

ing between realism and fantasy in which Eduard visits Charlotte's chamber one night, and their embrace has the elements of an illegitimate affair when both imagine their new lover in their sexual encounter.

*"In der Lampendämmerung sogleich behauptete die innere Neigung, behauptete die Einbildungskraft ihre Rechte über das Wirkliche. Eduard hielt nur Ottilien in seinen Armen; Charlotte schwebte der Hauptmann näher oder ferner vor der Seele, und so verwebten, wundersam genug, sich Abwesendes und Gegenwärtiges reizend und wonnevoll durcheinander."*

Mysteriously or perhaps magically, the child that is born has similarities with the Hauptmann and Ottilie and is therefore, according to Eduard:

*"aus einem doppelten Ehebruch gezeugt." "...Ottilie das Kind auf die Arme gelegt, ... erschrak nicht wenig an seinen offenen Augen: denn sie glaubte, in ihre eigenen zu sehen, eine solche Übereinstimmung hätte jeden überraschen müssen. Mittler, der zunächst das Kind empfang, stutzte gleichfalls, indem er in der Bildung desselben eine so auffallende Ähnlichkeit, und zwar mit dem Hauptmann erblickte, dergleichen ihm sonst noch nie vorgekommen war."*

It remains unclear why director Kühn chose not to delve more deeply into this pivotal aspect of the story. Taviani lets Eduard and Charlotte whisper the names of Ottilie and Otto before Eduard enters Charlotte's chamber and therefore alludes to the power of the imagination. In Kühn's version, Ottilie appears in separate scenes before and after this nocturnal encounter with much less of a dramatic impact.

### ***Entsagung und Tod***

Given the elective affinities in play, nothing seems to stand in the way of divorce and realignment of the lovers. But Ottilie, who lovingly cares for the baby, has an unfortunate accident on the lake, and the child drowns. Tortured by feelings of guilt, Ottilie withdraws and becomes anorexic. Before she dies, totally weakened, she wants Eduard to promise her that he will go on living. He agrees but soon follows her in death. They are buried side by side in the newly built chapel on the estate. The tenor of the concluding passage of the novel suggests reconciliation and peacefulness, even hope and fidelity:

*"Und wie er in Gedanken an die Heilige eingeschlafen war, so konnte man wohl ihn selig nennen. ... So ruhen die Liebenden nebeneinander. Friede schwebt über ihrer Stätte, heitere verwandte Engelsbilder schauen vom Gewölbe auf sie herab, und Welch ein freundlicher Augenblick wird es sein, wenn sie dereinst wieder zusammen erwachen."*

Notwithstanding the extreme difficulties of translating this novel into film (in particular the surreal aspects and the spiritual ending), Kühn can nonetheless be faulted for failing to achieve a convincing cinematic equivalent of the complexity of Goethe's novel, especially in terms of exploring the relevance of this work for contemporary society.

# THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

## *Friday Film Fest Series*



## Die Wahlverwandschaften

By Siegfried Kühn

January 13, 2016

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

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## Die Wahlverwandschaften—Elective Affinities (1974)

**Director:** Siegfried Kühn  
**Screenplay:** Christel Gräf  
**Music:** Karl-Ernst Sasse  
**Camera:** Claus Neumann  
**Editor:** Renate Bade  
Helga Krause  
**Production:** DEFA – Potsdam  
**Academic Advisor:** Prof. Dr. Hans-Jürgen Geerdts  
**Year:** 1974  
**Cast:** Beata Tyszkiewicz as Charlotte  
Hilmar Thate as Eduard  
Magda Vasaryova as Ottilie  
Gerry Wolff as Hauptmann  
Horst Schulze as Mittler  
**Commentary:** Karl Moehlmann



### Buch und Filme

When Goethe was told by a lady at a reception how amoral she found the novel, after a long pause he famously replied: "*Das tut mir Leid. Es ist doch mein bestes Buch.*" Goethe had published this novel in 1809 at the age of sixty, three years after marrying Christiane Vulpius, his longtime mistress and the mother of his seventeen year old son, August. Thomas Mann called Goethe's novel "*den höchsten Roman der Deutschen.*" Such considered opinions are reason enough to explore Goethe's novel. His treatment of the innate tension between natural romantic impulses and traditional social mores has repeatedly tempted directors to translate this novel into film.

