

Burning Life - A Recollection

by scriptwriter and author Stefan Kolditz



Caution! In your hand is a film that was rated "extremely dangerous" at its 1994 premiere in Germany. But before you panic, let me start from the beginning . . .

One morning in 1988 the doorbell rang. When I opened the apartment door, there stood before me an unfamiliar young man, who introduced himself as Peter Welz, student of directing at the Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg. He had seen my DEFA film *Die Entfernung zwischen dir und mir und ihr* (*The Distance between You and Me and Her*, 1987), which was then playing in theaters, and suggested that we should make a film together sometime.

The Distance between You and Me and Her was my second film. My screenplay was so different from conventional DEFA films—which were supposed to somehow help convince viewers that there was a true life in the falseness [of the GDR]—that most dramaturgs didn't even understand what it was about. To my surprise, the film was nevertheless made and, in 1988, I won the prize for Best Screenplay at the National Film Festival in Karl Marx Stadt (today Chemnitz). The film was a tragicomedy about young East Germans in the 1980s. Hopeless, with no respect, surreal. This was precisely what interested Peter Welz.

Peter Welz experienced the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 in Munich [at the International Festival for Film Academies] where his thesis film, *Unsere Familie* (*Our Family*, 1989), caused such a stir that a young producer from a big TV station offered to collaborate with him on something. Christian Granderath was floating an idea for a film about five to seven women of all ages, who reside in a deep, dark valley in Thuringia and undertake bank robberies à la Robin Hood. For this project, Peter Welz believed to have the right scriptwriter: me.

I found the basic idea intractable. Thuringia, once the southernmost region in East Germany, had now become a federal state right in the middle of unified Germany. After 1989, East Germany was *terra incognita* for many West Germans. A blank spot. Wildly romantic, or scary, or just lamentably poor.

The first thing I suggested was to reduce the seven to two women, who meet each other accidentally, get tangled together during a bank robbery, and become popular heroes because one of them spontaneously gives away the money they just stole. It was to be a road movie across a country that existed in two different time zones at once: with dilapidated factories and ultra-modern shopping centers on the edge of cities; leached-out strip mining sites and golf courses built upon leveled villages; communes in abandoned 18th-century castles and gas stations, lit up like UFOs on lonely country roads. A country in total transition, depleted by forty years of over-exploiting its resources, but with people who had learned to live under difficult circumstances. On the lam, Anna and Lisa—as the two heroines were called—meet one of the many adventurers who set out in search of easy money in East Germany after the *Wende*. It was to become a trip from the south to the north and a film about love and betrayal.

I began writing in 1991 and had the screenplay finished when Peter Welz suggested we go see a movie. The film was called *Thelma & Louise*, and for a moment we were both speechless: a road movie, two women, a handgun and a car. Ridley Scott had clearly stolen our idea. But *Thelma & Louise* is about two women who disentangle themselves from the world of men and gender stereotypes; our film, in contrast, is about two women who are reacting to social upheaval.

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Two different films. We didn't have to change a thing (even if some still stubbornly insist that we based our film on *Thelma & Louise*). Except for one thing: we had originally planned to call the film *Anna and Lisa*. That was just too much. So Peter suggested the title *Burning Life*, a line taken from an old blues song.

Alexander Gehrke became the producer. He was our age, like Peter Welz came from the Film Academy in Potsdam, and had created a production company just to make *Burning Life*. The budget was enormous, at least for us: somewhat more than two million marks. (Just to compare, my last film cost twice as much – and it was a film for *television*.)

The film was originally conceived as a summer road movie. But the budget – in Germany always linked in one way or another to public funds – had to be spent in that year. Thus, filming began at the beginning of November 1993 and ended, after 35 days of shooting, in January. A summer road movie at 15 below zero! If you take a closer look, you see that there's snow on the ground in some scenes.

Before a film makes its way into theaters in Germany, it is appraised by a commission that calls itself Voluntary Self-Monitoring (FSK). Its members check whether the film contains or shows things that could endanger viewers; then they decide what viewers are allowed to see the film. We got the rating *Prädikat FSK-16*, which means that no viewers under sixteen were allowed to see the film. We were assured that this has nothing to do with censorship; it was all about the protection of German viewers. We were familiar with this rationale from East Germany. In fact, the commission was so frightened by *Burning Life* that it wrote in its explanatory statement that the film would "socially and ethically disorient" viewers. Simply put, this meant that someone would go into the theater a normal viewer and leave an evil, dangerous person.

In 1994, *Burning Life* won the Young Director's Award at the renowned Munich Film Festival. The following year, it was nominated for the German Film Prize for Best Film, and Maria Schrader won Best Actress, which she won again a year later at the Film Festival in Catholica, Italy.

So I'd like to reassure you: I don't think *Burning Life* will turn you into an evil or dangerous person. But I'll let you decide for yourself.

Stefan Kolditz works as a freelance author, scriptwriter and playwright in Berlin. In 1990, he published *German Silent Film 1895-1913*. He collaborated with the Berliner Ensemble in the solo-play "EVA – Hitler's Lover" (premiere 1996). Kolditz has also written over 30 screenplays for television and cinema, including the important two-part TV film, *Dresden* (2006). *Borderline* (2007), based on his script, received the Gold World Medal at the 2009 New York festival.

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