

Ralf Schenk  
Berlin

## A Gold Mine—Not Only for *Cineastes*: Historical Sketches of the DEFA Film Studios

Atop a mountain of rubble, amidst rusted war machines and tangled weeds, a wooden cross rises up to the sky: a soldier's grave, a symbolic memorial among the ruins of Germany's capital. A man stumbles through the wreckage, unshaven and intoxicated; the camera staggers with him to the door of a house. As he opens the door, over which a sign reads "Dance—Atmosphere—Humor," loud jazz music floods the eerie grounds: a symbol of life in a realm of the dead.

And so begins the first German postwar film, *The Murderers Are among Us* (1946) by Wolfgang Staudte. The film was the first product of the East German Film Company DEFA, which would later produce numerous documentaries, animated films, and almost 950 feature films and shorts in the 45 years of its existence. During this time DEFA experimented with practically all genres: comedies, operas, operettas, science fiction and Westerns. There were detective films and revues, cloak and dagger adventures and historical biographical films. For example, DEFA produced films about the gynecologist Semmelweis, the sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider, the scientist Alexander von Humboldt and the poet Georg Büchner, about the revolutionary farmer Thomas Müntzer and the communist leaders Ernst Thälmann and Karl Liebknecht. Clear-cut political agitation films represent the minority in this collection. DEFA, which by the mid-sixties was producing 16 films per year, dedicated nearly a quarter of its work to its younger audience. With a high technical *niveau*, DEFA brought to the screen almost all the fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm, some from Hans Christian Anderson (*The Tinder Box* / Siegfried Hartmann 1959) and Wilhelm Hauff (*The Cold Heart* / Paul Verhoeven 1950, *The Story of Little Mook* / Wolfgang Staudte 1953).

To strengthen its reputation in its own country, DEFA became involved in international co-productions. Among the most successful of these were *The Adventures of Till Eulenspiegel* (1957) with Gerard Philipe as actor-director, *The Witches of Salem* (Raymond Rouleau 1957), modeled after Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and starring Simone Signoret and Yves Montand, and *Les Misérables* (Jean-Paul Le Chanois 1958) with Jean Gabin. Other stars filled guest roles in Babelsberg. Henny Porten, Germany's grand old lady of silent film, played in *Carola Lambertini* (Hans Müller 1954) and *Maiden from Scuderi* (Eugen York 1955), and the Swiss actress Lilli Palmer

starred in *Lotte in Weimar* (Egon Günther 1975).

Aside from cinematic feature films, DEFA created approximately 700 made-for-TV movies from the late 1950s onward. In addition to the actual performers, the studios had circa 2,400 additional employees, including technicians, administrative assistants, musicians and carpenters. Even the DEFA directors were full time employees; in Babelsberg there were approximately 40. Essentially there were two choices: one either worked constantly or one wasn't allowed to work at all. The gravest of such "cases" is exemplified by director Ulrich Weiß, whose projects were often hindered on the most trivial grounds. Leading GDR politicians falsely interpreted his films *Your Unknown Brother* (1981) and *Ol Henry* (1983) as inappropriately portraying the anti-fascist rebellion and as promoting historical pessimism and existentialism. Afterwards, the general director of DEFA personally saw to it that this disliked "protégé" would never be able to add another film to his resume.

### *The Happiest Years*

On May 17, 1946, DEFA received a license from the Soviet military administration to be Germany's first postwar film corporation. Its original capital entailed 21,000 Reichsmark. As license carriers, the Soviets selected a group of trustworthy men to run the studios. One of them was actor Hans Klering, who had moved to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and had starred in many films. Klering eventually became Artistic Director and created the DEFA logo: four letters on the background of a black and white strip of film. With his characteristic pathos, Klering interpreted the acronym as "honestly served peaceful reconstruction."

