



# TRAUMA AND MEMORY: AN ARTIST IN TURMOIL

By Angelos Koutsourakis

## **Konrad Wolf's Artist Films**

*Der nackte Mann auf dem Sportplatz* (*The Naked Man on the Sports Field*, 1973) is one of Konrad Wolf's four artist films. Like *Goya* (1971), *Solo Sunny* (1978), and *Busch singt* (*Busch Sings*, 1982)—his six-part documentary about the German singer and actor Ernst Busch, *The Naked Man on the Sports Field* focuses on the relationship between art and power. In *Goya*, Wolf looks at the life of the renowned Spanish painter—who initially benefited from the protection of the Spanish king and the Catholic church—in order to explore the role of the artist in society, as well as issues of artistic independence from political powers. In *Solo Sunny*, he describes a woman's struggle for artistic expression and self-realization in a stultifying world that is tainted by patriarchal values; Sunny's search is simultaneously a search for independence and a more fulfilling social role. Both films can be understood as a camouflaged critique of the official and social pressures faced by East German artists.

*The Naked Man on the Sports Field* can be seen this way as well, and simultaneously explores questions of trauma and memory. The film tells the story of Herbert Kimmel (played by Kurt Böwe), an artist uncomfortable with the dominant understanding of art in his country. Kimmel is a sculptor in turmoil, insofar as he seems to feel alienated from his social environment, in which people do not understand his artistic works. One of his bas-reliefs, for example—which captures the historic land reforms in the Soviet Occupied Zone in 1945-46—is shelved, as district officials are not satisfied with it, saying “it lacks energy and optimism.” Another example occurs when he visits his home village and offers to make a statue for the local athletic field. He convinces the locals of the idea, but they seem to have a different conception of the end product, which the naked runner he sculpts does not match.

Kimmel feels uncomfortable on other levels as well. He wants to create the head of a worker, but cannot find the right model. When he eventually does, the construction site foreman Hannes (Martin Trettau) refuses. Finally, after convincing Hannes to sit for him several times, Kimmel is not satisfied with his own work. The crisis he experiences—in his social relationships and in relation to dominant artistic dogma—can partly be attributed to the fact that he is haunted by thoughts of the past. This is expressed in the film's subtle references to the Buchenwald and Ravensbrück concentration camps and memorial sites, as well as to events in Babi Yar (of which more below). Kimmel seems to be stuck in this past suffering, unable to overcome these traumatic events.

Film journalist Heinz Kersten suggests that, like *Ich war neunzehn* (*I Was Nineteen*, 1967), *The Naked Man on the Sports Field* has autobiographical overtones and returns to a theme that preoccupied Wolf throughout his career: the fascist past and the extermination camps (Ebbrecht 2009: 74). In one of the scenes at the beginning of the film, Kimmel presents his bas-relief on the land reform to an audience from his village. The people seem to be puzzled and unable to understand the artwork. When he later returns to his village and discovers that the relief has been shelved, he talks with the friendly couple that breaks the news to him. Both noncommittally indicate that they like the project, but the woman says the faces look “a bit too serious;” her husband responds that “those were serious times.”

Kimmel is baffled and, in a later conversation with the same woman, he explains that an artwork needs to be given a chance beyond one's initial reactions—that a sculpture must be seen in different lighting and be given time to become part of a place before it can be fully understood. Kimmel struggles to articulate and communicate the nature of an artistic sensibility that is not based on naturalistic depiction, but rather connects with the realities and history of their shared country on a more abstract level. Kimmel does not speak from a position of intellectual superiority; throughout the film, it is clear that he feels comfortable with working-class and country people. Overall, his attitude betrays a romantic socialist

belief that people can escape ignorance and that art can be a path to enlightenment, which bypasses inflexible dogma and avoids reproducing facile messages to be consumed by the public. Ultimately, however, Kemmel's inability to make himself understood by ordinary people underlines the broader issue of suffocating cultural norms and constraints in the GDR.

## **Art in the GDR**

The main character in the film is inspired by the East German sculptor and graphic artist Werner Stötzer (1931-2010), who produced artworks that were not in line with the conformist understanding of the role of art in the GDR. He was frequently criticized by cultural officials for not addressing core ideological questions. As Stötzer stated, his aim was to avoid imitating nature and work more from instinct. Stötzer's monuments often feature "damaged" bodies that are far from harmonious and perfect. His 1986 statue *Der Engel mit dem gebrochenen Flügel* (*The Angel with the Broken Wing*) is a metaphor for his own experience as an artist in East Germany (Grimm 2017). Like director Konrad Wolf, he was in quite a privileged position as part of the artistic establishment;<sup>1</sup> and yet his constant pursuit of new forms was met with disapproval by officials.

