

CHAPTER 14



A Woman's Voice on Screen

Christa Wolf and the Cinema

BARTON BYG

Throughout her career, cinema was important to Christa Wolf: as a producer of work for films in various forms, as one who responded to cinema both formally and substantively in her writings, and as a “public intellectual” who sought to use film and media, along with other aspects of the author’s public role, as a means to engage with cultural and social issues in her country. A brief overview of the numerous points at which Wolf’s biography and career intersected with the cinema will help us to understand her legacy in the realm of film. Against this background, I will then explore the post-1989 voice of Christa Wolf, compellingly recorded in the 1990 film *Zeitschleifen* (Time Loops) by Karlheinz Mund and Daniela Dahn and again powerfully evoked in the 2014 film *Der Fluch der Medea* (The Curse of Medea) by Branwen Okpako. The cinema plays a central role in *Zeitschleifen*, as the dialog between Dahn and Wolf circles around the meaning of art and the legacy of the recently defunct GDR. Okpako’s film, on the other hand, uses the means of cinema to explore the basic elements of Christa Wolf’s cultural presence in 2010 and after. If Wolf tells Dahn in the 1990 film that she really “has given up hope” that Europeans will see the destruction that their history is leading to, Okpako’s version of Wolf’s own voice, juxtaposed with texts from her *Medea: A Modern Retelling* (*Medea: Stimmen*, 1996), places the earlier elegiac, modernist tone in another context, beyond the end of the GDR, and in a visual dialog with the Greece of antiquity and the Africa of today.

At the outset, however, it may be instructive to also note some parallels between two landmark works of European literature and film of the Cold War period: in East Germany, Christa Wolf’s novel *They Divided the Sky* (*Der geteilte Himmel*, 1963) and, with her close involvement in the screenplay, the 1964 film adaptation by Konrad Wolf (no relation); and, in France, Marguerite Duras’s script for the film *Hiroshima mon amour* (dir. Alain Resnais, 1959). Although not directly or biographically connected,

the works of Christa Wolf and Marguerite Duras in this period are aesthetically and critically parallel. Uniting them is a positioning of the female voice in narrative that has a melancholy yet modernist aspect, a consistent and crucial characteristic of both authors' prose. Various critics have underscored that *Hiroshima mon amour* and *They Divided the Sky* were important turning points in the careers of their authors: Julia Kristeva, for example, has maintained that "all of Marguerite Duras's oeuvre may be found in the text of *Hiroshima mon amour*" (143). Writing of the film *Der geteilte Himmel* after a retrospective in 1986, Peter W. Jansen found it "surprisingly modern, or rather already even post-modern ... [It] is years ahead of many films that were made later. Konrad Wolf himself was never able to surpass it."

Among the influences on Christa Wolf's prose are the "filmic" techniques of flashback and montage, which became central to her writing, at least since *The Quest for Christa T.* (*Nachdenken über Christa T.*, 1968). Nor should it be forgotten that Christa Wolf and Gerhard Wolf, her husband and occasional collaborator, worked together on screenplays with Konrad Wolf and other directors throughout the "times of tumult," as Therese Hörnigk has called the early 1960s in the GDR (107). Konrad Wolf had proposed making a film of Christa Wolf's literary debut, *Moskauer Novelle* (*Moscow Novella*, 1961), even before the work had appeared in book form; the screenplay was only abandoned due to Soviet objections. This was followed by their collaboration on the script for the film *Divided Heaven*, which Christa Wolf called "a very intensive collaboration" (Hörnigk 30). The author said she had to rethink the whole novel anew to produce the screenplay for the film, after weeks and weeks of work with Gerhard Wolf, Konrad Wolf, Willi Brückner, and Kurt Barthel (later to be the director in 1966 of *Fräulein Schmetterling* [Miss Butterfly], another banned film).¹ Among other changes, ten characters were dropped, while ten new ones were added, with the result that even Wolf herself could no longer keep the two works separate in her mind (*Progress-Dienst* 1964).² After the film was completed, she noted improvement over the book: "I now see many strands of the plot much more clearly than in the novel" (Konrad Wolf, "Zuschauer als Mitgestalter"). By 1989 she held a more critical view of the film, but as she told Therese Hörnigk in their interview, "Between the images and also outside the dialogs, our utopian thinking is apparent, our visions light up..." (30). *Divided Heaven* was followed by another unrealized project with Konrad Wolf called "Ein Mann kehrt heim" (A Man Returns Home); the partly finished film *Fräulein Schmetterling* (Miss Butterfly), which fell victim to the 11th Plenum in 1965–66;³ the adaptation of Anna Seghers's *Die Toten bleiben jung* (The Dead Stay Young; dir. Joachim Kunert, 1968); and the film based on her version of the folktale *Till Eulenspiegel* (dir. Rainer Simon, 1973), also with Gerhard Wolf.⁴

