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Author(s): Lenny Rubenstein, Shelley Frisch and WOLFGANG KOHLHAASE

Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1984), pp. 34-35, 53

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41692560>

Accessed: 14-04-2019 14:07 UTC

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# What Film Can and Cannot Do in Society:

AN INTERVIEW

WITH WOLFGANG KOHLHAASE

by Lenny Rubenstein  
and Shelley Frisch

**B**orn in 1931, Wolfgang Kohlhaase began his film career as an editor and advisor on scripts. Having written screenplays since 1953, Kohlhaase's credits include *Alarm in the Circus*, *Berlin Romance*, *Berlin-Schoenhauser Corner*, *The Silent Planet*, *Operation Gleiwitz*, *I was 19*, *The Naked Man in the Playing Field*, *Mama, I'm Alive* and *Solo Sunny*. This last film, which won a Silver Bear at the 1980 Berlin film festival, chronicles the life of a young Berlin girl who dreams of becoming a successful singer. Besides writing the script, Kohlhaase was associate director with Konrad Wolf with whom he has often worked. *Mama, I'm Alive* and *I was 19*, also Wolf and Kohlhaase collaborations, deal with the dilemma of German antifascists who had defected to the Soviets during the war years. Kohlhaase's most recently completed screenplay, *Held for Questioning*, depicts the self-examination of a young German POW who is suspected by the Polish authorities of having committed war crimes. In addition to his film credits, Wolfgang Kohlhaase has also written scripts for television and radio programs in both the German Democratic Republic and the German Federal Republic. Kohlhaase recently passed through the United States in conjunction with a retrospective of films from the German Democratic Republic sponsored by the American Film Institute and the State Film Archive of the GDR.



Wolfgang Kohlhaase (right) confers with Rolf Staude and Renate Krössner for a scene in *Solo Sunny*

**Cineaste:** There seem to be two parallel traditions in DEFA films: the examination of German history, specifically the war years, and the depiction of contemporary problems among the young. Since you have worked on both kinds of films, how do they vary?

**Wolfgang Kohlhaase:** As I understand the question, it is not so much what distinguishes these two trends as what unites them. DEFA was formed at the end of the war and therefore dealt with the immediate past, the Nazi and wartime years. DEFA's first films which then became internationally famous—*The Murderers Are Among Us*, *The Blum Affair*, and *Marriage in the Shadows*—were made in the first moments after the war and treated that period directly. The other major theme, the daily life of the younger, postwar generation, and the attempt to picture their social transformation on film, came later. I have made both kinds of films and this has to do with my own life.

I was a child during the war and so, despite the fighting and the devastating air raids on Berlin, my childhood was unexceptional. There is an unconscious happiness in childhood, a sense of immortality that kids have, that death is for others. Later, when the war was over, I was at that happy age, fourteen, when I could come to grips with Germany's change of circumstances. I had just turned fourteen so there was a curious coincidence of world history and puberty. I couldn't have said which was more important for me, most likely puberty, but puberty passes and world history prevails. I and those like me began to discover the real background to our childhoods. Our reflections on those years and the role played by our parents, and, in the larger sphere, the part played by the German people, was a shocking discovery and inseparable from our first thought processes. When I began to write, initially as a journalist, and then as a filmmaker, my moral reaction to my childhood continued to be one of my major themes. I think it is a theme suitable for one's life's work.

You know, the Nazis had proclaimed a Thousand Year Reich, and one morning you wake up at the age of fourteen or fifteen, and have lived through a thousand years. It's a great feeling, especially in a new, colorful Berlin with four sectors, two world systems in one city, and you could change from one to the other or commute between the two for twenty pfennig. All of this helped to form my youthful consciousness about which I made my first three feature films with a friend and colleague, Gerhard Klein, who was also making his first films. We were enormously influenced by neo-realism, because the stories brought to the screen by neo-realism made us think that our stories, too, could be made into film. Until then the "doorway" be-



*Solo Sunny*



*Held for Questioning*

tween my life and film wasn't there.

