

## *Enlightenment Guaranteed* Some Remarks on Doris Dörrie, Japan and Zen

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### Abstract

The German film director Doris Dörrie (born in 1955) concerned herself much not only with Japan but also with Zen Buddhism. This enabled her to transcend mere representations of national and cultural entities (such as “Germany” and “Japan”), their differences and relations or non-relations, and instead to imagine a trans-national and trans-cultural sphere based on human troubledness and Zen practice’s answer to that. Our paper firstly gives insight into Dörrie’s reception in Japan and finds support there to deal secondly with her tragicomic essay film *Enlightenment Guaranteed* (released in 2000) in regard to some correlations between Zen Buddhism and film.

Japan’s film market, the world’s third largest box office (approximately 1.6 billion Euro after China’s approximately 2.3 billion and North America’s 8.2 billion), traditionally owes a high share to domestic productions. Japanese films account for approximately 60% of Japan’s market compared to German films, which hold a 25% share of the German film market. At the same time, however, complete figures for releases of imported films in Japan are also significantly high. This is particularly true when compared to China, where the domestic production has become similarly strong in recent years, but where the market access for foreign films has so far been very limited.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the Foreign Films Importer-Distributors Association of Japan counted more than 500 foreign films. These included seven from Germany, 175 from the USA, 40 from the UK, and 22 from France. The year 2014 was no exception with regard to how German films fared in Japan. In 2013, the ratio was 513 to nine. In the mid-1980s, no more than ten pictures from West and East Germany were screened publicly per year. According to the information provided by German Films Service + Marketing, the figures for theatrical releases only were lower by approximately half.

The year 1988 was, after all, a quite considerable vintage year for German films as Wim Wenders’ *Der Himmel über Berlin* (Engl. *Wings of Desire*, 1987) as well as Doris Dörrie’s *Männer* (Engl. *Men*, 1985) reached Japanese audiences, each attaining different levels of success. Each film equally presented two German directors, both of whom developed

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. GERMAN FILMS SERVICE + MARKETING.

intimate relationships with Japan. Their combined range of films included Wenders' documentaries on film director Ozu Yasujiro (*Tōkyō-Ga*, 1985) and on fashion designer Yamamoto Yōji (*Yamamoto*, 1989), both of which were dedicated to Japanese art and style, and Dörrie's Zen documentary *How to Cook Your Life* (2007) and her tragicomedies *Erleuchtung garantiert* (Engl. *Enlightenment Guaranteed*, 2000), *Der Fischer und seine Frau* (Engl. *The Fisherman and His Wife*, 2005), and *Kirschblüten – Hanami* (Engl. *Cherry Blossoms – Hanami*, 2008), which were largely shot in Japan. The following remarks refer to Dörrie. Media observation and research on her relationship with Japan in general and to Zen Buddhism in particular has recently intensified. While Japanese and American media as well as the International Buddhist Film Festival<sup>2</sup> claimed Dörrie and her Japanese enterprises rather enthusiastically for Zen Buddhism<sup>3</sup>, German media – quite consistently from the *Spiegel*, a weekly magazine generally critical of religion, to the Christian *epd* and the conservative *F.A.Z.* – were highly skeptical of the religious legitimacy of this kind of spirituality presented by an artist.<sup>4</sup> Film studies' contributions partly identified integral forms of Zen in her works,<sup>5</sup> partly dealt with the critical judgment that this is “not Zen!”<sup>6</sup>. Analyses from Buddhism studies stated a severe lack of contextual understanding of Zen Buddhism in Dörrie's line of work,<sup>7</sup> but nevertheless generally admitted the possibility of an “expression” of Buddhism “through fiction, and film.”<sup>8</sup>

In our analysis, we assume that there is no authentic state of a religion in general and Zen Buddhism in particular but that syncretism is the only form in which religion exists at any given time.<sup>9</sup> Western Buddhism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century is as much Buddhism as are the very different forms of Buddhism passed on through the centuries and cultures from ancient India to Korea, China and Japan. In fact, Dörrie's films stress this transnational as well as transcultural dynamic of what is called Buddhism and reflect what she grasps as Japanese Zen Buddhism from sources such as Joko Beck's notorious writings<sup>10</sup> but also from participant observation<sup>10</sup> of Zen communities in Japan and Europe. Moreover, we presume that these movies do not suggest a secondary adaptation of Zen Buddhism in art or a mere aesthetic representation of a primarily given religion, but that they rather display the congeniality of religion on the one hand and textual and performative art on the other, or more precisely: they present Zen as film, and film as Zen.

<sup>2</sup> *Enlightenment Guaranteed* has so far been programmed four times in the International Buddhist Film Festival: the first time in 2004 in Washington DC, the last time in 2012 in Bangkok.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for example TANAKA 1996 and 2002, and HOWE 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. SCHNEEKLOTH 2000, SIEDENBERG 2000, GANSERA 2000, and KILB 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. MARSCHALL 2014.

<sup>6</sup> BENBOW 2012: 121.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. BECKER 2014.

<sup>8</sup> CHO 2009: 162.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. GEORGI *et al.* 2001: 539, 541.

<sup>10</sup> BECK 1996.

Zen Buddhism seems to be particularly suitable for this purpose since it is not so much teaching as it is practice or, in other words, performance, just as film is basically a performative art. Their secular approach to religion notwithstanding, these films' attitude towards religion and "enlightenment" is not so much that of a "mockumentary"<sup>11</sup> mocking the audience's beliefs in depiction and message. Rather, they owe much to a certain kind of sentimentality in the way they support humanitarian and edificatory views in order to reconcile everyday human crises. In this regard, too, Dörrie finds a pragmatic convergence of religious and cinematic functions.

