Without Is Within: The Scenography of *The Lost Angel*

By Annette Dorgerloh

Ralf Kirsten's artist film *Der verlorene Engel* (*The Lost Angel*) draws much of its power from its visual representation of the works of Ernst Barlach, against the backdrop of his home and studio in Güstrow and the surrounding Mecklenburg countryside. In his 1963 novel *Das schlimme Jahr* (*The Terrible Year*),[1] Franz Fühmann gave impressive literary form to this relationship under the anti-artistic conditions of Nazism. This was remarkable because at the time Barlach did not belong to the canon of socialist art, which was dominated by the formalism debate. Nevertheless, his work was concurrently very well received in circles close to the church,[2] and his memorials had won renewed relevance among pacifists after the Second World War.

In 1951, as a young man of twenty-one, Ralf Kirsten saw a prestigious exhibition of Barlach's work at the Academy of Art in East Berlin. The exhibit closed prematurely because a few leading GDR cultural officials pointedly excluded Barlach from their concept of the tradition of socialist art. Kirsten was deeply impressed by the vitality and "tragic optimism" of the exhibit, however. As he later wrote, "only a few years after the end of the war, [Barlach] helped me believe that antifascist art created in Germany had refuted the ideology of fascism and exposed it as criminal."[3] Disastrously, the Hauptverwaltung Film beim Ministerium für Kultur (Central Administration for Film at the Ministry of Culture) concluded that Kirsten's film was not about fascism, but rather about the artists disciplined by the SED party at the 11th Plenum of its Central Committee in 1965. Even if the contemporary reference had not been the original motivation for the Barlach film, Kirsten always attached great importance to the intended message of his work. This can be seen in a handwritten note by the director on the last page of the film's screenplay: "end more aggressive, clearly formulated, provocative questioning."[4]

The Lost Angel was banned in the aftermath of the 11th Plenum, and concurrent with Kirsten's grave illness in 1966. It remained unfinished until the occasion of the Barlach exhibit that commemorated the 100th anniversary of his birth and premiered on December 17 or 18, 1970 in Moscow. Although Barlach was now cautiously declared part of the GDR's cultural heritage, the German premiere which followed was not advertised—contrary to usual practice—and instead of the usual fifteen copies of the film, only five were produced and shown for only a short time.[5] Kirsten later referred to this practice as a "boycott," because it meant that the film would only reach a small audience. Apparently the content of the film and Kirsten's adaptation of it were still not fully trusted. Nevertheless, the film quickly gained the attention of cinéastes and art lovers, precisely because of its idiosyncratic aesthetic, and it inspired more animated discussion in film and cultural clubs than any other film by the director.

Indeed *The Lost Angel*, set in 1937, does not offer any obviously garish Nazi symbolism, although it certainly strives for historical accuracy in its props and set design. Director Kirsten and his scenographer, Hans Poppe (1928-1999), relied on more subtle means to visualize fascist power and the exclusion of the artist stigmatized as "degenerate." Even in Kirsten's rather un-dramatic realization, the nighttime removal of *Der Schwebende* (*The Hovering Angel*) sculpture registers as a terrible and barbaric act. (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1— Hans Poppe: Removal of The Hovering Angel *(E 406) © (NO19_0419) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum*

All props were carefully selected. The cost estimates already noted that original objects would have to be obtained on loan, because reproducing them would hardly be possible. Such objects included newspaper stalls, horse carts, a cargo bicycle, a Dutch tricycle, a 1937 baby stroller, swastika flags, an advertising pillar with posters, lamps with brackets, display signs (for example, "Strength through joy" and air raid shelter signs) and store fittings. Barlach's living room was also thoroughly reconstructed for the film. Because Marga Böhmer, Barlach's companion in Güstrow, was still alive, she was questioned in detail—for example, concerning the masks on the wall. Such extensive preliminary research found its way into the script in scene 6, page 15. Thus the first camera pan through Barlach's living room was to show the following: "Camera fixed on the telephone; it rings several times. CAMERA PAN. On the wall, the camera first discovers a model of the *Angel's* head, then drawings, masks, and a half-sized wooden sculpture. Every now and then the face of B[arlach]—self-portrait—appears in the images." (Fig 2 & 3)

Fig. 2 & 3 — Hans Poppe: Design for Barlach's living room with Angel's head (E 32-2) and Barlach's self-portrait (E 32-3) © (NO 19_0408 and _0409) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum

The film essentially revolves around three settings. The Güstrow Cathedral—a typical example of northern German Brick Gothic, erected in the thirteenth century, which the camera initially explores from above. Barlach's living room and studio. And the summer landscape, the harmony of which soon proves deceptive. The film was partially shot in Saxony and, of course, in the studio, as well as in Güstrow and the surrounding area.

