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Youth in Konrad Wolf’s *Divided Heaven* and *I was Nineteen*

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After World War II, Germany specifically, was a confused, misunderstood, and often misinterpreted space in the time from 1945-1990. Postwar East and West Germany transitioned throughout the years, going through very different political and cultural “stages”; it was not until 1990 that the country itself unified. History has shown us this, and today we can still see these various stages as it was captured in popular film. The German filmmakers in both West and East during the 1960s-1970s began to feel that it was an appropriate time to start addressing the war, and they began to grapple with their feelings, the feelings of their compatriots, and the political intentions of the governments in both East and West Germany. These filmmakers would have been born in the late 20’s-30’s and would have been brought up in a time during the challenging Weimar Republic and Hitler and the Nazi Party’s rise to power This collective emotional rollercoaster; the changing of power, feeling, and wealth of country and its citizenry in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, all culminate to this point. The filmmakers were born under very different regimes, then they were raised in a new one. They saw, lived through, and changed a lot in their upbringing, leading them to feel lost, outcast, and abandoned in their new environment after the war. The guilt, the anguish, the despair; left the society in an indifferent, yet chaotic state of mind. Having seen financial crisis as children, the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust as young adults, and living in a divided Germany shaped the way many of directors felt about their homeland as well as how the public viewed it too.

My focus in this paper is on East German filmmaker Konrad Wolf and two of his films from the 1960s that capture the essence of belonging in a society, from the standpoint of the youth; specifically, in *I Was Nineteen* (1968) and *Divided Heaven* (1964). Something should also be said about each films’ socialist messages portrayed, but I think that it already falls within the circle of influence that is the way the characters are portrayed in each film. Gregor and Rita are each without a doubt socialist heroes, in different ways, but heroes nonetheless. The focus, though, is how their youth is portrayed and how each is represented in two of Konrad Wolf’s better known films. In these films, however, he uses the youthful characters as a personification of Germany in the different stages of its “life” because young adults are often anxious, misunderstood, and misinterpreted by the older generations; much like East Germany was throughout her life.

Konrad Wolf was born in Germany and his family emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1933 because of his parents’ communist views. He fought in the Red Army and returned to Germany “as a conqueror in his defeated homeland.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It is perhaps the reason why films like *Divided Heaven* and *I Was Nineteen* are self-reflecting in a way to his youth and his own sense of identity. Yes, he was born and raised as a German during his youth in the Soviet Union, but he also felt an allegiance to the Soviet Union. How did his upbringing affect his later films? While a Soviet upbringing and an East German citizenship might have been grounds for a solidified sense of identity, I don’t perceive it that way. In both films each plot grapples with a conflict of identity. Overall, I would say this theme as well as the particularities of the youthful main characters with contrasting ideological viewpoints in his films are recognizable as traits of East German film. “The most recurrent story situation has to do with a pair of ‘star-crossed’ characters—two lovers, father and son….”[[2]](#footnote-2) To have such contrasting characters in the film provides a dynamic storytelling in relations to the plot, and it gives the audience a better insight into the heartfelt conflict the characters carry within themselves. Ultimately this conflict is conveyed most clearly in *I Was Nineteen*.

