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Ernst Opgenoorth: Volksdemokratie im Kino. Propagandistische Selbstdarstellung der SED im DEFA-Dokumentarfilm 1946-1957

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shows an increase in productions of plays from other socialist states and a growth in contemporary socialist drama, that, unfortunately, East German works still cannot match.

Given the wealth of detail found in the volume, errors are remarkably few. On page 302 the 1976/77 season date should be omitted. The Hebbel listed on page 319 should be Friedrich, not Johann Peter Hebbel.

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Volksdemokratie im Kino: Propagandistische Selbstdarstellung der SED im DEFA-Dokumentarfilm 1946-1957. By Ernst Opgenoorth. Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1984. 298 pp.

The somewhat redundant title of this book reveals its bias: The self-portrayal of any political organization is by its very nature self-serving. Thus, there would have been no need for the adjective "propagandistic" with its derogatory connotations. Instead, one might well argue that documentary films have a built-in tendency either to idealize or to criticize their subject matter. This book therefore cannot (and admittedly does not) make any claim of non-partisan and value-neutral scholarly objectivity. Prof. Opgenoorth not only defines his own political position as "leftish liberal," believing in a critical-emancipatory view of Marxism, but admits his intention of analyzing films "against the grain," i.e. interpreting not just what the films show but also what they omit. Furthermore, he often stresses discrepancies between the image on the screen and the spoken commentary. Frequently, technical aspects such as camera angle, type and duration of shot, and camera movement are interpreted to reveal the alleged aims of the film makers and

the presumed affect on the viewer. In absence of concrete evidence, this is of necessity a slightly speculative undertaking.

The author analyzes 64 DEFA documentaries from 1946 to 1957, approximately 20% of the total production for the period -- presumably a representative sample. The end date was chosen on the assumption that the destalinization following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 caused significant changes in the GDR as well. Actually, the events of June 17, 1953 turned out to have important consequences in the manner (if not necessarily the substance) of the SED's self-portrayal. In addition, the period covers the years in which TV played no significant role in the GDR as a government-controlled medium of information.

The author finds two major components in the SED's view of democracy, which he labels "stalinistic" and "popular-democratic" (volksdemokratisch). The former emphasizes the leading doctrinaire role of the Party and its hierarchical structure. Its philosophy is best revealed in the slogan "The Party is always right." The latter stresses the participation and consent of the masses in political decisions, allows criticism of dogmatism and bureaucracy, and believes that "if masses of workers do not understand the Party, it is the fault of the Party, not of the workers."

Not unexpectedly, Prof. Opgenoorth finds these two attitudes in frequent conflict between film makers who believe in a certain degree of artistic freedom and the authoritarian demands of the censor for conformity with the Party line. Nor does it come as a great revelation that after June of 1953 greater stress is placed on creating the image of popular involvement in the decision-making process.

The films are grouped by major themes, such as the SED itself, the FDJ, the Soviet Union, the Third World, the fight against Western imperialism, the polemic against neo-fascism in

the Federal Republic, and domestic topics like industry, agriculture, sport, culture, education, and the role of women.

The conclusions drawn by this careful and thorough study are neither novel nor surprising: under a pretense of objective realism, DEFA documentaries are deliberately biased to portray the socio-political structure of the GDR in a highly favorable light. As could be expected, their reception by the general public was apparently less than totally enthusiastic: Like most people everywhere, East German audiences tend to be bored and "turned off" by obvious didactic intentions: they usually prefer non-political entertainment films, frequently the product of the Hollywood "dream factory."

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Horns Ende. by Christoph Hein. Berlin: Aufbau, 1985.

As a boy of 12 Thomas remembers standing in front of a triptychon, making faces at himself and trying to see all three images of himself simultaneously. Thirty years later he is haunted by the memory of Horn, whom he and a friend had discovered hanging from a tree in the forest outside of town (suicide), an apparition which admonishes him to remember what had happened, even to remember, perhaps, some things which he hadn't seen.

The triptychon forms the remarkable structural basis for this somewhat controversial novel, which generated a year-long debate before its publication was authorized. Hein expands the single narrative perspective so skillfully -- and even deceptively -- employed in Der fremde Freund to include five separate individuals, each relating the end of Horn from their own subjective point of view. However, the

historical perspective itself which is at issue in this work, is related simultaneously in triplicate (Nazi period, 1950s during the socialist rebuilding of the GDR, and the present) from the standpoint of three differing "philosophies" of history, those of Dr. Spodeck (cynicism), Kruschkatz (historical necessity), and of Horn himself (factual).

There is more to the narrative technique: reading Hein's first novel is like observing an archeologist painstakingly fitting the shattered pieces of an ancient urn back together. Unlike in Der fremde Freund, where the reader is drawn by the rhythmic quality of the language to rush to the end of the book, he is forced here to proceed slowly, meticulously, to study the pieces and fragments of the puzzle as it is being put together. The result is a provocative fragment and we are left to fill in the missing parts, those lost forever, with our own thoughts, and to contemplate whether the future is served best by digging up the past or by forgetting it altogether. Each ensuing generation, according to Horn, will take whatever fragmented information is available, complete with factual errors or deliberate falsifications and then create its own image of history. Hein questions the ability of man to relate history with truth or accuracy in this novel. Each generation's attitude or partisan reaction towards history becomes more significant than history itself in formulating consciousness.

The "controversial" nature of the novel can be traced to two elements: In the mid 1950s Kruschkatz is appointed by the Party to carry out socialist reform in the small town of Guldenberg. In his own mind he fails. He fails to prevent Horn's suicide and he fails, during his 19-year tenure as mayor, to change the mentality of the Guldenberg citizenry. His failure, however, is a matter of degree. After all, Kruschkatz' actions did help stifle Bachofen's intrigues. By comparison to Bachofen, a villain parading as an ardent