The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 11

East German film comedies from the 1970s–*Don't Cheat, Darling!*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *Carnations in Aspic*

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This is the 11th and final part in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 on February 27, Part 3 on March 2, Part 4 on March 6, Part 5 on March 9, Part 6 on March 10, Part 7 on March 16, Part 8 on March 21, Part 9 on March 25 and Part 10 on March 30.

Thirty-five years after the dissolution of Stalinist East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR), a stream of German television films and documentaries continues to appear, presenting the state solely as a brutal dictatorship demonstrating the failure of socialism.

This year's Retrospective section of the Berlin film festival featured a number of GDR film comedies from the 1970s that convey a more nuanced and more accurate view. In an ironic, grotesque or absurd way, the handful of films reflected the growing contradictions of GDR society and took aim at the hypocrisy of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy.

***Don't Cheat, Darling!* (1973)**

In *Don't Cheat, Darling!* (*Nicht schummeln, Liebling!*, Joachim Hasler), a female vocational school teacher is transferred to a small town where the mayor is a football fanatic: everything for him revolves around the sport. The local youth team enjoy special privileges. If it can be justified in some way or another, the factory where they work gives them time off. The team hijacks a bus when their car breaks down. The teacher is stunned that the mayor finds this and other things perfectly normal. The pair of course fall in love.

Since football has priority in the town's financial planning, the teacher starts a football team of vocational schoolgirls and demands an urgently needed youth club as a bonus. The plan works, even though the city's finance officer initially resists handing over a dilapidated shooting club where he breeds his rabbits. The girls convince the boys to give them extra lessons and of course, the respective team captains fall in love.

In the end, the "comrade" mayor, who generally solves the city's financial problems through private relationships and other semi-legal and illegal operations, has to attend a training course. He's not a bad guy, the teacher realizes. Since the city has no attractions, he wanted to draw the attention of the leadership of the SED (the GDR's Stalinist Socialist Unity Party) to his "soccer city" so it would become eligible for financial support (a dose of self-interest also plays a role).

The low-key comedy by Joachim Hasler (1929-1995), starring two East German pop stars, is double-edged: it realistically shows how SED functionaries—in this case, the mayor—use corrupt methods to maintain their positions of power. At the same time, his actions are presented as creative initiatives in the service of "socialism." He has not enriched himself personally, and in the general situation of scarcity in the GDR, he wants to get the best for the city. He just has to learn to adapt to the higher party committees.

This of course has nothing to do with a genuine socialist concept that seeks to eliminate social inequality throughout the world. On the contrary, such conceptions serve only to compromise and discredit genuine socialism.

***Orpheus in the Underworld* (1974)**

The original 1858 operetta with music by Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) was a parody of the double standards of the French upper class under Napoleon III. The GDR film adaptation, *Orpheus in the Underworld* (*Orpheus in der Unterwelt*, Horst Bonnet), didn't have to change much of the original text to turn it into a satire about the opportunism of socially privileged layers in the GDR.

Orpheus, a state-employed violin teacher who likes to pose as a free-spirited artist, cheats on his wife Eurydice with various female students. Eurydice had hoped to ascend to the world of the privileged, but now sits bored at home and becomes involved with a shepherd—in reality Pluto, god of the underworld. She willingly follows him into hell. Orpheus is happy to be rid of his wife. But then the composer Offenbach floats by in a balloon and convinces Orpheus he should go fetch his wife, with Jupiter's help.

Meanwhile, Olympus, the home of the gods, is no role model for humans. The upper class laze around, and Jupiter is constantly unfaithful. His entourage grumbles when he warns them not to overdo it, because otherwise humans will lose respect—as proof he produces a pile of letters of complaint.

When Pluto arrives to assure Jupiter that he had nothing to do with the abduction of Eurydice, the court is fascinated by such a man of the world, who immediately presents his own brand of schnapps. The open revolt against Jupiter now has a leader. The Marseillaise is played and the flag of the revolution is waved.

Jupiter is disgusted that the gods are following a criminal who has abducted a wife. Pluto retorts in turn that Jupiter is no better. Reluctantly, Jupiter takes the gods with him to the underworld to track down Eurydice. The underworld and the overworld celebrate a lavish party together. In the form of a fly (to slip through a keyhole), Jupiter finds Eurydice abandoned by Pluto in a secluded golden cage.

Orpheus is reunited with Eurydice, but, as in the Greek myth, he must not turn around and look at her on his way back to the surface or he will lose her for good. Offenbach urges him to think only of his career. But the gods from Olympus don't want to leave Eurydice with the drunkard Orpheus. A divine flash of lightning causes Orpheus to turn around in fright in the course of which he loses his wife. The violin goes up in

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flames.

For Eurydice, a dream has come true. She ascends to Mount Olympus, which may in the future be more lively thanks to Pluto.

The parallels to the GDR are obvious. The letters of complaint to Jupiter allude to the submissions in which GDR citizens protested about grievances. Pluto meets the supreme god Jupiter with a GDR-typical gift basket and reads the welcoming words from a red party folder. At the same time, however, he comes across as the emissary of a freer, more glittering world when he speaks of a "historic meeting" and future economic and cultural exchange.

As the director of the film, Horst Bonnet (1931-2006), later explained, he sought to allude to the reform movement in the former Czechoslovakia for a so-called "socialism with a human face." Bonnet himself was imprisoned in 1968 after expressing his support for the reform movement. (The colours of the French flag were identical to those of Czechoslovakia).

