



# The Film Development of the East German Film Studio DEFA

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**Abstract.** The East German film studio Deutsche Film AG (DEFA) has gone through a full 45 years from its establishment in 1946 to its disappearance in 1991. In the interim, it produced about 750 feature films and 2,250 documentaries and short films, of which 14 feature films were listed among the 100 outstanding German films of modern times. Compared with the West German films of the same period, the films produced by DEFA more truly recorded the development process of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), reflecting the political and cultural changes that people experienced. This paper sorts out the famous films produced by DEFA during the 45 years in accordance with the chronological context and connects the films of different periods with the political background at that time, hoping to help readers have a clearer understanding of the history of that period through films.

**Keywords:** DEFA · film development · East Germany

## 1 Introduction

The history of the East German film studios can be traced back to the final stages of World War II. After the unconditional surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945, the Berlin Film Industry Center and the Studio Babelsberg in Potsdam-Babelsberg both fell under Soviet occupation. In November 1945, lots of writers, directors, photographers and actors were invited by Paul Wandel, the president of the German Public Education Management Center in the Soviet occupation zone, to hold a conference with the theme of “A New Beginning for German Cinematographic Art” [1]. At the meeting, the participants discussed the future development of German film. The key members of the meeting were Carl Hacker, Willy Schiller, Kurt Maetzig, Alfred Lindemann, Adolf Fischer and Hans Klering, who played a vital role in the development of the DEFA Studio.

## 2 East German Films in the Beginning of DEFA

The film series *The Eyewitness* (*Der Augenzeuge*) directed by Kurt Metzsch was released in East German cinemas on February 19, 1946. On May 17, 1946, with the permission of the Soviet central-government, the GDR established the first and only state-owned film company in post-war Germany-DEFA.

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Compared with the decentralized management of the film market in other Occupation Zones in Germany, the DEFA in the Soviet occupation zone was centrally controlled and managed by the government. As early as the beginning of the DEFA's establishment, Sergei Ivanovich Tiulpanov, the highest representative of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany, put forward the task facing the film company: DEFA has important tasks to solve in the future, and one of the most important is to complete the German democracy construction and to educate the German people, especially the youth, in the spirit of genuine democracy and human rights [2]. In other words, the GDR hopes to use DEFA to transform the people's ideology and help them build a new anti-fascist and democratic social order.

From July 6 to 9, 1947, the first filmmakers' conference was held in Potsdam-Babelsberg. Famous filmmakers from different occupied zones of Germany were invited to discuss how to formulate German cultural policies. Later, the world's political structure changed drastically, and the contradiction between the East and the West gradually became deeper and deeper. On May 23, 1949, the FRG was established under the leadership of the Western Allies. The German Democratic Republic, namely East Germany, also announced its official establishment on October 7 of the same year, which was dominated by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (German: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, shortened: SED). Henceforth, Germany was formally split into the eastern and western parts.

### 3 East German Films in the 1950s

With the division of Germany and the influence of Stalinist politics, the DEFA also gradually became a tool of government propaganda. At that time, East German films no longer considered their authenticity and artistic style, and turned to political compromise. Hans Deppe's *Die Kuckucks* (1949) and Hans Müller's *Bürgermeister Anna* (1950) were criticized for their inconsistent social ideology at the time, while the film *Familie Benthin* (1950), vigorously promoting the virtues of East Germany, was praised.

In July 1952, the General Secretary Walter Ulbricht made a report on the current situation and the new tasks of the SED at the second Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. He noted: "Germany is now at a turning point in its development. Our two major tasks are to build a united, peaceful and democratic Germany and to carry out socialist construction [3]." He also criticized East German films, pointing out that no film at this stage could reflect the advantages and advancement of the working class [4]. The film *Stärker als die Nacht* in 1954 was the first to examine the Nazi rule in Germany from a communist perspective, while also showing that only communism could create a better Germany. At the film conference that followed, Hermann Axen proposed that the theme of socialist cinema must be emerging and beautiful things in life, and it must be optimistic and future-oriented. In fact, such remarks make the film only divided between good and bad, without individuality and multi-layered characters. Sameness in content and rigidity in form accompanied East German films in the 1950s.

