

Thomas Beutelschmidt

A Wonderful Friendship? Relations between Film and Television Production in the GDR

This essay outlines the relationships between film and television production in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).¹⁾ The large number of television programs made at and with the assistance of the Deutsche Film AG (DEFA) indicates these institutional and creative ties. According to both the DEFA Foundation film database and my own investigations,²⁾ each year the studio made between four (1959) and twenty-three (1980) fiction productions for television, along with the numerous documentary, journalistic, and entertainment shorts that were made by other DEFA departments. The revised list comprises nearly 500 East German television productions.³⁾ Since many of these projects were two-to-five-part series or were serial films boasting up to twelve episodes, the number of productions would have been even greater. We can therefore safely assume that a total of over 800 films of varying lengths were made, which equates to an average of fifty percent of DEFA's output from 1959 to 1990. We should also bear in mind that the motion picture arm of DEFA not only made fictional teleplays and cinematic-style opera performances, but that well into the 1970s it turned out almost forty productions of between ten and seventy-five minutes in length that belonged to such categories as ballet and revue films, documentaries, cultural programs, (music) entertainment, and cinema advertising. By comparison, around 550 DEFA feature films were made at this time, with production dropping by the late 1960s to an average of fifteen titles per year. All in all, about twenty-five hours of feature film content was produced each year, compared to thirty-one hours of telefilms. After 1963, the production of telefilms surpassed that of motion pictures. These figures

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- 1) This essay is based on my chapter 'No TV without Film: The Production Relations between DEFA Studios and Deutscher Fernsehfunk', in Lars Karl and Pavel Skopal (eds.), *Sovietisation and Planning in the Film Industries of Soviet Bloc Countries. A Comparative Perspective on East Germany and Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, forthcoming 2013).
 - 2) Thomas Beutelschmidt, *Kooperation oder Konkurrenz? Das Verhältnis zwischen Film und Fernsehen in der DDR* (Berlin: DEFA-Schriftenreihe, 2009).
 - 3) See Thomas Beutelschmidt, *Die Auftragsproduktionen des DEFA-Spielfilmstudios für das DDR-Fernsehen von 1959 bis 1990*. Database version. Berlin (at the DEFA Foundation website <http://defa-stiftung.de/cms/beutelschmidt>).

point to a dependency that both institutions viewed with ambivalence. East German television profited enormously from the film industry, and, given the limited production capacities of this planned economy, would have been unable to achieve the status of a mass media institution without the assistance of DEFA. An increase in television viewers, the growth of daily broadcasts, and, most important of all, the medium's enhanced political significance increased the demand for television programming that boasted cinematic elements such as glossy visuals. Cinema, on the other hand, gradually lost its position as the definitive audiovisual medium following the establishment of television, a development that occurred in other industrial nations on both sides of the East-West divide. In the long run, Deutscher Fernsehfunk (DFF) competed with DEFA for market share and viewers, as well as economic resources and narrative traditions, even if, in the end, the expansion of the electronic medium did not supplant the motion picture but ultimately diversified the audiovisual material available in East Germany.

With the launching of a test program (or experimental broadcasting) in honor of Stalin's seventieth birthday on 21 December 1952, the GDR joined the ranks of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, as well as Great Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland and the Federal Republic of Germany in becoming one of the first European states to have a regular broadcast service. Artistic and purely fictional productions were still primarily the reserve of DEFA. Only later did the East German Film Academy, founded on 11 November 1954 — and known since 1969 as Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen der DDR — begin to train its graduates for careers in the television industry. This explains why television directors looked to recruit experienced staff from the country's Babelsberg film studios to contribute to its test programs. The executive board of DEFA was generally willing to offer its support, and helped to make the television test program a success.⁴⁾ Technicians in particular found promising career opportunities at the nascent television center. Intellectuals and artists were, however, somewhat reluctant to get involved with a medium that they considered to be profane and to flatten and trivialize nuanced and important issues. Many directors even feared for their reputations, and refused to work for television in spite of being made lucrative offers. In their view, only cinema projected sufficient prestige and would resonate at large festivals. It took some time for prominent DEFA figures such as Egon Günther, Ralf Kirsten, and Horst Seemann to see an opportunity to explore more rationalized production methods, by making the occasional foray into television, and to hone their talents with new formats such as the miniseries ("Fernsehromane").