Film occupied a prominent place in Wolf's life in other ways as well. Her husband and literary collaborator Gerhard Wolf not only worked with her on projects for which she was author/scriptwriter, he was also active as a dramaturg in his own right with the DEFA studios, such as in his work on Konrad Wolf's 1968 landmark film *I Was 19* (*Ich war 19*). The Wolfs' former son-in-law Rainer Simon, who directed the couple's *Till Eulenspiegel*, represented another connection to the world of film. The work on Seghers's *The Dead Stay Young* (*Die Toten bleiben jung*, 1968) as well as *Till Eulenspiegel* (1973) could in itself serve as a microcosm in which to see the interwoven threads of GDR culture at the time and Christa Wolf's involvement with it. Anna Seghers was a friend and mentor, but also a stalwart Communist exile. After *Divided Heaven*, Wolf undertook a biography of Seghers, which was never completed, but which contributed to the anti-fascist film *Die Toten bleiben jung*. Walter Janka, a Spanish Civil War veteran, but also a victim of Stalinist repression leading to his imprisonment in 1956, was another kind of Communist role model. His trial had led to his removal as head of the prestigious Aufbau-Verlag, where Gerhard Wolf later worked. Janka's "rehabilitation" after prison began with work as dramaturg at the DEFA studios, beginning with Konrad Wolf's *Goya*. From that time on, he was involved with film projects that both Gerhard and Christa Wolf worked on and was also their literary and political interlocutor and confidant. It is poignant that the breakthrough for Janka's influence in the GDR did not come until just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the publication of his autobiography, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Wahrheit* (*Difficulties with the Truth*, 1990), in West Germany. The public presentation of this confrontation with Stalinist corruption in the very foundations of GDR socialism included an introduction written by Christa Wolf but read by actor Ulrich Mühe, best known in the US for his role as the Stasi surveillance officer in the film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006). Wolf also read this piece on the same evening in the famous gathering in the East Berlin Erlöserkirche ("Wider den Schlaf der Vernunft" [Against the Sleep of Reason]).

Thus, by the mid-1960s, Christa Wolf had joined quite a number of GDR literary figures whose work also included writing for the screen; other prominent examples include Ulrich Plenzdorf, Jurek Becker, and Günter Rucker. On the basis of her several film projects, then, it was not surprising that she was one of the "film authors" who responded to a controversial questionnaire published by the GDR film journal *Filmwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen* in 1965. Its lists of the most significant films of the preceding twenty years, from the GDR and internationally, featured prominently films from capitalist countries: the French New Wave, as well as works by Fellini and Antonioni. This was precisely the direction of modernist formal innovation that *Divided Heaven* had represented, along with the dozen films banned in the turmoil of

the 11th Plenum. In the survey, *Hiroshima mon amour* is one of the films most often mentioned by the East German film artists, including Konrad Wolf. Christa Wolf did not refer to it, however, but instead mentioned Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) and Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960), *8 ½* (1963), and *La strada* (1954), among others.