There is a noteworthy sequence in the film that implicitly addresses the issue of stifling artistic orthodoxy and the repression of people's expressive and creative faculties from childhood on. When Kemmel returns home from the village, he finds his son (Andreas Schmid) and his wife Gisi (Ursula Karusseit) quite upset. The boy has received an F in his drawing class. He explains that he was asked to draw a ship, but wanted to draw a horse; so he drew a horse on top of a submarine. When his father asks how the horse ended up there, the child disarmingly responds that the submarine sank the ship the horse was on, and when he fell into the water he was rescued by the submarine crew. Visibly irritated by the inflexible teaching methods of the teacher and the educational system, Kemmel writes a letter to the teacher stating that, from his son's point of view, a horse can very well be on top of a submarine and he should respect this.

The sequence can definitely be read as a critique of how artistic dogmas suffocate artistic expression and imagination; it thus points to a problem in society. Official East German cultural policy was based upon a strictly didactic understanding of art, as developed by Andrei Zhdanov,<sup>2</sup> one of the major proponents of Socialist Realism, which became the official artistic doctrine of the USSR. Socialist Realism privileged optimistic, realistic works that celebrated the new socialist reality, conveniently ignored its contradictions and avoided artistic experimentation. This represented a substantial stumbling block for many artists in the country, whose influences included the modernism of the Weimar Republic and the Soviet avant-garde, as well as later European New Waves, with which most of them were familiar.

### **Artistic Freedom and Censorship in the GDR**

Ironically, as director Kurt Maetzig observed, immediately following the defeat of the Nazis in WWII, filmmakers in the Soviet Occupation Zone of eastern Germany had the freedom to make the films they wanted; Soviet occupation forces were in touch with left-wing Germans and believed that they would discover their own specific, German path to socialism (Brady 1999: 83). After 1948, however, things started getting more regulated. In keeping with Soviet artistic trends, experimentation was now to be dismissed as empty formalism; this did not further the GDR's aspiration to use art as a means to build and glorify the new socialist society that was ostensibly overcoming its uncomfortable past. Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev's ascension to power and the ensuing political thaw in the USSR raised the hope in East German artists that the thaw would spread to the GDR. This, indeed, did take place after the Wall was built in 1961. The thaw was short-lived, however, as artistic freedoms withered in the aftermath of the 11th Plenum of the SED party in 1965. From then on until the time the film was made, books, plays, films and artworks were banned, and officials put the brakes on any sort of artistic experimentation.

<sup>1</sup> Werner Stötzer was part of the group of artists that created the Marx-Engels Forum in Berlin in 1986. He contributed a five-panel marble bas-relief entitled *Alte Welt (Old World)*.

<sup>2</sup> In 1946, Stalin appointed Andrei Zhdanov to direct the Soviet Union's cultural policy. Zhdanov implemented state-sanctioned actions against non-conformist artists and intellectuals and demanded that they strictly adhere to the party line.

# TRAUMA AND MEMORY: AN ARTIST IN TURMOIL

Director Wolf was never comfortable with Socialist Realism. He was heavily influenced by the Soviet avant-garde, having trained at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow (VGIK), where he studied with Grigori Alexandrov, a former collaborator with Sergei Eisenstein's Proletkult collective. He was also heavily influenced by Weimar-era modernism through his family, and was later drawn to New Wave developments in Eastern and Western Europe. The modernism in Wolf's films was an exception to the rule in the GDR film industry, however; although there were other filmmakers who experimented with forms beyond the parameters of Socialist Realism, none did it as consistently as Konrad Wolf.

Scriptwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase, who regularly collaborated with Wolf, commented that—unlike the modernist Marxist tradition followed by playwright Bertolt Brecht and composer Hanns Eisler—Socialist Realism was not committed to the investigation, but rather to the prettification of reality. "For [the authorities], it basically meant a kind of idyllic naturalism: true to life but more beautiful" (Kohlhaase 1999: 121). Soviet author Anatoly Kuznetsov (of whom more below) described Socialist Realism as an illusionist artistic mode, which was not committed to uncovering unfamiliar aspects of reality, but rather to describe a world whose image did not correspond to reality (Kuznetsov 1971: 2). The strict adherence of officials to the doctrine of Socialist Realism had far-reaching consequences for East German filmmakers. Director Frank Beyer famously quipped that, to get a film approved, one had to go through a long, Kafkaesque process, which discouraged filmmakers and resulted in their censoring themselves. As he said, "once author and director no longer tried to tell stories that broached taboos, censorship had become self-censorship. [...] Thus, censorship was not located in one office. It was like a cancer attacking the entire social organism" (quoted in Berghahn 2005: 136). Daniela Berghahn remarks that this practice ultimately gave the illusion of a consensus between art and power.

Wolf's tendency to offer more questions than answers was a practice that sat uneasily with Socialist Realist principles, which put forward the idea of socialism as a form of historical closure and determinism that had overcome past historical contradictions. He had more liberty than many to bypass Socialist Realist doctrines because his socialist credentials were impeccable: his family had been active in the antifascist front before the Nazi takeover, he had been raised in the USSR and he had served in its army. That he could not be questioned by cultural officials or the SED made it possible for him to hold prestigious institutional roles in the GDR. He was chair of the Artists Union, president of the Academy of Arts, and a member of the SED's Central Committee. To this, one should add that his international recognition at festivals across the world made him an important cultural ambassador for the country. Nevertheless, despite his privileged position, Wolf's films dealt with uncomfortable questions pertaining to the persistence of traumatic memory, the role of art and artists in society and the political repercussions of individual choices.

Wolf's work thus successfully managed to combine formal innovation with political subject matter and avoid the triumphalist happy-ending format that was the norm for many other DEFA films. Even when manipulating the well-known antifascist film genre—which, for the cultural officials of the GDR, represented a means to exonerate both themselves and the country from its fascist past and place the blame on the West—his films end with more questions than answers. This is facilitated by a persistent melancholy that resists closure and the rigid didactic dramaturgy of Socialist Realism. This melancholy permeates Wolf's entire filmography and operates as a metacommentary on art's uncertain capacity to capture the crises and catastrophes of the twentieth century; but, as Thomas Brasch pointed out, it also conveys a melancholic acknowledgement that socialism never became the democratic alternative of which he and other socialists had dreamed (Brasch 1982: 13). This is brilliantly shown in Wolf's artist films: in *Goya*, the painter's problems with the Inquisition are a veiled commentary on the obstruction of artistic freedom in the GDR; more directly, in *Solo Sunny* the quest for individual self-realization depicts the desire of young East Germans to formulate their own ideas and creative processes, without being monitored by the state.

## **Traumatic Memory**

In *The Naked Man on the Sports Field*, one can identify all the key questions that preoccupied Wolf throughout his career. In particular, the persistence of traumatic memory figures importantly in the film. Kemmel seems to be haunted by the past, despite the fact that he himself did not experience the horror of the camps. Early in the film he and his wife Gisi visit an exhibition of Albert Ebert's paintings. Ebert, who started painting following his return from WWII, made naïve artworks portraying an idealistic and picturesque view of everyday life; this was a way of dealing with his traumatic wartime experiences as a soldier. The sequences that capture these paintings thus produce a sense of metacommentary on the relationship between art and life. In contrast to Ebert's aesthetics of escapism, Wolf chooses to capture everyday life in a much less dramatic way: Böwe's anti-spectacular performance of Kemmel and the anti-spectacular quality of Kemmel's work both contradict such an aesthetics and escapism itself.

For Kemmel, the required attitude is not to attempt to exorcise the past, but rather to return to it in an effort to understand it. In one emblematic sequence in the film, he is visited by a young couple that admires his work. When they ask him how much one of his drawings would cost, he gently evades the question and shows them a photo of Buchenwald. He tells them, "That's an aerial photo of Buchenwald, from the north. The train from Apolda ran along here. And in Ravensbrück there was only a lake between the boat rental and the crematorium." The couple seems uncomfortable, and the young woman can barely manage to say: "It's sad." The camera cuts to Kemmel's young son, whose expression betrays his inability to understand his father's melancholic attachment to the past. Kemmel sends him away, and he leaves the building and gazes in at his father through the window from outside. The viewer infers that Kemmel's obsession with the past is familiar to the child, who, like the young couple, fails to understand it.

