

# Jeans, Leather Jacket, Cowboy Hat: The Costume Design Concept in *Berlin around the Corner*



By Annette Dorgerloh

Like no other DEFA film in the 1960s, *Berlin um die Ecke* (*Berlin around the Corner*) is influenced by the protagonists' conflicts between work and free time, young and old, the actions of the characters, as well as the differences between the representatives within one generation. The filmmakers found an expressive visualization for all these constellations. The young people in the film are Berliners and metropolitans, who experience the climax of youth culture in the 1960s, and who are ostracized by the state and virtually forced by existing circumstances into independence.

Set and costume design play a significant and not to be underestimated part in the film's effect. Film historian Alfred Krautz summarized his thoughts about costume and space in his essay, "Kostümkonzeption und Charakterisierung der Figuren" ("The Concept of Costume and the Characterization of Figures"), published by DEFA's Studio Academy in 1985: The artistic reflections on reality in film "not only provide information and knowledge, but also convey inner attitudes and moral concepts."<sup>1</sup> In this respect, set designers, as well as costume designers, are "Menschenbildner"<sup>2</sup> (creators of people) who help to give film figures their characteristics. The ideas about production and costume design, which DEFA theorist Alfred Krautz specified again and again, are still insightful and inspiring today: "Information conveyed by costumes corresponds with information about space, the precise topography, place, and time."<sup>3</sup> This information not only makes it possible to identify time, but also helps to evaluate the images presented on screen. Krautz recognized correctly that "a certain costume creation correlates with the scenographic image."<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Klein's *Berlin around the Corner* is a perfect example of a correlation between space, character, and costume. The question is, how costume designer Barbara Braumann and set designer Alfred Drosdek—in collaboration with the director and cameraman—were able to create spaces of action assigned to the characters of the protagonists, and costumes as a discernable second skin of the characters.

Costume designer Barbara Braumann created over 50 designs for cinema and television productions, including the DEFA classics *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, GDR, 1972, dir. Heiner Carow), *Für die Liebe noch zu mager* (*Too Young for Love*, GDR, 1973, dir. Bernhard Stephan), the sci-fi *Eolomea* (GDR, 1972, dir. Herrmann Zschoche), the elaborate costume dramas *Wer reißt denn gleich vorm Teufel aus?* (*Who Is Afraid of the Devil?*, GDR, 1977, dir. Egon Schlegel) and *Zille und ich* (*Zille and Me*, GDR, 1983, dir. Werner W. Wallroth); each single costume design was a new challenge.<sup>5</sup>

As a child, Barbara Braumann knew exactly what she would like to be. She was a student when she won a painting competition in her home town of Magdeburg. "The award was a trip to Berlin, where I saw amazing cinema advertising. Everything sparked. I was convinced I would design costumes for films, and I worked towards this goal."<sup>6</sup> Although she was not happy to learn that being an apprentice tailor was necessary for admission to the Kunsthochschule (Academy of Arts) in Berlin-Weißensee, she became a costume and theater tailor. While still a student, she presented her portfolio to the DEFA Studio in Potsdam-Babelsberg and applied there. Finally, she got her dream job. "I spent half of my life at the Marlene Dietrich Atelier," Barbara Braumann remembers in a 2008 article.<sup>7</sup>

The personalities of the characters in *Berlin around the Corner* are shaped by their habitus. In seconds, the audience subconsciously analyzes the appearance of the performers through facial expression, body posture, and, most importantly, fashion. The Italian director, Michelangelo Antonioni, described the work of a costume designer as "a work of

<sup>1</sup> Krautz, Alfred. "Kostümkonzeption und Charakterisierung der Figuren, dargestellt an neueren DEFA-Filmen." *Aus Theorie und Praxis des Films*. Potsdam-Babelsberg: Betriebsakademie des DEFA-Studios für Spielfilme, 1985. Issue 1. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup> See: Jäger, Heidi. "Sie machte Paula schön. Kostümbildnerin Barbara Braumann übergab ihre Sammlung dem Filmmuseum." *Potsdamer Neueste Nachrichten*, February 22, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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indication and interpretation of the reason why the film was created and of the protagonists who act in the film.”<sup>8</sup> The film’s protagonists, Olaf, Horst and Karin, are young people who want to achieve more in their lives than just working according to existing rules; they want to create their own rules and future within the limits of their own possibilities. The characters are distinguished by their habitus and their ‘rebellious’ clothes. Although these are their everyday clothes, which they wear in their private and work lives, they also represent an expression of the imminent generational conflict.

