

## Study of GDR Cinema after 1989: Reflections and Prospects

Barton Byg

University of Massachusetts - Amherst

"With you I'd even go to a DEFA film!" This laugh line, with which Manfred Krug flirts with Krystyna Stypulkowska in the banned GDR film *Traces of the Stones* (Frank Beyer, 1966/89), reflects the perhaps undeserved scorn which the population of the German Democratic Republic had for its state film studios during much of their history. The film industry is, as in the U.S., much like the car industry. What was produced in the GDR, whether Trabis or DEFA films, was by 1989 old-fashioned and easily abandoned for the more up-to-date Western model. But both Trabis and DEFA films had once been modern, progressive, even democratic attempts to serve the needs of the population. And both, however discredited by 1989, reflected in particular ways the fabric of life in that part of the world under its specific political, historical and economic conditions.

My research and teaching have emphasized GDR film for almost 15 years. Colleagues have recently asked me what I will do now that the subject of my research no longer exists. This question, whether it relates to the GDR or merely its cinema, is understandable, but disingenuous at the same time. If the entire basis for interest in GDR film (or other arts) depended on the existence of the Socialist State, there would never have been any reason to study it as art but only as a parallel expression of cultural policy directives. Part of its interest did indeed derive from the tension between the artist and the work of art and the parameters set by State ideology and ownership of the means of production, but this tension--between artist, production conditions and audience--clearly has not vanished with the collapse of the GDR; it has only changed.

What then has changed in our subject of study if we study GDR film? What are the new questions we must ask now that the State framework is no longer there? What are the new opportunities for study that were not present before? How should we now see the moral and political ramifications of both the artists' activities in the GDR State, as well as our own role as scholars and critics in the national and international balance sheet during the Cold War? What *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) do we now have to do?

In the following I will try to answer the questions in a rather personal way, since as perhaps in all cases, one's relationship to a field of scholarship is not utterly separate from one's sense of scholarly and personal self-definition. If the subject matter for our

research has not disappeared, the conditions for our work have certainly changed a great deal.

My first thought when asked what I will do now that my field has disappeared is usually, "But the people whose work I've been studying aren't dead!" This rather obvious statement brings with it a number of ramifications that apply to anyone who works on contemporary culture: An artist can change media, style, residence, political loyalty and any number of characteristics that would call previous criticism into question or challenge one to see the "life's work" in a new light. And people die, too.

Those of us in the U.S. who study artists from abroad, and who publish for U.S. audiences and not for a national critical apparatus in the artist's country of origin, are always in a particularly complex position: In order to talk about these subjects at all, we have to argue for their significance and in part serve as promoters of the work in order for it to be noted at all in this country. Even today I am engaged in developing a "DEFA Film Library" at the University of Massachusetts in order to make more GDR films available for research and teaching in the U.S.

The role of critic as promoter is endemic to those who write about living artists. Criticism of a work implies that the reader is at least potentially part of an audience of the work. If the work is only made for a foreign audience and is unlikely to be imported to the U.S., this fact itself becomes a subject for the critic: Why is this work not accessible to people in the U.S. while other works are? What is important or interesting about the country of origin of the work that justifies writing about it even for people who will never see it?

Those of us interpreting obscure German art for a U.S. audience have had two ready reasons to argue for its significance: the Cold War and German economic and political power. Both reasons have furnished us an audience in the U.S., but they can also have undesirable effects. Both have led to a selection of art and artists for discussion in the U.S based on their significance to these categories of world politics in which the U.S. is involved, but they may lead to neglect of works that address audiences and issues in Germany that are unrelated to them. Added to the category of U.S. historical and political interest in "German" issues is the nearly natural subordination of films, for example, into the narrative of a national cinema, a sub-plot of the narrative of national history and national identity. All of these narratives are not phenomena that exist in the world, but are engaged after the fact to justify

the significance of the work we have chosen to address in the first place.

I have used such categories both consciously and unconsciously in framing my own work on DEFA films.<sup>1</sup> For instance, I insist on the relevance of the work of GDR filmmakers in any study of the "master narrative" of the German national cinema, since there was more institutional continuity between DEFA and UFA, and between DEFA and pre-Hitler German cinema than perhaps anywhere in the West. The simple fact of DEFA's centralization and antiquated industrial studio organization was part of this continuity with the "German cinema." As distinct from the love-hate relationship between the West German "New German Cinema" and Hollywood, for instance, I have proposed that the GDR cinema was "more German" than that in the West.

