

THE DOCUMENTARY VIEW

**A VISUAL DIALOGUE WITH EBERHARD GEICK
ON HIS CINEMATOGRAPHY FOR THE FILM SOLO SUNNY**

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Abstract: Our filmessay follows the work of the cinematographer Eberhard Geick, which he created for the DEFA film SOLO SUNNY in collaboration with its director Konrad Wolf. It is about the realisation of the documentary view of the camera, which was to become the defining artistic element of this feature film. Here, it is not the script that specifies the locations or has them built as backdrops if the desired motifs could not be found, but reality itself is so openly grasped and experienced that it can become an independent element of the film. This requires personal experience of life with this realism; the aesthetic model of an imagined existence cannot replace the substance of experience.

It is therefore all the more important to gain a detailed insight into the practical work involved in making a film and the ideas that arise on set. Eberhard Geick, whose work is the subject of this essay, presents his work with the camera and his collaboration with Konrad Wolf in conversations that I had with him at places where SOLO SUNNY was originally shot. I didn't want to predetermine any questions for our conversation, because they would have unnecessarily categorised our consideration of the work and limited our view to standards that this film does not need. Filmstills from eight important sequences of the original film, transferred to black and white for this essay, provide details of Geick's ideas for shots and editing.

Eberhard Geick often opted for the plan sequence when depicting complex action sequences. It is one of the elements that establishes his documentary style in this film. Alternatively, the black-and-white filmstills, which precede the respective film scenes here, reproduce individual shots that form the basis of his plan sequences and could themselves become the basis of a classic montage. The comparison between filmstills and plan sequences gives us an insight into the special way in which space and time are handled in the documentary view of cinematography.

They reveal the precise drafts of individual sequences that Geick and Wolf had in mind, and which they then ended up shooting as sequence shot. In them, the conceptual work of the camera for the documentary view becomes manifest; they concretise the shooting choices described by Eberhard Geick in the conversations of the essay.

Our filmessay aims to give the viewer an idea of the cinematography of the documentary view and its practical realisation. The version finally shot can be viewed directly in the original cinema version of Solo Sunny using the [VIMEO](#) link under the coloured filmstills.



INTRODUCTION

SOLO SUNNY is a DEFA film that was shot in East Berlin and the GDR in 1980 and immediately aroused huge interest among cinema audiences, especially as it presented an unmistakable, lived criticism of the GDR's image of society. Its main character, Sunny, has her problems with the life of a labourer and prefers to earn her money by singing at company fêtes and cultural events. Engaged by an up-and-coming band, she travels the country as a front woman and in no way, fulfils the expectations placed in her by everyday socialist life. Sunny loves the stage and her singing performances and somehow tries to fight her way to the top with this travelling life. Her life is inseparable from the working-class neighbourhoods in the center of Berlin and the Prenzlauer Berg district. Here, in the neglected houses, there are still the flats that Sunny can afford, and here there are the non-conformist people whose company she seeks.

Konrad Wolf, director of the film, definitely wanted his story to achieve a strong presence of this particular Berlin neighbourhood, whose character also defines Sunny's life. The film was to be shot in the middle of Berlin, without recreated street facades in the studio or staged milieus in the feature film studio. To this end, he brought in Eberhard Geick from the DEFA documentary film studio, who - like Sunny in the film - also lived in Prenzlauer Berg and worked as a cinematographer for documentaries. Wolf even wanted Geick, although a documentary filmmaker, to take over the image design for the entire feature film, so that the camera's documentary view of the life conditions in Prenzlauer Berg would never become nostalgic views of Berlin backyards, but would be characterised by Eberhard Geick's own experience in this city.





