



W I N T E R A D É

Narrating Women's History in *Winter Adé*

By Jennifer Creech

In the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), gender equality was part of the official socialist platform from the republic's inception in 1949. This was manifested in various policies that promoted women's economic and professional emancipation in ways still absent in the west, including: access to free childcare, the incorporation of numerous services on factory premises (laundry facilities, shops and supermarkets, day-care, etc.), paid maternity leave for up to one year with guaranteed job security, higher percentages of women in qualified jobs, middle management and formerly male professions (Rinke 2006: 20-25). Yet, the number of female directors at the East German DEFA Film Studios always paled in comparison to that of men. While women were often well represented in the areas of screenwriting, editing, costuming and production, they rarely stood behind the camera as director or cinematographer. This was the case at the DEFA Documentary Film Studio, as well as the DEFA Feature Film Studio. The Documentary Studio employed numerous well-known and well-respected male documentary filmmakers, including Jürgen Böttcher, Thomas Heise, Winfried Junge and Volker Koepp, as well as directors known for more propagandistic work, including Karl Gass, Walter Heynowski, Gerhard Scheumann and Andrew Thorndike. There were few influential female documentary directors, however. The most prolific and celebrated female documentary filmmaker was Helke Misselwitz; only two others—Gitta Nickel and Annelie Thorndike—were of parallel stature, albeit for rather different reasons.

Nickel and Thorndike, two of DEFA's most notable female documentarians, produced idealistic films that celebrated socialism, often focusing on model subjects: party leaders, master tradesmen and factory managers, five-year plans and the building of socialism. Asked what film ought to do, Nickel once answered, "Film should concentrate on the socialist ideals that stand at the center of our everyday lives, it should generate productive patterns of behavior that contribute to the growth of our society" (qtd. in Jordan and Schenk 2000: 166).

Misselwitz's work could not have been more different from this model. Often focusing on the lives of average women in everyday situations, Misselwitz's work reflects an interest in the intimate details of the private sphere. Like her renowned male contemporaries, Böttcher and Koepp, Misselwitz focuses on interpersonal relationships, family life and gendered experience to reveal various aspects of life under socialism. Attempts to document and probe the "everyday"—for example in Junge's Golzow documentaries and Koepp's Wittstock films—illustrate the tensions between the "personal" and the "political." As Barton Byg has suggested, politically motivated narrative choices made by filmmakers were often complicated by contradictions in participants' personal responses and the visual reality of domestic duties and personal space (2001). While these documentaries focused away from the "larger" problems of socialism, they achieved a more critical engagement with daily life that engaged viewers' desire to see socialism as it was really lived, not in the form of socialist realist idealism. Elke Schieber sees in this critical engagement a particular cinematic tradition at the DEFA Documentary Studio, in which the films construct a kind of "critical truth":

A style was developed that was characterized by long observations with no cuts and a peaceful flow of images. These films were appreciated by viewers because they didn't interrupt the people in front of the camera and because they offered the sight of people allowed to move in spaces that they knew well.... The camera doesn't prioritize anything, discredit anyone, idealize anything. (2000: 186)

Misselwitz's film *Winter Adé* is representative of a movement, also visible in DEFA feature films and in GDR women's literature, in which the contradictions of real, existing socialism are dealt with through a gen-



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dered lens. Misselwitz's film successfully constructs such critical truth by conforming to a trend within DEFA documentary filmmaking in which "woman" comes to represent the "truth" of everyday life. Whether or not one can think of "documentary women's films" as a genre in the GDR, it is clear that documentary films about women, especially in the 1970s and 80s, differed greatly from those about men. The most significant and renowned among these include: Jürgen Böttchers's *Stars* (1963), about a female brigade in the NARVA light-bulb factory on the outskirts of Berlin, as well as his film *Wäscherinnen* (*Laundry Women*, 1972), about a group of women working at an industrial laundry in Berlin; Gitta Nickel's *Sie* (*She*, 1970) about female workers in a Berlin confectionary factory, and *Wir von ESDA* (*We at ESDA*, 1976, a DEFA production on behalf of GDR television), about women working in a hosiery factory in the Erzgebirge; and, finally, Volker Koepp's Wittstock film series (1975-1997), about a small group of women living and working in a knitting factory in the town of Wittstock in Brandenburg.

