

3. From Everyday Life to the Crisis Ordinary: Films of Ordinary Life and the Resonance of DEFA

Abstract

This chapter examines Wolf's *Solo Sunny* (1980) and Dresen's *Summer in Berlin* (2005), two films that chart the transformation of ordinary life across the period of neoliberal intensification in eastern Germany. Emphasizing the transition away from—as well as the enduring influence of—DEFA and socialist realism, this chapter also attends to the affective dimensions of the neoliberal turn by focusing on women characters who figure as seismographs of political and cultural re-orientation. This chapter and the next chapter operate in tandem to analyse films that break with conventional forms of representation to signal disaffection with prevailing circumstances. I argue that this disaffection becomes retrospectively legible in the earlier films through the pointed critique of neoliberalism developed by their later intertexts.

Keywords: *Alltagsfilm*, Konrad Wolf, Andreas Dresen, socialist realism, self-optimization, affect

At the outset of the critically acclaimed box-office hit *Sommer vorm Balkon* (Summer on the Balcony, 2005; released in English as *Summer in Berlin*), a woman arrives at a job interview. Visibly nervous, she perches on the edge of her chair and gulps coffee while describing her work experience as a window dresser for a department store chain. Her eager responses to the male interviewer's questions demonstrate her desire to adapt to the demands of the modern workplace as well as her anxiety at being out of step with its requirements. When he asks her how she would approach her job today, she responds with the axiomatic statement, 'I'm a team player', but when pressed she is unable to explain what this means to her in practice. After an awkward silence, an offscreen voice interrupts the interview and the camera pans

around to reveal a teacher with a video camera and a classroom full of students. Only now do we understand that the preceding scene has been a performance, a role-play scenario in the context of a training course for the unemployed, trainees who now proceed to critique the woman's interview skills. A balding man criticizes her incorrect body language, while a young woman wearing a hijab notes that she has failed to convincingly market herself; several others comment on her unpersuasive use of the term 'team player'.

By placing viewers squarely within this documentary-style job interview scene and only subsequently revealing it to be a performative role play, *Sommer vorm Balkon* accentuates the erosion of boundaries between documentary and fictional modes in an era when realism has been co-opted for reality tv. At the same time, the film subtly makes visible both the technologies of the self required by the contemporary economy, and, more broadly, the changing scripts of the present that have left people like the character Katrin (Inka Friedrich) behind. A thirtysomething single mother and Hartz IV welfare recipient, Katrin finds herself among the ranks of the long-term unemployed, existing just at the edge of economic precarity. Like other young, female characters who populate recent cinema, Katrin responds to the insecurity of the present by drinking excessively, in a bid to create the kind of social solidarity that is sorely lacking in other facets of her life. Together with her best friend and neighbour Nike (Nadja Uhl), Katrin seeks and fails to find an identity tied to the local community of their neighbourhood in the gentrifying Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg; the film chronicles the two friends' adjustments to the shifts in daily life effected by neoliberal restructuring, in particular privatization and an increased emphasis on personal responsibility and self-optimization. Employing female characters as sites for imaging the transformations of the present, *Sommer vorm Balkon* develops narrative and formal strategies to help us apprehend otherwise imperceptible gendered aspects of daily life in neoliberalism.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant draws a distinction between the modern trope of *everyday life*—linked to the sensorium of the 20th-century metropolis, where subjects make do amidst the shocks of urbanization and mediation—and the *ordinary life* of neoliberal capitalism, which is characterized by affective adjustments to the systemic crisis that is embedded in the lives of populations increasingly affected by economic collapse, downward mobility, environmental disaster, and new bifurcations of gender, class, and race.¹ Following Berlant, this chapter and the next trace the generic shift

1 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 68–69.

in German cinema from films about everyday life to those depicting 'crisis ordinariness' beginning around 1980.

Alltagsfilme (films about everyday life) constitute a specific historical and aesthetic trajectory within German cinema, especially during the Weimar era and in both DEFA films and the New German Cinema of the postwar period.² Like other films in this tradition, *Sommer vorm Balkon* depicts the ordinary activities of Katrin and Nike at work, during leisure time, pursuing reproductive labour, and in their relationships with friends and lovers, focusing on the quotidian and the ephemeral in order to probe the relationship between the public and private spheres, between professional life and individual desires. However, in contrast to the mimetic representation of everyday life that characterizes the conventional *Alltagsfilm*, *Sommer vorm Balkon* exemplifies a transition, in form and content, away from the traditions of both socialist realism and postwar art cinema. At a point when prevailing forms of cinematic representation in the GDR and the FRG no longer appear adequate to the task, a new heterogenous narrative style develops that employs genre blending, along with a disruptive mode of documentary realism, to convey emergent forms of ordinary life.

In order to trace this transition, I analyse a 'foursome' of films paired across historical, geopolitical, and generic divides. This chapter addresses the transformation of the *Alltagsfilm* in the context of DEFA and its film-making legacies through a reading of Konrad Wolf's *Solo Sunny* (GDR, 1980) and Andreas Dresen's *Sommer vorm Balkon*. In the following chapter, I develop a parallel reading of shifting paradigms for depicting the ordinary in West German feminist cinema and the films it has inspired, focusing on Ulrike Ottinger's *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (Portrait of a Female Drinker; released in English as *Ticket of No Return*, FRG, 1979) and Tatjana Turanskyj's *Eine flexible Frau* (A Flexible Woman; released in English as *The Drifters*, Germany, 2010). Set in Berlin and featuring female protagonists, all four intertextually related films explore crisis ordinariness through narratives of gendered refusal that turn on the excessive consumption of alcohol and

2 While the term *Alltagsfilm* typically denotes a genre specific to the 1970s and the 1980s in the GDR, films emphasizing a close observation and poetic depiction of everyday life, often combining documentary and narrative styles, are common throughout German film history. They occur for example in the genres of the street film and the Berlin film; in certain films of the New Objectivity and proletarian cinema from the Weimar Republic; in the postwar West German *Zeitfilm* (film about the present) and in many films of the New German Cinema. On the GDR incarnation of the *Alltagsfilm*, see Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*; Hake, *German National Cinema*; and Harhausen, *Alltagsfilm in der DDR*.

drugs. In each film, women respond to the crisis of the present by drinking to the point of oblivion, falling into unconsciousness, hospitalization, and even death rather than acceding to normative regimes of self-regulation. The disturbing and discomfiting narratives presented in these films offer no resolution, progress, or catharsis; instead, they 'reveal cracks in the local experience of life that can be mobilized toward alternative imaginaries'.³ Crucial to my analysis is a discussion of the way these alternative imaginaries make neoliberalism visible not least by rejecting a future-oriented model of political consciousness. Exhibiting neither nostalgia for the past nor a futural orientation, these four films nonetheless emphasize paths not taken, thereby suggesting that things could be otherwise and disrupting any sense that the present represents the natural order of things. In this way, they differ from the films discussed in Chapter 1, which exhibit the neoliberal transformation of filmmaking itself, and those discussed in Chapter 2, which affirm neoliberal aesthetic and political developments.