In chapter 1, we will give a necessarily short overview of the rather inconsiderable reception of the director's work in Japan from *Men* to *Am I Beautiful?* In chapter 2, we will elaborate on the more significant Japanese reception of Dörrie's first film on Zen, *Enlightenment Guaranteed*. This will help elucidate her Japanese enterprises and provide a detailed background for the discussion of *Enlightenment Guaranteed* in chapter 3. In this case, Japan is not understood exclusively as a national entity with a particularly strong culture, but also as a space in which cultural exchange and transnational as well as transcultural phenomena, such as Zen Buddhism with its wider roots in Asia and its outposts in America as well as in Europe, are all the more apparent.

## 1 Japanese Comments on Dörrie's Works from *Men* to *Am I Beautiful?*

*Männer*, titled as *Men* (or in Katakana characters メン, which referred mainly to Western males), was distributed by a subsidiary of Shōchiku, one of Japan's largest studios and known for producing and distributing films by famous directors such as Kitano Takeshi and Miike Takashi, among others. Dörrie's artfully light comedy on virile flaws attained a breakthrough success in mid-80s Germany, thus symbolizing an end to the thoughtful era of New German Cinema. It nevertheless barely resonated with the Japanese public, who was particularly receptive of Rainer Werner Fassbinder at that time. Shimoyama Mineko, the translator of Dörrie's story collection *Was wollen Sie von mir?* (Engl. *What Do You Want from Me?*, 1989; Jp. *Sutekina dansei to shiriau niwa* 素敵男性と知り合うには, 1992), stated quite moderately in her 1992 afterword to the book that *Men* "did not become the talk of the town".<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, *Sekai eiga jinmei jiten* 世界映画人名事典, the Japanese encyclopedia of world film production published in 2011, listed Dörrie primarily for *Men*, regarding this film as a turning point in German cinema.<sup>13</sup> *Ich und Er* (Engl. *Me and Him*, 1988) was released in 1990 as *Me and Him* (or in Katakana characters ミー&ヒム). This film was introduced as Dörrie's second film in Japan and distributed by Gaga Communication,

<sup>11</sup> BENBOW 2012: 121.

<sup>12</sup> SHIMOYAMA 1992: 220. All translations from Japanese are ours.

<sup>13</sup> SEKAI EIGASHI KENKYŪKAI 2011: 4458.

another major Japanese film agency even today. Due to the American production background of this movie (the then leading German producer Bernd Eichinger was partnered with Columbia Pictures and hired American actors), the Japanese media promoted this film heavily prior to its cinematic release. There was a full-page preview in the leading film magazine *Kinema junpō* キネマ旬報. This preview first recalled the previous movie, *Men*, to be an unusually light pop culture comedy for a German film. It then revealed the German director's newest movie as filmed in New York and based on the 1971 novel *Io e lui* by the Italian author Alberto Moravia. Thus advertised with a good deal of Occidentalism, the erotic comedy was said to be "very promising."<sup>14</sup> In reality, however, the film about a talkative penis ("him") that belonged to an architect ("me") provoked little reaction from the Japanese press. In Europe and North America, it received mainly devastating reviews.

Japanese reserve regarding Dörrie began to melt following the releases of four more films during the next decade: *Paradies* (Engl. *Paradise*, 1986) as *Paradise* or in Katakana characters パラダイス (distributed in 1992 by Cine Saison), *Keiner liebt mich* (Engl. *Nobody Loves Me*, 1995) as *Aisare sakusen* 愛され作戦 (distributed in 1996 by Espace Sarou), *Bin ich schön?* (Engl. *Am I Beautiful?*, 1998) as *Am I Beautiful?* or in Katakana characters アム・アイ・ビューティフル? (distributed in 2000 once more by Espace Sarou), and *Erleuchtung garantiert* (2000) as *MON-ZEN* もんぜん (distributed in 2002 by *Kinema junpō*). Film scholar and German Studies Professor Segawa Yūji published a comprehensive appraisal of *Paradise* in *Kinema junpō*.<sup>15</sup> He gave a brief overview of its storyline replete with marital problems, personal dead-ends, and failed escape attempts. He also cited Dörrie's early cinematic works such as *Mitten ins Herz* (Engl. *Straight through the Heart*, 1983) and *Im Innern des Wals* (Engl. *In the Belly of the Whale*, 1985). Segawa's perspective focused on a new type of feminist film that dealt less with women and the social conditions in which they lived, but rather with men as the weaker sex.

In her review of *Nobody Loves Me*, also for *Kinema junpō*, documentary filmmaker Tanaka Chiyoko detected a new profile and image of German cinema in Dörrie's work that overhauled Fassbinder's model. However, she harshly criticized *Nobody Loves Me* (along with film critics worldwide), indicating that this work lacked shape and might be "at the end only half finished."<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the same film was warmly acclaimed by film critic Udagawa Seiichi for developing a "unique mood" and a cohesive atmosphere along with its special kind of optimism within pessimism. Udagawa alluded to Ernst Lubitsch and the proverbial "Lubitsch touch" when he attested that the director had cultivated a distinctive "Dörrie touch," exceeding her earlier experiments with *Men* and *Me and Him*. He was swayed by the relationship between *Nobody Loves Me's* dominant motifs of carnivals and

<sup>14</sup> [Anonymus] 1990: 82.

<sup>15</sup> SEGAWA 1992.

