

The Dove on the Roof

Interview with film director Iris Gusner

By film historian Ralf Schenk



Your first film begins with pictures of the cosmos, of a person floating in outer space. Why this overture?

I experienced the first manned launch into outer space while studying in Moscow, along with all the excitement that accompanied it. At that point my interest in the cosmos, which was always lively in my family, got a second wind. On one hand, with the images of launching rockets with which I begin *Die Taube auf dem Dach* (*The Dove on the Roof*) I wanted to hint at the creative potential of we humans. On the other hand, I wanted to place our way of living in relationship to the dimensions that the cosmos opens up. At that time, under the influence of the first manned voyage into outer space, I was plagued by the question: Why does our daily life remain so unaffected by this? How do we actually live, what's life on this planet about? Don't we have anything better to do? What would be ideal, and what is reality....

The title also associates the ideal and the real. The film is called *The Dove on the Roof*, but you are really concerned with the sparrow in the hand.¹

But I intimate that there could be a dove on the roof. The cosmos is only a metaphor for that. The working title of our film, *Daniel*, was only a stopgap solution. I was looking for an allegory for what I wanted to express. Regine Kühn came up with the title *The Dove on the Roof*. But it was fortunate that the working title was still on the canister of the editing print stored in the DEFA archive! Because all the film material labeled *The Dove on the Roof*—even the negative—was destroyed at some point after the film was banned. Only the canister labeled *Daniel* survived.

You develop three main characters: the construction manager Linda, the foreman Böwe and the student Daniel, who's working at the site during his summer break. Their triangular relationship isn't dramatically heightened, however; instead it is quieter, told through intimations. I have the impression that for you the three characters were a starting point for a much greater project – namely to sketch a panorama of socialist society. What became of this ideal? In what directions did the reality evolve?

The worker Böwe is the embodiment of the good socialist: he always puts his ego last, is always there for others, does not spare himself in the service of society and expects nothing for himself. In the 1950s there were many people in the GDR with this attitude; but in the 1970s, when the film is set, Böwe already seems like an anachronism. One weekend, while Böwe is helping him build his house, a young worker from his brigade gives him a talking-to: Is he nuts, always following the call of the party, moving from construction site to construction site and never thinking of himself? Does he think that when he's old the party will build him a house and say: Here, comrade Böwe, step inside?

I had had a lot to do with workers in my life. My stepfather was of the working class; I myself always worked in different factories, during school vacations and after graduating, and knew the workers' situation well. Early on I recognized the discrepancy between the state's assertion [that we had] a "dictatorship of the working class" and [the working class's] actual [lack of] power. Now I saw that everything revolved increasingly around personal advancement and property and that society was drifting into *petit bourgeois* values. It bothered me that the state would endorse this path. It was in this mindset that I filmed *The Dove on the Roof*.

¹ The German expression "*Besser ein Spatz in der Hand, als eine Taube auf dem Dach*" (literally, "*Better a sparrow in the hand than a dove on the roof*"), is the equivalent of the English expression, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

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Did you also see your debut material as somehow countering other contemporary DEFA films in which the working class was heavily idealized—for instance, *Brot und Rosen* (Bread and Roses, 1967) or *Zeit zu Leben* (Time to Live, 1969)?

For me it was not about countering other DEFA films. I was simply upset about the problems. I found people's increasingly *petit bourgeois* way of thinking dangerous for socialist society. The next step would have been to go where one can obtain more property: let's just open up a little capitalist venture! In the end, this is what it came to in the GDR; the utopia got lost and, along with it, the society's goals and *raison d'être*. From this perspective, I was very "red" back then; but in the 1970s it wasn't at all in fashion to be that "red" anymore.

The student Daniel is also a utopian.

Yes, you could say he carries my "cosmos flag." The GDR would have coped with this oddball quite well; they would have smiled and slapped him on the back: Oh, that's great, son! Just wait a while with the cosmos stuff! In contrast, the figure of Böwe, who looked like a fool in our so-called socialist society precisely because of his social stance, he appeals to her.

So a scene that's critical of society – such as the one at the dance, where Daniel calls for an expression of solidarity with Vietnam and passes the hat – played no role in the banning of the film?

No, it did. It made them ask: How does Iris Gusner actually see our GDR? In this scene I wanted to show the bureaucratization of a good cause. Showing solidarity had become a bureaucratic act; the monthly "solidarity contribution," which was automatically deducted from your wages, fulfilled your obligation without your having to think about the meaning of it. Those whose dancing and eating are interrupted by Daniel's request for a donation feel very put-upon.

