From Scenario to Film

By Erika Richter

When I read Helga Schubert's stories, I was surprised by the precision and denseness of her depictions of everyday life and by her ironic distance from things. This tension was at once provocative and seductive. I was captivated by her curiosity about peculiarities that nonetheless conveyed something characteristic. I thought immediately of movies, although the collection *Lauter Leben* (*So Much Life*, 1977) contained only short stories. Many of them depicted short scenes or contained the seeds of dialogic confrontations and conflicts. Her careful choice of language was striking, including her distinctive way of incorporating colloquial elements into her linguistic style. Her observations contained an inner tension. At the same time, some of the stories had an almost journalistic way of updating issues without sacrificing artistic quality. This produced a conjunction of short story and cultural essay, as, for example, in the celebrated "Meine alleinstehenden Freundinnen" ("My Single Girlfriends"). All this seemed to offer a promising starting point for a film. My desire to discover new authors was surely also a factor. Later, when Schubert, despite anxieties and doubts, enthusiastically agreed to my request that she try writing a movie plot, she told me:

> In order to write a story, I need two things: first, an idea and second a real person whose life or experiences correspond to that idea. This is how I start writing. But while I am working, I distance myself more and more from the thing that I originally envisioned. I treat the experiences freely and include others and imagine new things. And so a distinct story comes into being that has little to do with the concrete person I had started to write about. But I do need a concrete starting point.

That is exactly how *Die Beunruhigung* (*Apprehension*) developed. The idea—an illness bursts into normal, everyday life and forces the protagonist to take stock—became malleable for her because she had a concrete fate to bear in mind, namely her own. She began writing about herself, and important elements of her personal life survived the process, such as belonging to a certain generation, her occupation as a psychologist, her son, the encroachment of illness into her daily routines, and thoughts about emancipation and partnership. During Schubert's work on the scenario, however, the fictitious heroine increasingly developed a life of her own. She became saturated with a multitude of life experiences, observations and things she had heard and read.

Although Inge Herold´s fate is not identical with the author's, it derives its cogency and credibility from its closeness to Schubert's ideas about and expectations of life, as well as her ability to distance herself. After experimenting with different variations, these led to a clear structure. Schubert always kept the movie in mind; as she was writing the story, she read and studied the scripts of famous movies and studied film theory. Her scenario never deceives us into thinking that we are simply observing daily life. Instead, it deliberately shapes the material to bring the audience to reflection.

There are differences between the movie and the scenario. These are not a matter of the spirit, but rather the actual course of events. One big scene was dispensed with, others were modified to a greater or lesser degree and some were added. These changes make one aware of how differently film and literature deal with a subject, assuming that the scenario is of sufficient literary quality and the movie is truly cinematic.

A scenario is an independent proposal for a movie. It can be augmented, the more autonomously the better. But multiple modifications occur during the transition to film—involving directorial ideas, photography and actors—that necessitate intervention in the text (preferably with the author's consent). DEFA has occasionally been accused of presenting a cinema of subject matter and storytelling: if you read the scenario, then you know the film and cinematic specifics are lost in the process. This does not apply to *Apprehension*, particularly given that reading the scenario only adds to the experience. Its substance permits and even demands a cinematic thinking-through of the story, as well as inspired directing, cinematography and acting. But what was it in this scenario that attracted director Lothar Warneke?

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First, it was the story, which offered an opportunity to reassess the meaningfulness of everyday life based on an extreme case—one that is nevertheless not exceptional and could apply to many people. At the same time, a second layer deals with a generation taking stock, a generation of which Warneke is a part. From the outset, it was equally important that Schubert's story offered, on one hand, a solid framework and, on the other, ample scope for improvisation, observation, the unforeseen and the accidental. Under the premise of an imminent, severe illness, the course of a day is left open to many things that can be detected in reality or devised at work. At the same time, the motif of illness and its existential threat is so powerful and agitating that it can force the viewer to look at daily life differently, more keenly than usual. This establishes tension between the usual and the unusual. The familiar daily routine might be pictured accurately, yet be alienated nonetheless.

