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2013 GSA Conference Paper

Can't Buy Me Love: The Impact of Hollywood Import Films in East Germany and the Cultural Surrender of the GDR Film Control in the 1970s and 1980s

Still riding high on the wave of international recognition and athletic successes of the early 1970s, East Germany celebrated another first in late 1975. In the latter part of November 1975, the first Film Week of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was held in the United States, hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Twenty-one East German films were exhibited to American audiences, many of them for the first time. Six years in the making and coming just one year after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, this was clearly a momentous occasion for the country. Every little detail of the opening festivities was reported back to East Berlin: “During the evening dinner Mrs. Rockefeller [Director of the Museum] greeted our ambassador and the rest of his staff. Mrs. Rockefeller had a brief conversation with the ambassador.” In addition to chronicling the intermingling with the wealthy elite of New York’s high society, the author of the report clearly showed his relief that the events proceeded smoothly and without interruptions. “None of the conversations contained any critical comments,” he emphasized. “Quite to the contrary, everyone voiced praise and recognition for East Germany.”¹

The twenty-one films reflected the stand-out achievements of the East German film industry (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft, DEFA*) over the past 30 years, with a heavy emphasis on anti-fascist and historical films. The selection was most likely also influenced by the audience at the Museum of Modern Art, which consisted of young film enthusiasts and, more importantly, of older German-speaking and predominantly Jewish viewers. Each film was shown twice over the course of the week, and a number of the showings in the movie theater, which held over 400 people, were sold out. Though the Film Week report bemoaned a rather limited interest on the part of the New York media and criticized some of the technical shortcomings of the films, it was seen as an all-around success. Just as

¹ Bericht über die Teilnahme an dem Programm “Filme aus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik” in den USA, eingegangen January 15, 1976; BArch SAMPO, DR1 18857, 3 and 5. The films covered the whole 30-year period, from early films like *Die Mörder sind unter uns* and *Wozzek* to films from the early 1970s such as *Legende von Paul und Paula* or *Jakob der Lügner*.

importantly, the hope was that this would yield sales for DEFA films in North America as well as open up new social and economic contacts for the diplomatic staff of the new GDR embassy.²

The relative elation on the part of the East German officials over the event was quite understandable, since the GDR had been seeking both political and cultural recognition for the past three decades. Finally being showcased on the big New York stage and wining and dining with the elite of the city was another confirmation that East Germany had finally arrived on the international scene and was being taken seriously for its cultural accomplishments and contributions as well. Viewed from East Berlin, it looked like the continuation of the positive trajectory that had been building since the late 1960s and early 1970s. It seemed to indicate a new reality of normalized relations and routine international cultural exchanges, which had eluded the GDR for so long over the past decades.

Yet trouble was already brewing below the surface of East German cinema, and the GDR film industry provides a telling barometer of the increasing difficulties which the country was facing as the 1970s continued. The truth of the matter was that the GDR film sector was in crisis. With a few exceptions, GDR films were not popular with East German audiences and the technological shortages were growing as the decade progressed. Worst of all, the Ministry of Culture, like every other sector of the East Germany, was slowly but surely running out of money—unable to finance its costly films while simultaneously maintaining the basic infrastructure from movie theaters to production facilities.³

The other major aspect which proved particularly challenging for East German cultural planners was that GDR audiences, especially young people, were increasingly expecting recent Western films as part of the yearly movie program. This was not a new development in the 1970s. In fact, American and other western films had been imported since the very beginning of the GDR and were part of the regular movie fare. Yet because of the increasingly powerful TV competition, this expectation of the greater availability of western films was becoming more urgent and politically loaded in the 1970s. Unless GDR cultural planners wanted to lose the last remaining viewers—as well as the significant revenue which could be reaped from these films—they were well advised to keep a steady dose of western films mixed

² Ibid., 6-9; seventeen DEFA films were ultimately sold, but only to a non-commercial film distributing company.

