# 'Rescued in Vain'
## Parapraxis and Deferred Action in Konrad Wolf's *Stars*
## By Thomas Elsaesser

Konrad Wolf's *Sterne* (*Zvezdy / Stars*, 1959) is one of the better known (though less often seen) films produced in the former GDR. As an early treatment of the reaction of an "ordinary" German to the concentration camps and the deportation of Jews, the film reflects the "clean conscience" of the state-owned DEFA film studios in the process of coming to terms with the Nazi past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). But Wolf's film is also about love, self-sacrifice and resistance, and uses filmic idioms reminiscent of classic melodrama and Italian neorealism, as well as the first stirrings of European auteur cinema. Despite the almost sacrosanct aura surrounding this film, we should not hesitate to re-examine it, however, treating certain junctures in its plot structure as a sort of palimpsest – that is, as a specific layering of moments, a sedimentation of known images and historical references, whose political and hermeneutic function, I argue, can be read anew in retrospect. Today these temporal layers appear in a new light in view of the migration of, and dialogue between visual motifs, which is typical of contemporary "memory discourse" and which, in turn, characterizes the general memory culture that has grown up around the Holocaust since the 1990s, not only in Germany, but in Europe as a whole. This process of layering, sedimentation, migration and return – typical of "media memory" in post-1989 Europe – is here already present in a film made in 1959, in a country that, as the saying goes, has disappeared from the map.

In revisiting *Stars* by examining its flashback structure and the question of agency – that is, the motivation and actions of its protagonists – it becomes clear that the film does not correspond to the psycho-analytic model of "working-through," in terms of which *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* tends to be discussed. In contrast, my suggestion is to interpret the film performatively, not only in the poststructuralist sense of the word, but also in the sense of a Freudian slip or parapraxis. Parapraxis (*Fehlleistung*) can be understood as an apparent mistake of speech, action or behavior, which, on closer inspection, reveals another layer of meaning. The original German term situates itself in a dual register, depending on where one puts the emphasis: it can signify either "failed performance" or "performance of failure." The latter would retain the positive connotations of performance and refer to a special poetics of ambivalence, needed for narratives or films that try to address the consequences of catastrophically bad decisions in a way that, nonetheless, allows the protagonists of disaster their own motivations, without either justifying or condemning them in light of what, in retrospect, would seem to have been the "wrong " decision. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, "The point [of historiography] is to first accord the past its own future."[1]

Conceptually, this "poetics of parapraxis" is an extension and elaboration of the idea of a "historical imaginary," which plays a central role in my book on the cinema of the Weimar Republic.[2] Insofar as both concepts deal with the implicit or unconscious knowledge of a work about the historicity of its own cinematic means and effects, a poetics of parapraxis is the opposite of pastiche or ironic reflexivity. Its chief characteristic is the respective double inscription (and, along with it, the trace of possible discrepancies) of time and place, of intention and agency, of authenticity and citation, of knowledge and ignorance. Such a poetics of parapraxis has exemplary relevance with respect to Konrad Wolf, whose acute awareness of deferred

action (*Nachträglichkeit*) and asynchronicity throughout his work once persuaded Michael Wedel and myself to compare *Stars* to Nazi aesthetics and the first postwar West German productions: "*Stars* … is an archetypal melodrama of the victim and victimization that, in a typically German pattern predating Wolf, … casts women as victims in order to test the male protagonist's capacity for change, while the women are tested for their endurance in suffering."[3]

Although not entirely wrong, this rather harsh judgement overlooked certain crucial nuances within the stereotypical story elements, which lend the film a new relevance. In particular, its significance today derives from our current experience in a united Germany and Europe, where televisual and cinematic media-memory tends to assume a superior moral position, derived entirely in hindsight. The question to ask, then, is to what extent does *Stars* – a representative production of East German cinema, after all – make its contribution to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, as defined above, precisely by already challenging this easy wisdom-in-hindsight, opting for a "performance of failure," rather than representing an example of a "failed performance" as our negative remarks about its gender-bias apologetics seemed to imply.

A central role is played in the film by the idea of a past that continues to inscribe itself, not in the present of the plotline, but rather in the future of historical events. This yields a more complex relationship to the historical moment of the film's creation (1959), now placed in the framework of our current knowledge of these historical events (as well as of the GDR's history) and the post-1989 memory culture, called either "postmemory" or "prosthetic memory."[4] In brief, my new reading of *Stars* is prompted by an "archaeology" of our contemporary mode of representing history in film and on television, of how public recollection and commemoration are inflected by the memory of images, especially as this history relates to fascism, socialism, Germany's Nazi past and the persecution of Jews.

### Konrad Wolf and *Stars*

First some background information: *Stars* was a German-Bulgarian coproduction which was offered to Konrad Wolf after the treatment, written by scriptwriter Angel Wagenstein, had already been completed.[5] The story concerns a German corporal who, in 1943, bitter and convinced of the senselessness of war after having been on the eastern front, is sent to oversee a mechanics' garage in a Bulgarian town. When a transport of Sephardic Jews from Greece is temporarily housed in the town's school, he meets a young Jewish woman who asks him to bring a doctor for a pregnant woman.