The contemporary films (*Alltagsfilme*) of the documentary school at DEFA in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Warnekes's own movies, suffered from an absence of this tension or its restricted amplitude. Despite making certain modifications, Warneke never distanced himself from his love of contemporary topics and his opinion that movies could make everyday situations into artistic experiences. Unlike most of his colleagues, who increasingly used generalized artistic structures, for Warneke there was no backing away from the everyday world. On the contrary, he wanted to get even closer to it. He believed that our [East German] films did not lack artistry so much as a precise and deeply understood reality (a debatable dichotomy). Be that as it may, Warneke saw in Schubert's scenario the possibility of getting closer to reality, particularly given that the author was willing to grant him certain cinematic liberties, as long as he respected the basic spirit of her story.

Warneke wanted to keep as much leeway for the production as possible. First, that meant not writing a script. Moreover, it meant not working in a studio, where an architect would create a spatial reality, but instead finding suitable existing spaces, such as apartments where people actually lived—not pseudo-apartments constructed simply to shoot a movie. He wanted to go to original locations with the actors and, with them, look for the most concise, convincing phrasing of a given scene.

That required—and this is the decisive factor, of course—finding actors who were both interested in and capable of working independently on the profile of their character and developing it along with the director. Warneke's call for collaboration was actually directed at the collective: the entire film team. Nothing prefabricated or already established was to be included. Instead, he wanted it to be possible to include new elements at any point—be they details of the original reality, ideas, experiences, or memories of actors and other team members. For him, this was a requirement for attaining the highest possible authenticity in creating the characters, and their living spaces and environments. Of course, the principle of collective experimentation impacts the traditional role of the movie director. Usually, he is the one who knows everything or is supposed to know everything, the one who comes to the shoot with concrete ideas, determines what the scenery will look like in advance, immediately identifies practical solutions from among the available proposals, and sets the entire course of the work. It always troubled Warneke that the film industry imposed this role on him.

Such experimentation was possible with *Apprehension* because, from a technical perspective, the story could be brought to life with a small crew and because it was carried out by a collective of like-minded people and friends who agreed with the method. Above all, Warneke was able to absolutely depend on the female lead, Christine Schorn: her talent and her passionate engagement with both her part and the movie as a whole. For Warneke, casting Schorn in her first big role was a foregone conclusion and Helga Schubert agreed immediately. It almost seemed as if the part had been written for her. It was also a stroke of luck that Schorn did not have any other engagements in this period and was thus able to concentrate fully on her role. She was generally aligned with the author's views and her part, so that some details from her own life and memories (e.g., the story of the stolen bicycle in her childhood) could be seamlessly integrated into the framework of the character that the author had imagined.

The same more or less applied to all the principal actors, including Hermann Beyer, Cox Habbema, Walfriede Schmitt and Wilfried Pucher. More clearly than usual, they were able to connect their own memories and moods to Helga Schubert's text. Readers may notice that the deviations from the text are sometimes only a matter of accent. One example is Inge Herold's visit to her former classmate, the judge. In general, the scene is presented just as Helga Schubert wrote it—except for three tiny insertions. The first is the judge's question: "You need Dieter Schramm's address?" This was devised while working collectively; I could not really say who came up with the idea. The carefully tended situation of collective reflection was very productive. There are also two other new lines, in which Inge remembers what the judge was like as a schoolgirl. She had a thick braid and at one point wore a GST[1]-uniform. These are actually Christine Schorn's memories of Walfriede Schmitt, with whom she went to high school. Schorn spontaneously introduced these memories into the script while shooting, which surprised Schmitt and forced her to come up with a very personal response (within the scope of her part). Objectively, the change to the original is minimal, but it is enormously important to the mood of the scene. The additions produce a denser web of interrelationships and generate contradictory emotional tensions in its midst. They add layers to what the scene is saying. The two women know each other from an earlier time. There were connections between them and, where Dieter Schramm is concerned, they were even rivals.