The idea for this film came from screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase, who knew the story of such an entertainer in the GDR and used this image to write the screenplay for the feature film *SOLO SUNNY*. Following his films for the founding generation of the GDR, Konrad Wolf, director at the DEFA, wanted to follow the explicit call of young viewers and make a film for the youth of the GDR, who had long

had different ideas about life than their parents, and together with Kohlhaase, *SOLO SUNNY* was created, which tells the story of this maverick young woman. The leading actress Renate Krößner embodied life in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg with a fascinating uncompromisingness and struck a chord with an entire generation.

FILM SEQUENCE 1: SUNNY AND MISS PFEIFFER

Eberhard Geick is also a photographer. His photographs, which were taken in Prenzlauer Berg in the 1970s and 1980s and form the visual fundament for this essay, create tangible perceptions of his documentary view, which was to become the starting point for *SOLO SUNNY*. With Eberhard Geick's work, Wolf wanted to bring a documentary gesture to his film, from someone who had experienced this district in his own life and was able to photograph it for the film.

"Back then, Prenzlauer Berg was actually a magnet for artists of all kinds ... There were artists everywhere, but this place was a hotspot for both artists and students.

I myself didn't move here because I was particularly attracted to it, but because I found a small apartment here that I needed to work and attend evening school. Many of my friends and later fellow students all lived here; we didn't live far apart, we knew each other, we knew the pubs in the area.

Prenzlauer Berg was also a hotspot for people who were a bit rebellious, who didn't accept everything the way the party would have liked it, but who pursued their own thoughts and had their own wishes, which didn't always go down well with those up there ...

It was a melting pot, and I don't want to overemphasise that, there were also quite normal people who lived here, workers ... it was a district for everyone."



Images: Berlin - Prenzlauer Berg. 12 photographs and text by Eberhard Geick <https://vimeo.com/1135551856>











EBERHARD GEICK, CINEMATOGRAPHER

"The preparation took about two or three weeks, maybe four, where we worked on the scenario, which was not yet called a screenplay, but a "scenario", in order to turn it into a screenplay.

We met at Wolfgang Kohlhaase in the mornings, the most important people, I'd say, from the shooting crew, i.e. Wolfgang Kohlhaase as the author, Konrad Wolf as the director, the production designer Freddy Hirschmeier, the assistant director, the make-up artist - we were several people who sat together every day and went through scene by scene to think about how to turn it into individual shots: a long shot, a medium close-up, a close-up, a pan or whatever, down to the last detail.

But that didn't mean that what Kohlhaase had written down had to be implemented one-to-one, it was rather a kind of suggestion: this is how we could do it; but it could also lead to: we'll leave out all the singular shots, we'll shoot it in one take; that's what happened and it wasn't wrong either.

In other words, it was a wonderful collaboration in which everyone had their say and where everyone was heard, everyone was right in their own way, because - we discussed it thoroughly, and in that respect, you could also make a mistake and say: well, ok, what I said there, forget it, that was nonsense, we'll do it the way you or you said. ... that was connected to the way Kohlhaase and Wolf and everyone else worked; it was such a collegial way of working that I like to think back on it, and something nice came out of it."



<https://vimeo.com/1120537435>

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FILM SEQUENCE 2: SUNNY'S PLACE



<https://vimeo.com/112031813>



IMAGES: BERLIN - PRENZLAUER BERG. 6 PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY EBERHARD GEICK

"It wasn't really so much about what I wanted to show in my images, it was Konrad Wolf's confidence that I knew my way around here, and he was absolutely right. I felt at home here and I still have the impression today that this comes across in many of the film shots, as well as in many of the photos I took that have nothing to do with the film.

Konrad Wolf asked me because I lived here and I knew my way around. It was a form of mutual trust: I knew he needed it and he knew I could do it. And that's how we did it".







FILM SEQUENCE 3: RALPH'S APARTMENT IN THE BACKYARD

"We shot a scene here in the backyard, in Ralph's apartment. But then we moved into the studio because it got quite cold in the original house with the windows open, so the whole apartment was built into the studio again."



