

Emerging from the Niche: DEFA's Afterlife in Unified Germany¹

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Abstract: The cinema of the GDR has seen a steep rise in popularity since German unification. DEFA is now a popular “brand,” with its films being omnipresent on television, in movie theaters, and even on DVD, Blu-ray, or streaming video online. Reasons for this success are located in the current infrastructure of DEFA cinema. Since 1999 DEFA-Stiftung, Progress Filmverleih, and Icestorm Entertainment have (re-) introduced the GDR's cinematic legacy to German culture, where audiences embraced the new media as reminders of a bygone time.

In December 1992, production of feature films under the DEFA (Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft, the former GDR film monopoly) logo ended when the Treuhand—a federal agency created to privatize the state-owned East German companies— sold the DEFA Feature Film Studio to the French Compagnie Générale des Eaux (CGE, now Vivendi Universal). Many feared DEFA films would fall into oblivion and disappear like other GDR trademarks that had been replaced by their West German counterparts. Particularly, the complicated legal situation concerning copyright of DEFA films and the ensuing rights to their commercial exploitation made it difficult to tap into the vast film stock of approximately 950 feature films and shorts, 820 animated films, as well as 5,800 documentaries and weekly newsreels.² Growing disinterest on the side of audiences to engage with the films of a sunken country did not speak in favor of a future of DEFA cinema beyond scholars digging through the prints housed at the German federal film archive in Berlin either. Twenty years later, however, the situation has changed. DEFA films are booming all over contemporary Germany: a plethora

of television channels broadcasts them regularly, the DVDs are hot commodities, and the films are staples of film retrospectives and festivals. DEFA films staged a comeback and are now successfully established in Germany's cultural landscape.

In this essay I explore potential rationales for this new popularity. To some extent, the case of DEFA cinema provides us with a snapshot of the changing visibility of GDR art in Germany after unification and is a prime example of the integration of one culture into another. DEFA, as part of a past culture, continues to exist in the new cultural environment of a united Germany, a fact I explain by focusing on three aspects: First, I look at changes the location of the former DEFA feature film studio in Potsdam-Babelsberg has undergone, suggesting that a "Babelsberg Myth" is still present to some extent on the premises. Second, I document how the actual films remained visible in German cinemas, on television, as part of film festivals, and eventually on VHS and DVD after 1990. I read the work of the successor institution DEFA-Stiftung and other companies—such as the home entertainment distributor Icestorm Entertainment and the film distributors Progress and defa-spektrum, as well as the mass marketing by the East German tabloid *SuperIllu*—as preservation efforts and practices that were extrapolated to new markets. Third, I investigate the reception of DEFA films in unified Germany by taking stock of the films' popularity as evidenced by growing contemporary DEFA audience figures and an emerging fan culture, suggesting that this is part of an overall trend of accepting GDR history as one element of German history. DEFA has become popular, perhaps more than during its existence even as the GDR national cinema—and a number of agents contributed to this rebirth.

DEFA and the "Babelsberg Myth"

The integrative efforts of two cultures blending into each other are not visible at first glance for someone walking through the premises of the former DEFA Feature Film Studio in Babelsberg. In fact, one needs to pay attention to details, perhaps even be familiar with the studio before its sale in 1992, as recent history erased many of the traces. DEFA's trademark disappeared from the federal register in 1994, soon after the *Treuhand* sold the studios; all black-and-white DEFA logos had to yield to the new Studio Babelsberg insignia of a stylized Maria robot from Fritz Lang's 1927 feature *Metropolis*, paying homage to UFA, "Germany's greatest film company."³ Only a portion of the former DEFA studio, aggregated under the designation Media City Babelsberg (Medienstadt Babelsberg) is still used for film production, with Studio Babelsberg predominantly acting as co-producer of blockbusters such as *The Bourne Supremacy* (Paul Greengrass, 2004), *Valkyrie* (Bryan Singer, 2007), and *Inglorious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2008). The German Radio Archive (DRA) along with the regional broadcast network Radio Berlin Brandenburg (RBB) and a number of smaller production companies reside in a second part, while the Filmpark Babelsberg, a combination of studio tour and amusement park, occupies the third section. UFA history reigns, even though the GDR studio inhabited the premises longer than its predecessor.