## Cool boys: Jeans, leather jacket and a black turtleneck sweater

One of the first scenes shows Olaf and Horst on the roof of one of the new, architecturally significant buildings of the former Stalinallee in Berlin, renamed Karl Marx Allee (only in 1961). Using the elevator, they moved an old couch upstairs that they were asked to dispose of. They jump happily on the piece of furniture. The camera zooms in on the two boys, and one can see that they wear blue jeans; in addition, Olaf wears a black leather jacket, which he does not let go of until the end of the movie. The jacket defines the young boy even more than the jeans that get mentioned at various times. Jeans,<sup>9</sup> are an obvious statement that the boys make. Both wear brand-name jeans,<sup>9</sup> which were not easy to obtain after the building of the Wall in 1961.<sup>10</sup> In addition, jeans were officially labeled in the GDR as an expression of “American lack of culture, Texan ideology and culture of rangers.”<sup>11</sup> For GDR officials, jeans had a negative connotation.

In the short period of relative freedom before the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the SED Party in 1965, the production of a jeans-like fabric was considered and the emotive term ‘jeans’ was officially used in GDR fashion magazines. For example, the magazine *Saison* published a pattern for a dress made of “blue cotton,” a jeans-like fabric called *Cottino* in 1964. Mail order companies also tried to keep up with the increasing demand for denim clothing.<sup>12</sup> The GDR’s textile industry was not able to effectively react in a timely manner to the demands, and many years passed until the GDR would set up their own jeans production. Although the fabric of the jeans came close to its American original, the cut was not comparable.<sup>13</sup> “Jeans are a statement; not simply trousers!” These were the words of anti-hero Edgar Wibeau in Ulrich Plenzdorf’s novel, *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (*The New Sorrows of Young W.*), published in 1972. However, Wibeau’s idea had already been reality in GDR youth culture for quite some time.

In the opening scene of *Berlin around the Corner*, director Gerhard Klein shows the young workers, Olaf and Horst, dressed in jeans. This is a direct reference to his earlier Berlin films, in which the young heroes wear jeans and make a conscious fashion statement.<sup>14</sup> Not only Klein let his heroes put on jeans, audience darling Manfred Krug appeared in jeans—the item of clothing rejected by party officials—on screen in the 1961 DEFA film *Auf der Sonnenseite* (*On the Sunny Side*, dir. Ralf Kirsten).

In contrast to the rather underrepresented jeans in the film, Olaf’s leather jacket carries an even more important meaning. The black leather jacket is like a second skin. Barbara Braumann’s design sketches give an idea about the jacket’s genealogy. Obviously, a pale jacket was planned at first, but on the final design of a darker jacket, one reads the handwritten

<sup>8</sup> Antonioni, Michelangelo. „Una intervista.“ *La moda e il costume nel film*. Roma: Edizioni Bianco e Nero, 1950. S. 111. Quoted in: Krautz, Alfred. „Filmszenographie und Kostümbild. Kommentierte Quellen.“ *Aus Theorie und Praxis des Films*. Potsdam-Babelsberg: Betriebsakademie des DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme, 1980. Issue 2. 100.

<sup>9</sup> The so-called original jeans, including Levis and Wrangler, were the most appreciated jeans. See: Menzel, Rebecca. *Jeans in der DDR. Vom tieferen Sinn einer Freizeitthose*. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2004. Especially the chapter “Jeans in einem jeanslosen Land (1961-67).” 52-89.

