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Personal Vendettas and their Public Appropriations: Sibylle Schönemann's *Verriegelte Zeit* and the Politics of Film Reception

The making of images is not merely a personal artistic pursuit but also very much a social practice. Sibylle Schönemann's *Verriegelte Zeit* (*Locked Up Time*), a film produced shortly after the East German "revolution" of November 1989 amidst rapid political transition and a mercurial media landscape, dramatically demonstrates how the private intentions of a filmmaker intersect with multiple and varied public appropriations of a given work, both to establish its textual meaning and to determine its fate on the international distribution circuit. My intention is to apply this thesis – that different sites of consumption can generate quite distinct readings that thereby ultimately result in conflicting constructions of a film – to identify two distinct and potentially opposed discourses in Schönemann's film. I will first elucidate the significance and the implications of its prevalent marketing among a surplus of so-called Post-Wall or (Re)unification¹ films to illustrate how this marketing promotes Schönemann's project as an indictment of corrupt political policy in the GDR. As an introjection into this overly polarized East/West dichotomy I will then read the filmmaker's cinematic strategies and personal agenda as a significant contribution to feminist aesthetics. In the process of unpacking issues of authorship, text and reception in their necessary imbrication with the category of gender, I shall strive to distinguish between a film that happens to have been written and directed by a woman, and what could be understood as a 'feminist cultural intervention.' My ensuing discussion of the criteria that legitimize the use of the label 'feminist text' is grounded in the operative assumption that the term cannot be considered an *a priori* category: a film's 'meaning' is not an inherent or discrete attribute; it is necessarily dynamic and relational, mapped out along the coordinates of time and space, of history and context. Even as interviews and discussions with living filmmakers promise more determinate insights into authorial intention, ultimately every film document also submits to the politics of textual reception, thereby becoming a site for contention and dispute.

In this particular instance, what was originally an individual trauma holds the potential, via its filmic revisiting, to be transformed into a public spectacle in which socialist political policy is scathingly critiqued. Such a film seems to have found immediate resonance within the political climate of immediate post-reunifica-

tion Germany as well as in other democratic nations standing as smug witnesses to the collapse of socialist structures. Undoubtedly, the film's availability for private and public audiences was not merely the result of popular demand, but also of selective institutional sanctioning (i.e. by film festival juries, film distributors, and cultural ministries such as the Goethe Institute) of films that placed western political and economic policies in a more positive light relative to the East. In his 1990 essay, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," Slavoj Žižek considers this relationship between Eastern and Western political systems within a psychoanalytic framework to maintain, "Eastern Europe functions for the West as its Ego-Ideal: the point from which the West sees itself in a likable idealized form, as worthy of love. The real object of fascination for the West is thus the *gaze*, namely the supposedly naive gaze by means of which Eastern Europe stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy" (50). While concurring that identification plays an important role in this dynamic, I would argue that disavowal and projection are also significant in fortifying Western self-esteem. The disappointment and betrayal that East Germans, for example, expressed towards their government was easily appropriated by Western media and politicians to deflect attention from similar symptoms of systemic decay and failure in democratic structures. Furthermore, in the initial euphoria of 1990/91 the West projected its own gaze upon the topography of Eastern Europe in the form of a yearning to relive the birth of democratic principles the phantasm of justice meted out equitably under the law. This psychologization of national positions functions, of course, as a totalizing discourse – one which I will apply to the posturing that occurs in the media rather than to those viewpoints of individuals that are all too often projected onto broader segments of the population. Newspapers, television news stations and radio broadcasts, whether assuming a progressive or conservative position in relationship to current affairs, seem almost necessarily to avail themselves of *Feindbilder*, i.e. projected images of the enemy that shape the rhetorical contours of the events they are responsible for broadcasting.

The trajectory traced by Schönemann's professional career seems to reflect this reshuffling of political signs and rhetorical identities that occurred following the abdication of the socialist government in East Germany.²

Until her prison sentence in 1984, Schönemann was merely one of many production assistants in the DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*) film studios in Potsdam-Babelsberg, the state-owned and -controlled institution from whose generous funds fifteen to eighteen new films were produced annually.³ When DEFA began to impose severe restrictions upon her work and that of her husband, who had also acquired a reputation as a dissident filmmaker at DEFA, the two applied for exit visas to leave the GDR. Soon after they were quite unexpectedly arrested at their home and separated from their children on charges that they posed a threat to the state. After serving half of their year-long prison sentence, they were “bought out” by the West German government and released into the West together with a busload of forty-one other political prisoners. Sibylle Schönemann’s freedom was allegedly purchased for about 10,000 DM. In an interview with Margrit Fröhlich she explains the East German government’s traffic in bodies across national borders: “And when they needed money, they increasingly locked up people, even those who had only requested an exit visa” (22). Five years later, in 1990, Schönemann chose to return with a (GDR) film team to retrace the history of her prosecution and imprisonment. The release of *Verriegelte Zeit* in 1990 not only signaled her debut in the West following unification, but also landed her the Silver Dove in Leipzig and a nomination for the German *Bundesfilmpreis*, thereby catapulting her film into the media limelight and interpolating her personal experience of political trauma within public debates between two nations struggling toward unification. The film won international recognition as a result of its inclusion among other “Post-Wall” documentary films in a worldwide tour sponsored by the Goethe Institute in 1992.⁴ Today, *Verriegelte Zeit* is one of two German films indexed as “Films from Eastern Europe” within the inventory of Zeitgeist Films Ltd., a New York distributor that carries films by independent filmmakers such as Yvonne Rainer, Derek Jarman and the Brothers Quay.