As Sara Ahmed has persuasively argued, the promise of happiness has long functioned as a coercive form of politics that constructs a normative horizon of expectation. We expect that, if we accrue the right elements (e.g. marriage, family, career), we will be happy; at the same time, this promise entails our duty to be happy once we have achieved these markers. As Ahmed suggests, feminism and other revolutionary forms of political consciousness involve 'heightening our awareness of what there is to be unhappy about': 'In refusing to be constrained by happiness, we can open up other ways of being [...]. Affect aliens, those who are alienated by happiness, are creative: not only do we want the wrong things, not only do we embrace possibilities that we are asked to give up, but we can create lifeworlds around those wants.'⁴ Ahmed's work suggests how images of unhappiness and narratives about affect aliens—'troublemakers, wretches, strangers, dissenters, killers of joy'—can help to make visible the flaws of the present while also opening up a political horizon that favours forms of attachment, solidarity, and possibility not constrained by a focus on goals and ends.⁵ Ahmed's vindication of the killjoy resonates with Jack Halberstam's defence of 'the queer art of failure' as an opportunity to harness negative affects in order 'to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life', particularly in the context of heteropatriarchal neoliberal regimes which define success in terms of 'specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth

3 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 68.

4 Ahmed, 'Killing Joy', 592-593.

5 Ahmed, 'Killing Joy', 573.

accumulation'.⁶ For Halberstam, failure (especially as an aesthetic project) offers a detour around these future-oriented definitions in order to imagine other ways of being in the world.

The films under consideration here and in Chapter 4 all feature as their central protagonists affect aliens who flout social norms, eschew the conventional promise of happiness, and exhibit the art of failure along multiple registers. In *Solo Sunny*, the aspiring pop singer Sunny embarks on a quest for artistic expression and individual self-determination that brings her into deliberate and repeated conflict with socialist society. In *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, the main character arrives in West Berlin for a weekend of debauchery and binge-drinking that is designed to result in her own death, engaging in behaviour that proves shocking even in the ostensibly decadent environment of the walled-in city. In *Eine flexible Frau*, the unemployed architect Greta clashes with her friends, her son, and her professional circle, finding herself fundamentally at odds with the demands the neoliberal social order places on the responsabilized individual. Like Katrin in *Sommer vorm Balkon*, all of these protagonists are vocal killjoys who alienate those around them—in the films' diegetic worlds and, by extension, in their audiences as well—by expressing their unhappiness in bursts of violent rage and in episodes of self-harm.

While not always expressly legible as *feminist* killjoys, it is nonetheless significant that these characters are women. As critics have noted, the period around 1980 saw a marked rise in the prevalence of women protagonists in films from both Germanies. In the GDR, a general turn away from mythic narratives featuring (male) socialist heroes and toward the depiction of *Alltag* led to a focus on female characters. As Joshua Feinstein has argued, 'The East German cinema's general turn toward the everyday life of ordinary individuals favoured female experience. The abandonment of the GDR's utopian pretensions placed a premium on the private and more concrete social realms conventionally associated with women, while it also called into question the mythic dimensions of the political imaginary on which modern male identity often depends.'⁷ By featuring women protagonists, DEFA films emphasized 'the discrepancies between the legislated equal rights of women and everyday reality, in particular in the private realm', but they also used women's experiences as a way of evaluating East German society more broadly.⁸ Andrea Rinke explains that, because in Marxist

6 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 32.

7 Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 134.

8 Kersten, 'The Role of Women in GDR Films Since the Early 1970s', 47.

thought gender relations were viewed as a seismograph for social advances, at DEFA, *Frauenfilme* were perceived as providing “snapshots of social conditions” in the GDR, leading to a rise in their prevalence at a moment characterized by social and political change.⁹ While some DEFA films of this period featured heroines within the context of work and professional life, increasingly the cinematic representation of women began to focus on the private sphere, exploring women’s personal lives and desires, and often portraying nonconformist characters with subversive tendencies. As Sabine Hake suggests, at DEFA, ‘Film-makers [...] turned to rebellious women characters to test the limits of the utopian promise of happiness against oppressive social conventions and to explore the corrosive effect of normative definitions of gender and sexuality on personal and professional relationships.’¹⁰ As DEFA films probed the possibilities for individual and collective happiness, they evidenced an increasing preoccupation with emotion and affect in the 1980s.¹¹ The unhappy women characters in these films became sites for expressing political resignation and cultural reorientation.

Since only a very few women directors were ever able to direct feature films in the GDR, most DEFA films featuring women protagonists were directed by men. By contrast, as we shall see in Chapter 4, the prevalence of women characters in West German films of the late 1970s and 1980s derived in large part from the rise of the feminist film movement, with its support of women directors and its influence on the aesthetic and thematic focus of the New German Cinema. In both Germanies, the return of the *Frauenfilm* developed out of the context of feminist movements and their attention to women’s social and political status in patriarchal cultures; in West Germany in particular, the success of the feminist film movement in achieving an unprecedented degree of women’s participation in cinematic self-representation within a male-dominated film culture cannot be underestimated.¹²

At the same time, the centrality of women protagonists in East and West German cinema around 1980 also correlates to the rise of neoliberalism, with

9 Rinke, ‘From Models to Misfits’, 185.

10 Hake, *German National Cinema*, 135.

11 Schütz observes that the turn to emotion and affect in DEFA films of the 1980s opened up new thematic emphases, including sickness, guilt, and the ‘reversal of social conditions against society’s achievers’. Schütz, ‘Zur Erkundung individueller Glücksansprüche in DEFA-Spielfilmen der achtziger Jahre’, 155–156.

12 This success was soon foreclosed upon, however, when many of the progressive film policies favoring gender parity were dismantled in the 1980s.

its distinctly gendered repertoire and asymmetrical interpellation of women as ideal subjects.¹³ Female characters in women's films from the GDR and the FRG reflect the pervasive socioeconomic changes of the period. More significantly, they begin to figure the loss of hope in the utopian promise of the future offered by 20th-century political formations, including socialism, capitalism, and, indeed, feminism.¹⁴ As seismographs of political and cultural re-orientation, women characters function in East and West German films from this period as sites for imaging the present. As we will see, *Solo Sunny* and *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* demonstrate a break with conventional forms of representation and an emphasis on gendered modes of refusal that suggest disaffection with the prevailing circumstances, a disaffection that is retrospectively legible within the larger context of the neoliberal turn that their later intertexts, *Sommer vorm Balkon* and *Eine flexible Frau*, make patently visible.

After Alltag: Individualism and Refusal in the Transitional DEFA Film *Solo Sunny*

A collaboration of the writer-director team Wolfgang Kohlhaase and Konrad Wolf, *Solo Sunny* 'opened the 1980s cinematically' in both literal and symbolic ways.¹⁵ Debuting at the Kino International in East Berlin on January 17, 1980, the film went on to premiere in February of that year at the International Film Festival in West Berlin, where it won the Silver Bear. On both sides of the Wall, *Solo Sunny* met with an enthusiastic popular and critical reception, and hundreds of thousands of viewers saw the film within just a few weeks of its release.¹⁶ The film's popularity undoubtedly derived from its surprising departure from a range of formal and thematic conventions that held sway at DEFA. In this sense it is emblematic of the sea change in filmmaking, and in GDR culture and society more broadly, that took shape at the outset of the decade (and which is also indexed by Iris Gusner's *Alle meine Mädchen*, as discussed in Chapter 1).