It was this maxim that attracted artists interested in a new democratic method of making films. Emigrants like Slatan Dudow, Gustav von Wangenheim and Kurt Maetzig, who was forbidden to practice his profession during the Third Reich, came on board. Filmmakers who had worked during Hitler's regime were also invited. DEFA largely turned a blind eye to the majority of filmmakers of that period, although some of the more prominent Nazi-associated filmmakers, such as Veit Harlan and Leni Riefenstahl, had no chance with DEFA.

DEFA saw itself as a liberal, open-minded institution,

which attempted to provide struggling artists with a new beginning. Its main goal was to support "the fight for the proper instruction of the German people, especially the youth, in the name of democracy and humanity." At least this was what was outlined by the political counselor of the Soviet military administration, General Sergej Tulpanow, at DEFA's opening celebration. The years that followed were perhaps the happiest in DEFA's history: scripts were fashioned that reflected the turbulent atmosphere of the time and were by and large free of ideological ballast. Wolfgang Staudte produced *The Murderers Are among Us* (1946), in which he used evocative pictures to accurately describe society's reckoning with fascism. Kurt Maetzig, with *Marriage in the Shadows* (1947), reminded us of the fate of actor Joachim Gottschalk and his Jewish wife, who were driven by Goebbels to commit suicide. Erich Engel's *The Blum Affair* (1948) described the planned assassination of a judge by anti-Semites during the Weimar Republic. Director Georg C. Klaren continued the traditions of German expressionism with his adaptation of Georg Büchner's *Wozzeck* (1947). Practical advice and information came from contemporary works such as the documentary storybook about the agrarian reform, *Free Country* (Milo Harbach 1946), or optimistic children's films such as *Somewhere in Berlin* (Gerhard Lamprecht 1946) and *The Kuckucks* (Hans Deppe 1949). *Street Acquaintances* (Peter Pewas 1948) warned against the consequences of prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, and *Razzia* (Werner Klingler 1948) against the black market. Finally, by showing recent German history in the form of family dramas, the films *The Girls in Gingham* (1949) by Maetzig and *Rotation* (1949) by Staudte made quite an impression.

### *Shadows of the Cold War*

DEFA feature film production during the 1950s was clearly the reflection of political trends, especially the Cold War and the escalating conflict between East and West. Established in 1949, the GDR saw itself as a victim of the Cold War but actually contributed to it. Even cinema played a role in the battle. The doctrine of "socialist realism" was elevated to a beatific principle of artistic work. The term "formalism" hung like a sword of Damocles over the arts. The Stalinist politics of culture, both a reflection and instrument of the Cold War, rushed like a tidal wave from Moscow to Berlin.

After the boom of the late 1940s the number of DEFA productions sank quickly. In 1949, the final year of so-called "free" work, twelve films were produced, in 1951 there were eight, and in 1952 only six. One of the main reasons for this had to do with the commission from the SED Central Committee, which started reviewing all

the screenplays produced by DEFA and imposing strict ideological standards. This ultimately degraded cinema to an instrument of "agitation." Many artists became hesitant; either they didn't want to do anything wrong or they didn't want to associate themselves with SED ideologies. One of the most important films of the early 1950's was Falk Harnack's *The Axe of Wandsbek* (1951), which was banned only weeks after its premiere. It was claimed that the film aroused pity for a fascist hangman. In actuality, the film made quite an impression on the German psyche. It showed how a "simple man" could go from being a follower to an accomplice. This critical view of the German soul was not necessarily desired by DEFA. Numerous West German directors and authors left the DEFA studios because they were not willing to accept the propaganda and wanted simply to continue producing refined entertainment. Another compelling reason to leave was that the West threatened to blacklist those who continued to work for DEFA. After 1950, DEFA films were boycotted by the West for several years. Wolfgang Staudte's satirical masterpiece *The Kaiser's Lackey* (1952), based on the novel by Heinrich Mann, was introduced to the West six years after its initial showing in the East and only after certain scenes were cut. The East/West German co-production of *The Buddenbrooks* proposed by Thomas Mann never materialized, since the West German government routinely torpedoed ideas for such cooperative efforts.

