

CAPTURING THE ESSENCE: STILL PHOTOGRAPHER WALTRAUT PATHENHEIMER

By Dieter Chill and Anna Luise Kiss

As cinematographer Jürgen Brauer recalls the start of shooting for *Die Verlobte* (1980, *The Fiancée*), things didn't quite work between actress Jutta Wachowiak¹ and still photographer Waltraut Pathenheimer.² Very early on, there was a complicated scene in the attic of the laundry: the actress opens a skylight and the light shines on her face with great intensity—an image that also symbolized the hopeless situation of the prisoner Hella Lindau. Pathenheimer saw this and wanted to quickly capture the moment in a photograph, fearing that the effect of the light would be lacking in the later reenactment of the scene, which was when she usually shot her stills.

But Wachowiak did not want to reproduce this moment of strong emotional tension, because she was still finding the right mode of expression for her character. “How do you perform this? How do you represent the unimaginable?”—these were questions that the successful, experienced film and theater actress was dealing with. “Yes, I was focused on myself, selfish, as one gets. But there's no other way, because in acting you have to enter and come through a tunnel, without getting tunnel vision. That's why the tunnel must be made of glass”—so that nothing of the actor's expression is lost, not lost to the camera—that is to the potential audience—but also there for the still photos, which are supposed to tempt audiences into the movie theater.

Wachowiak was and is still aware of this; and yet, there is an irremediable contradiction between professional knowledge, on one hand, and one's feelings, on the other hand. Especially in difficult scenes, when one has emotionally “slid into the pit and is now expected to also deliver *that*”—which requires being completely present again—because this work is important too. “Because a mistake or fake performance is easy to see in the photograph; if you cheat, just to get it over with, it will be apparent to everyone afterwards.”

Wachowiak soon grasped that Pathenheimer was an excellent representative of her craft and was clearly able “to not lose sight of her concept in this uncomfortable phase.” Her consistent approach facilitated things a lot during the rest of the shooting. Jürgen Brauer said, “when Jutta Wachowiak noticed how reserved Waltraut was at work and how this inconspicuous approach allowed her to make excellent photographs, there were no more problems.”



Photo 1-3: *Die Verlobte* © DEFA-Stiftung, Waltraut Pathenheimer, Collection Potsdam Film Museum

¹ Jutta Wachowiak played the leading role Hella Lindau in the feature film *The Fiancée* (dirs. Günter Reisch, Günther Rücker).

² Waltraut Pathenheimer was the first woman to practice the profession of still photographer at the DEFA Studio for Feature Film. Over almost forty years, she created an extensive portfolio of over eighty films with an exceptional visual language. She worked with well-known directors, including Frank Beyer, Jürgen Böttcher, Heiner Carow, Erich Engel, Gerhard Klein, Kurt Maetzig, Gérard Philipe, Rainer Simon and Herrmann Zschoche.

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The Fiancée was a particular challenge for the studio, the actors and the film staff. The antifascist resistance struggle—a central, recurrent theme in DEFA films of prior decades, often in a simplified and propaganda driven form—was supposed to be told in a new way, as a “human story.” It was also supposed to attract more young people to an interest in what had happened in the past and in a main foundational idea of the East German state. Because—unlike for films of the 1960s, whose audiences had lived through and suffered the Nazi regime and World War II—young viewers in the 1980s had been born after the war. Other topics moved them, and they preferred other films.



Photo 4-6: *Die Verlobte* © DEFA-Stiftung, Waltraut Pathenheimer, Collection DEFA-Stiftung

This film production brought Wachowiak and Pathenheimer together, among dozens of others on the team. The two women were not only highly professional artists, they were also motivated by their own life experiences and the film’s story.³ For the actress, who had been only a small child in 1945, the experience of suffering, death and destruction remained present throughout her life; the consequence of such experiences was for her to espouse the motto “Never again war!” and to engage herself personally in its service. At its best, as in *The Fiancée*, this meant being useful “not in a directly ideological manner and without the clichéd black-and-white,” but rather at a differentiated and artistically elevated level.