At first he is indifferent to their plight and refuses; her accusation that all Germans are wolves, however, is troubling enough to persuade him to get medicine and a doctor. A sense of attachment and burgeoning love between the two slowly leads him to change sides. When he finally brings himself to arrange for a hiding place for the young woman, to save her from death in Auschwitz, he is too late. The transport has already left; he sees the last cars disappear into the night, while she looks out from between the bars of one of the boxcars. In a short final sequence, we see the corporal offer his services to the Bulgarian partisan leader as a go-between for arms deliveries to the Communist resistance.

The film has attracted numerous interpretations, which often refer – at least figuratively – to Wolf's own biography.[6] It is not difficult to recognize in Walter, the protagonist, and Ruth, the Greek Jew, a constellation of characters that recurs in Wolf's films (Frohmeyer- Lissy in *Lissy* (1957), Mamlock-Rolf in *Professor Mamlock* (1961), and Manfred-Rita in *Der geteilte Himmel* (*Divided Heaven*, 1964)). Walter calls to mind other male protagonists in Wolf's work, particularly in terms of the inner conflict they endure about their identity as Germans and their divided self when it comes to a sense of loyalty, duty and moral responsibility. At no point

and in no place in the film does Walter truly feel at home: neither in the *Wehrmacht*, nor in the pub with his buddy Kurt; neither among the interned Jews, nor among the Bulgarians who work for the Germans – although he speaks their language, he feels as indifferent to them as he does to the war. Least of all does he belong among the Communist partisans, who can hardly trust him, as a German soldier: for them he remains a German and, as soon as he helps them, becomes a "traitor to his own people."

This accusation had also been levelled against Wolf, following his return from Moscow in the late 1940s. The allegation of treason – viewed as either positive or negative – plays a central role in the literature on Wolf.[7] What is understood in negative terms, as identity confusion and a source of uncertainty and indecision, can also be interpreted in a positive sense, however, as the deeper reason for a particular quality of Wolf's films, a capacity for resistance and moral rectitude. Sensitive and remarkably clear-sighted about personal dilemmas throughout his work, in his life, too, Wolf had to negotiate radically irreconcilable elements; for instance, he had to find a viable position between the contradictory demands made on him by his triple identity as a German, a (Russian) communist, and a Jew. Always liable to find himself on the "wrong" side (of history), caught between so many different fronts, he had to assume complicity for actions in which he took no part, or found himself an actor in events whose consequences only caught up with him in retrospect. These agonizing strains were the source of Konrad Wolf's creative inspiration and may well guarantee the continuing relevance of his oeuvre today. The same biographical dislocations would therefore also fuel the dynamics that make the concept of "performative parapraxis" pertinent to Wolf's films, giving us one of the reasons why this director still fascinates us today as a European auteur filmmaker, while also directing our attention to the specific question of how both personal history – that of the director, as well as of the screenwriter – and the history of cinema inscribe themselves into *Stars*.[8]

### Historical and Political Contexts

Presented as the Bulgarian contribution at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, *Stars* won the Special Jury Prize. (It was, one will recall, the year of the *nouvelle vague*, with Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*) winning the main prize.) *Stars* not only made Konrad Wolf famous, it also caused a diplomatic incident in German-German relations. The film is a historical document, if only because of the fact that a work by a German director could, after an official protest from a German foreign office appealing to the so-called Hallstein Doctrine, only be shown at this international film festival as a Bulgarian, not a German film.

A further political dimension can be ascribed to *Stars* insofar as it was one of DEFA's first co-productions with a "socialist brother-land" and, through its prize at Cannes, brought the East German film studio considerable international legitimacy in both East and West.[9] In the European context, its historical meaning is ultimately that it is the first film by a German director in which Auschwitz and the persecution of Jews are directly thematized. Even though films such as *Ostatni Etap* (*The Last Stage*), produced by the Polish director Wanda Jakubowska in 1948, had been shown in both the GDR and FRG, no other German director had dared come as close to this sensitive topic as Wolf. This circumstance still gives *Stars* an exceptional status and perhaps further explains why the film has most often been treated with particular reverence by critics.

If I recall these contradictory, but in the end productive historical dimensions of *Stars*, it is to argue that the film, seen against multiple backgrounds, requires an equally multiple – dislocated and parapractic – perspective:

- First, rather than merely historicize the film's reception history, an immanent reading should be given to the fact that it was subsequent events that endowed *Stars* with the special significance it now has,

and that these retroactive revisions are now part of the historical meaning of the film. In other words, the film is part of a particular "historical imaginary" because, in its case, the present was able to change its own past, especially when seen in light of the unification of Germany in 1990 and the resulting double status of the GDR within this new/old country, as object of disavowal, as well as of nostalgia and regret.

- Second, there is the central role the Holocaust is now playing as a defining moment in the identity of the European Union. As a consequence of such a re-centering of the Second World War, several of Konrad Wolf's films can now be understood more generally as memory documents and monuments within the present memory culture of Europe's "divided memories," particularly in the face of EU expansion to the East and the aftermath of the Balkan Wars.[10]

- Third – in a certain sense reaching back to my first point, but now within a European perspective – is the question of how Wolf's films serve as sediments of a future memory culture about another trauma and touch on the political core of the postwar period, which we – because it is too close to us – are perhaps still unable to formulate correctly (although it is, of course, constantly being discussed and narrated): namely, the trauma of the "betrayal" of the idea of a better, different, more just world – betrayed in equal measure by the Stalinist version of socialism and by its victorious opponent, liberal market capitalism.