The DEFA era is conserved in the adjacent Filmpark with visual reminders of the DEFA era, such as original or reconstructed sets of many DEFA films all over the park. For instance, the re-creation of the Gardens of Little Mook, modeled after the original plans of Wolfgang Staudte's 1953 fairytale *Die Geschichte vom kleinen Muck* (*The Story of Little Mook*), is among the main attractions. Brochures and the park website also advertise this replica of DEFA's most successful film, presumably in order to attract audiences who recognize the film from numerous re-runs on German television channels. Other less famous but original sets, for instance the

medieval city used in Thomas Langhoff's 1988 TV drama *Der Aufstand der Fischer von St. Barbara* (*The Revolt of the Fishermen of St. Barbara*), and props, such as the collection of horse-drawn coaches, transfer visitors back in time to DEFA filmmaking. Links between these mementos of the past and the present subsist, for instance, in the studio of the Sandmännchen, a cult figure of GDR children's television that survived unification and is still broadcast as a bedtime show on RBB. These stop-motion shows of approximately five minutes are produced on location at the Filmpark, and visitors can watch the filming through the studio's glass walls, framed by an exhibit about the feature-length 2010 film *Das Sandmännchen-Abenteuer im Traumland* (*Little Sandman and his Dreamland Adventures*) by Sinem Sakaoglu and Jesper Møller. An "authentic" DEFA experience is thus rounded out, even though production of the television show was never affiliated with the feature film studio and only recently moved to Babelsberg from the Berlin studios in Mahlsdorf and later Adlershof.

Although only a small part of the premises commemorate DEFA history, a strong aura lingers over Babelsberg, fueling a "Babelsberg Myth." The status of the Sandmännchen and other visual reminders of DEFA film illustrate how closely connected the Babelsberg studio remains to GDR filmmaking in the minds of many visitors. Starting with UFA, the studio historically represented the success of German cinema; to some the changes to DEFA after unification appeared as hostile takeover and forced colonization by western companies. This development sustained a DEFA version of this myth, as the films produced in the "mythical city . . . in a prime location on the outskirts of Berlin and the kudos of the Babelsberg site and name"⁴ symbolized "the cultural heritage"⁵ of the East German people. In 1946, a group of mostly exiled filmmakers organized in the group Filmaktiv rebranded it as DEFA to indicate a legacy of German film tradition anchored by UFA and claimed the legendary studio premises for their

fledgling company. In this case, this strand of Germany's two parallel film histories reclaimed the myth already existing at Babelsberg for their purpose, culminating in the permanent move of DEFA to the historic studio in 1948 and renaming the premises DEFA Studio für Spielfilme in 1950.⁶ Throughout the decades of filmmaking as the GDR feature film monopoly until 1990, the brand DEFA developed and put its mark on the studio. Filmmaking changed in sync with politics. If a continuation of the UFA style was intended in the first DEFA productions, Adolf Fischer's choice of the name DEFA as acronym was equally deliberate to suggest both the continuity of German film production at the mythological location and the beginning of what would become an equally legendary era under the famous black-and-white DEFA logo displaying white and black lettering inverted on a film strip.⁷ When the DEFA epoch at Babelsberg came to an end in 1992 and the advent of the new Studio Babelsberg heralded the start of another era, DEFA's tradition of filmmaking lived on in many films released by smaller labels such as Ö-Film and Ostfilm.⁸ Many of those films, produced by former DEFA directors who remained faithful to a DEFA style of filmmaking, continue to examine the influence of GDR history on Germany, and create a new, parallel discourse that complements the Babelsberg myth.⁹ Their works evoke the "ghosts of Babelsberg" as they detach the cinematic legacy from the physical space of the former studio premises and reposition the myth on the films to bring closure to the emotional debate that characterized the years of change at the studios.¹⁰

As the studio premises and the highly skilled employees were considered to be the main value of the studio in the late 1980s,¹¹ the heated discussions accompanying the sale of DEFA¹² between studio personnel and many East Germans on the one hand, and the CGE with its manager Volker Schlöndorff on the other¹³ conflated two major debates. First, the studio premises became an "emotionally and symbolically charged sign" that embodied DEFA cinema

as the narrative anchor of a dwindling GDR culture in unified Germany.¹⁴ Many other GDR products had been replaced with their West German counterparts. East Germans shifted to survival mode to rescue the last remaining pieces of their cultural identity,¹⁵ a behavior that mutated a few years later into the extreme of *Ostalgie*.¹⁶ The take-over of the studio was seen by many as tantamount to robbing the collective East German population of their remaining cultural representation in a society meanwhile gauged on West German norms. Second, belittling DEFA films as poor artistic products reinforced the already tense relationship between East and West Germans and reflected a power structure that to some was reminiscent of colonial attitudes, with East Germany turning into the “Federal Republic’s ‘Orient.’”¹⁷ West German director Volker Schlöndorff, especially, derided East German film as a collective disappointment and pushed quickly to rename the film studio; he explained his reasons in a 2008 newspaper interview, which widened the gap and had former DEFA employees and many East Germans mount the barricades. Schlöndorff stated, “Defa-films [sic] were horrible. When I studied in Paris, they were only shown in the theater of the Communist Party. We only laughed when we saw them.”¹⁸ These recapitulated the attitudes of many West German investors in the early 1990s about the lack of cultural value of DEFA cinema, a lack that compromised the films as one of the remaining moorings of an otherwise lost GDR culture. Eventually, Schlöndorff apologized for his statements and acknowledged the cultural value of DEFA cinema.¹⁹

The discussion about the studio waned over the years, and while the high-tech Medienstadt now attracts international producers, a new “DEFA myth” emerged from the growing tendency to view the films as memorials of the DEFA past. Now, DEFA films were embraced as signifiers of a mythical past offering a shared point of contact for the plethora of personal memories present in the “affective community”²⁰ of people with emotional ties to

DEFA. The success of the “DEFA myth,” however, is owed to a combination of hard work and socio-cultural changes in German society that made the reappearance of DEFA films possible.