What emerged were a staging and theatrical balancing act and strong images for an extreme story. A communist woman lives for years among dangerous criminals; she never abandons her own humanism, but rather makes her fellow inmates a little bit better. This is definitely a great pathos; but the tone of the narrative is tender and feminine, yet still infinitely powerful—and, especially, contagious when one doubts that one is doing the right thing oneself. In its essence, it is about no more and no less love and how it can make one resistant enough to endure even the worst.

The script was adapted with respect and empathy from a literary treatment of the authentic experiences of a woman who went through much of what the character Hella Lindau does in the film. It was then dramatized in a powerful way and intensified by the expressive performance of an actress who reveals and conceals, who perfectly masters timing for her role, and who relies very little on external effects. Even if something seems momentarily overdone, it still rings true, because feelings bring things out that elude the actor’s self-control but show the camera coherent moments.

This is where the other woman comes into play—the one who documented all of this with extremely sensitive still photos. For *The Fiancée*, still photographer Waltraut Pathenheimer—born in 1932—also drew on her own experiences, while concurrently building on the content and emotional aspects of her earlier work. For example, *Nackt unter Wölfen* (1963,

³ The actress Jutta Wachowiak and the film photographer Waltraut Pathenheimer collaborated on a total of three DEFA productions. In addition to *The Fiancée* (1980), there was also *Seine Hoheit Genosse Prinz* (*His Excellency, Comrade Prince*, 1969) and *Märkische Forschungen* (*Exploring the Mark Brandenburg*, 1981).



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Naked among Wolves)—filmed at the Buchenwald concentration camp, where “killing and murder literally still clung to the site”—was marked by the strong antifascist impetus and the equally strong creative drive of a new generation at the DEFA Studio. These inspired the still photographer’s own masterpieces. Even back then she created empathetic pictures, which remain unforgettable and, in both content and form, are among the best still photographs that DEFA produced. One of Pathenheimer’s photos for *Naked among Wolves* won an award at the Second International Film Photography Competition in Karlovy Vary in 1964. The war and antifascist resistance remained meaningful themes for her and inspired exceptional film stills.

Some of Pathenheimer’s pictures of Jutta Wachowiak’s performance as Hella resemble images of saints, and yet—in the truest sense of the word—are inconspicuous. They were supposed to make audiences curious, and they did. Because before viewers entered a cinema, it was pictures in magazines and showcases that provided their first encounter—whether good or bad—with a film. Pathenheimer described this big responsibility, which she fulfilled professionally and with great skill: “The photo documents the essence. It is my job to recognize it, to convert it from motion picture to photograph, to achieve something through photographic means that is adequate to the onscreen action.” She describes her approach:

An independent job—which is more than shooting the scenes as they play out for the movie camera—that is, snapping shots during filming with more or less random results—in which one, rather displays one’s own considerations and creativity around what is being photographed. To create means to realize what is seen or experienced. I can only realize my intention when I arrange and stage my photos myself. By placing the actor, choosing a different camera angle from the one used in the film and changing the lighting, I achieve the photo I desire and have planned for. I grasp the main point of a scene only when I interpret it photographically. Of course, it requires some effort, concrete instructions and a great deal of empathy to revive the actor’s concentration and thus get good results.⁴

The photographer continued to perfect this approach during collaborations on some 80 films. One must remember that, unlike today, Pathenheimer could not check the image immediately after taking a picture. What she photographed was seen only days later on negatives, when there was no longer the opportunity to repeat the shot.

Like all the still photographs that bear the stamp “Photo: DEFA-Pathenheimer,” her stills of *The Fiancée* are proof of artistic quality. Even today, Jutta Wachowiak remarks: “When you see the photos, you understand half the film.” There is nothing more to add.

Translated by Victoria Rizo Lenshyn

Note: Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are from conversations conducted by Anna Luise Kiss and Dieter Chill in 2017 with Jutta Wachowiak, and in 2016 with Waltraut Pathenheimer and cinematographer Jürgen Brauer.

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⁴ This quote was taken from a hand-written text written in the 1960s by Waltraut Pathenheimer, and is from Pathenheimer’s private archive.