<sup>16</sup> TANAKA 1996: 78.

death, by the strong human impulse that the lonesome protagonist Fanny Fink bore, and by an end that revealed little pedagogy.<sup>17</sup> This was otherwise rare praise for this film. Just before the theatrical release of *Am I Beautiful?*, critic Matsushita Yumiko delivered a more general tribute to the director entitled “Dōris Derie no sekai ドーリス・デリエの世界” (“The World of Doris Dörrie”) in *Cinema Journal* シネマジャーナル. Matsushita’s portrait of Dörrie included notes from her biography, with some accent on the years spent at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, and quotations from her literary works. The critic paid tribute not only to Dörrie’s “unique sense of humor,” but also to her remarkable ability to make realistic films out of fantastic motifs.<sup>18</sup> A Japanese edition of Dörrie’s story collection *Am I Beautiful?*, originally published in 1994, was released in 1997 as *Atashi, kirei?* あたし、きれい? This edition appeared three years before the film’s release in Japan. In his afterword, translator Nishikawa Ken’ichi provided a more comprehensive study on Dörrie as a literary author, paying much respect to Dörrie’s synthesis of humor and sadness and her unique style of casual tragedies.<sup>19</sup>

## 2 Japanese Comments on Enlightenment Guaranteed / MON-ZEN

Dörrie’s most positive reception so far among Japanese audiences was for her first film shot in Japan: the camcorder-production *Enlightenment Guaranteed*. This film was released in Germany in January 2000, then released in Japan in 2002 under the title *MON-ZEN* (in capital alphabet letters) by the Japanese distributor *Kinema junpō*. By creating a quite offhanded impression and leaving specific ideas about Japan to its main characters, this minimally cast film inspired much more compassion than Dörrie’s later, far more elaborate and ambitious movies related to Japan: *The Fisherman and His Wife* and *Cherry Blossoms – Hanami*, the latter of which was widely considered in Germany as her “most powerful film yet.”<sup>20</sup> There was no theatrical release of either of these films in Japan. They could only be viewed at a few non-commercial events, such as the Aichi International Women’s Film Festival in 2011 or a series of public events organized in the context of the program “150 Years of Friendship between Germany and Japan.” In contrast, *MON-ZEN* had quite a successful release in autumn 2002. It was reprised during the Tōkyō International Film Festival in autumn 2007 (along with Wenders’ *Tōkyō-Ga*, Jp. 東京画), after which it was released to Tsutaya, Japan’s biggest video rental store chain, where the subtitled movie is currently the only one of Dörrie’s films available.

A glance at the DVD-shelves at Tsutaya may reveal the category by which most German films are sorted. Besides classic achievements such as *Metropolis* and *M*, one would find

<sup>17</sup> UDAGAWA 1996: 184.

<sup>18</sup> MATSUSHITA 2004: 48.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. NISHIKAWA 1997: 265 f.

<sup>20</sup> [Anonymus] 2008: 178.

mostly those works centered on notorious events and conditions in modern German history, such as *Das Boot* (Engl. *The Boat*, Jp. *U-bōto* U・ボート), *Der Untergang* (Engl. *Downfall*, Jp. *Hitorā – Saigo no jūni nichikan* ヒトラー ～最期の12日間～), and *Das Leben der Anderen* (Engl. *The Lives of Others*, Jp. *Yoki hito no tame no sonata* 善き人のためのソナタ). In that regard, Dörrie's *Enlightenment Guaranteed* or *MON-ZEN* (along with Wenders' *Tōkyō-Ga*) is quite a remarkable exception being a German film shot in Japan. Japan "as a perspective for a new meaning of life,"<sup>21</sup> as an occasion for unmasking, namely its visitors,<sup>22</sup> and as an island of salvation<sup>23</sup> are recurring themes in this multi genre artist's cinematic works, as well as in her literary writings. These themes are also reflected in her interviews, e.g. in those that appeared in the *New York Times* in 2009 ("Seeking the Essence of Japan? Look to Germany")<sup>24</sup>, in the *Asahi shinbun* newspaper in 2012 ("Nihon wa jiyū ni nareru kokyō 日本は自由になれる故郷", Engl. "Japan is the homeland where I can be free")<sup>25</sup>, and in the 2013 research project *Nipponspiration* ("Meisterin der 'kulturellen Kreisbewegung'", Engl. "Master of the cultural circular motion")<sup>26</sup>. How could the attraction of *Enlightenment Guaranteed* possibly apply to a Japanese audience? One answer lies in the film's dominant Buddhist features that are largely unknown to the widely secularized Japanese public and which cannot properly be considered "Japanese," despite failed attempts during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to label them as such.<sup>27</sup>

The critique of the technically and dramaturgically improvised-looking film in German newspapers and magazines was downright devastating. Tedious, harmless, and factitious as well as unconvincing, unimpressive, and unnecessary were the terms commonly used. To quote the notoriously colorful *Spiegel* magazine arts section: "Wer diese bräsiges Gebetsmühle – und somit echte Prüfung – bis zum Schluss durchhält, gehört mindestens heiliggesprochen [...] so erleuchtend wie eine IKEA-Lampe."<sup>28</sup> Even the generally more cautious Christian film journal *epd Film* found, besides some talented acting, not much more in *Enlightenment Guaranteed* than the construed story of an "Abenteuer-Urlaub mit spirituellen Akzenten."<sup>29</sup> In contrast, public response in Japan and North America was strikingly favorable. The frequently used terms included charming and delightful, realistic and informative, unintrusive and unforgettable. Equally remarkable is the fact that different aspects were emphasized in German film reviews and in predominant Anglo-American research on Dörrie on the one hand and by the Japanese reception of Dörrie's

<sup>21</sup> STERNEBORG 2008: 55.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. REIMER 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. HIRAI 2010; MRUGALLA 2011.