The third main character is the construction manager, Linda. I read in the book you wrote with Helke Sanders, *Fantasie und Arbeit* (Trans. Fantasy and Work, 2009), that with this character you also wanted to think about yourself and what you wanted from your own life. About the relationship between work and private life, career and family, and how to manage everything all at once.

Linda is a young woman, who in this country was able to study, who takes her work very seriously, who is responsible and wants to get ahead. Her parents feel it is high time that she also look for a husband and start a family. Linda knows this is difficult to reconcile with her career goals, but isn't yet thinking very deeply about the matter. With the supporting character of Dr. Sommer, who comes to get her runaway son, I wanted to indicate what a life exclusively dedicated to a career can lead to: the enormous human loneliness. Children – in case you have any – run away if you don't pay enough attention to them. In *The Dove on the Roof* I also present this problem, which all working women must face, from the perspective of a man, namely from the Böwe's perspective – and not as directly as I did later, in my so-called "feminist films."

Günter Naumann plays Böwe in a wonderfully tough, internalized, wounded fashion.

This toughness that Günter Naumann has, and at the same time the sensitivity of this massive, tall man – whom I made even more massive by putting him in a corduroy suit from time to time – really pleased me. The way that Naumann expressed power at the same time as vulnerability made the societal problem I was trying to get at clear—his defenselessness, despite the power officially ascribed to the working class.

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His vulnerability is also a result of the fact that Linda only returns his love very conditionally. Between the worker and the engineer there is a rift that belies the “Socialist Community,” the “Classless Society” that propaganda claimed was being created in the GDR.

Between Linda and Böwe there is not only an age difference, but also an educational difference. As soon as workers’ children had higher education, they automatically rose into another social class. On a human level, the two might get along wonderfully and they would certainly also get along well in bed. But I don’t know whether there can be a fulfilling relationship long-term if there are great intellectual differences, which in turn produce different needs and habits. It’s a love that can probably not be fulfilled, for historic-cultural reasons. In the film, I leave it open. Incidentally, it’s a theme that I took up again in other films, such as, for example, *Wäre die Erde nicht Rund* (*If the Earth Were Not Round*, 1981) . . . that I explored in different constellations.

There is a very beautiful scene with Günter Naumann, in which he stands in a record store and has them play the Freedom Chorus from [Verdi’s] “Nabucco.”

At the time a groan went through the ranks of our film officials. This song was very popular among listeners of radio request programs, but less so among GDR authorities: A choir of prisoners! And, to make matters worse, a worker who listens to it when he’s feeling low! Böwe is someone who never whines. But I needed a moment in the film in which it becomes clear that even he – the steadfast optimist – is sometimes sad. Since he moves from one construction site to another and doesn’t own much, he doesn’t have his own record player. He therefore goes into a store and listens to this chorus by pretending that he wants to buy the record. Concurrently, I sustain a drawn-out close-up of his face, for almost a minute. Days before we shot this scene, Günter Naumann asked me: What do I play here? How should I look? I reflected on what help I might give him. And then I remembered one evening, when we went dancing after shooting on location. Roland Gräf, the cinematographer, was dancing with Heidemarie Wenzel, our Linda. And Naumann sat on his chair and watched Heidemarie dancing with a kind of affectionate wistfulness and renunciation. I reminded him of that. That’s exactly how he should look. . . . He got what I wanted.

You cast Andreas Gripp as the student Daniel. But you also auditioned others—for example, Christian Steyer, who later played the trumpeter Lene.

It was always hard to cast good actors for big roles. Almost all of them were engaged at theaters and had to be driven back and forth between the shooting location and their shows and rehearsals. As a result, the actual time in a day devoted to shooting was drastically reduced. It was particularly disruptive with younger actors, with whom you need to work more closely. For this reason, I later liked to cast foreign actors in my films—for example Andrzej Pieczynski in *Alle meine Mädchen* (*All My Girls*, 1979) or Viktor Semjonow in *Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*, 1975). I had them at my disposal all day. They had received special dispensation to work on the film from their respective countries and had no other obligations. In the case of Daniel, I was looking for someone who still had a soft, untouched, unharmed quality, a youth who had just left his childhood behind. In contrast, Christian Steyer, whom I admire very much, already had a certain masculine maturity about him. The role was too childish for him; for example, Linda wouldn’t have been able to goof around with him the way she did with Daniel. In 1974, I chose Christian Steyer for one of the two leads in my next project, *Einer trage des anderen Last* (*Bear Ye One Another’s Burden*) - which, for political reasons, was not realized until Lothar Warneke made it in 1987.