On the surface, this film shares many of the features considered characteristic of the works of other former East German filmmakers that address the dramatic political changes of 1989. In light of the unprecedented explosion in documentary productions during this brief moment in film history, Marc Silberman has made some preliminary attempts to discern particular formal structures and thematic concerns, and to establish sub-categories with which to acquire an overview of the key features of these films (Silberman 29-35). He suggests four categories or approaches: 1) the “before/after approach,” in which subjects reflect on how their lives have changed since unification; 2) the narration of individual stories that trace a particular trauma and its

sequelae; 3) films that offer “a kind of illustrated newspaper survey,” i.e. a cross-section of various media – oral histories, newspaper clippings, images of mundane changes in the visual landscape of East Germany; and 4) films that assert their artistic autonomy by renouncing any ideological investment in or political alliance with either East or West German political systems – here the *Wende* “simply” affords further material for a film. Of course, Silberman acknowledges these categories as unavoidably reductive; closer treatment of any given film will invariably reveal features of more than one category to be applicable.

In his brief allusion to *Verriegelte Zeit*, Silberman places it squarely among the individual narratives (33). Certainly, it can be described as one person’s reflections upon her social and political marginalization and concomitant victimization. However, as a result of its classification as realist documentary, the reception of Schönemann’s film manifests the common tendency to attribute a truthfulness to images and a transparency to their representation – the camera lens seems merely to record the unfolding events without any external intervention. Such assumptions belie both the personal motivations that impel Schönemann’s project and the manner in which the political climate surrounding the film’s marketing colors our perception of its truth value and/or artistic merit. For *Verriegelte Zeit* also exhibits a unique emancipatory aesthetic that defies its categorization either as “Post-Wall film” or as the historicization of an individual’s life in the GDR. Schönemann’s agenda is first and foremost a very personal one: the recovery of her reputation as a DEFA filmmaker and of her integrity as a former East German citizen with high idealistic standards. She structures her film as a return to the “scene of the crime,” to reencounter her persecutors and to elicit from them an acknowledgment of the true nature of the drama that unfolded during countless interrogations and six months of confinement in the GDR’s largest and allegedly most notorious women’s penitentiary: *Strafanstalt Hoheneck*.⁵ In a prearranged and filmed reunion with her former prisonmate “Punkte,” she discusses her desire to confront their interrogators, face to face, and turn the tables, as it were. Her intention, then, is to reverse the gaze; her camera becomes a weapon aimed at her oppressors, who, as the objects of her interrogation, often squirm visibly under her direct questions.⁶ To understand this vendetta, it may be useful to reassess the discursive mechanisms by which she became one of thousands of victims of a complex state security apparatus comprising respectively the Ministries for State Security, of Justice, and of the Interior. Arguably, the relationship of the government to its own ideological underpinnings invites a comparison with the traditional relationship of the camera to its pro-filmic material. Like the cinema, the

State strives to cover the traces of its lack. This lack, constituted by the discrepancy between the ideology and its manifestation, finds its correspondence in the irreducible distance separating filmic representation from the real. In retrospect, both classic realist cinematography and the socialist polity could be said to have engaged in a complex series of maneuvers and manipulations that respectively provoke in the spellbound spectator or in a captive/captivated citizenry the illusion of possessing agency in relation to the events unfolding on the screen or within the nation.

Precisely what strategies can be employed to promote the illusion of resolving discrepancies between an ideology and its institutional praxis? How does the cinematic apparatus, based as it is upon a rapid series of cuts within a two-dimensional medium, shield the spectator from a disillusionment that Christian Metz argues functions as a form of castration, a severing of something integral in constituting the subject? Laura Mulvey has outlined two predominant means of disavowal operative in classical cinema: projection, followed by punishment of the guilty object. In such a reenactment of primal traumas, the guilty party, i.e. the one who is lacking, has traditionally been gendered female, thereby deflecting attention from the lack equally present in the male subject. If we analyze the circumstances of Schönemann's persecution by her government, we see that similar mechanisms of displacement of guilt were employed against her. By virtue of her discontent not with the ideals of socialism, but with the confining circumstances in which they were (not) realized, Schönemann revealed a lack within the larger body of the nation. The state then chose to expunge this part of itself, to project the lack onto Schönemann as hostile 'other', and thereby deny its own shortcomings. The trauma of interrogation which she underwent during her imprisonment served as a systematic means of eliciting a confession that it was, in fact, she who carried the burden of lack, and not the GDR as national subject. In this regard, a filmmaker "framed" as dissident could thus be said to have functioned as a fetish, the object concealing the flaws within a historically specific political system by means of their displacement onto herself.

In his *Hohenecker Protokolle*, Ulrich Schach⁷ has collected the testimonials of eleven political prisoners who served sentences of various lengths between 1950 and 1983. Invariably, all of these women describe a similar experience of unanticipated arrest, detainment without explanation, and concomitant trial either for crimes they had not committed or for acts that in fact were not really criminal. Interrogations lasting up to 72 hours at a time frequently led to the confession of deeds never actually committed in order to escape further corporeal or psychic abuse. Detainees were frequently

pressured to sign documents that had been written up by government officials in the first-person voice to stage a confession of guilt and remorse for a specific scenario of fictitious criminal activities. In effect, the entire spectacle of persecution was staged not in order to "reform" the alleged criminal, but as a performative means to shore up the ideological convictions of cohorts in support of the government regime (i.e. prison personnel, "educators," wardens, the police forces and the interdependent network of political functionaries).