<sup>10</sup> Although *Exquisit-Läden* (Exquisite shops) opened in 1962 and sold high-quality clothes—imported or domestic products—for high prices, jeans were instead available in Intershops that opened at the same time. These shops sold West German products for hard currencies, including West German marks or dollars. GDR citizens were only allowed to enter these shops with western relatives or if they possessed the requested currencies. GDR citizens were allowed to hold these currencies and were not obligated to give information about how they obtained the money. It was only important that this kind of money ended up in state accounts. Later, this currency became important in the GDR for paying handymen who were difficult to find or for paying for rare replacement parts for cars. Cf: *Lexikon des DDR-Sozialismus: das Staats- und Gesellschaftssystem der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*. Ed. Rainer Eppelmann. Paderborn: P. Schöningh, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> *SED-Bezirksleitung Leipzig: Zu einigen Fragen der Jugendarbeit und dem Auftreten der Rowdygruppen. Beschluß des Sekretariats der SED-Bezirksleitung Leipzig vom 13.10. 1965*. BV PDS Leipzig, PA, IV A-2/16/464. Quoted in: Rauhut, Michael. *Beat in der DDR 1964-1972. Politik und Alltag*. Berlin: BasisDruck, 1993. 377.

<sup>12</sup> See: Menzel, 2004. 76. A first pattern for a *Nietenhose* (Literally “rivet trousers,” the East German term for jeans) for boys was developed by the Main Office for Clothing in Leipzig. Image in Menzel, 2004. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Only at the end of the 1970s, the VEB Jugendmode made a domestic jeans product of the brand Wisent and Shanty available. Because of high demand and pressure from citizens, high quantities of American Levi jeans were imported in 1978. They were offered in special sales in selected large factories where a lot of young people worked, as well as in Jugendmodezentren (youth fashion centers), universities and the Academy of Science. See: Menzel, 2004. 160-161.

<sup>14</sup> See: Klein/Kohlhaase films: *Eine Berliner Romanze* (*A Berlin Romance*, GDR, 1956) and *Berlin - Ecke Schönhauser* (*Berlin - Schönhauser Corner*, GDR, 1957) Cf. also: Wrage, Henning. *Die Zeit der Kunst. Literatur, Film und Fernsehen in der DDR der 1960er Jahre*. Heidelberg: Winter-Verlag, 2008. 183-211.

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note: black leather. (Fig.—1, 2) However, her costume design sketches show the leather jacket in a rather moderate version. This version was probably not radical enough for the director. At the end, the stitching in the chest area was omitted. Olaf's jacket looks "really cool" and "much cooler" than the existentialist-influenced clothing that his friend Horst wears all the time. The turtleneck sweater is tailor-made for Horst by Barbara Braumann. (Fig.—3)

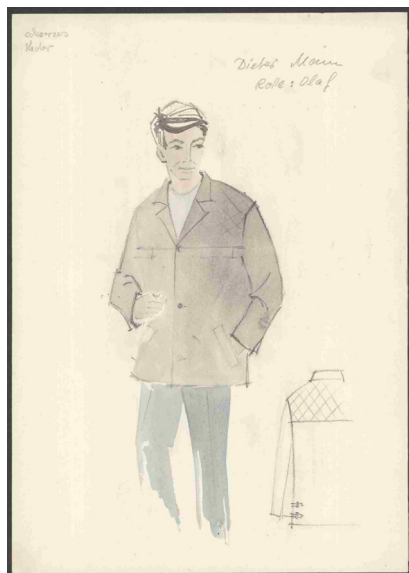


Fig.—1: Olaf with pale leather jacket. Set design by Barbara Braumann, 024, Filmmuseum Potsdam.

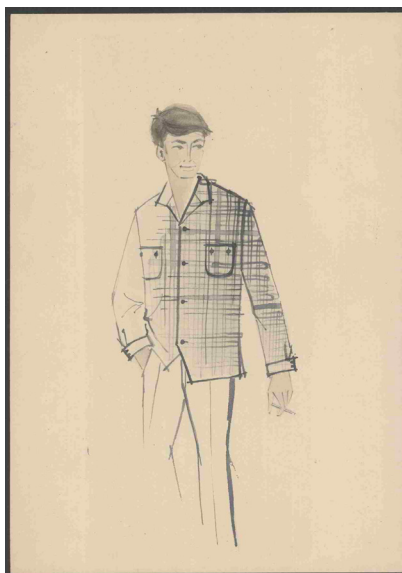


Fig.—2: Olaf with black leather jacket. Set design by Barbara Braumann, 025, Filmmuseum Potsdam.