That Wolf was occupied with questions of modern film aesthetics and their relationship to the traumas of history is also apparent in her critical juxtaposition of Ingmar Bergman's film *The Silence* (1963) and the West German Auschwitz trials in 1964 (Christa Wolf, *The Author's Dimension* 6). As we shall see, this film and its evocative title remained in the discourse employed by Gerhard and Christa Wolf to reflect on the vicissitudes of GDR cinema even after 1989, for instance in *Zeitschleifen*. In addition to formal questions of film, memory, and montage, the question of national identity and historical memory played a significant role in the productive collaboration between Christa Wolf and Konrad Wolf. As she recalled in a 1989 interview, the theme of her *Moskauer Novelle*, the love between a German woman and a Russian man, was very close to Konrad Wolf's own divided affinities, since he had grown up in exile in the Soviet Union (Hörnigk 30). *Divided Heaven* was also not the first of Konrad Wolf's films to treat an impossible love (as does *Hiroshima mon amour*): his prizewinning film *Sterne* (*Stars*, 1959), written by Angel Wagenstein, depicts a non-commissioned officer of the German Wehrmacht who falls in love with a Jewish Greek woman who is part of a transport bound for Auschwitz.⁵ There is much biographical and other evidence of the great artistic and personal influence that Christa Wolf and Konrad Wolf had on each other, particularly in their early collaborations in the 1960s, in the context of the 11th Plenum, and in their reactions to the expatriation of Wolf Biermann in 1976.⁶ Scriptwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase had interviewed her on their relationship in preparation for the film *Die Zeit, die bleibt* (*The Time that Remains*, dir. Lew Hohmann, 1985) several years after Konrad Wolf's death. She never published these reflections and, in the 1980s, commented on the difficulty of engaging with the topic: "He was for many years an important person to me; our relationship was too complicated for me to even remotely describe here" (Hörnigk 30). To my knowledge, Christa Wolf never did write extensively on her relationship with Konrad Wolf.

Although a discussion of the importance of the film *Der geteilte Himmel* for the development of the novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* is beyond the scope of the present overview, Alexander Stephan has asserted as much on the basis of the debate over the film's formal innovations: "Precisely the debate about the formal techniques of the film demonstrates that it was no longer such a long way to Christa Wolf's next novel, *The Quest for Christa T.* (*Nachdenken über Christa T.*)" (Stephan 58). Although Stephan does not elaborate, this seems to confirm the influence on Wolf of the modifications

of the earlier novel undertaken by the film adaptation. For the moment, one connection should be recalled: Christa Wolf received the news of the death of her friend Christa Tabbert in 1963, that is, at the time *They Divided the Sky* appeared and during the preparation of the film adaptation. If Heinrich Mohr is also correct in stating that a first draft of *The Quest for Christa T.* was finished in 1965, this would also make it likely that Christa Wolf had concerned herself with both works at the same time (Mohr 226n8). The common denominator between *They Divided the Sky* and *Christa T.*, which was both a breakthrough in narrative technique and a provocation for a socialist cultural policy of optimism, was precisely the element of mourning and its necessity for the construction of subjectivity.

The gender dynamics in Duras's film *Hiroshima mon amour* have been made explicit even in the conscious choice by a male director of a woman's perspective and a female voice (Morin 27). Both *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Divided Heaven* are now recognized as modernist breakthroughs—by male directors—partly because they use female protagonists to explore narrative subjectivity and traumatic cultural memory. The intervention of several men in cultural policy positions in support of the modernism of Christa Wolf's book and the film was important as well. In her long interview with Wolf, Therese Hörnigk noted "that not unimportant people from the cultural sector decided at some point to mitigate the intensity of the debate and protect you from the most outrageous attacks" (34). Such support from part of the GDR cultural establishment included the award of both the Heinrich-Mann-Preis (for the novel) and the National-Preis II. Klasse (for the film), as well as publications documenting the discussion of both works (see Reso). The film was more easily accepted, according to the author, because it was directed by Konrad Wolf (Hörnigk 31). Wolf even attributed her own position of increasing authority partly to the fact that, as a woman, she was an exception (Hörnigk 25). Her success contributed to the new and more modern image of socialism that SED social policies and the New Economic Program (1963–68) had hoped to create. As Therese Hörnigk puts it:

Christa Wolf was presumably not in demand as a speaker at conferences and forums just because of her critical, yet supportive engagement. It was also because she was the prototype of an emancipated and good-looking young woman who was able to demonstrate women's equal rights, which had been secured in law but not everywhere put into practice. (97)