³ For an outstanding and broader discussion of these financial difficulties of the GDR in the late 1970s, see Andreas Malycha's article, "Ungeschminkte Wahrheiten: Honeckers Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik—ein zentrales Konfliktfeld im SED-Politbüro. Ein vertrauliches Gespräch von Gerhard Schürer, Chefplaner der DDR, mit der Stasi über die Wirtschaftslage der SED im April 1978," in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Heft 2/2011. The worsening financial situation of GDR cinema will be discussed later in the chapter.

in with the overall yearly film programs. Western import films, therefore, were not just a cultural but also a financial necessity for the struggling East German cinema in the 1970s and beyond.⁴

This paper will analyze the complications which arose out of these culturally complex and politically explosive dynamics by focusing on the importation and impact of American feature films in the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s. It will trace which films were chosen for import, how they were advertised and received as well as analyze their influence on the overall cultural policies of the GDR. Finally, the paper will compare and contrast the policies and procedures of the early 1970s with those of the late 1970s and early 1980s. What this analysis reveals is that the GDR's cultural film policy was increasingly driven by economic necessity and overwhelming consumer demands while ideological concerns took a back seat—with important consequences for the overall political control which SED leading officials had over the cultural policies of their country. In a nutshell, it reflects the fact that the choices of the SED leadership became fewer and their cultural (and political) influence far more limited by the close of the 1970s. By the early 1980s, GDR film policy was a bundle of contradictions. Left with no alternatives, the SED leadership was forced to surrender control over its film policy and programs in the 1980s and culturally capitulated to the combined forces of East German popular demands, economic pressures and political fears as well as the relentless expansion of a western, especially Hollywood-dominated, international film culture.

I. The Importation, Selection and Impact of Hollywood Films in the 1970s

Based on their internal reports, GDR officials in the Ministry of Culture (Ministerium für Kultur, MfK) knew that the East German film industry was in trouble in the early 1970s. Several trends were headed in the wrong direction. First of all, East German television alone showed a combined 500 feature films on its two broadcasting channels in 1970. On the three West German TV channels, more than 400 films were shown in addition to the East German television fare that same year. Not surprisingly in light of these numbers, movie attendance dropped by over 10 million between 1966 and 1970 in East Germany. In addition, movie going had become youth-dominated by the early 1970s, when two-thirds of all movie goers were between the ages of 14 and 25. If one added the group of 25-35 year olds, the respective percentage increased to over 85% of all purchased movie tickets. These audiences were expecting and

⁴ For an outstanding introduction and discussion of this topic, see Rosemary Stott's book, *Crossing the Wall: The Western Feature Film Import in East Germany* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2012).

choosing entertainment films above all else, with adventure and comedy features leading the way. Even more ominously, youthful audiences largely shunned GDR and socialist films in favor of Western film imports, and importantly, it was increasingly those film imports from capitalist countries which filled movie theaters and kept the GDR film industry afloat.⁵

By the mid-1970s and into the latter part of the decade, then, the GDR film sector found itself facing two fundamentally damning and seemingly inexorable trends. One was that East German audiences preferred Western films over their own DEFA productions or socialist imports and were willing to pay more to see them. At the same time, money for cultural activities, including film, was becoming ever tighter and forced unappetizing policy decisions, such as to increase Western imports because they actually yielded profits which could be funneled back into the budget and ease financial constraints elsewhere. Prompted by these dual trends, therefore, GDR cultural officials kept spending more money on Western imports even as these became more expensive in the late 1970s. Though politically and ideologically opposed to such films and imports, the officials in the Central Film Administration had little choice but to satisfy this popular demand and—not insignificantly—reap the economic windfall of these audience preferences.

It is in the context of this changing landscape that Western import films became ever more important for GDR cinema and its officials in the 1970s. As mentioned, their numbers were actually relatively small. In the 1970s, GDR cinema introduced between 115 to 150 new films each year, with the greatest fluctuation in the early 1970s (1971—114 films; 1972—155 films); by the latter part of the decade the numbers changed much less drastically (135-145 films). In any given year, roughly 25% were western import films—usually varying between 30-40 films per year (an outlier year again is 1971 with only 23 import films). Consequently, socialist films comprised the vast number of program offerings with about 75%, or an average of about 100 films per year—about 15 of which were DEFA films. In terms of the western feature films, the vast number of these originated from France (close to an average of 10/year), the United States (roughly 8/year) and Italy (5/year) during the 1970s. Generally half of all imported features, therefore, came from the United States and France—a fact which was often bemoaned by the film selectors but which changed little over the course of the decade. West

⁵ “Analyse der Lage im Lichtspeilwesen der DDR und Einschätzung dieses Bereiches bis 1975,” (1971; no specific date provided); BArch SAPMO; DR1 13273; quote is on page 20 of the report.