By January 1956, this test program had advanced to the extent that GDR television could begin broadcasting regularly. The Politbüro and the Agitation Department of the Central Committee seemed to be satisfied by the development of their new means of communication. The ever more popular medium of television was fulfilling its stabilizing function of propaganda and knowledge dissemination, and of providing a source of art and entertainment. The service even gained a boost in quality thanks to new technology. Television was finally mobile and could cover events taking place across the republic, thus making good on its promise to be a 'window to the world'.

4) Protokoll der 4. Sitzung des DEFA-Vorstandes am 7.2.1952, (Archivbestand Thomas Heimann), p. 10.

It was during this period that the conditions for producing telefilms were established. The advantages of using high quality prints were fairly obvious; they could be used for reruns or theatrical exhibition, or for export and participation at festivals and fairs. Besides which, more demanding literary adaptations and the realistic portrayal of everyday life required atmospheric location shooting, greater action, and a more stylized *mise-en-scène* (rather than simply being captured on film). But the equipment — beyond that required for news and reportage — had not been taken into account when setting up the television center. The GDR did not want, and could not afford, a second fully fledged film studio alongside Babelsberg; facilities comparable to the West German television subsidiaries of Bavaria, Taunus-Film or Studio Hamburg would have exceeded the financial and material means of the GDR. Deutscher Fernsehfunk had therefore repeatedly to rely on support from DEFA.

The film camera was only used sporadically in the early years to document or rebroadcast teleplays, with scenes shot in order. As early as the mid 1950s, television directors attempted to enrich their work by including material that could not practicably be achieved with cable-bound cameras, such as exterior shooting and hand-held shots. These sequences were then edited into live teleplays so as to diminish their staged theatrical look, to offer a change of perspective, and to make the action appear more believable and the setting more realistic — as was the case with the historical teleplay *CHICAGO 1886* (1954). This mixing of media methods was however an unsatisfactory compromise due to its marrying of less than compatible elements. For one, transitions from video to celluloid shots were jarring due to noticeable differences in contrast and sharpness. For another, the respective characteristics of studio and outdoor shots created stylistic incongruities that seriously impaired the overall aesthetic of such hybrid forms.

Film production needed to be expanded to meet growing demand from both producers and the viewing public, and to enable “the entire channel to reach the international standard”.⁵⁾ By the end of the 1950s, television producers were provided with additional 16mm and 35mm cameras so that production could begin on three episodes of the successful crime series *WEIMARAR PITAVAL* (1959). In addition, in the early 1960s, Party leadership helped executives to gain access to the studios of neighboring Johannisthal. These studios were run by the Johannisthaler Film-Anstalten (JOFA), and later by the Ton-Bild-Syndikat (TOBIS). After 1945, the Soviet public company LINSa took over this production site as WWII reparations, but Moscow returned it to German ownership in 1950, at which point it became the property of DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme (the DEFA motion picture studio).⁶⁾

Although such steps helped to improve the quality of telefilms, television producers could only meet demand for more sophisticated fare by cooperating with tried and tested DEFA teams.⁷⁾ Seven co-productions were scheduled between 1956 and 1984, which these

5) Heinz Adameck, Schreiben an Staatliches Rundfunkkomitee/Ley mit Anlage ‘Perspektive der Programmentwicklung des Deutschen Fernsehfunks nach den bis jetzt vorliegenden Erfahrungen’, Berlin (DDR) 13. 11. 1956 (BArch DR 6/279), pp. 1f.

