

1993

GDR Cinema De-/Reconstructed: An Introduction to the "Forbidden Films"

Joyce Marie Mushaben
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Mushaben, Joyce Marie (1993) "GDR Cinema De-/Reconstructed: An Introduction to the "Forbidden Films";" *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v19i1.1074>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in GDR Bulletin by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

GDR Cinema De-/Reconstructed: An Introduction to the "Forbidden Films"

Joyce Marie Mushaben
University of Missouri-St. Louis

They are now well over fifty. In the autumn of 1989 they saw the films they had made when most of them were in their thirties. For almost all of these men, it was the first time in twenty-four years that they had been able to see these films. There was much emotion after the screenings. Tears. Memories of starting out as young filmmakers; memories of ideals. The films were like lost children.

So begins Regine Sylvester's introduction to a series of formerly censored GDR films viewed in select cities across the United States under the sponsorship of the Goethe Institute in 1992.¹ The essayist's tone is one of near pathos, a sentiment all too familiar to that special breed of scholars known as *DDR-Forscherinnen* and *-Forscher*, all of whom have been forced to come to terms with an ostensible loss of their field of analysis since the consummation of German unification. The description is nonetheless a curious one, given the nature of the regime from whence the "forbidden" films actually derived. The ideologues of the now-defunct German Democratic Republic consistently championed the notion that "the personal is the political," an ideal which was supposed to find its embodiment in the "all-sided socialist personality." In both her introduction and content summaries of six films, Sylvester seems to discount the political in favor of outright personal sympathy with repressed artists, raising a host of follow-up questions.

Were these middle-aged filmmakers mourning the loss of their youth in 1989, or were they depressed by the loss of ideals usually associated with one's tender years? Did their lugubrious reactions stem from a long-cultivated, thus deep-seated resentment over creative opportunities and career privileges they were never permitted to experience? Or did they still find their own works so moving after twenty years of storage in (presumably well-guarded) state warehouses? One wonders whether "all of these men" (sad but true, the GDR never became a state of *real-existierende Gleichberechtigung*) shed as many tears over the subsequent dissolution of their country, a land that once held the promise of becoming more anti-fascist and more democratic than the Germany which had preceded it.

"The East German films would have made such a mark on their time if they had only been given the chance...and the spiritual rewards and personal

satisfaction [that mark] would have provided are forever lost to the men who made the films," Sylvester continues. Never mind that "art" is supposed to lie in the eyes of the beholder, and that "personal satisfaction" has rarely been the driving force of creative activity. I would like to argue instead that the real value of the "forbidden films" in fact rests with their once-outlawed character: that the deeper messages they retrospectively convey about "life in the GDR" now provide a clear understanding as to why the system ultimately collapsed. Whether their release two decades earlier might have spared the East German regime such a fate altogether is a question left to the muses. The purpose of this essay is to sketch "the big picture," to examine the gaps between "theory" and "praxis" which made these films appear "inimical to the state" and thus rendered them grist for the censors' mill under the Socialist Unity Party.

Responsibility for film production in the GDR² fell under the central but not the exclusive direction of the Ministry of Culture. Additional advisory functions were eventually assigned to the Committee for Filming Arts, established in 1973. The latter was composed of state officials, film directors, authors, studio directors, the rector of the Academy for Film and Television of the GDR, as well as select representatives of the Free German Trade Union Federation (FDGB) and the Free German Youth (FDJ).

Exclusive authority for the production and distribution of films rested in the hands of *Deutsche Film AG* (DEFA), the first "national" filming center to be re/created in occupied Germany as of May 1946. The exercise began as a German-Soviet joint-stock concern, acquiring the status of a "popularly owned production center" (*Volkseigener Betrieb* or VEB) in 1952. By the 1970s, the main studio, located in Potsdam-Babelsberg, was averaging 15-20 major cinematic productions per year, at least three of which were addressed to children/youth audiences; it also turned out some 25 made-for-TV movies. Another 170 productions generated at the DEFA facility fell into the categories of documentary film, commissioned projects or advertising films (even "cultural production" was subject to The Plan, and the state occasionally had to hawk its own goods). Major film outputs were annually supplemented by 65 cartoons, puppet shows, and assorted children's programs, made largely for television. DEFA had its own synchronization and copying facilities, a film technology division, and an export agency; it cultivated an impressive array of