Germany, Great Britain and Japan—in that order—were the second-tier countries in terms of imported films (with a yearly average of 2-4 movies).⁶

All East German film imports and exports were handled by a special unit within the Central Film Administration, the DEFA Export (*DEFA Aussenhandel*). From 1973 to 1990 it was led by Helmut Diller. Films imported into East Germany also had to be approved by the State Film Licensing Committee (*Staatliche Filmabnahmekommission*). While many western films had been pre-screened via rental copies up until the early 1970s, this process became too expensive. Starting in the middle of the decade, a team of GDR cultural officials usually purchased packages of import films at international film shows in the West. On the domestic side, DEFA Export collaborated closely with the sole GDR distributing agency (*Progress Filmverleih*), which was led by Wolfgang Harkenthal from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s and was responsible for the distribution of all films in the GDR. DEFA Export was the only film agency not subsidized by state funds because it was expected to produce its own revenue as well as profits for the East German film sector.⁷

As Rosemary Stott convincingly demonstrates in her study on imported western feature films into East Germany, GDR cultural officials showed a very strong liking and respective dislike for specific genres and certain film stars. When it came to American films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it should come as no surprise that East German film selectors loved the socially critical features of the New Hollywood, which often explored the dark underbelly of American social and political life. In addition, crime and detective stories as well as musicals and comedies were a regular part of the GDR film program, especially if they featured darlings of the East German screen such as Barbara Streisand, Dustin Hoffman, Sydney Poitier or Jane Fonda—all of whom were appealing to reviewers because of their Jewish heritage, political stances or racial minority status. Favorites of the later 1970s included also Jack Nicholson, Shirley MacLaine and Robert Redford. By contrast, GDR film selectors usually avoided the traditional American Western, any science fiction and disaster features, horror and graphic combat films as well as hard-core pornographic films. The reasoning was to avoid showing what they considered excessively violent, destructive or sexually explicit films or movies which celebrated American myths or glorified warfare.⁸

⁶ "Spielfilm-Einsatz in der DDR nach Ländern, 1970-1982," no date provided, pp. 1-2; BArch-SAPMO, DR1 14971a.

⁷ See Stott, *Crossing the Wall*, Chapter 1 and Meurer, *Cinema and National Identity*, 123-129. [Check on the whether DEFA Export actually produced profits or not; Meurer says yes (126), but I'm not so sure.]

⁸ Stott, *Crossing the Wall*, 99-100 and 153-155.

For these reasons, GDR film censors were quite enamored by the films of the New Hollywood, which started to emerge in the late 1960 and began to fade by the mid-1970s in the United States. Since American films were usually imported with a minimum 2-4 year delay in East Germany, the first of these films didn't arrive until 1970 and stretched all the way to the late 1970s, thereby defining one core strand of US import films which East German audiences saw during that decade. From the standpoint of political ideology and audience resonance, they reflected almost the ideal combination for DEFA Export officials. Many of them were aesthetically challenging and artistically innovative at the same time as they presented a bleak and often devastating critique of the United States and, by implication from an East German viewpoint, the capitalist system overall.⁹

One of the first films of the genre which made it over to East Germany was *In the Heat of the Night* (*In der Hitze der Nacht*) by Norman Jewison, which was in many ways a safe import from an official cultural perspective. It focused on the virulent racism in the American South, featured Sydney Poitier as one of the lead characters and presented a suspenseful crime story of a wrongly accused African-American (Poitier) who turned out to be not only a competent but ultimately superior (Northern) detective to the Southern police officers who rather reluctantly accepted his help to solve the case. Originally released in 1967, it premiered in East Germany in September 1970 (with a three-year lease). In the Progress summary accompanying the release of the film, GDR officials expected "a powerful audience response" and advised all exhibitors that "with close observation of the political developments in the United States, the film should be shown in the large movie theaters so that the lease time can be maximized."¹⁰

Based on the GDR film reviews, this race-film-plus-crime-story—reviewed under headings such as "Murder and Race Hatred" or "Not Only a Crime Story"—clearly confirmed the widely held view in East Germany that the United States had neither dealt with nor effectively solved its race problem. Corruption, racism and violence, as the film reviews argued, far too often went hand-in-hand in the United States and prevented even a semblance of justice and equality. But there were also some critical tones in at least some of the GDR reviews, which did not like the conciliatory end of the movie, where the gruff yet reformed white sheriff (Rod Steiger) fully accepted Poitier as his equal and even carried his

⁹ For an overview of these films of the New Hollywood, see David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000) and Jonathan Kirshner, *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film In America* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 2012).

