

1992

## Harry Blunk and Dirk Jungnickel: Filmland DDR. Ein Reader zur Geschichte, Funktion und Wirkung der DEFA

Richard J. Rundell  
*New Mexico State University*

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

Rundell, Richard J. (1992) "Harry Blunk and Dirk Jungnickel: Filmland DDR. Ein Reader zur Geschichte, Funktion und Wirkung der DEFA," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v18i1.1031>

This Review 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](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

she again eked out a primitive existence until her *Pensionierung* in 1956. Thoroughly Russified after more than twenty years in the USSR, and without relatives in Germany, she had planned to stay on in the Soviet Union, until she received a copy of *Sonntag*, which reawakened her interest in German culture. With the help of Anna Seghers, who secured permission for her to leave the USSR, Richter returned to the GDR in 1957, where she worked as *Dozentin* of Russian and Soviet literature at the Becher Institut in Leipzig.

In contrast to the books of Zinner and Brüning, Richter's memoirs are not contemporary, dating instead from the 1960s. The first part: "Vom großen und vom kleinen Werden," written in 1968, was published as *Die Plakette* in 1972. Seen chronologically, it covers her life from childhood to her arrest in 1936; the majority of the text deals with her "second" and "third" lives, that is, the beginning of her active career in the KPD and her work with the BPRS in the late 1920s and early 30s—she assumed her pseudonym at this time—and her antifascist and *Aufbau* activities in the Soviet Union in the two years before her arrest. Her bourgeois childhood and upbringing—her many faceted, superb education would be of great benefit to her during her imprisonment—are treated in the form of an extended flashback. Richter relates with such exactness and detail, that those interested in German society during the early part of the century, or in the BPRS, will read her text with interest.

The second part of *Totgesagt*, "Tod und Auferstehung," which begins with her imprisonment and ends with her return to Germany, was written in 1964, but never published. Brüning writes that Richter, not expecting her memoirs to be printed, had deposited them in the SED archive for safekeeping (Brüning, 11). Although *Totgesagt* did not appear until 1990, arrangements for its publication were made before Richter's death in early 1989, and a portion of the second part was printed in *Sinn und Form* in May/June 1988.

With her title "Tod und Auferstehung" Richter is alluding, on the one hand, to her arrest and conviction, her shock of suddenly and without cause having been branded an enemy of the country to which she was so committed—as she told a guard on the way to Vladivostok: "Wissen Sie, was das Schlimmste auf der Welt ist? Wenn man Sie für einen Feind hält, und in Wirklichkeit sind Sie der allerbeste Freund.' Ich . . . würgte an dem bitteren Brocken, den ich nie verschlucken würde, das wußte ich" (297); and, on the other hand, her "arising" from the "dead" in the years thereafter, in the labor camps in Siberia and later in the GDR. For despite the enormous hardship of the years in Siberia—which Richter graphically describes—she found positive sides of her incarceration, valuing her experiences with the people and nature of Siberia as an enrichment of her life, her "Universitäten" (469). A highly spirited, energetic, and resolute woman, "vergüteter Stahl" (467), as an acquaintance once remarked, Richter not only survived, but managed to be intellectually productive and creative, even happy, also during the hardest of times.

And she maintained her strong belief in socialism. Toward the end of her stay in Ustj-Omschug she converted her anti-Soviet Cossack housemate to socialism! As she told Elisabeth Schulz-Semrau, who couldn't accept "ihre allzu idealistische Sicht . . . nach allem, was passiert ist" (462): ". . . ich ordne das alles historisch ein . . . Das Kind, wenn es klein ist, macht Fehler . . ." (462). At the end of *Totgesagt*, Richter sums up her Soviet exile:

Es waren schwere Jahre gewesen, die meine Kräfte bis aufs Äußerste beanspruchten, in jeder Beziehung. Doch ich hatte nie zu denen gehört, die sich den Aufbau des Sozialismus als Zuckerlecken vorstellten. Daher hatte ich stets neben dem Negativen auch das unaufhaltsam wachsende Neue wahrgenommen. Fest überzeugt, daß in einem klassenlosen Staate schließlich die Geister der Vergangenheit zum Untergang verurteilt sind (454).