contacts with over 1,100 distributional centers and TV stations located in 105 countries. By the late seventies, GDR filmmakers could report that they had participated in 421 international film festivals--where they were awarded 249 prizes. The pattern of cultural exchange was rather lop-sided, however. In 1976, for example, the GDR sold over 8,000 import licenses to partners in 80 nations; yet DEFA had acquired licensing rights of its own in conjunction with only 38 countries between 1950-1976.

The consciousness-raising power of film had been made quite evident by the experiences of World War II. The newsreels of the 1940s testify to the fact that this medium provided an extraordinary tool for propaganda and socialization purposes in both the (so-called) capitalist and socialist states. This author recalls her own experiences with the "duck and cover" shorts of the 1950s, along with the TV-thunderings of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen advising that we would all be better off "dead than red" and godless. Over 90% of the GDR households were equipped with televisions, and tickets to the cinema were very cheap by Western standards (still under two marks in 1989).

The purpose of this medium, as defined by the GDR leadership, was to raise public consciousness essential to the formation of "the new socialist man and woman." In the words of GDR film-researcher Manfred Gerbing, the function of film was to influence the intellect and the emotions of the viewers, in order to help instill the new socialist ways of thinking and living, to awaken new needs (including aesthetic ones) in humans...It should assist in building the ideological-moral psyche of people according to socialist criteria, to unfold the creative capabilities of people in all directions, to contribute to the further humanization of interpersonal relationships.³

Professional filmmakers in the GDR received their training at the Academy of Film and Television, founded in 1954. Among its more renowned directors were Konrad Wolf (who died in 1982), Egon Günther (who worked for ARD after 1979), Frank Beyer, Lothar Warneke, and Heiner Carow. The list is exclusively male (source: *DDR-Handbuch*), undermining the SED's own claims that it had created a society as free of sex discrimination as it was liberated from class conflict.

Cinematic portrayals of the last four decades clearly reflected the dominant political conditions and ideological emphases of each era. During the early years of the Republic, films were intended to inspire and promote active citizen involvement in

the processes of *sozialistischer Aufbau* [the construction of socialism]. A second thematic preoccupation focused on the exposure and denunciation of the fascist past, commonly referred to as the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Through the end of the sixties, these *anti-fa* films accounted for some of DEFA's most compelling and successful artistic productions. They were eventually supplanted by epic depictions of the history of the German labor movement (allegedly representing a higher form of socialist consciousness). Two critical turning points were the party-sponsored Film Conferences of 1952 and 1958, establishing the ideological parameters for future artistic production under the rubric of "socialist realism" (glibly summarized as "boy meets tractor, boy loses tractor; girl and/or *die Kollektive* helps boy rewin the tractor, resulting in a twentyfold increase in agricultural output"). Socialist realism mandated a focus on contemporary issues and "problems," the *system-konform* treatment of which almost always secured a happy ending.

In 1959, a year marking the definitive end of the post-Stalinist "thaw," Ulbricht decided to lead the country along a new cultural qua educational course, later christened the "Bitterfelder Path." Its aim was to raise the cultural niveau and aesthetic appreciation/understanding among average members of the proletariat. The strategy was to enhance class consciousness by incorporating artistic and cultural plans into the socialist competitions undertaken by work collectives (*Bewegung schreibender Arbeiter* and *Junger Talente* were two of the more extensive initiatives). The result was, more often than not, a mediocratization of cultural standards. After 1966, attempts were made to solicit love for the "socialist fatherland" among members of the younger generation by way of musical comedies--at a time when Western rock music was still denounced as the work of character-sabotaging, decadent capitalism. The leadership also sought to assuage potentially dangerous stirrings of young *Wanderlust* with more or less historically accurate treatments of Native Americans (known in those days as Indians)--as an oppressed stratum, to be sure.