The project of *Verriegelte Zeit*, then, is to reverse these displacements and uncover the pathology present within the SED⁸ regime. What becomes clear in Schönemann's "live" (i.e. unrehearsed) confrontations with various state and prison personnel is a gaping discrepancy within such a system between the legal superstructure and personal accountability. When asked to justify their complicity in Schönemann's imprisonment, and asked why they did not try to help her, her interviewees invariably responded that they were merely following the law. Yet when pressed to justify the law, they couldn't, and – in some instances – admitted that there was no logic to the law. As one judge explained, there was no possibility for an acquittal of her case because no legal structures were in place which would allow citizens to file an appeal or express dissent. Under such circumstances, he continued, one cannot claim unconstitutionality, and that in turn renders bankrupt the whole concept of a constitution. For if unconstitutionality categorically does not exist, this completely nullifies the parameters of the constitution as positive category. Under the scrutiny of her camera and through her persistent questioning, Schönemann exposes the law as an empty signifier, and reveals the people serving it to be castrated or disempowered subjects. As the lawyer who was assigned to her case points out, within a totalitarian state a lawyer has no real choices in the defense of his client – all trials ultimately become show trials that merely uphold the facade of justice.

Within the homology between state and cinematic apparatus that I have just outlined, the question arises whether Schönemann's heuristic strategies might invite a feminist reading. Given this filmmaker's long-standing association with DEFA and the claim, previously widespread among East Germans, that the notion of feminism is both foreign and anachronistic within "really existing" socialism, it is admittedly problematic to begin attributing feminist or, for that matter, "feminine" qualities to her work.⁹ For in doing so we inevitably engage a broader discourse that has grown out of the women's movement of the 1970's in western Europe and the U.S. I would, however, agree with B. Ruby Rich's conclusion regarding precisely this ambivalence about applying a feminist criticism to a motley assortment of films produced by

women filmmakers. She maintains: "'Feminist' is a name that may have only a marginal relation to the film text, describing more persuasively the context of social and political activity from which the work sprang" (Rich 10). Schönmänn was, in fact, well aware of her positionality as a woman filmmaker within a profession that even in the GDR had remained a predominantly male domain. In reflecting upon the years prior to her arrest, she has more or less acknowledged that it was DEFA's politically expedient need to rectify the lack of women directors that ultimately enabled her to work in the fiction film studio as long as she did, despite the fact that her husband's work was very critical of the GDR.¹⁰ As Renata Salecl (1994) has pointed out with regard to the status of women in socialist countries, when childcare, maternity leave and equal pay were structured into the state economy, "patriarchal domination became officially invisible – which also meant that its effects became much more difficult to recognize" (2).

At the time of the film's production, Schönmänn had been living in Hamburg for nearly five years, employed since 1987 as a dramaturgical consultant for such projects as Hark Bohm's *Yasemin* and Tevfik Baser's *Abschied aus dem falschen Paradies*.¹¹ The latter two films both address the dilemma of women struggling within structures of domination that are frequently gender selective. One could thus conclude that Schönmänn consistently cultivated a film aesthetic concerned not only with social justice, but also with acknowledging the differentiated experiences of gendered subjects within political systems. Arguably, the production of *Verriegelte Zeit* blends a number of political discourses and aesthetic practices. In fact, Annette Kuhn's discussion of the overlapping agendas of socialist realism and feminist film practices seems highly relevant in this context.¹² Schönmänn's film complies with the basic defining criteria of socialist realism in its documentary, i.e. realist modus and in the inscription of historical specificity. Whereas Hollywood cinema purports to establish the spectator's identification with the protagonist primarily at the level of individual persona, socialist realism also intends concomitant identification with the historical situation. Hence, a degree of typification occurs in which characters in the film have individual personality traits but at the same time function as embodiments of social and historical configurations. While the Hollywood figure thus putatively overcomes obstacles in the narrative exclusively through his/her own heroic qualities, the socialist realist protagonist's struggle is additionally overdetermined by the interventions of history (i.e. telos). Ironically, it would appear that prevailing media reception has seized upon precisely such a simplistic rendering of historical destiny in *Verriegelte Zeit*, such that the functionaries and IM (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* – unofficial

collaborators) encountered in the film become mere caricatures of a corrupt political system, while Schönmänn stands in for its victimized citizenry denouncing the system's failure.

Yet *Verriegelte Zeit* ultimately defies such a limiting discourse, for its narrative exhibits three hallmarks of feminist documentary film, namely an autobiographical discourse upheld under the premise that the individual filmmaker's fate is imbricated within broader political structures, a recovery of the voice and gaze in a manner that does not replicate dominant (i.e. patriarchal) modes of looking and containing, and finally, an acknowledgment of the gendered nature of women's inscription into history. I do not want to maintain that Schönmänn rejects dominant norms of filmmaking altogether; rather, her brilliance lies in her sublation of these techniques through the three criteria just outlined. Ultimately, the film's aesthetic is not "new," but rather reacts to and subverts, inverts and otherwise transforms discourses already in circulation. A film reviewer writing about *Verriegelte Zeit* sets it apart from other "Post-Wall" films when she remarks: "Daß Frau auf die polit-dogmatische Holzhammerdramaturgie auch in wesentlich eindeutigeren Fällen der Kriminalisierung kritischer Bürger verzichten und sie sogar wesentlich überzeugender durch eine gefühlsbetonte, aber nie wehleidige Perspektive der dokumentarischen Recherche ersetzen kann, beweist Sibylle Schönmänn mit ihrem Film *Verriegelte Zeit*."¹³

