely attacked by cultural bureaucrats. Strepel was made to destroy the mural himself, after which he fled to the West; he was never able to establish himself there and died in poverty in 1975. Finally, the painter Rudi Ebeling is interviewed. Accused of “formalism,” he was kicked out of the art academy; he later opened a private gallery and again attracted the attention of the authorities. All his attempts to establish himself came to nothing; nevertheless, he persevered in the GDR to the end.

Alongside carefully recalcitrant personalities—like the sculptor Werner Stötzer, the architect Kurt Mühle and dramaturg Carl Weber—on the other side of the spectrum conformist artists and theater people, including actress Barbara Brecht-Schall and her husband Ekkehard Schall, have their say in the film. Their insubordination never exceeded a certain limit—such that, even after Brecht’s death, they were more or less able to continue their careers unimpeded. The appearance of the notorious television-ideologue Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler¹⁹ must also be seen in this context. After the collapse of the GDR, he had become a pariah across Germany; it was therefore more than a slight provocation that Voigt included him in his film. This man too had witnessed and helped fashion this period; his voice should also be included in the arsenal of memories. An evaluation, or even characterization of his role in the GDR does not take place; audience members must do this themselves.

All in all, the open structure of *Dusk* works like a research offer. Its multitudinous pieces of information and moods are spread out before us like loose threads of an unfinished carpet. It is entirely up to the will of the viewers to pursue these traces.

<i>Und wenn wir's überlegen</i>	When we think about it
<i>Wir können nicht lang groß sein</i>	We can't be famous forever,
<i>Der Wind kommt und der Regen</i>	Wind and rain will come
<i>Und machen uns eilig klein</i>	And quickly make us small.
<i>Elendiglich und klein</i>	Miserable and forgotten
<i>Muss der Mensch dürfen sein.,</i>	Must humans be allowed to be.

—Bertolt Brecht, “Und wenn wir's überlegen”²⁰

Translated by Sigrít Schütz

¹⁹ Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler (1918-2001) came from the highest aristocratic and upper-class circles. In 1947 he moved to the Soviet Occupation Zone and put himself at the disposal of those in charge of propaganda. He became infamous as the moderator of his weekly TV program *Der schwarze Kanal* (*The Black Channel*), during which he commented on the latest West German television reports.

²⁰ Brecht, Bertolt. “Und wenn wir's überlegen.” *Gedichte*. vol. X. Berlin, Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1978. 14.



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