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Citation	Heiduschke, S. (2014). Inspiring and Educating GDR Women: Iris Gusner, Feminism, and the Film Kaskade Rückwärts. [Article in Press]. Women in German Yearbook, 30.
DOI	
Publisher	University of Nebraska Press
Version	Accepted Manuscript
Terms of Use	http://cdss.library.oregonstate.edu/sa-termsofuse

Inspiring and Educating GDR Women: Iris Gusner, Feminism, and the Film Kaskade Rückwärts (1984, Bailing out)

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Abstract

Directing feature films in the GDR was largely a male-dominated profession. One of the few female directors was Iris Gusner, whose films explored issues working GDR women faced in their everyday lives. A close reading of her 1984 feature film Kaskade Rückwärts, in particular the focus on sound and on camera angles, exemplifies clandestine strategies Gusner used to create a feminist film. Gusner reveals the hypocrisy prevalent in GDR society pertaining to achieving gender equality as she sets up her heroine embarking on a quest for love in a patriarchal GDR. A narrative that initially appears to confirm patriarchal structures gradually turns into a cinematic feminist manifesto that successfully challenges GDR gender ideology. As a result Kaskade offered female GDR viewers a motivating experience and simultaneously challenged the male-dominated GDR film industry.

In her autobiography, GDR film director Iris Gusner quotes a letter that DEFA dramaturge Tamara Trampe sent to her in 1985:

"Now you can read your films as variations of one topic: to encourage women to reflect on their lives" (Gusner and Sander 202).¹ Encouraging women to reflect on their lives is indeed a central topic of Gusner's oeuvre. Generally influenced by her own life, Gusner's films revolve around the experiences of GDR women, who navigated life while simultaneously occupying roles as mothers, caretakers, workers, and housewives in a country that took pride in being among the most emancipated in the world (Panorama DDR 10-11). The films by Gusner, however, challenge the model character of gender equality in the GDR put forth by the government in its official publications. They provide an alternative, critical, and feminist perspective to reveal the everyday challenges GDR women faced. Even more, by virtue of their existence in a male-dominated GDR film industry, Gusner's films are among only a handful of films with a critical feminist agenda that were directed by a woman. Using a close reading of her 1984 feature film Kaskade Rückwärts (1984, Bailing out) as an exemplary and representative film of a cinematic feminist movement in the GDR that could have been, but never was, will provide further insight into the status of DEFA's women directors and how Gusner worked for the equal status of women within the studio structure--a result that had not yet been accomplished by the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

As of now, Gusner and her films have received only little academic attention, partially due to the inaccessibility of DEFA films before the fall of the Wall. Since then, scholars have analyzed the cinema of the GDR using a broad spectrum of gender-related approaches, ranging from semiotic case studies of individual films looking at women in GDR society (Silberman, Stegmann) to more general analyses of the role of women in DEFA films (Bahr, Berghahn, Kersten, Rinke, Models, Rinke, Images). Others focused specifically on institutional aspects, attempting to show how the realities of a still very patriarchal GDR society and an even more male-dominated studio structure directly affected the number of female feature-film directors in DEFA cinema (Frölich, Lischke-McNab). Gusner's name is mentioned in some of these essays, but her films have never been the focus of critical inquiry.² This article seeks to expand existing scholarship by providing a gateway to Gusner's work. It will further make a case for the existence of a GDR feminist cinema, suggesting that it existed but that the feminist messages in DEFA films were situated in the details of films. In order to locate and decode these feminist messages, one needs to look thoroughly and closely when viewing Gusner's films.³

The existence of such details, along with autobiographical elements that Gusner infuses into the stories, sets her films and those of other female directors apart from those by male

colleagues. Curiously, men were usually appointed by DEFA to make films about gender equality and emancipation, and the GDR rarely missed an opportunity to emphasize how progressive its society was in terms of gender equality.⁴ To date, the best-known DEFA films about women were directed by renowned male filmmakers, were highly regarded at their time of release, and received favorable press reviews and official premiere screenings.⁵ In contrast, films by Gusner and Evelyn Schmidt were sometimes not even promoted or advertised the same way as those by their male counterparts (Frölich 51).⁶ Thus, even when female directors received film projects and successfully finished them, they were still disadvantaged when it came to the distribution of their work.