Schönmänn reclaims vision, stressing the act of looking not as a form of domination but of emancipation. As such, she actually engages in a form of what Adrienne Rich has coined "re-visioning," defined as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes" (Rich 35) as a means of survival and of recovering agency, in this case, by retracing the path of one's oppression. This type of vision is to be distinguished from the so-called "male" gaze, which fixes upon and fetishizes its object. For Schönmänn's cinematography emphasizes not so much the object of the gaze as the very axis of vision itself. There is a distinct absence of the 'reverse shot,' which normally serves to draw spectators into the narrative by visually aligning their gaze with that of the protagonist on the screen. The usual sequence of shot/reverse shot renders the camera invisible by alternately suturing us with the visual perspective and reactions of opposing screen personae such that we have the sense of being "amidst" the spectacle rather than limited to viewing it through the telescopic lens. In contrast, Schönmänn foregrounds the act of looking as such, whether by directing the camera lens through the barred cell windows onto an open meadow beyond the prison grounds, or by letting it peer through the peephole of the door leading into Schönmänn's former cell, as countless security personnel had done years before, fixing their watchful

gaze upon its lone inhabitant. In one particularly unsettling shot, this gaze is also explicitly directed at the viewer when an accusing eyeball framed and magnified by the peephole blinks furtively at the camera.

The inversion of the gaze can also be understood as the filmmaker's desire to see herself as those who participated in her oppression must have seen her, to regard herself in the *tableau vivant* that even local villagers had been able to survey and contemplate from the hills surrounding the prison property. In other words, she struggles against the intolerable circumstance of being entrapped in her own body, her own eye, bound only to a limited view, which is actually the fundamental human condition of "the absolute view" as described by Lacan: "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 72). The absolute view can be described as "a point of interiority which can never be externalized, a point from which we always look from inside out, a point we cannot possibly leave, a point from which we are unable to see ourselves but can only observe others" (Bozovic 164). It is a condition most emphatically literalized in its unbearability for Schönemann as a prisoner unable to escape this space of interiority or to move to another exterior point of view. In the use of live shooting in the search for visual material, Schönemann shies just clear of inflicting the same forms of entrapment on others. In one particular film sequence, she and her camera crew approach unannounced a former prison official who is enjoying a beer in his back yard; Schönemann ventures before the camera to ask the man if he knows who she is. The question seems to demand of its interlocutor an acknowledgment of her continuing presence as a witness to the active distortion of historical realities and her survival despite a broader system's attempts to efface her identity. In the ensuing futile encounter, in which probing questions are countered by evasive responses, the camera gradually abandons the ongoing dialogue and settles upon a glass jar of syrup hanging from a nearby tree. A close-up reveals wasps struggling ineffectually to escape the strategically placed sticky trap, thereby offering connotative material that fortuitously displaces the camera's former visual object.

As Schönemann's question "Sie wissen noch wer ich bin?" implies, full subjectivity rests upon acknowledgment through the mirror of another's speech or gaze. The desire to escape the limited view and be able to see oneself seeing, as it were, can only be fulfilled through another party, through another eye that gazes back. At that moment in which the subject catches sight of the other seeing her, she also catches sight of herself, for the other person's seeing is also contingent upon her presence, her being there and seeing. This very configuration finds expression in a scene in which the filmmaker

revisits a particular house atop a hill just beyond the prison grounds where the cherry tree stands upon which she had often gazed from her cell window, tracing the changing seasons in the tree's leaves and blossoms. Here she encounters a robust older woman setting up a ladder to harvest cherries from this very same tree. Following initial small talk, Schönemann steers the conversation towards the topic of the Hoheneck penitentiary, asking if she knows what kind of a people were interned there. The woman readily answers that there were political prisoners there, adding that from her ladder, she could watch them sweeping or doing yardwork in the inner courtyard. It is precisely at the moment in which this unwitting confession of voyeurism is elicited, that Schönemann so to speak sees the object, namely, the house on the hill (or the woman who inhabits the house) that gazes upon the prison,¹⁴ now gazing at her, and thus also "sees herself seeing." Of course, this is only possible because the woman she is speaking with does not *realize* that the object of her gaze (the political prisoners) actually includes Schönemann. When Schönemann then reveals that she herself had dwelled behind those yonder barred windows, this ephemeral moment in which she can see the other's gaze *as object* is shattered. Jean Paul Sartre's discussion of the split between the eyes and the gaze in *Being and Nothingness* can help clarify the elementary reasoning at work here (Sartre 258). In order for the gaze that is fastened upon us to be apprehending, blindness is required on the part of the object manifesting it: we cannot simultaneously perceive the world and apprehend the gaze fastened upon us, but only do one or the other. In this particular film sequence, Schönemann, as subject of the gaze, can see the gaze of the other as long as the other's gaze is not directed upon her, i.e., as long as the woman doesn't realize that Schönemann was, in fact, one of the people she had so often watched sweeping out the courtyard. Once this has been disclosed, the gaze of the other woman is no longer the object; rather, Schönemann herself again becomes the object of the other's gaze.

