Filming Women: Female Perspectives

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Female directors at the East German DEFA film studios[1] did not emerge until the 1970s, and before 1968 no student film produced at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (HFF, or Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg) was directed by a female graduate.[2] The majority of women in filmmaking tended to work on design, make-up or costume, rather than sit in the director's chair (Eckert 1991: 113-180). However, there were a considerable number of female dramaturgs, scriptwriters and editors at DEFA who specialized in films with contemporary themes (*Gegenwartsstoffe*) with female protagonists at their center.[3]

The 1970s, which saw the emergence of the first women directors, were particularly difficult for film graduates (irrespective of their sex), due to the limited output of the DEFA studios and the fact that an "older" generation of well-established film directors was on permanent contract. Because younger aspiring directors (*Nachwuchsregisseure*) were forced to work as assistant directors for many years before having the opportunity to make their own films, many gave up. The Polish film scholar Pavla Frydlova points out that this was similar in other East Bloc countries with limited production capacities (1996: 21). Another reason for the low proportion of female directors at DEFA relates to the fact that most women in the GDR—who tended to marry and have responsibility for their children at a young age—would consider the total commitment and unsociable hours this job involves to be irreconcilable with family life (Schönfeld 1990: 150). Iris Gusner, one of few female DEFA directors, confirmed this view: "I know women who were forced by these pressures to give up their profession as directors" (Richter 1988: 4).

While female directors were a minority in the GDR—a situation similar to that in the West, as well—those who did manage to obtain a permanent contract with DEFA nevertheless enjoyed the same privileges as their male colleagues, i.e. job security and a budget provided by the state for each approved film project. As director Evelyn Schmidt recalled: "Working for DEFA had one invaluable advantage: Once approval had been given, money was of no concern at any stage of the project…." (Schmidt 1991: 92).

Due to the different ideological context and economic structure for women directors in the GDR, they tended to reject the labels "feminist" for themselves and "women's films" (*Frauenfilme*) for their works. Gusner, for instance, rejected the term *Frauenfilm* for *Alle meine Mädchen* (*All My Girls*, 1979) in an interview published in *Neues Deutschland*, emphasizing that she perceived herself not primarily as a woman, but as a filmmaker on a par with her male colleagues (Goldberg 1980). Gusner's reluctance to commit herself explicitly here to a gendered approach to filmmaking was arguably a concession to the dominant ideology that perceived Western feminism in a negative light.[4] The term *Frauenfilm* was associated with the women's film movement in the Federal Republic of Germany (the FRG, or West Germany), which had emerged in the 1970s as part of the *New German Cinema*. Most West German women directors were politically committed to the women's movement, their prime concern being initially with feminist agitation and consciousness-raising (Lukacz-Aden and Strobel 1985: 8). During the early years of the women's film movement, feminist directors also aimed for their films to counteract what they saw as denigrating representations of the feminine in Hollywood-dominated mainstream cinema, by presenting more "realistic" images of women on screen. Some also strove to deconstruct sexist ideologies by aiming to problematize the female spectators' identification with the on-screen image, using experimental techniques that disrupted the visual pleasure of the audience (Knight 1992).

In the GDR, however, the situation was quite different. Socialist Realism, being the dominant aesthetic theory (albeit to a lesser extent in the 1970s and 1980s), it would have been impossible for DEFA filmmakers to

publicly reject the concept of realism altogether. Experimental filmmaking was considered counter-productive to the aim of wide public appeal (*Massenwirksamkeit*) and was rejected as "formalist" and "elitist." Women directors in the GDR who, like their male colleagues, wished to reach as wide an audience as possible with their films would not adopt a deconstructive feminist aesthetic as propagated by Western feminist "counter-cinema." Moreover, while most DEFA films about women were directed by men, these male filmmakers tended to avoid demeaning screen stereotypes of women, such as the sex object, "the femme fatale" or the sub-servient housewife.

