

Peter Welz and the Last DEFA Generation

by Laura G. McGee



“Die Zeit war reif für diese Geschichte.” (The time had come for this story)

– Peter Welz

Peter Welz stands out among the directors who studied filmmaking in East Germany in the 1980s for a number of reasons. Born on November 6, 1963, Welz is both an actor and a director. He played the main role in Heiner Carow's *Ikarus* (*Icarus*, 1975) at a very young age and subsequently acted in Ralf Kirsten's *Ich zwing dich zu leben* (*I'll Force You to Live*, 1977) and Bodo Fürneisen's *Robert in Berlin* (1982/83) before beginning his studies at the Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg (HFF) in 1984. Welz has the distinction of earning his degree with remarkable speed—he finished by 1989—at a time when the preceding generation of directing students (Jörg Foth, Peter Kahane, Evelyn Schmidt) had suffered repeated delays in the effort to reach director status. Like others of his own generation, such as Andreas Dresen and Andreas Kleinert, Welz benefited from the liberal cultural policies of the HFF under the rectorship of Lothar Bisky. Welz's student films tended to be grotesque-absurd works that would not have been tolerated just a few years earlier. *Willkommen in der Kantine* (*Welcome to the Cafeteria*, 1988), based on a scenario by Frank Castorf, was his primary examination film, and he produced his thesis film, *Unsere Familie* (*Our Family*) in 1989. Welz's thesis was an example of filmic realism in Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982). Welz completed his studies four months earlier than planned so he could act in and assist his mentor, Jörg Foth, to direct Foth's film *Biologie!* (*Biology!*, 1990).

Welz's next film was *Banale Tage* (*Banal Days*, 1990), one of just three productions by the *DaDaeR* production group. In spring 1989, largely in response to efforts by the HFF student cohort born in 1949 (Foth, Kahane, Schmidt, Helke Misselwitz and others), East German cultural officials had finally permitted the creation of a Young Directors Group (*Nachwuchsgruppe*) and given it 10% of the yearly budget of the East German film studio, DEFA. Formally established on January 1, 1990, the group dissolved on March 31, 1991, along with all other DEFA production groups. Calling itself the “Gruppe DaDaeR,” (a play on Dada and DDR/GDR), the group made three films before funds ran out: Jörg Foth's *Letztes aus der DaDaeR* (*Latest from the Da-Da-R*), Herwig Kipping's *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (*The Land beyond the Rainbow*), and Peter Welz's *Banal Days*.

In comments made after receiving a prize for *Banal Days* at the Max Ophüls-Festival in 1991, Welz described it an “Abschiedsfilm für mein bisheriges Leben” (a goodbye gesture to my life to date).¹ It took another year to find a distributor for the film, which premiered at the Babylon Mitte cinema in Berlin in January 1992. Set in East Berlin of the 1970s, it is the story of two friends, Michael (played by Florian Lukas) and Thomas (Christian Kuchenbuch). The press information for *Banal Days* called it “a subversive collage of GDR society.” Writing for *Neues Deutschland*, Uwe Theuerkauff called it “Absurdität per excellence, witzig, wenn auch verwirrend inszeniert” (the height of absurdity, funny, even if staged in a confusing way).²

Scriptwriter Stefan Kolditz and Peter Welz had known each other for some time before their collaboration on *Burning Life* (1994). According to Welz, in talking about films they liked they discovered they both enjoyed *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969): “I asked him if he could imagine the same kind of a story, but with two women as the main characters and set in the

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present day. Shortly after that, he came to me with a first draft; but it took another three years until we could begin filming.”³ Other films that lent inspiration to *Burning Life* were *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* and *Nikita*. The script was designed to be filmed in the summer months, but Welz and Kolditz were concerned that subsidies would dry up before summer 1993, so they began filming in the winter of 1993-94.

As Lisa, the film stars Anna Thalbach, daughter of Katharina Thalbach, who has appeared in *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004) and *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (*The Baader Meinhof Complex*, 2008), among other films. Her counterpart is Anna, played by actress Maria Schrader, who made her earlier films with actor and director Dani Levy (who plays the ruthless police commissioner in *Burning Life*); Schrader also starred in *Keiner liebt mich* (*Nobody Loves Me*, 1994) and *Aimée & Jaguar* (1999). More recently she directed the film adaptation of the Israeli novel *Haye ahavah* (*Love Life*, or *Liebesleben*) in 2007. Thalbach has a lengthy filmography to her credit as well. Actors familiar to East German viewers of *Burning Life* are Gojko Mitic (the Native American hero in East German westerns) as a gas station attendant, Ernst-Georg Schwill as a bank customer and Jaeki Schwarz as a local investigator who sympathizes with the female bank robbers. This was not the only road movie to be made in Germany in the early 1990s. Two others are Peter Timm’s *Go Trabi Go* (1991) and Detlev Buck’s *Wir können auch anders* (*No More Mr. Nice Guy*, 1993). In her article “Fantasizing Integration and Escape in the Post-Unification Road Movie,” Liz Mittman⁴ points out that the division of Germany resulted in a number of explorations of identity through *Heimat* (homeland) films; one response to unification, meanwhile, has been the road movie, as the two parts of Germany rediscover each other (P. 331). Because Germany is relatively small, the mode of transit needs to be less than efficient, in this case the Russian *Tschaika* that had supposedly belonged to Khrushchev (first name Nikita, like Lisa’s rat), and that expires in the course of the film.

In a 1994 interview, Peter Welz said that the time had come for this story.⁵ While delighting viewers with its humorous and even magical spirit, the film exposes some of the sobering challenges and contradictions that faced citizens in the wake of unification. Two examples: Lisa’s father, mayor of a small village in an lignite coal mining region, works to attract golf course developers in order to bring economic prosperity to his village—only to find the village will be flattened to make way for Europe’s largest golf course; and the citizens who are sympathetic to and protective of the “tax reformers” Lisa and Anna are swiftly duped by the Federal Criminal Police who use the press to portray them as terrorists. The time has come to see this film again and to reflect on its social critique in light of twenty years of German unification.

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Burning Life – A DVD Release by the DEFA Film Library

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¹ Heinz Kersten, in *Der Tagesspiegel*, Jan. 30, 1992

² *Neues Deutschland*, Jan. 25, 1992

³ Welz in Lubowski, *Berliner Morgenpost*, Dec. 2, 1993.

⁴ Mittman, Liz. "Fantasizing Integration and Escape in the Post-Unification Road Movie." In: *Light Motives: German Popular Film in Perspective*. Eds. Randall Halle and Maggie McCarthy. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2003. 326-348. (About road movie genre in post-unification Germany; does not treat *Burning Life* directly.)

⁵ *Neues Deutschland*, Nov. 17, 1994.

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