Numerous encounters between the filmmaker and her interviewees restage this drama, in which the camera fleetingly captures for Schönemann the uncanny and paranormal point of view that encompasses her both as subject and object in the totality of its field of vision, i.e., as the point or place in the other from which the gaze looks "past" Schönemann and is thus blind to her own gaze upon itself. Its significance lies in the fact that it appears to be the only means by which Schönemann was able to extract anything approaching an admission of complicity from any of the former state functionaries. For at the moment she captures their unsuspecting gaze upon her, she also captures them as knowing subjects and as complying agents of history – precisely what so many tried to deny with claims that they knew nothing, were

only fulfilling their duties, or were unable to or did not want to remember specific details.¹⁵ Of course, this type of confrontational approach ineffectively establishes anything resembling an intersubjective encounter grounded in the free and willing circulation of knowledge and information between interlocutors. Once the encounter becomes charged with anxiety and suspicion, little concrete information can be extracted from her interviewees, least of all a verbal admission of guilt. When Schönemann identifies herself as a former prisoner, and then proceeds to ask the woman at the cherry tree: "Was haben Sie darüber gedacht?" her hasty reply is "Nichts! Ich habe überhaupt nichts gedacht!"¹⁶ Given that the tactics employed are by no means effective in eliciting thoughtful or even coherent responses from those confronted, one has to wonder to what extent the search for an etiology of her arrest really fuels this journey into the past. Schönemann's project constitutes less a methodical mission to establish specific truths about the past than a desire to undergo catharsis by revisiting the scenes and the people involved in her persecution. As she herself has acknowledged: "Im Grunde ist mein Film ja eine Art Psychotherapie. Sicher habe ich so eine Art wie Triumph über diese Personen gebraucht, die sich plötzlich ihrer Macht beraubt und den peinlichen Fragen eines ihrer unzähligen Opfer gegenüber sehen" (Pätzold). To the extent that one can talk about finding out "the truth" of her incarceration, then, it is a situated truth founded on accepting the validity of her individual experience. What is most immediately imparted is the anger and indignation which she feels in reencountering her oppressors, and a distinctly guilty demeanor on their part.

Precisely the filmmaker's closeness to her filmic material has also drawn criticism from some circles. One film scholar contends, for example: "The highly personalized, emotional commentary maintains a tone of moral indignation that hinders both an analytical approach to the structures of hierarchical political authority or self-reflection by the filmmaker on her own helplessness in the face of the failed project to find the responsible functionaries" (Silberman 33). Another German journalist complains, "Zu oft deutlich spürbar, daß die Betroffene Sibylle Schönemann noch zu wenig Abstand gewonnen hat, wie ihr Rechtsanwalt im Film sagt, noch zu sehr leidet, nicht darüber hinweggekommen ist. Sie hat mit dem Film eine Art erster Selbsttherapie begonnen, die sie dem Zuschauer mit durchgehend kommentierender Weinerlichkeit quälend aufzwingt."¹⁷ Where do we, in fact, draw the line between valorizing a film for its high degree of personal emotional investment, or writing it off as either maudlin exhibitionism or a morbid obsession with one's own victimization? I would argue that it is precisely Schönemann's willingness to share with the viewer this journey into a past trauma that is of value.¹⁸

She does not presume to speak for others by presenting a "neutral" documentary regarding countless acts of wrongdoing against the general citizenry. Rather, she engages in a personal vendetta and interrogates a political discourse carried on without her. The film's title *Verriegelte Zeit* can thus be read to refer not only to her months of incarceration, but also to the manner in which ossified explanations – established by those powers invested in maintaining a stronghold on their determinate significance in history – held specific historical events captive. Schönemann's incapacity to receive concrete answers to her questions therefore also seems emblematic for the challenges that women encounter in trying to unlock or dismantle hegemonic discourses and crack their exclusionary codes. Recurring close-up shots of keys hanging on a nail on the wall, combined with the occasional off-camera amplified sound of a door slamming shut and the key scraping ominously in its lock, further reinforce this theme.

Schönemann's confrontational interview approach and her personal investment in this film may indeed pose a problem for viewers and critics with more conventional expectations of the documentary genre, but it would be a terrible discredit to dismiss her tactics as mere schlock journalism along the vein of *Rescue 911* or *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol* to name just a sampling of the sensationalist docu-drama series currently being broadcast by American television networks. Documentary film has traditionally been understood as a form of realism that contrasts with fiction film in its conceptualization of the visible as empirical evidence. The camera is implicitly perceived as 'merely' recording or reality, capturing the 'truth' on film. Schönemann does, in fact, employ such characteristic documentary techniques as the hand-held camera, a less "clean," i.e. less frequent and freer, editing, live action, and direct gaze into the camera by the filmed subjects. Her occasional superimposition of extra-diegetic voice-over when the camera records inanimate imagery further serves as a metadiscourse that orders the erratic images and confirms their validity for the viewer. Whereas most documentaries strive to transmit a relatively objective witnessing of events, in this instance, catering to the viewer takes second place to the drama unfolding between the filmmaker and her subjects. What preoccupies Schönemann foremost is the act of confrontation in and of itself. The resulting documentation of past wrongdoings by the government and of the hypocrisy of those who acted in conscious compliance becomes a mere substrate that coalesces out of this very private confrontation between a victim and those complicit in her oppression, an encounter characterized by a moving mixture of skittishness, fear, and a quiet dread that circulates between both parties.