Reviving DEFA

A number of companies, federal institutions, and non-profit foundations successfully collaborate in their efforts to preserve and to propagate DEFA cinema. First and foremost is the fairly young DEFA-Stiftung, DEFA’s official legal successor; other important organizations, such as Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Progress Filmverleih, Icestorm, and defa-spektrum, along with the Filmmuseum Potsdam, play various roles in the process of providing DEFA film to the general public for commercial or ideological reasons. Because of the recent post-unification success of DEFA films, all of these institutions deserve closer scrutiny, as their work allowed the films to leave their niche. Explaining their role will furthermore illuminate the ways DEFA films continue to live on as ideological and material products in German society. Although few physical reminders exist of DEFA, and production under the brand ceased with the completion of Herwig Kippings *Novalis-Die blaue Blume* (*Novalis-The Blue Flower*, 1994), the films experienced exponential growth in terms of popularity, exposure in the market, and in circulation and sales figures when the DEFA-Stiftung assumed ownership in 1999 of most of the DEFA film productions. Since then, interest in DEFA cinema has increased exponentially, suggesting a direct correlation between this occurrence and the work of the DEFA-Stiftung. This needs to be read in the context of changes in German society that included the emergence of a regional East German identity and the coming of age of the first generation of children born in unified Germany. Other socio-cultural developments, such as *Ostalgie*, which initiated interest in GDR artifacts in German pop culture in conjunction with the success of contemporary films about life

in the East—for example *Sonnenallee* (*Sun Alley*; Leander Haußmann, 1999), *Good Bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), and *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*; Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006)—helped establish DEFA films in post-unification German society. While audiences interested in DEFA fare are important for the recent success of the films, the institutions that make these films possible and transport their messages to these audiences have often been ignored. The afterlife of DEFA films, however, would not have been possible to the current extent without the work of the non-profit foundation DEFA-Stiftung.

The creation of the DEFA-Stiftung was delayed for almost a decade due to a complicated legal situation. On 25 September 1990 the GDR government passed a resolution to create a DEFA-Stiftung under public law based in Berlin, and put it in charge of all films produced by the state-owned DEFA between 1946 and 1990. However, Berlin as political entity separate from the rest of the Federal Republic did not recognize foundations under public law, which therefore prevented the creation of a DEFA-Stiftung after unification. In addition, the ownership and distribution rights to many films were unclear, as before 1990, the rights to DEFA films in the former West Germany were granted to companies by the GDR import and export company DEFA Außenhandel, while domestic GDR rights lay with the DEFA studio. This legal quagmire stopped the legal formation of a DEFA-Stiftung at this point.²¹ In the years that followed, there was no urgent need to revisit this issue, since the distribution of DEFA films by Progress, the former GDR distribution company that was now under the trust of Treuhand, continued successfully. Only when Progress came up for privatization in 1995, the question of ownership on the film rights resurfaced. It took three more years to sort out the rights and responsibilities of a DEFA-Stiftung, Progress, and other parties involved, yet after their clarification, the DEFA-Stiftung began its work on 28 January 1999. The current foundation owns the rights to the DEFA

trademark and logo, suggesting that the controversy with the new owner of the former DEFA studio space, Studio Babelsberg, has come to an end. Carrying the DEFA logo along with the name allows for easy identification in reality and in the virtual world; when the DEFA-Stiftung turns up as a query term on web-based search engines, it assigns ownership and transparency of rights to the foundation—an important factor in the creation of a visible brand name.

Enabling access to the films has opened up pathways for exploring German film history, and DEFA films have proven to be attractive objects of study for a critical examination of the GDR past. In addition to providing widespread access to the films for experts, the DEFA-Stiftung declared its intent to improve public awareness of the films and to promote the films as part of Germany's cultural heritage in the minds of the general public. Since its official launch, the foundation's main purpose is the preservation and management of DEFA films for the public good. The DEFA-Stiftung acts as ambassador of the films by granting stipends for research and non-profit film projects in semi-annual competitions that are predominantly related to keeping DEFA's legacy alive via the artistic and scholarly meta-reception of films. Reaching the general public requires media that are easily accessible; unlike the scholar who dedicates time to research the location of films and seeks them out in archives, the public needs to be presented with easily accessible media on a big screen or in some form of home media (DVD, television broadcast, an electronic file, or online streaming).

