

Educating with *The Legend of Rita*

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In an increasingly visual age, films and film-clips can enhance student understanding of historical events in ways that texts often cannot. Films are produced to engage an audience and draw them into an alternative world created on screen. They establish empathy for their characters, linking viewers on both rational and emotional levels with the individuals and events portrayed. Instructors can use the engaging nature of film to connect students with a historical period while also illustrating multiple perspectives from that era via different characters' actions and interests. Film can therefore provide a starting point for meaningful discussion about particular events and about the "spirit of the times" reflected in them. This contribution explores some of the problems and benefits of using fictional visual media in courses. Film can be viewed both as a descriptor of the period described as well as a "text" from the period during which it was produced. My commentary will concentrate on this media less as historical evidence and more as interpretation of history, although I find both aspects important. While *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) and *The Lives of Others* (2006) have attracted more attention, the film I find best for portraying issues related to divided Germany is *The Legend of Rita* (2000).¹ The West German Volker Schlöndorff and the East German Wolfgang Kohlhaase collaborated on the film's script. Under the direction of Schlöndorff, the film benefits from both perspectives and shows each side of the Iron Curtain from the perspective of its inhabitants.²

The Legend of Rita, based loosely on the experiences of members of the Red Army Faction (RAF), starts by showing the first contact between the protagonist Rita Voigt and Stasi agent "Erwin" after she arrives at Schönefeld Airport on her way to West Berlin. This initial meeting proves critical to the plot as Rita and her colleagues later flee from West Berlin into the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The story line traces the arch of Rita's life from her activities as a terrorist in the Federal Republic (FRG) to her conformity as a worker

in the GDR. It shows the idealism that drove her as well as the practical problems facing her and her colleagues, thereby offering a commentary on the 1968 generation. Schlöndorff establishes the young terrorists' motives early in the narrative by depicting a bank robbery. During the burglary, Rita and her colleagues lecture bank patrons and workers about the need to destroy capitalism, declaring that "ownership is theft." This scene and dialogue complements my discussion of leftist youth protest as well as the rise of terrorism in the FRG during the 1970s.

Schlöndorff sets the most dramatic events in the West but the majority of the film concentrates on Rita's life in the GDR. She and her colleagues flee there after they kill a guard and lawyer during a prison break of a member of their terrorist group. A scene in which these idealist Marxists interact with Stasi agents (including Erwin) during a barbecue provides a useful starting point to discuss different perspectives on Marxism. The group completes paramilitary training and seeks to fight in global hot spots. After a brief stint in Lebanon and then in Paris, the group is forced to return to the GDR when Rita shoots a policeman. At this point the film changes pace as Rita decides to stay in the GDR and take up a new identity. The rest of the story focuses on Rita's experiences in which her life as a German and then international terrorist ends, replaced by the banality of daily life in the GDR. She creates a fictional past (the "legend" of the title) and goes to work at a textile factory. The film provides ample opportunity to analyze different aspects of East German everyday life. It illustrates factory celebrations, summer holidays, donations for foreign causes, the gendered nature of work, the prevalence of western television, and East German views of the FRG. By juxtaposing the experience of Rita, who wanted to be in the GDR (both according to her legend and her beliefs), with the skepticism of East Germans, the film depicts the malaise that some East Germans experienced leading up to 1989. The film ends

chronologically with the early months of 1990. Schlöndorff shows reactions to the fall of the wall. Rita again stands out as she chastises her coworkers for their desire for consumption in the new GDR that will soon unify with the Federal Republic.