In general, then, it was already difficult for women to become directors in the DEFA Feature Film Studio, a profession traditionally reserved for men:

In the 1960s, only a few women entered professional film training. Among the student films produced at the film academy in Potsdam-Babelsberg, between 1961 and 1968 no films were directed by women, and until the midseventies, the percentage of films directed by women was very slim. In the 1980s, the number of male and female students graduating from the East German film academy was almost equal. But women graduates frequently occupied mid-range

positions (dramaturgy), often in traditional female careers (design or editing), or found employment either in television or in children's film. (Frölich 43)

In fact, during DEFA's forty-six year history, from 1946 to 1992, only five women directed feature films for the big screen: Bärbl Bergmann, known for her children's films, in the 1950s and 1960s; Ingrid Reschke in the 1960s; and eventually Hannelore Unterberg, Schmidt, and Gusner in the 1970s and 1980s. At the time of Gusner's 1973 directorial debut with Die Taube auf dem Dach (The dove on the roof), she was the only female feature film director at DEFA because of the patriarchal studio structure.

Yet why did so few women move up in the ranks, even though their education and their qualifications as filmmakers were at least on par with major male DEFA directors? Gusner provides a possible answer in her autobiography when she speculates that during her time at the GDR Academy for Film and Television, the head of the area directing, Richard Groschopp, believed that she did not fit in with the other students because she was a woman working in a male profession. Instead of completing her schooling in the GDR, Gusner trained at the renowned Moscow film school VGIK with famous director Mikhail Romm, working on the well-known documentary film Obzknovenyy Fashizm (1965, Ordinary fascism), before returning to DEFA after graduating to join

Konrad Wolf as the assistant director on his film Goya (1970). It would be another three years before she would direct her first feature film, Die Taube auf dem Dach (The dove on the roof), at age thirty-two. Even then, gender discrimination surfaced when this film was the only production that was banned by authorities that year for showing an "unrealistic" picture of life: a story about a female engineer in love with two construction workers.

In essence, Kaskade may represent the culmination of Gusner's decade-long struggle with the gender bias within DEFA and the GDR. Officially, an emancipated nation that actively supported gender equality by providing ample childcare and promoting high quotas of women working in traditionally male professions (Statkova), true parity of the sexes was still out of reach in the GDR. The GDR parliament (Volkskammer), for instance, usually consisted of only 24-32% female politicians, and no women ever made it into the highest ranks of the ruling Socialist Unity Party's SED politburo. Men made politics for women, supported by the official voice of GDR women, the Democratic Women's League of Germany (Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands, DFD), propagating the benefits of SED politics. While many West German women had become independent and organized into the second feminist wave, the DFD pontificated to GDR women a different official picture of a modern woman as

someone able to juggle family duties, her work, and political engagement without effort (Holland-Cunz, Kuhrig). Thus, emancipation in the GDR was a double-edged sword. In many respects, GDR women had achieved almost equal status to men. In the late 1970s, almost half of the workforce consisted of women--yet only 45% of the female workers received specialized training for their work (Sudau 70-1). Some women worked in traditionally male occupations, such as engineers, but when they got home, these women still did the housework and cared for their children (Trappe). Essentially, although the GDR was a more emancipated nation compared to many Western nations, the career ladder for women was still short (Langenhan and Roß) and was sometimes criticized as a myth (Ansorg and Hürtgen), a frustrating experience that Gusner, Schmidt, and the few other female directors preceding them at DEFA must have experienced. The female directors set out to criticize the system with, or rather in, their films--and to inspire other women who were also disillusioned with their lives.

As the institutional context of filmmaking in the GDR disallowed a frank and forthright debate of gender issues, Gusner had to find ways to express her opinion without risking open confrontation with the DEFA leadership. Another dispute after the 1973 ban of Taube would have jeopardized her future at DEFA. Whereas the GDR literary scene had a number of women

writers who were able to publish critical works, such as Sarah Kirsch's Die Pantherfrau (1973, The Panther Woman 1989) or Maxie Wander's Guten Morgen, du Schöne (Good morning, you lovely), the GDR film industry had neither the number of female directors nor the opportunities to frankly present the problems of contemporary women as freely as the 1988 documentary Winter Adé (After Winter Comes Spring, Helke Misselwitz). And yet Gusner was able to create films as testimonies that recall firsthand experiences of GDR women--filmed by women for women--by veiling the criticism in carefully crafted interplays of plot, sound, dialogue, costume, camera positioning, and the mise-en-scene. Of all of Gusner's films, Kaskade illustrates best how she was able to make feminist films that passed the tests of the male censors at DEFA and those of the Film Department in the GDR Ministry of Culture (Hauptverwaltung Film). Gusner used autobiographic elements as models for the unhappy relationships and the struggles of the female protagonist to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Doing this allowed her to tell the story of a single mother that could be read by audiences in two ways: first, as a fictional narrative about one woman setting out to change her life by taking advantage of the opportunities extended by the GDR government to women, and second, on a more general level, as a case study and a guide for women dissatisfied with their current situation in the GDR. The fact

that the film did not fall prey to the GDR censorship mechanisms suggests that Gusner's apparent strategy of presenting feminist stories clandestinely was successful.