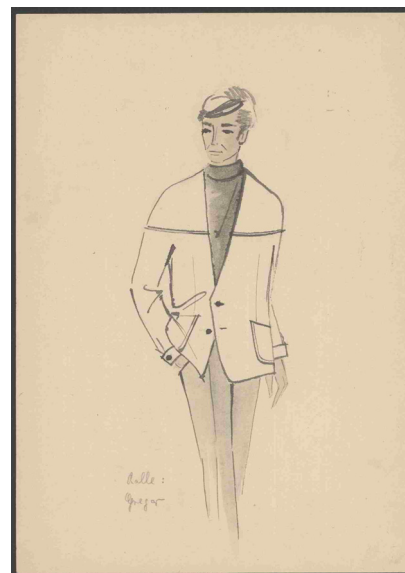


Fig.—3: Set design sketch with black turtleneck sweater for Horst. Set design by Barbara Braumann, 026, Filmmuseum Potsdam.

Jeans, as well as the black leather jacket, can be traced back to American film idols, including James Dean (*Rebel Without a Cause*, USA, 1955) and Marlon Brando (*The Wild One*, USA, 1953). These idols influenced the new image of *Halbstarken* (rebels)<sup>15</sup> and had an effect on contemporary West German cinema, as well as new music trends from jazz to rock 'n' roll. Fans could be recognized by their fashion style in which the black leather jacket played an important role. Leather, once a traditional material, is now a reference to underdogs or outlaws. The black leather jacket, a must in rock 'n' roll chic, became fashionable primarily when Marlon Brando, personifying the "rebel," wore it in the movie *The Wild One*.

At the end of the film, *Berlin around the Corner*, Olaf generously gives up his beloved leather jacket and hands it over to his younger brother. This is understood as a legacy, a "passing of the torch," to the next generation of young, style-conscious Berliners who belong to an international youth culture.

## Making a statement with working clothes: from cowboy hat to disease dress

Olaf makes a statement with leisure-time style, as well as with his working clothes. He combines his checkered shirt with a striking hat, a cowboy's Cattleman, the same hat James Dean wore in *Giant* (USA, 1956, dir. George Stevens) or Horst Buchholz as Chico in *The Magnificent Seven* (USA, 1960, dir. John Sturges). Not even his friend, Horst, wears a striking hat like that, but instead goes with a traditional worker's hat to make his own statement, as he is the only person wearing this kind of hat. At the end of the film, Olaf gets his beautiful Karin and rides off with her on his hot Jawa motorbike, mirroring Chico on his horse.

Olaf and Horst present different prototypes. While Olaf is the fearless young hero, his friend, Horst, son of an official from the prestigious Karl Marx Allee, is more the existentialist youth, who mainly wears a black turtleneck sweater and a dark jacket in his downtime. He enjoys life, has an affair with a married woman and feels attracted to West Berlin and the lost possibilities. Horst does not take over responsibility for his actions and he is not able to stand by his convictions; this

<sup>15</sup> This is also a reference to the West German film *Die Halbstarken* (*Teenage Wolfpack*, 1956, dir. Georg Tressler) that was influenced by American productions, especially *Rebel Without a Cause*, of the 1950s.

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character trait runs like a common thread through the film. Olaf, in contrast, appears on the scene more pronounced: He wears sneakers when he works on his motorbike in the basement or when he ambushes his older colleague, Hütte, in the hallway. But Olaf also wears fashionable, pointy leather shoes in unison with a backpack decorated with stickers when he says goodbye to Paul Krausmann after shift's end.

It is obvious that the character of Karin offered a strong design variability to costume designer Braumann: From a kitchen worker at a factory canteen to an elegant young night club singer. She leaves for work in a crocheted sweater and stove-pipe pants—for women, still a novelty at that time—or she dresses in a silky dress for her performance at a dance club. (Fig.—4-7) The costume design sketches, archived at the Filmmuseum in Potsdam, show that they were applied to the film without any changes. There are only slight adjustments in the leisure-time fashion. Instead of a checkered blouse and the proper hairband, Karin wears a modern, boxy sweater.