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Before *The Dove on the Roof*, Andreas Gripp had only had a few minor roles – for example, in *Hauptmann Florian von der Mühle* (Captain Florian von der Mühle, 1968) or *Rottenknechte* (Navy Officers, 1969).² Where did he come from? What happened to him?

He worked in a theater in the Harz Mountains. A few years after we shot the film he had a fatal accident. The film department [at the Ministry of Culture] tried telling me that I had made a mistake with this casting decision and should therefore be happy that the film wasn't released. What cynical nonsense! He did his job well, exactly how I wanted it.

At a certain stage of the work, Regine Kühn helped with the script. What did she bring to the film?

After the DEFA management had repeatedly compromised the scenario – when actually only the main dramaturg, Dieter Wolf, and I still believed in the story – I needed someone with an outside perspective who could think things through with me afresh. I knew Regine Kühn from my time in Moscow, she studied there too. She brought new nuances into the story, her poetic world, and the cooperation with her resulted in new scenes that enriched the relationships between Linda and “her two men.” As I already mentioned, I also have her to thank for the beautiful title. It was like a breath of fresh air for me to be able to rethink it all from another point of view.

How did the decision-making processes in the studio proceed?

As we worked on the scenario and the film went into production – 1970 to 1972 – a phase of cultural-political liberalization had dawned in the GDR. Erich Honecker and Kurt Hager, the Culture Secretary of the SED Politburo, said there should be no taboos in art – of course qualified by the statement that the artists had to stand on a socialist foundation. The screenplay swam along in this wave. But already by 1973, when the film was finished, the wind had changed direction again. Some films on contemporary topics that had been made, were now only handled gingerly: *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*), *Die Schlüssel* (*The Keys*), *Das zweite Leben des Friedrich Wilhelm Georg Platow* (*The Second Life of Friedrich Wilhelm Georg Platow*). I was the last one and it was my debut as a film director and author; Regine Kühn was also a beginner. Thus, there were no influential names associated with the film, whose resistance would have made banning the film more difficult.

How did you experience the ban emotionally? Did it push you into an abyss?

No, I didn't have time to be depressed. At first I was outraged. Then we thought about what we could change. They hadn't said clearly that the film was banned; instead, they said it still needed work. The studio itself had no interest in losing a film; it wasn't beneficial either politically or financially. We were therefore given the opportunity to make changes. We began to snip here and there, especially in the first twenty minutes – images and scenes taken out, then put back in, shortened or lengthened, and so forth. A lot of attempts to somehow be more accommodating.... In the midst of this we were interrupted. We couldn't put everything back the way it was originally because they collected all the materials. This is the source of the jumps and brittleness now in the first third of film. After 1990 we couldn't reproduce the original state of the film any more, because only the shortened editing print was still in existence; all the other materials, including the negatives, had been destroyed.

Did colleagues express solidarity with you when the ban was announced?

Yes, in such cases there was always solidarity in the studio—you could be the next one to get hit.

² *Rottenknechte* was a television mini-series directed by Frank Beyer.

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Colleagues who had seen the film at the approval screening held for the studio management came to me and expressed not only their empathy, but also their admiration—for example, Tamara Trampe, Lothar Warneke and others. They were mostly colleagues of my generation. I doubt that older colleagues in the studio liked the film. It differed structurally from the typical DEFA dramaturgy of the period. I remember the artistic council meeting that was called to rescue the film. Wolfgang Kohlhaase, for example, who like the others felt the film had political integrity, found the narrative form impossible. Individual scenes were praised, especially by Günther Rücker; but in general many of them found the style of the film alienating. Konrad Wolf hit the nail on the head in a telephone conversation, when he told me: “The dogs bite the last one in line” – by which he meant that the film would have been luckier if it had been submitted for approval two months earlier. It would have still been in the “soft wave” of cultural policy, not the last one after the shock of films like *The Keys* and *Platow*.

What differentiated the dramaturgy in your film from that of other contemporary DEFA productions?