<sup>24</sup> DÖRRIE 2009.

<sup>25</sup> DÖRRIE 2012.

<sup>26</sup> DÖRRIE 2013.

<sup>27</sup> See AMSTUTZ 1997 on the "Case of D.T. Suzuki."

<sup>28</sup> SCHNEEKLOTH 2000.

<sup>29</sup> GANSERA 2000: 39; similarly KILB 2000.

works on the other. The former tended to concentrate particularly on evaluating the German-Japanese cultural encounters in *Enlightenment Guaranteed* and the two subsequent films on/in Japan; more precisely, they weighed Orientalist longings against anti-Orientalist reflections found in the films.<sup>30</sup> The latter tended to overlap with an invigorating discourse in Japan itself that set cultural integrity sensitivities aside and acknowledged the relevance of transnational spheres that could in fact be revealed by Zen Buddhism as an established transnational and even transcultural phenomenon, which comes most directly from China and whose historic roots reach back to India, as shown by the very word Zen (Chinese: Chan), which is a transcription of the Indian word “dhyana.” Zen Buddhism’s modern expansion flourishes, for example, in California and France, thus contributing to a global network in which influences are reciprocal.<sup>31</sup>

In 2000, when the film first premiered in Germany, Yamada Yasuko, a literary scholar specializing in Zen Buddhism in Germany and Europe, referred to *Enlightenment Guaranteed* in an article on Dörrie’s novel *Was machen wir jetzt? (Where Do We Go From Here?, 2000)*. Yamada withheld interpretations and assessments and instead provided outlines and background information on what she referred to as a “Zen double pack.”<sup>32</sup> The novel’s storyline was indeed quite similar to the film’s storyline. The main character, the middle-class career man Fred Kaufmann from Munich, heads for a Zen monastery in Southern France to seek an exit out of his unhappy life and his difficult family circumstances. He finds the way, in accordance with Zen teachings, by focusing on each moment of everyday life and trying to reach a kind of mindfulness that pervades even the smallest activities. Yamada elaborated on Dörrie’s personal experience with her husband’s cancer and demise in 1996, a situation which Dörrie herself recalled as the starting point of her relationship with Buddhism.<sup>33</sup> The death motif had already been unfolded in *Nobody Loves Me* (1995), in which the fatally ill character Orfeo de Altamar plans to escape with the help of star shipped aliens he pretends to know. The question “Where Do We Go From Here?” later found a more practical answer in reference to Zen when Dörrie’s “identity as a practicing (albeit cranky) Buddhist” began to inform “the geographical and philosophical landscapes of her films.”<sup>34</sup> Yamada generally warned against the unrealistic expectations of

<sup>30</sup> Cf. on this debate KUZNIAR 2011: 183: “Dörrie [...] utilizes the Orient as a constitutive outside, allowing the self to find peace through the Other. It demarcates an exotic world, where mysterious, odd rituals abound and to which the Westerner is exposed,” vs. BENBOW 2007: 532: “While the film evinces a fascination for the contradiction between the hectic metropolis Tōkyō and the quiet Zen temples and monasteries, it undermines the kind of romanticizing Orientalism which is only interested in an ostensibly foreign culture. For in these locations, Dörrie provides examples of ethnic drag that underline her critique of German cultural consumption.”

<sup>31</sup> For details see CHO 2009 and CHO 2014.

<sup>32</sup> YAMADA 2000: 67.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. ADORJAN 2000.

<sup>34</sup> DÖRRIE 2009.

Buddhism raised in the novel. However, in Dörrie's "Zen double pack," she saw proof of Buddhism's use and purpose in a global context.

The review of *Enlightenment Guaranteed* in *Kinema junpō* was written by Tanaka Chiyoko, who had not refrained from sharp criticism for *Nobody Loves Me* in the same magazine in 1996. Earlier characterizations such as unnecessary technical complexity, exaggerated characters, overloaded dialogues, and artificial impression did not reappear in the review of *Enlightenment Guaranteed*. Instead, the review's comments included the following: "This is a film of wisdom," "sincere," "truly deep and yet approachable," namely "a film as Zen," i.e., a transposition of the theme into the form, an extension of meditation into the very experience of the film itself.<sup>35</sup> The sound of a bell, with which every new day in the depicted monastery begins, would become the rhythm of the cinematic representation. Improvisation techniques, known for example from the Nouvelle Vague director Jacques Rivette, in which the actors do not rely on a fully formulated script and thereby give the impression of being interviewed, received a new meaning and consistency in this context. The actors were encouraged to focus on the here and now, on the simple duties in the monastery's kitchen, hallway, and garden. The recording camera would then become the teacher of the eternal moment. From this stance, one could ask the question that columnist Hoshina Tatsurō asked in his interview with the proclaimed "ZEN-expert" Dörrie for *Asahi shinbun*: did her cinematic method change through her encounter with Japan? Indeed, Dörrie stated that her cinematic concept was to let Zen principles be film principles, referring hereby to her concentration on every single moment as well as to the minimalist aesthetic means reflected in the *Heart Sutra's* (Jp. *Hannya shingyō* 般若心經) famous line "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (*Shiki soku ze kū, kū soku ze shiki* 色即是空 空即是色).<sup>36</sup> This line is cited verbatim in the film's very last scene and represents a kind of aesthetic code for the entire film.<sup>37</sup>

After a few words of discontent about the first, unduly stereotyped Tōkyō scenes in *Enlightenment Guaranteed*, Tanaka stated her impression that Japan was not presented in this film merely as decoration. In said Tōkyō scenes, the foreign protagonists, two brothers from Germany, are rapidly becoming bankrupt victims of a luxury bar, for which they are actually too casually dressed to be allowed entrance, and of an incomprehensible ATM, on which they manage to overlook the sufficiently large button for the English language option. The assumption that foreigners would automatically lose their way in Tōkyō received neither Tanaka's approval nor that of (alleged) Japanese commentators in internet forums such as *kinenote.com* and *IMDb.com*. Comparisons to Sofia Coppola's *Lost*

<sup>35</sup> TANAKA 2002: 125.