13 See Gill, *Gender and the Media*; Gill and Scharff, eds., *New Femininities*.

14 For an incisive analysis of how the end of the Cold War signaled the demise of mass utopia on both sides of the historical East-West divide, see Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.

15 Streckfuß and Bartling, 'Solo Sunny', 299.

16 According to Meurer, *Solo Sunny* sold over a million tickets in the GDR during its first year of release. On the film's popularity, see Meurer, *Cinema and National Identity in a Divided Germany*, 291; Claus, 'DEFA – State, Studio, Style, Identity', 145.

Solo Sunny narrates the story of the nonconformist pop singer Sunny (Renate Krößner), who 'goes solo' in her personal as well as in her professional life. Focusing on Sunny's failed attempt to become a star, a goal that appears both desirable and taboo in the context of the late GDR, the film allegorizes both the dilemmas of artistic production (including popular filmmaking at DEFA) and the paradoxes of East German society more broadly in a period characterized by the bankruptcy of the managed public sphere and a turn inward to private life. As Larson Powell has argued, Sunny's 'bid for stardom stands in for the melodrama of GDR citizenship itself, with its continually frustrated aspirations, its paradox of wanting more freedom, but also not so much as to undermine equality or solidarity'.¹⁷ Blurring genres and combining aspects of tragedy and comedy, the film employs documentary realism to capture the routines of ordinary life in the GDR's ossified cultural scene and especially in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg.

In contrast to predominant forms of socialist realism, which expressed optimism about socialism's capacity to improve human life and encouraged the development of the socialist personality, *Solo Sunny* emphasizes the quest for individual freedom and personal happiness outside of the collective, revealing disillusionment with real-existing socialism. This disillusionment is conveyed not least by the way the film dwells on the banal and mundane qualities of quotidian life, underscored by its setting in the *Hinterhöfe* or back courtyards of old apartment buildings. We see shots of crumbling facades, rows of trashcans, and staring neighbours, evidence of the claustrophobia and internalized surveillance of life in East Berlin and of the dilapidated and decaying social infrastructure of the GDR. Shots of trains speeding along and airplanes flying overhead provide constant reminders of the lack of mobility—both literal and figurative—available to the film's characters and, by extension, to East Germans in general.

The formal language of *Solo Sunny* is characterized by an emphasis on ambient sound, static shots, tight framing, abrupt smash cuts, and the slow unfolding of time, qualities that link the film to developments in international art cinema in the 1970s and 1980s¹⁸ and that anticipate and have proved influential for subsequent countercinematic filmmakers including Andreas Dresen, Tatjana Turanskyj, and directors associated with the

17 Powell, 'The Desire to be Desired? *Solo Sunny* as Socialist Women's Film', 153.

18 Powell compares *Solo Sunny* to the late films of Fassbinder, arguing that Wolf and Fassbinder represent the 'swan song of European art cinema' before the rise of commercially-driven consensus cinema in Germany. He also emphasizes the film's indebtedness to New Hollywood films like Alan J. Pakula's *Klute* (1971).

Berlin School.¹⁹ At the same time, the film presents its protagonist Sunny as an almost Hollywood-style figure of identification, a presentation that resonated strongly with young, female viewers.²⁰

A number of factors contributed to the unique intervention into dominant modes of realism posed by *Solo Sunny*.²¹ Wolfgang Kohlhaase's script for the film drew on the real biography of Sanije Torka, a singer and social outsider who provided the model for Sunny's uncompromising personality and her refusal to accede to social norms. Kohlhaase's use of real events from Torka's life meshed with his noted mastery of Berlin dialect and calculated use of locations to endow the screenplay with a high degree of authenticity. Crucial also was Wolf's choice to work for the first time with cinematographer Eberhard Geick, a young documentary filmmaker, whose knowledge of Prenzlauer Berg and whose eye for tableaux of ordinary life contributed to the visual style of *Solo Sunny*. While its grounding in authentic sites and events and its use of documentary realism is significant for the critical perspective on socialism presented by *Solo Sunny*, these elements also provide a crucial backdrop for the film's metadiscursive commentary on the role and function of art and the image of the artist in the late GDR.

The film's first shot depicts the proscenium arch of a theatre stage, signalling its attention to performance; in the opening sequence that follows, we witness, along with the provincial audience, emcee Benno Böhne (Harald Warmbrunn) introducing the cast of the variety show that Sunny performs with. His opening routine, punctuated by bad jokes and tired clichés, gives way to a montage of mediocre performances, demonstrating how Sunny's aspirations to the glamorous life of a pop star contrast with the banal reality of her current gig touring the provinces. With its focus on the sheer ordinariness of the musicians' lives on tour and the monotonous and degrading quality of Sunny's work in particular, *Solo Sunny* demonstrates that 'the work of the artist is neither the means for developing the socialist personality nor the most important human activity, but rather consists of routine, stasis, and frustration'.²² Via the figure of Sunny, the film questions the possibility of developing an individual personality in contemporary society, whether through personal relationships, through work, or through art.

19 See for example the interviews collected by Schenk, 'Aus der Mitte des Lebens.'

20 Claus notes that 'Young East Germans reacted with enthusiasm and extensively modeled themselves on Sunny's appearance and lifestyle.' Claus, 'DEFA – State, Studio, Style, Identity', 145.

21 See Heiduschke, *East German Cinema*, 119.

22 Streckfuß and Bartling, 'Solo Sunny', 303.

Sunny's frustration as an artist mounts in the course of the film as drunk and disinterested audiences pay little attention to her singing and her status in the variety show is questioned. From the outset, *Solo Sunny* lampoons the variety show and especially Bohne, who repeats the same bad jokes at every stop on the tour. However, the film's satirical tone is punctured by repeated moments of violence, both physical and discursive, as Sunny is subjected to the everyday sexism of her bandmates and colleagues. Uta Streckfuß and Thomas Bartling read this blurring of comic and tragic elements as one avenue through which Wolf addressed his 'conviction of a new quality of artistic conflict in socialist society'; this mix is thus crucial to the aesthetic and political work of *Solo Sunny* as a transitional film that addresses the loss of hope in the possibility of transforming the GDR and the demise of socialism's mass utopia more broadly.²³