Although it is part of this documentary tradition, *Winter Adé* uses different cinematic techniques to create its critical truth, this authenticity of experience in the GDR—techniques, which specifically interrogate official ideologies of gender in the GDR. In particular, Misselwitz's use of "talking heads," traditionally a realist structure, engages directly with feminist film debates regarding the social and political role of documentary film practices. Both Sonja Michel and Julia Lesage have argued for the importance of certain realist structures for achieving feminist goals in filmmaking. Lesage asserts that many feminist filmmakers deliberately use realist structures such as "talking heads": "a simple format to present to audiences [...] a picture of the ordinary details of women's lives, their thoughts—told directly by the protagonists to the camera—and their frustrated but sometimes successful attempts to enter and deal with the public world of work and power" (1990: 223–24). These forms of realism can be understood as "an urgent public act" aimed at making these biographies and experiences simple, accessible and trustworthy. Lesage questions the notion of "truth" or "transparency" by suggesting that these textual techniques create a structure for the viewer that is recognizable and enjoyable, not transparently or factually "true." At the same time, the structure demands that viewers engage critically with established social narratives (233). Thus, in using this technique, Misselwitz participates in the demystification of the past by providing women a public forum in which they can speak about their lives and articulate new knowledges and new truths about socialist experience (Lesage 230; Michel 238; on the talking-heads technique cf. Lambrecht; Müller; Schmidt; and Wander).

Winter Adé also does not limit itself to one space and time, as is often the case in earlier documentaries that focus on a single woman, on women working in a particular brigade or factory, or on women living in one town. The women who speak in this film are located around the country, are in various stages of life, and lead a variety of lifestyles. In a sense, the film attempts to create something that other East German documentaries had yet to accomplish—a collage of East German women's experiences. The use of various locations, and an assortment of women in differing social positions and family roles speaking into the camera, makes it more difficult to generalize about the particular women interviewed and creates a differentiated, less stereotypical, and therefore more "authentic" picture of GDR "womanhood." *Winter Adé* thereby complicates and even contradicts official media images of women and does not suggest a single truth or reality. In its emphasis on autobiography and life stories, on the individual telling and interpreting of experience, the film creates a kind of *metissage*, a "braided text of many voices that speak their cultural locations dialogically" (Smith and Watson 1998: 12). The women interviewed construct a narrative of their experiences and themselves, but also reinterpret and revise those autobiographies at moments when they must engage with the competing and contradictory public discourses that surrounding their personal experiences. Thus, the authenticity of *Winter Adé* is located both in the plurality of the experiences narrated and in the women's composition and revision of the their own narratives.



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The film begins with an autobiographical frame in which Misselwitz narrates her own personal history in a voice-over monolog. Beginning with a shot from inside a car waiting at a railroad crossing, she says: "I was born here, in front of this railroad crossing. In an ambulance, Grandmother helped. [...] In her diary she [my mother] wrote: What a wonderful birthday present you are! Papa is very happy, even though you are not the son he wanted." The camera cuts to the still image of a family photo: a grandmother holds one small girl and one baby girl; a young couple, presumably Misselwitz's parents, stands behind. The image is replaced with a second still of two girls receiving diplomas, while the sound of the opening sequence (a passing train) is replaced by the sound of creaking. The still image is replaced by a medium shot of a man cranking the railroad gate open. Misselwitz asks to see the tattoos decorating his chest and back, wondering aloud what kind of women he has inscribed there. His answer: "beautiful women."

The film's establishing shot, waiting for the train to pass over the tracks, thus becomes a visual metaphor for Misselwitz's entrance into and experience of the world. Having been born a daughter, rather than the son for whom her father had longed, she was a mixed blessing. Her metaphorical standstill supports the two privileged sentences from her mother's diary, where her sex is clearly presented as a barrier. She must wait for it to pass or for a man to "open the gate" to her emancipation. The contradictions of Misselwitz's personal experience are then grotesquely multiplied in the figure of the railroad worker. Not only is he represented as an agent of (women's) "release," but the visual representations of women on his body are static and one-dimensional: his only description of them is "beautiful." This secondary screen—of the tattoos—reflects back onto the visual medium with which Misselwitz must struggle in order to represent "women and girls of this country." It is a medium that traditionally binds woman to what Laura Mulvey refers to as her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1975: 64).

Further, this sequence illustrates that alternative forms of history writing, like diaries or autobiographical forms, give voice to experiences that are often silenced in official narratives—in this case, by supposed gender equality in the GDR. Through the opening sequences of *Winter Adé*, the mother's diary and the still photos of Misselwitz as a child become tools in a public discourse, participating in the production of knowledge and historical narrative. Misselwitz's use of still photos instead of her own "talking head" illustrates that she remains at a kind of standstill: while she is shown receiving her diploma, the moment is frozen, raising the question of women's "progress" in the GDR and alluding to the reifying tendency of official socialist discourse. But by contrasting these still images with the moving images of her documentary footage, she intervenes in public discourse by giving the female experiences catalogued here a previously unattained historical agency.

