

The Third Way, or There's Also a Spot between the Chairs

An only occasionally interrupted monolog by Ulrich Weiß



Excerpts from an interview with director Ulrich Weiß published by Erika Richter and Rolf Richter in Film und Fernsehen (2/1992).

On the 1991 approval and certification meeting for *Miraculi* with new managers from the old [West German] federal states.

They came and one of them said to another: Look at your checklist [of changes].

One of them read aloud from the notes he had taken in the dark. Halfway through it I laughed, and they were shocked. Then I said, shall I tell you what comes next? I know this from way back—all the way down to the vocabulary and sentence structure. They asked whether there had been no changes for me at all. I replied that I still hadn't noticed any. And now I was expected to change [the film], and the contracts were checked [to see] if I was obliged to make changes. Then I was taken aside again and told, in a fatherly and indulgent manner, that I should really think about my future, etc.

I think of nothing else.

Perhaps one would do better to keep quiet. In any case I have intentionally kept quiet since 1989, so that I won't get mistaken for one of the victims who are shouting now, but were silent before. Because nothing is more deadly than to mix up similar things, to be like everyone else, to be "one of us."

If it comes to my speaking again, then always about statements like those of Bela Balázs.

Because for me [German] unification is above all the reunification of the petit bourgeois—of the ones who missed out, with the ones who have more. They get envious when they see the others have more. And the others get angry when they are expected to do without. They all want to expand, bicker for power. This also determines their feelings—or what they take for feelings. For them, life is "wanting to get something from life," like wares, love—wanting love, etc., property.

In elementary school we had wonderful lessons with a young female teacher. In connection with fascism, she spoke for hours about the petit bourgeoisie as the source of evil, about what's most important for them, their needs. Soon that was taken out of the history lesson again. Wonder why.

The petit bourgeois lurks in every person; the course is set early on. Then later you try to find out upon whom you modeled yourself and—assuming you can figure it out—you remain true to that model. Meanwhile, there are a thousand occasions to crack. And I'm afraid that if I do talk again and talk too much about that, it will be similar enough that I'll be mistaken for the others. Because you can't join in mud-wrestling without getting dirty yourself. In the meantime, the petit bourgeois is one of the great problems of the world, with the classic strongholds in Central Europe and North America.

How are your films related to this problem?

In the beginning of the 1970s, when I started working on documentary films with Karl Gass, there was still a slim hope that outer circumstances (the social, the political) primarily shaped (or could shape) people—until I realized that each person is his own primary circumstance. I encountered people whose relationships were emptied—part of which is that ideologies are interchangeable. Empty shells with threaded necks. How can one be a social being, if he is not first himself? [...]

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Miraculi is the description of the absence of alternatives?

What is an opportunity for humankind, anyway? A third way? People everywhere are thinking about this. But films today are mostly illustrations—they only confirm what is pre-formulated. That's where the majority of material gets eaten up. It's not about discoveries. It's only about new decoration. So you have to ask whether there is any progress at all.

Was there a breach for you?

When the Berlin Wall went up. Although I always knew that it would go up. This Germany, where I lived on one side, also only burdened me halfway. I learned to live with this side. Had I not been able to, I would have left. It was a blow when the Wall went up, although I like to laugh at a good joke.

That was not the result of a revolution, with which so many now adorn themselves. Germans and revolution—that's a contradiction in and of itself. I wasn't euphoric for a single second. For example, the concept that Leipzig was a city of heroes was entirely strange to me. I saw the problems that would arise. For me, the experience of the jubilant petit bourgeois was an experience of defeat.

With these feelings, you made *Miraculi*?

Yes.

The screenplay was written in 1978?

The lake disappeared at that time. I gave the first half to Rolf Liebmann, who was my dramaturg at the time, for his 40th birthday. I finished writing it and brought it to the administration building to be read. And there a basically well-meaning person said to me, "Ulli, what have you been writing again?" and smiled at me. "Wouldn't you rather take it back with you?" I took it, stuck the folder under my arm and left. Maybe he wanted to protect me. After each of my films I was told: "after this one, no more films."

These emotional deformities—not to mention the political ones—were everywhere.

If a scene had a certain atmospheric temperature that undermined the petit bourgeois emotional stance, they got uncomfortable or reacted hysterically.

Did you have the feeling during the filming of *Miraculi* that you were making up for something?

No. It was current for me. I would perhaps have preferred to film *Strindberg*—a combination of *By the Open Sea* and parts of Strindberg's biography—but that would have cost five to six million and only two were available. So I went over my drafts and decided on *Miraculi*. But *Miraculi* is not only oriented to the current moment; I am certain people will still watch it in a few years. We will see, when we find historical distance to these events. [...]

Miraculi is strongly embellished. The disruption breaks through in the form, the inner story has a strong cohesiveness. They are ellipses, a lot of little comedies, which in the end add up to a tragedy.

... and little tragedies. People had problems with its episodic and fragmentary aspect.

If so, it was rather with their [lack of] fantasy.

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But this aspect is cruder here than in the other films.

Maybe I had too little sympathy for the people whose lake disappeared. If you are indulgent, you get eaten up. This time I was more ruthless; I noticed it and did it consciously. That's always the question: do I celebrate disruption in a harmonious form, which I also like; or do I allow the disruption to break into the form disharmoniously? Spanish colleagues, by the way, had no problem with the film; they have a different relationship to miracles. For them, even a bullfight has something to do with death and love. To label such a film "symbolist" is to use this word too quickly. Everything is what it is and, at the same time, something different—because of the relationship we have to it. The lake disappeared because the fly came, the young boy swatted it, hitting the other one with the cue, and the billiard balls rolled differently than they were supposed to. Had the fly not come, everything would have gone differently. [...]

But you can't explain miracles, or else they're not miracles. You have to experience them. This is participatory consciousness. If it's missing, then relationships are sick. And they are sick for the petit bourgeois, "for whom only the immediate vicinity has reality" (Balázs). Everything is connected to everything—to narrate it is neither symbolic, nor an experiment. It points at most to the global stream of our existence and the endangering of its delicate balance, which goes berserk if it is disturbed. If someone admits that he doesn't understand that, how can he then (publicly) judge the film? And when someone writes that critics (of which there were hundreds, from around the world, at the Berlin Film Festival) would gladly see the film's symbolist chaos disappear into the archives, then he's only proving that he has deeply internalized the old censor's scissors in his head, and the totalitarian arrogance whereby one presumes everyone thinks the way he does.

Translated by Delene White, DEFA Film Library

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