



The Production & Reconstruction of *Miss Butterfly*

By Ralf Schenk

I

The rough cut of the DEFA film *Fräulein Schmetterling* (*Miss Butterfly*) was shown to a panel of high-ranking East German cultural officials on February 4, 1966. The panel included executive members of the DEFA Studio for Feature Film and the Ministry of Culture's Film Department, as well as three branches of the SED (East Germany's Socialist Unity Party): the Cultural Department of its Central Committee; its district office in Potsdam; and the party committee within the DEFA Studio. The reason for this impressive gathering was obvious: it was not about a single work of art, but rather about correcting a perceived grave political mistake. These alert guardians of socialist ideology saw *Miss Butterfly* as another Trojan horse to be placed by DEFA within the walls of East German culture.

Just a few weeks prior to this meeting, the DEFA Studio for Feature Films had been openly reprimanded during the 11th Plenum of the SED's Central Committee, which had taken place from December 15 to 18, 1966. Leading politicians, among them Erich Honecker and Walter Ulbricht, testified that two new DEFA films, *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit Is Me*, 1965, dir. Kurt Maetzig) and *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* (*Just Don't Think I'll Cry*, 1965/1990, dir. Frank Vogel), contained subversive themes. As a result, DEFA productions were now under renewed scrutiny, and executives and dramaturgs at DEFA were already reviewing all the films that had been shot but not yet released, as well as all projects about to go into production and scenarios currently being worked on.

Miss Butterfly had been shot from August 30 to December 8, 1965. During the 2/4/66 meeting, studio management decided to stop all production work on the film. Over the course of the next three months, the minutes state, the "central and artistic/practical mistakes" of the movie and its creators were to be examined and "constructive concepts for changes" were to be introduced. Shortly after this decision, all materials related to the film were locked away.

II

Following the 2/4/66 meeting, Klaus Wischnewski—the dramaturg for *Miss Butterfly*—wrote a statement summarizing the intention of the film's creators:

We wanted to produce a film that told, in an unconventional, poetic manner, of the factual and necessary realization that every single person must search for and find their own way into a beneficial, meaningful and fulfilling life within society—that they must examine their wishes and dreams and become active (Helene); and that, by the same token, every person is able to help others achieve this goal, if they only know them well enough (Frau Fertig). I am still of the opinion that this can be one positive, active goal of socialist art, that it can be one of the issues involved in the development of our society into the united, socialist, human community. Furthermore, I am of the opinion that fairy tales, fairy-tale elements, dreams and poetry can be possible artistic devices in socialist film.

Christa and Gerhard Wolf created the story of *Miss Butterfly* in collaboration with director Kurt Barthel. The script starts off on an old street in East Berlin, surrounded by tenement houses built in the mid-1800s



and littered with the kind of clutter that has been piling up in attics for decades. Soon this neighborhood will be gone; the excavators and backhoes are on their way. But, for now, a group of children still plays on the sidewalk with the remains of the past: a rocking chair, a golden picture frame, a top hat, an old piano. Pedestrians stop and laugh. A young woman joins them. Gracefully she gets up on her toes and, holding a broken umbrella in her hands, takes flight, levitating through the urban canyon, high above the city. This is the heroine of the film: Helene Raupe, aged 17.¹ In this opening scene already, *Miss Butterfly* sets the tone for its cinematic style: a poetic, modern-day fairy tale about the mindset of young people, a parable about an escape from restrictions and normalcy, about the dream of being happy.

Helene and her six-year-old sister, Asta, are in a particularly difficult situation. Just a few days ago, they lost their old father, who ran a tobacco shop in an old tenement house on a side street off the new Karl Marx Avenue. The store looks desolate: Plaster is flaking off the walls, posters are hiding water stains and cracks. Their apartment behind the store, which is reached via a short flight of stairs, does not look any better. An aunt from Potsdam is snooping around it, looking for a savings book or anything else of value that the deceased might have left behind. She promises to look after the sisters from now on—but only from afar, as her apartment is very small.

The same day, the sisters also receive other visitors, through whom Christa and Gerhard Wolf introduce the “state,” which starts interfering with the lives of Helene and Asta. A man from the municipal district council’s Housing Allocation Department inspects the apartment. A companion of his, Herr Himmelblau of the Trade and Supply Department, asks Helene about her plans for the future.

