

Two selections portraying the talented (East) German documentary filmmaker Petra Tschörtner, who was born in Potsdam-Babelsberg on May 6, 1958 and died in Berlin on July 25, 2012.

Petra Tschörtner: Radical, Conciliatory and Always Fascinated by People

By Barbara Felsmann

Black-and-white film images. An early morning drive through a Potsdam housing development. Noises from a high-rise building: dishes clatter, neighbors talk behind the wall, an intercom, the familiar “Sandmann” song on TV, moans of people having sex. The director explains what the film is about: the interaction of three couples, around the age of thirty, living in this part of town. There is the counter clerk Christel, who talks about her husband Rüdiger, a plumber, his boozing, and their first terrible years together. There is also the teacher Birgit and her husband, also called Rüdiger, who is studying teaching. He likes to cheat; she once fell in love with someone else when she was on vacation alone for five weeks. The responsibility for their little daughter is keeping them together—for now. Karin, an aesthetics lecturer, lives with Lutz, a locksmith, and their son. Lutz is learning to come to terms with the fact that Karin is more educated than he, and still takes care to wear the pants in the relationship; yet, he’s not ok with her taking postgraduate courses.

The 1983 documentary film *Hinter den Fenstern (Behind the Windows)* portrays these three couples, who do not match propaganda images of the GDR’s government-promoted socialist family at all. It is Petra Tschörtner’s graduation film; with it, she completed her directing degree at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (Academy for Film and Television, HFF). The film won the International Jury’s main prize at the International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen (West Germany!) in 1984, as well as the prize of the West German Children and Youth Film Center in Remscheid. With *Behind the Windows*, Petra Tschörtner, just 25 years old at the time, set new standards in terms of both aesthetics and content—by turning to the private sphere, instead of dedicating herself to portrayals of work environments, usually favored by DEFA documentaries; but also through a striking closeness to the protagonists and the openness and bluntness with which the couples reflect on their relationships. She completely dispenses with any explanatory or evaluative commentary.

The filmmaker, born in 1958, was the daughter of a teacher and Heinz Dieter Tschörtner, an editor at a publishing house and Gerhard Hauptmann scholar. In 1978, after graduating from *Erweiterte Oberschule* (high school), Petra Tschörtner completed an internship at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films. There, DEFA’s Managing Director Hans Dieter Mäde commissioned her and Angelika Andrees, a graduate of the film directing program, to shoot a short film to be screened before Roland Gräf’s feature film *P.S.* (1978). Since Gräf’s film is about the difficulties of a foster child who has come of age and must now make a life for himself, the two women are to take a documentary approach to the topic. The twenty-six-minute film *Heim (Children’s Home)*, however, does not depict the success of education in socialist children’s homes, as the studio management perhaps expected, but instead primarily gives a voice to the children and adolescents. They have few positive things to say and talk openly about alcohol-dependent parents, domestic violence, and neglect, as well as about their own alcohol consumption and tendency to get into violent conflicts. Shortly before its completion, Mäde banned the black-and-white film to DEFA’s so-called poison cabinet; it had its world premiere at West Berlin’s Arsenal movie theater only after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in January 1990.¹

With these experiences in her pocket, Tschörtner returned to the DEFA Studio for Feature Films after graduating, to work as an assistant director for a year. Then, in 1984, she moved to the DEFA Studio

¹ Tschörtner took up the theme of children’s homes again in a later film.

for Documentary Films. In the children's film artistic production group, she began to direct her own films. Besides various good night episodes for the nightly *Unser Sandmännchen* (*Our Little Sandman*) TV program, she made fifteen- to twenty-minute documentaries about a wide range of topics. *Filmkinder* (1984, *Film Children*), for example, accompanies two children during the shooting of Rolf Losansky's *Weisse Wolke Carolin* (1984, *White Cloud Caroline*); *Der Zirkus kommt* (1985, *The Circus Is Coming*) portrays a family circus; and *Unterwegs in Nikaragua – Eine filmische Reisebeschreibung für Kinder* (1987, *On the Way in Nicaragua – A Cinematic Travelogue for Children*) narrates the daily life of children in Nicaragua. This last film won the Special Award of East Germany's Film and Television Workers Union at the Goldener Spatz Children's Film Festival.

As in her films for adult audiences, Tschörtner is very sparing in her use of commentary or avoids it altogether; instead, she emphasizes a personal approach to her protagonists and their private lives. Her films for children are quite conciliatory, less critical, and generally cheerful in tone, however. This is particularly noticeable in the fourteen-minute documentary *Meine Mutter ist Lehrerin* (1986, *My Mother Is a Teacher*). Brigitte, a single parent, and her son Martin are at the same school. A harmonious mother-son relationship is presented from Martin's point of view, and he proudly talks about his mother's work and his own school experiences. The boy expresses no doubts, unfulfilled wishes, or even critical reflections here. In a 1988 interview with *Film und Fernsehen*, however, just after she had moved to the studio's DEFA Kinobox artistic production group, Tschörtner confessed that documentary films for children had never completely fulfilled her and had always been a compromise.²