At the same time, women directors in the GDR did not feel there was a political necessity to found a feminist filmmakers' movement, as they did not perceive themselves to be an oppressed minority at DEFA and wished to be treated as professionally equal to their male colleagues.[5] For the same reasons, theoretical discourse about films did not address questions related to the sex of their makers, such as whether films directed by women differed from those produced by men (Wolf 1997: 95). This said, in the mid-1980s, female filmmakers from the East Bloc tried to set up an international association for female filmmakers; they met a few times to discuss their films, but they never organized an association or finalized strategies, possibly due to political restrictions.[6]

For her entry exam at the HFF, Iris Gusner submitted a documentary about a women's brigade in a timber factory, where she herself had worked as a student (Knöpfler 1982). In 1980, she stressed the importance to her of a subjective approach to filmmaking: "My aspiration for the *Gegenwartsfilm* is that it engage with topics at a more personal level, that it be shaped by the author's own life experience, even contain autobiographical elements" (Höber 1980: 6).[7] All Gusner's *Gegenwartsfilme* after *All My Girls* revolve around women. *Wäre die Erde nicht rund* (*Were the Earth Not Round*, 1981) tells the story of an East German woman studying in Moscow who falls in love with a fellow student from Syria; the heroine in *Kaskade rückwarts* (*Bailing Out*, 1983) is a mature woman who embarks on a new life with the help of a dating agency; and *Ich liebe dich – April! April!* (*I Love You – Just Kidding!* 1987) revolves around a divorced couple whose daughter tries to bring them back together.

Whilst, historically, women's experiences have always been very different from men 's, in socialist countries this gap seems to have been bridged, at least to some extent, by the fact that the vast majority of all women were sharing men's experience of full-time, life-long employment. However, there were still experiences more typical of a woman's than a man's life. It was shared gender-specific experiences such as these, Iris Gusner argued, which could lead to a specific female approach to representing women on screen (Richter 1988).

Matriarchy and Female Solidarity: *All My Girls*

For *All My Girls*, Iris Gusner conducted thorough research and interviews on location at NARVA, a huge light bulb factory in East Berlin,[8] intending to integrate authentic documentary material into the film's fictitious narrative. The DEFA studio rejected this experimental slant, however, in favor of a more conventional approach for greater accessibility to a wider audience. Gusner nevertheless managed to get her idea in "through the backdoor," by creating a fictitious film director who is shooting a documentary at NARVA.

The film opens with the young film student Ralf Päschke, receiving his first job assignment: his professor at the HFF asks him to make a documentary about a women's factory-worker brigade.[9] He protests: "For God's sake, nothing but brigades—over and over again. What do I know about brigades or, worse still, women's brigades?" His lack of enthusiasm is due to the fact that the majority of women's brigades in the GDR did monotonous assembly-line work. With self-referential irony, Gusner alludes to the difficulty of making an

interesting film about a factory-workers' brigade—a topic that would not normally appeal to contemporary GDR audiences—through the voice of the professor: "Difficult. Very difficult. Six ordinary women, working on an assembly line. Who on earth will want to watch this in the evening?"[10]

Gusner modeled her approach on existing documentary films about women's brigades, such as Jürgen Böttcher's *Stars* (1963), also set at NARVA.[11] The interest of documentary filmmakers in women as the backbone of industrial mass production had peaked during the 1970s (Schreiber 1996: 169). Gusner's group portrait of feisty young women who cope cheerfully with the monotony of their demanding work is reminiscent of the self-confident, optimistic protagonists of Volker Koepp's long-term *Wittstock* documentary series (1975-97) about a close-knit group of female textile workers. While *All My Girls* does not contain authentic documentary clips showing "real" women workers, the film was shot on location with the cooperation of a NARVA brigade; the factory setting and the use of black-and-white film stock for the scenes that Ralf shoots for his documentary contribute to the feature film's authentic "feel."

Some young DEFA feature filmmakers who supported the "documentary feature film" approach criticized Gusner for her depiction of the factory milieu, claiming that she had glossed over the dirt, darkness and ugliness of the environment, thereby distorting reality and conveying a hypocritical message about such workplaces. However, Gusner did not intend her film to mirror the real world with so-called objectivity—an aim she considered not only impossible to achieve, but also undesirable. This perspective is underscored in a self-referential comment made by one of her protagonists: "Everything looks better in the movies than in reality!" Gusner was aiming for a more subjective approach that emphasized something beyond the surface level of appearances: "If we gave [the workplace] more light than in real life, it was because we wanted to express by optical means the human warmth of relations between the workers. I was more intent on internal credibility than external authenticity" (Harkenthal 1980).

Female Bonding: The "Collective Heroine"

Gusner does not focus on one character as the protagonist but rather on a group of six women who are characterized predominantly through their interactions as a workplace brigade. The assembly line is used as a metaphor for the collective spirit of this brigade, which not only compels them to work at the same rhythm, but also renders them entirely interdependent, with each one equally important to the end result. As the brigade leader Marie explains to Ralf: "On an assembly line you've got to work together. Line work is teamwork, first and foremost. You've got to rely on your colleagues more than in other jobs."