Objectively seen, the three books reiterate information about Stalin's purges and prison camps long since known in the West. The important difference is that these German émigrés, in spite of the injustice done to them in the name of socialism, remained faithful to the socialist cause; their political commitment was neither destroyed—nor apparently even reduced—by their experiences in the Soviet Union. Their reconciliation of the seemingly unreconcilable was made possible by their voluntary subordination of self to the greater whole—their acquiescence in what they saw as historical necessity—and their belief that Stalin alone was to blame for the derailing of socialist humaneness—to paraphrase his own statement: the Stalins come and go, but socialism remains.

Even without concurring in their political conviction, one cannot help but be impressed by the enormous strength and resoluteness of these women—especially those in Brüning's and Richter's books—who emerged morally, if not physically, intact from their subhuman existence in Stalin's Soviet Union. One wonders how they are coping with the most recent blow to their world view. Zinner speaks of "Die große Ungeduld, vom langsamen, schweren Schritt der Geschichte mitleidlos in den Staub der Illusionen und Lebenslügen getreten . . ." (5). It reads like a sad summing up of the present situation.

Blunk, Harry, & Dirk Jungnickel. *Filmland DDR: Ein Reader zu Geschichte, Funktion und Wirkung der DEFA*. Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1990. Paper, 120 pp. ISBN 3-8046-8764-4

"Honecker's Hollywood" it was wryly called—the East German state-subsidized motion picture studio DEFA (Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft), one of the success stories of the GDR, despite many trials and tribulations during its 44-year history.

The hope of preserving DEFA in some form as a production facility with a staff of more than 2000 people persisted long after the united German Treuhand had begun dissolving what was left of East German industry. Now that this hope, too, has been dashed, it is an opportune moment to take a good look at what DEFA actually was and did.

*Filmland DDR* is a fine collection of eight pieces written between summer, 1989 and spring, 1990 which deal succinctly with a surprising variety of aspects of studio production practices and policies. Of the anthology's six authors, five lived and worked in the GDR, four of them at DEFA. They present a fascinating composite image of a strikingly competent group of artists and technicians forced to operate at various disadvantages—sometimes financial, usually bureaucratic, inevitably ideological. The SED, heeding Lenin's

dictum that cinema was the most important of the arts in our time, paid meticulous attention to the 16-18 films which DEFA produced in an average year (compared with well over 100 films produced annually in West Germany). DEFA, this book makes clear, was as important to the party as Olympic gold medals or participation in Soviet space missions.

Ulrich Teschner presents an annotated interview with DEFA cinematographer Günter Marcinkowsky, who worked with the studio from its first production, Staudte's justifiably famous "Die Mörder sind unter uns" (premier 10-15-46), until he left the GDR in 1980. One is intrigued by Marcinkowsky's account of how Frank Beyer's notable film "Spur der Steine" went almost instantly from the category of "besonders wertvoll" to oblivion after its July, 1966 premier and a vicious review in *Neues Deutschland* (included in the book).

In the book's longest piece (18 pages), Betinna Hindemith examines the troublesome role played by GDR critics and their reviews in the history of DEFA films. Film criticism in the GDR was always evaluation of ideological content, couched in terms of the party's shifting concerns and short-term goals, such as the emphasis on the positive hero within the framework of socialist realism. Film aesthetics were invariably secondary. How the critics dealt with—or avoided dealing with—problems generated by controversial films such as "Solo Sunny" (1980), "Bürgschaft für ein Jahr" (1981), "Insel der Schwäne" (1983), and "Einer trage des anderen Last" (1988), to mention but a few, is explored in this article and ultimately judged:

Wie skandalös diese Verbote und Reglementierungen waren, mit welcher—für Außenstehende geradezu unfaßlichen—Regelmäßigkeit sie gerade die Künstler trafen, die sich der DDR zutiefst verbunden fühlten und fühlen, wird, bezogen auf den Schaden, den die DDR sich selbst zufügte vielleicht nur davon übertroffen: was auf lange Sicht solche Vorwürfe bewirkten und bewirken—Anpassung, Rückzug, Resignation, Auswanderung. (37-38)

This is the common observation of all the essays in this book: the party, over and over again, was its own worst enemy and consistently made precisely wrong decisions when faced with cultural or artistic problems. The absence of trust between party and DEFA permeated East German society; the media have paid particular attention since 1989 to the thorny path trod by literary figures in their dealings with *Schriftstellerverband*, SED and Stasi.