¹⁰ "In der Hitze der Nacht," Einsatzhinweise; HFF "Konrad Wolf," Pressedokumentation, Schlüssel-Nummer: 45003035.

suitcase while they waited for the train which would take Poitier back north to Philadelphia. Finally, when compared with West German reviews from late 1968 (it had been released two years prior in the Federal Republic of Germany, FRG), there was actually an interesting overlap in this respect. Coming relatively soon after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in case of the West German release of the film, its reconciliatory tone was frequently seen as misplaced and even reactionary.¹¹

The decision was equally easy for the DEFA Export selectors in the case of two other American films released in 1973 in East Germany: *The Strawberry Statement* and *They Shoot Horses—Don't They*. The latter film was released in January 1973 (US release year-1969) under the title *Nur Pferde gibt man den Gnadenschuss*. Set at the height of the Great Depression in 1932, the film chronicled the marathon-dance competitions popular at that time, where hundreds of desperate couples competed for prize money by dancing for days and even weeks with minimal sleep to the delight of howling spectators. The film was directed by Sydney Pollack and featured Jane Fonda as Gloria, one of the main contestants of the dance, who in the final scene of the film asks her partner to shoot her to put her out of her misery, which he does. Again the official statement accompanying the release was enthusiastic in its praise of the film and argued that “the death dance of 1932 is an exemplary case and showcases the merciless business climate of this [American] society.” GDR film critics predominantly echoed this assessment, arguing that the film highlighted the ruthlessness and disregard for human dignity in capitalist societies both in the 1930s and, by extension, during the current time period. With Jane Fonda as an additional attraction, this movie received high marks from film critics around the country.¹²

The Strawberry Statement (*Blutige Erdbeeren*) was released in March 1973 in East Germany, three years after it premiered in the United States (late 1970 release in West Germany). The film was loosely based on a non-fiction book by James Simon Kunen which focused on the student protests at

¹¹ For the titles of the GDR reviews, see *Freie Presse* (Karl-Marx Stadt), November 17, 1970 and *Der Neue Weg* (Halle), October 1, 1970; for a more critical East German review, see *Eulenspiegel*, December 1970 (No. 49). For a critical, historically contextualized West German review, see “Mit liberalem Anstrich,” *Deutsche Volkszeitung* (Düsseldorf), Oktober 25, 1968. The collection of reviews in the HFF “Konrad Wolf” does not provide any page numbers for these or any of the following reviews cited.

¹² “Nur Pferde gibt man den Gnadenschuss;” HFF “Konrad Wolf,” Pressedokumentation, Schlüssel-Nummer 45004735; for the representative reviews, see *Ostsee-Zeitung* (Rostock), “Keine Welt der schönen Bilder,” January 26, 1973 und “Sie tanzen für eine Handvoll Hoffnung,” *Sächsische Zeitung* (Dresden), January 23, 1973. For West German reviews, see “Die Pferde sollten zurückschiessen,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, September 22, 1970 oder “Blutende Füße,” *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), October 9, 1970. [Again notice same word—“death dance”—used in East German official review. Are they plagiarizing?] Also, some West German reviews show more depth in terms of a more film historical and filmographical focus, comparing this film, for example, to *Easy Rider* or *Midnight Cowboy*, films which were not shown in the GDR in the 1970s; see “Tanz ums goldene Schwein,” *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, September 9, 1970.

Columbia University in 1968. The basis for the protests was the revelation that one of Columbia University's institutes had collaborated closely with the Defense Department, which highlighted the close and intimate connections between many US universities and the military during the time of the Vietnam War. In the movie, a naïve but good-hearted student gets caught up in these protest largely because of his love for one of the women leading the student demonstrators. When she is clubbed during one of the protests, he rushes to her aid only to be killed in the violent confrontation with the policemen at the scene. Once again, GDR selectors saw this as a film which should be released as broadly as possible, especially in university towns, since it "demonstrates the dangers of US imperialism and showcases a disillusioned image of the capitalist system." What is interesting in the film reviews is that the authors followed the GDR film officials in praising the students' demonstrations as well as their political opposition to US imperialism and the US military-industrial complex, but several also chided the same students for their embrace for free love and the use of drugs. It is also noticeable that none of the reviews referred to the popular sound track of the movie, which quite possibly (together with the sexual promiscuity, the drug use as well as the political rebelliousness) appealed greatly to many East German young viewers in particular.¹³