Unlike some of Gusner's male colleagues who directed *Gegenwartsfilme* about women at work,[12] Gusner marginalizes the protagonists' love relationships with men, focusing almost exclusively on their relationship with each other. And, in contrast to films like *Der Dritte* (*Her Third*, Dir. Egon Günther, 1971), *Bis daß der Tod euch scheidet* (*Until Death Do Us Apart*, Dir. Heiner Carow, 1978) and *Solo Sunny* (Dirs. Konrad Wolf and Wolfgang Kohlhaase, 1979), she does not present female solidarity primarily as a union born out of necessity that compensates for problems with men. Instead, Gusner portrays the friendship between women as a value in itself.

From the very beginning of his visit, Ralf is fascinated by the strong emotional rapport between the women, which goes beyond the average work relationship. For instance, upon his arrival at the factory he witnesses a violent eruption of tension between Gertrud and Susi that, however, ends in laughter and embraces. They forgive and forget as easily as they clash, expressing their feelings in a spontaneous and uninhibited fashion and behaving as if they were sisters rather than colleagues. The young women's male partners, ex-boyfriends and married lovers are mentioned, but never seen on screen. Except for Ralf, all male characters—including

Marie's partner, the floor manager Lauterbach and Ralf's professor—play only small roles. Marie's alcoholic live-in partner stands by her during her nervous breakdown, but he is obviously no equal for her and cannot give her the emotional support she needs.

In *All My Girls*, the female "collective protagonist" not only drives the narrative but the women's bonding has strong undercurrents of matriarchy. The brigade leader Marie is portrayed as a robust, middle-aged, blue-collar worker who is proud of "her girls' " achievements, but at the same time controls them like a strict parent. She is seen to "play mother" on several rather comical occasions, such as feeding her "children" homemade potato salad. Behaving like naughty little girls behind Marie's back, they pile their own portions onto Ralf's plate, giggling and whispering: "If she knew light bulbs this well, we could pack it in!" Significantly, Lauterbach tries to placate Marie, when she protests about the top-down management decision to split up her brigade, by addressing her not as a colleague, but rather (condescendingly) in terms of her maternal role: "Come on, Mother, they'll manage without you for a few months. The decision has been made."

The management's decision causes a rift between Marie and her girls, who accuse her of disloyally siding with her superiors instead of defending their interests: "Comrade Lauterbach, always at the ready! If you… If you've forgotten where you belong...!" The discovery of a notebook into which Marie has entered the disciplinary infractions of each young woman, such as repeatedly coming in late and missing shifts, brings the argument to a head. But Gusner portrays Marie's bookkeeping as an idiosyncratic obsession, rather than the behavior of a political denunciator, and she is later seen to keep equally detailed records of her partner's drinking habits. The hot-tempered Susi, however, is not convinced by Marie's self-defense—"Come on. These are just notes I took for my own interest"—and launches an attack: "And maybe you also took notes about all the things we say, and maybe you'll go tell your bosses, eh?!" The allegation of betrayal is followed by dead silence and a long close-up of Marie's face, whose expression changes from shock to hurt disbelief before she quietly gets up, takes her coat and leaves.

To Marie, the sudden loss of her girls' confidence hits her at the core of her being, making her question everything she has lived for.[13] She had helped to build the factory from scratch as one of Berlin's *Trümmerfrauen* (women who cleaned up the rubble of bombed buildings after WWII), throwing herself whole-heartedly into her work. By leading a brigade of girls through thick and thin to exemplary achievements, Marie is doing more than just successfully managing her workers; on an emotional and psychological level, she is raising and running the family she never had. Her subsequent breakdown reveals that the tough forewoman hides a vulnerable human side behind her strong façade, which brings out "her girls'" compassion and binds them even more closely to their "matriarch." Much of the ensuing plot revolves around their joint effort to make things up to her and win her back. In Marie's absence, the young women successfully fight for staying together as a brigade, even though this entails continuing to work with outdated equipment for a transition period.