The replacement of Ulbricht by Honecker in 1971 was accompanied by a new, albeit short-lived phase of cultural liberalization. It was, after all, the era of détente, and the search for international recognition enabled filmmakers to incorporate treatments of individual and societal problems in their productions on a par with international standards. The ideological aims of East German cultural policy were formally redefined at the 6th Meeting of the Central

Committee of the SED in July 1972 by Kurt Hager, Party Secretary for Cultural Affairs. Among its fundamental components were

the socialist culture of labor, the protection and shaping of the environment, culture [as reflected] in human relationships and in personal lifestyles, the continuous development of a scientific world-view--in common parlance, *Weltanschauung*--and its dispersion among the people, the promotion of science and education, the cultivation of the humanistic cultural legacy, its assimilation by the duly employed, the enhancement of art and its societal effectiveness, the development of all creative gifts and talents of the people.⁴

It was likewise Kurt Hager who would unwittingly sound the death-knell of socialist realism with his summer 1989 comment that "just because the neighbors were in the process of repapering their walls--in the brighter colors of *glasnost* and *perestroika*--did not mean that the GDR was obligated to do so."

The irony, in fact, the paradox of censorship as exercised in the German Democratic Republic is that it deprived the leaders of important clues and deeper insights as to the nature of popular discontent. To the outside viewer of the 1990s, the six films comprising this series do not seem so extraordinarily radical or critical of the system as to merit a total ban on their distribution, or worse, to allow for their butchering by "politically correct" editorial assistants. The duller the indigenous film landscape became, the more average GDR citizens resorted to an even more heinous, decadent source of assaults against the system, namely, West German television and advertisements. It was a growing fascination and identification with the latter which ultimately precipitated the system's collapse.

The "forbidden films" portray all too vividly the asymmetries of *real-existierender Sozialismus*. The term "real-existing" gained currency among Western pundits and politicians around the sixties; it was intended to mock and disparage the shortfalls of the system as well as to challenge the legitimacy of its very existence (as were the quotation marks and the modifier "so-called" consistently appended to the country's name--"die sogenannte DDR"--by the Axel Springer Press through August 1989). At issue was Ulbricht's declaration that the German Democratic Republic had entered the stage of the *sozialistische Menschengemeinschaft*, an announcement that struck even many of the system's supporters as somewhat preemptive.

In true dialectical fashion, the SED leadership expropriated the label "real-existing" as a badge of distinction; it would employ the term regularly over the next twenty years, pointing with pride to its many "social achievements," i.e., a comprehensive health care system, free education, highly subsidized day-care, foodstuffs, rents and energy prices, free contraception, and, after 1973, legal access to abortion. By the early 1980s, however, the mocking and disparaging tones associated with the term began to be echoed from within, although the voices of criticism and dissent were muted or disguised at the time. The most profound examples of criticism still veiled rested with two sources--the first involved the realm of artistic and literary production; the second entailed a kind of *volkseigene* rebellion spouting from the underground wellspring of *DDR-Witze*.⁵

In late October 1989, Christa Wolf published a short essay in the newspaper *Die Wochenpost* on the question of mass education (*Volksbildung*) in the GDR. Her critique of the system no longer required camouflage. Only weeks had passed since a phenomenal wave of East German citizens had begun "voting with their feet," in numbers equivalent to the weeks preceding the erection of the Berlin Wall. It had been but a few days since Erich Honecker had been forced to resign his omnipotent posts as General Secretary of the SED and as Chairman of the Council of State. It would be another two weeks before the entire country would be catapulted along a new historic path, following the November 9th opening of the Berlin Wall.