6) Staatliches Komitee für Filmwesen: Protokoll der 9. Kollegiumssitzung vom 3. 12. 1952, Berlin (DDR) 8. 12. 1952 (BArch DR 1/4468) TOP 4, p. 3.

7) See the first major production *DER ANDERE NEBEN DIR* (The Other beside You, 1963), an attempt to shed light on and to help understand the historically strained relations between Czechs and Germans.

otherwise rival producers viewed as “jumping over boundaries previously thought impassable”.⁸⁾ 1956’s *DAMALS IN PARIS* (Those Days in Paris), which concerned anti-Fascist resistance, was followed by elaborate literary adaptations such as *TIEFE FURCHEN* (Deep Furrows, 1965), *JAKOB DER LÜGNER* (Jacob the Liar, 1974), *DIE LEIDEN DES JUNGEN WERTHERS* (The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1976), *DIE VERLOBTE* (The Fiancée, 1980); the contemporary comedy *HIEV P* (Heave Up, 1978); and the short film *WEIBERWIRTSCHAFT* (Petticoat Rule, 1984).

Commissioned productions were more numerous. This politically-intended cooperation can be understood as an attempt to maximize efficiency, in the light of scarce resources. Where income from such productions helped to cushion the high operating costs of the studios and to relieve the strain placed on the state’s culture budget, DEFA’s personnel who were not otherwise occupied with cinematic productions could be put to work on television programming. More challenging subject matter was chosen for telefilms. These projects were tailored in such a way as to fulfill the more exacting standards demanded by international audiences, and therefore required considerable resources. As such, they demanded an experienced industrial studio at every stage of their production.

Television management determined the overall budget as well as budget limits for each individual project in regular “annual performance contracts” based on general cooperation agreements. According to the available documentation, each year more than two-thirds of the overall budget was allocated to the motion picture studio to underwrite commissioned productions. The figures range from around DDM5m in 1960, the first year of cooperation, to DDM33m in 1970, and to DDM40m ten years later.⁹⁾ But even after the ‘Wende’ — the political transformation in East-Germany — the newly democratized television industry stood by the economically endangered DEFA. In 1990, according to its provisional director Hans Bentzien, DFF spent approximately DDM67m on what would turn out to be its final productions.¹⁰⁾

In general, the monies assigned to contract films were higher than those used for in-house television productions. For example, at the end of the 1970s, spending reached around DDM16000 per minute on the former, and around DDM8000 on the latter.¹¹⁾ Such expenditure testifies not only to these projects higher artistic standards, but also to their cultural-political significance, propaganda aims, and export requirements. These amounts were quite significant, and represented a large part of the television budget. Hence production managers consistently tried to cut costs. A stricter time schedule was needed, but also a greater degree of flexibility in the case of production schedules, delays or cancellations. The latter could be caused unexpectedly by conceptual changes, such as when a change of director took place during the 1969 production of the historical drama

8) Hans Müncheberg, *Blaues Wunder aus Adlershof. Der Deutsche Fernsehfunk. Erlebtes und Gesammeltes* (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2000), p. 95.

9) The annual development of costs was planned und controlled by the Hauptabteilung Ökonomie/Abt. Planung at GDR television.

10) Ralph Kotsch and Volker Müller, ‘Alle Kräfte, die für Erneuerung eintreten, haben gleiche Chancen. Gespräch mit Hans Bentzien’, *Neues Deutschland*, January 18, 1990.

11) HA Ökonomie: Analyse über die Entwicklung der Effektivität der Auftragsproduktion im DEFA-Studio für Spielfilme in den Jahren 1970–1979. Berlin (DDR) o.J (= 1980/DRA SGFS/DraKu/Planungsunterlagen DEFA-Analysen 1978–87), p. 15.

ROTTENKNECHTE (broadcast 1971), or when production was interrupted by personnel shortages and weather conditions. Time and again, both partners struggled with long production schedules on bigger projects that spanned several business years, and, with the termination of individual projects, newly freed up capital needed to be quickly reallocated to other projects. These modifications or disruptions meant that supposedly fixed budgets were in practice constantly adjusted in response to developments on the ground.