The Female Workforce Versus Male Leadership

A number of DEFA *Gegenwartsfilme* of the 1970s and early 1980s contain allusions to the existence of different social classes in an allegedly classless society, including *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, Dir. Heiner Carow, 1972), *Die Schlüssel* (*The Keys*, Dir. Egon Günther, 1973) and *Unser Kurzes Leben* (*Our Short Life*, Dir. Lothar Warneke, 1980). In *All My Girls*, Gusner shows that the main decisions are made by men in positions of power, while the female workers are treated as mere workhorses. In the conflict between the brigade and Lauterbach, Susi protests: "You make the decisions, and we're the dummies! All you need is five pairs of hands, economically speaking. Nothing else matters to you at all!" Lauterbach hides his male

chauvinism under a mantle of patronizing joviality, not taking the women's concerns seriously. After suggesting that Marie calm down when she voices her objection to the management decision, he displays a similarly sexist altitude towards the girls, trying to diffuse their anger with condescending flattery: "Lovely—not just the best, but also the prettiest!" Whereas Marie on her own was unable to defend her brigade, the united action of the young women, who voice their discontent in strong unison, brings about results. Anita, the union representative, acts as the mouthpiece of the group, while the other women—even timid Gertrud—emphatically support her.

The brigade's protest against being split up is motivated, to an extent, by a strong sense of group identity and belonging. This "personalized" attitude towards their jobs suggests that they regard colleagues in their workplace collective as friends or a substitute family. The majority of East German women workers, who were confined (due to additional commitments to family and household) to repetitive and monotonous menial jobs, compensated for low job satisfaction by focusing on the social and emotional benefits of working in a group (Helwig 1993: 246-7). The role of the workplace collective was all the more important for women as there were no self-help groups or feminist organizations like women's shelters. This is why, after unification, women who lost their jobs spoke of missing their colleagues; as one woman put it, "I miss the female colleagues with whom I worked for 16 years, because we used to help each other. They were with me all through my divorce. I supported one colleague through her divorce. What women in the West call 'self-help groups' was what we had in the workplace" (Dodds 1994: 108).

Oksana Bulgakowa cynically dismisses the brigade's protest as silly irrationality, because they choose to forego better equipment (1991: 100). But the conflict is not about being comfortable or fear of change; rather, it is about human values, such as friendship, loyalty and quality of life at the workplace. Moreover, the workers' clash with management exposes the discrepancies between the ideals of socialist democracy and existing practice in the contemporary GDR. In their dispute with Lauterbach, the women explicitly address their right to be consulted and to participate in decision making: "You have to talk to us about it. This is a decision we all should be involved in!" His feeble excuse—"with all this talk, I'm not getting any work done at all"—provokes a full-blown confrontation with Anita, who reminds him of what socialist democracy entails: "Let me tell you something: It's your job to discuss such decisions with us! After all, it's up to you to make sure such decisions are implemented, right?! If you can't do that, then you'll have to quit!" Clarifying that for them this is a matter of principle and not a "feminine whim," she threatens to lodge a formal complaint: "Well, in that case we'll just have to talk about your leadership methods elsewhere."

In *All My Girls*, Gusner proposes female collectivism as an effective means to express personal engagement with society and to fight against the sexist oppression of hierarchical, male-dominated power structures. The brigade's assertiveness as a group results in actual change then and there, as they successfully push through their demand that management reverse its decision.[14] The conflict ends with the girls forcing Lauterbach to launch the conveyor belt they will work on together for a transition period. This is depicted as a triumph for the female workforce and an embarrassment for male management, as Lauterbach tries in vain to send a (female) colleague in his place. The brigade's reunion with Marie who is beaming with pleasure—"Well, I've heard amazing things about you. Well done!"—concludes Ralf's filming sessions.

Arguably, Gusner's optimistic view of the possibilities for improving social conditions made the film palatable to the censors—despite its outspoken criticism of hierarchical gendered power relations at the work place. As the West German film scholar Margit Frölich maintains: " it is this optimism that ultimately keeps the film within the acceptable boundaries within which filmmakers were allowed to criticize the GDR's social problems" (1998:49).

All My Girls, an otherwise light-hearted success story of collective female life, is dimmed by the failure of the brigade to accept the outsider Kerstin in the same way they accept Ralf. Kerstin meets with suspicion and resentment, for not only is she a juvenile delinquent on probation, she is also an intellectual among blue-collar workers. Unlike the outsider Ralf, she stays aloof, cultivating an air of superiority. She brings books to work; she shames the other girls by announcing that she will donate all her bonus pay to the factory's fund for socialist third-world countries (*Solidaritätsbeitrag*); and she embarrasses Anita by publicly criticizing her punctuation.