Wolf began her essay with a personal vignette, recalling a guest lecture she had recently delivered in the spirit of the new openness that had begun sweeping the land. At the close of her talk at an East Berlin art academy, she had encouraged her listeners to join in an open and honest discussion of the future course of socialism and reform in "our land," the GDR. A forty-year old woman stood up, Wolf recounted, and responded to her exhortation in a rather forlorn voice: "You want us to discuss our own ideas and feelings? *Das haben wir nicht gelernt.*"

Under the rubric *Angepaßt oder mündig?*, Wolf's article assailed the East German educational system for its failure to address critically many important questions of history. She noted the school's deliberate efforts to deprive youth of their creative instincts and potential for critical judgment. She spoke of the apathy afflicting the country's "most important resource," of youth's increasing inability and unwillingness to identify with their own land.

militaristic turns in GDR school curriculum through 1989.

One film, *Wenn du Groß bist...*, takes a less "realistic" approach to the failed rationality of socialism, transporting the viewer into the world of allegory. It is the only one filmed in color, while the other five features presented in black-and-white intensify the sense of hope lost and ideals betrayed. Its clear color lines and less grainy quality notwithstanding, *Adam* ironically blurs the question of who-is-to-blame? A young boy finds a flashlight which exposes liars by lifting them off the ground--the bigger the prevarication, the higher they float. Scientists are immediately set to work with orders to replicate the wonder-lamp, but the project is abandoned when managers realize its implications for their own careers. Blame is multi-dimensional, the power of truth assiduously avoided.

The fact that a repressive political system, mired in the irrationalities and chronic deficiencies of a commando economy, managed to survive for forty years owes not only to the iron wills or monopolization of force ascribed to those at the top. Its survival owes, just as importantly, to the passive complicity of those at the bottom. Post-Wall outcries to the contrary, an overwhelming majority of East German citizens consistently falsified and thereby denied expression to their own value preferences. Timur Kuran describes the process of "preference falsification" in the following manner: "It is generally in a person's self-interest to let others make the sacrifices required to secure the regime's downfall, for a revolution constitutes a 'collective good'--a good he [sic] can enjoy whether or not he has contributed to its realization."¹¹ Initiation of the revolution by a few courageous souls affords a free ride to most non-participants, once the system has collapsed. Each citizen faces a choice of whether to support or oppose an authoritarian regime, in private as well as in public. Should those two positions diverge, an individual winds up "living a lie"--owing to any number of payoffs, sanctions or privileges s/he associates with one standpoint or another.

The GDR survived because it was sustained, even nourished by the majority's willingness to support the system in public--an existential lie, characterized by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the early 1970s as "the vital link holding everything together." NOT TO LIE, the Russian dissident argued, would be NOT SAYING WHAT YOU DO NOT THINK.¹² Following the censoring of their films, the directors cited struck out along different artistic paths. Zschoche continued at DEFA through 1991; Böttcher turned to documentary films; Maetzig

remained active in the film industry, shifting later to video technology. Banned from film-making until 1969, Beyer engaged in stage and TV productions through the 1980s; Klein did not revise his work, prior to his death in 1970. Did these artists really "not say what they did not think" after 1965? *Angepaßt oder mündig?*

Three generations of disgruntled and alienated Eastern Germans opted to conform to the system's demands and constraints. Through their participation in parades, socialist "competitions," and ostentatious anniversary celebrations, they paid lip service to the official goals of the Party. They not only internalized Marxist jargon and other forms of "newspeak," they made excuses for socialism's shortcomings by reiterating the "worse" faults of capitalism (which, in truth, are many). They assisted the state in keeping their fellow citizens ill- or uninformed, by disguising their reservations, or by refusing to disclose private beliefs which were highly critical of the status quo. In consciously repressing their private thoughts, by deliberately immersing themselves and others in a world of false facts, GDR citizens distorted all forms of public discourse. In a universe of self-reinforced mistruths, they cultivated a measure of "mental resistance" to fundamental flaws within the real-existing social order.