In the scene immediately following this, Kemmel pensively reads a book, and then his wife reads passages from it aloud. The book is Anatoly Kuznetsov's documentary novel on the 1941 massacre at Babi Yar. The passage she reads is from the testimony of the Jewish-Ukrainian actress Dina Mironovna Pronicheva.<sup>3</sup> When Gisi asks her husband why he has underlined these passages, Kemmel retorts with some historical background on Babi Yar; when she asks whether he is planning to make a piece about it, he is irritated and responds that this is impossible, because he wasn't there. We can see that Kemmel's obsession with the past has a negative effect on his relationship with his family, as is made clear when Gisi complains that he never talks to her. Finally, Kemmel also has a lover who is a photographer; this secret relationship is another index of his own personal crisis.

Kemmel is restless in his refusal to leave the past behind. The character thus almost functions as the director's double—as Wolf never stopped searching for new ways to represent the un-representable horrors of the war and Holocaust. Kemmel's constant return to the Buchenwald picture—his inability to understand the proximity between the natural idyll and human horror—reveals Wolf's familiarity with New Wave filmmakers and particularly with Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and the Fog*, 1955), a film that also muses on the contradiction between environmental beauty and the horror of the camps, while it considers the impossibility of representing the Holocaust and the need to invent more complex forms that depart from realistic conventions.

## **The Resonance of Babi Yar**

The return of Wolf, Stötzer, Kohlhaase and Kemmel to put a lid on history, their fixation with the traumatic past can well be seen as a resistance to the GDR narrative of progress and its identity as the antifascist nation that managed to defeat its Nazi past. This point can be corroborated by looking closely at the historical details of Babi Yar and the ways in which Kuznetsov's

<sup>3</sup> Dina Mironovna Pronicheva was one of very few Babi Yar survivors. She testified at the war-crimes trial in Kiev in 1946. Later, she told her story to Anatoly Kuznetsov, who included it in his book.

well-known volume raises questions about the troublesome relationship between art and power. *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* was originally published, in an edited and censored form, in the USSR in 1966. The censors removed all passages that were critical of the Stalin years, as well as those that explained how many Ukrainians collaborated with the Nazis and informed on Jews—a fact that sat uneasily with the Soviet narrative focusing on the patriotic sacrifices made in the struggle against fascism. The book nevertheless caused a sensation; the impact was only heightened when Kuznetsov managed to publish the unabridged version with additional comments in 1970, after escaping from the USSR in 1969.<sup>4</sup>

### What happened at Babi Yar?

Babi Yar was a ravine near Kiev. There the German army, with the assistance of Ukrainian collaborators, executed more than 30,000 Jews and other Ukrainians who witnessed the first wave of executions, in 1941. It remained an execution site until the end of the war, where thousands of people—communists, Russians, Ukrainians, POWs, Roma, disobedient locals, sick people from the local concentration camp and numerous others—were killed. The murders were committed en masse; many people who played dead were buried alive by bodies falling on top of them. When the Nazis realized they were losing the war, they started a huge operation to excavate the corpses from the ravine and burn them, so as to remove all traces of their crimes. The people who did the work were inmates at a nearby concentration camp. Many died while working and most of the rest were executed; the corpses were thrown into the fire that burned to erase the trace of previous murders.

What emerges in Kuznetsov's documentary novel is a more historicized view of the horror of Babi Yar that connects Stalinist atrocities to the Nazi ones that followed. It also reveals how easily people get used to conditions of terror and oppression and start thinking about their own survival at the expense of others. The novel's fragmented style brings together stories of people informing on each other during the Stalin years, as well as during the German occupation of Ukraine. For the author, Babi Yar thus signifies a state of mind, not just a ravine where executions took place. Prominent in the novel is also Kuznetsov's belief that there is no guarantee that similar horrific events will not take place again in the future. For this reason, he cautions his reader against historical amnesia:

Young people who were born in the 'forties, the 'fifties and later, who did not see or live through any of this—for you, of course, the story I have to tell is pure history.

You do not like the dry-as-dust history you were taught in school. I don't like it either. It often seems to be no more than a long list of reigns, dates and idiotic battles which I am supposed to be impressed by. On top of that, stories of all sorts of horrors, one dirty trick after the other, stupidities on top of idiocies, until you are ashamed: can the history of civilization really be like that? [...]

The only thing is that I can see from my little window that while some people are loving and sleeping, others are busy making handcuffs for them. Why? That's the question. There are so many would-be benefactors in the world. And they are all determined to shower benefits on the whole world. Nothing less. And for this purpose very little is needed: simply that the world should fit into the design which is taking shape God knows how in their feeble, complex tortured minds.