Of special interest to scholars is the federal film archive Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv in Berlin, which serves as both storage and archival facility of original negatives, film prints in mostly 16mm and 35mm format, and unfinished visual material shelved as result of persisting censorship during East German times. As guardian and main preservation agency of the physical collection, the Filmarchiv regulates access to the films in the interest of preserving the film

material for the future; its employees also possess the technical expertise to store the combustible negatives and to produce new copies for cinematic distribution, thus doing the preliminary work in preparation for new releases and re-releases of worn or destroyed copies. The (re)construction of a number of films since 2002 was met with enthusiasm among scholars and the general public, indicating, moreover, that undiscovered DEFA films and material cut after mandated edits during GDR times may still be hidden in the depths of the archive, perhaps to surface in the future and reveal more information about GDR cinema. For scholars interested in DEFA films not released on home video, the archive constitutes the tangible connection to the physical films. Without the Filmarchiv, neither scholars nor the DEFA-Stiftung (and therefore the general public) would be able to have relatively unproblematic access to the copies.

Preserving DEFA's legacy in post-unification Germany hinges on the films' commercial success, as the DEFA-Stiftung receives no government subsidies and has to fund itself by generating revenue with the DEFA films. Hence, expanding the distribution of DEFA films to the public via the established channels of public screenings in movie theaters and other venues, television broadcasts, and home video are important to secure the foundation's future. Since 2012, two companies are in charge of commercially marketing DEFA films: Progress Filmverleih was recently re-issued the distribution rights, while its parent company, Icestorm Entertainment, owns the rights to the home video market. As their presence on German television and at film festivals evinces, DEFA films have turned into hot commodities.²²

In 1999, a candidate for the commercial management of the films emerged rather quickly in the home video company Icestorm Entertainment. A glance at the founding years of this company and at the situation of Progress in 1995 reveals an interesting nexus between their commercial endeavors and the cultural work of the DEFA-Stiftung. Obviously, the three entities

are united by the aspiration to further the access of the general public to the collection of DEFA films. In fact, the privatization and sale of DEFA and the battle for the films culminated in the founding of Icestorm in December 1997 by Gerhard Sieber. When Treuhand listed Progress for sale (in return for a 15 year exclusive leasing agreement of the DEFA film stock to the buyer), they also imposed the condition of paying approximately 70% of the revenue to the planned DEFA-Stiftung. In 1997, Progress was sold to the consortium of Drefa, a subsidiary of the German public broadcasting network MDR (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk) and the Tellux company; a year later, Kinowelt Medien acquired a minority share of Progress. Eventually Tellux purchased all shares in 2001 to become the sole owner.²³ Meanwhile, Gerhard Sieber, who had proposed the marketing of some DEFA fairytales at his previous position working for the Bavarian film distributor EuroVideo, had launched Icestorm, to take advantage of a niche in the distribution network for DEFA films—the home video market. By the end of 1998, more than 75% of all East German households owned a video recorder,²⁴ yet only a few DEFA films, mostly the fairytales and children's films Gerhard Sieber originally arranged for distribution in the old Federal Republic, were available on the market. Icestorm filled this space quickly by releasing on videotape a large number of DEFA films in high demand. The banned *Kaninchenfilme* of 1965, many DEFA fairytales, and the *Indianerfilme* starring DEFA audience darling Gojko Mitic were among those released during the first months. The release schedule was based on polling East Germans, and the sale price for the videotapes took into account the fact that salaries in East Germany were on average lower than those in the West.

The success was overwhelming, and Icestorm marketing manager Brigitte Miesen even suggested “eine wahre DEFA-Euphorie” in 2002.²⁵ Consequently, the revenue allowed a quick expansion to the current market saturation of Icestorm, offering more than 500 titles of DEFA

productions or Soviet and Cuban films dubbed into German in the DEFA studios on DVD and Blu-Ray discs. The change from VHS tape to DVD also opened up the western German market, and marking the sixtieth anniversary of DEFA in 2006, a newly forged cooperation with the German tabloid *SuperIllu* allowed the dissemination of DEFA films in previously unexpected dimensions. Beginning with the September 2006 edition, SuperIllu has released monthly special issues containing a DEFA DVD supplement for an additional price of only €2 per disc. This agreement is still in effect (with the price for a disc having climbed meanwhile to €2.99), giving DEFA films a potential exposure to approximately 3.7 million readers—and widening their circle of viewers. Icestorm also holds the worldwide rights to more than 13,000 DEFA productions for any type of audiovisual medium, and in 2012 launched its own streaming network Icestorm TV.

