

[Torner on Eichinger and Stern, 'Film im Sozialismus - die DEFA'](#)

Review published on Thursday, September 23, 2010

Barbara Eichinger, Frank Stern, eds. *Film im Sozialismus - die DEFA*. Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2009. 429 pp. EUR 17.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-85476-291-1.

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Fragments of Socialist Film Worlds

The many different approaches to East German cinema in *Film im Sozialismus* demonstrate the extent to which interest in East German cinema (produced by the state-run film studio Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft, or DEFA) has flourished in the last decade. To be sure, the joint efforts of the DEFA-Stiftung in Germany and the DEFA Film Library in the United States have increased awareness of DEFA films and their role in cinematic and German history.[1] Since the 2005 end of the DEFA-Stiftung's annual publication *apropos: Film Jahrbücher*, however, few academic forums have existed for German-language scholarship on DEFA. The volume promises, and generally delivers, an invigorating account of recent international topics about East German cinema.

The edited volume contains fifteen diverse intellectual encounters with the DEFA legacy. Topics range from close readings of films before and after the 1989/90 *Wende*, to film festival reports, to recently published interviews with former DEFA employees. The four "scenarios" that divide the book--"Negative und Positive" (Negatives and Positives), "International: Gestern und Heute" (International: Yesterday and Today), "Österreich und ÖsterreicherInnen im DEFA-Film" (Austria and Austrians in DEFA films), and "Reale Visionen" (Real Visions)--must accommodate rather disparate material. This diversity has its advantages and drawbacks. Those specialists familiar with topics in DEFA film history will find the book useful for its combination of newly available primary and secondary sources in current research projects. Those scholars unfamiliar with DEFA and its history may struggle with the authors' assumptions about prior knowledge of scholarship concerning GDR (German Democratic Republic, or East German) cinema.[2]

Scene One, "Negative und Positive," contextualizes the GDR's approach to fascism and its studied avoidance of the state's shortcomings in this area. It opens with Bettina Mathes's marvelous reading of director Egon Günther's *Her Third* (1971). Mathes departs from traditional feminist interpretations of the film by troubling it with the underlying discourse of the East German secret police, the Stasi. In analyzing the DEFA actress's Jutta Hoffmann's behavior on camera, Mathes argues that Hoffmann, like other actors, recognized the state's constant scrutiny of their every moves, on and off screen. Sarcastically, Mathes suggests that every citizen in a society based on surveillance certainly has what it takes to be a film star: the (state's) camera has already discovered them. Frank Stern's chapter succinctly contextualizes the director Konrad Wolf's *I Was Nineteen* (1968) within Wolf's oeuvre as well as against salient political issues in the 1960s. Elke Schieber introduces us to the 1972 TV adaptation of Peter Edel's Holocaust autobiography *Die Bilder des Zeugen Schattmann*, using the

author's papers at the Academy of Arts (Akademie der Künste) as well as an interview with Edel's second wife, Helga Korff-Edel. Following these essays on antifascist works is Lisa Schoß's extensive discussion of the screenwriter Horst Seemann's antifascist TV film *Levin's Mill* (1980). Schoß interprets this film as a GDR multicultural parable, culminating in an egalitarian dance sequence between (Holocaust) victims and their persecutors. Klaus Davidowicz ends the section with a comparative study between the director Frank Beyer's work on the concentration camp Buchenwald, *Naked Among Wolves* (1962), and early West German film attempts at thematizing the Holocaust. Together, these chapters illustrate the persistent scholarly interest in those East German films based on the experiences of German Jews during the Holocaust.

The second section, "International--Yesterday and Today" focuses on the circulation of DEFA films and filmmakers across international borders from the 1960s until the present. Skyler Arndt-Briggs's essay highlights the DEFA Film Library's recent accomplishments in screening and translating East German films for U.S. audiences. She argues that the plethora of works about DEFA and its films within North American institutions has established the field as an accepted and permanent part of history, German studies, and film studies departments. Yet she shares the concern with Ralf Schenk, Günter Jordan and virtually the entire DEFA community[3] that educational institutions must continue to present East German cinema to young people, as well as contextualize such cinema within the global cultural flows of the Cold War. The films themselves may be hard to market to a larger audience, but often awaken profound interest with some guidance towards a few gems. Ralf Dittrich elaborates one success story in this regard, where his experience of the 2007 DEFA Retrospective in Israel convinced him of the cinema's unique power to break down stereotypes about the SED-Dictatorship in favor of a genuinely reflective discussion about the past. "Für wenige Tage," he writes, "waren DEFA-Filme und ihre Protagonisten in Israel etwas, was sie in der DDR kaum je sein konnten: Stars" ("For a few days, DEFA films and their protagonists could be something that they could hardly have been in the GDR: stars", p. 178). This statement alone beckons us to evaluate DEFA's post-Wende reception and distribution history anew.

