



# Christa Wolf and Film

By Ralf Schenk

*Der geteilte Himmel* (*Divided Heaven*) comes first and foremost to mind when exploring connections between the author Christa Wolf and film. Wolf's novel was published in East Germany in May 1963. Film director Konrad Wolf had already read the novel in manuscript form and decided to adapt it even before it became a literary success. An edition of 160,000 copies was printed in the first year alone! The film, too, became a phenomenon, examining East German society with unprecedented openness and identifying intolerance, political opportunism and hypocrisy within "our own ranks" as the source of existential conflicts.

In the artistically intricate manner already present in the book, the film *Divided Heaven* portrays the evolving consciousness of a young woman who has a mental and physical breakdown after her fiancé leaves the GDR for West Germany. The subjective narration from the perspective of the protagonist, Rita, results in a fragmentation of the story. As in the highly associative films of Alan Resnais (*Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959), in *Divided Heaven* episodes from the protagonist's memory arise, overlapping and suppressing each other. Past and present merge, and spaces communicate with one another, partially by means of parallel editing, with many images also embodying a symbolic dimension. Premiering in September 1964, *Divided Heaven* is both an aesthetically modern and a politically brave film that, over and above all critiques, expressed hope that the system could be reformed and pleaded for "socialism with a human face."

It was the first and, for a long time, would have been the last film with Christa Wolf's name in the credits. It is little known that, in addition to *Divided Heaven*, Wolf tried her hand as a screenwriter for a series of other DEFA films—always on subjects that would have brought a certain "worldliness" to GDR cinema. In the fall of 1960, for example, she turned one of her early stories, *Moskauer Novelle* [*Moscow Novella*] into a synopsis of a screenplay. The interrupted love story of an East German pediatrician and a Russian interpreter, which starts in a village in Mecklenburg in 1945, is ultimately rekindled after they accidentally meet in Moscow in 1959. Konrad Wolf was interested in the story and saw in it an opportunity to reflect upon the "new relationship" between Germans and Russians. Yet the Soviets, whose involvement would have been necessary to produce the film, declined; they deemed the character of the Russian man, despite all pathos, not to be heroic enough, too broken, too passive. Christa Wolf was obviously disappointed. Only in 1973, when she reflected back on her debut novel and subjected it to a critical analysis, might she have been quite glad that the film was never made; at this point she regarded *Moskauer Novelle* as a treatise with "wooden dialogs" and "unsuccessful images" and too much of a conflict-free idyll, especially the episodes in Moscow.

The next project that Wolf, her husband Gerhard and director Konrad Wolf worked on, between 1962 and fall 1964, also never made it to the screen. It was supposed to be called *Ein Mann kehrt heim* or *Heimkehr* (*A Man Comes Home* or *Homecoming*). Like Konrad Wolf, the protagonist is the son of political emigrants and returns to Germany fairly late. Full of doubt about the willingness and ability of the German population to change, he tries to establish himself as an engineer in the GDR. As Christa Wolf recalled in the 1980s: "We wanted to employ the alienation effect to allow a critical, but not only critical examination of certain phenomena in the GDR. We had already written the scenario when we were told that there was no sense continuing with it."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hörning, Therese. "Unerledigte Widersprüche: Gespräch mit Therese Hörnigk, Juni 1987/Oktober 1988." *Christa Wolf Gesamtausgabe*. Volume XII. Munich: Luchterhand Verlag. 82.



Especially former DEFA Director Hans Rodenberg who, as the minister of film and a member of the state council was in charge, rejected the scenario: "To examine our GDR through the foreign eyes of a different planet is not the perspective we need right now."<sup>2</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the SED's (Socialist Unity Party) Central Committee, with its condemnation of contemporary critical films, was already looming.