The recurring trope of train travel, which binds Misselwitz's own personal history with that of the other women in the film, serves as the point of departure for the various interviews we witness. As the film's title sequence rolls, we hear a woman's voice announcing that passengers should now board the train. This narrative device invites the viewer to join Misselwitz on a personal journey that is also a public attempt to rewrite history through dialog. From inside the train car, the camera looks out the window at the passing countryside. Misselwitz tells the viewer that she is under way, "to discover how others have lived and how they want to live. I will talk to them on journeys, at work and at home. [...] Occasionally we'll only look at them, the women and girls of this country."

The stories that these women tell of life in the former East Germany are as diverse as they are similar. There is the Berliner Hillu, an advertising economist, aged forty-two, who discusses growing up under the thumb of a patriarchal father, escaping a failed marriage, and experiencing surprise and disappointment as one of only a few women in a sea of workers being awarded the "Banner of Labor" at a state award ceremony. At the other end of the spectrum is Christine, a thirty-seven year old single mother, who works a dead-end job loosening soot from the pipes in a briquette factory. Living in a small, rural town near



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Altenburg, Christine must cope with the alienation of unskilled labor, the disappointment of unfulfilled romantic desire, and the ostracism of small-minded neighbors, who are unsympathetic toward the difficulties of raising a child with mental illness. We also meet Kerstin and Anja, two young punks who have run away from home to avoid dealing with the oppressive structure of a school that has labeled them “problem children.” Their hatred of rules, parental and communal expectations, is a typical marker of youthful rebellion during the teenage years. Perhaps one of the most moving interviews is with Margarete, aged eight-five, who lives in the Uckermark and whom Misselwitz visits on the day of her diamond wedding anniversary. Assembled around her are her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all celebrating the persistent familial warmth and happiness that Margarete’s marriage has produced. Yet, Margarete’s personal narrative—revealed to Misselwitz in the privacy of Margarete’s bedroom—weaves a story of sadness and regret that stretches back many decades and refuses her any peace in her old age. One of the film’s brightest moments comes when Misselwitz interviews a group of middle-aged women who work at the fish factory in Sassnitz. Shot as a collective, they work, talk and laugh together, creating a sense of camaraderie and intimacy that is unmatched in the film. One woman’s assertion that “you can’t make it without men” elicits raucous laughter from the others, suggesting that, while men may be good for only one thing, at least they don’t disappoint in that respect. This sequence is also mirrored in another sequence in which Misselwitz interviews a train car full of young teen girls, who assert their various positions on love, living in and out of marriage, and having children. The feeling one gets in witnessing this youngest generation articulate its hopes and desires is that these girls have learned from their parents’ mistakes and successes, that they know what they want and are determined to make it happen.

Winter Adé actually grew out of an earlier short-film project Misselwitz worked on as a *Meisterschülerin* at the Academy of the Arts. After seeing this earlier project, the director of the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films approached her with the idea of making a longer film, which became *Winter Adé*. The film was premiered at the 1988 Leipzig Documentary Film Festival, where it won the Silver Dove, and made the rounds at various East German film clubs in both larger and smaller cities. For Misselwitz, the post-screening discussions at the film clubs revealed the real need for films that engage with the contradictions of gender in everyday life under socialism:

The most important reason why I made the film was that I believe women’s fate is the best indication of the quality of life in a society; Marx ... was right when he said the progress of a society can be measured by the position of the fair sex.... *Winter Adé* takes stock of human relations [The post-screening] discussions [were] very intense ... I’ve done 75 of them (and I could have done a lot more had I accepted all the invitations) ... people have a great need to talk. (Rosenberg 1990: 7)

While the film presents a variety of perspectives and voices, Misselwitz maintains a certain level of artistic control over the text. She creates a collage of women’s voices that resists any singular narrative of gender in the GDR. Misselwitz also acknowledges her directorial construction of a narrative frame—through autobiography and personal interest in oral history—that contextualizes these voices. The film’s title, *Winter Adé*, reflects the artistic and critical goals of the film. Meaning “good-bye winter” or “adieu winter,” the title suggests a movement away from a season of cold, death, emptiness and silence. The “winter” in the title can easily be read as the state in which Misselwitz reads women’s voices and narratives in the GDR at the end of the 1980s. The marginalization of these women’s stories from the mainstream discourse of women’s experience under socialism is the winter from which women must depart.



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