Throughout the film, Susi and Anita bully Kerstin and the suppressed hostility towards this outsider erupts when Kerstin is (unfairly) accused of stealing another girl's money: “And we're expected to work with these antisocial elements?!” Kerstin does not fight to be accepted by the collective, but rather gives up and leaves the factory for good, thereby breaking the terms of her probation and spoiling her chances of social rehabilitation. Ralf, who has had a brief romance with Kerstin and feels he let her down, suffers from a sense of loss and guilt and is unable to continue filming when Kerstin's replacement joins the brigade. Anita runs off to the changing room with tears of remorse and pours out her feelings of shame and envy to Ralf: “She was so different from me! Like ... I could never be!”

The Girls and “Their” Man

By placing a male character in a female collective, Gusner was able to explore gender relations from an unusual angle: *All My Girls* is a film by a *woman* filmmaker about a fictitious *male* director filming *women*. Ralf is played by the young Polish actor Andrzej Pieczyńsnki, whose slender build, boyish features and shy demeanor characterize him as the opposite of a macho-style womanizer or rough industrial worker, such as, for example, Balla in *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*, dir. Frank Beyer, 1966/1990). Ralf's first encounter with the prospective heroines of his documentary project proves to be somewhat of a culture shock for him, as he realizes that he is not only a stranger to the industrial environment, but also a male intruder in an almost exclusively female environment. Upon his arrival, he is the object of much attention—not just of flirtatious glances, smiles and giggles, but also of the female scrutinizing gaze—for his modest appearance does not meet the women's expectations for someone from the glamorous world of filmmaking. Susi laughs: “Just look at his get-up, will you? ... Man! And for this I had my hair done!" Then she teases him, eyeing him up and down, winking and whistling, in a comical gender-role reversal of a male blue-collar worker cat-calling a woman.

Like Paula in *The Legend of Paul and Paul*, the women workers do not show feelings of inferiority towards this intellectual, despite their lack of education and lower social status. Quite the reverse, it is Ralf who feels inadequate in the rough factory environment: “How on earth can you cope with this?” In fact, the brigade does not take his job as a documentary filmmaker very seriously, compared to their own “real” work—“Nice job! Watching other people work”—making it quite clear that he is no match for them on the factory floor. When he asks Marie if he can join the brigade on the assembly line, she tells him he cannot hope to measure up to the girls' expertise: “No way! We make 10,000 per shift, that's not exactly easy!” She is worried that Ralf might literally and metaphorically bring the brigade “out of rhythm:” “If you distract my girls from their work, then it's goodbye to you, do you understand?!”

However, Ralf is subsequently seen working alongside the girls, grinning cheekily as he tries his hand at some of the easier jobs, which earns him the women's respect: “You've got nimble fingers, I'll give you that.” Gusner shows how Ralf gradually bridges the class divide by making an effort to watch, learn and participate, and getting involved beyond his role as a mere observer. His ability to empathize with the young women's concerns contrasts with the detached indifference of Lauterbach, the only other man on the premises, who has

lost touch with the workers by moving up the career ladder. As Anita tells him: "I just don't understand you! You sat on the production line long enough. How often did you say: 'Disgraceful—count me out!'And now?"

The collective spirit of the brigade is celebrated in an episode at a hotel near Marie's hospital, where they spend the night together before visiting her. Susi and Anita playfully act out a mock seduction scene in the bedroom, pretending to lie naked under the duvet, giggling and waiting for Ralf. He rises to the bait by parodying a male stripper, posing in red briefs. After the other young women join them, they throw a spontaneous party, drinking from the same goblet, dancing and caressing one another. This sequence is filmed without diegetic sound; rather, the soundtrack is a soft pop music tune, which gives the scene an unreal, dreamlike quality. The gaiety and erotic intimacy that unfolds between the girls and Ralf temporarily relieves all tensions. The outsider Kerstin drops her bitter, resentful attitude as she is included in the exchanges of tenderness. Anita lets go of her repressed anger, performing an uninhibited veil dance similar to Paula's dance with the veil in the iconic Carow film, which this scene seems to reference. Interestingly, the half-naked woman is not presented as the passive object of a voyeuristic male gaze. In a brief switch from fantasy to black-and-white documentary mode, she is shown to be fully aware of being filmed; directing her performance at the camera, she smiles and dances towards it a number of times, obscuring the lens with her veil. Anita's dance then acquires a hallucinogenic quality, as she disappears and reappears through the flower motif of the picture above the bed.[15]