A feminist reading of Kaskade is best accomplished by a close reading of the protagonist, Maja Wegner. Such an investigation reveals how this unlikely heroine turns from a woman stuck in an everyday routine into a happy person, thus serving as a role model for women. As the title suggests, her "bailing out" and venturing into the unknown on a quest of self-discovery becomes the key to eventual happiness. The film follows Maja, a widow in her thirties, and her attempt to bail out of her daily routine by giving up her job and leaving her house in the countryside to move into the city in search of new challenges. In her new apartment building, she meets a number of interesting people and begins a relationship with a neighbor, the composer Toni, which only lasts until she understands that he is not interested in a long-term relationship. She also befriends another (female) neighbor, Margot, who lives in an unhappy relationship with her career-oriented husband. Margot convinces Maja to place a personal ad in the local newspaper. When response letters arrive, she chaperones Maja on a number of fruitless dates. Maja does not become involved with these men, but she slowly realizes that the supervisor at her new job, Gert, has fallen in love with her. Working as long-distance

train attendants, they spend many hours in close proximity with each other and share their life stories. Another storyline in the film emphasizes both Maja's preoccupation with her own life journey (in that she fails to recognize that her teenage daughter, Mine, is struggling with her own first love with a neighborhood boy) and the theme of finding love. Eventually, Maja and Gert kiss for the first time at an unscheduled stop of their train, suggesting that Maja's search for a new partner has concluded.

Structuring Maja's story as a quest evokes an association of the film with self-discovery during a journey experienced by a hero or heroine, in the literary genre of the Bildungsroman. In the archetypical work of this genre, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship), the hero embarks on a quest of self-realization. In the end, it is the quest itself that turns out to be the formative experience. This transformation is reminiscent of the external forces impacting Maja in Kaskade, making her experiences in a new environment a quest to find, and assert, her position as a woman in GDR society. Yet how does the notion of Kaskade as a cinematic Bildungsroman of sorts, defining life as a quest within the patriarchal GDR society, further a feminist agenda--in particular if we take into account that Maja eventually appears to engage in a new relationship

with a protagonist embodying the paternal structures of the GDR? The answer requires us to think within these paternal structures. Gender equality was more advanced than in the Federal Republic and many other western nations at that time, placing a bigger burden on women as they were forced to juggle work, household, family, and sometimes also political obligations. In the end of Kaskade, Maja has managed these areas (sans politics) by being successful in her new job, managing her household, making more time for her almost-grown daughter, and finding a new partner. By deliberately centering the plot around these three clusters of female experiences, Gusner seems to point at exactly the intersection of the public and the private spheres: first, Maja as woman in the traditionally male workplace; second, Maja as mother of a teenage daughter; and third, Maja as an individual looking for a new partner. Other male and female characters rotate in and out of the plot as needed to complement the composition of the heroine as her personality morphs over the course of the film.

As suggested, structuring Maja's story as a quest evokes the association of the film with the self-discovery during a journey experienced by a hero or heroine in the Bildungsroman. "The teleological process of a hero in search of her- or himself generally ends in the subjective experience of one's identity," writes Gerhart Mayer (19), and the "protagonist is now

experiencing her- or himself as an individual and as a consistent person who has learned to make decisions leading towards a unique way of life.”⁷ Socialist literature had adapted the genre structures as early as 1949 to promote the new socialist man (Mayer 341). Over the decades, women writers such as Christa Wolf and Brigitte Reimann appropriated and reshaped the genre with stories about the experience of women in socialism, with influential novels such as Wolf’s Nachdenken über Christa T. (The Quest for Christa T.) and Reimann’s Franziska Linkerhand. Much like in their stories about female protagonists caught in the dialectic of the individual and GDR society, Gusner’s Kaskade employs similar means. It carefully vindicates Maja’s decisions as part of a socialization process of women in a socialist society and personalizes her experiences as particularly unique to the lives of women. In contrast to the heroines’ “failures” in literature (Christa T. dies of leukemia and the architect Franziska Linkerhand is unable to design houses), Kaskade differs from the structure by refusing to classify Maja’s life experiences that neatly. Gusner offers Maja’s search for the meaning of her life as a woman in the GDR as a series of necessary experiences. In the end, it is not the patriarchal GDR society that determines her future, but Maja herself who takes the initiative by selecting a suitable male

partner with the goal of not simply complementing him but of remaining an independent woman, as well.

