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GDR Film Festival in U.S.

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CORRIGENDUM

In connection with the information on films about the GDR available from the United States Committee for Friendship with the German Democratic Republic, their address was erroneously printed. It should read

U.S.C.F.G.D.R.
130 East 16th St.
New York, N.Y. 10003

Sincere apologies to those readers who experienced delays in obtaining their films because of requests addressed to Sixth St. !

GDR Film Festival in U.S.

Reviewed by Dr. Robert Ante

Twenty-one films from the GDR were shown during November and December, 1975, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City through the cooperation of the State Film Archives of the GDR, Deutsche Film-Aktion Gesellschaft (DEFA), and Macmillan/Audio Brandon.

The films can be roughly classified into two broad groups: (1) those films which recount the evils and the collapse of the Nazi era, and (2) those films which reflect the problems and achievements of a State that is constructing socialism. Of course, several of the films must be grouped under another heading -- (3) other.

The most cinematically powerful films shown were those portraying the rise of Hitler fascism as well as the struggle against it. These films include the Murderers are Among Us (1946), Jacob the Liar (1974), Marriage in the Shadows (1947), The Blum Affair (1948), The Submissive (1951), Lissy (1957), The Gleiwitz Case (1961), They Called Him Amigo (1959), I Was 19 (1968). Two other films, Wozzeck (1947) and Farewell (1968), dealt with the role that dehumanized bourgeois culture and science plays in sowing the seeds of fascism.

Less successful and memorable are those films dealing with the problems of contemporary society in the GDR such as The Seventh Year (1969), The Third (1972), My Dear Robinson (1972), The Story of Paul and Paula (1973), and The Naked Man in the Playing Field (1974).

Undoubtedly, the greater artistic impact of the first group of films is based upon their thematic content. Perhaps one aspect of their more ready acceptance by American audiences is that they more closely reflect the social realities of the present day U.S.A. Marriage in the Shadows describes the moral and/or physical destruction of those who acquiesced to Hitler fascism. The concept that "art and artists should be pure and not involved with politics" and the phrase "I joined such-and-such governmental or private art fund because I could then exert a countervailing liberal influence against the Nazis", rings more familiar to the American ear than the moral and social transformation of a youth into a genuine human being in Do You Know Urban? The multifaceted mass appeal of fascism is revealed by Lissy. Fascism had an appeal to the unemployed petty bourgeoisie (Lissy's husband), to socialists who accepted the Nazi's

militant Wallacite tirades against the banks and the capitalists at face value (Lissy's brother), to those without moral scruples who simply viewed the Nazi party as a way to "get ahead" (her husband's friend). The general tenor of conversation by the audience after watching Lissy was "it hits too close to home!" Other films from this first group also have their contemporary counterparts: Wozzeck -- experiments with syphilis on Blacks; The Blum Affair -- the Angela Davis frameup, the Elsberg Case; The Gleiwitz Case -- the Tonkin Bay incident.

A second reason for the greater success of the first group of films as compared with the second group is that the literature of struggle against tyranny is thousands of years old and already has well structured and defined formulas whereas the problem of how to artistically express the construction of how socialism has not yet been solved to the same extent. For example, Konrad Wolf, who directed two of the most powerful films included in this series, Lissy and I Was 19, both of which dealt with the Nazi period, also directed one of the most forgettable, The Naked Man in the Playing Field, which deals with an artist in contemporary socialist society.

On the other hand, whatever their artistic success, this second group attempts to deal with real problems: the working married professional woman and motherhood (The Seventh Year), the search for true love and a happy marriage (The Third), the limitations of our desires by the realities of life (The Story of Paul and Paula), the problems of teenage marriage and children (My Dear Robinson), the rehabilitation of an ex-convict (Do You Know Urban). The humanistic quality of society in the GDR is perhaps best revealed in those films populated by less than admirable characters. Obviously, the GDR film makers do not maintain that socialist realism must portray a utopia, but rather, a society striving for a better life for all.

Two remaining films must be mentioned. The only comment that can be made about The Flying Dutchman (1964) is that Richard Wagner would surely have said: "Exactly what I had in mind!" The Devil's Elixir was not as successful. Methodical and scientific attention to meticulous detail created strong artistic impact in such films as Lissy, but the audience could not place The Devil's Elixir in time because of the ambiguities of costuming. The actors also had a plastic Hollywood quality about them. The moral of a story, that a monastery, a commune, or the church offers no refuge from the world of struggle between good and evil was lost in unrealistic timeless fantasy.

While those who attended the films in this series generally appreciated them, many younger people were unable to appreciate these films because they lacked the necessary historical and cultural background about the nature of Hitlerism, and the alignment of forces during World War II. This was the most disturbing aspect of this series. The American educational system has seen fit not to educate its youth about the evils of fascism.

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P.A.H.