Like other DEFA films of the period, *Solo Sunny* focuses on the dilemmas of a female protagonist as representative of the broader social dilemmas of the GDR; as Rainer Schütz has argued, *Solo Sunny* is part of a larger movement of 1980s DEFA films in which women serve as 'Träger des Glücksanspruchs', test cases for the right to happiness.²⁴ Not only does Sunny embody the quest for individual freedom and personal happiness within the context of the collective, but, as a woman, she struggles for emancipation within the ossified patriarchal structures and patent sexism that characterize her daily life. This thematic focus is set up during the film's credit sequence, which is introduced via a sound bridge that links Sunny's performance with the variety show to her ordinary routines at home. After the introduction of the show, the credits appear over a static shot of Sunny's apartment building; through the window of her apartment, we see her getting in and out of the shower, eating an apple, and looking out the window. From below, Sunny's busybody neighbour Frau Pfeiffer (Ursula Braun) yells at her to clean out her cupboard so that pigeons will stop roosting on her windowsill, an incitement to put her house in order. A cut to the inside of the apartment shows Sunny putting on her bathrobe and telling the man in her bed, 'It's without breakfast'. When he protests, clearly assuming that she will perform the traditional female role by serving him food, she retorts, 'It's without discussion as well'. This morning-after scene demonstrates Sunny's volition as a woman who pursues her own desires without compromise, but her rejection of normative gender regimes in professional and personal

23 Streckfuß and Bartling, 'Solo Sunny', 311.

24 Schütz, 'Zur Erkundung individueller Glücksansprüche in DEFA-Spielfilmen der achtziger Jahre', 150.

relationships is tested again and again in the course of the film. As Sebastian Heiduschke argues, its emphasis on everyday sexism represents the most radical critique of ordinary life articulated by *Solo Sunny*, since it challenges the dominant narrative that socialist society guaranteed gender equity.²⁵ Like the other films under consideration in this and the next chapter, *Solo Sunny* makes visible through its focus on ordinary life the interpellation of women into choiceless systems in which they struggle to achieve agency. With its dual emphasis on the decline of art's emancipatory function and everyday sexism, the film portrays how Sunny is stymied as an artist and as a woman. Unable to find fulfilment in singing or in personal relationships, Sunny seeks agency instead via forms of refusal.

For instance, having sent away her lover without breakfast, Sunny heads to the police station, where she has been ordered to respond to complaints placed by her neighbours about her lifestyle: 'Loud music, relationships with men, pigeons in the cupboard.' Sunny responds to this litany, which exposes the petit-bourgeois and gender-normative expectations of the social mainstream, by hanging a petition in the entranceway of the building and loudly asking her neighbours to sign it: 'I hereby proclaim that I do not feel assaulted by Fräulein Ingrid Sommer's lifestyle!' Climbing up to her apartment wearing her trademark high heels, Sunny purposefully stomps on the hand of Frau Pfeiffer, who is washing the stairs, thereby deliberately injuring her. The film is punctuated by similar outbursts, gestures of refusal through which Sunny aims to assert herself in the face of stasis. When one of her lovers, the philosopher and erstwhile saxophonist Ralph (Alexander Lang), betrays her trust by sleeping with another woman, Sunny takes a large knife into bed with him. Horrified to discover the knife in the bed, Ralph questions Sunny about it, and she calmly admits that she wanted to kill him but fell asleep before she had the chance to do so. This emblematic episode combines the tragic and the comic since Ralph, who is given to pretentious lectures drawn from his philosophical treatises about death, is reduced to a shaking mess by this scrape with real violence. Calculated to beat him at his own game, Sunny's use of the knife is emblematic of her stance as a killjoy; it is her way of disturbing the promise of happiness.

Like Sara Ahmed's 'affect aliens', Sunny generates scenes of conflict and violence rather than 'settling for' happiness. As Ahmed writes, 'The feminist killjoy spoils the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.'²⁶ Indeed, Sunny is

25 Heiduschke, *East German Cinema*, 116.

26 Ahmed, 'Killing Joy', 581.

repeatedly designated as a spoilsport throughout the film, not only by Ralph. When she refuses the sexual advances of her bandmate Norbert (Klaus Brasch), the whole band accuses her of ruining their tour. Norbert expects that Sunny will accept him because he is attractive and a relationship between bandmates would be 'practical', an expectation that the rest of the band seems to share. Later, Norbert's anger at Sunny's refusal leads him to sexually assault her, a violent act for which Sunny is again held responsible, and which ultimately leads to her dismissal from the band. Sunny also rejects the repeated advances of the taxi driver Harry (Dieter Montag), whose refrain to Sunny, 'You sure know how to spoil things for a guy', explicitly names her as a killjoy.

Sunny prefers to go solo—to pursue her own desires rather than conform to the expectations and demands of others in romantic or professional relationships. Indeed, her repeated rejection of men throughout the film amounts to a renunciation of heterosexual desire as a channel for female self-realization. Sunny's rejection of Norbert, Harry, and Ralph bears a political dimension not only in its refusal of the patriarchal, heteronormative order in general, but also in regard to the specific context of the GDR. As Streckfuß and Bartling suggest, the film 'shows through its various characters different life paths in real-existing socialism and in this way narrates the general search for personal fulfilment under the conditions of stagnation and mediocrity'.²⁷ Sunny's rejection of Norbert and ultimate departure from the variety show demonstrates her refusal to make artistic compromises. By rejecting Harry, an entrepreneur who owns his own taxi and earns 'plenty for two', Sunny turns down the offer of financial stability and a heteronormative partnership in favour of retaining her own personal independence. Sunny initially chooses Ralph: as a philosopher, he appears to be an independent thinker, and his nonconformist lifestyle suggests his individuality. However, his fixation on death indicates that Ralph's approach is also a dead end, while his free-spiritedness does not extend much farther than sleeping around. Sunny rejects the paths represented by all of these characters, as well as that of her friend Christine (Heide Kipp), a textile worker whose job security allows her to afford an apartment in a brand-new building, but whose work does not lead to fulfilment or self-actualization.

Instead, Sunny exemplifies the new type of female protagonist identified by Rinke in DEFA films of the early 1980s: 'Their lifestyles appear subversive because they refuse to go along with the socialist code of conduct: they do not seek approval, help or advice from the collective at work; they show no "team spirit" and having a successful career is not one of their priorities.

27 Streckfuß and Bartling, 'Solo Sunny', 301.

Instead they seek personal fulfilment and social recognition in alternative subcultures such as bars and discos or else in total solitude.²⁸ The different life paths or 'Lebensentwürfe' represented by the various characters in *Solo Sunny* reflect the *Nischengesellschaft* (niche society) that characterized the late GDR, a pervasive withdrawal from public life into private 'niches'.²⁹

However, while some critics have viewed *Solo Sunny* as a plea for the niche society, the film in fact demonstrates that Sunny's dilemma is precisely the lack of social solidarity that the niche society reflects, and the impossibility of self-actualization in the context of total solitude and isolation. This is especially clear in a series of sequences foregrounding Sunny's contemplative gaze at herself. At several key moments in the film, we see her reflected in triplicate, looking intently at her own image in a mirror. The first of these sequences occurs early on in the film, shortly after Sunny steps on Frau Pfeiffer's hand. The scene begins with a cut to the interior of Sunny's apartment, where a tape recorder sitting on her vanity table plays the song Sunny plans to perform solo. A tightly framed long take of her hands and torso reflected in the vanity table's tripartite mirror is followed by a slow pan up to Sunny's face, also reflected in triplicate. Gazing steadfastly at her own image, Sunny slowly unwraps a candy and places it in her mouth as if she were watching a movie. The slow pacing of this sequence—the camera holds the shot of Sunny gazing at her own image for a full minute before panning up to a glamour shot of her that is tacked to the wall—emphasizes both her quest for self-optimization (stardom) and her social isolation. This emphasis is reiterated in a later sequence, when we once again see Sunny sitting at a vanity table gazing into a three-part mirror, this time applying make-up back stage before a show. Fed up with the harassment of her colleagues, Sunny has entered a rocky phase with the band, having recently left the stage rather than endure the taunting of the emcee. Now, the bandleader Hubert enters the room and tells Sunny, 'You paint your face like a whore'. The camera focuses on Sunny's tripartite reflection, a split image of her face and upper torso, as she tells him off.