On a lighter note, GDR selectors generally made sure that the yearly program included at least one newly-released American musical or comedy.¹⁴ When *Funny Girl* came along, therefore, which had been a huge box office hit in the United States and which featured the irrepressible Barbara Streisand in the lead role, the GDR selectors jumped on it very quickly. Released in the United States in 1968, it premiered in East German theatres by May 1970, which was a record time for US import films into the GDR. There was no political aspect to this film, as the DEFA Export selectors acknowledged, but they judged the musical numbers to be of "a high artistic caliber" and, of course, Barbara Streisand stole the show. "Because of these advantages the film deserves a spot in our cinema program," they commented pragmatically, "and it will help close the gap in the area of musical entertainment films [in the yearly program]." The film reviews, as expected, heaped praise on Barbara Streisand for her portrayal of the

¹³ "Blutige Erdbeeren," HFF "Konrad Wolf," Pressedokumentation, Schlüssel-Nummer 45005135; "Blutige Erdbeeren" nicht mehr aktuell?," *Sächsisches Tageblatt*, July 26, 1973 and "Nachdenken über einen Film," *Junge Welt* (Berlin), April 5, 1973.

¹⁴ For the 1970s, this list included the following films: 1970—*Funny Girl*, 1971—*Cat Ballou*; 1972—*Hello Dolly* and *The Fortune Cookie*; 1973—*West Side Story*; 1975—*Cabaret* and *Some Like It Hot*; 1976—*For Pete's Sake*; 1977—*What's up, Doc?*; 1978—*Lucky Lady*; see Stott, *Crossing the Walling*, Appendix One, 251-254.

historical Fanny Brice, who danced her way from rags-to-riches as one of the Ziegfeld Follies in the early 20th century as well as lauded the masterful film direction by William Wyler.¹⁵

As this brief overview shows, because of the sheer popularity of American films and for variety's sake, GDR film selectors bent their ideological rules and assured at least a steady trickle of musical films and comedies onto East German cinema screens during the course of the 1970s. Despite their general distaste for the traditional American Western, the same can be said for this genre in terms of US film imports. Traditional American Westerns, and especially their stand-out star John Wayne, were despised by GDR film officials because of the re-writing of America's ruthless colonial history and because of the self-aggrandizement which they entailed. Less common than the light-hearted genres, American Westerns were still included in most of the yearly cinema programs during the 1970s.¹⁶

In this respect, the New Hollywood in the 1970s again made the choice for the East German film selectors a great deal easier since it introduced the revisionist Western. Unlike the traditional films, the revisionist Western reversed the role of hero and outlaw. Now it was the US military who savagely slaughtered innocent Indian women and children, plundering their villages and ruthlessly exploiting their vulnerability. Cowboys, too, were no longer men of steel with laser-like precision but more often dark and brooding, capricious and self-serving.¹⁷ A film like *Little Big Man*, then, was indeed seen as a welcome addition to the GDR cinema program and was rushed to the East German movie screens with relative speed: it premiered in November 1972, three years after its release in the United States. Predictably, it was celebrated for the novel approach of the film and Dustin Hoffman's convincing performance. Through Hoffman's character the viewer is led to take side with the Indians and thereby reverses, as the official Progress review highlighted, the traditional and historically inaccurate portrayal of white-Native relationships. These combined themes, Dustin Hoffman's star performance and the critical, yet largely accurate re-writing of the history of the American West also dominated the published

¹⁵ "Funny Girl," HFF "Konrad Wolf, Pressedokumentation; Schlüssel-Nummer: 45002750. For a representative and fairly detailed review, see "70-mm-Märchen vom Broadway," *Thüringische Landzeitung* (Weimar) June 6, 1970. West German reviews (it had been released a year earlier there), showed a similar focus on Streisand, but generally included more background information and historical depth; see "Der Traum vom Aschenputtel," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 1969.

¹⁶ The following films were released: 1970—*Mackenna's Gold*; 1971—*Destry Rides Again*; 1972—*Little Big Man*; 1973—*The Ballad of Cable Hogue*; 1974—*Buck and the Preacher*; 1976—*Count your Bullets*; and 1977—*High Noon*; see Stott, *Crossing the Wall*, Appendix One, pp. 251-54.

¹⁷ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 173-182; the quote is on page 174.

film reviews in the GDR. And with the Vietnam War still raging at the time, several made sure to link it to the contemporary US brutality and barbarism, including regular references to the My Lai Massacre.¹⁸

Yet when surveying the discussions of the selection reports closely, it is apparent that another significant shift took place right around the mid-1970s: compared to the early part of the decade, selection criteria are becoming noticeably more lax in the late 1970s and especially the early 1980s. When in doubt in terms of politics and ideology, GDR selectors generally rejected even crowd-pleasing films in the first half of the decade. In the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s, selectors emphasized the role of mass appeal more and more—even to a degree where ideology was forced to take a backseat.