With the death of Stalin in 1953, DEFA experienced a cautious political thaw and was able to offer a more multifaceted and exciting film program. The centrality of the "anti-fascism" theme provided the broad consensus of those who worked for DEFA at that time, yet each director approached the Nazi past from a different perspective. The situation in the GDR also played an increasingly important role even if the most important film of that time, Konrad Wolf's *Sun Seeker* (1958), was forbidden. The film portrayed conflicts in the Soviet-controlled mines in the southern GDR. In *A Berlin Romance* (1956) and *Berlin-Schönhauser Corner* (1957), the Berlin scriptwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase and director Gerhard Klein present undistorted observations of everyday life in the divided city.

At the beginning of the 1960s, director Kurt Maetzig's suggestion for a democratization of the film industry made it through the highly complicated and bureaucratic acceptance procedure of the Ministry of Culture. Actual script development took place in small work groups of studio artists including directors, authors, dramatists, producers and camera people, in which disagreements were worked out in a very positive and productive manner. At the same time, though, most of the DEFA artists thought that with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 they would finally be "among

friends" and would have the freedom to talk more openly about the realities of the GDR.

In 1962 Ralf Kirsten's comedy *On the Sunny Side* became part of the DEFA collection. Important new films shared an acceptance of the GDR's "real existing socialism" and at the same time objected to and criticized the deficiencies of democracy. The films most associated with these qualities were Konrad Wolf's *The Divided Heaven* (1964)), Egon Günther's emancipation drama *Lot's Wife* (1965), and Günther Rücker's *The Best Years* (1965). Frank Beyer persuaded audiences with his anti-fascist trilogy *Five Cartridges* (1960), *Starcrossed Lovers* (1962) and *Naked among Wolves* (1963), as well as with the influential postwar comedy *Carbide and Sorrel* (1963).

Of course this was the calm before the storm. In the Soviet Union, the political spring ended with the ousting of Khrushchev and in East Berlin the horn sounded the arrival of the "New Thinking." At the eleventh session of the Central Committee of the SED in 1965, a type of tribunal composed of party leaders censured twelve DEFA films. Among these were social commentaries like Frank Beyer's *Trace of Stones* and Gerhard Klein's *Berlin around the Corner*. Everyday studies like Jürgen Böttchers *Born in '45* and Kurt Maetzig's *The Rabbit Is Me*, in which this leading director denounces the opportunists of the GDR justice department with unexpected frankness, were also affected. Opinion pieces incorporating contemporary themes, some presented in an almost documentary film style, were also forbidden (*The Spring Needs Its Time!* Günther Stahnke), as were satirical modern fairytales (*When You're Older Adam* Egon Günther, *Miss Butterfly!* Kurth Bartel) and even an honest police comedy (*Hands Up, or I'll Shoot!* Hans-Joachim Kasprzik). The main themes shared by these films are skepticism, revisionism, and a bourgeois interpretation of art. DEFA never fully recovered from this purge of East German film culture.

### *Hope and Disappointment*

At least a couple films stood out from the dispute between avoiding problems, resignation, weariness and compliance. Notable was Konrad Wolf's *I Was Nineteen* (1968), in which the director incorporated his own memories of the last war and the first days of peace in 1945. Heiner Carow described this time period from the perspective of a member of the Hitler Youth in his film *The Russians Are Coming* (1968); the film was forbidden. Egon Günther only narrowly escaped this fate with *Farewell* (1968), which was based on a novel by the former GDR Minister of Culture, Johannes R. Becher, that satirically attacked such pillars of authoritarian society as teachers and law abiding parents.