These mirror sequences in *Solo Sunny* call attention to the fragmentation of the self she experiences; by emphasizing her own gaze in the mirror, they foreground Sunny's individualism and the objectification of her body, both qualities of the star (see Illustration 7). Conventional images of stardom common to the Hollywood woman's film and the celebrity biopic, these citational shots represent the production of Sunny's star persona through self-stylization and media technologies (tape recorder and glamour shots),

28 Rinke, 'From Models to Misfits', 195.

29 See Gaus, *Wo Deutschland liegt*.



7. The quest for self-optimization and the fragmentation of the subject: Sunny (Renate Krößner) gazes at her mirror image in Konrad Wolf's *Solo Sunny* (1980).



8. Labourious technologies of the self: Nike (Nadja Uhl) applies lipstick in the bathroom mirror in Andreas Dresen's *Sommer vorm Balkon* (*Summer in Berlin*, 2005).

but they also attest to the paradoxical sense in which stardom, as the ostensible path to individuality for Sunny, is predicated on her objectification and commodification within patriarchal society.³⁰

30 On *Solo Sunny*'s use of the generic iconography of the women's film, see Powell, 'The Desire to be Desired?'.

It is her recognition of this paradox that apparently leads to Sunny's suicide attempt after the failure of her solo performance. In the visual and narrative climax of the film, Sunny performs at a Berlin bar, dressed in a glamorous outfit and singing the song Ralph has helped her to write. A far cry from the variety show with its institutional-representative components, Sunny's solo performance is a carefully curated instance of self-styling, with the costume, make-up and song all tailored to create her star persona. Nonetheless, her performance meets with the same distracted reception that she has repeatedly encountered on tour, and afterwards she is subjected to another instance of sexist behaviour when a man accosts her at the bar. Enraged, Sunny removes his glasses from his face, symbolically emasculating him by breaking them in half. But her rage turns inward in the ensuing scene, when she drinks to excess and then shows up at her friend Christine's apartment and asks for a sleeping pill, telling Christine: 'I had a solo.' Late for work, Christine leaves Sunny with a box of medicine. Sunny takes some pills, and we see her looking out the balcony doors of Christine's newly built apartment onto the vast construction site below.

This equivocal shot—both a symbol of the GDR's ongoing process of *Aufbau* and a desolate wasteland—figures the ambiguity of Sunny's suicide attempt, which *Solo Sunny* represents obliquely. A hard cut takes us from the construction site to the inside of a hospital where Sunny lies on a stretcher having her stomach pumped by a team of women doctors. When a query about her profession is answered—'Schlagersängerin' (pop singer)—they respond with eye rolls and knowing glances. Portrayed ambivalently as a result of Sunny's desperation, as a sign of her refusal, and as a cliché of her profession, the suicide attempt ultimately becomes the pivotal moment in Sunny's quest for individualism. At the mental health clinic where she is treated, a psychiatrist asks Sunny the key question staged by the film, 'How do you define success?' Clearly, this question pertains not only to Sunny's existential dilemma, but also more broadly to the social and political context of the GDR around 1980. Sunny equivocates at first, mentioning her general lack of success as a singer, before adding, 'I usually have my greatest success when I tell someone my opinion...I think I need to know that someone wants me.' Sunny's response identifies the isolation at the root of her alienation, underscoring the necessity of a sociopolitical horizon that can foster both nonconformity and social solidarity.

In the aftermath of her suicide attempt, Sunny tries out several paths forward, all of which culminate once more in failure. Her return to factory work at the textile plant reveals that Sunny will not find success through

labour. Instead, she embarks on a renewed attempt to form a relationship with the taxi driver Harry. Throughout the film, Sunny has refused Harry, telling him at one point that he must be dense to keep pursuing her. As Harry responds, 'With the money I make, there's no way I could be dumb'—as a self-styled entrepreneur, Harry exemplifies the rationale of emergent neoliberalism, where financial success is the only thing that counts. Nonetheless, heteronormative sexuality and economic power also fail to facilitate Sunny's self-actualization, nor does one last attempt at solo performance.

In the penultimate episode of *Solo Sunny*, Sunny narrates a dream she has had that concisely enunciates the film's negation of futurity. In the dream, someone enters Sunny's apartment and says, 'Sunny lived here. Here are traces of Sunny', and Sunny responds 'I'm already far away, I would like to come back, but I can't.' As Sunny cries desperately, the camera pans over the rooftops of Berlin, indicating the loss of hope in the present day about the possibility of a transformed future in the GDR.

Like the many establishing shots of buildings and courtyards in Prenzlauer Berg that recur throughout *Solo Sunny*, this shot of the rooftops places Sunny's story firmly within the quotidian, everyday space of the city, emphasizing the ordinariness of her dilemma within the context of East German life. These documentary-style shots of East Berlin city scenes, with their narrow vistas and confining architecture, punctuate the film in order to emphasize the entrapment of individuals whose experience of the GDR reflects both a lack of personal freedom and the failure of managed forms of collective social life. At times, documentary realism in *Solo Sunny* is employed in a montage-like manner to register the paradoxical fact that the seismic aspirations of socialism's mass utopia fail to exert tangible effects on the ordinary lives of citizens, even as the public and private spheres remain inextricably intertwined in the GDR.

For instance, in a short sequence midway through the film, Sunny arrives at Ralph's apartment bearing bags of groceries and a large melon. As Ralph answers the door, a quick cut away to the view from his kitchen window reveals a building collapsing in the background, one of many war-damaged, obsolete Berlin apartment houses that the regime was still razing through controlled demolitions in the late 1970s. A cut back to the internal space of Ralph's apartment registers the impact of the explosion through a close-up of Sunny's melon shaking on the kitchen table, before we glimpse in reverse shot a view of the dust clouds triggered by the blast. This sequence demonstrates the material effects of GDR architectural policy by juxtaposing a building explosion with the everyday objects in Ralph's kitchen; notably, however, we see neither Sunny nor Ralph respond to the detonation. As Simon Ward puts

it, the sequence is composed 'to imply that such demolition is now simply part of the everyday, rather than the visceral interruption that it is in *Paul und Paula*', the 1973 Heiner Carow film which had also featured footage of an East Berlin building demolition.³¹ As Ward suggests, by 1980, exploding buildings had become just another banal fact of ordinary life under state socialism, no longer warranting an affective or sensorial reaction let alone suggesting hope for a revitalized cityscape, a transition that *Solo Sunny* makes visible through its incorporation of documentary realism.