FILM SEQUENCE 4: BREAKFAST AT THE WINDOW



"This scene in Ralph's apartment, where we look through the window from outside, where we look in to the apartment - that couldn't be done in the back-yard. You couldn't drive a crane in there, the doorway was too small, you couldn't set anything up. It would have been possible to shoot from the opposite window - but it wouldn't have been good.

So, we said, well, if we're going to set up the apartment in the studio anyway, then we could also shoot this scene by the window there, in such a way that you wouldn't notice that these shots were taken at the original location and those in the studio. And that was absolutely the right decision."









<https://vimeo.com/1120325606>

FILM SEQUENCE 5: SUNNY DISCOVERS RALPH'S PLACE







<https://vimeo.com/1120328241>

IMAGES: THE DOCUMENTARY VIEW 11 PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY EBERHARD GEICK

"With my photographs, I wanted to show what I saw and experienced every day. I had to walk through the streets on my way to work; I often walked, and sometimes I had a camera with me and took photos that, when I look at them today, actually have historical value. I didn't want to show what I didn't like here, but simply things that I did like. For example, stores that were closed, where it said above them: butcher's shop, but no meat has been sold there for 50 years, or it says bakery, but no bread has been baked there for ages; for me, that was typical of the GDR, but

especially of our district of Berlin Prenzlauer Berg. I was familiar with that, and it was my or our intention to convey that in the film.

I wasn't born here, I didn't grow up here either; I came here because I needed a job without having to work three shifts so that I could go to evening school, and that all happened here in Prenzlauer Berg; that was my experience, and I was able to bring some of that into the film."













FILM SEQUENCE 6: FILMING AT THE VILLAGE FÊTE

"There are definitely also documentary images; one event with the band in a village hall comes to mind in particular. A large hall, music and dancing, drinking and celebrating. And we decided that we wouldn't stage anything else there, but that I would simply see what was interesting for the film in order to record it, both in terms of the faces and the posture ... Yes, it's typical village people, without make-up, it's

not that everyone looks likeable, some just look like they look, but it was interesting for me, and Konrad Wolf was standing next to me. He saw what I was doing without him looking through it; he smiled, we shot it, and it was used or not used ...

And then in between there was the action, that is, our actors and actresses. Yes, it was just good ... it fitted."









<https://vimeo.com/1120346067>

FILM SEQUENCE 7: A SEQUENCE SHOT AT RALPH'S APARTMENT

7 filmstills and text by Eberhard Geick

"It was and is always important to me to differentiate. It can be very important to show the actor in close-up: what he says, how he speaks, what his mimics look like, but I find it quite boring to focus only on that. It was also important to me to show what he's doing at the moment when he says something important, and not to use the usual method: let's make a cut and now

let's show: where do you have your hands now, what are you doing besides, are you putting on a record or are you writing ... You can react to this by moving from the face to the hands or to someone who is listening

... And we tried to do that here in one shot, and I think it worked."



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<https://vimeo.com/1120349123>

FILM SEQUENCE 8: SUNNY'S WAY HOME



<https://vimeo.com/1120366268>

"So, it was the case that I made suggestions and he usually accepted them. Or vice versa, he asked me, what do you think if we ... And I usually agreed, but there were other moments when things diverged a bit, when we could have done it one way or another, and there were also moments when we said, well, we'll try both; we'll shoot one and we'll shoot the other - there were even those. And then you can decide at the editing table which one to take ..."

EBERHARD GEICK ON ALFRED HIRSCHMEIER

Scenographer of Solo Sunny



<https://vimeo.com/1120997909>

"I only saw Freddy Hirschmeier's designs a few years ago. A book about Freddy Hirschmeier was published on the occasion of an exhibition, and I saw these designs for the first time and I was amazed, because a lot of them appear almost 1:1 in the film; but I didn't know that, but it shows me that there was an unbelievable agreement in the conception, i.e. how to realise something. So, if I find myself in a motif and I see it, how do I have to photograph it or how do I get it across in the film.