Again, the film transcends reality into the fantasy of its heroine. Helene starts daydreaming about her future: she is strolling across Karl Marx Avenue, surrounded by well-dressed, industrious, cheerful people; she is a stewardess, an elegant sports car driver, a model in an evening gown. A vision of elegance and beauty—suddenly shattered by a hard return to reality. Because Herr Himmelblau finds her a job assisting a fishmonger at East Berlin’s market hall. Here, on her boss’s orders, Helene must dress in a rubber apron and wooden clogs. The girl tries her best to follow the instructions of this resolute woman, yet she never makes it past trying: the flood of customers is just too great, the fish are just too slippery. Here, as well as in subsequent scenes, director Kurt Barthel and cinematographers Hans-Jürgen Sasse and Claus Neumann employed hidden cameras and microphones to capture what was said by the “real” customers, capturing an authentic, documentary glimpse into everyday life.

Helene is unfit as a fishmonger because she is unable to harm any animal. She and her sister release a carp she was given as a gift for supper that night. The next day, she utterly fails to serve the masses clamoring for smoked eel—a product that was rarely available in the GDR. Unlike her boss, she lacks authority, miscounts the change and is overwhelmed by the situation. “You are too fine for fish,” is how the fishmonger sums it up; in other words, Herr Himmelblau must find Helene another job. We see him going through his index cards and, feigning a joke, he says, “I’ll tell you something: you’re too fine for fish. What are we going to do with you? Fine mechanics, fine soaps, fine glassware, fine smithery.... Footwear: nothing available. Produce: not fine enough. Young people demand only the purest communism.”²

Finally, he gets her a job at FF Exquisit, a fashion boutique on Karl Marx Avenue—which is to say, in the center of the new socialist Berlin: “FF, the finest of fine. [...] It’s renowned, best at fulfilling the plan: a career

¹ Editor’s Note: Many of the character’s names in *Miss Butterfly* carry common meanings that convey something about the character. Helene and Asta’s family name, Raupe, meaning “caterpillar” underlines the childish phase of life they are in. The name of the optimistic Herr Himmelblau means “sky blue.” The name of the efficient Frau Fertig means “done,” “finished” or ‘exhausted.’

² This translation is based on DEFA Film Library’s English subtitles.



for you.”

It is an *Exquisitgeschäft*—one of those fashion boutiques in every larger East German city offering expensive products, often imported from West Germany, for wealthy clientele. The film again uses documentary methods here, the camera filming real customers without their knowledge, showing us insecure provincials, well-heeled urbanites, show-offs, posers. In the midst of it all is Helene, wearing a fashionable smock, with teased hair. Again, the girl feels useless, however. Her boss is unhappy with her as well, as Helene’s straightforward approach drives away the fastidious customers. After being fired once more, all Helene is left with is a dream: her little table at an automat restaurant on Alexanderplatz transforms into a sales counter where she offers neatly packaged fish, lingerie, exotic fruits and books; her kind, genuine manner is infectious, and she creates a peaceful and friendly world around her.

But her dream is far from reality. A woman from Youth Welfare Services, Frau Fertig, is now checking up on the sisters and learns that Helene has already lost her second job. After Helene, in an attempt to appear older, has a hairstylist friend of hers do her make-up and doll her up, Frau Fertig assumes the worst. She is considering admitting them to a children’s home: “You need order and a collective.”

Helene preempts this by getting a job as a conductor on a bus—and is even quite happy with the position. Her older colleague, Herr Kubinke, becomes something of a fatherly friend, with his Berliner wisdom. Overall, Helene is having a lot of fun helping the passengers and answering their questions. But she quits this job as well. She falls in love with a boxer, whom she meets at a pub. She rebuffs his aggressive advances, however, and when he gets on her bus the next day, he refuses to buy a ticket. They argue, while the passengers look on indifferently.

On Helene’s eighteenth birthday, her aunt is waiting for her at home to give her two tickets to the circus. Helene and Asta are especially fascinated by the clown, a mime who keeps searching for the sun, to warm himself and make himself feel better; ultimately, he folds it up and puts it in his pocket. Reality, however, does not look as sunny. The next day, the sisters must visit Youth Welfare Services in a building with long hallways and many rooms. In one of these, Frau Fertig reigns. In her opinion, Helene is unstable and morally compromised. She has now lost her third job. Frau Fertig orders Helene to return to her job on the bus and Asta to go live with her aunt in Potsdam. When Helene starts talking about the clown and his sun, Frau Fertig naturally understands nothing. The meaning of life, she says, can only be found through reputable work: “Don’t you all have a sense of innovation, of competition? If I’d had it as good as you at your age....”