Despite its remarkable indexing of the loss of hope in a transformed GDR, evidenced not least by such documentary sequences, the film nonetheless ends on an upbeat note, with Sunny auditioning to be the singer for a new band. We see her walking alone through the snowy streets, dressed in black leather, a fox fur stole, and her trademark high heels. Arriving in the industrial warehouse in Prenzlauer Berg where the band is practicing, Sunny tells the group of men in no uncertain terms, 'I sleep with someone when it's fun for me. I don't mince words. I'm the one who the Tornadoes kicked out. My name is Sunny.' An extreme close-up of Sunny's face, held in a long take, shows her breaking into a smile, suggesting a guardedly optimistic ending to her quest for self-realization, albeit one that is lodged firmly outside the official venues of the GDR public. In Halberstam's sense, Sunny's repeated failures in fact lead to an ending that suggests 'more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world'.³² With its twin emphasis on Sunny's self-determination and her pursuit of shared artistic and social aims in the underground rock scene, this ending suggests a reading of *Solo Sunny* as an archive of the past—at the dawn of the neoliberal age—that opens onto different possibilities: it is a film that depicts the end of socialism while insisting on the necessity of individual sovereignty and collective solidarity, political and social equality.

This open ending, and the overall ambivalent and contradictory character of *Solo Sunny*, resonates with broader tendencies in German cinema on both sides of the Wall at a moment that Walter Uka has termed a 'Zwischenzeit' (interim time), characterized by 'the incursion of the artistic and aesthetic and the simultaneous disappearance of society, politics, and ideology critique in the films of the eighties'.³³ This resonance helps to account for the remarkable success of *Solo Sunny* not only in the GDR, but also in the Federal

31 Ward, 'Obsolescence and the Cityscape of the Former GDR', 386.

32 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

33 Uka's account focuses exclusively on West German film, but many facets of his description pertain equally to the East German case. Uka, 'Der deutsche Film "schiebt den Blues"', 105-113.

Republic, where the film 'had the biggest launch of an East German film ever'.³⁴ The popularity of *Solo Sunny* helped to usher in a new era of interest in DEFA films in the Federal Republic. Throughout the 1980s, DEFA films played regularly at the Berlin Film Festival³⁵ and they were also purchased by West German television, where they aired successfully.³⁶ In terms of its formal-aesthetic and narrative concerns, and on the level of production and distribution, *Solo Sunny* signalled the transitions to come in German cinema and society.

Into the Crisis Ordinary: Refusing Responsibilization in the Post-Wende Comedy *Sommer vorm Balkon*

Director Andreas Dresen's biggest box office success to date, the 2005 comedy *Sommer vorm Balkon* forges a deliberate and explicit intertextual relationship with *Solo Sunny*.³⁷ *Sommer vorm Balkon* follows the lives of two thirtysomething women living around Helmholtzplatz in Prenzlauer Berg early in the new millennium, combining documentary realism with elements of tragedy and comedy to depict ordinary life amidst the crises arising from economic precarity, the breakdown of traditional family structures, and gentrification. Both *Solo Sunny* and *Sommer vorm Balkon* were written by the noted screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase, whose work helps us to contemplate the continuities and transitions that underpin these two films' attempts to make visible aspects of the historical present.

Kohlhaase has observed that 'Everyday life is preserved in films and this is what gives the medium a different kind of significance'.³⁸ Kohlhaase's observation resonates with Berlant's suggestion that 'Cinema and other recording forms not only archive what is being lost but track what happens in the time that we inhabit before new forms make it possible to relocate within conventions the fantasy of sovereign life unfolding from actions'.³⁹ In her discussion of the cultures of neoliberalism, Berlant emphasizes the emergence of new generic and aesthetic forms that 'manifest the unbinding of subjects from their economic and intimate optimism', including the

34 Claus, 'DEFA – State, Studio, Style, Identity', 145.

35 Haase, *Zwischen uns die Mauer*.

36 Kohlhaase, 'DEFA: A Personal View', 128; Wedel et al., eds., *DEFA international*.

37 *Sommer vorm Balkon* sold close to a million tickets and finished in the top ten of German films in 2006.

38 Kohlhaase, 'DEFA: A Personal View', 117.

39 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 7.

situation tragedy and the cinema of precarity.⁴⁰ Exhibiting qualities of both emergent forms, *Sommer vorm Balkon* tracks this unbinding in several noteworthy ways: via scenes (like the one discussed at the start of this chapter) that call attention to the performative nature of contemporary subjectivity; and through its intertextual relationship with *Solo Sunny*, which highlights the connections and disruptions between life in Prenzlauer Berg during GDR times and after unification.

Sommer vorm Balkon addresses the post-unification context by focusing on not one but two female protagonists: Nike, who grew up in East Berlin, and Katrin, who moved there from the western German city of Freiburg after her divorce. While the best friends Nike and Katrin thus figure the merging of East and West after the *Wende*, they also trouble conventional representations of this dynamic, since it is the western German Katrin who experiences insecurity and crisis most directly. An unemployed single mother, Katrin spends her days fulfilling the obligations of a Hartz IV welfare recipient: attending unsuccessful job interviews to meet a quota, completing a coaching programme, and doing menial labour as a temporary employee. Meanwhile, she strives to conform to normative role expectations while mothering her pre-adolescent son and pursuing adult social interactions through friendship and dating. In both her search for gainful employment and her quest for a viable domestic life, Katrin fails miserably to perform properly. Unable to exhibit confident modes of self-presentation or self-regulation, she also chafes at the demand to take personal responsibility for problems that arise from situations of social risk (divorce, unemployment) beyond her control. If *Solo Sunny* ends with cautious optimism in its depiction of Sunny's quest for self-determination, thereby endorsing the possibility of sovereignty, in *Sommer vorm Balkon* self-determination no longer appears on the horizon of possibility for the film's protagonists, whose prospects are shaped instead by forms of self-optimization, identity performance, and responsabilization demanded by neoliberal governmentalities.

Ostensibly occupying a more stable position as a childless, employed woman, Katrin's friend Nike indexes the precarity of the present along different lines. Nike works as a home care aide for the elderly, a job that she excels at and also appears to enjoy, but one that epitomizes the flexibilization of labour. Although she earns so little that her wages hardly equal Katrin's welfare payments, Nike is subjected to a tightly managed schedule that has her biking madly from one apartment building to the next and racing through the routines of feeding and bathing her clients. When she takes the time to

40 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 7.

read aloud to these senior citizens or listen to their reminiscences, she is castigated by the boss of the private firm that contracts her employment, who tells her in no uncertain terms that these 'personal' activities must take place off the clock. For Nike, neoliberal responsabilization emerges as a demand to quantify all aspects of her work life, excising apparently unquantifiable human interactions from her day in ways that aim to turn her into an automaton.