Divided Heaven and *Hiroshima mon amour* each represented a modernist turning point in their respective national cinemas. The new waves that began to make themselves felt in Europe in 1959 and after were the expression of a new generation finding its own subjectivity in contrast to the old. Yet the basic shared experience of this generation was still World War II or, for the

younger ones, the memory of their parents' shock and "inability to mourn"⁷ in the immediate postwar years. Christa Wolf illustrated this sense for the older generation's bankruptcy in Manfred's monolog about his family history in *They Divided the Sky* (43)—his father's opportunistic transition from wearing a Nazi uniform to a Party badge in the GDR. But in the years between the construction of the Berlin Wall and the 11th Plenum, Wolf explained, "We believed that we had earned for ourselves a certain space of freedom. We authors, of our generation above all, even the younger ones ... We had to find our own courage, developing ourselves as subjects, which was very difficult at that time" (Hörnigk 30). The closing of the GDR border with the Berlin Wall in 1961 had led to exaggerated optimism that it would quickly lead to socialism with democracy, and thereby to "finding a national subjectivity." But why is "modernism" a necessary ingredient in this reconstruction of subjectivity, and why is "female subjectivity" such an integral part of this modernism? The answer lies in the alienation, break, or doubling that is required for the self to come into existence and say "I"—and particularly to say "I" from a female point of view. Alienation and a traumatic break are found for both Wolf and Duras in the memory of the "grand fantasms" (to use Julia Kristeva's term) of fascism and the atomic bomb. And as Kristeva also explains, this process leads to an interweaving of the political, the autobiographical, and the authorial:

Durassian melancholy, however, also explores history. Within the psychic microcosm of the subject, private pain absorbs political horror. This French woman in Hiroshima may be Stendhalian, perhaps eternal, but she nonetheless exists because of the war, the Nazis, and the bomb. And yet, through its integration in private life, political life loses the autonomy that our conscience religiously wants to reserve for it. (143)

While the fantasm in *Hiroshima mon amour* was the memory of the lover's death (and the woman's inability to differentiate it from her own), in *They Divided the Sky* it is Rita Seidel's memory of her own collapse or attempted suicide. In the novel, however, the moment where she falls in front of two approaching railway cars at the factory where she works is embedded in a narrative of her progressing recovery. As she lies in a hospital bed, she can see the cars rolling toward her, but she still cannot differentiate between herself as subject and object: "And where they meet, that's where she is. That's where I am" (5). Three paragraphs later, however, the narration intervenes to predict that this fantasm can be overcome: "What she needs to struggle against now is this insistent feeling: they're coming right at me" (6).

The film has removed this fantasm further from any time and place in the narrative of Rita's recovery and leaves the impression that it remains a constitutive part of her identity. Her collapse and the approaching railway car are seen once at the beginning of the film and once at the end, and in identical

form. Her memory of it, however, is not located in the hospital, which she leaves in order to continue her recuperation at a sanatorium. Instead, in the film the hospital and sanatorium are absent altogether, replaced by what is supposedly her childhood home, a small house under an incredibly high, arched highway bridge, which recurs as a leitmotif—another signifier of a divided sky. The traumatic memory itself remains separate from this location, and is also not clearly placed in a temporal progression. A doubling is provided by the repetition of the scene, while Rita's sensation, "They're coming right at me," is conveyed by the shot composition. Instead of two cars (which are to meet as they strike Rita), there is only one. Rather than being at the intersection of two tracks, Rita is shown at far left of the wide screen, while the converging lines of perspective reflect the car's threatening movement from right to left. This asymmetry stands in stark contrast to the otherwise carefully balanced composition, which often divides the screen in half. Rita's confrontation with death is presented not with the sensation, "They're coming right at me," but rather by an extreme close-up of her eyes, turning toward the sky as she falls.

At its conclusion, the film thus juxtaposes two images of female subjectivity in the GDR and vis-à-vis German history: the eyes turned up as one falls into unconsciousness and the eyes straight ahead as the modern young woman walks confidently down the street and toward the camera. Both the confident, engaged citizen and the mourning self are still also present in the post-1989 view of Wolf's film work presented in the documentary *Zeitschleifen* by Karlheinz Mund and the writer Daniela Dahn. The title of the film is taken from Christa Wolf's comments at the time Bertolt Brecht's grave had been smeared with anti-Semitic graffiti after the opening of the Berlin Wall, as if time were repeating itself in a loop of film or tape. Her words at the time, anticipating the importance of voices later in her work and in Branwen Okpako's *The Curse of Medea*, were: "That, even that, we had not been able to prevent."