Helene returns to the bus in the pouring rain, while their aunt takes Asta to Potsdam. Meanwhile, the demolition machines are slowly making their way to their building. Helene feels lonely—especially when she sees the bleak modern apartment she has been allocated.

So Helene returns to their old apartment, where she is surprised to find Asta, who has run away from her aunt and is seeking refuge here. The girls lie awake all night with nagging doubts: Should they give in to the authorities, even if they are in the right? But are they really in the right? Helpless, they leave the apartment and wander through East Berlin until they get to the circus.

Here, the unexpected happens: The clown chooses Helene, of all people, to be his assistant. Accompanying him, the two sisters step out of the circus tent and hand sunflowers to the passers-by. Suddenly, people’s



faces grow kinder; even the jaded, hectic and grumpy ones start to smile. The clown rides away on top of a taxi, while Helene and Asta disappear into the crowd.

III

Kurt Barthel, a graduate of the Deutsche Hochschule für Filmkunst (German Film Academy) in Potsdam-Babelsberg, became acquainted with author Christa Wolf while working as a co-author and assistant director on *Der geteilte Himmel* (*Divided Heaven*, 1964, dir. Konrad Wolf). She told him about the story of a film that she had been working on with her husband, Gerhard Wolf, and that was inspired by experiences with her two daughters, born in 1952 and 1956. The original idea for *Die Geburt des Schmetterlings* [*The Birth of the Butterfly*] was a story about an immature girl whose artistic talents are only discovered after she goes through some hardships and only manifests herself through an encounter with another artist, a clown. Over the course of a months-long process, DEFA—which considered the concept too limited—changed it into a modern-day fairy tale about the self-actualization of a young person.

While writing the scenario for the film, the authors pondered whether such self-realization was actually possible under the current socio-political conditions. Or was any aspiration to autonomous action bound to clash with the system's rigorously established rules and prejudices? How could the subjectivity and spontaneity of young people fit in with state institutions and mechanisms? Was it not precisely the invisible constraints of a mundane concept of daily "normalcy" that posed the greatest obstacle to unrestricted personal development? On the other hand: Was not the free development of people, the happiness of each individual, one of the conditions for the happiness of the whole society?

The self-image, goals, dreams and irritations of young East Germans had become a central issue in GDR culture in the early 1960s. The title of a novel by Brigitte Reimann, *Ankunft im Alltag* [*Arrival in the Everyday*], rendered the tenor of the times in a broad sense. In books, films and television shows, adolescent heroes pushed into the foreground. These were young adults born during the last years of World War II or shortly thereafter, who were now in search of their own place in the East German here-and-now, unburdened by the trauma of war and fascism and in productive tension with their parents' and grandparents' generations. While acknowledging the achievements of their parents and grandparents in rebuilding the country after the war, they were searching for their own form of emancipation. They refused attempts by their teachers, parents and politicians to force them into the existing concept of "our homeland, the GDR" and instead tried to develop this sense of belonging through their own critical examinations. Only with and through this—many young authors and directors believed—would they come to develop a sense of belonging in the nation of their birth.

Feature films made at the DEFA Studio reflect this process as well. Just a few months after the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, a film premiered that dealt with the aspiration to find one's own place in life in an entertaining manner and with unbroken optimism: *Auf der Sonnenseite* (*On the Sunny Side*, 1961, dir. Ralf Kirsten). Thematically similar films would soon take a more contemplative form. *Ach, du fröhliche...* (*A Lively Christmas Eve*, 1962, dir. Günter Reisch), for example, confronts an older SED comrade with a future son-in-law who opposes East German society, with its state-sanctioned bootlicking and, to him, insufferable small-mindedness. *Beschreibung eines Sommers* (*It Happened One Summer*, 1962, dir. Ralf Kirsten) paints a critical and differentiated picture of SED interference in a young couple's personal life. *Divided Heaven* in particular, however, exposed social injustices that were suffocating young adults and others in the GDR: hypocrisy; the social impossibility of speaking freely; concealment of the truth; and the ever-present pressure to toe the party line. Christa Wolf's eponymous novel, on which the film was based, was being prepared for a DEFA adaptation



before it even went into print and, thus, well before the dogmatic critiques that were raised after its publication. This indicates that, aside from the sort of ideological constraint and caution that could be found anywhere in the GDR, the climate at the DEFA Studio in 1962-64 was defined by courage and an openness to debate.