And there were things in there that are incredible, both at the beginning of the movie and at the end. ... That's the original - I mean, that's what the courtyard looked like back then, and Sunny is just drawn in there, walking down there, as well as the end, as she crosses this bridge that leads over the S-Bahn.

... This [is] the backyard here. We shot similar shots like this, but as I said, without me seeing it beforehand, but it shows how we somehow completely agreed on what we wanted there. Here too, she leaves the apartment, downstairs the suburban train, that's how it looks in the movie."

FILM SEQUENCE 9: A SEQUENCE SHOT IN CHRISTINE'S APARTMENT

10 filmstills und Text by Eberhard Geick



"Yes, the hand-held camera was a necessity for me in the sense that you can handle it more smoothly; so, I'm not tied to the tripod, but I can react better, react faster, and why at all? Because it was important to me to not only show the actor in close-up, what he's saying, but also ... to casually show what he's doing, what he's really engaged in; and that was appropriate here on the one hand and it worked out well.

You're not tied to the tripod and have to see that this or that is done perfectly or so and so, instead you react smoothly, in an appropriate way, emotionally too, and I actually enjoy doing that - I can do it differently, I can also do an entire movie in fixed shots, I don't have to pan at all, that can also be very good, but not in this case. In this case, it was appropriate to respond emotionally to what was happening there."











<https://vimeo.com/1120374817>

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FILM SEQUENCE 10: CROSSING THE S-BAHN BRIDGES



<https://vimeo.com/1135754167>

FILM SEQUENCE 11: RESHOOT IN THE SNOW

"That was a wonderful coincidence ... it must have been anticipation. It had snowed overnight; that gave Konrad Wolf the idea of re-shooting this scene, which was supposed to be the end of the film, even though the film was almost finished.

... So, to see what it looks like in the snow, a completely different impression to the previous one in

the beautiful autumn weather, and for me of course, and not just for me, it also had a symbolic meaning, it was yesterday's snow lying on everything, it was the end of the old story, it was a new beginning for Sunny.

Snow over it, and we start all over again."





<https://vimeo.com/1122180386>

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FILM SEQUENCE 12: RESHOOT IN THE SNOW



<https://vimeo.com/1122199877>

CONCLUSION SOLO SUNNY AND THE DOCUMENTARY VIEW

The silence between the sparse dialogues of the film's protagonists finds its counterpart in the magnificent views of the camera from the dilapidated windows into the decaying courtyards, and in its movement through the streets. These scenes are like still lifes, but often full of impatience, which is interrupted by the noise and speed of the suburban trains; a magnificent abstraction that is hidden in the static images of firewalls and courtyards, which at the same time make us feel Sunny's impatience. For the view of the house facades is not only grey, but also full of her longing.

Only seemingly in contrast to this, in other moments, is the hand-held camera, despite its velocity her precise view, focusing on certain moments of proximity and an unbroken continuity of time, like a restless contrast to the still images of the montage.

The montage of images in this essay also follows this particular form of abstraction in the film, which allows the viewer to find their own impulse in the breaks, to correspond with their own feelings, and which is reflected in the black and white snapshots of scenes from *SOLO SUNNY* and photographs of the city district.

Unexpectedly, the views into the grey of the courtyards give the viewer a moment of calm and exhalation; they confirm the extraordinary effect of the montage of images with their very different perspectives.

Eberhard Geick often opted for a sequence shot when depicting complex action sequences. It is one of the elements that establishes his documentary style in this film.

The result of Geick's work is a magnificent symbiosis of documentary and staged composition of images; without the routines of narrative cinema with an eye for the documentary gesture of the film shot by someone who had experienced this city in his own life and who also makes this experience a reality in his cinematography.

MY THANKS TO

Eberhard Geick
 Ursula Dieterich
 DEFA - Stiftung / Fotograf: Dieter Lück
 Akademie der Künste Berlin
 PROGRESS Film GmbH
 Studio Babelsberg AG

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 Progress Film