It is instructive that in 1990–91, *Zeitschleifen*, in its look back on Christa Wolf's films, focuses mainly on the 11th Plenum that banned *Fräulein Schmetterling*, along with most feature films made in 1965 and the then recent television adaptation of *Selbstversuch* (Self-Experiment, dir. Peter Vogel, 1990), not *They Divided the Sky*. Since *Fräulein Schmetterling* is an irreverent satire and *Selbstversuch* a futuristic fantasy, the most elegiac tone in *Zeitschleifen*, I would argue, is instead present in the voice-over of Christa Wolf reading from *The Quest for Christa T.*, while on the screen we see images tracing the events of fall 1989 leading to the opening of the Berlin Wall:

Our words, not even false ones—how easy it would be if they were!—but the person speaking them has become a different person. Does that change

anything? [pause in the reading; paragraph in the novel] Christa T. began, very early on, when one thinks about it, to ask herself what change means. (56)

While the text from *The Quest for Christa T.* involves female subjectivity turning inward on itself, on the more engaged side is a long discussion of the dynamics around the 11th Plenum in 1965 among Christa Wolf, Gerhard Wolf, and Klaus Wischnewski, former head dramaturg at DEFA, who had been removed from his post at the time. Here Wolf makes it clear that she felt compelled to speak out in defense of culture at the party plenary, in response to the attacks on her film in production, attacks that echoed language used in threats of punishment for counter-revolutionaries in Hungary in 1956.

The transition to the discussion of film in *Zeitschleifen* underscores the importance of film in Wolf's career, as well as in the history of the GDR. The first images from the banned *Fräulein Schmetterling* appear immediately after Christa Wolf describes the change in her position toward the Party: instead of attempting to reconcile her disagreement by insisting to officials, "I want the same thing as you," she observes that she had begun to realize, "I want something different." And here Dahn and Mund cut to the first image of Berlin from *Fräulein Schmetterling*. As Wischnewski and the Wolfs look at clips of the film on a monitor, they also discuss what could not be tolerated in the atmosphere of the mid-1960s: hidden camera observations of how GDR citizens really look, on the street or while shopping, "showing the social tensions, the loneliness, isolation and alienation." The importance of the 11th Plenum to the three of them once the Wall came down reflects the importance of the films banned that year for many other GDR cultural producers as well.⁸ But this emphasis on the caesura in GDR film history represented by the banning of films in 1965–66 obscures the fact that Christa and Gerhard Wolf were active immediately after the 11th Plenum in an attempt to revive the stunned GDR film industry. Filmmakers returned to anti-fascist themes and World War II, but now with a continuation of modernist, formal experimentation: Konrad Wolf was convinced to exploit his own autobiography for *I Was 19* (*Ich war 19*, 1967), for which Gerhard Wolf served as dramaturg. At the same time, Christa Wolf, with a team of writers, adapted Anna Seghers's novel *The Dead Stay Young*, which was filmed in a starkly stylized manner by Joachim Kunert. Simultaneously, yet another radical film was produced and banned: Heiner Carow's *Die Russen kommen* (*The Russians Are Coming*, 1968, which had been intended as a counterpart to *I Was 19*).

In *Zeitschleifen* the subject of gender comes up in the clip from *Selbstversuch*, Wolf's story of an experiment in which a female scientist turns herself into a man. In the story, a man's tendency to see events in a detached way, as opportunities for manipulation, is connected with the film medium itself. In their introduction to the English publication of the story in 1978, Helen Fehervary and Sara Lennox write:

What is it that Wolf's heroine finds so essential in her female mode of existence? Wolf gives us only hints to go on, but the feminine psychology she presents seems to involve an alternative mode of appropriating the world. The male mode corresponds to what one might term positivistic, or scientific in its worst sense: the external world is taken to exist independently, unaffected by the subject's interaction with it—"Like at the movies." (110–11)

In the clip from *Zeitschleifen*, we hear a male scientist ask the central character, played by Johanna Schall: "How do you feel, Fräulein Anders?" "Like at the movies," she replies. To which the man says, "You, too?" As she states in her discussion with Daniela Dahn in *Zeitschleifen*, Wolf regarded the assertion that a career of accomplishment could not coexist with a private life as a purely male way of looking at the world.