Parallels to such openness and disputability could also be found in politics. The SED Central Committee founded a youth commission, run by Kurt Turba. It issued a “Youth Communiqué” that explicitly demanded that adolescents not be treated as mere educational objects, but rather as autonomously thinking, acting and feeling human beings. For this concept they coined the term *Hausherren von morgen* (tomorrow’s heads of households). To appease the dogmatists in the party, the communiqué detailed the duties of youth to society; but it also insisted that “patronizing, finger-wagging, administrating” had to become a thing of the past. A text like that, which actively demanded the democratization of society, encouraged not just the young poets and beat bands of the GDR, but also the dramaturgs, authors and directors working at DEFA.

The films mentioned above—which, in the early 1960s, tackled the “arrival” of adolescents “in the everyday” of the GDR, but were still presented as one-off creations—would soon be accompanied by a whole array of new works in 1965/66. This process was not planned, but instead grew out of an all-encompassing mood. Young filmmakers, in particular, began to approach their own country with increasingly critical questions. It was no one’s intention to question the GDR in general. Instead, they wanted to help improve real-existing socialism; to show the dangers that egoism and opportunism posed to the socialist human community; to search for the roots of—solvable—generational conflicts; and to question ingrained social rituals. These young filmmakers used means as diverse as drama, satire and allegory to oppose all the same things that the “Youth Communiqué” had criticized.

After the 11th Plenum, the majority of the films that had premiered or were to premiere in 1965-66 were banned, canceled and in part destroyed. The plenum was used by the Stalinist faction in the SED to prove their power. One of the central reasons that the dogmatists around Erich Honecker could do this was the transfer of power that had taken place in Moscow shortly before, during which the liberal party leader Nikita Khrushchev was replaced by the conservative Leonid Brezhnev. The cinematic sacrifices that the DEFA Studio for Feature Film was forced to make in the months to follow included several productions about young protagonists critically questioning society and themselves as a means to self-realization: *The Rabbit Is Me*; *Just Don’t Think I’ll Cry*; *Karla (Carla, 1965/90, dir. Herrmann Zschoche)*; *Jahrgang 45 (Born in ‘45, 1966/90, dir. Jürgen Böttcher)*; *Berlin um die Ecke (Berlin Around the Corner, 1965-66/90, dir. Gerhard Klein)*; *Spur der Steine (Trace of Stones, 1966/90, dir. Frank Beyer)*; and *Wenn du groß bist, lieber Adam (When You’re Older, Dear Adam, 1965-66/90, dir. Egon Günther)*. When these films were banned, their main protagonists were silenced: Peter Naumann in *Just Don’t Think I’ll Cry*, expelled from high school for writing a critical essay; the waitress Maria in *The Rabbit Is Me*, who is not allowed to attend university; and the workers Olaf and Horst in *Berlin Around the Corner*, who are pushed away when they criticize members of the older generation.

Another full-length feature film, *Ritter des Regens (Knight of the Rain)*—which Dieter Roth and Egon Schlegel started in fall 1965 as their thesis film at the Babelsberg Film Academy, and DEFA supported as a co-producer, which is another example of the theme of young people contesting established structures. Here, a high-school graduate distances himself from his dogmatic father, a professor of philosophy; the father, in turn, accuses his son of recklessness and ignorance. The father’s lines in the script illustrate in an explicit manner where the actual problem for young people lay. Roth and Schlegel have him say:

We old Communists show you the way, but you don’t want to! We want to teach you how to live properly, but you don’t want to! If you would examine what you reject with a bit of historical



awareness, you would easily see that we have to be this way. And within this framework you have full freedom and one duty, which corresponds to your abilities as well as our demands. I want the son to be a continuation of his father.