<sup>36</sup> DESHIMARU 2012: 4.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. also HOWE 2001: "Doerrie's movie [...] does not place too much stock in the story, per se. True to its Buddhist sentiments, it's about the journey, not what happens in the end. [...] The movie's greatest asset is its completely disarming attitude."



*in Translation* from 2004 have been the golden thread that has run through these comments since then, more or less surprisingly in favor of *Enlightenment Guaranteed*. “Get in Translation” was considered to be Dörrie’s mantra, while due to a number of highly problematic scenes, Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* was received uneasily by Japanese and Japanese-American audiences.<sup>38</sup>

The film’s careful shift of locations from Tōkyō to the innermost rooms of the Sōjiji temple in the town of Monzen, Ishikawa prefecture, also led the average Japanese audience (average with regard to religious knowledge) from the known into the unknown. This correlated with the experience of the average German audience (average with regard to travel experience) at the film’s beginning, in which the characters travel from suburban Munich to central Tōkyō. Dörrie’s depiction of foreigners’ experiences in Japan has a double bottom. Firstly, it withdrew from a national cultural impression of the others in Tōkyō. Secondly, it discloses a transnational sphere in a monastery that is determined not by anyone’s native tongue, since sutras in Zen are not chanted “in Japanese”<sup>39</sup> but in a liturgical language register formed, simply stated, by a Sanskrit fundament, its translation into classical Chinese and a modification by the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese letters’ sound equivalents. This is, however, no vernacular that any Chinese or Japanese national would understand. From here emerged what might have surprised even the Japanese viewers and what bound the audience to the film’s extensive, as well as intensive, scenes of monastic life. In this context, Tanaka in her review for *Kinema junpō* expressed amazement particularly about the fact that Dörrie obtained such extensive permission to shoot scenes in the temple. These scenes ranged from sitting meditation, sutra recitation, and personal instruction by the abbot (a less media-friendly character than the American Zen teacher Edward Espe Brown in Dörrie’s *How to Cook Your Life*), to the kitchen and the toilet, the garden and the bathroom. Dörrie explained in her *New York Times* interview: “The abbot said, ‘Well, you can shoot the movie here, but you have to undergo the entire procedure: get up at 3, meditate until 4, then sutra singing and clean the monastery from 6:30 a.m. to 7 at night.’ I said, ‘Aye, aye, sir.’ I did not think he was being serious.”<sup>40</sup>

### 3 Zen Buddhism and *Enlightenment Guaranteed*

Tanaka Chiyoko’s worthwhile insights into *Enlightenment Guaranteed* provide a basis for further deliberations about the film’s relationship with Japan and Buddhism. On the outside, Dörrie’s first and constitutive Zen Buddhist film enterprise is a bitter-sweet comedy about two middle-class German men in their midlife crises. It begins with various

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, [Anonymus] 2004 and RICH 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Mistakenly so BENBOW 2012: 134.

<sup>40</sup> DÖRRIE 2009.

difficulties found in private and professional everyday life. The abbot would later say – and the protagonists would carefully listen to him – that the meaning of these complications is that of muddy cat footprints on the freshly cleaned wooden floor of a monastery hallway. The opening argument belongs to Uwe (played by Uwe Ochsenknecht, who is well known for his acting in *The Boat* and *Schtonk!*, and also for starring in Dörrie's *Men* and *Am I Beautiful?*), whose emotional state sways between surprise, disbelief, despair, and weariness. This is contrary to the abbot's later recommendation to focus solely and completely on emotions in order to consume them entirely and forever. Uwe, assumingly in his mid-40s, is a kitchen consultant and married father of four young children. He experiences a total nervous breakdown when his wife suddenly leaves him and takes the children with her. After a frantic call to his brother Gustav (played by the lesser-known entertainer Gustav Peter Wöhler, who had already appeared in Dörrie's previous production *Am I Beautiful?*), Uwe forces his way into his apartment. The plump little Gustav, with round glasses on his gentle eyes, is also in his forties, but rather acting as the younger brother. A Feng Shui consultant, he is childless and lives with his female (and, as we learn later, unfaithful) partner. He has been preparing very carefully for a Zen trip to Japan. The departure date is the next day. The heavily crying and increasingly drunken Uwe comes up with a virtual "Schnapsidee," as he calls it himself the next morning, in order to accompany his brother. Gustav first objects to the idea by citing Uwe's oft proven disrespect for Zen, but later insists on the decision. The Zen monastery in Monzen on the Noto Peninsula now awaits two guests from Germany. *MON-ZEN*, the Japanese title that is so conspicuously different from the original title *Erleuchtung Garantiert* and the English title *Enlightenment Guaranteed*, refers (based on alphabetical letters instead of the Chinese characters) to the name of the city Monzen 門前 (literally meaning "in front of the gate"), while highlighting the suffix "zen" 前 (meaning "in front of") as "Zen" 禪 in the religious sense. Together with this pun, the film distributor captured the principle of false etymology that Uwe practices on the way to the airport: the unwilling traveler interprets "Monzen" as "Mon Dieu," a very lucky misunderstanding as discovered later.

