

Finding the Right Path in Our Short Life We Are Given



Director Lothar Warneke and film historian Erika Richter met regularly from November 2001 to March 2004. Among other topics, they discussed Warneke's life and work, his philosophy of filmmaking, and the role of art in society. The director then agreed that these extensive conversations be transcribed and published as *Die Schönheit dieser Welt* (The Beauty of This World, 2005).

Erika Richter (ER): *Our Short Life* was based on the exceptional novel, *Franziska Linkerhand*, by Brigitte Reimann and on a very good scenario by Regine Kühn. How did this project come about? Did the studio management or the dramaturg Christa Müller present this film project to you?

Lothar Warneke (LW): To be honest, I cannot remember exact details. I believe that Christa Müller gave me the story. I got it somehow. Initially, Rainer Simon had worked on this film project.¹ When I talked to him, he said he was not interested in it anymore. I cannot recall why he had given up the project; but I would like to stress that I did not start working on the film behind Simon's back.

Certainly, it was a great and wonderful opportunity for me. Because I knew the author Brigitte Reimann from earlier; [director] Roland Oehme and I had visited her in Hoyerswerda. We lived there too and, in 1967, collaborated with her on the film project *Martin Jalitschka heiratet nicht* (*Martin Jalitschka Won't Get Married*). The idea for the film was based on a book written by a *Arbeiterschriftsteller* (worker-writer), and the three of us tried to turn it into a film scenario. We had a great time together, talked and had a lot of fun and, in my opinion, got on very well together. But the studio decided not to make the film; they weren't interested in it, or perhaps had no money. That was supposed to have been our first feature film. Yes, my history with Brigitte Reimann went way back. She was a fascinating woman and knowing her was a very special experience. At the time, the novel *Franziska Linkerhand* didn't exist; it was published after she passed away.

So when I was confronted with the film project I must admit that it was a wonderful, but also awesome moment. When you make a film based on good literature, you have to overcome a certain inhibition. You feel intimidated about changing any sentence, and especially dialogue written by an admired author. However, film follows its own rules that must be observed. Regine Kühn primarily took on and realized this process. But I too had to get to the point where I could detach from Brigitte Reimann's book and find my own approach to the story—because film basically demands different structures and elements than literature.

ER: What were your crucial considerations? What was important to you? Did you highlight different things than the book?

LW: Not with the story, but in the scene composition. While literature can use clauses, film has to use images, which sometimes means finding a larger image structure—and using more film material—to make it clear what's going on. For example, [Franziska's] complicated relationships with men—Jatzwauk, Schafheutlin—were important to me. I wanted them to appear more vibrant, not as clear-cut as relationships between men and women are often presented. I wanted to make them as open-ended as is often the case in real life, where relationships are often kind of unclear and indefinite. I tried to make this visible, for example, through the acting and the camerawork.

I accepted the title Regine Kühn proposed for the project immediately: *Our Short Life*! It was exactly my theme, the theme of all of my films: Here is your life, now make something of it! We can also go wrong in our lives. These are essential questions, to which films can draw our attention. They appear in all my films, including this one, if only because of the fact that we are not immortal. We cannot do wrong over and over again we must at least try to play a part in essential

¹ Editor's note: In the documentary *Zeitzeugeninterview: Rainer Simon* (2000), Simon remembers his work on *Franziska Linkerhand*. He recounts that he worked with Regine Kühn on a script for quite some time. But the East German television station (DFF) was also interested in making a film based on the novel and considering Frank Beyer as director. The DEFA Studio and DFF played the two directors against each other, explaining to Simon that the television station owned the rights and vice versa. Simon assumed that some rights issues stemmed from Reimann's last husband. In the end, neither DEFA nor DFF made the film at this point. Later, Simon read in his Stasi files that, in fact, both DEFA and DFF were happy to find an excuse for why the film could not be made. For more information, see Detlef Kannapin and Hannah Lotte Lund's article "Einen Film müsste man schreiben," in *apropos: Film 2003* (Berlin: Bertz Verlag, 2003. 106-27).



things. I was really happy when I learned that Ullrich Kasten and Fred Gehler entitled their film about me, *Unser kurzes Leben – Ein Moralist und seine Filme* (*Our Short Life: A Moralist and His Films*, 1997). This title was meant to convey an intellectual and emotional responsibility. That is the essence of our being, that we make something good of our given, short life. This problem was formulated even more emphatically in my next film, *Die Beunruhigung* (*Apprehension*), where a specific situation forces the protagonist to confront the fact that she is living wrong and must try to correct it.