**Cineaste:** *It would seem that I was 19 was a transitional film that linked both themes?*

**Kohlhaase:** Yes, there is in the films of the German Democratic Republic a continuity of the anti-fascist theme. That is one of the elements in *I was 19*. Even a great theme, however, is not safe against being trivialized or made routine and mechanical. *I was 19* was important because, at the time it was shown, there was a totally new audience, young people for whom the war was the concern, not of their fathers, but of their grandfathers. The background to the film was the life of its director, Konrad Wolf, and it was my first collaboration with him. Our working together came about because Wolf felt that his perspective at the war's end was an unusual one, that of a young German in the Red Army. He wanted to combine this viewpoint with that of a more normal boy, like me, who stood on the corner and saw the Russians arrive and the start of peace. We were concerned with this double-perspective within the film, so one cannot say the film is totally autobiographical, though its moral position is literally based on Wolf's own life. *I was 19* was the first of four films we made together and, although it was not planned, we varied the themes from the historical to the contemporary.

**Cineaste:** *How do you, as a writer, work with a director?*

**Kohlhaase:** Although I have written prose and journalism, I realized from the start that making films is a communal activity, a team effort, and I mean that in a positive sense. I've made four films with Gerhard Klein, one with Frank Beyer, four with Wolf, and one in between, and, from the start, I've always worked with the director in mind and in contact with him. When I have the story half conceptualized, I talk to the director about it, and only

later do the other people get involved. When one writes the screenplay, the core of it is usually written alone; you have to prepare the meat before you can place it on the table for the director. By the time we are finishing more polished versions of the screenplay, the set designer, and cameraman may be included in the discussions, since we try to plan the external elements of the film before the screenplay is in its final form. We try to work as concretely and practically as possible.

I never simply hand in a treatment and ask when the film's premiere is to occur! Instead, I've always participated in about half of the actual filming sessions, since there may be changes that have to be made because of the set, the performers, or the weather. You might not know that in our work the right of the screenwriter to be consulted on the choice of performers is assured. I have also taken part in the selection of the musical score and the editing, so I am in the unhappy position of being responsible for a film's final failure. Since you work together so closely, one film leads to further collaboration. During one film you may talk about or even plan the next. In my last film with Konrad Wolf, *Solo Sunny*, I was associate director, since the story dealt with life in Berlin.

**Cineaste:** *How is the film production organized and what is the role of the production groups?*

**Kohlhaase:** Our film production is state-owned and within the industry there are the so-called production groups. DEFA on the whole produces fifteen to eighteen films annually. The idea behind the groups is to give a smaller group the responsibility for the handling of film production. That way a circle of collaborators, directors, and writers, can get to know and work with each other.

*Continued on page 53*

### Wolfgang Kohlhaase Interview (contd.)

They search out scripts, try to win over writers, and bring writer and director together. It is a type of collegial arrangement, and though Wolf and I always did our films within the Babelsberg group, we could have worked with another one. The groups do have certain thematic concerns and sometimes make films within one genre or another, but in the end you can make only those films in which the directors are interested and for which scripts are available. One can also offer an already existing work, say a novel, to several directors.

**Cineaste:** What happens if a film idea is rejected?

**Kohlhaase:** If DEFA definitely rejects an idea, you can go to the television studios, and if they won't do it, there are no further possibilities. Sometimes you just have to wait, and that does happen, and not to the worst films. Sometimes the studio decides to wait two or three years and the films then turn out to be very good. If a script can survive a four year wait, then I think it might be a very decent script. This, however, is not the rule. More often, one tries, even with differences of opinion, to push through one's idea, to explain it and to win over a studio for a specific film. If a writer and director are united they have a certain influence. It is easier for those with experience in film than for beginners, but that's the way of the world, no?

**Cineaste:** Isn't acceptance of a film sometimes dependent upon the prevailing political mood?

**Kohlhaase:** It may seem that way from a distance, but in my understanding, how a socialist country deals with the arts is a continual question. What is expected of, and hoped for, from art? Society may consider itself on the whole as an educational institution, but there are many different opinions about how educational art can be. For example, can it be educational in a direct way? I don't think so; Flaubert's title, *Sentimental Education*, captures what education can do—it can be humanizing. Art can also bring hidden moral questions before a large public. There are expectations that art can be more direct, and solve problems. That's an issue in our debates and discussion. Seems to be, it's a never-ending discussion.