With its costumes, screenplays, pictures, original props, and even letters documenting important decisions (such as to halt production or to ban films), the Filmmuseum Potsdam complements the list of institutions concerned with DEFA's contemporary afterlife. It commemorates DEFA's history as visual memorial of the DEFA infrastructure. Since the museum opened as Filmmuseum der DDR in 1981 in proximity to the DEFA feature film studios in Babelsberg, the emphasis on the DEFA years in its permanent exhibit turns the museum into a pilgrimage site, displaying relics of a period of filmmaking. Before 2011, when the exhibit space was undergoing another restructuring, the previous display and an accompanying website reflected "a time when films by chance or on purpose, raised a monument to the GDR." Indeed, the exhibit does endeavor to link film and East German politics by way of documenting the production process of many DEFA films. Within the exhibit, a chronological periodization of DEFA history within the larger context of film history at Babelsberg suggests that DEFA films

were firmly embedded in the political system of the GDR. The curating of exhibits took place in a way that allowed even younger visitors without personal connection to DEFA an individual approach, combining interactive stations with traditional displays in order to create a space to experience DEFA—an aspect that has become increasingly important for generations used to technological aids. The permanent exhibit thus functions as a link between the past and the present and allows visitors to understand the significance of DEFA as part of German cinematic history without requiring their knowledge of an actual DEFA film. To some visitors, the museum becomes the entry point to a film culture still unknown to them—successfully, as the positive reaction to the films indicates.²⁶

DEFA Film Reception

The popularity of DEFA cinema has improved drastically since the end of the GDR to the point that contemporary audiences deliberately seek out the films. In comparison to West German films produced between 1946 and 1990, the DEFA productions have outdone their counterparts by far in popularity. Reasons for this popularity are manifold: for instance, the fact that there is no equivalent to the DEFA-Stiftung to promote the West German cinematic legacy. The decentralization of film in the western zones that lead to the founding of numerous small film production companies had the disadvantage that a chaotic copyright situation exists presently, making it difficult for one foundation to be in charge of the rights. In contrast, the centralization of filmmaking in the Soviet Zone has made it much easier to distribute and market the entire corpus of DEFA films. Finally, there is no comparable motivation to seek out West German films currently as is the case with East German audiences reminiscing about their GDR

past.²⁷ Ostalgie dominated the 2000s, but one would be hard pressed to locate a similar movement for West Germany.

During GDR times, however, domestic cinema was not that well-liked, and “DEFA films did not tend to be box-office hits,”²⁸ states Karen Ruoff Kramer, citing the joke about a man hallucinating that he is being followed because he has the impression of someone sitting behind him when he goes to see a DEFA film. This statement requires mitigation, as GDR movie theaters were usually well-filled. Statistics indicate that in 1951, for instance, 188 million tickets were sold in a nation of less than 18 million residents (even though not all of them went to see DEFA films), and films such as *Ehe im Schatten* (*Marriage in the Shadows*) and *Die Geschichte vom kleinen Muck* attracted 12.7 million and 10.5 million viewers, respectively.²⁹ Like in other nations, the advent of television brought a significant drop in attendance, yet the occasional star-studded DEFA blockbuster with Gojko Mitic, Manfred Krug, or Angelica Domröse still broke the barrier of a million viewers. However, many of the well-attended DEFA films did not become epic hits with the GDR population because of their lack in entertainment value, as an often-referenced sequence in *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*) puts forth. Foreman Balla asks engineer Kati out on a date to the movies, professing that “For a date with you I would even be willing to watch a DEFA film,”³⁰ a quote that captures the cynical relationship of many East Germans to their cinema. Cinema was tied to politics, and DEFA films propagating the victory of socialism by decree were required to attract the working class. The question how films such as the two-part biopic *Ernst Thälmann-Sohn seiner Klasse* (*Ernst Thälmann—Son of His Class*, 1954) and *Ernst Thälmann-Führer seiner Klasse* (*Ernst Thälmann—Leader of His Class*, 1955) could draw 8.6 and 8.5 million viewers is easily answered: entire factories halted work, and schools closed for collective visits to the movies. After the opening of East German screens to

western imports in the 1970s, moviegoers sometimes had to sit through a DEFA film before seeing the import, or pay up to two times the ticket price to see the non-DEFA film. Without such government intervention, attendance of DEFA films would have been even more abysmal, while imported West German films such as *Otto—Der Film* (*Otto—The Film*, 1985) brought over five million into GDR movie theaters. The fall of the Wall seemed to put the nail in the DEFA coffin, when open borders and a changing economic structure required films to fulfill the desire for entertainment. DEFA films were unable to do this at that point and gradually disappeared from movie theaters and their prime time television broadcasts, heralding the death of GDR cinema.

Twenty years later, DEFA films are experiencing a never-before-seen popularity among Germans of all ages, a curious fact given the films' previous renunciation by GDR citizens. As previously mentioned, the work of the DEFA-Stiftung was central to the rebirth. After it commenced operations and started with aggressive distribution and re-release of the films, older East German audiences remembered "their" films, and younger generations took interest in the flicks that had influenced the lives of their parents and grandparents, depicting a country that they had only heard about. In some respect, the delay in creating the foundation turned out to be serendipity, as the temporal distance and the maturation of the first post-unification generation of young Germans helped spark interest in the films because of their curiosity about the GDR as a way of understanding the generational differences and the ideological background of their parents and grandparents. Growing attendance figures and continuously strong DVD sales are evidence of this development. In 2009 alone, Progress distributed 540 films to television and more than 100,000 people attended public screenings,³¹ and although not all of these productions were DEFA films, these numbers confirm a growing acceptance of DEFA in German society.