While this indicates the meta-historical and conceptual horizons of why a new reading and revision of *Stars* is both timely and challenging at this point in time, the concrete historical references to the time of the film's production can likewise not be overlooked. One is faced, on one hand, with the political situation around 1959: the film was made after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Suez Crisis, but before the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, and also before the construction of the Berlin Wall (which Wolf thematized in *Divided Heaven*). On the other hand, the significance of the debates that took place in the late 1950s about the function of the feature film in the GDR, where the question of how DEFA films ought to engage with the "contemporary problems of people in the GDR" was repeatedly raised, cannot be underestimated. When one considers that *Sonnensucher* (*Sun Seekers*, 1958/71), the film produced by Wolf directly before *Stars*, was banned by the censors because it dealt with problematic aspects of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the GDR, it seems symptomatic that his acceptance of the subsequent project should avoid contemporary East German issues, focusing instead on the Second World War and a period when – according to official GDR doctrine– the Soviet Union heroically conquered fascism and liberated Germany.[11]

What traces remain of these historical circumstances in the film, and what future does it outline for those aspects we now can, and must read into the film as deferred action, or *action après coup*, given our knowledge in hindsight? The question already points to the palimpsest-like character of films that engage with history in general and, more specifically, with the persecution of the Jews. How do such films cope with the knowledge that they can neither withhold, nor impart to their protagonists? What do they do with the inevitability of the catastrophe they would just as soon have not taken place? *The parapractic core of such films is that the unavoidable becomes the (un)representable and the (un)representable becomes the unimaginable*. Particularly in the case of the Holocaust it seems paradoxical that this catastrophe, apostrophized time and again as the (un)representable per se, has proven, over the last thirty years, to be perhaps the most narrativized event (in literature and film) of the entire twentieth century – so much so that a whole iconography surrounding the Holocaust has emerged, with its own genres, sub-genres and predetermined

interpretative frameworks. In this sense, the clichéd elements of *Stars*, critiqued in our earlier essay, are also the effect of another type of temporally displaced action, according to which Wolf's film seems clichéd in retrospect because of the many films that were produced later and that lodged their images so deeply into our subconscious over the course of the 1980s – repetition as a motor of knowledge in ignorance.

If we now consider the film from its own political and historical position, it presents itself as a particularly good example of what I described as the mode of "working through" the past, albeit specific to the dominant ideology of the socialist countries around 1960, rather than to the needs and desires of the West German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of the 1970s and 1980s. Viewing *Stars* as a variant of the *Bildungsroman*, we encounter a protagonist who is sensitive yet irresolute and whose striking nihilism reveals not only his defeatism with regard to the war, but also the hard shell surrounding the soft core of his idealism. Through an external demand, or rather a provocation ("All Germans are the same…. wolves!" – another self-referential pun, in view of the director of the film), Walter is confronted with his own indecision, finally faces up to the choices he must make and finds his way into determined antifascism and – by implication – militant socialism.

From this perspective, East German critics were able to confirm that "Wolf, Wagenstein and Werner Bergmann [the cameraman] draw on artistic devices that are as simple as they are clear and convert the linear plot into memorable images."[12] Read in this way, the sacrifice of the woman acquires meaning – not unlike, one might argue, in a Hollywood Western (a genre both imitated and turned inside out in many a DEFA production), where the woman must sacrifice herself so that the man can become a man. In Hollywood's case, however, it is the demimondaine from the saloon or brothel who clears the way for the teacher, whereas here it is the teacher who sacrifices herself so the hero can commit himself to socialism.

I am consciously employing this somewhat casual form of comparison not only to outline a basic cinematic structure, which in this case is common to DEFA and Hollywood cinema alike, but also to indicate that the events in *Stars*, or rather in the historical field of reference surrounding the film, are more complicated and layered than these laudatory critics would suggest. It is evident that a reading of the fable that focuses entirely on the maturation process of the male protagonist – from an indifferent *Wehrmacht* soldier, through love and doubt, to an antifascist saboteur and militant communist – downplays the monstrosity of the extermination of the Jews. The genocide occupies a subordinate role in such a reading of the plot, not only dramatically, but also ideologically. Since Marx, as we know, the Jewish question took second place, or even had no place in the struggle for Socialism. Particularly among Communists, Jews were all too often labelled as the class enemy, and even the murderous anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime was described as "irrelevant" in comparison to the class struggle. Against this background, Wolf's detailed depiction of the transport, his sophisticated portrayal of the group's plight, and his portrait of the officer Kurt, capable of any atrocity despite his jovial bonhomie, are noteworthy acts of independence and courage, not least in a political sense. Despite my complaints that his Jewish figures are not free of clichés – they include, for example, only feeble old men, worried mothers and children, and the intellectuals among them wear glasses and read Heinrich Heine, – the sheer, interminable tracking shot along the faces of the Jews assembled for roll call leaves a lasting impression as a scene of great documentary power and depth of feeling. As one East German reviewer remarked in 1959: "One of the high points of the film (and of the oeuvre of Konrad Wolf as a whole) is the long camera shot over the deported Jews from Greece…. In these scenes the visual imagery is so intense that a blush of shame creeps across one's face."[13]

A further instance of the film's historical and ideological complexity is in the choice of setting and

moment in which the plot takes place: October 1943. At this point in time, Bulgaria was still allied with Hitler's bloated "Third Reich." We are therefore dealing with what was, for the Bulgarians of 1959, a very painful period in their history: the focus is not on scenes of foreign occupation, but rather of collaboration (the police interrogation, for example). When one considers the film from this perspective, it comes as no surprise to learn that *Stars* was never shown in Bulgaria, even though the partisans play an important role in it. Just imagine: a film that won prizes at Cannes as a Bulgarian entry is banned in its own country because it depicts Bulgarians as collaborators and Nazi Germans as all-too-human. As this impression was no coincidence, however, and reactions to the film must have been anticipated by all the parties involved, it seems to be less an irony of history than a kind of consciously staged performance of failure.