On the plane, Gustav starts to quote parables and aphorisms from his Zen book, that fail to uplift his desperate brother. This very book was a copy of *Now Zen* (1995) written by the American Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck (1917–2011), the German translation of which was published in 1996, the same year Dörrie began to study Buddhism. This book is carried and cited by Gustav during their first night trip through Tōkyō. However, it vanishes during the course of the film, along with all the other evidence of the Japan images that Gustav had cultivated in Germany, like the miniature rock garden in his living room that Uwe mistook for an ashtray. Recurrent motifs in Munich as well as in Tōkyō and Monzen are symbols of death, namely crows, cemeteries, and falling leaves, whose melancholic meanings nevertheless are not cited in the film's dialogues. These death omens refer to Dörrie's personal experience with her middle-aged husband's death, which led her to

practice Zen. They cover Uwe's and Gustav's story like a thin black veil. Even when Dörrie's two protagonists, who are riddled by their respective midlife crisis, imitate the crows' cry later in the film, they are unaware of death's dark presence that might concern them soon enough.

Tōkyō, the metropolis full of surging crowds, flooded with neon lights and noise, appears to engulf everything. Alterity and the visitors' consternation are expressed manifoldly and at the same time concentrated in a single scene. In a restaurant, a colorfully costumed person wearing a tiger mask waves directly into the camera and then leaves through the exit door. This appearance, which passes without comment, alludes to the newspaper deliverer Harada Yoshiro in Tōkyō's Shinjuku district. Harada assumed the identity of the Tiger Mask Man or Shinjuku Tiger 新宿タイガー in the late 1970s and has since become an urban legend. Uwe and Gustav are soon wandering around in the night without money, without orientation, and with no means of communication. As Zen enthusiast Gustav falls rapidly into despair and finally calls out "I'm tired!", Uwe reads cynically from the Zen book by Joko Beck: "Have patience with every day of your life." After this turbulent Day One in Tōkyō, the two Germans sleep in cardboard boxes between the gravestones of a downtown cemetery (see Fig. 1). They do not comment on this strange choice, although the cardboard boxes are virtually like coffins from which they rise, for now, to a new life. They start their Day Two as the first customers of a new trading day in a traditional department store, respectfully bowed to by a long line of staff. Uwe very disrespectfully steals a completely yellow tent from the outdoor equipment section. This small, brightly colored tent helps the mismatched brothers find and live with each other. In a way, it replaces the Zen book by Charlotte Joko Beck, that was carried and used by both men without positive effects on their relationship.



Fig. 1 Production photo from *Enlightenment Guaranteed*; from left: Uwe Ochsenknecht, Gustav Peter Wöhler. Source: Deutsches Filminstitut.

On the large Shibuya Crossing, a topos of filmed and photographed Tōkyō, the brothers lose each other. The digital camera held by cinematographer Hans Karl Hu exclusively follows Gustav, who rapidly passes through all stages of humiliation within the next several hours. He experiences complete consternation at the sight of a Butoh dance performance in front of the Isetan department store in Shinjuku (the spooky performance itself being another death omen similar to the macabre appearance of Butoh dancer Endo Tadashi in *Cherry Blossoms – Hanami*), common theft in a Kaiten-Sushi (a conveyor belt sushi restaurant), and desperate begging on a street with a poorly performed German version of the 1980's disco hit *I Will Survive*. Finally, a young German-speaking woman from Serbia named Anica (played by Anica Dobra, who also starred in *Am I Beautiful?*) passes by. As she states in accent-free German (obviously gained by living in Germany for a significant amount of time, as Anica Dobra did), she ran a tailor shop in Belgrade and has been living in Tōkyō for three years, visiting the office of fashion designer Yamamoto Yōji twice weekly in order to become his assistant. Since she has not yet been able to even meet the maestro, to whom Wenders dedicated his documentary *Yamamoto*, she earns her living as a waitress at the “Hofbräuhaus” in Shinjuku (at that time ran by the former Hilton and Keio Plaza chef Hartmut Keitel). Anica lives with a Sumo wrestler with whom she speaks in fluent Japanese. In total, this young and fearless woman with a background in Eastern European post-communism, presumed immigrant experience in Germany, and playing a German waitress in “Hofbräuhaus” Tokyo can be regarded as a truly transnational and transcultural figure. In that regard, she is an obvious parallel to Buddhism, which is discovered in the film as a phenomenon not restricted to national or cultural boundaries.

With Anica at his side, Gustav discovers the yellow tent in a dark spot of the city. The tent is illuminated from the inside, where they find Uwe. As a sort of punishment for their cultural misconceptions of Japan to date, both brothers are forced to play the rather ridiculous and again, albeit reversed, misconceived roles of Bavarian taproom waiters in the “Hofbräuhaus” in order to earn money and to prepare to approach Zen Buddhism (see Fig. 2). While the eager Zen student Gustav has forgotten the name of their destination over 300 miles away, Monzen, Uwe reminds him correctly based on his false etymology “Mon Dieu”. Thus, Uwe finally reaches something (here the Monzen monastery) of which he had no ambition to reach (as suggested by his jokes about Monzen). He displays, in other words, the mental state of *mushotoku* 無所得, in which no result is meant to be achieved. The storyteller Doris Dörrie hereby imitated the structure and logic of a Buddhist parable.



Fig. 2 Production photo from *Enlightenment Guaranteed*; from left: Uwe Ochsenknecht, Anica Dobra, Gustav Peter Wöhler. Source: Deutsches Filminstitut.