Barlach endowed his sculpture *The Hovering Angel*, which he gave to the Güstrow Cathedral, with the features of his esteemed colleague, sculptor and graphic artist Käthe Kollwitz. (Fig. 4) As Barlach's Munich publisher Reinhard Piper wrote in his memoirs (published in 1950), in reference to a visit to see Barlach in Güstrow, the face of Käthe Kollwitz just "appeared" to him, without his having intended it. "If I had wanted something like that," said Barlach, "it probably would not have worked."

Fig. 4— Hans Poppe: Head of the Angel *(E 91) © (NO19_0412) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum*

It is noteworthy that Ralf Kirsten later dedicated a film to this artist, *Käthe Kollwitz - Bilder eines Lebens* (*Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life*, 1986), for which he also wrote the script. This is another quiet, intense film, which presents scenes from the life of the artist, with many flashbacks, like a collage. Käthe Kollwitz appreciated Ernst Barlach greatly because, as she said, in his works "without is within, form and content are exactly equivalent, nothing is filler."

Barlach had to win over the Güstrow Cathedral parish to his very singular memorial; originally the priest had wanted a boulder with a cross to commemorate those who had fallen in the First World War. Barlach then gave them *The Hovering Angel.* When this sculpture was removed by the Nazis on August 24, 1937, his memorials in Kiel and Magdeburg had already been removed or hidden because they, like the *Angel*, were too pacifist for the new rulers. Although Barlach issued a declaration of loyalty to the new government in 1933, his works

were nevertheless soon labeled "degenerate." The stolen Güstrow *Angel* was later melted down. Fortunately, by then friends of Barlach had produced a second casting, which they successfully hid during the war. It has been on display in the Antoniterkirche (Church of St. Anthoninus) in Cologne since 1952. The mold for the new Güstrow *Angel* was taken from this cast in 1953.

Because the director required his own *Angel* for the scene in the film in which the sculpture is taken down, a cast was made of the Güstrow sculpture, not in bronze, but in the lighter material polyester, which would take on color accordingly. (Fig. 5) Today it is one of the most impressive objects in the Potsdam Film Museum's collections, which also contain sketches and design drawings by Hans Poppe.

Fig. 5 — Polyester cast of The Hovering Angel *© Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum*

Kirsten filmed a number of scenes in the Güstrow Cathedral itself, as is illustrated by floor plan sketches with marked camera positions. (Fig. 6) The film team agreed that many scenes should be shot in the city of Güstrow. Poppe's designs show the intended expressive content of the selected streets, as well as of the nature scenes, to which director and camera often imparted a decidedly expressionistic character. (Fig. 7)

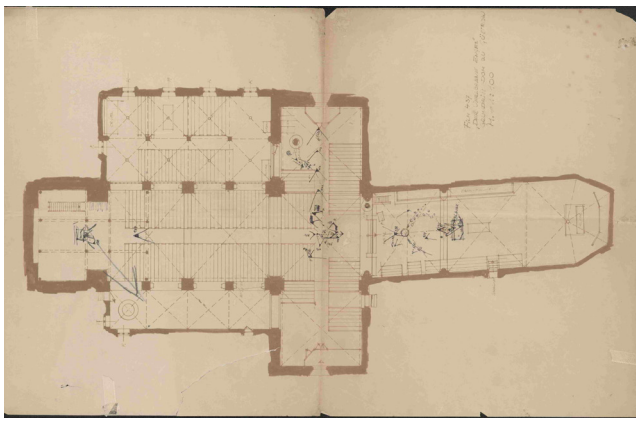

Fig. 6 — Floor plan of Güstrow Cathedral with delineated camera positions © (NO19_0420_01) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum

Fig. 7 — Hans Poppe: Countryside scenes (E 373-77) © (NO19_0418) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum

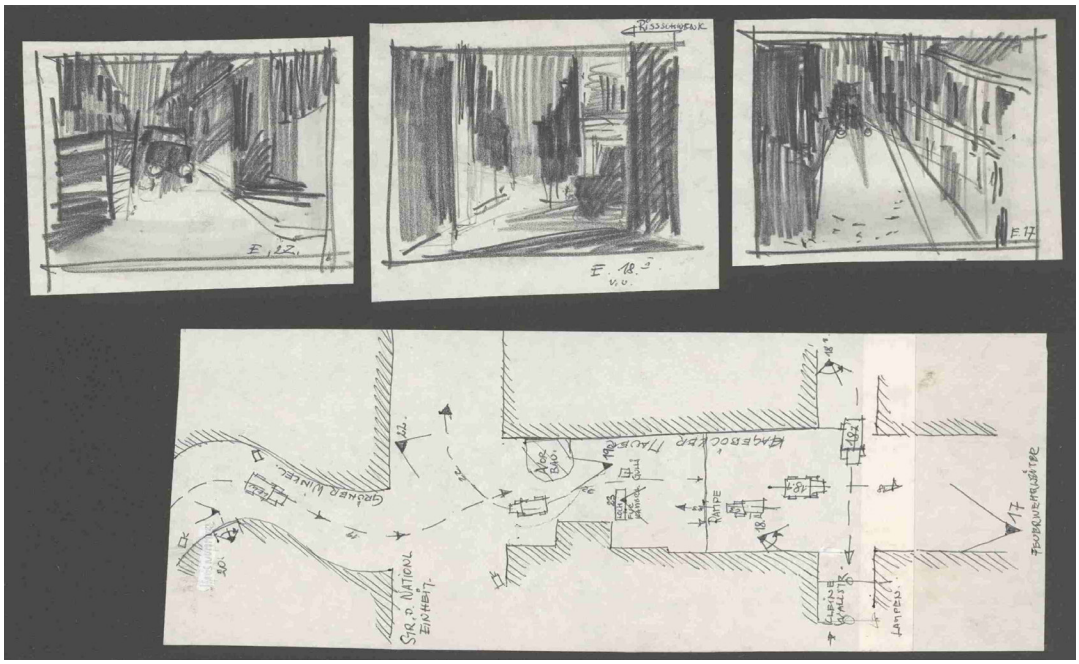

Fig. 8a— Hans Poppe: Design for nighttime drive through Güstrow, sketches with camera positions © (NO19_0372) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum

Fig. 8b— Hans Poppe: Nighttime drive through Güstrow (E 17) © NO19_0400) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum

The black-and-white film makes heavy use of light and shadow effects. The glare of the headlights of the police van at the beginning of the film illuminates a ghostly Güstrow Cathedral on a quiet night; the plot is "fore-shadowed" by the shadow, as it were. Poppe's designs show very well how he used different artistic forms: the quick charcoal sketch of different road scenes (Fig. 8a), which are combined on this sheet with an overview of the winding Güstrow street through which the vans of the Nazi iconoclasts drive. The sketch with the camera positions clearly illustrates how many different vantage points were needed for this one scene. The executed scene design (Fig. 8b), in contrast, indicates—comparable to an anticipated film still—the effect or value that this scene is to have.

Hans Poppe—whose father was a music director and organist and whose mother was a voice teacher—studied set design at the Berlin College for Applied Arts in Berlin-Weissensee. Then, starting in 1949, he interned at the DEFA Film Studio as a painter. He was accepted onto the team of the renowned set designer Erich Zander in 1953, before becoming an independent set designer at DEFA in 1956. Initially, Poppe worked mainly on children's and youth films; in the 1960s, he designed fairytale and biographical films. He was married to set designer Marianne Willmann. Directors such as Ralf Kirsten, Rainer Simon (who was director's assistant for *The Lost Angel*), and Horst Seemann also appreciated him for his work on contemporary films.

Poppe's designs congenially turn what Kirsten—partially in accordance with Fühmann's novel—envisioned as a realm of action, into a useful space for filming. Almost all his designs are relatively dark (Fig. 9) or, as with landscapes and night scenes, exhibit contrasts that bring a shrill tone to the summer landscape. Yet time and again it is Barlach's works—his sculptures and their models—that form the nucleus of all the spaces. The film is, in sum, dedicated to the creation, but also particularly to the vulnerability of art and artists to contemporary circumstances. This early auteur film uses the example of Barlach to work through how artists must position not only their art, but themselves as individuals for good or for ill.

Fig. 9— Hans Poppe: Drive by horse-drawn carriage to Güstrow (E 302) © (NO19_0416) Courtesy of the Potsdam Film Museum

Proof of this is found in a short, handwritten, almost casual instruction from Kirsten to the set designer: "refrain from the absolutely typical (landscape + architecture + period atmosphere)." It can certainly be said that following this mandate ultimately produced exactly the effect the censors objected in 1966. From today's perspective, the aesthetically successful actualization of the Barlach story, in the filmic style and form of an auteur film of the late 1960s, makes *The Lost Angel* a classic of DEFA cinema.

Translated by Christopher Hench

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We thank Ines Belger of the Potsdam Film Museum for making Hans Poppe's drawings and additional images available for this DVD. All pictures: © Potsdam Film Museum.

[1] This novella was later published under the title *Barlach in Güstrow*.

[2] Debates on the role of formalism in socialist art took place in the GDR from the early 1950s through the early 1960s. Cultural officials rejected any abstract form or styles that contradicted the idea of realism in art.

[3] Kirsten, Ralf. "Die wunderbare Errettung des *Verlorenen Engels*." Hand-written manuscript, no date, 10 pages, N014/0112 (Potsdam Film Museum, estate of Ralf Kirsten).

[4] In the collections of the Potsdam Film Museum there are: three screenplays; the director's script, with notes and various corrections; and two optical screenplays, with pasted-in photographs of set designs and sketches with camera settings by Hans Poppe. This quote is from the director's scrip, p. 178 recto.

[5] See Quandt, Bernhard. "Ernst Barlach gehört zu uns. Ansprache auf der Festveranstaltung in Güstrow anläßlich des 100. Geburtstages von Ernst Barlach am 4.1.1970." *Zeitschrift Bildende Kunst* 6 (1970). Transcript from Kirsten's estate, Potsdam Film Museum.