Other than historical interest and the affective bond between some moviegoers and DEFA films, the notion of DEFA as representation of a “camp” aesthetic is helpful to rationalize the rise in popularity. Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” explain the audience fascination with and appreciation of kitsch to capture the spirit of objects through an evaluation of their cult value.³² As Sontag takes up Theodor Adorno’s idea of a “dialectic of the ugly,”³³ she offers a tool allowing us to explain another segment of fascination with DEFA cinema. These audiences are interested in cinematic quality and visual characteristics instead of the political complications often associated with DEFA films in scholarly interpretations of GDR cinema. Since the end of the Cold War and German unification that marked the end of communism in Europe, DEFA films no longer appear as representations of a political ideology. The films may be marked as boring and outdated, subjective statements that express personal repugnance, yet they are no longer rejected outright as propagandistic effects of a nation threatening the democratic foundations of the Federal Republic. Read from this angle, films such as the two-part Thälmann biopic become an amusing spectacle elevating the communist leader to the status of a pop star whose likeness might well appear on T-shirts without causing the same unease it might have shortly after unification. Others, such as the all-time classics *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*) turn into prime examples of vanguard filmmaking, combining elusive dream sequences with corny visuals that fit the camp character of the present time. Popular films, such as *Heißer Sommer* (*Hot Summer*), revisit the genre of the summer flick and how it existed in 1968 “even” in the GDR. Most of contemporary DEFA audiences, it appears, attempt to ignore or at least strip the political layers from these films and read them as campy, perhaps even banal, representations of life in the past.

Contemporary DEFA audiences consist of people with diverse backgrounds, histories, and motivations. Some spectators are conscious of the significance of certain films in their historical GDR context, others are entirely oblivious to such considerations.³⁴ They come with different expectations, as an incident after one of the film screenings of Iris Gusner's banned and long-lost film *Die Taube auf dem Dach* showed in 2010. More than 250 people packed Berlin's Kino Arsenal over its capacity of 220 to be present for Gusner's film, originally slated for release in 1973. After the premiere, the film continued to run for more than five weeks at the Kino Babylon. Following one of the screenings with Iris Gusner in attendance for a Q&A session, three students from Cologne, Bonn, and Aachen in the western part of Germany approached Gusner with words of thanks for the film. When Iris Gusner seemed surprised, the students, who belonged to the first post-unification generation, explained that to them the film was a timeless document with implications for the present. "The worker," they elaborated, "is still powerless, women remain torn between family and a job, and Germany has more than its share of the petty bourgeoisie."³⁵ In the meantime, the afterlife of DEFA films developed well beyond a footnote in the contemporary German cinematic landscape, and the recent success of *Die Taube auf dem Dach* is only the latest development in what promises to become a massive success with potential for the future. Up to the present, more than 5,600 people have seen the film in movie theaters, and in 2010 alone two hundred DVD copies of the films sold—overall a good indicator that even thought-provoking and visually challenging DEFA films resembling art house cinema have their following.³⁶ The 2009 release of the long-banned DEFA crime comedy *Hände hoch oder ich schieße* has attracted over 16,500 people until today and had sold more than 3,600 DVD copies by the end of 2010.³⁷ DEFA cinema is booming.

Arguably the best evidence for the popularity of DEFA is a flourishing fan culture that expanded as a consequence of the public availability of DEFA films. In his work *Textual Poachers*, film scholar Henry Jenkins describes the extraordinary dedication of fans as a reception that goes beyond everyday practices.³⁸ When fans poach, they claim ownership of the original texts as they rework and redevelop them beyond their original meaning into new creations that pay homage to the originals while contributing to the creation of a fandom. Largely unknown to many, a DEFA fan culture does exist that creates unique works and proves in a number of examples how GDR culture continues to live on in present-day Germany. Basic poaching techniques of fans consist, for example, of creating and maintaining websites dedicated to their fandom. Most renowned are www.defa-fan.de, a website celebrating the fandom of site owner Jens Rübner along with a brief introduction to the best-known genres and film periods of DEFA cinema, and www.defa-sternstunden.de, an online DEFA encyclopedia run by sisters Katrin and Uta Zutz that also informs about broadcast times on television. Rübner also self-published a number of books about DEFA, a typical example of poaching, while Team Zutz, as the sisters call themselves, created not only an entry point for new DEFA fans but also offer an online guestbook and forum, thus acting as an asynchronous, permanent virtual DEFA fan convention. Along with official websites such as www.defakinokiste.de, a site run by the DEFA-Stiftung to introduce DEFA films to children, these websites aim to provide a broad, comprehensive look. Fans of individual DEFA films are more radical in their poaching activities.