I have also argued that the GDR cinema was more "European" than that in the West, on the basis of its own master-narrative as a "national cinema" and on the basis of its (sometimes underground) connections to Neo-Realism, New Waves and other movements in Europe, especially France, Italy, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. The project of being a "national cinema", both in regard to others and in regard to the audience in the GDR, is one which the West German film industry has never undertaken -- at least not with such consistency and self-consciousness. That this was a lack for which individual directors sought to compensate in their own efforts is a thesis central to Thomas Elsaesser's history of the New German Cinema.<sup>2</sup>

But in spite of these arguments, another voice asserts itself: there is no such thing as the "German National Cinema" -- East, West, or United -- and this is a problem for research that involves any aspect of film from "Germany" (whether produced by DEFA or anyone else). This is a reflection in my own memory of Jean-Marie Straub's both polemical and accurate admonition that there is no such thing as film history; there is only the history of commercial successes.

Part of my interest in GDR cinema has indeed been in response to this doubt about the criteria for deciding what is worthy of study. Why should only the productions that deal with German identity, ideology or history be the ones that tell us what it has meant to be "German" in the 20th Century? The criteria of "film history" have led U.S. scholars and audiences to remain generally ignorant of numerous aspects of German cinema which may be as central to it as any more famous ones. For instance, the regional comic genius of Karl Valentin is rarely

mentioned in U.S. studies of German film, perhaps due to his lack of connection to Hollywood.

And Herbert Achternbusch, a unique and prolific figure of "new German cinema" is largely ignored for perhaps the same reasons. A Goethe Institute staff member once explained that Achternbusch films were not brought to the U.S. by the Institute because they were simply "too German."

It would take detailed socio-cultural study to determine the reasons for the kind of culture (with a small *c*) that existed in the GDR. Certain patterns and practices from working class traditions were preserved there, but it is difficult to determine whether this was due to poverty and isolation, popular will or State policy. For instance, aspects of GDR cinema, such as the outdoor summer film festivals, may have been a sign of cultural continuity with pre-war social institutions. But were they valued as a working-class German tradition or merely as an inferior substitute for the high-tech, popular culture of the West where they had long since disappeared? Or, on the other hand, did the lack of innovation persist because the cultural policy of the GDR was meant, in theory if not in fact, to serve the working class? For that reason, it was excusable if not desirable to continue habits of entertainment that had more in common with the working class of Germany in the 1920s and 30s than the modern industrial states of the 50s and after. This contradiction in GDR cultural policy, which one could term the reification of working-class culture, certainly has its counterparts in the pre-1989 West and in contemporary society: the commercialization if not eradication of working-class culture. What was once reassuring because of its familiarity is now hated for its glaring backwardness.

To sum up thus far, then, the demise of the GDR has given new intensity to issues that were already there: how do we decide what is important, representative of what is defined as a "national cinema" which may not even exist? There are now more issues to discuss and more material to examine than before, not less. With the new availability of documents and films from studio and Party archives, researchers have an unprecedented opportunity to examine the interplay of influences that produce a "national cinema": the interaction of the experience of artists and audiences with politics, economics, history, and national and international cultural trends.

While thinking about these questions of significance and representativeness, I return to the subject of the artists themselves; many of those who

were involved in the early years of creating the GDR cinema are still alive. A number of important figures, friends, colleagues, have also died since 1989 or have withdrawn into a kind of professional limbo. To witness this must also have an effect on the critic, and makes one hesitate to make hurried judgments of the historical significance of these people's lives and work as they struggle for the basics of personal survival. Even in cases where people's past behavior in the GDR deserves criticism, one is sobered by the magnitude of the changes they face. And GDR dissidents, too, have experienced a loss of context within which to define themselves and construct a vision of the future of "their country."

One of the inhibitions placed on honest thinking about the situation is the one-sided political and economic risk involved in confronting the GDR past. We in the U.S. learned from Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter that one gains power by denying that one knows what one knows and is despised for admitting any doubts. As former GDR citizens face the future, they are fully aware that nothing is to be gained for them in the context of the Western social order by investigating the past or their own mixed feelings about it. The social theorist Irene Dölling uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" to examine how women in eastern Germany saw the changes unification brought to their everyday lives. As former GDR citizens experience a radical re-evaluation of the cultural capital, now introduced from outside by the challenge of surviving in the Federal Republic, there is little space for them to participate themselves in a critical re-evaluation of their identity and their cultural capital. Since the West is undergoing no similar public exposure of its security apparatus or challenge to institutional legitimacy, any admission by an Easterner of something to apologize for is bound to result in a loss of status, not an increase in credibility. In such a one-sided power equation, self-criticism or reflection on past institutions appears irrational or masochistic.