*I Was Nineteen* was released in 1968 in East Germany and is something of an autobiographical story from Wolf’s life as a Soviet soldier. It shows a young ethnic German, Soviet lieutenant in the final days of World War 2, and the return to war-torn Germany. The movie begins with a shot of a German traitor who was hanged, he is floating on some makeshift raft and gallows down a river. Then it pans to a landscape wide angle shot, to Gregor, the young protagonist, announcing over a loud speaker that the war is lost for Germany and that the Russians will accept their surrender. This recurring scene of Gregor on the loud speaker in the speaker truck telling German soldiers to surrender is repeated throughout the film. A native of Cologne, the young man knew German as well as Russian and often spoke both, depending on his audience; often he served as a translator for German citizens and Nazi soldiers, to clearly communicate with their invading Soviet counterparts. Gregor soon becomes the commandant of a small town in eastern Germany, where he meets a young woman who witnessed a suicide and is in a delirious hopelessness, claiming that everyone should kill themselves, that all hope is lost and there will be nothing. To this Gregor responds with a blissful hope claiming that everything would be alright, and Germany will make amends, clean up the rubble, and get back to doing what it ought to be doing, with the help of the Soviet Union. The young woman begins to think about this as she debates with herself on where she should go. Maybe she should go “…further west,” she says, to which Gregor doesn’t respond. She asks him directly if he is German, then he looks away and doesn’t respond; a moment later, he is graciously saved from the conversation by another Soviet soldier. I think Gregor’s disinclination to answer where he is from, his identity, is a major theme of this film. A young, ethnically German Soviet officer returns to his homeland, but he has a hard time determining how he feels toward his German compatriots. He is undoubtedly a Soviet, but he is also a German. He is lost in the world. He subscribes to a Soviet philosophy; he works for the Soviet Union and he likes being a Soviet too. However, he encounters “his” people and they ask him what he is, but he refuses to answer them, perhaps he doesn’t know. I think this ties in well with the idea that East Germany maybe didn’t know what they were either. At the time of the Soviet occupation in 1945, the German people east of Berlin had an irrational, although justified (contradicting?), fear of the inbound Soviet troops. I think at the time the film was made, a culture unique to East Germany was alive and well; a bastardized German culture, then having “Risen from Ruins” to a Soviet style government. I interpreted this film as Gregor personifying East Germany after World War 2, as he is unsure of where he stands. He is a German, however he is occupied by Soviet sentiment; he fights for the Soviet Union, so in the end he is both. While this film is often interpreted as autobiographical of Wolf’s life from today’s perspective, many speculate he had a similar conflict. He was a German, but he also had strong ties to the Soviet Union. So ultimately, after the war, a conflicted young man and a new young country may share similar qualities and feelings.

This film also features historical Soviet documentary footage from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The footage showed an SS guard explaining how the camp worked and how to administer the gas to kill the prisoners. As this scene takes place, there is a scene cutting in simultaneously of Gregor showering, it seems he is attempting to wash away his sins and begin anew; or even as a representation of East Germany and Pontius Pilate alike, washing themselves from Germany’s horrific and recent past. After this, Gregor and two other comrades meet with a horticulturist. Gregor’s comrades appreciate German culture, one interested in the music, and the other is a German teacher from Ukraine who appreciates German literature, such as Kant’s writings. While speaking with the horticulturist however, the horticulturist has a brief monologue explaining the desperation of the German people and how they were tricked into following Hitler. A key scene in the film, as a man from the older generation explains to a group, all in their youth, the people’s false hope in putting their trust into a fascist. Immediately, Gregor’s comrade outs him about being a German, Gregor appears flustered and brashly says: “People will change.” The horticulturist explains that because of this hope, this makes Gregor German; it’s obvious that his positive outlook is something within him, the scene making a clear separation of the Germans and the Russians. To this Gregor responds in Russian: “A bad dancer is only hindered by their feet.” I interpret this cliché as saying: “you are your own worst enemy”. This brash response, in this context, would serendipitously reflect what the horticulturist is saying is right, due to his response Gregor would say: “He’s right, what is within me makes me stand out; I am my own worst enemy (in a Soviet perspective).” It is ironic however, for him to say this in Russian, then immediately not translate it into German--or use an equivalent. Gregor’s ‘German-ness’ is evident, and he admits it, but he admits this in Russian, which we can understand as his attempt to over-compensate in trying to hide his German identity. Language in this film also plays a key role, as the film is shot in 2 languages and switches between them unexpectedly. When this film was released, this young, new, and hopeful country of East Germany, could now be embodied by Lieutenant Gregor Hacker; occupied by Soviet feeling as well as starting new in their former homeland. The point of the film however, what I took away, was the role that youth played in the film in how it is supposed to represent East Germany, specifically.