They do not scorn politics; they are makers of policy. They make their own cudgel and then bring it down on other people's heads and in this manner they put their politics into practice.

Careful, my friends!

On the basis of my own and other people's experience and of experience generally, on the basis of much thinking and searching, worry and calculation, I say to you: THE PERSON WHO TODAY IGNORES POLITICS WILL REGRET IT.

I did not say I liked politics. I hate them. I scorn them. I do not call upon you to like them or even respect them. I am simply telling you: DON'T IGNORE THEM. (Kuznetsov 1971: 44-45)

<sup>4</sup> The censored version was released in English in 1967 by The Dial Press in New York. It was released in German-speaking countries in 1968 by Volk und Welt in the GDR; Brücken Verlag in the FRG; and Diogenes in Switzerland. In 1970, after Kuznetsov defected to the UK, the complete manuscript with new additions was published: in English under the pseudonym A. Anatoli and in German in West Germany.

## *Art against Historical Amnesia*

For Kuznetsov, then, historical amnesia was tantamount to ignoring the very problems that produce horrific events, such as Babi Yar. It is this melancholic assumption that connected Wolf, Kohlhaase, Stötzer and Kemmel to the author Kuznetsov. But there was also another, deferred connection between the Ukrainian author and the East German artists—namely, that his acclaimed novel had suffered censorship and artistic suppression, a reality that was all too familiar to Wolf and Stötzer. Kuznetsov was a firm believer in the idea that art should not attempt to prettify reality, but rather to expose its evils and corruptions. Ironically, the copy of *Babi Yar* that Kemmel and his wife read in the film is probably the censored version, which did not include uncomfortable truths that the USSR wanted to avoid. By the time the film was made, however, the uncensored book had been published in the UK, U.S. and Western Europe, including in West Germany. One wonders whether Wolf was aware of the uncensored version of the novel. If this was the case, the film's references to the novel become a political metacommentary on both the issue of art and power in the GDR and the conservative politics of memory in the USSR, which, like the GDR's own regulated historical memory, aimed to exonerate the country from its past. For Wolf, as for Kemmel, this would have represented just another form of historical amnesia, of no value in trying to understand the horrors of the mid-twentieth century.

The sense that the horror of the camps demanded new forms of artistic representation is evidenced in the scene when Kemmel visits Ravensbrück. The camera cuts back and forth between Kemmel, the lake, the landscape and the memorial sculptures created by Will Lammert and Fritz Cremer. The historically informed viewer is invited to notice the parallels between Lammert's artistic work, which was initially met with reservations because of its modernist and expressionist anti-heroic style, and Kemmel's own pursuit of a largely anti-naturalistic artistic language. Lammert's memorials did not celebrate antifascist resistance and historical closure, as GDR officials wanted. His work differed, for example, from Cremer's Buchenwald memorial and his *Müttergruppe* (*Group of Mothers*) at Ravensbrück, which subscribe to Social Realism and maintain the country's official creed of antifascist resistance and historical closure (Peters 1957: 21-22). Ironically, Lammert's renowned *Die Tragende* (*Bearing Woman*, 1957-59)—a sculpture shown in the film of a woman carrying another woman who has collapsed<sup>5</sup>—was read as a symbol of solidarity and “new beginnings” (Eschebach 2011: 137). This departed from the artist's original intentions, which were far from celebrating antifascism. Lammert had originally designed a series of anti-heroic figures of haggard, shaven women and children from the camps, which were meant to be placed at the base of the pillar in Ravensbrück; these figures had to be shelved, however, as their anti-heroic quality did not appeal to GDR cultural officials.<sup>6</sup> This historical detail shows how art and memory can be manipulated to represent closure and ostentatious progress, rather than historical vigilance and understanding.

These events taking place in the GDR raised issues that also resonated with Werner Stötzer's artistic preoccupations. In 1967, Stötzer made both a bronze bas-relief and a lithograph entitled *Babi Jar* (*Babi Yar*). What is noteworthy in the relief is the non-naturalistic style of the deformed human figures placed one next to another, evoking the mass graves of those murdered at Babi Yar. Interestingly, there is a sense of dialectic between stillness and movement in this artwork; while most of the figures evoke corpses, there is also one figure that looks like someone holding his head. Is s/he trying to protect her/himself? Or is s/he attempting to avoid witnessing the horror? This is not made clear, since the relief is in a modernist anti-representational, rather than naturalistic style. Emphasis is placed on mood rather than realistic representation. It seems clear that Stötzer was also familiar with debates on the impossibility of representing the Holocaust.