Our Short Life presented me with a very concrete problem. The story is about an architect who leaves a guaranteed career and moves to a small town, because she wants to learn more about life and the world. Once there, she is repeatedly confronted with the question of reality and the ideal. Her ideals bump up against limits in their actualization. This was a reality of daily life in the GDR; there were limits and not everything could be actualized. This situation presents another point in life where you can fail. You can either get comfortable with the existing limits and forget about your ideals, or you don't accept the limits or their reality. In the film, I present the need for a compromise—but without completely giving up on yourself, on your own dignity or ideals. Back then, that was the basic problem. On one hand, apartments had to be built, because people needed apartments; but they shouldn't only be typical housing blocks—instead, there should also be beauty in a livable city. Franziska Linkerhand must find a solution for herself within these extremes. It is also a form of becoming an adult, not only in the GDR, but everywhere on the planet. You can't just exist in dreams, but you can't live without dreams either. I tried to emphasize this point. This is why Schafheutlin is not an antagonist, but rather a person who is reminded by Franziska that dreams exist too, and that you cannot simply fulfill the necessities and duties of your professional practice.

ER: The construction industry in this city, which stands as a metaphor for the whole country, is developed convincingly in the film. I am deeply moved when, at the end, Franziska destroys everything—her drawings, her models. For me, her strange love story is not as convincing. In general, I really like Simone Frost as Franziska Linkerhand. She has an intense, humane charisma; I think she is beautiful and shines with an inner light. It all fits together. But I have the impression that something doesn't work in the scene where she rides with the man on the motorbike—actually, it's the only time in the movie that she wears a dress.

LW: Yes, I have to admit that I'd try a different solution today. If you experience a love story, you must comprehend this love, or at least be able to relate to it. The man doesn't have to be handsome. This is always difficult in a movie. I must admit that I always had a problem with the question of what type of man women find attractive. I think something went wrong here. You make mistakes. On the other hand, I told myself: Who feels attracted to whom? Can you always understand it? Sometimes the most bizarre things can move somebody to love another person. It's complicated. Of course, in a film you need elements that give the viewer some inkling. And not everyone rejected the love story.

ER: I don't reject the love story, but it doesn't completely convince me.

LW: Right, because you could not relate to it. I take this critique very seriously. It is the nature of film: once you've made it, it can't be corrected—unless you shoot it again. Usually, that's not possible. Certainly, the figure of Franziska Linkerhand, Simone Frost, absorbed my entire attention and energy. I concentrated on her completely. Maybe in casting the male part I focused too soon on the moment when they separate again, on how he is an inadequate partner for her. This is the tragedy of the love story. [Franziska] is not ready to enter into the same compromise that he has found for himself. But, as I said, I would accept that this part didn't work out completely.

ER: You have to see it within the context of the whole film. Franziska has so many problems dealing with reality that, for her, love is perhaps an escape or a kind of anchor she tries to hold on to. I don't feel that she is madly in love with the man; I have the feeling that she is lonely, disillusioned, and sad, and that she is looking for something to hold on to. This is why she is interested in this man. It is absolutely legitimate, even though it cannot be a real solution. But today, we know the archetype—Brigitte Reimann—even better than in the past; now we've read her diaries and letters, which may also lead to faulty conclusions. Apparently, Reimann always searched ardently for love. Love was the center of her life. From this perspective, I am left unsatisfied.



LW: For me, too, the moment of love is something extraordinarily sacred, meaningful, something that gives meaning to our life. So for me it is unimaginable that Franziska only uses love to sublimate her problems or crises. I would not want to see this love in this way. Obviously, something went wrong, because I estimated it was a much greater love. But in retrospect, and especially after so much time, we can talk about it; but it is not satisfying, because I cannot change it. I'll repeat what I said—for me there are only two themes in all the good films in the world: love and death. This is the meaning of life, which I try to explore in all of my films. That's why I have to acknowledge that something got away from me in this film.