Both the setting and the cinematography of this sequence are reminiscent of the love-feast fantasy in *The Legend of Paul and Paula*.[16] However, while the latter depicts a couple's passionate lovemaking, *All My Girls* portrays a group of friends all sharing their caresses equally. Ralf playfully, and often comically, participates in this celebration of bacchanalian, yet innocent sensuality. This scene is not to be read as a concession to male fantasies, such as, for instance, a man being at the center of female sexual attention. Quite the reverse, it accentuates the fact that the girls do not compete over the man and try to please him, but rather include him in the affectionate feelings they have for one another. This experience, a reference to the "free love" spirit of the hippie era, cements the bond between Ralf and the girls, taking it beyond the stage of camaraderie by "making love" collectively. The West German film critic Heinz Kersten praised this sequence as a "plea for sensuality free from taboos as the basis of truly human relationships, depicted with a depth of conviction not seen in a DEFA film since *The Legend of Paul and Paula*" (1996: 164).

The Camera as a Catalyst

As Ralf's fictitious documentary has the chance to get commissioned by television (which followed stricter ideological guidelines than the DEFA studios), he initially focuses on formal events. He aims to present his subject matter in a positive light by filming the visit to NARVA of a delegation of functionaries, an election to the workers' advisory committee, and a formal group interview with his "model brigade." By contrast, the filmmaker of *All My Girls*, Iris Gusner, uses the "film within the film" device to ridicule and deconstruct formalized displays of status, power structures and their rituals. For instance, during Ralf's first shoot on location, we see Marie guiding the delegates around the factory. As the image switches from color to black-and-white and diegetic sound is replaced by the buzzing of the handheld camera, we catch a glimpse behind the scenes through Ralf's eyes, where things do not run as smoothly as they appear to on the surface. In flustered disarray, Susi follows the delegation but misses the opportunity to hand over the obligatory bunch of flowers. Having failed in performing her official role, she stages her own private ceremony; after smiling directly at Ralf's camera, she thrusts the bouquet into Anita's arms and emphatically and repeatedly embraces her, in a parody of the formal greetings of Soviet Bloc statesmen. The other girls join in and break into boisterous song

and dance to the tune of the Russian folksong “Kalinka,” showing that they do not take such male political rituals very seriously.

Ralf's second filming session records an election for the factory worker’s advisory committee. Marie chairs the meeting in as perfunctory a fashion as possible, while the workers barely suppress their boredom. Anita reluctantly accepts her re-nomination as representative (“Not again!”), patiently suffering congratulations (the ceremonial embrace and bouquet). The collective’s lack of enthusiasm and Marie's stilted opening—“I welcome you to the election of the union representative”—expose it as a procedure imposed by hierarchical power structures. The meaninglessness of the routine is accentuated by the presence of the camera, giving it a presumed importance that it obviously does not have for those involved. Gusner contrasts this ritualistic procedure to the women's own informal and collective decision-making process, which is characterized by female pride, self-sufficiency and creative power commonly associated with matriarchy.

What temporarily disrupts the harmony of the brigade is not so much Ralf's role as a male visitor in a female domain, but rather his presence as a filmmaker. During his third shoot, he unwittingly reveals confidential information, triggering the young women’s reaction against Marie, as well as the subsequent dispute between the women workers and male management. The filming in Marie's office starts out as a formal documentary-style interview, in which he asks the gathered members of the “model brigade” about their histories and aspirations. However, his subsequent innocent questions about the planned new assembly line, about which the girls know nothing, expose well-kept secrets and hidden tensions that lead to the ensuing conflict between Marie and “her girls.”

A Woman Filming a Man Filming Women

Ralf’s filming at the factory thus triggers conflict, but it also contributes to his personal and professional development. Kerstin, for instance, forces him to reflect upon his ethics as a documentary filmmaker when, during the conflict between Marie and her brigade, she puts her hand over his camera lens in a protective gesture. She later accuses him of ruthlessly exploiting other people's pain for the sake of his career, suggesting that he would not have thought twice about shamelessly filming Marie's breakdown, if only he had brought his camera. He defends his position, insisting on the duty of a documentary filmmaker to record “the truth” without taboo and irrespective of the feelings of the people involved. By the end of the film, however, he has changed his attitude in favor of a more compassionate approach and does not include the sequence showing Marie's distress in the final version of his film.