In 1954, the Soviet Union gradually removed its supervision of the GDR and authorized the self-decision of the GDR on "domestic and foreign affairs" [5]. The GDR itself began to examine the developing problems facing up to the social situation, and

proposed to slow down the excessive socialist development rapidly; in terms of culture, it also proposed to meet the needs of mass culture and entertainment and give art more autonomy for the purpose of diversity. Firstly, in the case of films, is the film boom in the GDR. Secondly, the Berlin film series created by the second generation of filmmakers from Babelsberg became a specialized film genre. The most famous of the Berlin film series is *Berlin-Ecke Schönhäuser* (1957) directed by Gerhard Klein. The Berlin film series is a truly significant attempt, and the protagonists began their real lives with new social identities rather than struggle to survive.

From July 3 to 5, 1958, the second film conference was held by the Ministry of Culture of GDR, aimed to address the “revisionism” within the film industry. This was apparently influenced by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. This conference also marked the end of the previous phase of the attempt at the film, with the theme returning to the requirements of the second Party Congress in 1952.

#### 4 East German Films in the 1960s

After the founding of the GDR and FRG, about 2.5 million East Germans fled through West Berlin to the FRG and other Western European countries. In addition, the leaders of the GDR and FRG failed to negotiate German reunification. Later, the GDR began to build a tall wall, known as Berlin Wall in history.

In fact, the construction of the Berlin Wall objectively endowed East German artists with more creative enthusiasm and autonomy. Klaus Wischnewski, the East German theater consultant at the time, recalled that period: “The border issue has been resolved, and finally we should solidly get down to the work on the film [6].” At the same time, in order to change the backward situation of East German films, the SED proposed that filmmakers’ bonuses should be linked with film quality. Under the relatively stable political situation in the 1960s, a series of life movies appeared in the GDR from 1961 to 1965, which reflected people’s problems and conflicts in daily life.

In 1961, Brigitte Reimann’s novel *Ankunft im Alltag* was published in the GDR, which caused a great reaction among young East Germans and also created a new genre of East German literature: *Ankunftsliteratur* (in German). Through this book, East German filmmakers also began to transfer their focus from the abstract concept of social theory to the concrete content of people’s lives.

The most famous film at this stage is Konrad Wolf’s *Der geteilte Himmel* in 1964. It tells the love story of a pair of ordinary young people in split Germany. The Life film series focuses on the daily life of ordinary people in GDR and takes the contradictions and conflicts between individuals and society as the theme of the film. Usually, at the end of the film, this kind of film will always find an optimistic and positive solution to the contradictions and conflicts.

In December 1965, the GDR government convened the 11th Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party, at which it was proposed that East German films were currently developing toward an ideology of skepticism and alienation from socialism [7]. Frank Vogelde’s film *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* (1965) and Kurt Maetzig’s *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (1965) were banned for being too sensitive. After the conference, some films reflecting social reality were canceled or abandoned. Writers and directors were afraid to

venture into political and social themes in favor of entertaining or historical films. In the mid-to-late 1960s, historical adventure films and American Indian film series appeared in GDR.

## 5 East German Films in the 1970s

After the Prague Spring in 1968, the political tensions in Eastern Europe grew once again. But with the Ostpolitik implemented by Chancellor Willy Brandt and the voluntary resignation of Ulbricht, the first SED secretary of the GDR, a new and open era was coming for East German artists and intellectuals at that time.

In December 1970, Honecker, the first secretary of the SED, delivered a speech on art and literature: “From the perspective of building a society, in my opinion, it is impossible for art and literature to have any taboo topics [8].” This new idea coincided with the rise of the third generation of East German directors, who pioneered a new style of cinematic narrative, using documentary narratives to tell characters and stories, such as Lothar Warneke’s *Dr. Med Sommer* (1970), *Leben mit Uwe* (1974), and Sieger Kühn’s *Im Spannungsfeld* (1970). This type of film takes advantage of the real place and uses some amateur actors to truthfully reflect the daily life of East Germans by borrowing the shooting technique of the documentary.

This kind of realism-themed film based on documentary film constituted the main development direction of East German films in the early 1970s. However, due to its lack of intense contradictions, exaggerated emotional fluctuations and dramatic appeal, audiences’ interest in this type of film burned out in the middle and late 1970s. Heiner Carow, the famous director at that time, once pointed out that this type of film lacked a certain artistic imagination [9].