While older generations such as Rübner and the Zutz sisters are interested in the documentation of the past, younger fans appropriated tacky aspects of DEFA films and turned them into artistic projects. Some of the more moderate examples include references in Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* to the DEFA cult film *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* that show a

doorbell reading “Paul und Paula” and a cameo appearance of Paul, played by Winfried Glatzeder. Others create thematic allusions to the music from the original films, such as the 2008 song “Ich bin mein Haus” by German band Rosenstolz and Ludger Vollmer’s opera adaptation that debuted at the Nordhausen Theater in 2004.³⁹

A more radical poaching of the DEFA musical *Heißer Sommer* appeared on YouTube in 2010, when the YouTube user “frischbeton” uploaded a video response to the well-known Matthias Fritsch video *Technoviking* in which he used a techno-beat combined with the title theme of the DEFA film.⁴⁰ One of the most active and varied fan groups among DEFA fans was founded to celebrate the DEFA fairytale *Drei Haselnüsse für Aschenbrödel* (*Three Nuts for Cinderella*). Abbreviated by the acronym 3HfA, the fandom unites a large variety of activities centered on the film, ranging from jewelry copied from the necklaces worn by the actors, music and songs inspired by the film, a cellphone ringtone, Barbie dolls, coffee mugs, and even pralines. Two annual conventions allow fans to dress up in fairytale garb, reenact their favorite scenes with other fans, and keep up to date with most recent developments.⁴¹ All in all, contemporary DEFA fandom exhibits all the customs and traits of a lively film culture serving a wide array of aficionados to pass the litmus test of significance in post-unification Germany. The reception has long gone beyond mere film-watching and turned into a full-fledged DEFA fandom with ritualized behavior and poaching activities.

Leaving the Homeland: DEFA Afterlife in the US

The stock taking of the current DEFA situation demonstrates changes in the perception and the status of the films in post-unification Germany. DEFA lives on, not as dusty prints on shelves in moldy storage facilities, but as an array of institutions, events, products, and audiences, all of which contribute to part of Germany’s film culture. The success story of DEFA

films has gone beyond national and eastern European borders and has a surprisingly solid influence in the USA.

Since the founding of the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst by Barton Byg in the early 1990s, an event whose consequences are only now beginning to be realized, the films have generated more and more interest. In 2005, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City curated the retrospective “Rebels with a Cause: The Cinema of East Germany.” In addition, there are bi-annual interdisciplinary summer film institutes uniting established and emerging scholars for week-long seminars on DEFA and East German cinema, as well as First Run Features and the DEFA Film Library offering a sizeable selection of DEFA DVDs in subtitled NTSC versions. In 2010, in collaboration with the Wendemuseum in Los Angeles, the DEFA Film Library started selling the DVD series of *Wendeflicks*, DEFA films finished at a time of social change in Germany—months before they saw their release in Germany. DEFA filmmakers regularly tour the USA to show their films at colleges and universities, and the US premiere of Iris Gusner’s film *Die Taube auf dem Dach* in the Oregon college town Corvallis sold out the local movie theater three times in a row. Future plans for retrospectives, guest lectures, and the integration of DEFA cinema in the curricula of high schools and colleges, as well as a steady presence of topics related to DEFA at film conferences throughout the USA, indicate rising interest. DEFA films continue to fascinate people in the USA and in Germany—more than ever before.

What the future will bring for DEFA cinema is certainly unpredictable. Given the current mood, it appears that the formerly belittled GDR films are presently firmly integrated into Germany’s cinematic history. The way the DEFA-Stiftung continuously reinvents the DEFA brand and rejuvenates its products to bring in new audiences promises future success. In the

meantime, the process of identity formation within Germany will continue to influence the way DEFA films are going to be received and the pace at which the organizations involved with DEFA can grow. At the moment, DEFA's future looks bright.

¹ I would like to thank the Center for the Humanities. Their grant supported research and the write-up of this article.

² See Stefan Haupt, *Urheberrecht und DEFA-Film*. Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung, 2005.

³ Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa-Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company 1918-1945*. New York: Farrar, 1996.

⁴ Daniela Berghahn. *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005, 214-215.

⁵ Leonie Naughton. *That was the Wild East: Film Culture, Unification, and the "New" Germany*. Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2002, 22.

⁶ See Albert Wilkening. *Betriebsgeschichte des VEB DEFA Studio für Spielfilme: Teil 1*. Potsdam: Betriebsparteiorganisation der SED im VEB DEFA Studio für Spielfilme, 1981.

⁷ See Jürgen Brettschneider and Bärbel Dalichow, eds. *Babelsberg—Gesichter einer Filmstadt*. Berlin: Henschel, 2005.

⁸ Günter Jordan. *Film in der DDR: Daten Fakten Strukturen*. Potsdam: Filmmuseum, 2009, 192.

⁹ See Nick Hodgin. *Screening the East: Heimat, Memory and Nostalgia in German Film since 1989*. New York: Berghahn, 2011.

¹⁰ Massimo Locatelli. "Geister von Babelsberg." *DEFA-Film als nationales Kulturerbe*. Ed. Klaus Finke. Berlin: Vistas, 2001. 109-18.

¹¹ Bärbel Dalichow. "Das letzte Kapitel: 1989 bis 1993." *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg*. Ed. Ralf Schenk. Berlin: Henschel, 1994. 329-53. Here 329.