In her book *Women and the New German Cinema*,

Julia Knight identifies this focus on *process* vis-à-vis both filmmaker and spectator as one of the traits that many filmmakers agree constitutes a feminine aesthetic (146). Margarethe von Trotta, for example, reflects on one of her own films: "I think that the manner in which this film is made is perhaps tied to a woman. How the characters and their feelings are portrayed – the stress lies not in the story but rather in the emotional flow which runs through this story – is perhaps a specifically feminine manner of expression" (Golub 298). And in speaking of women's films generally, Trotta has also suggested: "The most essential thing is that we make no distinction between reason and emotion, large and small events ... For that reason we stand up in public for what we think in private and are not so able and eager to make compromises. I think that is a virtue and precisely this virtue, which is to be found in our films, might lead perhaps to a new aesthetics" (Trotta 90). Schönemann's explicitly subjective and confrontational camera strategies engage the viewer in an empathic relationship by aligning our vision with the gaze she projects through the camera lens. She rarely appears within our field of vision; we hear only her off-camera voice as she speaks with her interviewees. At other times, there is no dialogue, as the hand-held camera silently retraces her steps through narrow labyrinthian corridors, impressing upon us the claustal atmosphere of the prison. In reconstructing the setting, the filmmaker not only tries to *show* us what happened, she also wants us to *feel* what she felt: "Ich wollte den Zuschauern mit ein paar Momenten vermitteln, was man mit den Leuten im Gefängnis gemacht hat, was es für ein Gefühl ist, ohnmächtig zu sein."¹⁹ While most countercinema films, i.e., those that take an oppositional stance in relation to dominant discourses, tend to focus on political issues as they affect the broader population, Schönemann's very personal point of view places her among feminist filmmakers concerned with tracing the relationship between the personal and the political. Those critics unable to overcome their aversion towards what they perceive as an indulgent display of self-pity may simply fail to recognize this connection between personal suffering and broader systems of oppression.

I have already elaborated how Schönemann's mode of filmmaking can be categorized on the one hand as documentary, since she actively interrogates and reconstructs a part of history via interviews, reenactments, and revisitation of specific settings, but on the other as a clearly autobiographical film. According to Annette Kuhn, it is precisely this contradictory blend of documentary realism and the subjective perspective of personal narratives that first came to constitute feminist documentary film in the 1970's (149). Representative West German films such as Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Deutschland, Bleiche Mutter*, Jutta Brückner's *Hunger*

Jahre and Helke Sander's *Der Subjektive Faktor* share a common attempt to reclaim history as a narrative experienced not by an apparently neutral (male) subject, but rather as projected through the personal experiences of individual women.²⁰ Furthermore, Schönemann implicitly rejects the necessity of "objectivity," since such a category carries little valence within autobiographical discourse. Kuhn expresses this close relationship between the enunciator and her filmic content as follows:

Given that autobiographical discourse structures feminist documentary films, and if protagonists order their own discourses, then clearly the enunciating voice of these films belongs to the female protagonists themselves. This point is underscored by the fact that voice-over is invariably absent from feminist documentaries. When there is a voice-over, it does not come from outside the diegetic space set up by the film, but is spoken by the subject or subjects of the autobiography. (149)

How does this constellation of cinematic and discursive structures relate to the marketing success of Schönemann's film? While I argued earlier that in the fantasy of an omniscient totalitarian state this filmmaker functioned as the fetish upon whom disavowal and guilt could be projected, it is ironic that her identity and her work have once again been instrumentalized, this time in the service of western discourses on democracy (and by implication, capitalism). Within the current international scramble among differing political factions to establish their hegemonic claim to a particular rendering of the past, i.e., to buy stock in that valuable commodity called history, Schönemann's film seems to have been rendered a tain that aids in consolidating worldviews, whether that of a socialist state or of triumphant global capitalism. In assessing the strategies employed in renarrativizing GDR history within the press and media today, Konrad Jarausch points out in his essay "Die DDR denken":

Die Entstehung einer öffentlichen Erinnerungskultur fünf Jahre nach dem Ende der DDR ist dabei, die komplexen Erfahrungen zu paradigmatischen Diskursen der Täter, Opfer und Mitläufer zu vereinfachen. Diese Stilisierung erlaubt es dem Einzelnen, sich, unter Bereinigung des eigenen Lebenslaufs, einer größeren Gruppe anzuschließen und dadurch eine kollektive Identität zu bewahren (9).

Because of the polarized division between pure victim and pure oppressor, Schönemann's film can easily be appropriated as a show trial of the GDR, inviting viewers to participate in denouncing socialism and projecting the evils of history upon this flawed system. By revealing

socialism in its praxis as a failure, western democracy in its current feeble condition is, by default, inflated as the system in which sign and referent still maintain their mythic self-identical status.