Advocating marriage, or at least partnership, as the culmination of Maja's quest turns Kaskade into a visual political pamphlet and a feminist broadside against patriarchal DEFA filmmaking. It appropriates the traditional structure of the GDR women's film and deliberately replaces endings of other films made by male directors that showed women deciding to leave their partner or remain without one. Having Maja complete her quest for a partner becomes a meaningful tool as Gusner establishes her heroine "as a potentially oppositional force to existing social and cultural values" (Felski 132) and a way to voice her displeasure with the status quo of filmmaking in the GDR. By doing so, Gusner's filmmaking turns from what she herself believes to be a "withdrawal from political engagement" (Gusner and Sander 268) into a proposition for a model of a new GDR woman who can be neither reduced to a set of feminist issues nor used to promote the socialist wonder-woman, easily juggling family, work, and political activism. Kaskade becomes Gusner's tool to challenge the GDR gender ideology, coaxing it into reconsideration by working through the tensions between socialist ideals and reality as dialectic of the cinematic Bildungsroman (Naumann).

Gusner sets this tone as early as in the opening shots of the film when she introduces the three realms of the life Maja is involved in. First, the camera captures Maja in her workplace as a switchboard operator for a trucking company, coordinating deliveries and pick-ups, followed by a sequence of Maja as she repaints one of the outer walls of her house, representing the personal sphere, and third, in her role as mother, arguing with her teenage daughter. These three sequences coalesce into a representative picture of Maja, suggesting from the onset the balancing act between the three realms to be encountered. The film's premise certainly must have appeared familiar to GDR women as reminiscent of their own everyday situation, constantly in tension between the various roles. At the same time, the film's exposition also introduced the idea of a heroine ready to escape this routine and to embark on a journey of self-exploration--the idea of Bildung.

The precredit introductory sequence also allows a more positive reading: a challenge to patriarchal structures. Although she technically occupies a low-level job as telephone operator, a traditionally gendered occupation, Gusner shows Maja as the true manager of the company. Without consulting her (presumably male) supervisors on the rerouting of a truck to ensure trouble-free operation and timely delivery of the freight, Maja uses a blend of humor, coaxing, and rebuke to talk

one of the truck drivers into an additional route and working overtime to fill in for the driver of a broken-down vehicle. Her cordial rapport with the drivers over the two-way radio, which includes the singing of a song for one of them, never feels as if she uses her femininity to accomplish her goals. Maja comes across as a strong woman in charge of the workplace--and the male workers--despite the gender-coded job.

Nevertheless, the more the film's opening sequence unfolds, the more viewers realize that Maja may be in charge at her workplace but her personal life lacks cohesion. During the opening credits, Gusner depicts Maja repainting an exterior wall of her house, reinforcing the impression of Maja as an independent woman. Following the credits, the first sequence brings in the realm of the family. When Maja wants to celebrate with her teenage daughter the conclusion of the renovation by opening a bottle of champagne, the situation ends in a verbal conflict. As Maja pours three glasses of champagne (one for her deceased husband), her daughter Mine confronts her about the renovation as "busting her back" instead of taking the time to relax. Mine also yells at Maja to get over the death of her husband (Mine's father). Here, we experience a crucial moment in the film, when we learn that Maja's single parenthood was caused by her husband's accident or an illness, and not due to divorce, which would have been a more likely option in the GDR as country

with one of the highest divorce rates in Europe (McLellan). By setting up Maja as a young widow, her departure into the unknown becomes a story of overcoming suppressed grief and the willingness to conclude a mourning process.

Mine runs off to her riding lesson instead of celebrating with her mother. Maja follows Mine to the lesson and observes one of the instructors demonstrating how to "bail out," how to dismount a horse no longer under control of the rider. "The trick," the instructor points out, "is to surmount your fear." The camera shows Maja in a medium close-up, fascinated by the symbolism of this move for her own life. It then returns to the rider to reiterate the bailing out in slow motion--not coincidentally the only special effect in Kaskade--in reference to the film's title and its premise of restarting one's life. The significance of surmounting one's fear of change and bailing out for a fresh start is crucial, and the camera suggests this by inserting a slow-motion repetition of the hazardous move. The scene immediately following the slow motion shows Maja's new neighbors helping her move furniture into the Berlin apartment. By breaking the continuity of the story, Gusner seems to suggest that venturing into an unknown future is sometimes necessary and beneficial for one's well-being.