Actually, the film *Die Legende von Paul und Paule* (1973) directed by Heiner Carow himself radically changed the narrative of such films. He put a fictional story full of conflict and contradictions in a real social background, making the film full of unreal color without losing its authenticity. Sieger Kühn’s film *Das zweite Leben des Friedrich Wilhelm Georg Platow* (1973) and Egon Gunther’s *Der Dritte* (1972) both reflect indirectly that the society at that time was not only rosy, but also had a lot of dark sides. These films emphasize the self-realization of personal values while reflecting the real life of East Germans. So, from this point of view, the 1970s was the best era in the history of GDR cinema [10].

The success of the film in the 1970s also attracted the attention of the SED, who feared that the development of film would go beyond the government’s control. In the mid-70s, the GDR began to strengthen ideological control over the entire society. Finally, the Biermann Incident broke out in November 1976, after which a large number of outstanding East German artists fled the GDR in the late 1970s and early 1980s. On the whole, although East German films in the 1970s still had some shortcomings, compared with before, the films in this era were closer to the people and better served the cultural life of the country.

## 6 The East German Films in the 1980s

The economic crisis of the GDR, which began in the 1970s, intensified in the 1980s. Since Honecker came into power, the debt of the GDR had reached 10 billion dollars in 1981. From 1982 onwards, the FRG has been lending up to 1 billion marks and the Kohl government has provided risk guarantees for loans, which were traded for the East German concessions in the exchanges between the two countries.

With the release of Konrad Wolf's film *Solo Sunny* in January 1980, East German films began to explore more about people's psychological activities. Among them, *Dein Unbekannter Bruder* (1982) directed by Ulrich Weiß is the most famous, whose story is set in Germany in 1935. This film was originally selected for the Canadian Film Festival that year, but was cancelled due to various reasons.

In 1982, a new generation of East German directors, including Maxine Dessau, Michael Kann, Karl Heinz Lotz and Dietmar Hochmuth discussed with Kurt Hager, a member of the Politburo and Central Committee of the SED in charge of culture and education, about the future development of East German films. Its main topic is how to improve the working conditions of young filmmakers. In fact, the East German government did not adopt their suggestions and propositions at that time. Jörg Foth recalled the situation as follows: A sincere and constructive analysis of the situation was completely ignored [11].

As the political situation changed in Germany in the late 1980s, many films dealing with social sensitivities began to disappear in the public eye, including Lothar Warneke's *Einer trage des anderen Lasten* (1988) describing the relationship between politics and religion; Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* (1989) for homosexual teachers; and the *Biologie* (1990) exploring the environmental issues et al.

On 10 September, 1989, Hungary announced the opening of the border with Austria from midnight. The East German leaders accused the Hungarian government of being bought by West Germany, but the outcry of people grew louder and louder. Starting in mid-September, mass demonstrations broke out on Monday evenings in Leipzig, and on October 7th, the 40th anniversary of the GDR, mass demonstrations took place in East Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, Potsdam, and other large and medium-sized cities. The crowd chanted for democracy, freedom and human rights. Honecker was succeeded as head of the party, government, and military by Krenz on 18 October. However, the replacement of the top leader did not radically solve the economic and political difficulties inside and outside GDR. Half a million people marched in Berlin on November 4th; On the 7th, the GDR government announced its resignation; On August 8, all members of the Political Bureau of the SED Central Committee announced their resignation. Later, the Berlin Wall finally came down. It all happened so quickly, just like the story in a movie. For East German films, a special committee was established on October 1989 to review the previously banned films. Many of them passed the review by this special committee and were re-released in 1990. After the reunification in 1992, the DEFA was split up and sold to Vivendi, a French media conglomerate.

## 7 Conclusion

Compared with the West German Film Company producing feature films mainly for entertainment and recreation, the DEFA has been trying to reflect the current situation, development and problems of the society at that time through films based on the domestic market since its inception. Although these filmmakers have always been under political pressure, their works are as close as possible to the social situation at the time, taking the public's needs and acceptance of art into account. So, we can say that after World War II, the films of the GDR still achieved some impressive results. And after the German reunification, filmmakers of the DEFA finally relieved the political pressure and had creative autonomy, but at this time the audience lacked interest in these realism themes, especially with the emergence of private cinema ownership in 1991, the DEFA eventually became a historical product of the GDR. At last, the German films themselves eventually face a huge impact of American culture.

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