The story is not told as an uninterrupted, linear narrative; rather, it is a series of scenes that each show something characteristic or essential about a person, relationship or situation. *The Dove* builds upon the premise that these come together with thoughts and associations like a puzzle in the minds of viewers. In the approval meeting we were told that the film was not only politically false, but also artistically erroneous. My younger colleagues, however, did not feel this way. Some of them were making similar experiments at the time – for example, Lothar Warneke with *Es ist eine alte Geschichte* (*It's an Old Story*, 1972). The warning shots represented by these critiques and the ban undermined my self-confidence; after that I more or less conformed formally. Not only did I write less succinct, brittle screenplays, I also built my stories more complaisantly. If *The Dove* had been assigned another fate, I would have certainly experimented with and expanded the style I used there instead.

At this time in international cinema, there were exciting attempts by directors, in particular by women as well, to split open the principal of realism and radically break with conventional forms. I think, for example, of the Czech filmmaker Vera Chytilová and her Sedmikrásky (Daisies). Were you familiar with such films?

No. I only got back from Moscow in 1967, and after the Prague Spring such films were not screened at all anymore. I therefore very much regretted that I could not go with *The Dove* to festivals in Mannheim and Locarno, where international debut films were screened. I could have seen a lot there, that might have encouraged me.

How did the festival organizers in Mannheim or Locarno know about *The Dove*?

They had heard that a woman was shooting an adult feature film at the DEFA Studios again. After the death of Ingrid Reschke, I was the first, and for a long time the only woman to work here as a director. The GDR press had covered this film extensively, with both photos and articles. Clips had been shown on television and a journalist had written that the scenes look stylish. Apparently that didn't go unnoticed.

In your book, *Fantasy and Work*, you tell of a later encounter between you and the Mannheim festival organizer, Fee Vaillant . . .

She spoke to me several years later at the Leipzig Festival: “Are you Iris Gusner?” When I said I was, she said: “And why are you not dead?” After inviting me to Mannheim, a representative of the film department [at the Ministry of Culture] had informed her that I had been killed in an accident. Some perplexed official who didn't want to tell her that the film had been banned, must have just blurted this out. The encounter is unforgettable; after all, such things don't happen every day.

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How was the cooperation with the cinematographer Roland Gräf?

I was just starting out, so nobody in the studio could assess my work as a director yet. I had good contact with the younger colleagues in the studio—with Siegfried and Regine Kühn, Lothar Warneke, Peter Wuss, Rainer Simon, and also the Gräfs. I liked Roland Gräf's camera work very much. And luckily Roland liked the script. He got Jürgen Lenz as a camera operator for our team; this film was his first in this role. Roland treated us two beginners with a lot of tact – but also at times with his reserved irony, when he had to. I remember that once, when he asked about camera distance, I uttered with the following slip: I'd like the face large, but in such a way that everything around it is visible. For a long time, Roland and Jürgen gave me a hard time about it – “How about a Gusner-shot? Both close-up and long.” In addition to his skill and experience, I admired Roland's readiness to help others and his patience, because aside from the beginners Jürgen Lenz and Iris Gusner, it was also set designer Marlene Willmann's first film. A number of times, he must have quietly – and at times loudly – swallowed his sighs. On the whole, the entire film crew had a lot of solidarity, beginning with the old production manager, Fritz Brix, who had already started working at Ufa.

The film rarely uses close-ups of faces or details; the preferred shot is the medium-long shot, the medium close-up.

I wanted to show interactions, not emotions. These should arise in the mind of the viewer, just like theoretical conclusions. When I watch the film today, I think it could use a few close-ups and, in many places, more details; it would have made the film more emotional and the situations clearer.

You regret very much that the color version of the film did not survive. In 1990 it wasn't possible to save the single remaining color print because of delamination; only a black-and-white duplication negative could be produced.

In 1990, DEFA didn't have the technical capability to repair the damaged print. Today it would be possible. But unfortunately, the color editing print they used then is nowhere to be found. I regret it because the film also incorporated a kind of dramaturgy of colors. For example, in the scenes shortly before the end, in the Christmas decoration factory – especially when we hung the ornaments up in the space in varying sizes and colors – they sparkled and glittered as colorfully as suns in the cosmos. And then the factory manager's line, the last line of the film: “Choose something beautiful for yourself; Christmas always comes faster than you think.” That was something! In color these sequences had a stronger effect and irony, of course. And a lyricism came forth from the muted fall colors of the Thuringian landscape that made the film softer, as well. The color simply made the film more sensual.

With some details you bring time and world into the film – for example, with the poster of the American human-rights activist Angela Davis or the character of the Lebanese man with whom Daniel shares a room in the construction workers' dorm.