Two key aspects of Christa Wolf's film career would be underappreciated if we stopped with *Zeitschleifen*: first, satire and wit in regard to everyday life, from a woman's point of view; and second, Christa Wolf's use of film, among many other tools, in her role as a public intellectual. As Fehervary and Lennox wrote of Wolf and "Self-Experiment" in 1978: "Like other GDR writers, she views her works as performing a specific social function within their society, both criticizing existing conditions and encouraging change" (109). In this context, it is significant that in 1989, just before the collapse of the GDR, Wolf participated in a taboo-breaking film by Roland Steiner, *Unsere Kinder* (Our Children, 1989), on the phenomenon of right-wing skinheads in the GDR. In this film, author Stefan Heym also makes an appearance, asserting that his generation has failed the world by bringing it to the brink of catastrophe, an even more dangerous situation than the years 1930–33; he even predicts that irreversible environmental damage will result in the political discrediting of his own generation. Christa Wolf, too, is present in the film, not, however, making pronouncements, but in conversation with two young skinheads, asking them about their motivations and about their view of Germany and its history. She tries to explain the feelings of guilt and shame, still not dealt with, with which the older generation thus burdens the younger ones, who see no reason to support the society before them. Empathy with victims is beyond the understanding of her young interlocutors, but she listens attentively to their assertion of the need to believe in something strong and positive.

Because *Zeitschleifen*, too, offers such eloquent testimony about the engagement with society in Wolf's works, from literature to film, I see Daniela Dahn's subsequent engagement as a public intellectual as a continuation of the collaboration between Dahn and Wolf represented in the film. Dahn is, after all, currently vice-president of the Willy-Brandt-Kreis,⁹ an organization of intellectuals and public figures from East and West that seeks to engage in productive dialog on the issues facing Germany today. Christa Wolf was also a member.

The stress on *Fräulein Schmetterling*, as opposed to the more history-laden works such as *They Divided the Sky*, emphasizes, even in the fraught period of 1990, the culturally engaged and even humorous, playful, and impertinent aspect of Wolf's film work. For example, even the title "Miss Butterfly" evokes the playful fantasy that challenges everyday life: the protagonist Helene Raupe (the German word for caterpillar, not yet a butterfly), orphaned and not yet eighteen, is confronted by social welfare officials named Herr Himmelblau and Frau Fertig (as the German names mean "Sky Blue" and "Finished," suggesting both vacuous and judgmental personalities, the latter had to be changed to "Fenster" [window] to gain script approval). Helene tries on various roles, from clerk in a lingerie shop to bus conductor, but her inability to hold a job is contrasted with a shocking range of fantasy images: flying over the city, distributing flowers to passers-by with a mime from the circus, blowing soap bubbles in a lecture hall while a man explains human reproduction, dancing a floor exercise that is transformed to the rooftops and towers of the city, and romancing a glamorous boxer. Many images of women's fashion are contrasted with the ruins and construction sites and everyday drudgery of Berlin. A fairy-tale frog appears on a birthday cake, and Helene even dances alone in her apartment to the U.S. pop song "Wooly Bully" by Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs.¹⁰

Melancholy modernism is certainly one of the principal aspects of Wolf's protagonists' position in contemporary society, and it was a major aspect of her narrative innovations. But in such public works as the film projects, even starting with the confident strides of Rita Seidel at the end of *Divided Heaven*, Wolf's female characters represent a challenge to the status quo based on fantasy and humor as well.