This is all the more remarkable in that a further historically crucial point is never mentioned in the film: namely, that Bulgaria (which, in this respect, is only comparable to Denmark and stands in stark contrast to other occupied countries, such as France or the Netherlands) refused to hand over Bulgarian Jews to the Germans. From our current perspective, it is precisely this question – how European states treated their Jewish fellow citizens – that is decisive in our understanding of our shared history as "Europeans." It moreover influences our attitude towards new EU countries, in particular Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, who as members of the EU must demonstrate how they are addressing their respective histories of anti-Semitism. Under these circumstances, yet another significant historical event seems like a parapraxis. In 1992, at the commemoration in Berlin of the tenth anniversary of Konrad Wolf's death, Angel Wagenstein reported that, after a single television broadcast in 1989, *Stars* had once again been banned in his homeland because it allegedly glamorized the Communist partisans, who – from the perspective of a new Bulgaria with a renewed sense of nationalism – seemed not much different from terrorists. Wagenstein also reported that in the town of Bansko, the location of the film, a monument erected in memory of a poet and partisan leader had been demolished during the anti-Communist purges of 1991.[14]

Transcending the specific context of its genesis, as well as the biographies of its makers, *Stars* therefore remains an exceptionally vivid historical document, whose productivity springs precisely from those contradictions inherent in European history itself – from the misunderstandings or, as I call them here, the constructive parapraxes of its memory work.

**Visual Imagery**

If we turn now to the visual imagery of the film, we are struck by the many occasions that convey a sense of *déjà vu*. This begins with the women and children being loaded into railway cars at the start of the film and continues, through the shots of detainees at the barbed wire, to the emotionally and thematically central image of Ruth, the Jewish girl, clinging to the bars of the window as the transport pulls out of the station. Here, factual material derived from the historical record is overlaid and combined with images that have become iconic. As to the historical record, the following quotation helps clarify the situation of the Greek Jews in Bulgaria:

> During the war, German-allied Bulgaria did not deport Bulgarian Jews. Bulgaria did, however, deport non-Bulgarian Jews from the territories it had annexed from Yugoslavia and Greece. In March 1943, Bulgarian authorities arrested all the Jews in Macedonia and Thrace. In Macedonia, formerly part of Yugoslavia, Bulgarian officials interned 7,000 Jews in a transit camp in Skopje. In Thrace, formerly a Bulgarian-occupied province of Greece, about 4,000 Jews were deported to Bulgarian assembly points at Gorna Dzhumaya and Dupnitsa and handed over to the Germans. In all, Bulgaria deported over 11,000 Jews to German-held territory. Jews were deported from

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Kavala, Seres, and Drama in Bulgarian-occupied Macedonia. Some 3,000 Jews were taken to Drama and herded onto trains without food or water for transport to a camp in Gorna Dzumaya. The Jews were probably then taken to the Bulgarian port of Lom on the Danube River, where they boarded ships for Vienna. From there, the Nazis deported them to the Treblinka extermination camp. In 1945, the Jewish population of Bulgaria was still about 50,000, its pre-war level. Next to the rescue of Danish Jews, Bulgarian Jewry's escape from deportation and extermination represents the most significant exception of any Jewish population in Nazi-occupied Europe. Beginning in 1948, however, more than 35,000 Bulgarian Jews chose to emigrate to the new state of Israel.[15]

A photograph of one of these transports of Greek Jews from Bulgaria has survived, which was circulated widely at that time and bears a remarkable resemblance to the opening images of Wolf's film.

The more important iconographic source for *Stars*, however, was undoubtedly Alain Resnais' film *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955), whose lasting impression Konrad Wolf emphasized in an interview given in 1964.[16] The image of barbed wire, for example, which is a leitmotif throughout *Stars*, can also be found in Resnais' film, but is typical of photos taken during the liberation of the camps rather than during internment.[17] Another substantial borrowing from *Night and Fog* is clearly found in the famous passage in *Stars* where the Jews are leaving the transit camps. In Resnais' film, this involves footage (not specifically identified in the film) originating from Westerbork, the biggest reception camp in the Netherlands. It is from a film commissioned by the German Commandant Albert Konrad Gemmeker to send to Berlin as documentary evidence of orderly and efficient deportation techniques. The footage was shot by Rudolf Breslauer, a Jewish prisoner from Munich who had fled to the Netherlands with his wife and three children, but was rounded up in Utrecht. A further case of performed failure: Gemmeker had his work documented because he was proud of it; today, however, the same footage is considered a document of German fanaticism and barbarity. Did Breslauer hope to save himself and his family with his services? The unconstrained atmosphere in the camp speaks against this and ignorance renders it all the more grim for us viewers in retrospect: the film was shot in May 1944; in September 1944, he and his entire family were deported to Auschwitz and immediately murdered. By some standards a collaborator, Breslauer is for us today a hero of the Jewish resistance because he helped to document the heartless reality of Westerbork and the transports.