Co-editor Dirk Jungnickel presents a wealth of studio information and statistics in his article, with details about production procedures and sequences as well as pre- and post- production aspects. We also learn that DEFA found a valuable source of hard currency in the rental of sound stages, sets, props, and costumes to West German film companies.

The editors interview Armin Mueller-Stahl, probably the best-known ex-DEFA actor to appear in American films. Mueller-Stahl notes how difficult his decision was to return to the GDR from a project in West Germany after the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, but how DEFA personnel afterward put a positive face on things by saying that one could now concentrate on making movies since the border situation had stabilized. Mueller-Stahl, whom readers will recognize from "Music Box" (1989) and "Avalon" (1990), notes that in the GDR he played sons and heroes, in West Germany he played fathers and "Mieslinge," and now, in the USA he is playing grandfathers.

Sibylle Schönemann outlines the process of story development at DEFA through the dramaturgy department, from idea via exposé and treatment to scenario and shooting script. She notes that some 70% of DEFA films were based on literary texts. Advance self-censorship was almost universal, in order to get projects realized or even considered: "Eine Chance ist schneller vertan, als sie kommt, also paßt man sich an und ordnet sich unter. Man fügt sich und hofft auf bessere Zeiten" (76).

Co-editor Jungnickel also contributes an interesting piece on the history and themes of children's features at DEFA, from Staudte's 1953 "Geschichte vom kleinen Muck," which Jungnickel calls "bis heute ... der internationale DEFA-Erfolg überhaupt" (83), through a variety of such types of children's features as "Märchenfilm," "Indianerfilm," and "Gegenwartsmärchen." It becomes clear that the SED and the DEFA administration staked high hopes on the effectiveness of these children's features in the education of well-rounded socialist personalities, especially in the generations born in a stable GDR after 1961.

Jörg Foth writes in March, 1990 about his work on one of the last film projects at DEFA during the revolutionary events of the fall of 1989. Foth pleads for the preservation of an independent DEFA and asserts hopefully (but in vain, as it now turns out), "Zu einer Außenstation der Schwarzwaldklinik wird sich unsere DEFA nicht umbauen lassen" (97).

The book's final essay is an updated and annotated abstract of editor Harry Blunk's book, *Die DDR in ihren Spielfilmen: Reproduktion und Kozeption der DDR-Gesellschaft im neueren DEFA-Gegenwartsspielfilm* (2nd ed. 1987) and probably the most comprehensive single essay in the volume. Blunk provides a superb and convincing analysis of what DEFA might have been and what went wrong, as well as a sense of DEFA's position in the overall cultural landscape.

Only two criticisms are worth noting for this excellent, small paperback. The editors clearly assume that readers are thoroughly familiar with production practices in other countries; more explicit comparisons would have been instructive. Although numerous DEFA films have been broadcast on West German television in recent years, many US readers probably have not been able to see more than a tiny sampling of the hundreds of DEFA films. A DEFA filmography ought to have been appended.

Richard J. Rundell  
New Mexico State University

Bock, Sigrid, Wolfgang Klein und Dietrich Scholze (Hrsg.). *Die Waffen nieder! Schriftsteller in den Friedensbewegungen des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989. 351 S.

Friedensforscher, Pazifisten, Literaturwissenschaftler und andere werden in diesem Band, der verschiedene Essays zum Thema Frieden enthält, nicht nur einführende, sondern auch weiterführende Aspekte auffinden. Die Herausgeber entschieden sich bei der Erfassung von Kategorien für die folgende Einteilung: 1) Entscheidungszeitraum 20. Jahrhundert; 2) Verführung durch Krieg; 3) Verantwortung des Individuums; 4) Versuche, die Kräfte zu organisieren; 5) Macht der Literatur.

In den "Entscheidungszeitraum 20. Jahrhundert" fällt z.B. die Arbeit von Sigrid Bock: "Bertha von Suttner, *Die Waffen nieder!* Vom Roman zur organisierten Friedensarbeit." Bevor Bock auf den eigentlichen Roman eingeht, zeichnet sie auf