Branwen Okpako uses the medium of film to bring the image of Christa Wolf up to the present. Her film *The Curse of Medea* (2014) is an innovative construction based on interviews with Wolf in 2010, excerpts from the novel *Medea: A Modern Retelling*, and documentary material, mainly from 1989, related to the subsequent revelations of Wolf's early cooperation with the Stasi. As Okpako put it:

Medea's experiences are similar to those of an immigrant in Germany, whose culture is viewed with skepticism and disinterest and who is encouraged by her host country to integrate and to adapt to the actual culture, just as Medea's Colchians are asked by the Corinthians to bow down before the superiority of their culture. I wanted to translate this text into a film, and the special circumstances, the way the book came to be, played an important role for me.¹¹

The discussion proceeds from Wolf's initial refusal to agree that *Medea* was in some way a reaction to 1989 and the way she was subsequently treated in the media to an admission that "I have always written on the basis of conflicts,"

although “the content determines the form.” Wolf confirms to Okpako that the Medea project had gone back to the fundamental themes of *Cassandra*, “An interweaving—if you wish, that is feminine....” Wolf finally does allow that the novel began with her reaction to the public attacks but soon went beyond them, as she needed to “generalize” (“verallgemeinern”) the story and thus looked for other levels, for multiple voices. She no longer needed the personal motivation.

Here, Okpako takes her at her word and places the novel not only in the linear progression from 1989 to 1996, or even in the metaphorical world of Medea between two powers, being made a scapegoat by the leaders of Corinth because she knows the crime on which their state was based. As Okpako's Medea says, “Either I am mad or your state is founded on a crime.” Here, Okpako also goes beyond critic Holly Case's East/West summary of the novel:

In *Medea: A Modern Retelling* (1996), she [Wolf] rewrote the legend of Jason and Medea as a story about a society in the West (Corinth) that, because it cannot come to terms with its past, chooses a scapegoat for its own crime of infanticide: Medea, a woman from the East (Colchis). “They wanted to save Corinth. We wanted to save Colchis On this disc we call Earth there is nothing but victors and victims.”

This is all present, to be sure, but Okpako connects the power of the myth and the beauty of the German language to Africa as well. The tree where Jason finds the fleece is an African tree. The gardens on screen while Medea's healing powers are described are African gardens. And in the despair of political and even mythical failures, the endurance of the work attests to it as a source of hope in spite of the incompatibility of truth and experience. While the Wolf interview and the documentary materials belong to the past, the words and the faces belong to the present, or even the future.

Here the film builds on two of Okpako's earlier works, *The Pilot and the Passenger* (2007), on the poet Christopher Okigbo, and the more recent video installation entitled *Christa / Christopher* (2013). Through projections on facing walls, Wolf and Okigbo enter into a dialog—a construction for the audience of “engaged” authors meeting though times and spaces that never intersected in reality.

Thus, Okpako's film allows us a new way of asking who Christa Wolf is now. Is she the author whose voice we hear over a blank black screen in the cinema, being interviewed in 2010 by the filmmaker? Is she the public figure we see in the video excerpts, reading the text “Für unser Land” (For Our Country, a co-authored appeal, pleading for GDR citizens to remain committed to East Germany as a socialist state while insisting on reform in 1989¹²)? Okpako has reframed the video clips to emphasize the hands and faces of the

speakers from the GDR documentary clips as well as the hands of Jason and the faces of Medea and the women around her. Or is Wolf the subject of journalism and the *Literaturstreit* (literary critics' controversy)¹³ indicated here by words on the screen, newspaper clippings, and a close-up pan across Christa Wolf's face in newsprint? The film opens, after all, with Wolf's voice over a dark screen saying, "But you need images." Or is she to be found most powerfully in her literary figures, in the voices she created? Here, too, there is both melancholy and feminist engagement, words delving into both the everyday and the immense historical burdens placed on the everyday. In the imageless interview with Okpako, one can hear Christa Wolf's labored breath, suggesting exhaustion or even mortality. But she is also the voice of Medea, lent by the actor Sheri Hagen in Branwen Okpako's film.