The “general agreements” that were reached between DEFA and Deutscher Fernsehfunk in 1960 governed the individual working stages, the production schedule, and practical issues related to the production process. Those responsible for handling contract productions were therefore firmly established. Where the television station was responsible for both political-ideological content and the basic concept, the studio and certain creative personnel also had a say in these matters. Moreover, the film studios were also responsible for production and organization.¹²⁾ Television decision-makers not only endeavored to establish a clear division of responsibilities between the two media in the area of film production, they also wanted to play the roles of initiator and client, showcasing to the outside world the qualities of telefilms as compared to the motion pictures being made at Babelsberg. In this respect, DEFA was not involved in tailoring themes, or the recruitment of above-the-line talent, or the complexity of a project.

Fruitful cooperation between television and DEFA began with the 1959 comedy-thriller *SPUK IN VILLA SONNENSCHEN* (Spook in the Sunshine Villa), a production that was still characterized by the slow-moving, dialogue-heavy tradition of the teleplay, a tradition for which film crews were ill-prepared. Despite the skeptical attitude towards this unaccustomed approach, the pilot project did provide an important learning experience for DEFA. With its lower budgets, lower shooting ratio, and shorter schedules, this production came in well below the cost of a motion picture. The more economical production of telefilms therefore became something of a favorite argument among those DEFA producers who called for overheads to be lowered and for motion picture production to adopt the more effective working methods of television. Creative practitioners such as the director Kurt Maetzig viewed this development from the outset as a “harmful tendency” inasmuch as it restricted their creative freedom and further lowered the quality of feature films.¹³⁾ Given the limited resources that were available, this was a conflict that could never be resolved, which meant that every project was characterized by a tension between the aspirations of those involved and the reality on the ground.

Telefilms grew ever more sophisticated as a genre, as their makers borrowed much from cinema. These efforts to gentrify the product earned praise, particularly from critics who spotlighted their “progressive departure from the convention, both in the selection and organization of the material, as well as in character development and dialogue”.¹⁴⁾ In this respect, DEFA promoted the ‘cinematization’ of fictional television productions, thereby serving gradually to blur the boundaries between television and cinema. Oftentimes,

12) See Rahmenvertrag zwischen dem Staatlichen Rundfunkkomitee — Deutscher Fernsehfunk — und der VVB Film. Berlin (DDR) o.J (= 1960/BArch DR 1/4363), p. 1ff.

13) Kurt Maetzig in a 1959 letter to studio director Prof. Albert Wilkening: *Bessere Planung, in Filmarbeit. Gespräche — Reden — Schriften* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1987), pp. 279f.

14) Erwin Reiche: “Fernsehfiktion — Fernsehspiele”. In: *Deutsche Filmkunst* 6/1961, pp. 200–202, here p. 202.

television productions were on a par with DEFA's works, as they exhibited not only solid workmanship, complex images, and complex forms of editing, but also non-linear narration and other forms of complex storytelling. The dramatic arts experienced increased artistic innovation, as they were freed from the bondage of in-house protocol and were fashioned to the standards of cinema. However, the gradual decline of the teleplay was lamented by some members of DFF, who suggested that the creative challenge of a live performance risked being lost.

If motion pictures were initially a major influence on telefilms, the latter would also influence cinema. The television scholar Peter Hoff has even written of a "decisive innovation process in the field of audiovisual media arts" which began in the field of East German television drama before spreading to other socialist countries.¹⁵⁾ A case in point was the internationally acclaimed 1961 five-part series *GEWISSEN IN AUFRUHR* (Conscience in Turmoil), a biopic about a Wehrmacht officer during the transition to State Socialism. Hoff has repeatedly pointed out that given the competitive advantage afforded by television's national penetration DEFA was forced to target the prime youth audience with topical content.