From Susi he learns about having the courage to do what feels right, rather than blindly following instructions. During a tram ride home after work she argues: “Anyway, it doesn't matter what a person does. What really matters is how they feel, whether they listen to their inner voice, whether they dare to act upon it.” Ralf is later shown to have taken Susi's words to heart. When criticized by his professor for jeopardizing his project by getting too involved with the problematic brigade, Ralf refuses to switch to another brigade just to meet his deadline: “I can't leave now. Should I just drop them? I'm part of it. […] Sometimes you just have to do what is right for you, just for you!”[17] By prioritizing his feelings of loyalty to the young women over his own career interests, his moral strength proves to be of the same order as theirs, who also refuse to sacrifice their solidarity for reasons of individual convenience.

Gusner uses the character of the young male filmmaker to “sneak” her own preferred approach to the representation of women into her film. After Marie's breakdown, Ralf no longer aims to construct official-style images of socialist women at work, but rather approaches his protagonists as individuals on a one-to-one basis in informal settings. In a scene at Marie's apartment after her release from the hospital, for instance, collecting documentary footage is no longer the prime objective. Instead of his movie camera, Ralf has brought a tape recorder; he does not interview Marie, but rather lets her speak for herself with as little interference as possible. Marie, who at first resents this intrusion into her personal sphere, nevertheless appreciates Ralf's dedication to his work—"You never give up! I like that... Well, what do you want to know? About my life, eh?"—and proceeds to relate her life story in a continuous, autobiographical monologue. This is comically interspersed only by her own grumpy, suspicious remarks about the mushrooms Ralf has brought for dinner. Ralf has relinquished the role of detached observer, helping with the preparation of their meal, and both seem to have forgotten about the tape recorder running (invisibly) in the background.

A typical session with one of the girls, Ella, takes place after work one night in the deserted factory cafeteria. Ralf's camera frames Ella's face in a large close-up as she confides in him in a relaxed and trusting fashion. This scene, in which she tells him, unprompted and uninterrupted, about her relationship with a married man, is shot in one long take: "You see, in life there aren't alternatives like in the movies—either the wife and children, or the lover. [...] What's in between, that which makes the half whole, that's what I have." She is content with the arrangement, feeling neither guilty nor jealous, and even considers the possibility of living in a ménage-à-trois. As in the episode in the hotel bedroom, Gusner advocates an open-minded, tolerant and sexually liberated attitude between men and women, allowing for alternatives to the norm of the nuclear family.

In the end, Ralf presents his documentary to his professors at the academy, while the brigade is present in the audience making comments. We get a glimpse of the finished project by way of two sequences: the "Kalinka" episode and a long, autobiographical monologue by Anita. Her face dominates the screen in extreme close-ups, as she looks directly at the camera and confides her feelings about her ex-boyfriend and her opinion about developments at work. As the camera turns to the fictitious audience, we can see Marie's face in mock indignation, the girls laughing and the two film professors mildly amused. Ralf, however, quietly leaves the auditorium before the lights go up, to avoid having to face the brigade of which Kerstin is no longer part. The conflict between the brigade and Kerstin remains unresolved in an otherwise optimistic story. Gusner implicitly criticizes intolerance towards people who do not fit in, making a plea for more understanding and acceptance of people who are different from the rest or who have difficulty coping with their lives.

For viewers today, *All My Girls* offers a retrospective insight into collective female life in a socialist society. It stands out among DEFA films about women workers, in that it depicts the conflicts of a factory brigade in a dramatic, but ultimately upbeat fashion. It shares with other *Gegenwartsfilme* of the 1970s and 1980s (predominantly directed by men) a concern with recurrent issues, such as the role of work for an individual's self-fulfillment and the problem of misfits on the margins of socialist society. Iris Gusner, however, manages to offer a woman's perspective on these issues in her strong emphasis on maternal responsibility and female bonding.

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[1] Female DEFA directors include: Angelika Andrees (feature), Róza Berger-Fiedler (doc), Renate Drescher (doc), Hanna Emuth (doc), Iris Gusner (feature), Helke Misselwitz (doc), Gitta Nickel (doc), Ingrid Reschke (feature), Ingrid Sander (doc), Evelyn Schmidt (feature), Sibylle Schönemann (doc), Lotti Thiel (doc), Annelie Thorndike (doc), Petra Tschörtner (doc), Hannelore Unterberg (feature), Renate Wekwerth (doc), Leionija Wuss-Mundeciema (doc).

