

Director Annekatrin Hendel about Her Film *The Brasch Family*

The interview with director Annekatrin Hendel was conducted in March 2025.

What is your brief summary of the film?

I portray three generations of the Brasch family, who deal with the tensions of history within their own family - between East and West, art and politics, communism and religion, love and betrayal, utopia and self-destruction. And I meet the only survivor of the clan, Marion Brasch in New York, but also numerous confidants, friends and lovers, including the actress Katharina Thalbach, the poet Christoph Hein, and the singer-songwriter Bettina Wegner. *The Brasch Family* is a panorama of time that brings history to life as family history, an epic about the decline of the "red aristocracy," a GDR version of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*.

How did you come across this unusual family saga, this "family of the century?"

I already knew Marion Brasch from my youth in the GDR. I made fashion, she made music. I sewed a costume for her. But it wasn't until much later that I decided to make this film. I asked my mother what kind of film she would like to see. And she said: Well, a film like the one about the Thomas-Mann-family

by Heinrich Breloer. I immediately thought of this family of writers from East Germany. But it was also the thought that the filming of a real GDR family saga was long overdue. This was the force that drove me to make the film.

Although the author, poet, and filmmaker Thomas Brasch is the most famous member of the family, I was not interested in an artist portrait, but, like all my other films, a personal story in a larger social context that gives us new insights and asks for intellectual reflection. So telling the story of the whole family was obvious. A family of functionaries who exemplify the complex story of the hopes and mistakes of the communist dream in its everyday form until its downfall. In 2011, when I heard that Marion Brasch, the youngest daughter and sole survivor, was writing about her own family's fate from the subjective perspective of the youngest child, I immediately jumped at the chance to produce her novel as a feature film. Since 2011, we have worked on the adaptation of her book "Ab jetzt ist Ruhe - Roman meiner fabelhaften Familie," which Marion wrote with surprising ease and from a child's view.

At first, I looked for contemporary witnesses for research purposes. Companions of the long-deceased parents and the three brothers. I met people who were closely connected with the family's fate. Their personal views on the dramatic events that led not only to the extinction of a state, an idea, but of the entire family, seemed so precious to me that I began to accompany these encounters with my camera. The openness and complex reflections of my protagonists are now a completely different, new and documentary approach to this family history.

What was your personal interest in this family history?

As I said earlier, I knew Marion. But later, I also got to know her charismatic brother Thomas Brasch, but unfortunately only briefly before he died. In fact, there are personal connections here too. For me, Thomas was a pop star before I read a single line of his work. His expulsion from the GDR, because he protested Wolf Biermann's expatriation, outraged me. I was in eighth grade at the time. I then met Thomas in the '90s during my nightly wanderings through Berlin. If you wanted a verbal challenge, you went to the Ganymede. Thomas regularly "held court" there. The restaurant was right below his apartment, and I was very touched when he said one night: "My mother said that anyone who lives at Schiffbauerdamm has made it."

In my theater days, I met Marion's younger brother Peter Brasch, who was also a writer. We often met after performances at my theater and we had heated discussions about art, literature, and politics. His sudden death in 2001 hit me hard, as did the fact that Thomas died just 5 months later.

What were the main themes that you addressed in this film?

On the one hand, I wanted to reconstruct and to understand. On the other hand, I wanted us to be thrown back on ourselves in the here and now. I hoped that when the film shows how a young generation emancipates itself from its mother and father, we perceive this ordinary, archetypal process as a political one. After all, there were harsh discussions, and they went down to business. It was about something, everything. Father Brasch and his GDR leadership team of the post-WWII period defended their claim to power autistically hard, even against their own people, out of fear of a relapse into fascism. The deeply humanistic

social concept became a dictatorship: the “real existing socialism.” But has the idea of a global, just society, in which the “free development of the individual is the basic condition for the development of all,” now deteriorated because a group of self-righteous functionaries betrayed it?

My generation is now occupying the—big and small— seats of power. But what motivates the younger generation, what are their goals? How do they see their future, whose foundations we have laid? How do we deal with our children?

You gave the film the subtitle “A German Story.” Why not an East German story?

Because it’s an all-German story, and that is one reason why I made this documentary. You forget that the GDR only existed for 40 years. Actually, all family stories are not purely East German. The father was born and grew up in Bavaria, Germany. Thomas moved from East to West Germany. Marion has been living in the Federal Republic of Germany for 35 years now and her daughter Lena was born after the fall of the Wall. She is currently revolutionizing German theater with her directorial work in Berlin.

You are sometimes referred to as “the woman documentarist of the East.” What do you think of that?

Perhaps because I, like Marion Brasch and Sven Marquardt, belong to the last generation that grew up and came of age in the GDR. We were born after the Wall was built and still learned our professions in East Germany. We are the last people who can tell East German stories from our own experience. I started telling these German-German stories from my own perspective over 20 years ago. Maybe that’s why? But I’ve also made films like *Fassbinder*, which, as a West German filmmaker, filmed the post-war history of West Germany in all its facets. And I’ve also produced more than 30 films on many topics. But the core of my film work is related to the more recent German-German history.

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