In particular, the image of the Jewish girl at the door of a railway car has become iconic. It has been reproduced hundreds of times, used as the title of a book and, particularly in the Netherlands, been elevated alongside Anne Frank to a symbol of the Holocaust in general. When one compares Wolf's central thematic motif – the Jewish woman at the boxcar window – with the icon of the Holocaust in Resnais' film, one is struck not only by the similarities, but also by the differences: in Resnais, the anonymous victim represents millions; in Wolf, the altruistic love and self-sacrifice of the personalized angel of mercy call the man to moral duty and political choice.

The melodramatic charge of the image in Wolf's film, in turn, relates in a particularly productive manner to a discovery that only came to light in 1994 – namely, that the Dutch icon of the Holocaust does not depict a Jewish victim. The transport filmed by Breslauer in Westerbork – which Resnais spliced into his film about French political prisoners in Buchenwald, and Wolf transformed into the symbol of a failed rescue attempt in *Stars* – also contained several railway cars with non-Jewish victims, in particular Sinti and Roma people living in the Netherlands who were picked up in May 1944. The journalist Aad Wagenaar has shown in meticulous detail that the unknown girl actually has a name and a story. She was Settela Steinbach and came from the area around Aachen and Maastricht, on the German-Dutch border:

Anna Maria (Settela) Steinbach (Dec. 23, 1934 – July 31, 1944) was a Dutch girl who was gassed in Auschwitz. For a long time she stood as an icon of the Dutch persecution of the Jews, until it was

discovered in 1994 that she was not Jewish, as had previously been assumed, but rather belonged to the Sinti branch of the Romani people. Steinbach was born in Buchten near Born in southern Limburg as the daughter of a trader and violinist. On May 16, 1944, a raid was ordered throughout the Netherlands against the Roma. Steinbach was rounded up in Eindhoven. That same day she arrived in Camp Westerbork along with 577 others, of whom 279 were subsequently allowed to leave because, although they lived in caravans, they were not Roma. In Westerbork, Steinbach's head was shaved as a preventative measure against head lice. Her mother tore off a piece of a sheet for her to cover her head. On May 19, she was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with 244 other Roma, on a train that also contained railcars with Jewish prisoners. As the doors of the boxcar in which she would be transported were closed, she briefly glanced outside at a dog running past. This image was captured by Rudolf Breslauer….[18]

Thus a chain of mistaken assumptions, appropriations, cultural prejudices and symbols taken out of context, but all the more effective for it – in short, a whole series of performative parapraxes – nevertheless leads to an important discovery and a vital recognition. Hidden behind every train there can be a further transport, one genocide may obscure another, only to then reveal it in a new form. The images do not simply come to a standstill at some point in history; they travel with us – they accompany us and sometimes even overtake us.[19]

This also indicates what one might call the media-specific memory of the Holocaust, which is likewise activated – as I have tried to show, nolens volens – through a reading of *Stars*. This media-specific memory, I suggest, exhibits several characteristics alongside the use of images whose iconic meaning is already established from the outset. Paradoxically – thanks to the ever ready and repeated repertoire of images drawn from an almost inexhaustible supply of photographs, individual film stills and newspaper images that these atrocities have bequeathed to us – this media-memory, like Freud's unconscious, seems to know no temporal "before" and "after" and is therefore bound to no permanently fixed causality. Likewise, the location of these images is unspecified with respect to the past and future. Their cultural presence becomes a sort of "virtual" dimension, in which these images circulate in suspended agitation, capable of redefining their meaning: they can hit the spectator like a sudden shock, or open up an altogether new path into the past. This might explain why media images can repeatedly rewrite cultural memory. Expressed more precisely: through the visual and linguistic elements of the images a particular form of potentiality – singular in its reference, multiple in its meanings – comes into being, which only underlines the constitutive asynchronicity of the historical imaginary and purposive performances of failure mentioned above. What struck me particularly, during repeated viewings of *Stars*, is that it is precisely in these suspended and suspending temporal levels that the discrete layers of meaning embedded in the futile attempt of the male protagonist to save the Jewish woman can fully deploy.

### Temporal Layering, or 'Sheets of Time' in *Stars*

Thus my thesis is that, through the intertwining knots of history, its twists and turns, its reversals and rewritings, *Stars* – which has been viewed as paradigmatic of East German or Central European *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – not only presents itself to us differently from how it was perhaps originally intended; it also accesses something like a historical unconscious – the historical imaginary – nested in the images themselves and identical neither with the auteur(s), nor with their original public. This unconscious knowledge, written into the "memory images" of the film, shows that history is not archived in images as in a strongbox, or fixed in the same way as the indexical bond ties the photographic to reality. On the contrary, it means that history continues to act, is continually resurrected, like Dracula, much more powerfully through images than text (and is also open to re-interpretation, of course). For this reason, historical images do not

help us deal with the past, in the manner of "working through" loss or mourning. On the contrary, it is the past in these images that threatens to overcome us – and often in quite unexpected ways: closer to living memory than to history, and closer to trauma than memory.

