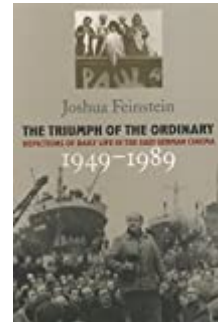


Joshua Feinstein. *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949-1989.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 331 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-5385-6.



Reviewed by Thomas Lindenberger (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam)

Published on H-German (March, 2004)

One of the merits of the boom in GDR history during the nineties is found in its impulse to overcome the conventional divisions between disciplines and methodologies. The relation between film studies and contemporary history is a case in point. Joshua Feinstein's study of the making of East German cinematography represents a powerful example as to how film studies may enrich our historical understanding of the making of collective identities and mentalities under historically determined political, economical and social conditions. At the same time he is able to show that the detailed reconstruction of institutional, technical and ideological contexts of concrete cinematic productions is indispensable for the adequate interpretation of their aesthetic dimensions.

Feinstein starts from the assumption that cinema is a particularly apt object of study to understand East Germany: GDR political elites had to offer compensation for the absence of the legitimacy of an "original" nation state and saw cinema as a high road to achieving the goal of creating a new socialist collective identity. At the same time, cinema proved to be a site for negotiating more general changes in popular lifestyles and inter-gender and inter-generational relations within modern societies, changes that tended to undermine the state socialist project of the new uniform culture of authoritarian integration. This very capacity of filmic practice to func-

tion as a public space of contention and mediation raises questions about the place of art in a socialist society: how could the products of DEFA, the monopolistic film producer, despite the tense regulation of all DEFA activities by party and state agencies and despite the profound political loyalty of its most eminent artists serve as such an "avenue for social communication"?

As his concrete object of analysis, Feinstein chooses one particular thematic and aesthetic strand in DEFA production: the depiction of daily GDR life in feature films. Beginning—after an introductory chapter on early DEFA productions—with the SED's short phase of de-Stalinization in 1956, he follows the unfolding of this agenda until the establishment of *Alltagsfilme* in the early Honecker period of the 1970s. The core of the book is formed by the scrupulous reconstruction of several individual film productions, which are discussed as emblematic instances in the intricate relationship between the Party, film makers and the GDR public. Choosing individual movies as "representative" of particular political processes and periods may always provoke objections, but I think that Feinstein had the right idea: by exploring the wider context of *Berlin–Ecke Schoenhauser* (Gerhard Klein, 1957), *Verwirrung der Liebe* (Slatan Dudow, 1959), *Der geteilte Himmel* (Konrad Wolf, 1964), *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (Kurt Maetzig, 1965), *Spur der Steine* (Frank Beyer,

1966), and *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (Heiner Carow, 1972) he manages to balance in-depth analysis of single projects in all their institutional, economic, and aesthetic ramifications with accounts of the simultaneous changes in the development of the GDR as a polity, with the portrayals of the most eminent directors of GDR cinema as an extra, useful for all those interested in film history to whom DEFA is still unknown territory. This is complemented by an “epilogue” chapter, covering the last fifteen years of East German film production.

By the same token, each of these chapters discusses particular aspects both of cinematic practice and of more general developments of politics and culture in the GDR. Thus, *The Discovery of the Ordinary* assembles themes such as the feedback of the Soviet thaw and the arrival of Western youth culture in German cities as the background against which Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase could realize their unique project *Berlin–Ecke Schoenhauser*, both a socialist “teenpic” and a neo-realist breakthrough in the search for a creative way out of the impasses of socialist realism and its “anti-filmic” prescriptions. The chapter on Dudow’s *Verwirrung der Liebe* continues this line of reasoning in exploring the indissoluble antagonism between the utopian potential inherent to a love comedy and the restless efforts of top level bureaucrats to contain its transgressive meanings and allusive power. In this conflict, Dudow, admired for his 1932 classic *Kuhle Wampe*, stands for the radical culture politics and life reform projects within the Weimar KPD, a legacy which the SED leadership definitely tried to leave behind. Konrad Wolf’s *Der geteilte Himmel* is treated as an exceptional moment of transition between socialist realism and *Nouvelle Vague*. Feinstein underlines that at this stage, East German cinema at his best was still fully in step with the international avant-garde. By focusing on the movie’s leitmotif of negotiating the violent and seemingly irrevocable division of Germany in terms of a drama about regaining female identity, Feinstein rightly exposes the latter’s nation-(re)building potential. One of very specific traits by which GDR society would gain profile as the “other” of West German society in the remaining decades of its existence was the relative economic and social autonomy of women within gender relations as a norm of everyday life—notwithstanding their persistent under-representation in the higher echelons of power.