The construction of the film's conclusion is revealing. The interview with Wolf concludes with an irreconcilability: she admits that she did not really expect "Für unser Land" to have an impact, but she accepted both that fact and her being chosen as the one to read it publicly as historically inevitable. People don't want constant revolution, she says, they also want freedom to travel, and of course, "Konsum." Consumerism is thus Wolf's last word, and the last "documentary" image is the West German 100 DM note held aloft, as *Begrüßungsgeld*, the "welcome money" that was given to East Germans arriving in the West in the days after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But after that, there is no place on earth for Christa Wolf's voice. Medea is only a voice, a text, and the face, in extreme close-up, of Sheri Hagen speaking the words: "Where can I go? Is it possible to imagine a world, a time, where I would have a place? There's no one I could ask. That's the answer."

But there *is* someone there: as with the earlier characters from *Medea: A Modern Retelling*, Okpako has the actor speak most lines directed to a microphone within the frame, or at a slight angle off camera. But at decisive moments, as here in conclusion, the actor looks directly at the camera. There is someone there. That is the answer.

Barton Byg is Professor Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Based in the faculty of German and Scandinavian Studies, he founded the DEFA Film library and served as associate faculty in Comparative Literature and Communication, and as a founding faculty member of the UMass International Program in Film Studies. Principal areas of research and teaching include the work of filmmakers Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, GDR cinema and culture, documentary film, culture of the Cold War, memory culture, landscape and film, and color and film. The DEFA Film Library at UMass Amherst is the only archive and study center outside Europe devoted to the cinema of the German Democratic Republic.

Notes

1. These remarks are from an undated clipping from *Freie Presse Zwickau*, in the materials on the film consulted before 1990 at the Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR.
2. The streamlining of characters was no doubt seen as necessary to make the film comprehensible, since the number of locations and roles makes its fragmentary structure challenging to viewers, even after decades of experiments with film narrative.
3. The 11th Plenum of the Socialist Unity Party of the GDR was a low point in GDR cultural history. Initially a party meeting intended to discuss economic matters, the focus vehemently turned to artistic endeavors across a wide spectrum. These were attacked as too "negative," presumably Western-influenced, and destructive of socialism. Most of the feature films of that year were banned and never screened until after the Berlin Wall fell. In 1989–90, the films were quickly brought out, if screenable versions could be found at all, and presented at the 1990 Berlin International Film Festival.
4. In his essay, "Fräulein Schmetterling – Probleme der Rekonstruktion," to accompany the film's partial restoration in 2005, Ralf Schenk gives an even fuller overview of Christa Wolf's film-related adaptation projects. (See p. 32 of the DEFA-Stiftung/Bundesfilmarchiv brochure.)
5. It is also worth investigating whether the unrealized idea for this film, or *Moskauer Novelle* itself, had any influence on Iris Gusner or her film *Were the Earth Not Round* (*Wäre die Erde nicht rund*, 1982) which had a similar theme and was criticized by authorities for similar reasons as the film scenario for *Moskauer Novelle*.
6. See Magenau, e.g., 288, 316. Notes on their relationship are also found in Christa Wolf's *Ein Tag im Jahr* (*One Day a Year*, 2003). As the Konrad Wolf biography describes it, their connection soured after the expatriation of Wolf Biermann in 1976, another break of trust between cultural figures and the state. As president of the GDR's Academy of Arts, Konrad Wolf did not voice opposition to the move to expel Biermann, unlike Christa and Gerhard Wolf and many other prominent artists and intellectuals. (See Jacobsen and Aurich 464–65 and 467–68.)
7. See Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich. This psychological interpretation of postwar (West) German society in regard to the Nazi past became a touchstone for many analyses of "coming to terms with the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) in Germany.
8. *Fräulein Schmetterling* was not shown along with the others in 1990, since it was in such a fragmentary state that the director chose not to attempt a screenable version. Only in 2005 did the DEFA Foundation in Berlin produce almost two hours of rough footage, edited together on the basis of Christa Wolf's script.
9. See <http://www.willy-brandt-kreis.de/>.
10. See Lacosta. Sam the Sham was actually Domingo "Sam" Samudio.
11. Branwen Okpako, Filmmaker's Statement in Berlinale Forum film catalog 2014: https://www.berlinale.de/en/archive/jahresarchive/2014/02_programm_2014/02_filmdatenblatt_2014_20147520.html#tab=filmStills.
12. See <http://www.ddr89.de/texte/land.html>.
13. Georgina Paul places *Medea* in the context of the *Literaturstreit* (64).

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