How, then, does *Stars* succeed in keeping this past alive and exerting its friction, as Alexander Kluge would say?[20] Paradoxically, it is precisely not in the form to which we are accustomed in western European auteur films – namely, through a so-called open ending, in which the hero is sent off into an uncertain future. Wolf cannot and does not wish to indulge in an open ending, à la Michelangelo Antonioni; instead, he chooses narrative forms and visual techniques that suggest several temporal levels that are neither inter-dependent, nor mutually exclusive. I would call them "the temporal levels of too-late and too-early" and thereby return to my title-topos of a "rescue in vain," now seen as a performance of failure or parapraxis. Four modalities or themes of hoped for, yet im-possible "rewinding" can be discerned in *Stars*: the future as past; the voice of God; the appeal to the virtual spectator; and the temporalities of a foreclosed future.

*The future as (a still recurring) past:* Let us ask ourselves again: what is the core of the story which Wolf is telling us? Is it really that, in 1943, it was more useful to help the Communists to victory, than to save a group of Greek Sephardic Jews? That might have been the right political choice for a German Communist; but Walter is not a Communist. He is an artist who has not yet achieved a great deal, who is soft-hearted towards all manner of people, including the Bulgarians and Jews, and harbors an intuitive sense of sympathy, but is nevertheless mostly indecisive in his behavior and actions. Or does the moral lie in the possibility that rescuing the woman one loves is less important than fighting on the side of foreign partisans against one's own compatriots? And why would this alternative be the logical consequence of the futile rescue attempt? Is fighting on the side of the partisans more a form of atonement for a subjectively-felt complicity in the death of the beloved, as if one could compensate for the other, or even as if two "wrongs," or parapraxes, could make a right? Could restore some justice to the world, as in ancient tragedy? Yet Ruth did not want to be saved in this way at all: she had already absolved Walter from his guilt before he had thought of a concrete escape plan, equating the value of her life with that of her community. ("Every star belongs in its constellati-on … [and] everyone has a star in the sky. And when it breaks from its place, the person perishes"). Moreover, Wolf shows how difficult it is for Ruth, because of her contact with Walter, to hold her ground within the Jewish community and not be cast out as a spy or traitor.

What makes *Stars* so unconventional in this respect is that the film clearly sustains all these possibilities, and thereby subjects its hero to a more detailed scrutiny of the motivation and efficacy of his actions, long before Walter ultimately arrives at the politically correct decision. The episode with the medicine is a striking example of this: Walter wants to help the Jews and therefore lets the partisan leader Petko have valuable army medicines. The latter smuggles them to the partisans, with a boy from the village, however, who is promptly captured by the police in the forest. As Walter himself must admit, his good intentions harmed both the Jews, who are humiliated at roll call and have their food rations withdrawn for three days, and the partisans, whose clandestine network has been uncovered and compromised. Walter rationalizes his failure, as though this is, even in advance, the reason why his attempt to rescue Ruth can only lead to further cala-mity. In both cases he concludes: "I didn't mean for it to be like this, I didn't want it to be like this." This would indicate that Walter knows he will fail from the outset and that the film's entire plot actually unfolds under the sign of the foreknowledge of this failure. Melancholic and nihilistic as he appears in the opening scenes, it is clear that his actions, his change of heart, even his love are in vain and that right, from the start, everything he does comes, as it were, "too late."

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This "too late" has echoed down the decades ever since. And, in the film itself, it is only from this position of deferred action that the flashback structure becomes comprehensible, even compellingly necessary, since only this temporality of recall can make palpable to the viewer the possibility that the future is nothing other than the past, which inevitably recurs because it is not yet understood. The narrative of *Stars* is therefore not comparable to the flashback structure of films such as Andrzey Munk's fragmentary *Pasażerka* (*Passenger*, 1961/63) or Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964). When Walter picks up the Star of David lying in the mud and tries once again to run behind the train, the film refers us to the return of what the Star of David will one day signify for Germans as well. It seems as though this star will be waiting for him, wherever Walter happens to return from his partisan combat. Thus, one of the most striking images of the film remains that of a hero who is constantly chasing after events, or even – as is expressly emphasized both in the commentary and on screen – that of a hero *visibly limping after history*.

An equally startling displacement of the film's temporal levels can be observed in the roll call scene mentioned above. Dramatically, this is a moment of extreme tension, of terrible foreboding and trepidation regarding the fate of those assembled. Then, however, there begins a piece of music that already mourns and weeps for these faces and figures, as if the Jews only existed in the memory traces of their future murder. Thus, amidst action taking place in the present, Wolf switches into the pluperfect: a glance from the future into the irretrievable past. A similar tense of im-possibility is activated in the Yiddish song itself: the lyrics of *"S'brent"* ("It is burning") cry out for help because the *shtetl* is on fire – but also know that the *shtetl* will continue burning, even if help should arrive. Here too, the futility of rescue is a central motif.

In this sense, the film never takes place in any conceivable form of an imaginable "present" (whether 1943 or 1959), which would open towards the future. Instead, right from start it is a film of remembering, a film which must conceive of itself from beyond its present, in the suspension between a traumatic past and a deceptively insecure future, in a time that is neither utopian, nor purely cyclical. This position is clearly outlined in one of the opening scenes. Walter and his friend Kurt are sunning themselves on a hill above the town. They are relieved to have escaped the hell of Leningrad and are now simply awaiting the end of the war, which even Kurt, the committed and – as we later learn – sadistic Nazi, believes to be lost. In contrast to Kurt's cynicism, Walter's nihilism recalls what Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich identified in the postwar generation as the "inability to mourn," or the melancholy of those who, in the Freudian sense, have lost their ego-ideal and can no longer derive meaning from the world.[21] In this way the film becomes a memento mori, not only for the Jews who lost their lives in such a horrific manner, but also for those who lost their souls in the process: the Germans.