The characters in the film are complex and well developed. One sees, for instance, Rita's attempts to integrate into and yet at the same time to improve her adopted society and her perhaps idealistic efforts to defend a third way after the fall of the wall. On the other hand her extremism, namely her involvement in a bank robbery, a prison break, and a police shooting are continuously relived in the film either through newscasts from the West that broadcast authorities' continued search for her or in her own admissions to loved ones including the disenchanted coworker/lover Tatjana and a man who wanted to marry her. This complexity extends to the other characters, including Rita's Stasi liaison, agent Erwin. Erwin, who Rita assumes is using a false name, is in many ways living his own legend as a Stasi agent. The viewer is told that Erwin has a wife and family but he still makes a pass at Rita. The viewer is left to ponder what his family life must be like because the film focuses exclusively on Erwin's work as he tries to prevent Rita from being discovered both in the East and more importantly in the West. After she is "uncovered" in her first location, he moves her to a new place and sets up another "legend" for her. This paternalistic approach reflects the role that some Stasi agents thought they played in society. Still, one sees that this paternalism is also closely linked to his willingness to use all means necessary to carry out his mission to protect Rita. For example, Erwin imprisons Rita's lover Tatjana merely to prevent her from talking with her colleagues about Rita. At the end of the film, we learn that all his efforts were for naught as the West German government had known all along that Rita and others were hiding in the GDR. The plot provides ample material to discuss the methods of the Stasi and the effects of the Cold War on individuals in Germany. It is fitting that at the end of the film both Erwin and Rita feel betrayed by the GDR. In their shared willingness to exploit people for larger goals, the terrorist and the Stasi agent had common ground as "revolutionaries" and both were ultimately disappointed by the unification of Germany. Still, the Stasi agent adjusts to the new conditions more quickly than Rita, who in the last scene is shot by an East German policeman as she tries to run a roadblock set up to find her.

Using film as a pedagogical tool has some potential pitfalls. First, if instructors rely on film too much, students may lose interest. I generally choose film clips instead of entire films and often use only the first half of this particular film. Another risk is that students who view many films in classrooms may become convinced that all films are accurate historical portrayals. In a study of two high school classrooms, students found movies more accurate after watching five to

seven films in a year-long history class. To my knowledge this small study has not been replicated on the college level but it may indicate a larger trend.³ I usually show only one feature film and spend time contextualizing it. I also tend to mention in my lectures other popular films to both critique and compliment them. While I have found that my students are more culturally oriented toward visual than print media and therefore appreciate the use of film. They are also generally unused to critically analyzing this format.

Films present instructors with other challenges, such as the manner in which they often simplify more complex stories for the sake of the narrative. For instance, in *The Legend of Rita* one character represents multiple historical figures. Rita was originally based on Inge Viett but the character came to represent an entire generation of terrorists.⁴ I explain in class that Rita represents this amalgamation of different RAF terrorist experiences and Erwin represents elements of the Stasi. I have found in other classes that using films that are directly based on a book (either a novel or a historical account) sometimes causes confusion as one character in the film often represents multiple characters in the book. This problem too can be resolved in class discussion.

While films with subtitles often lead to groans from students in my survey classes, I have found that in the upper level there are a number of students that enjoy foreign films and a few who can even understand some German. Thus, the experience of watching and reading is not as "foreign" to them as it is to my survey students. Showing German films has a further advantage in that the actors are generally unknown to students and therefore they can take the portrayals more seriously. Students can establish empathy with the character (and not the actor), making the portrayal more convincing or "real." While this does put an additional burden on the instructor to discuss the film, it has the advantage that it focuses viewer attention away from the actors themselves and on the events portrayed.

Students often remark that a film made an event "real" to them. There is a danger that they take away more from the film than from readings or lectures so I find it important to use class discussion to teach how to evaluate this visual media. As popular interest in historical film persists in the United States and Germany, students will continue to view such films long after their graduation. I hope that my students are better prepared to analyze visual media and challenge assumptions portrayed in them. Although there are some difficulties with using film, I have found films and film clips to be extremely useful as pedagogical tools.

Notes:

1. Volker Schlöndorff, dir., *The Legend of Rita*, 2000. VHS. Kino International Corporation, 2001.
2. For more on this collaboration and the use of typically East German products in the film see Jennifer Marston William, "When West Meets East and Decides to Stay: Shared Historical Experience in Volker Schlöndorff's "Stille Nach dem Schuss," *German Studies Review*, vol. 28 no. 1 (February 2005): 127-40.
3. Alan Marcus, "Students Making Sense of the Past" in Alan Marcus, ed., *Celluloid Blackboard Teaching History with Film*, (Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, 2007), 121-66.
4. Hans-Bernard Moeller and George Lellis, Volker Schlöndorff's Cinema: Adaptation, Politics and the "Movie-Appropriate", (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 311.