A departure with such uncertain outcome shifts the focus of the story from a somewhat successful but passive woman who has

aligned herself with the status quo to a story of personal development. Such stories of female emancipation are not new, of course, and as "[f]eminist criticism offers a particularly interesting example of an attempt to reappropriate the term," perhaps for "the link between gender and genre" (Kontje x), Kaskade very clearly presents Maja's quest as that of an already independent woman. In this context, it is therefore important for Gusner to establish Maja as a working woman, completely capable of supporting herself and her family. This is not unique to East Germany as Bonnie Dow's Prime Time Feminism about the link between television culture and the Women's Movement has shown, thus, Maja resembles other international working women. Because she does not depend on a male partner to support her, Maja is "free to couple as she chooses; put simply, she may marry for love not money" (Leonard 100). When Gusner introduces Maja as a double-working woman--both at the workplace and in the home--she does so to offer a role model to GDR women, carefully avoiding the notion of creating a "super woman" possessing unattainable qualities and no flaws. As a result, Maja's quest for a male partner turns into a journey in self-discovery of which she is in charge and represents "a vehicle advocating fuller exploration of women's goals and expectations" (Kleinbord 8).

Once Maja has opened this new chapter of her life, she is exposed to a plethora of interpersonal interactions and impressions. As she carefully attempts to negotiate the work-family-personal life balance, Gusner shows in the film how this balancing act requires constant practice and acceptance and that setbacks are part of the experience, too. In her new job as train attendant, Maja experiences the daily tribulations of a woman in a misogynistic work environment. She is repeatedly confronted with male passengers making sexist and suggestive remarks about Maja's figure and clothes (see Fig. 1).

<Insert fig. 1 approximately here.>

Whereas Maja has trouble initially and requires Gert's assistance to keep drunken male passengers at bay, Gusner shows how Maja learns how to manage such situations. Later in Kaskade, when obnoxious soccer fans get on the train and torment other passengers, she escorts those passengers to another train car, seemingly unfazed by the noise. And although Gert is not overtly sexist, he nevertheless condescends to Maja. While training her, for instance, he behaves more like a teacher lecturing schoolchildren, and in at least one instance, he enhances his lesson with a wink, underscoring the hierarchy of the sexes (see Fig. 2).

<insert figure 2 approximately here>

Maja's new career requires her to be away from home for long durations, sometimes up to twenty-four hours at a time, while her teenage daughter Mine is unhappily in love for the first time, without the support of her mother. The subplot of the generational conflict between Maja and Mine is restricted to a few instances, mirroring the lack of time Maja finds for her small family. The problems, however, are substantial. In one instance, when Mine and a friend have a discussion about a seventeen-year-old classmate who got pregnant, Maja scolds Mine for not taking the pill. As it turns out, Mine is not sexually active, a fact unknown to Maja. Yet at a later point, when Mine is seeking out Maja's guidance about her first love, Maja does not understand her daughter's signals for help. "We will find time to chat later," says Maja as she is getting ready to leave for work in the morning, to which Mine replies, "[i]f it is not too late then," suggesting that she is considering sleeping with her boyfriend. By linking these two scenes, Gusner points to the problem of many working women who no longer have the time to identify the growing pains of their children and cannot offer support during difficult transitions into adulthood. While the high percentage of working women in the GDR is typically seen as suggesting progress and emancipation--at some point, 87% of the women of working age held a job, and 50% of the GDR workforce consisted of women (Bahr 126)--the brief moments between mother

and daughter in Kaskade might also indicate that GDR women sometimes paid a price for having a job.

In Maja's case, the lack of time for her daughter is also caused by her relationship status. Being single but actively looking for a new partner requires her to invest a significant portion of her time in the search for "Mr. Right." Ostensibly, Kaskade foregrounds this subject by having Maja place personal ads and meet with promising candidates. In addition, she goes out with her female friends to test the waters in bars and dance clubs, and she even dates her neighbor Toni. While Kaskade attempts to reinforce the significance of a balanced personal life, it does not trivialize the difficulties for emancipated women trying to find partners willing or able to accept the equality of sexes. For example, Toni also dates a singer in Leipzig while dating Maja, but it is not clear if he would accept a similar open relationship of Maja. Further, the men who reply to Maja's personal ads look for a domestic woman in a subordinate status and not someone with an equal or higher position in the workplace (and a higher salary). Finally, the men at the bars and dance clubs only seek sexual encounters and not stable relationships or marriage. Even Gert, who at the end of the film turns out to be Maja's Mr. Right, has his flaws. Simply put, finding the right man requires compromise, and locating a perfect partner may not be possible in real life. The

journey turns into the enlightening experience that concludes, if not with an unexpected outcome, at least with one that may have left GDR women disappointed: if Maja's personal growth ends in a new domestic relationship, what is the value of Kaskade in terms of feminist cinema? Does the film's ending reinforce, instead of undermine, the foundations of a patriarchal GDR society? Gusner offers a more nuanced way for GDR women to use Kaskade not as answer to their questions, but as point of departure for individualized reflection.