The following chapters on Maetzig’s *Das Kaninchen bin ich* and Beyer’s *Spur der Steine* cover the middle years of the sixties, the period in which the fate of the GDR as a socialist experiment was definitely sealed by its failure to reform itself from within. Both films were

part of a larger cohort of approximately a dozen productions engaged in frank and unforgiving representations of the inherent problems of socialist society. Banned after the infamous eleventh plenary session of the SED’s Central Committee in December 1965—in the case of *Spur der Steine* after cinema riots staged by the party in June 1966—they are memorialized in the DEFA annals under the label *Kaninchenfilme* or *Verbotsfilme*, premiered only after the democratic revolution in 1989 and 1990. While Feinstein’s competent treatment of the institutional setting and ideological stakes defining the always precarious relationship between movie artists and the party in the preceding chapters can only be praised as a model for the practice of film history by historians, in these two chapters he strikingly bypasses some aspects of established knowledge about the intricacies of the SED’s 1965/66 turnaround towards authoritarian centralism. Neither Dorothee Wierling’s work on the police crackdown against Beat fans in the “hot” fall of 1965 in GDR cities, nor—more importantly—Monika Kaiser’s pioneering study on the transition of power from Ulbricht to Honecker already beginning in 1965 are mentioned. In consequence, Feinstein misses the decisive impact of inner Party antagonisms between “old” Ulbricht pushing for reform and flexibility and “young” Honecker representing the conservatism of the established party machinery and state security. From this standpoint it can be argued that during the eleventh plenary the radical DEFA productions of 1965 as well as the long-haired Beat fans figured above all as comfortable scapegoats in order to conceal and to heal a severe crisis inside the Party’s top leadership. In this sense, authoritarian readjustments in the realm of culture served as a welcome opportunity to demonstrate the unity of the party. Also, the famous scene in *Spur der Steine*, in which the hero Balla throws a police officer into the water, and which served dogmatic hardliners as the main pretext to put up protests and boycotts during the first two weeks of its screening, is not mentioned at all in Feinstein’s account.

These remarkable omissions barely affect the detailed presentation and interpretation of the films themselves. But ignoring the indirect effects of inner party power struggles on the realm of culture politics leads Feinstein to ascribe to the filmmakers a stronger position that they actually had. In the chapter on the *Alltagsfilme* of the 1970s, referred to in the book’s title, Feinstein is correct when he describes “documentary realism” as the cinematic style informing the bulk of DEFA’s remaining feature film production dealing with GDR reality. He also rightly chooses *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* in order

to expose the inherent ambivalence of socialist *Alltag*: in this film, the escapist and breathtaking *amour fou* of the two main characters does not, in the end, have a chance of survival within real existing socialism. What bothers me, however, is Feinstein's presentation of the arrival of this style of filmmaking as a triumph. This term invites us to look out for victors and vanquished in a rather unambiguous sense—but where were they in those days? Disenchantment, compromise, and outright boredom were the hallmarks of the Honecker period. The specific and highly vernacular GDR *Alltag* imagery evolving from the 1970s onwards, which Feinstein rightly identifies as an element of the GDR's civic identity, nevertheless remained essentially deficient and quite “non-triumphant”: it remained an option besides Western popular culture, TV, pop music, and movies (Hollywood productions included) always surpassing DEFA and other GDR products in popularity. It was an *ersatz*, or second-best solution in the same way that GDR consumer commodities could never qualify as a viable alternative to “real,” i.e. Western consumerism. Today's “Ostalgia” for this perished universe of objects and images confirms the assumption of their identity building qualities, but this *ex post facto* enthusiasm must not be confounded with the historical practice of an *Alltag* marked by individual aspirations continuously frustrated by shortages, restrictions on mobility, and intrusive paternalism. Labeling the cinematic representation of this *Alltag* a “triumph of the ordinary” may serve as a nice word play to lure those readers who

continue to associate German cinema (inevitably in connection with Leni Riefenstahl) with a new domain of film history, but clearly distorts the political, economic and artistic toils and troubles filmmakers had to go through, until they were finally allowed to work this soil during the remaining decades of the GDR's existence.

This objection, however, touches upon principal options regarding the assessment of the GDR as an integral, self-sufficient polity, as it is debated within GDR historiography, in general. It is one of the eminent merits of Feinstein's study that he has written a history book about films and film production that leads us into the midst of this salient problematic, without ever losing letting the original problematic out of sight: the intricate inter-twining of cinematic creativity, political and economic constraints and social change under state socialism. One's differences regarding some interpretations aside, this is highly recommendable reading for anyone interested in learning more about the “other,” underservedly ignored, New German Cinema and the historical circumstances that made it possible.

Copyright (c) 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Thomas Lindenberger. Review of Feinstein, Joshua, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949-1989*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9020>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.