*The voice of God*. This loss of the subject's temporally anchored point of reference – given that for Germans of Walter's (and Wolf's) generation, the past had already appropriated the future – explains why the film has a narratorial voice-over, in addition to its flashback structure. Where does this voice come from, and to whom does it belong? It remains anonymous and disembodied; it is not embedded in the diegetic world of the characters; it is at times benevolent, at others disdainful, sometimes ironic; and it usually speaks from a position of retrospective omniscience, although it claims not to know who this German soldier named Walter really was. It speaks German with a Bulgarian accent, but clearly does not belong to the partisan leader. Since it is not visible as a person on-screen, it ought really to be assigned to the church tower and its symbolism, to which Walter refers in his sketches at the outset. This church is repeatedly shown in the picture, and from its bell tower the town, the camp and Walter's futile attempts to reach the moving train are observed as if by a silent witness. The off-screen voice would thus actually be something like the proverbial

"Voice of God" of conventional documentary film commentary – albeit taken here literally as a voice *sub specie aeternitatis*, which nevertheless can or will not help these protagonists. Abandoned by man and by the Christian God, this story of a futile rescue attempt becomes something like an attempt to "rescue the futile;" all the utopias, the effort and sacrifices for a better, more just future – or, more precisely, the desperate endeavors to secure a future at all – are concurrently awaiting rescue, and to no avail.

*The appeal to the virtual spectator*. In Wolf's *Stars*, this anticipation of a "rescue of the futile" is translated into a highly remarkable compositional style, which tends to stage the action along a diagonal, often with extreme close-ups in the foreground and an equally extreme vanishing point situated far back in the depth of field. It almost seems as though Wolf has modeled his film on *Citizen Kane* (1941, dir. Orson Welles) – which, after what I claimed about the use of the flashback structure, should not seem quite as disconcerting as at first sight. Werner Bergmann's camera style can perhaps best be described as deconstructing Gregg Toland's deep staging, as it seems to exaggerate Welles' baroque spaces into moments of mannered expressionism, forcing the audience to reflect on its own spectatorial position. Are we being addressed as voyeurs, or as witnesses? Where, in this mise-en-scène, is our optical point of view, and thus our locatable place within the space of the fiction? The foreground – in particular when the two leading actors turn directly to the camera in close-up shots – refers to the hope of a blossoming romance, whereas the background encompasses all that the two lovers want and need to leave behind. If one looks even more closely at what is being negotiated here, and in particular what is placed in the space of the spectator, it becomes apparent that this extreme form of frontal staging does not refer to the profilmic space, but rather to the fact that space once again represents a temporal dimension – albeit no longer the future or past, but rather the respective "present" and presence of the spectator and his/her knowledge about both the past and the (now-historic and failed) future. Whatever we might think of the lovers' hopes when voiced directly into the camera, the direction of the address already contains the knowledge of the futility of this hope. And vice versa: when Walter decides to follow the partisan leader, Wolf shows him not approaching the camera, but rather vanishing into the depth of field, becoming increasingly small and inconsequential, and thereby undermines the expectation that the hero is promised a better future as a result of his decision.

*Temporalities of a Foreclosed Future*. Most of the scenes displaying this curious movement – between a future that has already become past, and a past that is yet to arrive – play very close to the camera. The film marks out a trajectory along the spatial axis of an extreme foreground and the emphatic staging along the diagonal (which leads into infinite space). As such, it implicitly answers the question: What is the direction/ decision that its protagonist will take? But, by metaphoric extension, it also asks (and answers): what destination and fate await the Jews on the train (entering a tunnel whose shape recalls the ovens at Auschwitz)? In these scenes, the film moves on a temporal axis of an impossible, already foreclosed future, as the foregrounded close-ups do not communicate closeness or intimacy, but rather function as an appeal. The anxious face of Ruth, the baffled features of Walter address the present, on behalf of a past that burdens the characters with an unbearable future. It is as if we, the *Nachgeborenen* (those born after), were to be their judges, but also the ones who might undo what the protagonists already know about the futility, as well as necessity of any doing-as-undoing – making us part of what has indeed proven to be a vicious circle of guilt and disavowal, of regret and restitution, of rescue without redemption.

## From Germany to Europe

My reading of *Stars* in terms of performative parapraxis and "futile rescue / rescuing the futile" leads me

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to conclude that the usual questions about the autobiographical elements in Konrad Wolf's work – the fact that he was frequently forced to change sides, and the fateful role he played as a double agent for the noble idea of socialism – should be expanded to include a European dimension, as someone who anticipated the memory wars yet to come. On one hand, his preoccupation with the (un)representability of time links him to the European auteur cinema of the 1960s, in particular to Alain Resnais (and, of course, the post-Holocaust "time-image," as Gilles Deleuze defined it).[22] On the other hand, the ambivalence that Wolf repeatedly expressed towards the films of Resnais (in particular *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, 1960)) becomes more comprehensible precisely because of the many parallels to Resnais, as well as a crucial difference. For in Wolf's work asynchronicity is not a psychological motif rooted in the interpersonal dimension of consciousness and memory, but rather has political under-pinnings: to be precise, the "politics of memory" as a key to Euroean identity. The tragedy, for Wolf, is that the hope for a better future always leads to the suspension of the present – which, as a result, risks always being overtaken by the past. The knowledge of deferral and delay attending upon action, as much as causality and consequence, is therefore one of the more authentically political aspects of *Stars*, not only in relation to Konrad Wolf's biography and life history, but also for the history of the country he sought to serve with his work.