<sup>5</sup> Besides *Die Tragende*, Lammert's *Frau mit Tuch* (*Woman with Scarf*) and *Frau mit abgeschnittenem Haar* (*Woman with Shaved Head*, 1956) are also shown in this scene.

<sup>6</sup> Lammert's original design for the Ravensbrück memorial included *Die Tragende* on a pedestal, with 18 (later 20) figures on the base. After Lammert's death in 1957, Cremer took over, making crucial changes to the original design. The result was that *Die Tragende* was cast in a larger size and only two other sculptures were included—and placed elsewhere than planned. In 1985, 13 of the sculptures that Lammert had originally created for the base of *Die Tragende* were placed in front of the Jewish cemetery at Grosse Hamburger Strasse in Berlin.

Wolfgang Kohlhaase, who spoke with Stötzer while writing the script for *The Naked Man on the Sports Field*, confirms that the sculptor was concerned with the issues treated in the film. He says that Stötzer mused on:

The contrast between idyll and catastrophe are the two human possibilities. The idyll: harmony, humanity and love. The catastrophe: devastation of man by man. He has elaborated on this subject with important, simple pictures. So we return to this theme. And I was moved by the fact that a man like Stötzer, a man of this generation, a man in Germany, in his quiet studio on the outskirts of Berlin, treated one of the great catastrophes of the century, felt restless and responsible, and argued against forgetting. That should appear in the film (quoted in Ebbrecht 2009: 157).<sup>7</sup>

Exploring the past as a means of thinking through, as opposed to prettifying the contradictions of the present was something shared by Stötzer, Wolf and Kohlhaase, whose artistic output engaged with questions of memory. Stötzer was working on his Babi Yar relief while Kohlhaase was writing the screenplay. The sculptor believed that historical trauma should not be forgotten—but the sombre quality of his work did not fulfill the official desire that the past be used to glorify the present. Instead, the affective intensity of Stötzer's work refutes a facile catharsis legitimizing the postwar present.

Kohlhaase was born in the same year as Stötzer and shared with him a particular interest in questions of history; this was a point of connection between them (Fischer 1990: 161). Recalling the end of the war, Kohlhaase explains that the Russians entering Berlin was an unforgettable experience, which signalled the end of one historical period and the beginning of a new one—with all “the hopes and disappointments that were to come” (Fischer 1990: 118). For people of his generation, art was a vehicle for their own accountability towards future generations—generations that should not repeat similar mistakes—as well as a way to help others understand the sources of the historical calamities of the past.

Orienting history to the present and the future was also one of Konrad Wolf's key preoccupations. Like the aforementioned artists, Wolf could never leave the past behind. Somewhat older than Stötzer and Kohlhaase, Wolf—who had become a Soviet citizen while growing up in exile in Moscow—participated in the war as a soldier in the Red Army. In many of his antifascist films—including *Lissy* (1957), *Sterne* (*Stars*, 1959), *Leute mit Flügeln* (*People with Wings*, 1960), *Professor Mamlock* (1961) and *I Was Nineteen*—he muses on the individual's responsibility to understand his/her historical role and not be carried away by the dark forces of history. In a way, Wolf's own struggle against fascism as a Red Army soldier, equipped him with a romantic outlook that made him believe that the GDR could offer a viable alternative to the social conditions that gave rise to Nazism.

Then again, there is something intrinsically melancholic in Wolf's films—as if indirectly conveying that socialism of the time was not what he and so many other socialist antifascists had fought for. This melancholy pervades *The Naked Man on the Sports Field* and simultaneously expresses Wolf's scepticism about the problems facing East Germany at the time. Wolf's biographers, Wolfgang Jacobsen and Rolf Aurich, cogently argue that in the 1970s Wolf became interested in contemporary issues; as he began making *Gegenwartsfilme* (films about contemporary issues), he went back to questions pertaining to WWII and the Holocaust with a view to revisiting and interrogating the past in order to understand the impasses of the present. As they write, “Wolf needed Kemmel as his deputy, as his interrogator of the present” (Jacobsen and Aurich 2005: 356).

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<sup>7</sup> Translated from the German by the author.

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