The first such effort was the East-German **DEFA-Production of 1974**, directed by Siegfried Kühn. In **1982**, one hundred and fifty years after Goethe's death, Claude Chabrol made another attempt in a version made for TV/ARD. Finally in **1996**, **Paolo and Vittorio Taviani** used the novel for an Italian language adaptation. Unable to obtain the Chabrol movie, we decided to show the DEFA-film and present it in the historic context of its production. Following that, we will discuss just a few elements that are central to the interpretation of the novel and the assessment of Kühn's cinematic solutions.

### **Schloss Rossewitz**

When the DEFA-Filmmakers decided in 1973 to use the empty *Herrenhaus Rossewitz* located near Güstrow south of Rostock in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, they faced an enormous challenge. "*Der Bau sah damals fürchterlich aus. Total verwahrlost*" said Hilmar Thate, who played Eduard in this movie. The castle had been built between 1657 and 1680 by J.H. Vieregge and was the first *Barockschloss* in Mecklenburg during the budding building period after the Thirty Years War.

Considered one of the most beautiful castles in Northern Germany, it fell into disrepair over the centuries and was last renovated in 1847. After 1945, it made the list of the Soviet Military Administration's '*Schlösser and Herrenhäuser* to be saved' - a lucky fate, since many remnants of the old feudal society were destroyed by the new communist authorities.

The *Staatsfilmer der DDR* put up 200,000 *Ostmark* to refurbish the building for the movie set, but the signs of long neglect were still visible, especially in the half destroyed front entrance and façade. It is safe to assume that Goethe had envisioned a more affluent and elegant setting since his novel observes at the outset: "*Eduard – so nennen wir einen reichen Baron im besten Mannesalter ...*". However, for a filmmaker, the ruins of Rossewitz might not only represent the scars of our recent history, but also the state of Eduard's marriage with Charlotte after his passionate attraction to Charlotte's niece Ottilie. We should note parenthetically that after the *Wende* in 1989, with the help of the Bielefeld industrialist August Oetker and money from local agencies and the federal *Stiftung Denkmalschutz*, *Schloss Rossewitz* received a new roof and is slowly being restored to its former *Glanz*.



### **Wahlverwandschaften und Ehebruch im Ehebett**

Elective affinities are the tendencies of certain chemical elements to suddenly dissolve their existing bonds in the presence of other substances and electively create new combinations with the newly added elements. Goethe uses this chemical metaphor for his novel to describe the conflict between the natural law of human attraction and the socially imposed moral order of the marital institution. His story takes place during the Napoleonic wars.

Eduard, *ein reicher Baron im besten Mannesalter*, has married the love of his youth, Charlotte, after both have ended previous conventional marriages. They have retreated to Eduard's estate for the past two years and are making plans for a new building and the remodeling of their park and garden. While Charlotte is happy in *dieser vertrauten Zweisamkeit* and enjoys their *spät erlangtes Glück*, Eduard wants to invite their friend Hauptmann Otto, who has fallen on bad times, to stay with them.

Charlotte responds "*mit einiger Ungeduld, dass diesem Vorhaben mein Gefühl widerspricht, dass eine Ahnung mir nichts Gutes weissagt*", an intuitive reaction that turns out to prophetic. But she reveals to Eduard the next day that she is in a similar situation regarding her young niece and *Pflegetochter* Ottilie who lives in a boarding school in "*sehr drückenden Verhältnissen*". So they agree to go ahead and invite both of them to their estate, thus unleashing the dynamics of the elective affinities. Eduard passionately falls for Ottilie, and Charlotte and the Hauptmann are intensely attracted to one another.

This cross attraction culminates *in einer unerhörten Begebenheit*, a scene hover-