¹² See for example Axel Geiss. *Filmstadt Babelsberg: Zur Geschichte des Studios und seiner Filme*. Berlin: Nicolai, 1994, and Rolf Giesen. *Metropolis 2001: Traumfabrik Babelsberg*. Nuremberg: Burgschmiet, 1998.

¹³ "Wunderbares Spielzeug." *DER SPIEGEL* 21/92. 144-145.

¹⁴ Hobsbawm, Eric. "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" *The Invention of Tradition*. Ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. 1-14. 11.

¹⁵ Daphne Berdahl. *Where the World Ended: Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.

¹⁶ See Daphne Berdahl. "(N)Ostalgie for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things." *Ethnos* 64.2 (1999): 192-211.

¹⁷ Paul Cooke. *Representing East Germany Since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia*. New York: Berg, 2005.

¹⁸ "[D]ie Defa-Filme waren furchtbar. Die liefen damals in Paris, wo ich studierte, nur im Kino der kommunistischen Partei. Wir sind da reingegangen und haben gelacht." Lars Grote. "Hausbesuch: So viele Speichen. Plausch mit Volker Schlöndorff auf seinem sonnengelben Sofa." *Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 December 2008. Web. 20 June 2011. <<http://www.maerkischeallgemeine.de/cms/beitrag/11375038/63369/Plausch-mit-Volker-Schloendorff-auf-seinem-sonnengelben-Sofa.html>>. My translation.

¹⁹ "Volker Schlöndorff: Entschuldigung für abschätzige DEFA-Äußerungen." *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*. Online, 21 January 2011. <<http://www.mz-web.de/servlet/ContentServer?pagename=ksta/page&atype=ksArtikel&aid=1295589824236>>

²⁰ Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper, 1980, 30.

²¹ Stefanie Eckert. *Das Erbe der DEFA—Die fast unendliche Geschichte einer Stiftungsgründung*. Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung, 2008.

²² See also my article on the commodification of DEFA cinema, forthcoming in *German Studies Review* 36.1, 2013.

²³ See Martin Blaney, "Tellux takes Progress in Germany." *Screen Daily*. Online, 7 March 2001. Accessed 9 August 2011.

²⁴ Statistisches Bundesamt, ed. *Statistisches Jahrbuch Für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999.

²⁵ Miesen, Brigitte. "Icestorm Entertainment GmbH. Ein Report der ersten Jahre." *Apropos: Film 2002. Das Jahrbuch der DEFA-Stiftung*. Ed. Ralf Schenk and Erika Richter. Berlin: Henschel, 2002. 316-8. Here 316.

²⁶ In an interesting development, the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen "Konrad Wolf" is planning to acquire the Filmmuseum Potsdam.

²⁷ I attempted an initial exploration of the audience structure attending cinematic screenings of DEFA films in my dissertation *The Afterlife of DEFA in Post-Unification Germany: Characteristics, Traditions, and Cultural Legacy*. Austin: University of Texas, 2006.

²⁸ See Karen Ruoff Kramer's essay "Representations of Work in the Forbidden DEFA Films of 1965" in this volume.

²⁹ See <http://www.progress-film.de/de/progress/geschichte/documents/datenfakten.pdf>, accessed 11 August 2011.

³⁰ "Mit ihnen würde ich mir sogar 'nen DEFA Film ansehen." *Spur der Steine*, dir. Frank Beyer, 1967.

³¹ See <http://www.progress-film.de/de/progress/geschichte/documents/datenfakten.pdf>.

³² Sontag, Susan. "Notes on 'Camp.'" *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, 1967. 275-292. I tested this approach in my article "Communists and Cosmonauts in Mystery Science Theater 3000: De-Camping *First Spaceship on Venus/ Silent Star*." *In the Peanut Gallery with Mystery Science Theater 3000: Essays on Film, Fandom, Technology and the Culture of Riffing*. Eds. Robert Weiner and Shelley Barbra. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011, 40-5, to illustrate how DEFA films might—and have been—read as camp.

³³ Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann eds., Robert Hullot-Kentor trans. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 47.

³⁴ See in more detail the results of a study on the reception of DEFA films I describe to some extent in my dissertation.

³⁵ Email conversation with director Iris Gusner, 27 May 2011.

³⁶ Email conversation with defa spektrum CEO Manja Meister, 2 August 2011.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

³⁹ See <http://www.operundtanz.de/archiv/2004/03/berichte-nordhausen.shtml>.

⁴⁰ See more detail on visual artist Matthias Fritsch who tested the effect of Web 2.0 culture at <http://www.hfg-karlsruhe.de/~mfritsch/works/installation/technoviking-archiv/technoviking-archive.html>. The original Technoviking video can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1nzEFMjklI4, and the video response by frischbeton, a poaching of *Heißer Sommer*, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48dTH_pWtFA.

⁴¹ Those and other fan activities are documented on the fan website

<http://www.dreihaselnuesssefueraschenbroedel.de/>