I have always had the need to bring “world” into my films, because I lacked that in the GDR. We did not get out, and the world did not get in. After my experience studying in the Soviet Union and at the international Moscow Film Academy, in the GDR I often felt very much thrown back on myself and unable to establish relationships. Later on I also liked to work with foreign actors for this reason. They brought another *habitus*, a bit of another atmosphere into the film.

Did the ban of the film stress you a great deal, or did you repress it?

I probably did repress it. It wasn't so hard, because I always had something to do. When Hans Dieter Mäde became the general director of DEFA in 1977, I asked him whether something could not be done with the film.

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He answered, “We’re not pulling any skeletons out of the cellar.” Sometimes, I screened the film internally – for cameramen, for example, or dramaturgs with whom I was beginning a new work. To do this, I had to have the general director’s permission and submit in writing who would see the film and why. It was more or less treated like poison. Of course, a few more people always came to the screenings than were on the list; many had heard of this *Dove* and wanted to see it. I suspect that the negative that was stored in the studio for years was destroyed sometime during the Mäde era. Before that, under his predecessor Albert Wilkening, another standard was applied for handling the material, along the lines of: Although the film is not authorized, it must be preserved for the purpose of artistic study. That was in keeping with a decision of the Artistic Council at DEFA and the Film Association and was read aloud by my colleague, the director Günter Reisch, during an advisory session.

Did Studio Director Wilkening try to console you?

Dieter Wolf consoled me by immediately offering me another project, *Bear Ye One Another’s Burden*, which I already mentioned. I was therefore busy talking about the book with the author Wolfgang Held and preparing for filming. But when the approval was unexpectedly denied me due to cultural policies only one month before we started, I fell into an existential crisis for a few weeks. I was rescued from this crisis by an offer from the Television Studio Halle to film a documentary – a nice job. And afterwards Wilkening pressed me to make the fairy tale *The Blue Light* because, he said, he didn’t want to put up with a rumor going around the studio that I was incapable of making a feature film.

How did you find out about such a rumor?

In the summer of 1973, all those who had caused problems in the studio with their latest films were sent to a party-instruction-course—for example Siegfried Kühn on account of his *Platow*, Heiner Carow because of *Paul and Paula*, and of course me . . .

And Egon Günther on account of his Keys?

No, I never saw Egon Günther at an “instruction through continuing education event,” because he was much higher up – “*tausend Meter drövvver*,” as they say in Cologne. In any case, it was a cheerful week and we learned a lot more about GDR problems than we got in the newspapers. Once I was sitting on a bench during the lunch break when an old comrade sat down by me and said: “Iris, you’re such a smart and stalwart girl – “I was 32, but for him I was still a girl” – I can’t imagine why you weren’t capable of finishing your first film!” Studio Director Albert Wilkening wanted to counteract the rumors that were circulating instead of the truth about the ban. We had already known each other for several years and I had gotten on his nerves so often that, in the meantime, he could almost stand me. Before I could stick him for a third time with some risky project that would once again make problems, he put a fairy tale into my hands: “Just show your craft!” Thus came about *The Blue Light*, a film that I enjoyed making.

How was it, after the fall of the Wall in 1990, when *The Dove on the Roof* could be shown publicly for the first time? You lived in Cologne and had no time to reconstruct the film; so Roland Gräf searched for it, found the editing print and, on account of the delamination, had a black-and-white duplication negative made . . .

I was very thankful to Roland Gräf for even finding the film, that he even had the idea to look for the material under the title *Daniel*, and for not being deterred by the entry: “*The Dove on the Roof* – destroyed”! I have already said what I miss because of the absence of color. In addition, at the time the entire film seemed

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somewhat bleak to me in the black-and-white version—the contrasts either too hard or too blurred. But of course the film had been lit for color. The first screening was before the Commission for Banned Films that was founded in mid-October 1989 at the Film and Television Association of the GDR with, among others, the film scholars Rolf Richter and Christiana Mückenberger. They had never seen the film and therefore couldn't make any comparisons to the color print; they seemed taken by it. The premiere took place in October 1990 at the Babylon cinema in Berlin at the time of German unification, when interest in East German banned films had cooled noticeably. The reaction of the small audience was diffuse. Then all the film reels disappeared into storage once again and were considered lost for almost two decades. Last year the black-and-white negative was found and digitally restored by the DEFA-Stiftung. I am astounded and pleased by what they accomplished: the pictures are transparent and three-dimensional again, they have contour and, despite the absence of color, have recovered brightness and clarity!

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