After this turning point, Tschörtner again focused on topics "that resonate with our own lives" and "describe her generation's attitude about life."³ In her film *Das Freie Orchester* (1988, *The Free Orchestra*), for example, she introduces the Free Orchestra band members with poetic language and develops their song "Ham wa nich" ("It's Sold Out") in her own way over the course of the film. Her atmospherically dense documentary *Schnelles Glück* (1988, *Fast Luck*) is a portrait of a retired woman who frequents the betting window at the GDR's only harness racetrack, in Berlin-Karlshorst; the film tells the stories of winners and losers, of gambling and gambling addiction. In 1987 Dagmar Benke—an editor at West German ZDF television who was enthusiastic about Tschörtner's films and also knew her personally—obtained a commission for a production at the DEFA Studio. For ZDF's *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* (*The Little TV Play*), Tschörtner was to produce a 60-minute documentary about the daily life of three single mothers in the GDR; the film was broadcast under the title *Und die Sehnsucht bleibt* (*And the Longing Remains*) in 1988.

In 1989, Tschörtner shot one of her most moving films, *Unsere alten Tage* (*Our Old Days*). Here she again demonstrates her predilection for the vulnerable, marginalized members of society, turning to elderly people spending the last chapter of their lives in a *Feierabendheim*, as nursing homes in the GDR were called. She visits a new, modern nursing home, where (in contrast to the catastrophic conditions in many other nursing homes) external circumstances are tolerable and the residents well cared for. Nevertheless, they seem to have been forgotten by the outside world—especially by their children, who are busy with themselves and stuck their parents in a nursing home. Except for a prologue, Tschörtner does without commentary in this film as well. For the elderly she is primarily a listener and someone to talk to, and she gives them the opportunity to speak in front of the camera.

Regarding her approach, Tschörtner herself said: "An important element of my work is to build trust, open up to people, not to remain anonymous, which means listening to them and not pushing them in predetermined directions."⁴ She remained faithful to this philosophy in all her later works, be it in

² Hübner, Martin. "Kein Gegeneinander – dafür Toleranz. Gespräch mit Petra Tschörtner. *Film und Fernsehen*. No. 11, 1988.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg – Begegnungen zwischen dem 1. Mai und dem 1. Juli 1990 (1990-91, *Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg: Encounters from May 1 to July 1, 1990*), or in *Marmor, Stein und Eisen* (1994, *Marble, Stone and Iron*), the poignant portrait of her former seminar group. The subtitle of her atmospheric black-and-white documentary *Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg* does not include the word “encounters” for nothing. Here, as in a kaleidoscope, Tschörtner captures the mood before the monetary union through very personal encounters with people in Prenzlauer Berg; for a wide range of reasons, they look at the future rather critically—and, watching the film from today’s perspective, their reservations were not always misguided.

Her last documentary film, *Herr Giwi und die umgekehrte Emigration* (*Herr Giwi and the Reverse Emigration*) was produced in 1997. Like many other GDR filmmakers, she, too, found it difficult to find her way in the new production conditions as a freelance director and author. Until her untimely death in 2012, she worked primarily as an assistant director for film and television and accepted lectureships as a visiting professor at her former Konrad Wolf Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg.

PS: My Friend, Petra Tschörtner

By Helke Misselwitz

Petra Tschörtner and I first met during the entrance exam at the Babelsberg Film Academy in early 1978. She was nineteen, and I was thirty years old. We saw a documentary film by Gitta Nickel, which we then had to describe. Intuitively, we agreed that the film had little to do with our perception of life. Later, after we had taken our daughters to the nursery and kindergarten, we made up each other’s eyes and painted our fingernails at our desks during our Basics of Marxism-Leninism class.

Susis Schicht (*Susi’s Shift*) was Petra’s first film at the academy. A silent observation of the work during the night shift at the VEB Altstoffhandel.⁵ On the fully loaded truck, Susi cuts the ties on bundles of cardboard boxes with her knife and throws the pile down onto the conveyor belt. When one truck is empty, she combs the dust out of her thick hair, then works on the next truckload. At the cafeteria table during her break, the men joke with her. Then they get up and go back to work. But before they do, they push their dirty dishes over to her. Susi will clear it up. Patriarchal society made visible in a single shot.

If anyone wants to know who Petra was, I would show them her graduation film, *Hinter den Fenstern* (*Behind the Windows*). Here, the longing to find someone you can live with becomes painfully tangible.

Petra was someone you couldn't fool. She looked behind windows, behind masks, behind the ocean. Her eyes remained melancholic, even in happiness.

—Translated by Hasret Eleby

The DEFA Film Library is grateful for permission to translate this biography of Petra Tschörtner, which first appeared in German in Sie: Regisseurinnen der DEFA und ihre Filme, edited by Cornelia Klauß and Ralf Schenk (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2020: 353-357).

⁵ A publicly owned enterprise for recycling of all materials, including plastic, glass, paper and textiles.