The uncanny sense of history repeating itself finds reinforcement in the fact that Hoheneck, a site that had functioned as a penitentiary since 1863, actually did serve as an SA concentration camp during the Nazi era, and was also memorialized by GDR political historians as the site where the Stollberg KPD functionary Alfred Kempe is alleged to have been brutally mistreated (Schacht 20). In a particularly disturbing sequence, we view unknown hands removing jewelry and then a cut to the original document that lists every article of clothing or adornment seized from Schönemann's person and from her handbag when she was first interned. Even as the removal and itemization of personal effects represents a routine prison procedure worldwide, within the German context, the list of such mundane articles as scarf, sweater, underwear, wedding ring, house keys immediately brings to mind the systematic process of dispossession which concentration camp victims were subject to during the Holocaust, and thus seems to imply that the legacy of fascism was carried on within the GDR. The filmmaker herself has expressed ambivalence about such a comparison: "The Holocaust cannot be compared to anything ... I do not feel particularly comfortable with this comparison, but I also can't say that there aren't any parallels" (Fröhlich 24). Within West German reception, i.e., within a mass media that in the early 1990's was primarily orchestrated by funds and directives from the "old" *Bundesländer*²¹ it is easy to imagine how this apparent projection of guilt upon the socialist state functioned to alleviate the Federal Republic's already burdened historical conscience. A cursory perusal of review titles that appeared in newspapers of the *alten Bundesländer* would seem to further reflect such an emplotment, to speak the language of Hayden White (1987); among such titles as "Suche nach den Tätern," "Auf den Spuren der Stasi," "Schweigepflicht in den Köpfen," "Der Beginn der Entstasifizierung," "Statt Reue nur Ausreden: Abrechnung mit DDR-Funktionären," there is no trace of an historical consciousness reaching further back than forty-five years or any acknowledgment of possible continuities with the National Socialist era.

It appears that Schönemann's individual saga of recuperating her identity – which is precisely the site where a feminist reading could be most incisive – may well have been coopted by the broader economics of cultural production, thereby expanding its political potential but also neutralizing its potentially feminist critique. One could therefore pose the rhetorical question whether a woman's subversion of basic models of cinematography is really so essentially different if it still

lends itself to expropriation by precisely those types of structures that it sought to overthrow. But perhaps this capacity for semantic "excess" can be understood as part of what I see as Schönemann's "radical signifying practices," to borrow a term coined by Annette Kuhn. By using modes of representation that place subjectivity itself in process, the moment of reading/viewing becomes one in which multiple meanings are set in play and made variable over time rather than consolidated or fixed.

The intention of this essay, then, has been to offer precisely such an alternative reading, one that invites Germanist scholars, feminist film critics, and filmmakers alike to reconsider Schönemann's work as an important venture into the experimental ground of redefining aesthetic and formal knowledge in the service of political critique. By drawing our attention specifically to the formal elements of filmmaking, to the strategies employed in the production of meaning and hegemony, Schönemann shares a common agenda with feminist filmmakers; she engages in practices that work against and challenge dominant cinema at the level of both signifier and signified, i.e. in both choice of form and content, so that the viewer is in a position to understand the operative discourse and to challenge it. In this respect, her own interrogation of the various machinations and psychological maneuvers by which a particular state ideology was assembled through both the naive as well as the knowing complicity of its citizens represents by analogy the active nature of discourse and the continued opportunities to effect change within any oppressive social structure. In the words of the filmmaker: "I think that this film is not just about Germany, but rather about the functioning of social structures. It is about responsibility. If everybody had been responsible the whole thing wouldn't have worked. And this trust in authority or the lack of courage to stand up for one's beliefs and say 'no' – you find this in nearly all countries" (Fröhlich 23-24).

Notes

- ¹ While dispute about the most politically and historically accurate appellation for the events of Fall 1989 is not a focus of this paper, this discussion can be retraced in the 'Special Issue on German Reunification' in *New German Critique* 52.
- ² For an interesting panoply of viewpoints on the collapse of communism, see the special issue on "Understanding Communism," *New Left Review* 183.
- ³ To understand the prominence of the DEFA in proportion to a modest nation of 16 million citizens, one has to consider that, as a result of the former Ufa holdings, DEFA maintained the largest studio park (i.e. studio space, costumes, props, etc.) in Europe and by 1989 maintained 50 full-time directors on its payroll – an impossibility in Hollywood even during the cartel era of the 1930's. For a more extensive description of the DEFA film enterprise and its fate following reunification, I recommend Marc Silberman's "Post-Wall Documentaries: New Images from a New Germany?"
- ⁴ Organized under the title "1989/90: Post-Wall Germany," the film package included *Leipzig im Herbst*, *Die Mauer*, *November Days*, *Sperrmüll*, *Im Glanze dieses Glücks*, *Berlin Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse*, *Verriegelte Zeit*, *Countdown*, *Ein schmales Stück Deutschland*, *10 Tage im Oktober*, *Deutschland*, *Deutschland, Ausgerechnet Bananen*, *Wandlitz mit neuem Antlitz*, and *DDR-Ohne Titel*.
- ⁵ It is worth noting that Schönmann's filmic revisiting is not the first time that the decaying 13th-century walls of the women's penitentiary Hoheneck in the village of Stollberg (a precinct of the former Karl-Marx-Stadt) were captured on celluloid. In 1980, four years before Schönmann was to experience the debilitation of forced labor and appallingly squalid cell conditions, DEFA screenwriter Günther Rücker and director Günther Reisch filmed *Die Verlobte*, a historical romance set within the milieu of anti-fascism, at the same site.
- ⁶ Critic Brigitte Pätzold made a similar observation: "Umgekehrtes Rollenspiel: die Verfolgte wird zum Verfolger, sie ist es nun, die die Akten durchforscht, die Fragen stellt, mit ihrem Mikro die gewundenen Ausreden registriert, mit der Kamera die verlegenen Gesichter und Gesten erheischt."
- ⁷ Schach is personally imbricated in the *Protokolle*, not only through his role as editor, but also because he himself was born within the prison infirmary of Hoheneck. His mother was sent there during her fifth month of pregnancy after a failed attempt in 1950 to flee to the West with her Russian fiancé. A few months following childbirth in prison, her son was taken away from her and placed in a foster home elsewhere in the GDR. Included among the protocols are not only that of his mother, but also that of his wife, who also served time in Hoheneck in 1976 prior to their later acquaintance in the FRG.
- ⁸ The *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) was the ruling party in the GDR until Fall 1989.
- ⁹ While the term "feminist" refers to a political stance concerned with the position and welfare of women within societies historically perceived as male-dominated, i.e. patriarchal, the term 'feminine' generally either has an essentialist connotation or implies a gender specific socialization which results in a gendered aesthetic labeled 'feminine.' Helke Sander's comments in an early speech, "Feminism and Film," in 1977 still effectively summate the dilemma of the latter term. She argues that it is problematic to talk about a feminine aesthetic, because mere descriptive features in women's artistic production easily become programmatic and prescriptive: "But just as a progressive social theory has led to a dogmatic aesthetics, that is, the equation of 'social realism' with a thesis about knowledge (about how we experience the forms of knowledge), feminism has also had the tendency to make certain aesthetic categories a measure of the aesthetic experience" (Rentschler 78).
- ¹⁰ "The studio actually wanted to support me because I was a woman, and they needed women for the studio. There were very few female directors. But they didn't want my husband who was also a filmmaker in the studio, because he had the reputation of being a wrong-headed thinker with a very critical perspective. He wrote stories about outsiders, those who did not function in society and did not adapt so unconditionally as was desired. And always at the moment, when I said that I was going to work together with my husband, the projects died" (Fröhlich 21).
- ¹¹ The cinematography and imagery employed in *Verriegelte Zeit* bear striking resemblance to that in Baser's *Abschied vom falschen Paradies* (1988/89), which chronicles a Turkish woman's incarceration in a German prison after she kills her abusive husband in self-defense.
- ¹² See her discussion of Herbert Biberman's film "Salt of the Earth" in the revised edition of her *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (136-42).
- ¹³ "Der Beginn der Entstasifizierung: Sibylle Schönmanns Dokumentarfilm 'Verriegelte Zeit,'" *Wupper Nachrichten*, 11/91.