ER: In your past films, you experimented with different narratives and stylistic options, like using dreams. As you approached this film project, did you consider using filmic elements that divert from concrete presentations of reality? Or did you want to tell this film story as simply as possible?

LW: I held to the original work with great discipline. In the book, Franziska's ideals are not expressed in dreams. My task was to discover how to convey that her ideas were expressed in her thoughts and lifestyle. There are moments—like when she intensely tinkers on the model city, or criticizes her colleagues for taking it easy; these are also ways to present ideals. It is not always necessary to show dreams.

ER: Her constant little dialogues with the angel are also one of these elements.

LW: That much is clear, this figure has the power of a symbol; it's a metaphor. Franziska is looking for a partner with whom she can have conversations that go deeper than chats about daily life. But the angel is a visual figure existing in reality, rather than a figure of dreams.

ER: Don't get me wrong, it's not a veiled criticism. I think the film is beautiful and miss nothing—except the intensity of the love story. Everything in the film is told very convincingly: the framing of the little town, its inhospitality, the slime pits and garbage dumps surrounding the new buildings, and the life in the residential home, which is an important part of Franziska's reality.

LW: The problem of social differences, which has existed for centuries, was not eliminated. It was clear that those who'd been educated were not automatically accepted by workers and others who had to fight for their lives and livelihood on another level. These situations were not emphasized in GDR daily life, because they wanted—and rightly so—to forge a connection between the intelligentsia and workers, the proletariat. But in this film the issue had to be raised—not in a malicious way, but rather very clearly so viewers could understand that these are problems that have not yet been solved and urgently need to be. It was a central problem of the GDR that many unsolved problems were officially declared to be solved. I accept the goal that stood behind it, however: namely, the attainment of equal rights and value for everyone.

ER: In the film this message is not at all theoretical, but rather very sensual, carried as it is by the fabulous characters; Schafheutlin's secretary, played by Christine Schorn, really stays with you, for example, or the waitress, beautifully played by Barbara Dittus. The caretaker of the residential home, whose chest gets run over by a motorbike, is one of these characters as well. Everything makes an impression and is very vivid.

LW: Earlier I mentioned that in supporting roles—actually, I don't like this term—I find brief appearances very important; although they only appear for a moment, it allows the whole universe of a life story shine through. For this you need very good actors. Like Barbara Dittus, who just stands behind the bar and all of a sudden starts telling stories that make you believe that she's had a complicated and difficult life. Or Christine Schorn as Schafheutlin's secretary. When I saw her in this role, I realized what an exceptional actress she was and that she deserved a leading role. That's why I cast her in my next film, *Apprehension*.

I am interested in those small moments in which a large, powerful dimension opens up and makes it possible to understand an entire life. This is something wonderful and important for me. In real life as well. Whenever I spend time with people, I try to discover what kind of a life they've had. This need has to do with my image of humanity, which was



shaped by theology. There are no unimportant human beings in the world; on the contrary, each human being is a gigantic world unto him- or herself. This becomes obvious to you only in the moment when you grasp the human and understand the value of that person before you. Most interactions in which people get pushed aside are the result of ignorance and lack of knowledge about them.

ER: When you tried to capture reality in this film, did you think about your old ideals?

LW: I confess that with this film these elements receded quite far into the background, although I always apply the question of authenticity when guiding actors. I don't allow actors to simply recite texts, but require that they infuse the text with authentic self-expression. This lends the text a different depth. Alfred Hirschmeier's exceptional set design created an additional level in the film. I believe that some of the basic issues I discussed were already apparent in the set design. It was thus not necessary to look for original locations for given scenes.

ER: But the new housing development was shot on location.

LW: Of course. We filmed in Marzahn and some in Hoyerswerda. In this reality, the loss of ideals was starkly apparent. These gigantic apartment blocks are anxiety-provoking, standing one behind the other, offering no qualities of urban life. In this respect, we showed authentic aspects of reality that deserved criticism. That was an idea from documentary feature film. Of course, on the other side, the ideal was also made visible: Dresden in winter, baroque architecture in the snow. That has a certain beauty, even though not much was left after the destruction of the war.

PUBLIC REACTION

ER: I cannot remember how the public reacted to the film. Almost everybody I knew read the book with enthusiasm when it was published, but I can't recall the public discussion. How was the film received?