While much as the film's plot replicates the meandering path of life that occasionally dead-ends or even regresses, it also tells the story of Maja's Bildung by way of songs as part of the film's diegesis to augment and explain Maja's various emotional states. Similar to the chorus in ancient plays, the songs in Kaskade also anticipate future events in the plot, bridge the various acts, and explain the events by restating and summarizing for audiences the contemporary tribulations of being a woman in the GDR, of course filtered through Gusner's lens.

The same songs also become part of the non-diegetic structure of the film to form the film's gender critique. Picture and sound correlate in a way that requires viewers to question the credibility of the visuals on-screen, and this allows Gusner to set up a situation that puts viewers in a conundrum: should they believe the lyrics of the songs that

suggest that women should depend on men, or should they read them as ironic remarks and warning signs of how Maja may be setting herself up for problems? In a key sequence, Maja's friend Carola helps her to get ready for the upcoming series of dates with a selection of men who answered Maja's personal ad in the newspaper. While Maja is trying on a number of dresses, looking for matching shoes, practicing walking with upright posture, and having Carola apply make-up, a song about the skills a woman needs to attract a man complements the sequence non-diegetically. Sung by the actress Maria Wiegmann, who plays Maja, along with an accompanying piano, the lyrics appear to be the auditory match of the on-screen preparation for Maja's first blind date:

A woman needs to be talented, /
And she requires imagination /
If a woman wants to be a man's woman /
She has to be ambitious and resourceful. //
First, she needs to use tested methods /
A lot of rouge and black lace, /
And has to take off the kitchen apron /
As it serves no purpose. //
Seamed stockings are a tried and tested weapon /
And so is a slim garter /
One says such a combination defeats /

A man of any age //
There are also gymnastics /
Which build agility /
That challenge /
The husband's clumsiness.⁸

While these lyrics appear to promote subordinate behavior in order to attract a man, we need to understand the song as an ironic comment. Although Maja is indeed trying on dresses under the critical eyes of Carola in preparation for the date, the afternoon is by no means only a literal dress rehearsal for the evening date. Instead, it forges a bond between Carola and Maja that uses dressing up as way to illustrate the strengthening relationship between the women as they join forces in order to lure men. Here, the reversal of agency becomes important. A number of visual clues and special effects inserted by Gusner suggest the director's intention to have the sequence understood ironically, a strategy the film critic Fred Gehler associated with the harlequinade. As Maja tries on a variety of dresses, the mood is vivacious: both women drink heavily, indicated for example by one shot focusing on Carola's hands steadying a glass and pouring champagne (see Fig. 3). The women also laugh a lot and show their playful desperation about an ill-fitting outfit by rolling their eyes, and they turn the private fashion show

into a mockery of a real fashion show. In contrast to other fashion shows that objectify women, turning their bodies into living mannequins, the dresses in this sequence of Kaskade are repurposed to convey a sense of power that women have over men: by selecting and wearing clothes strategically, any man, regardless of his age, can be "defeated."

<insert fig. 3 approximately here>

Gusner empowers Maja further by having her satirize the notion of a fashion presentation. Accompanied by the stanza that describes a woman's agility versus a man's clumsiness we see Carola model an upright, straight posture while Maja tries to twirl in a red dress but loses the book she was attempting to balance on her head throughout. Mocking the strutting of models on the catwalk, Carola then puts on a straw hat and pretends to dance the tango, holding up the ends of her dress to simulate the steps. Here, Gusner enables women to look beyond the established structures by having Carola and Maja put on a fashion show without being exposed to the voyeuristic male gaze, and encourages them to do things not for male pleasure but for their own enjoyment.

The didactic value of the fashion show arises when Ali, one of Maja's male neighbors, takes her back to her apartment after she has had too much to drink, sits down on a couch, and wraps

his right arm around her while she leans her head on his shoulder. The same song that accompanied the show as non-diegetic music now turns into a piece of the film's diegesis when Maja sings the first words. Ali recognizes the piece immediately as one of the composer Toni's songs. "Toni is creating waves again," he comments, hinting that Maja is not the first woman Toni has enchanted with his compositions.⁹ Potentially spurred on by Toni's status as well-known gigolo and by the suggestive, objectifying lyrics of the song, Ali unbuttons Maja's blouse and touches her breast. The seduction attempt sobers Maja up enough to stop singing the song, grab his hand and remove it from her shirt, sit up, and slap it.