In her personal life, too, Nike searches for human connections that elude her. An orphan who spent her childhood in a GDR children's home, Nike occupies a carefully curated domestic space and calibrates her days according to a domestic routine featuring pop songs and a well-laid breakfast table. Like Sunny in *Solo Sunny*, the character of Nike is modelled on GDR singer and social outsider Sanije Torka, whose uncompromising attitude and rejection of social norms inspired Kohlhaase's depiction of female protagonists in both films.

Lacking familial relationships, Nike's closest personal relationship is her friendship with Katrin. Early in the film, after drinking on the balcony, the two women lie in bed together, in a scene that expresses the erotic potential of their bond. However, after stroking and kissing Katrin, Nike gently pushes her away, halting Katrin's advances. Subsequently, the problem of desire between the two women is sublimated into their conflict over a man, when Nike begins an affair with the macho truck driver Ronald, in whom Katrin has also expressed interest. As David Lode describes him, 'Ronald is absolutely the projection screen of female longing (sunglasses, open shirt, tattoos) and is established from the outset as a clichéd but above all comic figure',⁴¹ and Nike's desire for the masculine ideal he represents, as opposed to the actual person of Ronald, is revealed by the fact that she consistently flubs his name (she keeps calling him Roland). Nike invites Ronald into her space and includes him in her routine, appearing to embrace conventional gender roles by preparing his meals and servicing his needs. While she is at first satisfied by his companionship and sexual performance, however, Nike soon begins to rebuff his chauvinist behaviour. Apparently attracted to him precisely because of his macho self-presentation, Nike ultimately rejects Ronald for living up to his looks, asking him: 'Do you think that just because it's working out sexually you can act like an ass?'

The depiction of Nike's relationships in *Sommer vorm Balkon* demonstrates the way that both traditional and flexible gender roles coexist in neoliberalizing societies, or what Volker Woltersdorff has described as 'precarious sexualities'. As Woltersdorff argues, the flexibilization of gender paired with the ongoing insitutionalization of the binary sex-gender system has led to

41 Lode, *Abenteuer Wirklichkeit*, 182.

a condition of insecurity in which 'individuals find themselves exposed to contradictory social role requirements. Quite often, different normative ideas compete with one another'.⁴² Nike renounces the same-sex eroticism of her relationship with Katrin, instead embracing heterosexual desire. However, she experiences difficulties reconciling her heterosexuality with the normative gender roles it appears to entail. Finally, learning that Ronald has three children by three different mothers, she locks him out of her apartment, trapping him on her balcony where he is forced to spend a cold, dark night, exiled from her domestic space but unable to escape from it entirely.

The eponymous balcony in *Sommer vorm Balkon* is a liminal space, floating above the city streets, neither fully public nor fully private. The film's narrative is framed by episodes on this balcony, where Katrin and Nike meet up regularly to escape the social and economic pressures that shape their lives by drinking, talking, and flirting with the pharmacist who works nights below. As Mila Ganeva suggests, the liminal space of the balcony figures a 'psychological state of in-betweenness' for the two protagonists: 'as the yearnings and hopes of the two remain unfulfilled, the balcony becomes the spatial equivalent of the uncertain present, suspended between past and future'.⁴³ The spatial symbol of insecurity in a film that maps the crisis ordinary through its authentic depiction of city streets and neighbourhood locales, the balcony represents a space of conviviality, but one that makes visible the precarity of social solidarity and the promise of happiness today.

For what begins as a ritual of escape from the crises of ordinary life soon transforms into a more deliberate form of refusal for Katrin, who begins drinking to excess not only during her nights with Nike on the balcony but also at home alone, at the odd jobs she works, and, in the film's climactic scene, during a night out at the disco that culminates in a sexual assault witnessed by Katrin's son. Ashamed and livid, Katrin drinks the large part of a bottle of vodka, and is ultimately admitted to the hospital with alcohol poisoning. For Katrin, whose overdose is ambiguously represented, like Sunny's, as a possible suicide attempt, it is the experience of rape that pushes her over the edge and that ultimately makes her situation of precarity visible as crisis.

Nearly identical in framing to the stomach pumping scene in *Solo Sunny*⁴⁴, the clinic sequence in *Sommer vorm Balkon* deliberately cites Wolf

42 Woltersdorff, 'Paradoxes of Precarious Sexualities', 173.

43 Ganeva, 'Encounters on a Street Corner', 6.

44 A similar stomach pumping scene is also featured at the outset of Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* (1989), the GDR's first film about homosexuality, in which a gay character attempts suicide by overdose (see Chapter 5). The intertextual connections with *Coming Out* add a further

and Kohlhaase's earlier film in order to highlight the continuities—namely the asymmetrical gender relations, everyday sexism, misogyny, and sexual violence—that shape the lives of Sunny, Nike, and Katrin, even amidst the radical transition, in Dresen's words, 'from social welfare state to individual state; from a society of care to a society in which everyone is left to their own devices'.⁴⁵ Shot during the night shift at an actual rehab centre at St. Joseph's Hospital in Berlin-Weißensee and using lay actors—members of the clinic staff—Katrin's hospitalization is one of several scenes in *Sommer vorm Balkon* that combine elements of documentary and narrative filmmaking in a move to unsettle both filmic realism and our naturalized perception of the present. The scene includes dialogue improvised by actual doctors and nurses and features a direct, immediate style of cinematography. As Katrin lies on a cot in a stupor, a doctor tries to establish a direct connection with her, asking her to open her eyes and focus on her finger. While the doctor physically examines Katrin, a nurse has her blow into a Breathalyzer and determines that her blood alcohol level is 2.5 per mill (0.25 percent). Katrin, whom we see framed in close-up, groans and grimaces at the bright lights of the clinic and the insistent voices of the medical staff, as the camera pans quickly across her body. This camera style continues in a subsequent scene featuring the real-life clinic director at St. Joseph's Hospital, who discusses liver function, alcohol withdrawal, and addiction with Katrin, drawing on her own work experience to create an authentic dialogue. In this improvised scene, Katrin expresses rage, denial, and desperation, threatens suicide, and ultimately breaks down in tears as the camera hovers close to her face. Filmed in one take, the scene conveys a sense of authenticity through its tight framing and rapid pans between characters.

Documentary-style cinematography and the use of improvisation by lay actors employing genuine professional vocabulary are integral to the representation of ordinary life throughout *Sommer vorm Balkon*. In the hospital scene, actual doctors and nurses discuss medical procedures, drawing on their own work experience to create a sense of immediacy. In the opening sequence of the film, the seminar leader at Katrin's job training course, a real employment coach in Berlin, critiques her interview skills and incorporates the comments of the audience, all participants in an actual job training seminar. Later, Nike meets with the boss of the home

dimension to Katrin's possible suicide attempt, suggesting that her sublimated desire for Nike has contributed to her shame and despair.

45 Sylvester, "Als ob man mit einem Einbaum auf einen Wasserfall zufährt", 183.

care service where she works; this actor too is the actual head of a Berlin health care firm. In this improvised scene, the employer drew on her own experience disciplining employees who fail to meet the firm's quotas to develop the dialogue in which she castigates Nike for mismanaging her time. The improvisations of these 'real-life' professionals are crucial to the way *Sommer vorm Balkon* conveys the spreading emphasis on personal responsibility across all realms of contemporary life.