Writing or painting you can do alone, for yourself, but film or theater requires collaborators and agreement among them. It is always a practical question what film can do and what it cannot do in a society where problems are viewed as solvable, not necessarily solved, but solvable. It is sometimes uncomfortable discussing unsolved

questions, but that precisely is one possibility of art. Though there are differences of opinion, I think art has much more to do with the ambiguous than with the definite and clear-cut.

**Cineaste:** Why was the suspect soldier, the major character in your latest film, *Held For Questioning*, not made into a less innocent figure?

**Kohlhaase:** You mean he might have had something questionable about his past? Well, that relates to the moral idea of the story. Niebuhr [the major character] was only a soldier for three or four months, and at the front for perhaps six weeks. In his first and last battle he shot at a tank, but his fate is linked, I feel, to the more complicated question of fascism in Germany. Was it simply a question of millions of people being seduced and their morality turned into immorality? Many people thought they were doing good, fighting patriotically against the evil enemies on the border. Anyway, I believe the system couldn't have lasted as long as it did if it hadn't exploited people's decent attitudes. *Held for Questioning* tries to deal with the connection between the regime and these good citizens. Niebuhr is no war criminal, but comes into contact with real war criminals, so in this sense he is an innocent. The question emerges, however, whether these criminal acts could have been committed without the many people who weren't war criminals in a personal sense, but who kept the Nazi machine well-oiled and functioning. We are using a guiltless person to discuss culpability. Niebuhr is linked to the guilt of the German people, and, though innocent of any specific charge, he is not totally blameless.

**Cineaste:** What is the role of the film in a socialist society?

**Kohlhaase:** Firstly, I think no part of reality should be overlooked. Socialist films especially should not differentiate between important and unimportant people. Film-makers should be interested in the great majority and their preoccupations. Although films should not be elitist, this does not exclude the possibility that smaller segments of the population may interest filmmakers. Secondly, the question of the individual in society is a theme that we should investigate again and again. Film has a great influence on contemporary emotions and opinions, and, in turn, is dependent upon them. Like all art, film should help people in the widest sense to understand the world and reality and even themselves a little bit more. ■

### The Cancer War (contd.)

One can also assume they knew that just criticizing conventional medical views would make their film highly controversial within professional and educational circles.

The makers of *The Cancer War* believe that the impasse in cancer research is not the result of a conspiracy to delay a cure, but of a prevailing medical consensus that hinders a needed shift away from present assumptions and routines. Medical hierarchs, like military hierarchs, are loath to admit that entire weapons systems just don't work as expected and are a waste of public funds. Doctors don't like to lose patients anymore than generals like to lose battles, but losses often mount in staggering numbers until third party intervention forces a reexamination of fundamentals.

Such a reappraisal has begun, led by medical mavericks within the United States, cancer physicians in other nations, and patients disgusted with accepted treatments. Even the National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society show signs of change as can be seen in their newfound respect for the role played by dietary and environmental factors in cancer, and the preliminary considerations of vitamins, enzymes, minerals, and other substances used in the treatment of cancer by medical dissidents.

*The Cancer War* is designed to be part of the process which will change how professionals and the public regard cancer. Medical educators and those involved in the formulation of public policy will find it an invaluable resource, noteworthy for its soberly phrased criticisms and lack of hys-

teria. Individuals faced with a diagnosis of cancer will find the film useful as a basic orientation to a conventional course of treatment, and as an encouragement to look beyond the establishment pale.

Dan Georgakas

### Letters (contd.)

home movies, photos, or newsreels of Los Angeles demonstrations, anti-fascist and Hollywood Guild activities from the 1930s or '40s. If any of your readers have collected or know of material like this, please call (213) 821-2597 and leave a message, or write: Penumbra Films, 2322 Clement Avenue, Venice, CA 90291.

Kenneth Mate  
Los Angeles, CA