As the song shifts from being a non-diegetic into a diegetic element of the film, we can observe one instance of how change has already taken place in Maja's life. By becoming a diegetic piece sung by Maja, she appropriates and controls the content formerly associated with Toni. This control indicates how she has grasped gender inequalities in the GDR, which she also symbolically slaps--an important step to self-determination. While the problematic lyrics do not disappear, they have lost much of their power when Carola and Maja satirize them.

Along with the intervention of songs to emulate Maja's personal growth, Gusner coaxes viewers into sympathetic readings

of Gert. From the beginning, viewers are attracted to him, despite his initial patronizing behavior towards Maja, as previously mentioned. Here, Gusner employs a number of distinguishable and pronounced camera angles and movements to define Maja's connection to Gert. This limitation of the camera as the eye of the viewers reverts the gaze: in Kaskade, the camera does not expose Maja or other female characters to the scopophilic gaze, objectifying them. Unlike in many DEFA women's films by male directors, this camera unmaskes Gert and allows us to look beyond the grumpy surface of a middle-aged bachelor. Whenever the gazing camera penetrates his surface, it reveals Gert as an emotional person and suggests that he would be the right partner for Maja. The interplay of camera and plot thus conveys subconsciously his suitability to become Maja's new partner.

By limiting close-ups almost exclusively to Maja and Gert, the concentration of the otherwise neutral camera on these two people reveals their emotional state and declares Gert's significance in Maja's journey. When Gert shares personal information with her, the camera scrutinizes his face, often lingering there. The camera implies that Gert is more interesting than the composer and gigolo Toni by granting viewers the time to have a deeper look, beyond Gert's surface. Gert appears clumsy and at times more in a paternal role than

that of a lover towards Maja--partially due to his beard that conveys maturity and to his life experience (see Fig. 4). Gert may lack Toni's youth and impulsiveness, but the camerawork redeems him gradually and turns him into the preferred partner.

<insert fig. 4 approximately here>

The camera also frames the budding relationship between Maja and Gert by using a number of extraordinary camera positions and angles not used elsewhere in the film. Most times when the paths of Maja and Gert cross, the view shifts from a static camera shooting predominantly at eye-level to perspectives rich in variety to indicate the significance of them being together. One particular example is their initial meeting, when Gert trains Maja for her job as conductor of a long-distance train. When they walk the train tracks along their train as they prepare it for the trip to Leipzig, the film uses an extreme long shot from a high angle as the establishing shot, directing our attention to the peculiarity of the situation. The camera then zooms in on the couple, engaging in their first conversation, before it switches to a medium shot, panning to keep Maja and Gert centered. This sequence contains the most camera movement in the entire film. Although we do not yet know that their professional relationship will slowly turn into friendship and finally to love, the unusual perspectives caused

by the different camera angles and camera movement lead us to understand that Gert will have a particularly important influence in Maja's formative process. Indeed, in the closing sequence of Kaskade the camera alternates between long shots of Maja standing next to a waiting train and Gert sitting in the grass next to a river before it switches to a position on the tracks behind the train. After it shows Maja in a long shot, Gert comes into the picture and walks slowly towards the train, where Maja meets him. The camera slowly zooms in on the couple as Gert takes off Maja's hat and puts a wreath of flowers on her head. We then see alternating close-ups of Maja and Gert that turn into a two-shot as they kiss for the first time, a scene reminiscent of a wedding. With the introduction of these shots that are used exclusively in this sequence, the camera anticipates the beginning of a relationship--and the end of Maja's journey. At the conclusion of the cinematic Bildungsroman, the camera remains stationary while the train disappears into the distance, followed by Gert and Maja running after it, leaving the ending of a potential common future of Maja and Gert open.

How could Kaskade have served as a motivating experience for GDR women struggling to situate their lives between the various roles? The answer lies in the format of the film as a cinematic Bildungsroman, showing a woman who is equally trying

to manage her life--and who fails again and again before she realizes that finding happiness requires her to make decisions by thinking of herself first. As previously mentioned, the hero or heroine in the Bildungsroman concludes the quest upon realizing her or his individuality (Mayer 19). Maja accomplishes this in Kaskade by taking a risk in getting involved with the unfaithful Toni and then by her putting an end to that relationship and choosing Gert instead. Various men and women provide important input to Maja's development--as models and antimodels, allies and antagonists--but eventually it is Maja who finds her own individual way to happiness by choosing what may appear as a regression into the traditional gender hierarchy. Yet, instead of staying single (and unhappy), Maja truly "bails out" by finding her very own individual model of self-realization and happiness.