[2] "In her detailed study of this topic, dramaturg Tamara Trampe states that for many years (1961-68) no student films were made under the direction of women." (Löser 1996: 349).

[3] These include, for example: dramaturg Christel Gräf and scriptwriter Helga Schütz (*Lots Weib; (Lot's Wife)*, dir. Egon Günther, 1968); dramaturg Christa Müller and scenario writer Regine Kühn (*Unser kurzes Leben; (Our Short Life)*, dir. Lothar Warneke, 1980); dramaturg Anne Pfeuffer and editor Helga Krause (*Das siebente Jahr; (The Seventh Year)*, dir. Frank Vogel, 1968); dramaturg/scenario writer Tamara Trampe and scenario writer/ scriptwriter Gabriele Kotte (*Bürgschaft für ein Jahr (On Probation)*, dir. Herrmann Zschoche, 1981); and dramaturg Erika Richter, scenario writer Helga Schubert and editor Erika Lemphul (*Die Beunruhigun (Apprehension)*, dir. Lothar Warneke, 1981).

[4] Author's note: In fact, on other occasions, she modified this view, suggesting that the gender of a filmmaker could indeed influence the approach to his or her subject matter.

[5] This attitude is reflected in the use of the generic masculine term for women filmmakers in the files documenting the process of authorization prior to a film's release (*Zulassungsverfahren*) such as for instance : "Regisseur: Evelyn Schmidt." See also Frylova's chapter entitled: "Ich bin keine Frau, ich bin ein Regisseur!" (I Am Not a Woman, I Am a Director!) 1996: 47-49.)

[6] Iris Gusner describes the founding of, and her involvement in this association in the memoir she wrote with Helke Sander (2009: 138).

[7] Much later Gusner wrote: "I always wanted to be a witness. I was interested in group dynamics…. In the early 1980s, I put female characters at the center of my films and told stories from their point of view. I had experienced firsthand that the state of a society is expressed more clearly through how it deals with women…; its problems mostly affect women more intensely" (Gusner and Sander 2009: 182).

[8] NARVA was the only industrial plant in the GDR that produced various kinds of light bulbs.

[9] The term *Brigade* is defined in the *Kleines politisches Wörterbuch* as the core of a work collective, which "works in accordance with the principles of comradely mutual help and support" (Schütz 1983:142).

[10] This self-reflexive slant is reminiscent of a DEFA musical entitled *Revue um Mitternacht* (*Revue at Midnight*, dir. Gottfried Kolditz, 1962), in which a scriptwriter, a composer, an editor and a director complain about the impossibility of creating a revue film that is both acceptable to the censors and entertaining enough for the viewers.

[11] Publisher's note: See Interview with Iris Gusner, also on this DVD, in which she says that she first saw Böttcher's film *Stars* in 2004.

[12] See, for example, *Sabine Wulff* (1978, Dir. Erwin Stranka), *Die unverbesserliche Barbara (The Incorrigeable Barbara*, 1976, Dir. Lothar Warneke), and *Unser kurzes Leben* (*Our Short Life*, 1980, Dir. Lothar Warneke).

[13] At the first National Film Festival in Karl-Marx-Stadt, the audience's jury awarded Lissy Tempelhof, who played Maria Boltzin, a prize for "the most successful portrayal of a working-class character."

[14] In contrast, the male brigade in Ralf Kirsten's *Lachtauben weinen nicht* (*Ring Doves Don't Cry*, 1979), released about the same time, does not take collective action and the conflict of interest between management and the workers remains unresolved.

[15] Gusner recalled that, at the time, the blurring of genre boundaries (such as combining documentary-style realism with a dream squence, or using comic elements in a serious *Gegenwartsfilm*) had met with disapproval. "They demanded purity of genre, without specifying what that meant. They criticized my method of stylization. They accused me of distorting reality" (Richter 1988).

[16] And of the greenhouse scene in *Für die Liebe noch zu mager* (*Too Young for Love*, Dir. Bernhard Stephan, 1973).

[17] Author's note: This statement could be read as an intertextual reference to *SOLO SUNNY*, which was released three months prior to *Alle meine Mädchen.*

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