This would mean that Konrad Wolf's personal fate – as a remigrant in both senses and both directions, from West to East and East to West – makes him all the more representative today, or rather only now renders him representative of the GDR, in a way that could never have happened in his lifetime, despite his prominent position in the political and cultural hierarchy of the GDR. Precisely in light of the "disappearance" of the GDR and the suspension of its history, Wolf and his films are growing in importance. From his work we can learn what it means to expose oneself to those contradictions and temporal ruptures which emerge when one dedicates one's work fully to the legacy of German history and the rescue of the "soul of Germany." In the words of Walter Benjamin, echoing Karl Kraus and taken up by Alexander Kluge (and which, in my interpretation, reverberate in the uncanny deep space photography of *Stars*): The more closely one examines Konrad Wolf's films, the more distant becomes the answering gaze, not only of Konrad Wolf, not only of "Germany," but also of "Europe."

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[1] See: Paul Ricoeur, *Gedächtnis, Geschichte, Vergessen* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004).

[2] Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London, New York: Routeledge 2000).

[3] Thomas Elsaesser & Michael Wedel, "Defining DEFA's Historical Imaginary: The Films of Konrad Wolf," *New German Critique* 82 (Winter 2001): 13.

[4] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004).

[5] Angel Wagenstein, "Die ersten und die letzten Jahre mit Konrad Wolf," *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 28 (1987): 15 - 38.

[6] See, for example: Marc Silberman, "Remembering History: The Filmmaker Konrad Wolf," *New German Critique* 49 (Winter 1990): 163 - 191; Gertrud Koch, "On the Disappearance of the Dead among the Living: The Holocaust and the Confusion of Identities in the Films of Konrad Wolf," *New German Critique* 60 (Winter 1993): 57 - 75.

[7] See, for example: Konrad Schwalbe, "*Sterne* (1959): Um den Anspruch auf Leben, Liebe, über Vaterlandsverräter, Kameradenmörder," *Konrad Wolf: Neue Sichten auf seine Filme, Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 39 (1990): 65 - 71.

[8] Much of what has been said about Konrad Wolf's biography, as a life torn between divided nationalities and political loyalties, applies a fortiori to Angel Wagenstein as well. See, for instance, an article on the intertwining of fiction and autobiography in his literary work <http://www.thenation.com/article/schlepics-fiction-angel-wagenstein>

[9] Ellen Mollenschott, "*Sterne* – Der erste deutsch-bulgarische Gemeinschaftsfilm," *Neues Deutschland* 29. 3 (1959): 6.

[10] For an account of Germany's 'divided memories,' see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Harvard University Press, 1997). On the question of Europe's divided memories, see, among many others, James Marks, "1989: Divided Memories East and West" <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion/opinion_18.html>

[11] Barton Byg, "Konrad Wolf – From Anti-Fascism to Gegenwartsfilm," *Studies in GDR Culture and Society 5. Selected Papers from the Tenth New Hampshire Symposium on the German Democratic Republic*, ed. Margery Gerber (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1985): 115 - 124.

[12] Mollenschott, *Sterne.*

[13] Hans-Dieter Tok, "Sterne," 1959; reprinted in *Regiestühle. Zoltán Fábri, Akira Kurosawa, Andrzej Munk, Alain Resnais, Michail Romm, Francesco Rosi, Konrad Wolf* (Berlin): Henschel-Verlag, 1972): 111 – 128.

[14] Angel Wagenstein, "Rede für Konrad Wolf," *Film und Fernsehen* 5 (1995): 5.

[15] *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 27 Sept. 2008 <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005451>; compare also: Michael Bar-Zohar, *Beyond Hitler's Grasp: the Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews.* (Avon, MA: Adam Media Corporation, 1998).

[16] Ulrich Gregor & Heinz Ungureit, "Konrad Wolf," *Wie sie filmen: Fünfzehn Gespräche mit Regisseuren der Gegenwart*, ed. Ulrich Gregor (Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohn, 1966): 336.

[17] The sequences at the barbed wire used by Resnais come from footage filmed by the Allies, that is, when the camps were liberated. It is unlikely that during the War such proximity between those behind and in front of the wire would have been tolerated: Wolf's barbed wire serves, above all, a symbolic function.

[18] Aad Wagenaar, Settela – *Het meisje heft haar naam terug* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, 1995). Compare also: Wikipedia 7 Oct. 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Settela_Steinbach>

[19] On the Settela case, see also an earlier article of mine: "One Train May Be Hiding Another" <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/classics/rr0499/terr6b.htm>

[20] See Klaus Eder, Alexander Kluge, *Ulmer Dramaturgien: Reibungsverluste* (Munich: Hanser, 1980).

[21] Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove Press/Random House, 1975).

[22] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

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