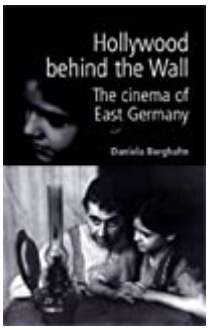
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Daniela Berghahn. *Hollywood Behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. ix + 294 pp. $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-6172-1; $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-6171-4.

Reviewed by Andrew Gaskievicz (Department of History and Political Science, Mansfield University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-German (March, 2007)

A History of Film in the GDR

Daniela Berghahn's *Hollywood Behind the Wall* is the first comprehensive, book-length history of film in the GDR in the English language. It is a welcome addition to a growing but underrepresented body of scholarship on East German cinema. Compared to work on Weimar, Nazi and West German cinemas, East German filmmaking has received little attention until recently. Although a number of articles and even book-length studies have been published in English–such as Joshua Feinstein's *Triumph of the Ordinary*[1]–on aspects of East German cinema, only Sabine Hake in *German National Cinema*[2] has covered the entire history of film in the GDR, although only in two chapters. The value of Berghahn's book, however, is not just its almost encyclopedic coverage of East German film. This book has balance. On the one hand, it provides a detailed history of DEFA, East Germany's state monopoly film company, as well as the political and ideological influences on film production in the GDR. On the other hand, Berghahn devotes a considerable portion of her book to detailed textual analyses of important East German films, such as the rubble film *Die MÃ¶rder sind unter uns* (1946) and the banned *Spur der Steine* (1966/90). A further great strength of this text is its location of East German films in the context of eastern European and West German cinemas. In chapter 5 on "Women on Film," for example, Berghahn argues that "what distinguishes Soviet and East German films about women made during the 1970s and 1980s from those made in the West is that they pursue no feminist agenda as such. Nor were they linked to a women's movement" (p. 181). She goes on to say that both GDR and Soviet western-style feminism were "discredited as a bourgeois protest against the oppression of women under capitalism which was deemed to be uncalled for in a socialist society, an alleged community of equals" (p. 181). Thus, East German and Soviet films on women of this era were more concerned with a "critique of the collective" than the emancipatory individualism of western feminism. Hence, as Berghahn points out, DEFA productions on women in the 1970s and 80s were "curiously out of step" (p. 183) with their western, particularly West German, counterparts.

Berghahn's balanced and nuanced analysis of GDR

cinema is reflected in the organization of her book. The first chapter, the "East German Film and the State,"gives a history of DEFA, explaining its institutional structures, censorship mechanisms and distribution and exhibition processes. The most interesting part of this chapter is the discussion of DEFA's genre films. Berghahn argues that DEFA was "suspicious of genre cinema" because it tried to differentiate itself from western genre cinemas, most notably that of Hollywood (p. 39). The kinds of films principally referred to in this regard are the so-called East German *Indianerfilme*, mostly produced as escapist films in the aftermath of restrictive measures imposed on DEFA by the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in 1965. *Indianerfilme* were undoubtedly westerns, although they differed from Hollywood westerns in both plot and form. Their inclusion here is an important moment of the book, as they were among the most popular films that DEFA ever produced, yet Berghahn devotes less than two pages to them. She also only devotes two pages to DEFA's fairy-tale productions, which were, in terms of box office receipts, East Germany's most successful films; they were even popular in West Germany. The fact that at least representative examples of these films were not included among the twenty-some film analyses that comprise this book is a weakness.

The remainder of Berghahn's book departs from the straightforward overview of the history of DEFA given in the first chapter. Chapters 2 through 6 are organized topically around distinct themes that informed East German film production. Chapter 2 covers DEFA's anti-fascist films, arguing that *VergangenheitsbewÃ¤ltigung* meant something entirely different in East Germany than in the West, although, as in West Germany, "coming to grips with the past" was a crucial discourse in the "construction" of East German identity (p. 59). Through DEFA, the SED disseminated the "myth of heroic anti-Fascist resistance," which denied any notion of German guilt because the communist East German state represented a "clean break" with the Nazi past. According to the Marxist critique of fascism, by eliminating the root cause of the Nazi takeover–capitalism–the SED prevented any possibility of a Nazi resurgence. The East German state was established by supposedly heroic communist resistors who fought against the Nazis in concentration camps like Buchenwald. Hence, in DEFA films, other victim groups, most notably Jews, are omitted or completely deemphasized. The real victims, according to the SED, were average Germans. This stance is reflected in DEFA's earliest film, Wolfgang Staudte's *Die MÃ¶rder sind unter uns*, which, according to Berghahn, "created a universal model of victimhood that allowed the Germans to conflate their own experience of suffering during and after the war with the experience of the primary victims," the Jews (p. 71). By the 1980s, however, this state-imposed interpretation of the Nazi past was under considerable attack and many East German filmmakers began to admit that East Germans had to consider their share of guilt for the Nazi past as well.