The monastery stands silent in the nightly darkness with no people and no neon lights. It is difficult to identify what is actually there, since the place is barely illuminated and the architecture and gardens are unassuming. There is nothing to understand or not to understand yet, very much in contrast to the superficially similar contrast between Tōkyō (with the Park Hyatt Hotel) and Kyōto (with the Zen Buddhist Nanzen-ji temple) in *Lost in Translation*. In that film, it soon becomes all too clear to the lead character Charlotte that she will find no answers to her questions in the temple. A young monk (not credited) welcomes the shy guests. They imitate the monk's hand folding and bowing, and take off their shoes, whereby the monk carefully corrects the position of Uwe's removed shoes. They enter the inside of the monastery. Hard physical exercises are expected of them: arising at three o'clock in the morning, cold-water ablution, perennial sitting meditations (*zazen* 座禪) and sutra recitations, highly ritualized mealtimes (*ōryōki* 応量器), exhaustive clean-ups in the monastery's hallways and gardens, and collection of alms in the neighborhood. All of this is largely identical to the weekly routine reported in any Zen monastery.<sup>41</sup> Except for a short glimpse of the neighborhood street, we see nothing of the monastery's exterior realm. The film hereby draws its audience into a sort of optical enclosure. Any sense of time is repealed. The number of days and weeks spent in the monastery are undetermined, but Gustav's complete breakdown and both brothers' process of change certainly do not occur over a matter of days. The acoustics carry no familiar meanings or messages, they do not call for hermeneutical judgments. This applies even to the Japanese audiences as they would understand as little of the sutra texts as the

<sup>41</sup> Cf. MAGUIRE 2000: 91–128.

German audiences would understand a Latin Mass. In accordance with its core concepts,<sup>42</sup> Zen thus far appears as a practice, not as a teaching.

The athletic and pragmatic Uwe easily finds his way to monastic life, gets along well with his monastic brothers, leaves his divorce drama behind him, and begins redesigning the monastery's kitchen. He is obviously at peace with his professional determination from Munich. The kitchen motif hereby hints to Dörrie's Zen documentary *How to Cook Your Life* from 2007.<sup>43</sup> The thoughtful and anxious Gustav, on the other hand, is overburdened by the physical disciplining and finds no use for his professional occupation as a Feng Shui consultant. However, he seeks advice from the abbot, in whom he hopes to find a paternal authority. He actually receives help from the abbot in a private encounter with the master (*dokusan* 独参). The Buddhist aphorism that Gustav takes away from the *dokusan* is to accept oneself as one is under the premise that the other is just like oneself. In that regard, Zen appears as a teaching and brings Gustav onto the right path. In Munich, he had felt uncomfortable dealing with a homosexual client (played in a special appearance by German star actor and sex idol Heiner Lauterbach). While meditating, Gustav remembers this amongst other scenes of the film such as his humiliating theft in a sushi restaurant back in Tōkyō. Here, the Zen maxim "The other is like you" receives a surprisingly pragmatic meaning since it prepares Gustav to discover and accept his own gay identity later in the story. From a conceptual point of view, it becomes clear again that Dörrie tried to merge Zen principles with cinematic principles when she inter-related meditation and a flashback montage. This is all the more appropriate since successful sitting meditation in Zen, as achieved by Gustav at that state (called the state of *hishiryō* 非思量 consciousness), does not mean non-thinking but rather to let pass the appearing thoughts and memories.

With "Domo arigato" on their lips, the brothers leave their helpful hosts, who have gathered to say goodbye in front of the temple. In this scene, more than ever in *Enlightenment Guaranteed's* synthesis of documentary and feature film, Uwe and Gustav appear as Uwe Ochsenknecht and Gustav Peter Wöhler, who bid farewell to their true companions with whom they had to live for the sake of Dörrie's cinema of participating observation. After a short stay at an Onsen, they cope again with the crowds and the noise of Tōkyō. They easily use the smoothly gliding chain of transportation back to the capital and move fluently in the pedestrian flows there, which Dörrie in her interview for *Asahi shinbun* reflected as a peculiar simultaneity of order and sensitivity. As they would do for sitting meditation, they sit on a bench in the Tōkyō Metro underground to observe the people hurrying and coordinating appointments on their mobile phones. It is Uwe, who had earlier been rather robust and unthinking, who now asks, implicitly supported by

<sup>42</sup> Cf. SUZUKI 1964: 34 f.

<sup>43</sup> On *How to Cook Your Life* cf. BECKER 2014.

Gustav: “Where are all these people heading to?” This is not so much a sign for remaining outsiders in a specific cultural encounter,<sup>44</sup> but a questioning of human longings in general.

On a ride from the main station to the Shinjuku district, the afternoon passengers are elderly people and schoolchildren who show no reaction to the following conversation of the two foreigners. Gustav calls to his brother sitting face-to-face on the other side and says, “I’m gay.” Uwe asks back, “Who’s gay?” Gustav states, “Me! I’m gay!” Uwe asks, “Really? Aha... Since when?” Gustav replies, “Since always, I think.” Gustav smiles sheepishly and relieved. Uwe nods respectfully and says nothing more. Afterwards, Uwe and Gustav sit at the counter of a ramen noodle restaurant, which is actually a branch of the “Hakata-Tenjin” chain that advertises itself with Tenjin, the Shinto deity of scholarship. During their lunch, they practice the *ōryōki*-ritual from the monastery. While unfolding the napkin, one of the small errors that used to upset Gustav occurs. However, he now no longer allows himself to be distracted and pursues the ritual consistently following the concept of *zanshin* 残心: giving full presence to the action at hand. The sounds of sutra recitation we have previously heard at the Sōjiji Temple begin to fill the soundtrack stunningly.