It is also apparent that a political concern of a different kind was creeping more frequently into the considerations and deliberations: GDR officials were becoming ever more concerned that western import films might actually stir up or magnify political trouble or opposition to the regime. This concern was very clearly the main reason why an otherwise appealing film on Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, was not imported to the GDR in the late 1970s. Coming just on the heels of the tumultuous protests against the expatriation of the controversial East German folk singer, Wolfgang Biermann, the East German officials were in no mood to stir up further trouble despite their positive appraisal of the film: “All in all, this is a well-made film on a topic which has barely been represented on American screens. Guthrie’s critical and uncompromising attitude [...however,] would provide unnecessary discussion material in light of the current events (the so-called dissident problem).”¹⁹

The concern about potentially misfiring or backfiring film imports also made its way into the official assessments of the GDR film selection process by the late 1970s. Officials were still set on introducing more American films, especially socially critical movies of the New Hollywood, but they were also worrying that these films might get re- or misinterpreted by GDR viewers. There was an ever-present danger that these films could be “wrongly judged or received by our viewers,” as the report put

¹⁸ “Little Big Man,” DFF-“Konrad Wolf,” Pressedokumentation; Schlüssel-Nummer: 45004640. See “Ein Krieg nach dem anderen,” *Sonntag* (Berlin), January 7, 1973 or “Little Big Man,” *Der Morgen* (Berlin), no date provided. The West German reviews (the film was released in 1971 there), the tenor is a similar one, including the references to the Vietnam War. Again, many reviews provide more film history context like Arthur Penn’s previous films: “Noch ein letzter Held,” *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), August 27, 1971 or “Des Westerns letzte Schlacht?,” *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, September 4, 1971.

¹⁹ “Dies Land ist mein Land,” February 7, 1978, 6788C. By comparison, an earlier film on folk music, *Festival*, was not shown only because of irresolvable technical issues. The film premiered in the United States in 1967 and focused on the Folk Music Festival in Newport; it was requested for import into the GDR in 1971; see “Festival,” June 18, 1971, 7728C; Berlin Filmarchiv.

it, “especially since, aside from the political criticism, they are very appealing in terms of their artistically attractive milieus and detailed [...] scenes.”²⁰ These potential troubles can be recreated in rough outlines at least when one looks at three of the most celebrated films of the late 1970s: *Chinatown*, *All the President’s Men* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. All three of these films were devastating in their criticism of the United States politics and society, and all three of them were rushed to East German screens as quickly as possible, which was two years past their original release in the United States in the 1970s.

Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (released in the US in 1974; shown in the GDR in 1976) and Alan Pakula’s *All the President’s Men* (US release in 1976; GDR 1978) most clearly share a thematic focus. Although Polanski’s film noir is set in 1930s Los Angeles and chronicles the corrupt politics surrounding water rights at that time, its real focus is not far removed from Pakula’s Watergate film. Both movies dealt with the corruption at the heart of much of American politics and the greedy and manipulative culture this bred. In many ways, *Chinatown* cut even deeper because it highlighted the incestuous relationship of Los Angeles’ most powerful man, Noah Cross, with his daughter and traced his ability not only to get away with his crimes but ultimately remain at the top of his politically corrupt and morally bankrupt empire. In *All the President’s Men*, audiences at least had the satisfaction to see democracy in action, which ultimately removed Nixon from office. Not surprisingly, GDR officials were effusive in their praise of both movies and recommended that both films be shown in the biggest theaters to reach the widest possible audiences.²¹

It is very likely East German movie audiences were riveted by these films, and these movies might well have chipped away at the ever-enduring appeal of American society and the American way of life. However, it is just as likely to imagine that the same GDR audiences might have admired and even envied the openness with which American film directors and some of their favorite movie stars could portray these flaws of the United States and its capitalist, politically corrupt system without being prosecuted, imprisoned or expatriated for their actions. In addition, similar to earlier films like the popular *Strawberry Statement*, they conveyed an alluring and aesthetically pleasing milieu and

²⁰ “Jahreseinschätzung der Zulassung ausländischer Spielfilme im Jahre 1978,” no specific date provided; BArch SAPMO, DR1 12852. “Die Gefahr, dass dadurch diese Filme missverstanden, falsch gewertet und rezipiert werden, ist fast immer gegeben, zumal sie neben der Kritik im künstlerisch gestalteten Lebensmilieu äusserst attraktiv und in der Detailgestaltung, einschliesslich bzw. der erotischen Szenen, die bisherigen Sehgewohnheiten unseres Publikums weit über fordern.”