The next film by Konrad Wolf that addresses identity in youth is *Divided Heaven* (1964). This film adaptation of Christa Wolf’s novel is set mostly in Halle but also briefly in East Berlin right after the Wall had been built. It follows a young woman, Rita, who recalls her time before her nervous breakdown, remembering her times with her lover, Manfred, and her experiences both at the university and as a member of a brigade in a railway car assembly line. In the early scenes, Manfred has left her to pursue a career in West Berlin. As the story unravels, we realize that she had the option of joining him, but the lifestyle in the West was not something she valued. Rita was significantly younger than Manfred, by 10 years, and he always talked to her like she was his little sister; reminiscing on his time from the war as a child.

Interestingly, the film shows youth differently than *I Was Nineteen*, however. In *Divided Heaven*, East Germany was already a country for the past 20 years or so, hence it is less about being hopeful about the trajectory of a united Germany and more being hopeful in regard to maintaining the East German way of life. Given the choice, Rita chose to stay in East Germany because she felt a loyalty to her community more than she felt an attraction to the West. Through various *mise-en-scènes* the audience is hinted toward the West being commercialized, shallowed, and flawed. Ultimately she subscribes more to East German than West German society and decides to stay in the East, losing her love. She chooses to pursue education to be a teacher, she is hardworking, and she is also a woman in a normally male-dominated industry. She is the only female worker on the floor of a train car factory. When Manfred took Rita home for dinner to his parents’ house, his parents asked her about her hopes and dreams. When Manfred’s father, the factory owner, spoke of how women used to behave compared to the modern times, Manfred’s mother remarked that women should go to school to find a husband and learn to be a good wife. This conversation is one that shows the intergenerational conflict in the film. Rita would like to focus on her own goals of working in the factory, but also graduating school to be a teacher. She wanted to establish her life first and foremost, then marry and have children when she felt comfortable. However, the older generation is critical of this, even though they themselves were somewhat indecisive in their earlier years. Manfred’s father was a Nazi party member, then when the Russians took over, he quickly appealed to the powers that be to become a GDR party member for his own gain. He always spoke poorly of the hard-working people like Meternagel, Rita’s foreman in the factory and arguably the ideal socialist.

An additional difference between *Divided Heaven* and I *was Nineteen* is the mise-en-scene. *In Divided Heaven*, the scenes seem crowded or busy, almost stressful such as Manfred’s parents’ house or when Rita and Manfred visit West Berlin. The characters are often behind, next to, or in front of a lot of things, making each frame seem crowded for them, or in tight spaces. Even as they were cramped in the side of the shot, awkwardly close to one another and people look like they don’t have much space to move. Could this have been a representation of the “baggage” people carry with them, or the other distractions in life? The things get in the way, and I think that is a hallmark of socialist realist film; to be able to recognize that things are in the way and work toward a simpler life, and not want as much, but instead focus on the community and one’s work. I think Rita is a socialist hero in that sense, but also in a sense that her youth is her redeeming quality. She resists defecting and would rather lose someone she loves, than to abandon her country. I think she knows exactly who she is, in contrast to Gregor. I think she is also a representation of East Germany, but when East Germany was in a different stage of its’ life. She represents the resolute, the young, the still hopeful, but more of a loyal and blatant adversary to the West. She is, in my mind, supposed to idealize what the true East German is and should be, to want to work for the collective and to have a loyalty beyond personal relationships. While these two films do contrast in many ways; chiefly the youthful characters being representations of East Germany in different stages of her life, they still are similar in some ways.