The situation not only upholds the status quo of the West and discredits the East, it also robs Easterners of an opportunity to redress the wrongs done in their former country. The redress of wrongs is a much more cumbersome process even than economic reform, and can take place on two levels, the personal and the judicial. Both approaches to the redress of wrongs must be pursued in order for Germans to come to terms with the GDR past, as Jürgen Habermas has argued in *Die Zeit*.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty of redressing past wrongs was brought home to me quite personally by Sibylle Schönemann's film *Verriegelte Zeit* (Distributed in the U.S. as *Locked-Up Time* by Zeitgeist Films). Schönemann was arrested and imprisoned in 1984 for applying to leave the GDR. In her 1990 documentary she returns to confront those responsible for her persecution. The film beautifully investigates the spaces where her past suffering took place while the director interviews or attempts to interview those responsible for her persecution, in a manner reminiscent of Marcel Ophuls' approach to former Nazis.

In a panel discussion with the filmmaker in New York last year, I was reduced to an abject muteness by the pain of Schönemann's memory and the inadequacy of the film in dealing with it. Habermas' categories have helped me identify my reservations about the film: especially when seen outside the former GDR, the film inevitably conflates the personal and the judicial path to the redress of wrongs, thwarting both.

The film is only partly a settling of accounts; it is also an evocation of lasting ties to a past that was forcefully cut off. But the personal complexities of the filmmaker's connection with the GDR past lie beneath the surface and were easily misinterpreted in the U.S. National Public Radio, for instance, reported that Schönemann returned to her former prison with a Western film crew, when in fact production support and crew members had come from the DEFA Documentary Studios, not from the West.

On the other hand, the film attempts to show the director's search for a personal word of apology from her former persecutors, when they well know that in a film they are subject not to her personal anger but to public judgment and condemnation. Their miserable attempt to deny their past actions is painful to watch; that even one of them admits to a conscious lack of civil courage is actually surprising, given the context of the interviews. But if the film actually had been a personal settling of accounts, it would have had to follow up aspects of Schönemann's fate that are only touched on, for instance, the fact that friends and relatives also urged her to side with the State against her husband and save herself a lot of suffering. That the State was able to command this level of conformity, and that ordinary citizens offered it, is a legacy that cannot be addressed in a public judicial forum, I would argue, and a film that deals with its personal ramifications would need rare candor and tact.

Another recent documentary about abuses in the former GDR has not found distribution in the U.S., perhaps because it possesses just this mixture of candor, patience and subtlety. It is called *Der schwarze Kasten: Versuch eines Psychogramms* (*The Black Box*), and was an East/West co-production, directed by Tamara Trampe and Johann Feindt in 1992. In this film Trampe firmly yet gently urges a psychologist and former training officer of the *Staatssicherheit* (State Security Service) to confront the implications of his former activities. As in *Locked-Up Time* the filmmakers return with the camera to the locations of earlier crimes, but this time the crime is the abuse of knowledge and skill, the aptitudes of a man with academic credentials and artistic sensitivity; in other words, a person with whom audiences in an art cinema might identify. Trampe does not allow this empathy with the Stasi officer to go so far as to excuse him from judgment for his actions. But the film makes it clear that such a judgment is meaningless without understanding, and that understanding is not easily gained.

To understand and to judge are privileges reserved to those with the power to do so, and a film such as *The Black Box* might be an empowering experience, also for former GDR citizens. How much cultural, political and economic power they will be able to maintain in a united Germany remains to be seen, and this question will ultimately determine whether future films will document the experience of the people in these regions and whether fiction films will tell stories of particular meaning for them. The art and culture of the GDR, its origins and its legacy, is not an exhausted subject, even if the labels change and the parameters of study broaden. There is still much to understand.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf., for example, "What Might Have Been: DEFA Films of the Past and the Future of German Cinema" *Cineaste* 17.4 (Summer 1990): 9 - 15; "Cinema in the German Democratic Republic" *Monatshefte* 85.3 (Fall 1990): 52 - 59; and "Generational Conflict and Historical Continuity in GDR Film" in *Concepts of History in German Cinema and Television*, ed. Bruce Murray and Christopher Wickham (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992) 197 - 219.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989) 41 - 42.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Bemerkungen zu einer verworrenen Diskussion: Was bedeutet 'Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit' heute?", *Die Zeit*, (10. April 1992,) p. 17 [overseas edition].