As Schramm, Hermann Beyer then takes up the thread in his scene by revealing that he knows exactly how old the judge, Katharina, is and must thus have known her quite well. These details make the characters more accessible and more contradictory; their relationships with one other become more complex, while their entanglements with their time and their social and political positions become clearer. From the interactions among the actors emerges a believable representation of this generation, which never had to say "Heil Hitler" in school, which mostly grew up without fathers, and which was free to choose between capitalism and socialism. Schubert focuses on more or less average representatives of that generation. They were perhaps more molded by the social development of our [East German] country than they molded it. Schubert shows no outstanding hero of social progress. But she also makes it clear that the representatives of this generation work independently where things are actually done—in production, education, social work, and the administration of justice. The actors contributed a lot from their personal experiences to make the representation of this "normal" self-reliance and responsibility concrete and convincing. At the same time, Schubert's text and the situations presented in her story were of a quality and style that challenged the actors. This is the prerequisite for a good film script: it does not close anything off, but rather unleashes the fantasy, gestural imagination and life experiences of the people who are to embody it.

Impulses that arose while working on-location or with lay actors were also important. These include the atmosphere in a hospital waiting room or, for an example with more import, the medical exam scene where Christine Schorn's interaction with Dr. Roesler is so critically important for the movie. This scene raised concerns about Warneke´s concept of working with lay actors. Some argued that the doctor's self-consciousness in the presence of a camera would make the character less plausible and that only Christine Schorn's excellent performance preserved the artistic level of the scene. Yes, the doctor is self-conscious and that is probably due to his unfamiliarity with the camera. But far more important is the real, authentic helplessness of the doctor when faced with a situation that confronts him more or less starkly every day. Normally only the patients experience that kind of helplessness, but they are so concerned with themselves and their crises as to be completely unable to consciously take it in. The viewer rejects the doctor's helplessness out of a desire to see the physician as mastering such situations and capable of comforting and uplifting the protagonist. But this doctor is a human being, just like us—just as confident or helpless as we would be in such a situation. And it is exactly this behavior that demands uncommon and nuanced reactions from the actress: defensiveness, defiance, desperate attempts to maintain composure. Schorn picked up on authentic reactions from the real doctor across from whom she was acting—reactions that a trained actor could hardly have produced—and handled them masterfully, without any trace of theatricality. This scene has true synergy.

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[1] Editor's note: GST (Association for Sport and Technology) was an East German mass organization. Officially, it was established to structure the free time of young people interested in sports and technology. The association also contributed to the militarization of East German society by organizing the country's mandatory pre-military training in schools, universities and workplaces. During training, participants had to wear uniforms and received ranks.

A similar scene takes place when a young woman leaving the hospital wants to comfort Inge by explaining her own medical condition. This woman, Bärbel Loeper, recounts her own story. After an extensive conversation with her, Helga Schubert wrote a text explaining that, with great inner strength, Loeper had forged a relationship with her illness that gave meaning to her life. But when she tells her story in front of the camera, she is so agitated, so troubled, and has such difficulty that the central problem of her life is revealed in its unadorned entirety. Although she insists that she has come to terms with her illness, inasmuch as she can say for now, Inge can only save herself from this oppressively authentic inability to cope by abruptly, almost brutally turning from this woman and leaving. At that moment, Inge simply cannot endure the empathy; she can only forcefully ignore it. Here too a complex new situation arose from the written scene and spontaneity merged with what had been planned.

It is illuminating that Warneke's method—eliminating everything prefabricated or predictable and facilitating spontaneous responses to situations—naturally and directly applied to the camera work as well. He insisted on using Thomas Plenert, a young documentary cinematographer who had never shot a feature film. Warneke anticipated that Plenert would impact the film in several important ways and hoped his response to real situations would yield a kind of productive tension. A documentary cameraman becomes accustomed to working with minimal equipment, moving as inconspicuously as possible and impacting the shooting location as little as possible. Added to this was another technical issue: working with black-and-white film. The author and the director agreed from the very start to shoot this story in black and white. The trivializing effect that color film can produce seemed inappropriate for the subject matter and the view of reality presented in *Apprehension*. Given that black-and-white film stock is seldom used for feature films today, knowledge of its use is gradually fading. Thomas Plenert had achieved very impressive effects using black-and-white film in a number of documentaries.