As a result of the decrease in state-ordered taboos in the years surrounding the eighth SED Party convention in 1971, artists gained more freedom in creating their work. Thus, the next phase that DEFA experienced was considered a hopeful breakthrough. A younger generation—with directors like Rainer Simon, Lothar Warneke, Roland Gräf, Roland Oehme, Ingrid Reschke, and Siegfried Kühn—offered up documentary-like films that described the situation in the GDR more accurately. Heiner Carow recorded the tragicomic love story *The Legend of Paul and Paula* (1973), Egon Günther the emancipation story *Her Third* (1971) and the philosophical film *The Keys* (1974), which portrayed the relationship between Germans and Poles. Konrad Wolf, president of the GDR Art Academy, brought to light the relationship between power and art in his opulent artist biography *Goya* (1971), based on the novel of Lion Feuchtwanger, and in his prudish yet pretty *Naked Man on the Playing Field* (1974). Frank Beyer led us into a Polish ghetto with his tragicomedy *Jacob the Liar* (1974) set towards the end of the Second World War. It remains the only DEFA film nominated for an Oscar award. (In the fall of 1999, Hollywood released a remake of this film starring Robert Williams and Armin Mueller-Stahl.)

Even after the expatriation of the song writer Wolf Biermann from the GDR in 1976, when a storm of dogmatism swept across the land, there were still some brave, stylistic works to be made, namely Konrad Wolf's *SOLO SUNNY* (1980), a praise of individuality, and *Jadup and Boel* (1980), in which Rainer Simon philosophizes on the omnipotence of a petty state functionary and his arduous journey towards self-realization. Such films proved polemic, satirical and very much in the mood of Glasnost and Perestroika, which a half-year later Gorbachev would describe as the "new thinking." *Jadup and Boel*, which had been banned, was first shown after 1988.

At DEFA, the eighties were marked decade that was marked by a series of small conflicts. A growing studio of young directors buckled under the pressure of an increasingly senile SED bureaucracy. Thus, the youngest directing generation of DEFA was held far below their ability and capacity. Critical and realistic youth films like Helmut Dziuba's *Appearance is Mandatory* (1984) were massively attacked in the official media. Pressing and controversial themes that caused a stir among GDR citizens played absolutely no role. The flight of many to the West, political disturbances in Poland or Hungary, and GDR provincialism were a few of these hot topics. The cinematic works also suffered under this "lead tent." The new talents exhausted themselves to the point of not even being noticeable. Prominent directors avoided the present and devoted themselves to recreating big metaphorical stories from the past, e.g. Rainer Simon's *The Airship* (1982) and *The Woman and the Stranger* (1985), or

Roland Gräf with *The House on the River* (1986) and *Fallada—Last Chapter* (1988).

On November 9, 1989, the day the Wall fell, Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* premiered. *Coming Out* was the first gay film produced by DEFA and at the same time a general plea for the freedom to admit publicly who one was. Peter Kahane's *The Architects* (1990) and Jörg Foth's *Last One out of the DaDaeR* (1990) were considered fitting good-byes from a land that loved to be hated. And with its last funds from the GDR government, DEFA attempted to create a sort of reparation; Egon Günther, the alienated director, was allowed to work again (*Stone*) as well as Ulrich Weiß (*Miraculi*) and the much younger Herwig Kipping (*The Land behind the Rainbow*). Works were created that were both bitter and melancholy regarding the GDR.

#### *More than "Honecker's Hollywood"*

In mid-1992, DEFA Studio GmbH Babelsberg was sold by the Treuhand to the French Compagnie Immobilière Phenix (CIP). In their first press conference the new owners announced their extensive plans to have by the beginning of the next century, "at least 3,500 workers on the 451,000 m<sup>2</sup> large area" busily working. Approximately 410,000,000 German marks were invested in the building, of which 60,000,000 would be applied towards the production of new films. A new European film center, which would be available to producers from around the world, was also part of the plan.

One of the first matters of business was to eliminate the name "DEFA" from the commercial register. Today the former DEFA Studios produces only made-for-television movies and shorter programs. With few exceptions, cinematic films no longer have a home in Babelsberg.

So what is going to happen to DEFA? Possibly a few respectable anti-fascist works, good literary adaptations and numerous poetic children's films? Probably that and much more. DEFA, like Ufa, has become a closed, yet contradictory and exciting chapter of German culture and social history: the reflection of stormy times, the reflection of great hopes, naïve utopias and lost illusions. The studio was more than a faithful instrument of the state or "Honecker's Hollywood." It was a place where one struggled "between the pictures" to reveal the truth about life in one's own country and in the world.