During the 11th Plenum, films that contained such lines, that presented generational conflicts generally denied by officials and that brought the rebellious attitude of rock music into movie theaters were pilloried as “pessimist,” “nihilistic,” “skeptical” and ultimately subversive to the party and state. And this despite the fact that none of the protagonists of these films remained outside, but rather found their way into GDR society at the end. Acknowledging the concerns, questions and demands of young artists, however, would have required party functionaries to also examine their own achievements and opinions, to admit mistakes and not see their own actions as the gold standard.

Aside from short-lived periods of liberalization, GDR leadership was never prepared to make any such admissions. Their position was that “our homeland, East Germany” should shine as bright and uncompromised as possible from the pages of books and the silver screen. In the Politburo Report on the 11th Plenum, Erich Honecker expressed it as follows: “Our GDR is a clean state. We have unshakeable standards of ethics and morals, of decency and morality.” Just a few months prior, scriptwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase (*Berlin Around the Corner*) had called for a fundamentally different perspective during a discussion on “Dialectic of Life – Dialectic of Art” in the journal *Filmwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen*: “What we must show is the vitality of our system, not its beauty. Our historical position cannot be captured in still lifes. Every day, everyone must resolve more contradictions than we dare confront them with at the movies. I do not think that comfortable people have ever furthered anything.”

Kohlhaase’s thought could have also been the credo for *Miss Butterfly*. The film was developed within the Heinrich Greif Artistic Production Group—a DEFA team, first run by Konrad Wolf and then by Klaus Wischnewski, which had already produced *Divided Heaven*. Christa Wolf noted that the central intention of her newest work was to show a young person finding herself. *Miss Butterfly* was to be a plea for individuality and meant to push naivety and subjectivity into public consciousness. At the same time, the film polemicized against the idea—held especially by party functionaries—that, as socialist society cared and provided for its citizens, it deserved nothing but gratitude... a gratitude that, above all, meant complete submission to the demands of the society. Christa and Gerhard Wolf came out against such a short-sighted perspective. The tenor of their scenario was that everyone has a right to their own wishes and dreams; and that nobody should be categorically ostracized or condemned for wanting to make their own wishes a reality and not submitting to instructions “from above,” even if well-intentioned. It was precisely this, the authors expressed in the final scene of the film, that would lead to a friendlier and more peaceful world. This scene emphasized the optimistic attitude of the authors; Helene Raupe was not to break under the constraints of GDR society, but rather society should shine anew through this *Miss Butterfly*.

To make this parable work, Christa and Gerhard Wolf and director Kurt Barthel used a particular, exaggerated narrative stance. The real story—of two underaged girls who, after the death of their father, try to stay together even though the law prohibits it—corresponds to a “normal” feature film. A second level is constituted by the dreams of Helene and Asta Raupe, primarily depicted by means of pantomime. In consciously blatant contrast to this is the third level, made up of documentary scenes that sketch in everyday reality in Berlin: the soon-to-be demolished neighborhood behind Karl Marx Avenue; the fishmonger’s shop in the market hall; the fashion boutique. Because the use of such disparate means, including the use of hidden cameras, had never been attempted at DEFA before and because *Miss Butterfly* was Kurt Barthel’s



directorial debut, everyone involved wanted the film to be understood as an “experiment.” Konrad Wolf was asked to mentor his former assistant director—which he barely did, being involved in pre-production for two upcoming projects, *Der kleine Prinz* (*The Little Prince*, 1966) and *Goya* (1971).

The authors and their director oriented themselves in relation to specific models. Kurt Barthel’s idea was to shoot a film like *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1951, dir. Vittorio de Sica), an Italian neorealist classic that blends dreams and reality. Above all, the message and style of *Miss Butterfly* were influenced by recent Czech films that were attracting international attention, however. These, too, depicted a young generation in search of its place in an increasingly rigid world. Miloš Forman’s *Černý Petr* (*Black Peter*, 1964) and *Lásky jedné plavovlásky* (*Loves of a Blonde*, 1965), for example, were surprising in their fresh, brisk look at communication gaps between the generations. Forman’s understanding of realism is heightened by the use of documentary cinematography and amateur actors, among other means. The film *Až přijde kocour* (*Cassandra Cat*, 1963, dir. Vojtěch Jasný), in which the tristesse of the Czech provinces dissolves into playful fantasy, had proved just as striking. Here, a magic cat and a circus performer compel the people of a small town to reveal their true, often unflattering inner selves to the world. It is a cheerful allegory about human weaknesses, indifference and willing compliance, but also a plea for fantasy—exactly what the creators of *Miss Butterfly* had in mind.