Maja's decision to settle for a less than perfect man might leave viewers who are looking for a feminist message unsatisfied and questioning the feminist nature of Kaskade. If we were to take into account only the plot, such criticism would be well warranted. Once approached within the context of the GDR film industry, however, the harmonious ending turns into a well-designed act of feminist resistance against the patriarchal structures of DEFA. As the majority of films about women were directed by men, and other men sanctioned and approved the films

by the few female directors, a truly feminist DEFA film required alternative paths to indicate resistance. By having her film deviate from the "standard" male cinematic model of DEFA, in which women refuse relationships, Gusner ingeniously challenges the established studio structure and engages her audience in the mission to subversively reclaim feminist film. Thus, when Maja enters into a rather conservative relationship with the not-so-attractive Gert, Gusner essentially writes between the lines and creates a marvelous feminist ending that the male censors in the GDR were unable to decode as ironic. Women may have never achieved equal status at DEFA, but they crafted a feminist cinema that worked against the patriarchal studio conventions.

Notes

1. "Du kannst inzwischen deine Filme als Variationen auf ein Thema ansehen--Frauen Mut zu machen, über sich selbst nachzudenken." My translation. DEFA is the acronym for Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft, the GDR centralized film monopoly, controlled by the Socialist Unity Party, SED. GDR stands for German Democratic Republic, also known as East Germany among speakers of English. DEFA employed a number of dramaturges like Tamara Trampe to develop treatments for new film projects.

2. The film was part of the 2011 East German Summer Film Institute Cold War--Hot Media: DEFA and the Third World, organized by the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Gusner's oeuvre was featured in a panel at the 2012 German Studies Association in Milwaukee, WI, entitled "Working Women Before and Behind the Camera: Iris Gusner Rediscovered." I am aware of only one German-language article, by Goldberg, that is dedicated exclusively to Gusner's films.
3. DEFA films often required spectators to "read between the lines," i.e., to look for a hidden critical meaning in seemingly innocuous scenes. See for example Heiduschke, East German Cinema 99-105.
4. Usually, an all-male committee planned the annual film production, established budgets, selected the director, and, if necessary, censored the film for political reasons. For more on the domination of men in the studio structure see also Allan and Sandford, Berghahn, and Heiduschke, East German Cinema.
5. For instance, Der Dritte (Her third; Egon Günther, 1972), Die Legende von Paul und Paula (The legend of Paul and Paula; Heiner Carow, 1973), Bis daß der Tod euch scheidet (Until death do us part; Heiner Carow, 1979), and Solo Sunny (Konrad Wolf, 1980).
6. Gusner's films Alle meine Mädchen (All my girls, 1979), Wäre die Erde nicht rund (If earth were not round, 1981), Kaskade

Rückwärts, Ich liebe dich ... April! April! (I love you--April fool, 1987) by Gusner; Schmidt's films Seitensprung (The affair, 1979), Das Fahrrad (The bicycle, 1981), and Der Hut (The hat, 1990).

7. "Der zielgerichtete Prozess des sich selbst suchenden Helden endet in der Regel in der subjektiven Erfahrung gewonnener Ich-Identität. Der Protagonist erlebt sich nun als unverwechselbaren, konsistenten Charakter, der sich für einen individuellen Lebensentwurf verbindlich zu entscheiden vermag." My translation.

8. "Ja, da muss das Weib begabt sein /
Ja, da braucht es Fantasie. /
Will das Weib dem Manne Weib sein /
braucht die Strebsamkeit Genie. //
Man nimmt zuerst bewährte Mittel /
mit viel Rouge und schwarzer Spitze. /
Und legt ihn ab den Schürzenkittel, /
denn hierfür ist er zu gar nichts nütze. //
Der Nahtstrumpf bleibt bewährte Waffe /
und ein schmaler Hüftenhalter. /
Man sagt ein solch Ensemble schaffe /
noch jeden Mann in jedem Alter. //
Da wäre auch noch die Gymnastik die Beweglichkeiten schafft. /
Bis zu des Ehemannes Spastik ein abgrundtiefer Abgrund klappt."

My translation.

9. "Nachbar Toni greift wieder um sich." My translation.

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