Having previously shot films on both 35mm and digital video, Dresen chose 16mm for *Sommer vorm Balkon*; the cheaper format allowed him to collect more footage (with a shooting ratio of 25:1 in film shot compared to what was used in the final cut) and thereby to incorporate more documentary-style scenes.⁴⁶ Involving actual professionals filmed in authentic locations, these sequences mix documentary footage into the fictional narrative to achieve a realist mode that undoes conventional binaries of documentary/feature, unsettling our perception of 'reality' and making processes of neoliberalization visible. Indeed, in *Sommer vorm Balkon*, the recourse to documentary does not so much ground or underpin the film's realism as highlight and make us aware of the slippage among different forms of realist visual representation today. In an era when 'authenticity' has been fully co-opted for fictionalized forms of entertainment via reality tv shows and social media that commodify representations of 'real life', *Sommer vorm Balkon* employs interlaced scenes of 'documentary' and 'fiction' that reflect, echo, and amplify one another, making visible the erosion of boundaries between these two modes.

Similarly, and in an interconnected way, *Sommer vorm Balkon* blurs the lines of established genres. Marketed and in some instances received as a comedy, and building on the popularity of relationship comedies in the post-unification period (see also Chapter 5), the film shifts tone partway through, as its light-hearted depiction of ordinary life culminates in the tragedy of Katrin's sexual assault and alcohol poisoning. As Lode describes it, 'The style of production, its overt minimalism, focuses on the essence of the conflict and allows the escalation of [Katrin's] breakdown to develop in a non-organic, unpredictable, and as a result truly shocking way. The tone of the film transforms radically here: an almost naïve-seeming comedy develops into an existential drama.'⁴⁷ To be sure, it is no accident that, precisely in the depiction of crisis—of the 'unbinding of subjects from their

46 Köhler, 'Angstfreies Klima', 15.

47 Lode, *Abenteuer Wirklichkeit*, 187.

economic and intimate optimism’—we see comedy and tragedy converge in a new generic form that indexes the precarity of the present.⁴⁸

Crucial to this image of the present, *Sommer vorm Balkon* develops a homology between gentrification and self-optimization, two forms of improvement that demonstrate in stark visual terms the transformation of ordinary life in late-stage capitalism. Shot at a crucial moment in the renovation of Prenzlauer Berg from a dilapidated, working-class neighbourhood to the bourgeois epicentre of the New Berlin, the film captures in Dresen’s words, ‘Prenzlauer Berg as it once was and is quickly disappearing. Back then, Prenzlauer Berg was a much more raw area, with stairwells that smelled like piss and like old coal-burning stoves. It had something mangy about it. We wanted to tell a story about that world, which is disappearing. The old people are dying out there.’⁴⁹ This disappearing world is evident in the apartments of the seniors whom Nike cares for (apartments that will be snapped up by investors as soon as the old people die), and in the neighbourhood bar that Katrin and Nike frequent, emblematic of all the locales that were closing their doors at the time of filming to make way for coffee shops and cocktail lounges catering to the new residents of the district. At the outset of the film, Katrin and Nike inhabit an unrenovated building on Helmholtzplatz, an actual apartment block slated for renovation which the filmmakers were able to use as a shooting location during a short period after all the residents had moved out and before construction began. The film’s final shot shows this building under scaffolding, demonstrating how the domain documented by the film was already gone by the time *Sommer vorm Balkon* was released in theatres. The theme of gentrification is echoed metatextually in a series of paintings that Katrin created shortly after moving to Prenzlauer Berg when she documented her impressions of the neighbourhood—‘it looked so East German [ostmässig] back then’—and which she tries to place on consignment in a second-hand shop. Later, Katrin’s son Max shows the paintings to his friend Charly, explaining: ‘Now they’re repainting all the buildings, but here you can see how they used to look.’ Katrin’s paintings, like *Sommer vorm Balkon* itself, preserve a disappearing world, sharpening our perception of the transformations of the present.

Gentrification names an ambivalent process of neighbourhood improvement in which old forms of life literally become obsolete, as buildings are

48 Ascheid refers to *Sommer vorm Balkon* as a postromantic comedy, aligning it with the genre of the postromance, which she calls the ‘dystopian twin’ of romantic comedy. She posits the generic innovation of the postromance as a response to the dismantling of conventional gender roles and family relationships in the present. Ascheid, ‘The Romantic Comedy and Its Other’, 259.

49 Dresen, cited in Lode, *Abenteuer Wirklichkeit*, 177.

renovated, businesses are closed, and populations are cleared to make way for new economic developments. In *Sommer vorm Balkon* the gentrification of Prenzlauer Berg is echoed in the processes of self-optimization demanded of Katrin and Nike if they are to succeed in the changed world of the present, a world in which, as Angela McRobbie has described it, 'it becomes increasingly difficult to function as a female subject without subjecting oneself to those technologies of the self that are constitutive of the spectacularly feminine. There are new norms of appearance and self-presentation expected not just in leisure and in everyday life but also in the workplace, and government concerns itself with this aspect of self-management through various initiatives'.⁵⁰ In addition to the many forms of professional improvement that Katrin and Nike are held responsible for, including Katrin's Hartz IV requirements and the demand on Nike to quantify her work through more efficient interactions with the seniors she cares for, the film also reflects on the laborious technologies of the self practiced by the women in their relationships, domestic life, and appearance. This theme is brilliantly indexed via a recurrent shot of Nike in the bathroom of the neighbourhood bar, where she must stand on tiptoe and stretch to see her face in the mirror in order to apply lipstick (see Illustration 8). Demonstrative of the effort required to perform the self, this visual motif highlights the toll for women in particular of the demand for an optimized self-presentation.

Screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase has remarked that, in *Solo Sunny*, Sunny is a character who refuses to make compromises, even in an era (GDR times) when compromises were demanded of everyone.⁵¹ In *Sommer vorm Balkon*, Katrin and Nike similarly refuse to embrace normative roles and relationships or to accede to the regime of responsabilization that characterizes the neoliberal present. Notably, both films suggest and then withdraw the possibility of achieving narrative resolution through the successful pairing of a normative heterosexual couple. Renouncing heterosexual desire, Sunny joins a band and Nike rejects Ronald in favour of a renewed friendship with Katrin. However, while *Solo Sunny* exhibits optimism about the possibility of women's self-determination at a moment of transition for GDR society by ending with an extreme close-up of Sunny's smiling face, *Sommer vorm Balkon*, with its final shot of the scaffolded apartment building undergoing a gentrifying renovation, suggests that

50 McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 60.

51 'What interested us about the character was that she wasn't much good at making compromises, and as people in the GDR had to live with so many compromises, this was what made her attractive.' Kohlhaase, 'DEFA: A Personal View', 127.

the inexorable processes of optimization will continue, despite Katrin and Nike's refusal to embrace them.

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