- ¹⁴ According to Lacan, even inanimate objects possess the gaze insofar as we feel ourselves apprehended by them: "I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not see, not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there. This window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straightaway a gaze" (*The Seminar* 215).
- ¹⁵ Or as Barbara Kunze sums it up in a review: "Die Täter dagegen, die keine gewesen sein wollen, (und die heute immer noch in Positionen arbeiten, in denen sie Verantwortung tragen), werden von niemandem zum Reden gezwungen. Aber die Kamera hält fest, wie sie sich winden, herausreden, verweigern und sich – ohne es zu merken – selbst entlarven" (19).
- ¹⁶ Sibylle Schönemann, about her film: "Wen auch immer ich traf, oder wer auch immer sich vor mir versteckte, meine Spurensuche wurde immer mehr von der Gewißheit beeinflusst, den oder die Täter nicht finden zu können, weil es sie nicht gibt. Begriffen aber habe ich, daß es einmal wieder dieses ewig deutsche Geflecht von 'nur' Ausführenden, Befehlsempfängern, einer höheren 'Notwendigkeit' Folgenden und Ahnungslosen war, in deren Mechanismus ich gefangen war." (Publicity brochure, *Ex Picturis*, Berlin)
- ¹⁷ Hannes John, "In memoriam: politischer Alltagshorror in der Ex-DDR."
- ¹⁸ In this respect I share the sentiments expressed by Rolf-Rüdiger Hamacher, who writes, "Daß der schon auf der Leipziger Dokumentarfilmwoche 1990 mit einer 'Silbernen Taube' ausgezeichnete Film 'Verriegelte Zeit' auch auf der diesjährigen Berlinale Ovationen erhielt und derzeit auf vielen Festivals gefragt ist, liegt nicht so sehr an seinem 'Stasi-Thema,' das schon mehrere Dokumentarfilme aufgegriffen haben, sondern eher an seiner Art, wie er sich diesem nähert. Sibylle Schönemann geht das Wagnis ein, ihre Person physisch wie psychisch in den Film einzugeben, ohne Wenn und Aber tritt sie die Reise in die Vergangenheit an."
- ¹⁹ Michaela Lechner, "Begegnung auf dem Wäscheplatz."
- ²⁰ In a discussion of women's film in West Germany, Helen Fehervary has said: "The relationship between history and so-called subjective processes is not a matter of grasping the truth in history as some objective entity, but in finding the truth of experience. Evidently, this kind of experiential immediacy has to do with women's own history and self-consciousness" (176).
- ²¹ About screenings of her film in the two Germanies, Schönemann recalls: "In the East, the film was shown very little because the entire organization had collapsed. The movie theaters had been bought by large American distributors, and the people in the East didn't quite know how they could organize the films they were interested in now. In the West, the film received a lot of media attention and the eight copies that exist were constantly circulating somewhere" (Fröhlich 23).

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Filmography

Verriegelte Zeit, (BRD) 1990, B/W, 35 mm, 93 min.
Director: Sibylle Schönemann
Script: Sibylle Schönemann
Camera: Thomas Plenert
Cutter: Gudrun Steinbrück
Music: Thomas Kahane
Producers: Bernd Burckhardt, Alfred Hürmer, Alert, DEFA, SFB
German Distributor: Ex picturis, Berlin
U.S. Distributor: Zeitgeist Films, New York
Premiere: November 24, 1990, Leipzig