#### *New in Berlin: the "DEFA Foundation"*

Towards the end of DEFA's existence, the idea of a DEFA Foundation was born. East German filmmakers feared that DEFA's film stock would be torn apart by businessmen from all ends of the earth. This concern was

not completely unfounded. Who would be able to assure that, during the confusion of the East Germany's dissolution, such things as the real estate and rights of the films produced by DEFA in Potsdam-Babelsberg, Berlin and Dresden would not be turned over to new owners? Those responsible for the privatization in the Treuhand and the Department of the Interior of the German government decided it was best to place the rights to DEFA's film stock in a foundation. The government's own Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Foundation in Wiesbaden, which was responsible for licensing rights granted to German companies before 1945, served as a model.

One of the main questions in this case was how a DEFA Foundation was to finance such an undertaking. You couldn't ask for money from the buyers of the DEFA real estate because they owned no rights. Even the Federal Government couldn't be responsible for supporting DEFA due to its lack of excess funds. As a result, it was determined that the DEFA Foundation would remain proprietor of the complete DEFA film stock, but it would have to turn over the rights of commercialization to a partner. In return, the partner would have to pay a yearly sum of money to the DEFA Foundation. With this money, the production capacity of the Foundation would be guaranteed.

PROGRESS Film Distribution, which had a monopoly on film distribution in the GDR, was chosen as partner to the DEFA Foundation. After its privatization, PROGRESS received the exclusive rights for the commercialization of every movie in the DEFA film stock and promised to pay the yearly sum of DM 650,000 to the Foundation in return for these rights. This was a green light for the creation of the foundation. The property of the DEFA Foundation includes over 7,000 cinematic films which carry the DEFA seal. These include about 950 feature and short films, whose history is summarized above, as well as 5,200 documentaries and newsreels (*The Eye Witness*) and 820 animated films. This artistic and cultural-political treasure has yet to be completely discovered. The Foundation's primary goal is to preserve this treasure. Furthermore, there is the need to scientifically analyze the films and support their distribution and management, as well as German film culture in general.

#### *Videos from ICESTORM*

While PROGRESS has received the worldwide cinema and television rights, the rights for all video and audio distribution were granted to ICESTORM Entertainment/ICESTORM International. ICESTORM International is located in Northampton Massachusetts, very close to the DEFA film library at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Thus it will be no problem in

North America to gain access to DEFA's enormous film stock. ICESTORM International has already prepared the first batch of important DEFA titles, most of them with English subtitles. Some of the titles that ICESTORM has made available include such classics as *The Murderers Are among Us* (1946), *Rotation* (1949) and *The Kaiser's Lackey* (1952) by Wolfgang Staudte, as well as films by Frank Beyer like *Carbide and Sorrel* (1963), *Traces of Stone* (1966) and *Jacob the Liar* (1974). A number of contemporary films by Kurt Maetzig and Gerhard Klein are also available, as are works by Konrad Wolf such as *I Was Nineteen* (1968) and *SOLO SUNNY* (1980) and classic literature and operatic films. Also being offered to the North American public are full-length color fairy tales and "Indianer Filme"—Westerns made in East Germany.

Thanks to the videos that ICESTORM offers from month for month, we can finally catch a glimpse of this unique aspect of cinematic history and also have the opportunity to examine it. It will be an exciting source of information for *Cineastes* and for those interested in political history and sociology. Diverse comparisons can be made between the Weimar period, the reign of the Nazis, and also the cinema of the FRG government. A broad field waits to be discovered.

Written by Ralf Schenk, film journalist and critic, author and publisher of a variety of books on DEFA. He currently lives in Berlin.

Translation by Brian Chartrand, courtesy of ICESTORM International.

Please direct any questions or catalogue requests to the following address:

ICESTORM International, Inc.  
78 Main Street  
Northampton, MA 01060

Phone: (413) 587-9334  
Fax: (413) 587-9305  
[info@icestorm-video.com](mailto:info@icestorm-video.com)