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East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History

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***East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History.* By Sebastian Heiduschke.** New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 196 pp. \$28.00 Softcover. ISBN: 978-1-137-32231-9.

East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History offers a basic introductory text to the state-run institution of the East German film industry, DEFA (*Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft*, “German Film Stock Corporation”). As its flashy cover suggests, *East German Cinema* strives to be more accessible in the undergraduate classroom than chapters devoted to this topic in more comprehensive recent works by Stephen Brockmann and Sabine Hake.¹ Heiduschke’s volume is also more approachable for students than Séan Allan and John Sandford’s older edited volume, though this accessibility perhaps does not sufficiently challenge its prospective undergraduate readership.² From that Allan and Sandford collection, for example, Barton Byg’s excellent essay “DEFA and the Traditions of International Cinema” and Christiane Mückenberger’s “The Anti-Fascist Past and DEFA Films” provide the kind of unthreatening depth into which new students can still safely plunge, and perhaps learn better from.³ Plainly, as an elementary text for undergraduates, *East German Cinema* makes no claims to being exhaustive or even critical. As such, it intends to function as a first textbook for courses on East German cinema and culture, or a supplementary one for survey courses on German cinema at large. Heiduschke offers an able and intelligent account of DEFA history and East German culture—a handy sort of wiki-book, as it were—and a twelve-film “mini-canon” (4) with chapters devoted to providing mostly background and context for the dozen movies he has selected.⁴

The first chapter of Part 1, “East German Cinema as State Institution,” explores the relationship between DEFA and the East German State, particularly with regard to the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED). Chapter 2, “Reciprocities and Tensions: DEFA and the East German Entertainment Industry,” considers the particularities that come with DEFA being a cultural institute in a communist country charged with providing mass cinematic entertainment. Finally, Chapter 3, “A Cultural Legacy: DEFA’s Afterlife,” delves into the resurgence of DEFA cinema since 1999, covering “*Ostalgie*,” the rise of DEFA fan clubs in the former East, the privatization and re-marketing of cultural legacy, and the renewed critical and scholarly interest in this closed period of cinematic history. Although there is not much really new here, Heiduschke has done an excellent job of diluting a massive topic down into thirty highly readable pages.

Part 2, the “mini-canon,” is comprised of the following twelve films: *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*, 1946); *Die Geschichte vom Kleinen Muck* (*The Story of Little Mook*, 1953); *Berlin–Ecke Schönhauser* (*Berlin–Schönhauser Corner*, 1957); *Der schweigende Stern* (*Silent Star*, 1960); *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit Is Me*, 1965); *Heißer Sommer* (*Hot Summer*, 1968); *Apachen* (*Apaches*, 1973); *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, 1973); *Jakob der Lügner* (*Jacob the Liar*, 1974); *Solo Sunny* (1980); *Die Architekten* (*The Architects*, 1990); *Letztes aus der Da-Da-eR* (*Latest from the Da-Da-R*,

¹Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010), pp. 213-233 and Hake, *German National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 86-143.

²Allan and Sandford (eds.), *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999).

³*Ibid.*, pp. 22-41 and 58-76.

⁴Readers should also be aware that the DEFA Film Library at UMass Amherst has concurrently published, under the same title, a DVD set of all twelve films as part of its “BOOKed” series (\$230 for individuals, +\$545 for institutions).

1990). Since Heiduschke intends to pick out the most representative films, and not necessarily the most critically acclaimed or most written-about ones, there is not much to argue about here. Indeed, his coverage of genre—from rubble film to sci-fi, musical to melodrama, western to New Wave—is all but exhaustive, and uniquely so, though he will have to be forgiven for leaving out three central pillars of the East German film industry: documentary, animation, and dubbed films.