Yet another film idea that the Wolfs and Konrad Wolf considered in 1964-65, a biography of physicist Klaus Fuchs, was ultimately never realized. Fuchs had emigrated to Great Britain in 1933 and then worked on the development of the atom bomb for the U.S., where he was arrested and convicted of being a "communist atomic spy" in 1949-50. After many years in prison, Fuchs was transferred to the GDR, where he directed the Central Institute for Nuclear Research in Rossendorf. A film about someone like Fuchs required approval from the highest state functionaries, but the SED Central Committee denied the request. In his Christa Wolf biography, Jörg Magenau explained why Wolf was intrigued by Fuchs' life. It was not the spy plot, but rather:

how a middle-class, Christian family drifted to the left and was forced to emigrate. Konrad Wolf saw the similarities to his own past in exile. But Klaus Fuchs, whom Christa and Gerhard Wolf sought out, remained silent. They described him as loyal to the party and overly correct, refusing to say anything unless released from his nondisclosure agreement. And Konrad Wolf, who consulted with Erich Honecker, received through him the *nyet* (no) of the Soviet Union. In the middle of the Cold War, it was impossible to thematize real espionage cases, which had officially never taken place, even though the rest of the world knew better.<sup>3</sup>

At least one of the stories of interest to Christa Wolf around 1965 actually made it to the film studio: *Fräulein Schmetterling* (*Miss Butterfly*), the story of a 17-year-old who tries to find her place in life after her father dies. The film was a plea for individuality and self-determination. At the same time, it polemicized against the idea—held by SED functionaries in particular—that, as socialist society cared and provided for its citizens, it deserved nothing but gratitude—a gratitude that, above all, meant a complete submission to demands "from above." In contrast, Christa and Gerhard Wolf defended the right to dream, make mistakes and rebel. Along with debutant director Kurt Barthel—who had met them working as Konrad Wolf's assistant director for *Divided Heaven*—they developed a cinematic form employing realistic feature film sequences, documentary takes (shot, in part, with hidden cameras) and surreal scenes.

Like many films of its time, *Miss Butterfly* ultimately found itself in the political crossfire sparked by the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum. Here is not the venue to detail the discussions that took place between the end of shooting on December 8, 1965 and the termination of the project on February 4, 1966. As high-ranking politicians from the East German Ministry of Culture put it after screening a rough cut, however, the film "achieves its intended effect, which is directed against our republic and is essentially hostile to our republic. The film misrepresents the reality of our republic and expresses a philosophy that has nothing to do with our philosophy. It is a mental stance, an ideology, which has an objectively hostile effect." Sharing the fate of nearly a dozen other films, *Miss Butterfly* was locked in the vault. Admittedly, Christa Wolf had reservations about the artistic creation herself. Its motto—that "you shouldn't prematurely give up on your longings and adapt to flat everyday rationality"<sup>4</sup>—significantly influenced her literary work in the second half of the 1960s, however. Her book *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, (*The Quest for Christa T.*, 1969), for example, is also based on the experience of the young heroine of *Miss Butterfly*.

<sup>2</sup> Wolf, Dieter. *Gruppe Babelsberg. Unsere nicht gedrehten Filme*. Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2000. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Magenau, Jörg. *Christa Wolf. Eine Biographie*. Berlin: Kindler Verlag, 2002. 146-147.

<sup>4</sup> Wolf, Christa. "Rummelplatz 11. Plenum 1965 - Erinnerungsbericht." *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou: Texte 1990-1994*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994. 69.



Despite all these disappointments and defeats, Wolf kept in touch with DEFA for a few more years. At the start of 1967, she and her husband presented a concept for an adaptation of Günther Weisenborn's novel *Der Verfolger* (*The Pursuer*, 1961), a story about the only survivor of a resistance group who unsuccessfully tries to bring a former Gestapo informer to justice in a West Berlin court and ultimately resorts to vigilantism. Wolfgang Staudte was to be convinced to direct it, but DEFA was not interested. The rather intense five- or six-year relationship between Christa Wolf and DEFA closed with her co-authoring the script of the adaptation of Anna Seghers' *Die Toten bleiben jung* (*The Dead Stay Young*, 1968) and her attempt to retell the story of Till Eulenspiegel, set on the eve of the Peasant's War, as a panorama in two parts. Under the direction of Rainer Simon, *Till Eulenspiegel* (1973) became feature film that is impressive to this day.