Some things these two films would have in common could be separated into production aspects and plot aspects. In production aspects, each film has wide angle camera shots, getting the landscape (or cityscape) as well as close shots of people’s faces or eyes especially. It is no secret Wolf appreciated the Western style of movie, and often incorporated techniques in his own films. In each, the large landscape shots, with little figures in the distance, is a key feature in westerns as is a camera shot toward the sky; the vastness of the setting and how small and insignificant people can be in the world. Also, each film also has unsteady camera handling and tilt angles; giving the impression that the audience watching the film is also a part of the film with a character seemingly speaking directly to them or them being involved in a chase as a silent observer. The music in each film too plays an important role to indicate a cut or overlapping scene. While some films were in color by the 1960s, these two films remain in black and white. That makes the message a little stronger because the audience has to focus on the film itself and not the background. Each film also has, at some point first-person narration. In *I Was Nineteen*, Gregor is the narrator. In *Divided Heaven*, it is unclear who narrates. Sometimes it is Rita herself, and other times it is a third-person narrator. It may just be an outside character we don’t know, who is following the situation. With this mysterious third-person narrator, the story is better told because the narrator is trustworthy, unless they are not. What I mean is: the third person narrator enhances the viewing experience because the audience is engulfed in the feelings of the protagonist, but a third person narrative and the first-person camera shots could be an effect to get the audience to be more involved again. An omniscient narrator tends to build the suspense and can even create a sense of credibility or trust; much like a news broadcast. However, this alternating narration may just make this film work better for Rita, who in the beginning is recovering from a mental breakdown, and the plot of the film itself is just her flashback memories.

Plot aspects in each film include faith and hope in education. Gregor says that after the war he hopes to attend school and get an education. He has high hopes for Germany and the Soviet Union, too, and he counts on his youth to afford him the luxury of learning. Rita also studies to become a teacher, as well as work at the factory. So, education is emphasized as essential to further progress as a nation; from a character personification perspective. There is also a fascination with heading westward. In each film, the protagonists always talk about the West and that they have instead chosen the East. They wonder what it is like in the West. At one point, Manfred observes that the “west wind… smells of coffee” in *Divided Heaven*. Which could mean that the West has better resources, good enough coffee to smell from the East and to be fascinated with, for example.

Finally, the use of bridges as a backdrop in each film is significant. At the end of *I Was Nineteen*, there is a small bridge that the surrendering German soldiers cross over into the fortified village where the movie ends. This can be understood in hopeful terms as connecting the two sides (East and West) physically or socially. Each side has German people; they are two former enemies joining forces to become one people again. In *Divided Heaven*, after Rita’s breakdown, she lives next to an enormous stone bridge that becomes the focus of the camera again and again. She and Manfred also cross a foot bridge each time they go down by the river. Bridges connect things, and as the water passes beneath a bridge, in English, we say this to mean: “what happened happened”. So, could this be a statement from Wolf to say that what happened is just water under the bridge? Could this be a subtle symbol of hope of East and West Germany, or the Cold War to end just as quick as it started? Perhaps a political statement urging both sides to engage in dialogue and move past the 2 ideologies.

In conclusion, Konrad Wolf explored a central topic in the fledgling nation of East Germany in his two films *I Was Nineteen* and *Divided Heaven*: the representation of East Germany in different stages of her life via the perspective of youthful protagonists. East Germany, as a relatively new nation in the 1960s was personified through strong protagonists, one male and the other female. Gregor in *I was Nineteen* and Rita in *The Divided Heaven* reflect differences according to the very specific different contexts in which they live. Gregor, a hopeful young man, is ready to rebuild Germany and ready to usher in socialist ideology; he is a communist German and he figures that out for himself upon his return to his “fatherland” in the late 1940s. By contrast, Rita is loyal to socialist ideals that are tested by opportunities that present themselves at her work place and in relation to her boyfriend. She, too, is true to herself and she puts her community and her goals above the selfishness and the superficial materials that she observes in the capitalist West. Each character is the personified version of an East German hero, yet both remain relatable characters to a young audience. The youth are often very hopeful, or naïve; they are more impulsive and optimistic, to the point of being unrealistic. This naiveté, however, is an important factor in the makeup of the “youth”. Konrad Wolf effectively captures this antecedent in his two films of the 1960s, and they remain testaments to a difficult but optimistic sentiment, typical of East German society during this time that can be examined in hindsight.

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1. See *Remembering History: The Filmmaker Konrad Wolf*, Silberman provides a very brief overview of Wolf’s life in the first paragraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Recurrent Themes in East German Film*, Hitchens recalls many East German films and draws this conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)