While *Miss Butterfly* was still being shot, Christa Wolf and other authors and artists were invited to a discussion with State Council President Walter Ulbricht. It took place in the East German State Council on November 25, 1965, and effectively paved the way for the 11th Plenum. Ulbricht bluntly asked the authors present what function critical art should fulfill: “For whom is this supposed to be useful? Do we need it to educate today’s youth?” He referred to the negative influence of beat music, which had supposedly led to riots in Leipzig; attacked alleged sex scenes on GDR television; and drew a direct correlation between adolescent misconduct—that is, a rising crime rate—and critical literature and art.

Christa Wolf—who had been elected the candidate of the SED’s Central Committee during the 6th Party Convention in 1963 and remained in that position until the 7th Party Convention in 1967—objected. She tried to explain what the DEFA films of those months were showing. According to her, the socialist state was confronting young people “as an institution. At first blush, it appears as if this institution is imposing a wide array of restrictions upon their lives, because the freedoms that it offers are taken for granted.” She pleaded for a greater degree of flexibility in schools and the press, for an open approach to conflict. Whether she knew it or not, on this day Wolf was already countering the threat of a new cultural and political ice age.

Three weeks later, during the 11th Plenum, *Miss Butterfly* was not yet a topic of discussion, as the film was not finished. In her contribution to the discussion, written the night after she heard Honecker’s presentation, Wolf focused less on her own film and more on the development of the arts in the GDR overall. Again, she appealed to them not to suffocate the democratization process in the arts and society as a whole.

Writing is really complicated. We cannot allow ourselves to lose the right to deal freely with artistic themes, which we have secured in recent years in several books, in discussions and in certain advances in aesthetics. Now as ever, [art cannot] do without [...] being subjective, that is, to understand the style, language and world of the artist. [...] This is not a defense. I only ask that we try to acknowledge and preserve our real achievements.

Expressing such pleas, Wolf was the only person to contest the concentrated dogmatism and grave atmosphere of the 11th Plenum. In so doing, she also defended the right of young people to a self-determined life in socialist East Germany.



Even after the auto-da-fé of the Plenum, director Kurt Barthel kept working on *Miss Butterfly*. Parts of the rough cut were initially only shown and discussed within the Heinrich Greif Artistic Group, however, not before a wider studio audience. The artistic composition of the film was central in these debates; unfortunately, they uncovered severe flaws. Christa and Gerhard Wolf had written the scenario for actress Jutta Hoffmann, who was then not available for shooting, as she was playing the title role in the soon-to-be banned film *Carla*. Jutta Hoffmann could have brought the playful irony and youthful naivety that were central to the role of Helene Raupe. Her face, and especially her big, quizzical eyes were reminiscent of the young Giulietta Masina in *La Strada* (1954, dir. Federico Fellini). The Czechoslovakian mime Melania Jakubisková, whom Kurt Barthel cast only after a strenuous search, did not evoke such an association. Her performance was too introverted, not spirited enough; it had nothing of a spry “Berlin” girl; and in the real scenes it was excessively gestural, hence damaging the role by making it appear artificial.

The working group also found that the approach to the dramaturgy and production was overly didactic. Many scenes missed the lightness of the script, were not elevated enough, too direct. To mitigate this didactic dimension, in a letter to the DEFA Studio director dated December 21, 1965, group leader Klaus Wischnewski suggested adding a commentary to some of the scenes. Such voice overs could also address political objections already being anticipated after the 11th Plenum. According to Wischnewski, they would “clarify connections, motifs and opinions [...] and, by inserting distance from the protagonist Helene, [counteract] a false passivity.”

The voice over—written very quickly by Christa and Gerhard Wolf in late December and early January 1966—was read by actor Manfred Krug. It ended up having the opposite effect, however. It does not sound appeasing or conciliatory when Krug, voicing something like the inner monologue of both girls, at one point says: “We’ve dreamed enough. We should do something as well.” On the contrary, the ironic tone only reinforced the demands *Miss Butterfly* was making of the state and its bureaucratic institutions.