LW: I pride myself on the many controversies and thoughtful discussions that the film provoked. There were extraordinary discussions, which I always think is to the credit of a film, because it pushes people to talk about their own problems. I think many viewers accepted the moments depicting compromise, the need to compromise, ideals, the attempt to stick to your ideals—things that don't only apply to architecture. I had the impression that the film was well received.

ER: I assume that discussions focused more on the problem of idealism versus reality, than specifically on urban development. Right?

LW: Yes, but also on urban development.

ER: Because urban development was rather a taboo topic in the GDR.

LW: That's is why it became a topic of discussion. Because a public debate on the topic was not allowed, people discussed it in a sort of non-public place—i.e., in film discussions.

ER: Did the Academy of Architecture invite you to show your film there?

LW: No. But following the broadcast of the film on DFF television, the GDR's chief architect, Hermann Henselmann, gave an interesting talk about Brigitte Reimann's ideas and thought. I was a little worried about it beforehand. He didn't tear the film apart, though, but accepted and talked about the existing problem [of urban development].

ER: Henselmann was an intelligent and well-educated man. Unfortunately, he built some awful buildings. He was, in fact, in the same situation as Franziska Linkerhand. This is clear in his correspondence with Brigitte Reimann, which was recently published as *Mit Respekt und Vergnügen* (*With Respect and Delight*, 2001).



When the film was shown in theaters, I vaguely remember that some people criticized *Our Short Life* for not being harsh or aggressive enough—but I have no specific example. At the time, I did not share this opinion. Recently, when I saw the film again during your retrospective, I felt that it develops the problem in its complexity and in a coherent manner and had gained in substance.

LW: I heard this criticism. It came from people who insisted on their ideals and did not want to accept reality, with all its difficulties. I imagine that these people ignored the problems that architects and builders had to deal with—for example, not much material or money available, etc. Nevertheless, apartments had to be built. That some people had no apartment today strikes me as appalling. Everybody ought to have an apartment, and by the end everybody had one, and it was even affordable. But the problem was that these apartments were not state-of-the-art beautiful. I thought that people who missed the harshness of the confrontations in the film had no clue about the conditions that those in construction actually faced. We found ourselves in the midst of this debate. I tried to maintain a certain balance in the film, and as a result had to accept a certain lack of sharpness. Even today, I think that this was necessary: we have to make compromises in our lives. We cannot live our lives without making compromises. You just have to know where the compromise ends. At what point does it go too far? When do I reach the point where I cannot look at myself anymore? But entirely without compromises, I don't believe it's possible.

ER: From today's point of view, you see a lot of things differently and more sharply. The film helps us experience—sensually, not theoretically—one of the basic mistakes of the type of socialism in the GDR. There was a regulatory force that presumed to create a new world, be it in the little town Hoyerswerda or elsewhere. But this force, which claimed to be something new, understood this new world as something narrow, small, and boring. Pragmatic options, or lack thereof, were only part of it. I experience this in the film. I see interesting people at work. I think it's important that I feel these are responsible and original people. For example, Schafheutlin, played by Hermann Beyer, has charisma; he's a wonderful man, someone you'd wish for her as a partner. However, their world is arranged in such a way that, even when people like him are striving to do something, it doesn't work out—because they experience decisions made by someone "upstairs" as unalterable. In this respect, from today's perspective, it is spot on.

LW: That's why the discussion that took place after the screening last year was so interesting for me. It made clear that the same problems, with slight differences, exist today as well. For we humans it has something to do with coming of age, coping with the tension between the ideal and the real—to not neglect or push away one or the other, but rather to live with the conflict. It's about this balancing act.

ER: Today, you have the feeling that there are no ideals anymore. But I know that this radical view is also not accurate.... Afterwards your film is often linked to Peter Kahane's *Die Architekten* (*The Architects*)...

LW: ... which treated urban planning in the GDR ...

ER: ... and especially about the final days of the country, with people leaving and feeling entirely disillusioned. Taken together, the films paint a very good picture.

LW: I would like to add that I am very happy about how well Simone Frost grasped the role. Although she's small physically, she is hugely energetic and sharp, and yet still has a feminine beauty. This is not unimportant. I got to know these traits in Brigitte Reimann, who was both filled with energy and a beautiful woman.