As Vaclav Havel has further observed, typical East European residents too often feigned disapproval of dissidents, while applauding their causes in private.¹³ Admiration for individuals who dared to think differently was inextricably coupled with resentment: those who lacked the courage to be true to their own political preferences felt threatened by a display of too much integrity by others willing to encounter the heavy hand of the state.¹⁴ Defiance was stamped "an abnormality, an act of arrogance." More importantly, it complicated people's lives. They had "an arrangement." *Der Abschied von den Lebenslügen*, with all due respect to Jens Reich, must be celebrated as a form of emancipation, as a starting signal, as a moral appeal to the next generation.¹⁵

On the night of October 3, 1990 the GDR became an historical artifact whose political relevance will soon be considered equivalent to that of the bronze ax and the spinning wheel, to borrow irreverently from Friedrich Engels. DEFA exists no more, its properties and equipment having been sold to a French film concern under the auspices of the *Treuhand*. Its historical-cultural significance will probably be subjected to a number of positive and negative reinterpretations, however, based on observable trends in the literary field. On the one

hand, Western publicists have waged a chauvinistic, *post facto* assault on the literary qualifications and contributions of GDR writers, most notably, Christa Wolf.¹⁶ A select contingent of *Besserwessis* charges that the allegedly *Lesser-Ossis* were but handmaidens and valets to the cultural capriciousness of the socialist state--now that there is no longer a quick profit to be made in the FRG by the publication of so-called dissident works. On the other hand, there exists a real danger that works long repressed will suddenly be hailed as classics, owing to astute packaging by market-savvy distributors. *Entartete Kunst* is the stuff of which myths are made.

¹ Brochure, *The Forbidden Films*, written by Regine Sylvester (translated by Jeremy Roth) for the Goethe Institute München, Mayr Miesbach, Druckerei und Verlag, 1992. The series includes: *Karla*; *Das Kaninchen bin ich*; *Spur der Steine*; *Jahrgang 45*; *Wenn du groß bist, lieber Adam*; *Berlin um die Ecke*.

² I cannot refer to this country as "former" unless I apply the same adjective to the old states of the Federal Republic. Historically speaking, the GDR remains a legitimate point of reference, just as one continues to speak of the Third Reich and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation--which, we might note in passing, was neither particularly holy, nor especially German.

³ As cited in the essay on "Filmwesen," in Hartmut Zimmermann, ed., *DDR-Handbuch*, Bd. 1 (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1985): 389.

⁴ See the entry on "Kulturpolitik" *DDR-Handbuch*, 768

⁵ Two of this author's untranslatable favorites read: *Lieber arm dran als Bein ab*," and *Das Beste zum 10. Parteitage--der Rest zum Wohle des Volkes*." For further examples see Clement de Wroblewsky, *Wo wir sind ist vorn. Der politische Witz in der DDR* (Hamburg: Rasch und Röhring, 1990).

⁶ Petra Gruner, Hrsg., *Angepaßt oder mündig? Briefe an Christa Wolf im Herbst 1989* (Frankfurt a. M.: Luchterhand, 1990).

⁷ Ministerium für Volksbildung, Sekretariat für Berufsbildung, Ministerium für Hoch- und Fachschulwesen, ed. *Gesetz über das einheitliche sozialistische Bildungssystem der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1973).

⁸ Sylvester.

⁹ See Joyce Marie Mushaben, "Swords to Plowshares: The Church, the State, and the East German Peace Movement," in *Studies in Comparative Communism*, XVII. 4 (July 1984): 423-438.

¹⁰ The two reportedly stood on the brink of divorce for many years--indeed, Margot is mentioned only six times throughout Erich Honecker's 400+ page autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1981).

¹¹ Timur Kuran, "NOW OUT OF NEVER. The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44 (October 1991): 14.

¹² Cited in Kuran 27.

¹³ Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central Eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985): 37.

¹⁴ Thus, the allegations that many people allied themselves with the underground peace movement in the eighties, to ensure that they would be arrested and eventually "bought out" of prison by the FRG.

¹⁵ Jens Reich, *Abschied von den Lebenslügen. Die Intelligenz und die Macht* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1992).

¹⁶ Christiane Zehl Romero, "Forum: The Christa Wolf Controversy--Was bleibt?," *GDR Bulletin* 17.1 (Spring 1991): 1-3.