Above all, Plenert's conception of cinematography was important. He has an extremely irreverent perspective on the things that people say to each other in movies. For him, the spoken word is not so important, which is rather unusual for a movie. He regards the ways that people move in space and the relationships that become apparent to viewers through the characters' movements toward, with and against each other as far more significant. Only a movie can produce these effects and Plenert wants to concentrate on them. He is therefore strictly opposed to frequent close-ups of human faces because they isolate people from the overall space and the total process, making events seem abstract and artificial and therefore disposable.

Plenert thus always insisted on, or at least stated his desire for, medium-long or wide shots. There was a constant dispute between him and Warneke during shooting, because Warneke believed that close-ups were indispensable at important moments. This tension between them contributed to the work. Close-ups were not overused but rather only employed at certain points in the film. In general, somewhat more distant shots were chosen so that an entire sequence would be discernible. This brought something decisive to the acting. Most scenes—which, in this movie, mostly comprise encounters between two people—were generally acted and shot in their entirety, without interruption. This seems normal, but is not very common in the film business. For various reasons—be they artistic, technical, or organizational—big scenes are often broken up into many small takes; sometimes all the actors in a given scene don't even need to be together on location. For *Apprehension*, the actors were able to develop their situation and their relationship to a given partner in a concentrated manner, with all its nuances, responding to each other and in context. A true synergy became possible, even necessary. One senses the actors' great inner concentration and the genuineness and authenticity of the characters' relationships. This quality of theatrical externalization is one of the essential building blocks of the credibly authentic atmosphere that the movie exudes, much to its advantage. To be sure, parts of a scene, certain details, etc., were re-shot after the complete scene was finished so that the director could create a montage of a sequence or accentuate an event.

The cinematographer's image concept became apparent in another feature of the film as well. Where appropriate, Plenert prefers long, well-composed shots of fixed images; he shows streets and squares, apartments, entrances, etc., in very well thought-out, calm takes. Shots of Alexanderplatz, for example, appear downright alienating—they are so well-proportioned and austere, supported by the abstracting effect of black and white—but we also see the setting with new eyes. Plenert also knows the dangers of an overly calculated composition, however, and interrupts these shots again and again, following the flow of movements, people and gestures. He has a deep-seated distrust of the imaginary in feature films and tries, when possible, to counter it with alienating techniques, barbs and interference. Overall, the collaboration with this documentary cinematographer brings a high degree of pictorial concentration, compression and awareness of form to this movie.

For both Helga Schubert and Lothar Warneke, *Apprehension* is an attempt to enter into an intensive conversation with the audience. They want to challenge viewers with the most intense experience of the story possible and make them question the meaning of their own lives, embrace anxiety, find a humane response in the experience and contemplation of that anxiety, and develop understanding and sensitivity for the anxieties of others. Initial experience shows that many audience members eagerly seize upon this proposal of communication.[2] The movie loosens the tongue. People discuss how illness is handled, the willingness to communicate and the absence of communication, inter-generational relationships, the various problems of emancipation, divorce as victory and danger, the desire for personal freedom and attachment, being there for one another and emotional security. All this and much more is brought up from the depths because Helga Schubert depicted a slice of life that the audience can believe in. Because Christine Shorn represents a character whose vitality and intensity are inescapable. Because the director constructed an artistic organism that the audience accepts for its accuracy of observation and veracity of intention. This is what we hoped for from the very beginning, although we were not always certain we would succeed in communicating the team's intentions with such a simple plot, which was, moreover, realized in black and white. I am certain that one reason *Apprehension* works is because it is different from other movies—which I believe is another advantage.

Comparing the present version of the scenario, which formed the basis for the movie, with the film itself may prompt those interested in movies to reflect a bit on the nature of film. But it is precisely because the scenario and movie are not identical that one can recommend reading the script to those who do not care much about movies but are simply interested in texts by Helga Schubert.

Translated by Sigrit Schütz and Joe Keady.

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[2] This refers to discussions with the audience held after screening *Apprehension* in East Germany in 1981 and 1982.