The crossmedia experiences of the DEFA directors who worked for Adlershof and who experimented in television-specific subject matter had a lasting effect on the film studios. Some directors, such as Bernhard Stephan, even switched from film to television. To a certain extent, this practice fulfilled the hope that working in television would enable personnel to hone their respective crafts. Nevertheless, only a few DEFA employees, like Heiner Carow, were in fact willing to admit that telefilms had influenced the look of East German cinema, and its focus on daily life. For its part, cinema would gradually lose its privileged role, and would be subjected to latent pressure to conform. "The influence of television; the influence of its possibilities on the narrative standpoint, on the choice of subject matter, and on the type of film has been underestimated. Filmmakers themselves have often fiercely denied these influences", Heiner Carow has suggested.¹⁶⁾ There is also good reason to conclude that the form of light entertainment practiced by television was also a source of inspiration for DEFA planners. For example, the positive reception of a number of comedies that were both broadcast on television and screened at movie theaters led to a noticeable expansion of light-hearted fare.

Given DEFA's shift toward television production we might ask: to what extent in the last two decades of its existence the organization sought to distinguish itself as a supplier of distinct content? And was its output able to fulfill its intended public function? Whereas Westerns, science fiction adventures, and impressive stand-alone works such as *GOYA* (1971) promised a powerful movie-going experience, most of DEFA's films were barely distinguishable from television programs.

In structural and organizational terms, and in terms of culture and media policy, the relations between DEFA and television were rather contradictory, marked as they were by attempts to cooperate and by competition. Alongside shared creative agenda and concrete

15) Peter Hoff: *Wettbewerbspartner oder Konkurrent? Zum Verhältnis von Film, Kino und Fernsehen in der DDR*. In: *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 4 (1985), pp. 48–74, here p. 63.

16) Heiner Carow, "Zwischenbilanz", *Film und Fernsehen*, no. 4 (1977), pp. 5–9, here p. 9.

te cooperation on co-productions, there was some overlap, and thus a measure of convergence at the level of ideology and among personnel. Yet, these two forms of mass media were different in terms of their political functions and operations, in terms of their content and artistic aspirations, and their target markets and intended audience effects. Thus, despite Party leaders' appeals to recognize shared interests and to strengthen cooperation, film and television institutions pursued different goals and employed distinct strategies, as evinced by their rivalry to secure well-known writers, popular stories, qualified staff and, ultimately, to win audience approval. Yet, neither of these two media can be viewed as fully autonomous; each must be conceptualized within a broader framework of socialist media. For all the dissonance in the GDR between the centrally controlled but independently run Party departments — the "Culture Department and Central Film Office and the Agitation Department and State Television Committee — film and television were in effect equal institutions, both of which were subordinate to a single State authority, both of which were subject to a single cultural policy, and both of which were dependent on a single state budget.

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SUMMARY

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This essay outlines the relationships between film and television production in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In structural and organizational terms, and in terms of culture and media policy, the relations between DEFA and television were rather contradictory, marked as they were by attempts to cooperate and by competition. Alongside shared creative agenda and concrete cooperation on co-productions, there was some overlap, and thus a measure of convergence at the level of ideology and among personnel. Yet, these two forms of mass media were different in terms of their political functions and operations, in terms of their content and artistic aspirations, and their target markets and intended audience effects. Thus, despite Party leaders' appeals to recognize shared interests and to strengthen cooperation, film and television institutions pursued different goals and employed distinct strategies, as evinced by their rivalry to secure well-known writers, popular stories, qualified staff and, ultimately, to win audience approval. Yet, neither of these two media can be viewed as fully autonomous; each must be conceptualized within a broader framework of socialist media. For all the dissonance in the GDR between the centrally controlled but independently run Party departments — the "Culture Department and Central Film Office and the Agitation Department and State Television Committee — film and television were in effect equal institutions, both of which were subordinate to a single State authority, both of which were subject to a single cultural policy, and both of which were dependent on a single state budget.