The next three entries involve specific moments of transnational collaboration. Eichinger describes the circumstances of relatively easy cooperation behind director Rainer Simon's GDR /FRG (West German)/Ecuador co-production *The Ascent of the Chimborazo* (1989), primarily on account of its focus on Alexander von Humboldt, whose appeal spanned both sides of the Atlantic." Simon himself is given voice in the next chapter's interview, in which he articulates a reflexive anti-authoritarianism as well as sympathies for the pantheism of the *Indígenas* in Ecuador, whom he has been filming for nearly two decades. Andreas Filipovic's short chapter on cinema interactions between East Germany and Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 70s stands out as the first major entry on the transnational filmmaking tensions between those two former countries. His essay also draws on Dagmar Nawroth's first-hand knowledge of film synchronization in the GDR, a key topic for anyone looking at Cold War foreign film circulation.[4] Anthonya Visser finishes the "Szenarium" with a close reading of Robert Thalheim's comedy *Netto* (2005) in terms of the DEFA comedic tradition established by films such as Günter Reisch's *Anton the Magician* (1978). This last chapter stands a bit apart from the other chapters; yet, it underlines the need to understand the relationship between East German and post-Wende comedies.

The third "Szenarium," "Österreich und ÖsterreicherInnen DEFA-Film," addresses the images of Austria in the GDR and the Austrian filmmaking presence in the country's cinema and television

production. Sabine Fuchs breathes life into biographies of several of the approximately ten to twenty thousand Austrians who lived in the GDR. Jewish Austrian actor Wolfgang Heinz of *Professor Mamlock* (1961), for example, exerted a strong influence on Konrad Wolf in the antifascist film's creation. Composer André Asriel's jazz work with Ralf Kirsten on Manfred Krug's vehicle to stardom, *On the Sunny Side* (1961), was representative of many films that entrenched big band jazz as standard cinematic music for the 1960s and 1970s. Intriguingly, the interview with Asriel reveals his curious situation as a celebrated jazz musician: having trained under the socialist modernist Hanns Eisler, Asriel had actually received little practical access to jazz music.

Klaus Kienesberger focuses on positive portrayals of Austria in GDR television after 1972, which conveniently ignored Austria's complicity in National Socialism in favor of its "kritisch-humanistisches Erbe" ("critical-humanist legacy," p. 325). Some of these television films and series introduce realistic interpretations of Austria's rejection of fascism; others are less credible. The importance of Josef "Sepp" Plieseis as a resistance fighter raises few eyebrows (*Gefährliche Fahndung*, dir. Rainer Hausdorf, 1977); more surprising are the composers Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Franz Schubert as role models who rose up against (Habsburg) tyranny (*Leise flehen meine Lieder*, dir. Horst Hawemann, 1978). Especially important here were the popular DEFA "Indianerfilme" ("Indian Films," sometimes referred to now as "Red Westerns" or "Easterns"), with assorted North American Native American tribes rising against up against fascist-style cowboys. This Szenarium certainly enriches the scholarship on foreigners in the GDR as well as the GDR's self-projection through other countries' histories, although the essays have thematically enough in common with the scholarship already presented in Szenarium "Positive und Negative" as to only be distinguished by their Austrian particularity.

The final Szenarium, "Real Visions," comprises several essays under an awkward umbrella title, namely two chapters on Konrad Wolf's monumental film *Goya, or the Hard Way to Enlightenment* (1971), followed by a three-page bureaucratic presentation of the DEFA-Stiftung's holdings and mission. Seán Allan examines *Goya* alongside Wolf's *The Naked Man on the Athletic Field* (1974) in terms of the DEFA *Künstlerfilm* (artistic) tradition, the politics of art in the GDR, and the crisis of masculinity. Allan's close readings reveal the philosophical roots of the pathos faced by Wolf and so many other artists working within their chosen society's ideological limitations. Helmut Pflügl sees *Goya* the figure as a "Medium für gesellschaftspolitische Positionierungen," ("medium for socio-political positioning," p. 383), comparing and contrasting Wolf's movie with the 1999 Spanish biopic by Carlos Saura (*Goya in Bordeaux*). Pflügl's analysis notes the similarity of filmic and figural gestures across both films that the directors employed, demonstrating the nuances of artistic oppression under proto-totalitarianism in Europe. I laud all scholarship that draws more attention to Wolf's 70mm *Goya* classic, a cross between Brechtian theater and a Ken Russell film. Unfortunately, Helmut Morsbach's contribution in the pages to follow is too abrupt of an ending to the book.

