

## *Short Comment*

# 3. The New Sorrows of Young W.

## *Comments on the Film Adaptation of Ulrich Plenzdorf's GDR Novel*

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*Comment on film version of important German literary work.*

### **English Title**

The New Sorrows of Young W.

### **Original Title**

Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.

#### **Production Company**

*Artus-Film Dr. Harald Müller, Südwestfunk (SWF)*

#### **Distributor**

*Artus-Film*

#### **Director**

*Eberhard Itzenplitz*

#### **Producer**

*Rolf von Sydow*

#### **Screenplay**

*Ulrich Plenzdorf*

#### **Cinematographer**

*Franz Rath, Uli Burtin, Martin Hesse, Detlef Ruge*

#### **Editor**

*Bernd Lorbiecki*

#### **Duration**

*112 min.*

#### **Genre**

*Drama*

#### **Cast**

*Klaus Hoffmann (as Edgar Wibeau), Léonie Thelen (as Charlie), Hans-Werner Bussinger (as Edgar's father), Barbara Klein (as Edgar's mother)*

**Year** 1976

## Synopsis

Edgar Wibeau is an excellent young student who leaves his apprenticeship in a factory after an argument with his supervisor to move – as a statement of anti-authoritarian rebellion – from the boring town of Mittenberg to East-Berlin where he works as a house painter. In East-Berlin, he lives in a garden shed and discovers, by chance, Goethe's epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The novel becomes for him a cult book which he uses to distance himself from everyday life in the GDR and position himself as a disaffected outsider. In this period, he falls in love with a young kindergarten teacher, Charlie, who is engaged to and later on marries Dieter. He records audio tapes, in which he reflects upon his literary and musical interests, his frustrated love for Charlie, and recites excerpts from Goethe's *Werther*. He sends these tapes to his best friend Willi, who, however, cannot make any sense of them. In between his solitary activities in the garden cottage (listening to music, painting, recording tapes), his contact with Charlie, and his job, he secretly starts constructing a hydraulic nebula-free spray gun, which his colleague, brigade leader Addi, had tried in vain to develop. When he tries out the device, he is electrocuted. It remains unclear whether Edgar's death was an accident or suicide. After his son's death at age 17, Edgar's father – who didn't take part in Edgar's upbringing – enquires among friends and acquaintances in order to get to know his son and understand the circumstances of his death.

## Critique

Ulrich Plenzdorf counts among the most successful and best known writers and scriptwriters of the GDR. Despite or even due to his socially critical works he was one of the most frequently produced dramatists, who also attracted attention in West Germany. In the mid 1960s he began to develop film material at the DEFA studios, repeatedly taking up contemporary themes and the problems of young people. He wrote the script for *The Legend of Paul and Paula*, one of DEFA's most successful films. Plenzdorf's novel *The New*

*Sorrows of Young W.*, published in 1972, was eagerly received both in the GDR and the Federal Republic. Many young people saw in it a realistic presentation of their own situation. However, particularly in East Germany, Plenzdorf's book reflected the doubts and the criticisms of a generation in regard to the conflict between the easy-going life in the world of blue jeans and rock and roll and the pressure to perform and achieve in the everyday life of the GDR. *The New Sorrows of Young W.* was originally conceived as a film script as early as 1968, but after it had been rejected by DEFA it was first staged in the GDR for the theatre. The premiere of this stage play in 1972 gave rise to lively discussions in the GDR. In 1976, the West German film version was filmed in the Südwestfunk studios in Baden-Baden.

The common thread running through the film narrative is provided by the father, who attempts to reconstruct Edgar's life by making enquiries among various people who had known him. With the help of the 'blue screen procedure', which permits the insertion of one film take inside another, a parallel storyline is created which reproduces the commentaries and recollections of Edgar Wibeau. Edgar transcends time to speak from beyond the grave and is shown in a number of scenes commenting on, supplementing and correcting information. In the West German Artus-Südwestfunk film adaptation individual quotations are faded in as intertitles. This has the effect of detaching the viewer from closely identifying with the visualised filmic events and instead to emphasize the literary references to both Goethe and Plenzdorf.

Itzenplitz and Plenzdorf stay relatively close to the given novelistic structure of *The New Sorrows of Young W.* However, the long monologues in the book are radically shortened. Some events which Edgar relates in the novel are presented and illustrated, for example the encounter with Charlie or later with Dieter or the work in the painting brigade. On the other hand, a number of new dialogue scenes have been inserted: for example the enquiring

father's conversations with Edgar's mother, Addi, 'Old Willi', and the meeting with Charlie or Dieter. They explain and give specific information on Edgar Wibeau's life and his world view. In this way, the film is made more explicit and it leaves less room for interpretation. In spite of these changes the film version stays close to Plenzdorf's text.

The screen adaptation is to some extent unwieldy because the organizational structure of the repeated interventions of the defunct Edgar interrupts the narrative storyline, bringing the scenes with the other figures to a standstill. These insertions enable the interlacing of the levels of action and commentary. In a style taken from epic theatre, Edgar speaks directly to the viewers, thus suggesting an immediacy which is furthermore emphasized by the flippantly youthful manner of speaking. In this way, the inside view of the perspective of the outsider who refuses to accept the norms prevailing in the GDR is presented in a particularly impressive way. In spite of the complexity of the different levels of narration and presentation the potential of Edgar as a figure of identification is scarcely weakened even though the film aims in an epic sense to achieve a distancing effect.

This film version of *The New Sorrows of Young W.*, in which Klaus Hoffmann played the young Wibeau, acquired the status of a cult film in 1970s West Germany, especially in the circles of the left-wing student movement. For his leading role Hoffmann was awarded the German 'Bambi' award for popular media and television.

## REFERENCES

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