ER: I think that Brigitte Reimann was more feminine than Frost, who is a little prickly. But this is wonderful in this role. It's a shame she hasn't had a leading role in a film since then. For *Die unverbesserliche Barbara* (*The Incurable Barbara*), you had collaborated with a Polish composer, who wrote what I'd call a "sweet" score. The film is rebellious and acerbic, but it seemed the music was meant to soften or compensate for this. In *Our Short Life*, however, you moved away from this music concept again.



LW: Yes. I had worked with Gerhard Rosenfeld on all my earlier films. For *The Incurable Barbara*, however, I imagined a score that would affect viewers and didn't require much musical knowledge. I don't want to insult Andrzej Korzyski, but afterward I felt that the next score needed some more depth. So I asked Gerhard Rosenfeld to write the score for *Our Short Life*, which I really like. It created a level that I'd describe as emotional meditateness. Through the score, more thoughts and emotions about the world enter the film. I think Rosenfeld's music worked well here, although I think the score in *Barbara* worked as well.

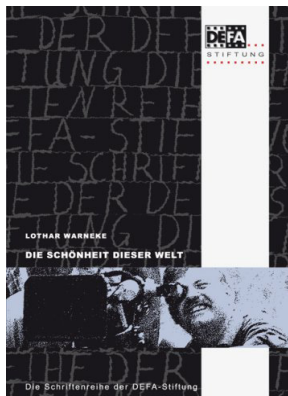
ER: Rosenfeld's score has a clarity that is suitable for the film. [...] Which films made at the same time as *Our Short Life* were important for you? We've talked several times about the fact that you moved away from your old ideas; but you surely continued to appreciate neorealism.

LW: Well, neorealism moved away from itself. The later neo-realists were no longer extreme stylists in the same way. They drifted, one way or the other, closer to conventional filmmaking, used studio equipment, etc. The film equipment we then got was much lighter and easier to handle, and gave us many ways to work in the studio. I even would go so far as to say that sometimes working in the studio actually allowed filmmakers to get closer to reality and truth than was possible shooting opportunistic observations on original locations, streets, etc.

ER: But films continued to be shot on the street, for example, Antonioni's films *L'Avventura, La Notte, L'Eclisse*...

LW: But he too moves away from filming on location with *Zabriskie Point*. Coming back to your initial question: I love watching films. Films, when they are good, fascinate me instantly, and I am not capable of distancing myself and looking at how they were made. I always went to the movies as an escape. I was different from my old colleague Horst Seemann, who didn't want to see any films by other directors at all. I always tried to keep up-to-date. In the past, our film association held Monday screenings with sometimes very good films. [...]

Erika Richter studied drama theory at the Deutsche Hochschule für Filmkunst from 1956 to 1960. After finishing special training at the Moscow film academy, VGIK, she was an editor for *filmwissenschaftliche mitteilungen*. From 1975 to 1991, she worked as a dramaturg on fourteen feature films at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films. Richter collaborated with directors including Heiner Carow (*Coming Out*), Evelyn Schmidt (*The Bicycle*), Rainer Simon (*Jadup and Boel*), and Lothar Warneke (*Apprehension*). In 1992, after the death of her husband, film historian Rolf Richter, she took over publishing the magazine *Film und Fernsehen*. From 2003 to 2005, she co-edited the DEFA Foundation's *apropos: Film* book series. For her important contributions to German film, she was awarded the Camera at the 2003 Berlin International Film Festival. Erika Richter lives in Berlin.



From November 2001 to March 2004, film historian Erika Richter met regularly to conduct conversations with director Lothar Warneke. The resulting book, *Die Schönheit dieser Welt* (*The Beauty of This World*, Berlin: DEFA – Stiftung, 2005), is an extensive and insightful conversation about the director's life and films, and the power of art.

The interview on *Our Short Life*—translated and published on this DVD, with the kind permission of the DEFA-Stiftung and Erika Richter—was originally published as part of the chapter “Ich schaue die Schönheit dieser Welt, aber meine Augen sind voller Tränen” (“I Look at the Beauty of This World, But My Eyes Are Filled With Tears,” pp. 118-132).

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