The chapters Heiduschke devotes to the individual films are clear, concise, and what might be described as superficially thorough in that the reader gets all the basics but little besides. Typically following a pattern of plot summary, cultural and studio-historical context, brief formal analysis, and historical significance, Heiduschke ably sets out and connects the major points of interest for each film, which presumably would be expanded in classroom discussion by the instructor, or in the library by the more curious researcher. This brisk comprehensiveness, again, comes at the cost of a certain depth when attempting closer readings of the films. That is somewhat a shame, since Heiduschke demonstrates a sharp eye for picking out formally decisive filmic elements and a talent for articulating them. One thinks here of his analysis of the sonic shift from a single bicycle ping to a cacophony of car horns as central protagonist Dieter crosses from proletarian East to decadent West Berlin in *Berlin—Ecke Schönhauser* (67), or of the “living tableau” apparent in a still from *Das Kaninchen bin ich*, as the jealous wife ominously points an air-rifle at her husband’s mistress Maria in an easy-to-miss landscape shot (82).

After surveying all twelve films and Heiduschke’s commentary on them, one wonders what binds them all together. Perhaps an inherent shortcoming of picking out a genre-based “mini-canon” is that this method necessarily delivers a diffuse, nearly irreconcilable, body of work. If so, however, what is the value in following up a viewing of Gerhard Klein’s *Berlin—Ecke Schönhauser*, a gritty meditation on youthful delinquency, one week, with an analysis of Kurt Maetzig’s science-fiction bonanza *Der schweigende Stern* the next? *East German Cinema* seems useful for introducing the reader to the culture that DEFA brought to the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and in a sense the films are treated as cultural artifacts. It is less clear how this selection could be valuable for a sensibility more grounded in film studies: how can we read the films in themselves? Is there a basic cinematic grammar of East German cinema that differentiates it from other cinemas? How does this grammar evolve or transform between films that closely relate to one another?

Equally unfortunate is the choice to limit the introductory book to only the twelve films of the DVD boxed set, which effectively sets the hypothetical syllabus at a pace of one per week. This is fine in and of itself, but it does force the instructor who wishes to teach beyond the chosen twelve to do some of the extra work Heiduschke designed his book to render unnecessary. Since the average chapter length is only six pages, an additional five films would not seem to have added much cost or length to the book, and the bonuses of increasing the canon size and easing instructor flexibility would seem to improve *East German Cinema*’s prospects of becoming the standard teaching text for the material that it strives to be. Given this goal, Konrad Wolf’s *Sonnensucher* (*Sun Seekers*, 1958) and *Der geteilte Himmel* (*Divided Heaven*, 1964), as well as Frank Beyer’s *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*, 1966) are glaringly absent. A film from Slatan Dudow could help Heiduschke link up DEFA cinema with the tradition of German leftist filmmaking, and Janoc Veiczi’s *Die gefrorenen Blitze* (*Frozen Lightning*, 1967), for example,

contains an integration of radical documentary technique that would bring that latter neglected topic at least partly into the collection.

More broadly, *East German Cinema* does not have the critical lens to focus our gaze, and as a result the book feels written for an abstract audience whose needs and intentions are tenebrous. Perhaps Heiduschke's barely-concealed enthusiasm for the material—nothing to be ashamed of in itself—has precluded him from including the kind of foothold uninitiated viewers of East German cinema are likely to require. To be fair, the basics are all there, and the comprehensive, up-to-date bibliography and (English) filmography is almost worth the price of admission. *East German Cinema* will thus nevertheless amount to a valuable addition to the field, primarily as a teaching text, and will no doubt further the appeal of and interest in DEFA cinema in particular as well as GDR culture at large.

The book scholars are still waiting for in English—and the one we wish Heiduschke had written—is the equivalent to Sergio Micheli's incomplete Italian-language study published more than thirty years ago.⁵ Though he leaves out the genre-films almost entirely and the last fourteen years of DEFA history still hadn't happened yet, Micheli reads films in clusters, hashing out the issues that commonly link them together and presenting a more cohesive account of the internal uniqueness of DEFA cinema. While there is no disputing that DEFA represents a “closed cinema,” Heiduschke's orientation—one might call it “artifactual”—perhaps suffers from the historical finality this implies; it is perhaps one reason why Micheli's account, written in 1978 when DEFA and history were still “open,” remains one of the more vibrant ones available. Perhaps, then, it is this cinema's vibrancy that should be conveyed in the classroom as much as our own enthusiasm for its historical and cultural artifacts.

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⁵Micheli, *Il cinema nella Repubblica Democratica Tedesca. Trenti anni di attività della DEFA (1946-1976)* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1978).