Fig.—4. Karin as a singer. Set design by Barbara Braumann, 021, Filmmuseum Potsdam.



Fig.—5. Karin dressed in a white nylon coat. Set design by Barbara Braumann, 018, Filmmuseum Potsdam



Fig.—6. Karin dressed in a suit and a crochet pullover. Set design by Barbara Braumann, 015, Filmmuseum Potsdam.

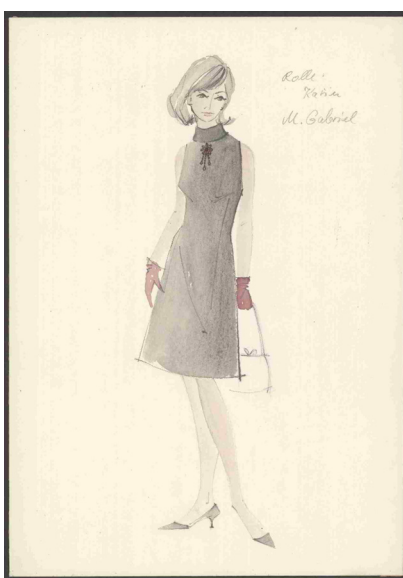


Fig.—7. Karin in a sleeveless, high-necked dress. Set design by Barbara Braumann, 016, Filmmuseum Potsdam.



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The wide range of costumes corresponds to the traits of the characters in the film. While Olaf, the steady rebel, wears his leather jacket throughout the film, the more multi-faceted character of Karin dresses in a wider variety of styles. Although there are worlds between the singer with pinned-up hair and the slick, slitted dress, and the woman working in the kitchen, her downtime fashion seems to be a balance between these worlds. Both characters, no matter how they dress, always show closeness and understanding for the working class. However, at the same time, they want to be respected in their own particular ways.

All young people in the film have in common that their living spaces are not consistent with their fashionable appearance on the street. The young people live in modest places, seen from today's point of view. Olaf has to share his room with his younger brother and has only some space for individually selected pictures above his bed. Karin's temporarily furnished rear house apartment seems to be a consequence of her separation from her husband. In one of the dialogs, her husband criticizes her apartment: "This den is a declaration of bankruptcy." But he is not able to provoke her. Karin stands by her new status being in a transitional situation of her life, like the other young people in the film. Olaf and Karin will leave this situation at the end when they decide for a future together at a different place. The film only suggests a place and leaves open where they will go next; maybe they will move like Horst to one of the large GDR construction sites in Eisenhüttenstadt, or to the gas combine Schwarze Pumpe near Spremberg.

Until the beginning of the 1970s, GDR youth fashion<sup>16</sup> had a strong political dimension, although young people felt that their clothing was rather unpolitical. It radically changed in the 1980s with the punk movement. This development can clearly be seen in DEFA youth films.<sup>17</sup> Critical DEFA works, including the Berlin films by the Klein/Kohlhaase duo, offered an important vision for the GDR youth. The young audience could identify with their contemporaries on screen who tried to find their own way in a system that they supported and criticized at the same time. Today, we hardly can understand why party and government strongly mistrusted the contemporary currents in the GDR youth, as well as their artistic interpretation in film. *Berlin around the Corner*, one among twelve films banned in 1965-66 in the aftermath of the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the SED Party, still offers new and important insights into a historic period of fashion and costume design.

*Translated by Hiltrud Schulz.*

*We thank costume designer Barbara Braumann for her permission to use her set design sketches in this article.*

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<sup>16</sup> In 1968, the first GDR Jugendmodezentrum (Youth Fashion Center) opened on the Karl Marx Allee, the same street where Olaf and Horst were filmed and near Karin's apartment.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Zwischen Bluejeans und Blauhemden. Jugendfilm in Ost und West*. Eds. Ingelore König, Dieter Wiedemann, Lothar Wolf. Berlin: Henschel-Verlag, 1995.