In addition to effectively serving as the DEFA-Jahrbuch for 2009, *Film im Sozialismus* lies at the nexus of several overlapping academic projects. One is the DEFA research initiated by the Filmarchiv Austria's 2001 *Der geteilte Himmel* retrospective that now stakes a claim on Austrian aspects of East German media. This transnationalist project vis-à-vis cinema is an overarching second interest that has been vigorously encouraged by scholars across the disciplines around the world. A third project, however, can be found in the volume's simple oral history documentation of stake-holding filmmakers (Simon, Asriel) before they pass on, leaving little room for distanced analysis of their work. DEFA's

presence at events organized in Israel, the United States, and other locales is a fourth interest, as institutions like the DEFA-Stiftung and the DEFA Film Library assess how they can maximize their impact on the younger generation. The fifth and sixth interests would be the established and upcoming generations of scholars found in the book, with the former seeking the reevaluation of undervalued texts and the latter seeking a wider, explanatory picture of the Cold War as a whole through media. Stern's project on Jews in DEFA films can be counted as a seventh, and Allan's and Mathes's classic film studies readings--taking the films seriously as closed systems of meaning--are yet an eighth agenda. Thus we see Eichinger and Stern's book perform a juggling act between recording primary sources for posterity, personal research goals, wider research trends, and DEFA institutional observations, which accounts for most of the book's disjointedness.

The volume's introduction could have also used a final fact-check to attend to a couple of errors. Wolfgang Kohlhaase, not Michael Kohlhaase, was the screenwriter for the Berlin trilogy (p. 20).[5] Skyler Arndt-Briggs was the associate director (now executive director) of the DEFA Film Library. Rainer Simon toured the United States in the fall of 2008, not 2009 (p. 22). Furthermore, *Naked Among Wolves* (1962) was not the first DEFA film shot in Totalvision (p. 138); that honor belongs to the sci-fi flop *Silent Star* (1960). Several of the entries (e.g., Schoß) might have been profitably shortened. In addition, the volume's emphasis on analyses of first-hand accounts and literary material fresh from the archives tips its emphasis away from the numerous secondary sources published over the last four years, leaving me with a scattered impression of the state of the field. Finally, as a matter of practicality, the book is bound in flimsy, semi-plastic material that will not stand up to the many times that a scholar will refer to *Film im Sozialismus*. Yet, these are minor points, given Eichinger and Stern's overall pursuit of a transnational engagement with larger East German topics through film.

Perhaps Dittrich best articulates the phenomenon that the book seeks to address when he says: "Dass es die DDR nicht mehr gab, wusste man. Was die DDR allerdings gewesen war, wusste man nicht" ("One knew that the GDR was no longer there. What the GDR was, however, was not known," p. 165). GDR culture is now being approached from these new interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives, but its fragmentary fantasy worlds must also maintain a solid position within the international canon(s) of the Cold War. World film history cannot thrive without including DEFA, and the DEFA film history now cannot thrive without including the world. If the DEFA film negatives are part of what remains of the GDR and are themselves to be in the German federal archive's (Bundesarchiv) cold storage for centuries, let us at least follow Eichinger and Stern's example and advance the apparatus required to understand them in context. Crass images of the Stasi and border guards should not be the last images we hold of DEFA cinema.

Notes

[1]. To name a few recent examples: the September 2009 "Winter Adé" transnational film series held at the Kino Arsenal in Berlin, the April 2010 symposium/film festival "Making History ReVisible: East German Cinema after Unification" hosted by Indiana University, and the July 2009 summer film institute "Rewriting (East) German Cinema: Issues in Film Methodology and Historiography," hosted by the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

[2]. See for instance, Seán Allan and John Sandford, eds., *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992*

(New York: Berghahn Books, 1999); Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Ralf Schenk, *Eine kleine Geschichte der DEFA - Daten Dokumente Erinnerungen* (Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung, 2006); and Günter Jordan, *Film in der DDR. Daten Fakten Strukturen* (Potsdam: Filmmuseum Potsdam, 2009).

[3]. Jordan's discussion of *Film in der DDR* with Schenk, Rainer Rother, Helmut Morsbach and Claus Löser at the Filmmuseum Potsdam on April 13, 2010 repeatedly emphasized the expansion of DEFA history into a broader international film context and outreach efforts to children and university students worldwide. Not unironically did I find myself the youngest person (27) in attendance.

[4]. Dagmar Nawroth, "Synchronisation ausländischer Filme in der DEFA," *Der geteilte Himmel. Höhepunkte des DEFA-Kinos 1946*, vol. 2 (Vienna: Edition Filmarchiv Austria, 2001), 63-74.

[5]. Kohlhaase recently won an honorary Golden Bear at the 2010 Berlinale; the third film in the trilogy, *Berlin - Schönhauser Corner* (1957), was screened in sold-out theaters.

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Citation: Evan Torner. Review of Eichinger, Barbara; Stern, Frank, eds., *Film im Sozialismus - die DEFA*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31025>

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