On December 23, 1965, Albert Wilkening, DEFA’s production director, instructed the studio’s photo department to cease producing photographs for *Miss Butterfly*—a clear sign that, internally, DEFA already expected the film to get banned. Nevertheless, work on the rough cut continued, and the director made more changes to the film during the first weeks of 1966. Changing the name of the woman from Youth Welfare Services from “Frau Fertig” to “Frau Fenske” (thereby avoiding the ironic aptronym), for example, was more than a minor cosmetic decision. In addition, some of the hidden-camera documentary scenes were cut. Images like the crowd swarming the fish shop for smoked eel or the woman pressing her nose against the window of the boutique captured the supply shortages and social inequalities in the GDR only too clearly.

The rough-cut screening on February 4, 1966, and the decision of the studio leadership to cease all work on the film were not the last chapters in the slow death of *Miss Butterfly*, however. To maintain the semblance of a democratic process, the rough cut was screened again in April 1966, this time before the film advisory board of the Ministry of Culture, a newly founded department designed to spot and prevent political mistakes made by DEFA. The meeting was attended by Franz Bruk, the new director of the DEFA Studio for Feature Films, and Wilfried Maaß, the new director of the Ministry of Culture’s Film Department. (The “old” directors, Jochen Mückenberger and Günter Witt, had been deposed from office in February and March 1966, respectively.) In the hours-long discussion following the screening, Christa Wolf and Klaus Wischnewski were vehemently criticized. Although both agreed on the artistic weaknesses of the film, they must have still been shocked by the devastating political verdict the functionaries reached, not just on the unfinished film, but also on the intentions of its creators.



Hans Koch—who had headed the department of Marxist Arts and Cultural Studies at the Institut für Gesellschaftswissenschaften (Social Science Institute) for many years and who, in 1966, became the first academic member of the Ministry of Culture—called *Miss Butterfly* the worst of all the DEFA films criticized in the context of the 11th Plenum. According to him, this film combined all the negative tendencies of DEFA. He compared it to Ingmar Bergman’s *Tystnaden* (*The Silence*, 1963), which at the time was considered the paradigm of bourgeois decadence and alienation in the GDR. Christa Wolf would later recall that Hans Koch argued that her entire philosophical concept was to “portray the persistent inability of adults to communicate with one another. That we insisted on an unresolvable opposition in interpersonal relationships. It allegedly revealed an intellectual deficit in conception and activity. Koch demanded that this opposition be resolved.”

Horst Brasch, state secretary in the Ministry of Culture, stressed that the film was ideologically wrong; among other things, his proof of this was that the film had allegedly been shot in the dirtiest corners of East Berlin. DEFA’s new Head Dramaturg, Günter Schröder—who had previously worked with Kurt Hager in the SED Central Committee—called *Miss Butterfly* “a crude misrepresentation of life in the GDR.” At one point in the discussion, it was claimed that the film discredited the achievements of socialism. Everyone was glad to get a new apartment, but the Raupe girls wanted to stay in their shabby old hideaway, of all places. And the film made the new buildings seem cold and impersonal. As could be expected, the functionaries saw in Frau Fertig/Fenske a parody of themselves and the SED: She thinks she knows everything, she does everything, she means well, but it’s all wrong. This was tantamount to a denunciation. Only a handful of artists in attendance, including Wolfgang Kohlhaase, argued in favor of a more nuanced evaluation of the film.

Deputy Minister of Culture and Director of the Film Department Wilfried Maaß gave the closing remarks. Christa Wolf would later summarize them as follows:

A million East German Marks have been wasted. [...] The film achieves an effect that is directed against our republic and is essentially hostile to our republic. The film distorts the reality of the republic and expresses a philosophy that has nothing at all to do with our own philosophy. What we see on the screen now must, at same point, have been in the minds of the people who made the film. It is a mental stance, an ideology that has a hostile effect, which the 11th Plenum cleared away.

IV

After *Miss Butterfly*, Christa and Gerhard Wolf never again worked on a contemporary DEFA film. Christa Wolf used the theme she’d developed—“Don’t give up on your wishes prematurely and resign yourself to the flat rationality of everyday life”³—for multiple literary works, however. The book she wrote after *Miss Butterfly*—*Nachdenken über Christa T.* (*The Quest for Christa T.*, 1968)—was based on the experiences of a young Helene Raupe with the GDR’s cultural bureaucracy.