In chapter 3, Berghahn explains how DEFA appropriated Germany's cultural heritage through literary adaptations, a hotly contested area between West and East Germans in the "cultural sphere." DEFA's "heritage" films, as they were called, often used anachronistic scenes to connect the GDR with its alleged socialist forerunners. Many of these films were therefore biopics of men like J.W. von Goethe, Friedrich HÃ¶lderlin and Ludwig van Beethoven, who were all cast as "fervent supporters of the French Revolution, and thus harbingers of socialism" (p. 130). West Germans usually dismissed such films as propaganda, which, Berghahn surmises, "testified to the longevity of Cold War prejudices and to the different aesthetic sensibilities which audiences and critics had developed in the East and the West" (p. 130). Still, West Germans were no doubt unaware that DEFA heritage films could also be subversive, especially in the aftermath of the Eleventh Plenum, when censorship became much harsher. Such was the case, for example, with Egon GÃ¼nther's *Lotte in Weimar* (1975), a "flagship" film that was DEFA's first submission to the Cannes Film Festival, but received no awards or recognition at home.

DEFA's production of potentially subversive films is one of the most consistent themes in this volume. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with DEFA's banned films and women on film, both areas where politically and socially subversive elements surfaced in the GDR. DEFA's "forbidden films," as Berghahn terms them, were largely a consequence of the Eleventh Plenum, as a result of which a dozen films were banned because of a cultural backlash against the relaxation of norms in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Berghahn situates the decisions of the Eleventh Plenum in an international context, associating their decisions with Cold War trends such as de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev and the backlash against the attendant relaxation of social and cultural norms under Leonid Brezhnev after 1964. The Eleventh Plenum essentially banned an entire year's production at DEFA, largely because the films, mostly known as *Gegenwartsfilme*, "examined socialist society more critically and more honestly" (p. 142). The most famous film that

was banned, Frank Beyer's *Spur der Steine*, was actually completed before the Eleventh Plenum convened. Thus, unlike most of the other films, which were still in production, it actually reached theaters. The SED, however, resorted to Nazi-like tactics and hired youth gangs to disrupt the showings. *Spur der Steine* was summarily withdrawn from circulation, officially banned and shelved in the East German film archive under lock and key until the *Wende*.

While the film artists who made the "forbidden" films of the Eleventh Plenum did not intend to be subversive, many films produced afterwards, particularly those on women, did so. Naturally, they had to be careful to mask their subversiveness to escape the harsh censorship of the 1960s. The best known example of a women's film that "pushed the boundaries" of what was acceptable on the screen in the GDR was Heiner Carow's *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1973). The heroine of the film, Paula, believes that "love meant everything and locates the source of happiness exclusively in the private sphere ... In short, Paula is anything but the socialist female role model that was advertised in other DEFA films of the time" (pp. 194-195). Unlike most other DEFA productions of the period, which were losses at the box office, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* constituted a rare financial success for the East German film industry. The character of Paula was seen as a "real" person by most East German viewers. However, the film, seen by East German authorities as sexually permissive and morally liberal, was also criticized for its transgression of the boundaries of what was acceptable in East Germany. Interestingly, West German audiences seemed not to understand the significance of this film for East Germans. The West German feminist journal *frauen und film* even went so far as to call the film "a slap in the face of feminism" (cited on p. 202), illustrating how out of step East and West German film viewers were at the time.

The last chapter in Berghahn's volume explains the fate of DEFA and its artists after German reunification and examines the phenomenon of*Ostalgie* as expressed in post-unification German films. The privatization of DEFA assets resulted in hard times for many East German film artists, primarily because West Germans were not receptive to East Germans' cinematic contributions, particularly their portrayal of life in the GDR. Very few East German film production companies survived the first decade of reunification. Babelsberg became more of an amusement park than a viable, successful studio. Most disturbingly, West German filmmakers have largely ignored East Germans, even in films about the GDR. Berghahn argues that a united German cinema has only very recently begun to emerge, most notably evidenced in the film *Goodbye! Lenin* (2003).

Daniela Berghahn's volume is the most comprehensive history of the East German cinema in English to date. It balances a straightforward history of East German cinematic institutions with nuanced and sophisticated analyses of the GDR's most important films. It is extremely well researched, incorporating the most recent scholarship on DEFA and rich material from Germany's film archives. There are weaknesses; Berghahn's book lacks a conclusion and she misses a chance to sum up and reinforce her arguments. Still, this volume is an important contribution to the growing body of scholarship on GDR cinema.

Notes

[1]. Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema. 1949-1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[2]. Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002). See especially chapters 4 and 5.