²¹ “Chinatown,” HFF “Konrad Wolf,” Pressedokumentation, Schlüssel-Nummer 21507. For *All the President’s Men*, see memo from Harkenthal to Kranz, March 10, 1977; BArch SAPMO, DR1 13236, 2-3.

landscape: the appeal of the hippie culture, the allure of big American cities like Los Angeles and New York or, as in *All the President's Men*, the advantages of a free press and free speech which, in this case at least could bring even the most powerful men to their knees. At the very least, capitalist countries periodically seemed capable of purging themselves of their evil demons while few in East Germany in the late 1970s saw this potential for political regeneration in the GDR, since only the wrong people seemed to get purged.

This open, and potentially troublesome, room for interpretation and reinterpretation was probably no more evident than in the film *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Milos Forman, which again was eagerly pursued by GDR selectors and premiered in East Germany two years after its original release in April 1978. The film classic starred Jack Nicholson in the role R.P. McMurphy as a dishonorably discharged Korean War veteran and trouble maker. When McMurphy finds himself confronted with a prison sentence, he instead feigns mental illness and is transferred to a mental institution which is run with an iron fist by the omnipotent and feared Nurse Ratched. McMurphy, recognizing that most patients in the mental institution are actually quite normal, is able to alleviate the monotony of the patients and wakes them from their collective slumber. He even manages to take them for an unauthorized joy ride outside the walls of institution, temporarily eluding the iron grip of the authorities. Yet upon his return, McMurphy is punished for his transgressions and subjected to electro-shocks and ultimately brain surgery in order to heal his insanity. The authorities win, although McMurphy's social rebellion has at least revived his Indian friend "Chief" Bromden, who in an act of kindness kills the comatose McMurphy and escapes the walls of the mental institution.

GDR selectors insisted that this film represented a perfect metaphor for the repressive capitalist system ("bürgerlicher Unterdrückungsapparat"), but East German youth could probably have been forgiven if their thoughts strayed a little farther than that. After all, Milos Forman had left Czechoslovakia after the brutal suppression of the Prague Spring uprising in 1968 and was thereby a fellow, if lapsed, Communist intimately familiar with the oppressive nature of the communist system. Even the official review by GDR selectors inadvertently highlighted how wide open this film was to interpretation: "He [McMurphy] encounters a system, which destroys individuality and dignity, because it presses human beings into a senseless, bureaucratic regime." A little further along it continued, "The institutional authorities recognize quickly that a mentally sane rebel has risen against them. Therefore, they have to make him 'not dangerous' because he disturbs their 'order'." The official Progress report

finally assured that the film will “teach the viewer to look a little closer and makes him a bit more observant.”²²

Unlike almost all of the West German reviews of the film, none of the GDR reviews ever made reference to the fact that Forman was an émigré from Czechoslovakia who fled after the suppression of the Prague Spring in the late 1960s. In articles titled “Taming a Rebel the American Way” or “Dead Souls,” they viewed McMurphy’s rebellion as well as this whole film one-dimensionally through a narrow ideological lens as a critique of capitalist systems. To be sure, this was one possible way to read this film. But there certainly were others.²³ And it seemed that GDR cultural officials had an inkling that this film contained the potential for multiple readings. The final report to the head of director of the Progress film distribution stressed that “while propagating this film we need to make sure that we enable viewers to judge the content and the critical potential of this film properly [as criticism confined only to the capitalist system].” In an interview, Milos Forman, too, argued that the character McMurphy stood for rebellious heroes everywhere: “Well, individuals fighting or rebelling against the status quo, the establishment, is good for drama. And also I feel admiration for rebels, because I lived twice in my life in totalitarian society [sic], where most of the people feel like rebelling but don't dare to. And I am a coward, because I didn't dare to rebel there and go to prison for that. That's, I guess, why I admire the rebels and make films about them.” And while clear documentary evidence about the precise impact of the film is lacking, what is clear is that Jack Nicholson’s rebellious character McMurphy was celebrated as one of the most sympathetic and admired film heroes by East German youth in the late 1970s and that they embraced him as one of their own.²⁴

²² “Einer flog über das Kuckucksnest,” HFF “Konrad Wolf,” Schlüssel-Nummer 24696; film summary.