What other points of contact were there between Christa Wolf and cinema? A few documentaries, of course. In 1976, Günter Jordan and Maxie Wander portrayed a Hoyerswerda Cultural Club and its energetic director in the film *Eine Stadt wird gebor'n wie ein Kind* (*A City Is Born Like a Child*, 1976). Wolf commented on this work and at the same time on her own confidence in art: "That art is capable of creating human connections is something that we have always claimed. And they did just that." In Roland Steiner's *Unsere Kinder* (*Our Children*, 1988)—the first DEFA film to feature neo-Nazis, punks, goths and other marginal groups in East German society, Wolf—who by then had not appeared before a GDR camera in a long time—interviewed two skinheads. As Elke Schieber noted, it was a sign of "hope that those who had flipped out would find their way back to society, if only we acknowledged their problems and talked to them."<sup>5</sup> Aside from such rare guest appearances, it was not until 1990-91 that a long DEFA portrait devoted to Wolf—whose conscious and critical stance in the Biermann case was never forgiven by GDR leadership—could finally be made: Karlheinz Mund's *Zeitschleifen – Im Dialog mit Christa Wolf* (*Time Loops – A Conversation with Christa Wolf*).

Finally, of course, an important point of contact between Christa Wolf and cinema, which can only be mentioned here, occurs in her literary works, which are replete with reflections on film. The character of the film director in her unfinished novel *Das Preisgericht* [*The Jury*, c. 1965], for example: a hero who receives a prestigious award but is sick of only directing "ideals" and now wants to make documentaries. As Jörg Magenau writes, "It's a plot that could have interested Konrad Wolf, who [...] was determined to work without the technical apparatus that a film director needs. He wanted to roam the streets equipped with only a handheld camera and capture what was really going on."<sup>6</sup> Christa Wolf's 2003 published diaries, *Ein Tag im Jahr 1960-2000* [*One Day a Year 1960-2000*], also contain a few references to cinema and film, for example the impact on her of Peter Stein's *Sommergäste* (*Summerfolk*, 1976) or John Cassavetes' *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976). After seeing a documentary about Andrzej Wajda and his *Człowiek z żelaza* (*Man of Iron*, 1981), Wolf wrote in her diary: "The Polish filmmakers finally allied with the workers. That would never happen in our country."<sup>7</sup> It is a sentence from a time when any attempt to collaborate with the DEFA Studios or East German television was unthinkable. Only in January 1990 did East German television finally air the adaptation of her story *Selbstversuch* (*Self-Experiment*, dir. Peter Vogel), which had been made a year earlier.

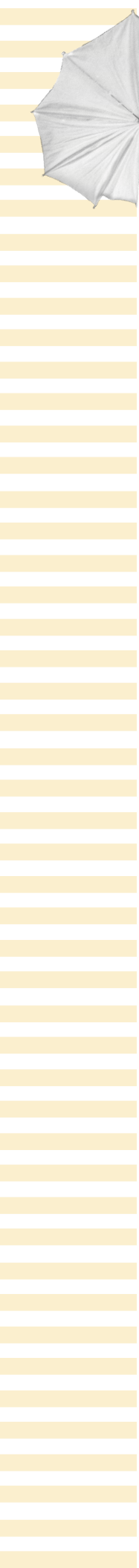
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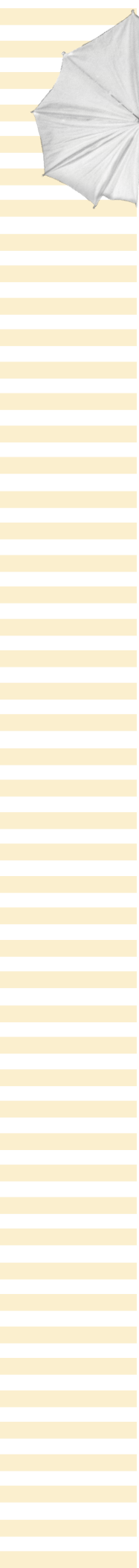
*This text by film historian Ralf Schenk is based on exhaustive discussions with Christa and Gerhard Wolf that took place on September 6, 1996 and was originally published in German by the DEFA-Stiftung in Informationsblatt zu Fräulein Schmetterling in 2021.*