The dramaturg and leader of the Heinrich Greif Artistic Production Group, Klaus Wischnewski—who was also responsible for banned films like *Just Don’t Think I’ll Cry*, *Berlin Around the Corner*, *Trace of Stones* and *Der verlorene Engel* (*The Lost Angel*, 1966-71, dir. Ralf Kirsten)—was fired from DEFA in fall 1966. After a one-year ban on working in his field, Wischnewski found a job as a dramaturg and later as the chief dramaturg at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin.

After director Kurt Barthel shot one last children’s film for DEFA—*Die Nacht im Grenzwald* (*The Night in the Border Forest*, 1968) about the anti-fascist resistance—he only worked on short films and documentaries. In

³ Wolf, Christa. “Rummelplatz 11. Plenum 1965 - Erinnerungsbericht.” *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou: Texte 1990-1994*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994. 69.



1990, when many DEFA films banned around the 11th Plenum were restored, finished and screened, Barthel had the opportunity to prepare *Miss Butterfly* for a proper theatrical release. After screening the raw footage, however, he quickly abandoned this project, reasoning that the footage would not be able to present the ideas and zeitgeist of the early 1960s to a contemporary audience: “With the tremendous transformation taking place today, I don’t think that there’s interest in what we were attempting to do back then or in the sources of our aesthetic devices and our hope to revolutionize GDR cinema....” This is how *Miss Butterfly* remained a fragment.

This text by film historian Ralf Schenk is based on exhaustive discussions with Kurt Barthel (August 7 and 31, 1996; April 2005), as well as with Christa and Gerhard Wolf (September 6, 1996). The dramaturg and former head of the Heinrich Greif Artistic Production Group, Klaus Wischnewski, provided the author with his original 3/2/66 statement on the meeting of February 4, 1966 and other documents from which the author quotes in the text.

AFTERWORD

During the *Wende* of 1989-90, the banned films of 1965-66 were restored for the first time and presented to a broad audience at the Berlin International Film Festival. Unlike many of the others, *Miss Butterfly* was not submitted, in accordance with the wishes of Christa Wolf and Kurt Barthel. The rough cut the director reviewed at the time has been considered lost since 1990.

The DEFA-Stiftung and the Deutsches Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archive) initiated a first attempt to reconstruct the film between 2002 and 2004. Ralf Schenk and editor Ingeborg Marszalek screened the roughly 320 cans of film footage stored in the Federal Archive, which contained: the negatives of all the different takes; positives; cut material; rehearsal shots; documentary shots; audiotapes; music recordings; and a few recordings of the sound synchronization. Neither an assembled version of the film nor a rough cut was found. The first task was to screen all the materials and match them to the different takes in the director’s script. This revealed that they possessed most, if not all the material from 1965, but that most the audio was either missing, or of no use in its current form.

For this reason, everyone involved in that reconstruction ultimately decided to produce a documentation of the material, choosing the most complete shots with the best audio and visual quality and then putting them together as a montage. Scenes that were shot from different perspectives were thus present in the documentation multiple times. Dialogs that were hard to hear or missing were captioned. This montage of the existing materials according to the original script was far from a finished film.

In 2019 and 2020, the DEFA Foundation again attempted to reconstruct the film; the goal was to turn the 2004 documentation into a complex piece of cinema art representing the original intentions of director Kurt Barthel. This work was supported by the Förderprogramm Filmerbe (Program to Support Film Heritage), financed through the German Ministry of Culture and Media, the states of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Filmförderungsanstalt (German Federal Film Board). The original negatives were digitized in 4K and the music and sound recorded. Together with composer Peter Rabenalt, who had originally written the music for the film in 1965, editors Ingeborg Marszalek and Emma Gräf reconstructed the dramaturgy of the film, based on the original script and musical motifs, thus creating a new cut of the film. Thanks to some complicated technology, it was possible to restore the original audio recordings of the main actors, including: Carola



Braunbock, Herwart Grosse, Rolf Hoppe and Lissy Tempelhof; missing dialog and the dialogs spoken in Slovak by the leading actress, Melania Jakubisková, were newly dubbed. A new sound design was then created, and the new audio was combined with the video track. The video track was color-corrected and retouched in 2K. This new version is a finished film in high-definition digital format suited to screenings in cinemas.

Translated by Jan Jokisch.

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