Today, following the demise of the GDR, the Olympians' fascination with the rich crook Pluto is particularly striking. The only loser in the film is the unsympathetic music professor Orpheus from provincial Thebes, who lacks the attractive sophistication of a Pluto.

Following the initial rapprochement between the GDR and West Germany at the beginning of the 1970s, which was initiated by the government led by Willy Brandt as a new *Ostpolitik* (Orientation to the East), intellectuals, artists and more privileged layers in East Germany compared their modest privileges with the opportunities available in the West with growing dissatisfaction.

***Carnations in Aspic* (1976)**

Since the 1950s, filmmaker Günter Reisch (1927-2014) had been confronting GDR audiences with bourgeois tendencies in East Germany, which he deplored as anti-socialist—initially full of optimism, they could be overcome if people changed their behaviour.

The film *Carnations in Aspic* (aspic is a savory jelly made from clarified meat or fish stock, with gelatin added to set it) is relatively unknown. It was only shown in cinemas for a short time after some of the actors left the GDR.

Wolfgang, played by famed actor Armin Mueller-Stahl (who later appeared in films by R.W. Fassbinder, among others), is a draftsman at the East Berlin House of Advertising, technically weak but socially committed, a football commentator, photography teacher and chatterbox who comments on everything he doesn't understand. He loses two incisors in an accident. To hide the embarrassing fact (and lisp), he reduces himself to silence and an unwanted new career begins.

He remains silent when his superior Comrade Huster, in a good mood, provokes him with the question of whether he knows of an argument for the superiority of capitalist product advertising over socialist advertising.

Wolfgang is promoted to operations director after he proves to be a genius at improvisation and procuring foreign currency. At an electronics trade fair in San Francisco, for example, a mix-up leads to him selling a Texas businessman not computers but a whole host of GDR hand puppets.

However, he doesn't want to be a director and, on the advice of his psychiatrist, he seeks to downsize himself by merging several factories. The project fails. About 20 directors lose their jobs, but not him—he becomes managing director.

The psychiatrist advises trying the opposite, instead of dynamism—do nothing, "cease work." Wolfgang stops advertising production and declares a "White Advertising Week," convinced that this will cause enough damage to get him fired. All advertising, including party ads and SED publications, are replaced with blank, white surfaces.

The party's reaction is unexpected. Wolfgang's superior Huster is furious, but only due to the former's unprecedented solo effort. A suspension of production—"no one has ever dared to do that!"—is an "uncoordinated initiative," he says, addressing Wolfgang informally.

Meanwhile, as part of White Advertising Week, newspaper content is suddenly only white, and a discussion breaks out within the population about the general meaning of advertising.

A luxury sedan drives Wolfgang to a hastily convened gathering of journalists, where he is supposed to talk about "aspects of his work," but then remains silent and lets Comrade Huster do the talking. The latter presents Wolfgang, who has become popular with the population, as the coordinator of the measures resulting from the White Advertising Week.

Wolfgang is horrified and the possibility of joining the ranks of the powerful plunges him into depression. But the railroad track on which he lays his head in order to end his life belongs to a disused line. Suddenly he can speak again, he has grown new teeth. In an exuberant mood, he declares that people are the "planetary machine" of advertising, which makes it superfluous: "Next winter, everyone will need coal, everyone will get it without advertising."

Wolfgang and Huster are immediately dismissed, the advertising company dissolved and converted into the "Central Institute for the Early Detection of Misdevelopments." The result, as we see five years later, is that everything remains the same.

Reisch's film is full of grotesque elements. He makes fun of apparent absurdities and clearly enjoys injecting anarchic disorder into the order of the GDR, such as a car ride under unwitting drug influence.

Various Soviet films of the time also show this tendency. Reisch's most successful comedy *Anton the Magician* (1978) laughs at a "socialism" in which shortages in large-scale state production can only be remedied with the help of the "clever" tricks of an independent car mechanic.

From today's perspective, the events surrounding White Advertising Week recall the transition in 1989-90. Overnight, socialist-sounding phrases disappeared from the streets. The empty spaces were plastered over with capitalist advertising. As can already be seen in Reisch's film after the journalists' round table, eccentric dreamers like Wolfgang were replaced by pro-capitalist careerists who could all have come from *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

From comedy to tragedy

The comedies show how some GDR artists grasped the sick social symptoms of the Stalinist-ruled country, but without seriously understanding the deeper causes at work. The carelessness and amorphousness of their direction bears witness to this.

Stalinism, which represented a complete distortion of the socialist perspective, prevailed in the GDR as it did in the Soviet Union. Although capitalist ownership in East Germany was eliminated as a result of the Soviet Union's victory over the Nazi dictatorship, the working class was politically oppressed.

After unrest in the 1950s and '60s, there was an apparent liberalization in the '70s, along with social concessions such as wage increases, better education, the expansion of the kindergarten system, a better position for women, more housing construction and a free health system.

But under the pressure of the globalization of the world economy, the GDR bureaucracy moved closer to capitalism. It promoted political hypocrisy, careerism, the acceptance of market-based competition and ultimately skepticism and even hostility towards a socialist perspective. In 1989-90, the SED leadership organized the introduction of capitalism with disastrous consequences for the population.

Pluto's underworld triumphed, and today, 35 years after the end of the GDR, many viewers of these comedies will find their laughter sticking in their throats.

Concluded

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