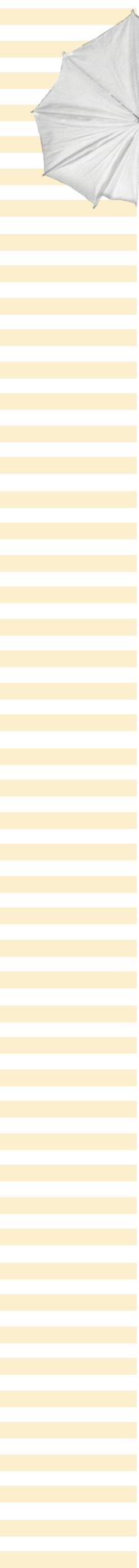
<sup>5</sup> Schieber, Elke. "Im Dämmerlicht der Perestroika 1980 bis 1989." *Schwarzweiss und Farbe. DEFA-Dokumentarfilme 1946-92*. Potsdam/Berlin: Filmmuseum Potsdam, Jovis Verlagsbüro. 191.

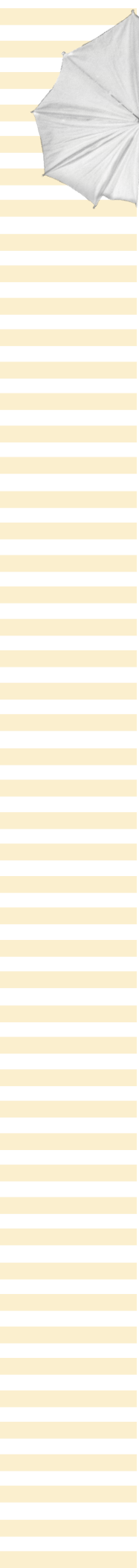
<sup>6</sup> Magenau, Jörg. *Christa Wolf. Eine Biographie*. Berlin: Kindler Verlag, 2002. 194.

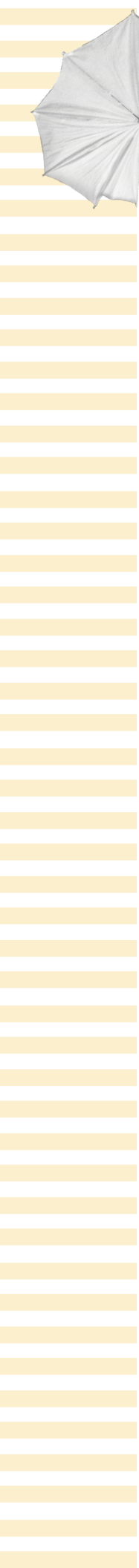
<sup>7</sup> Wolf, Christa. *Ein Tag im Jahr: 1960-2020*. eBook ed., Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002.



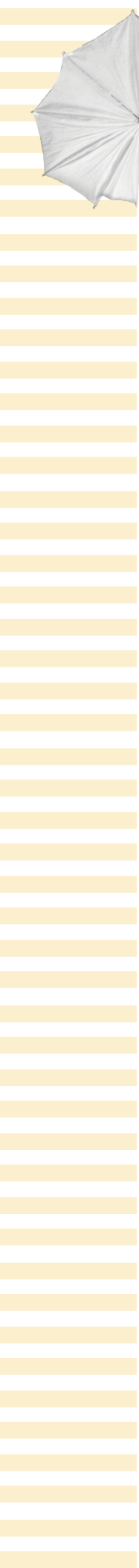












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<sup>3</sup> Wolf, Christa. "Rummelplatz 11. Plenum 1965 - Erinnerungsbericht." *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou: Texte 1990-1994*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994. 69.