The film ends with an evening scene in which the brothers’ shining yellow, almost golden, tent in its own way gives sense to the film’s title *Enlightenment Guaranteed*. Ironically, the only guaranteed “enlightenment” / “Erleuchtung” was determined to be switching on a light. The film poster from the theatrical release in Germany in 2000 promised exactly that: it featured a red round light switch against a white background, thus looking like the Japanese national flag (see Fig. 3). Dörrie once more applied a typical trope of Buddhist tales to her own story-telling, thus offering the most simple and pragmatic answers to what appeared to be the most difficult questions. This is a frequent pattern of the *kōan* 公案 genre: fables, among others, of the seemingly inappropriate answers that Zen masters gave overambitious disciples to discourage them from speculation.<sup>45</sup>

As the camera zooms out, we realize that the brothers’ tent is pitched in the corner of a tennis court beside the railway track. The tennis game between two people creates a steady rhythm; these players, just like the locals in the underground and in the ramen restaurant, are undisturbed by the happy campers. In a way, they too follow the concept of *zanshin* by focusing on the yellow ball and thereby reaching a very steady game that is obviously analog to the brothers’ new accordance. The visitors’ “isolation from their Japanese context”<sup>46</sup> is relative insofar as their activities, i.e., chanting the *Heart Sutra* together, correspond with the smooth interaction of the tennis players. This final picture is not so much about cultural divide. Instead, it is virtually about providing each other with

<sup>44</sup> Cf. BENBOW 2012: 134.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. FOULK 2000: 34, 37.

<sup>46</sup> BENBOW 2012: 134.

space on the same court and also about cultural exchange. This is more noticeable as the Japanese players practice tennis and not, for example Go, Kyūdō or Aikido, which would have been suitable to exoticize the situation rather than to underline the mundane similarities as Dörrie does. The perspective on cultural convergence, social mutuality, and spiritual commonality is finally underlined by the soundtrack, on which the brothers' chanting gradually merges with the monks' chanting from the Sōjiji Temple. The closing credits begin to scroll up and adopt the rapid rhythm of the litany. Frequent, flat-sounding drumbeats are finally accompanied by deep, long reverberating tones of a bell. On the very last sound, the screen fades to black. The rhythmic accordance between the closing cast and crew credits and liturgy suggests once more Dörrie's attempt to offer a film on Zen as a sort of film Zen.

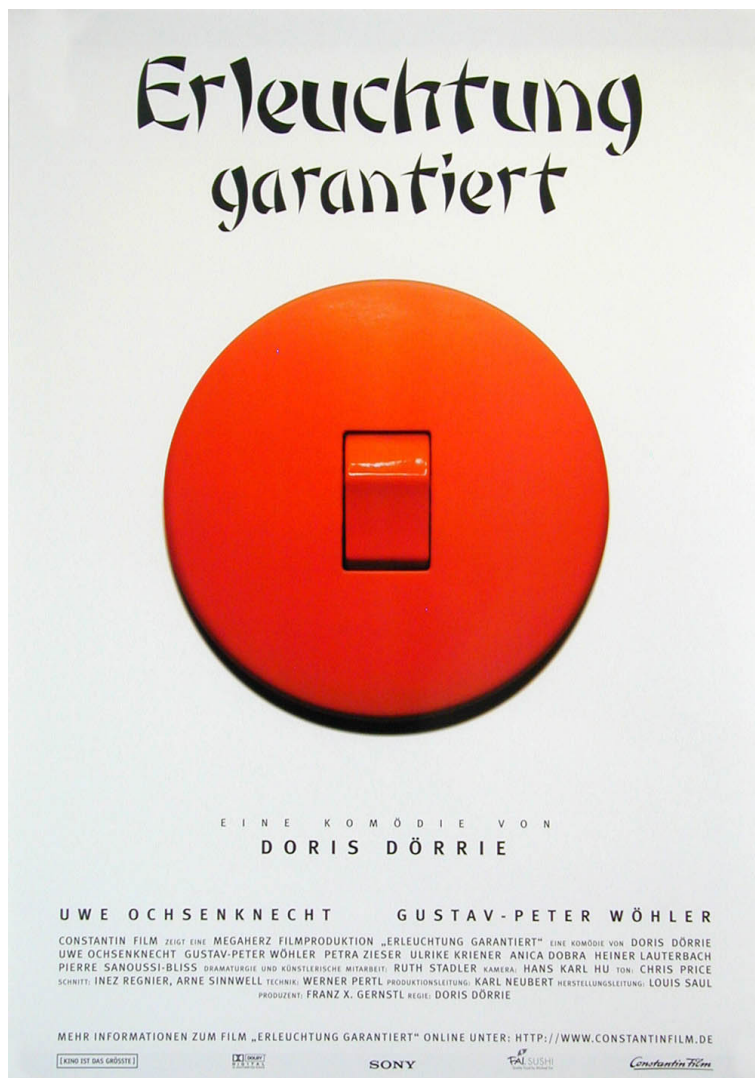


Fig. 3 Film poster for *Enlightenment Guaranteed* for the German release in 2000. Orientalist characters were used in the title and an interpretation of the Japanese national flag's sun disk was used as light switch. Source: Deutsches Filminstitut.





Fig. 4 Film poster for *Enlightenment Guaranteed* for release in Japan in 2002. The thought bubble appears in the simple Katakana and Hiragana characters instead of Kanji: サトリたい... (*satoritai*, Engl. "I wish enlightenment"; *satori* or 悟り meaning enlightenment). Source: private archive.

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