²³ For more narrowly focused East German reviews, see for example “Taming of a Rebel the American Way,” *Neues Deutschland* (Berliner Ausgabe), November 1978, “Tote Seelen, *Das Volk* (Erfurt), December 20, 1978 or “Einer flog über das Kuckucksnest,” January 16, 1979, *Volkswacht* (Gera). For the West German reviews, see “Irrenhaus als Zirkus,” *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), March 19, 1976 (the quote is from this review) and “Mit Elektroshocks und Objektivität,” April 2, 1976.

²⁴ Memo to Harkenthal, June 21, 1977, BArch-SAPMO, DR1 13236. The survey and McMurphy’s particularly strong appeal to East German youth is mentioned in Lothar Bisky’s and Dieter Wiedemann’s study, *Der Spielfilm—Rezeption und Wirkung. Kultursoziologische Analysen* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1985), 85-86. Unfortunately, neither the specific question nor particular comments are captured in this analysis. For the 2002 interview with Milos Forman by Tasha Robinson, see <http://www.avclub.com/articles/milos-forman,13764/>; accessed July 2, 2013.

II. Economic Crisis, Political Fear and the Cultural Convergence of GDR Cinema in the late 1970s and 1980s

By the late 1970s, a perfect storm was gathering over the East German film sector, which would unload its destructive energies on the East German cinema throughout the 1980s. Trouble was brewing in every sector of the industry. First and foremost, the financial bottlenecks were becoming ever more restrictive in the late 1970s, and the film import sector was being squeezed as well. In 1981, for example, the GDR film selectors had to pass on importing Francis Ford Coppola's antiwar opus *Apocalypse Now* because they simply could not afford it. "Based on the current economic situation, an adoption of the film is not possible," the DEFA Export summary conceded. In the more detailed notes, it was apparent that the film would have cost almost twice as much as most other imports, something that was still done in exceptional cases in the mid-to late 1970s, but which was increasingly out of the question by the early 1980s.²⁵

Economic concerns were certainly nothing new when it came to the purchase of western import films, but financial considerations became ever more pressing and decisive by the turn of the decade. Even an old Disney movie was looked over twice by the turn of the decade. The 1970 film *Aristocats*, for example, had finally been imported to West Germany in 1980 and ran in West German theaters to the delight of family audiences. Hoping to utilize this already dubbed film version, GDR selectors admitted that it would also have been an appealing addition to the family program in East German theaters, but concluded that "considering the well-known price demands of the Walt Disney Company an adoption cannot be recommended." Likewise, other appealing films like *Barry Lyndon*, which was available in a dubbed West German version as well as *F.I.S.T.*, which was considered by GDR cultural officials "an important contribution concerning the problems of the union movement in the United States," both were rejected based on an increasingly more common refrain: "rejected because of the current economic situation."²⁶

In order to deal with this restrictive financial situation, officials in the Central Film Administration were developing two coping mechanisms. One was to give previously rejected, and slightly older, films a

²⁵ "Apocalypse Now," October 28, 1981, 7881C; Filmarchiv Berlin.

²⁶ "Aristocats," February 4, 1981, 6600C; "Barry Lyndon," January 23, 1980, 7886C and "F.I.S.T.," January 23, 1980, 7909C; Filmarchiv Berlin. The average price for a Western import film in the late 1970s was around 40,000.- VM, but top-rated films went for as much as 60,000.- VM, plus fees for renting of film negatives; purchasing already dubbed films was a preferred strategy of GDR selectors, even though some scenes might have to be edited; see "Bericht des Hauptbuchhalters zur Rechenschaftslegung über das Planjahr 1978," no specific date provided; BArch SAPMO, DR1 15199a.

second look, and a number of them were now finding their way into the yearly cinema programs in the early 1980s. The second strategy was to delay the purchase of US films until they had aged enough to become economically feasible. Following the first path, the Western *A Man Called Horse* (*Der Mann, den man Pferd nannte*; premiered in the US in 1970) finally was scheduled for viewing in GDR movie theaters in 1983 because selectors expected a strong appeal among youth audiences and because “the reasons which led to its rejection years before [competition with East German *Indianerfilme*]” were no longer valid. Likewise the children’s film *Black Stallion* (*Der schwarze Hengst*; US 1979) was postponed even though a dubbed West German version was available. As the report highlighted, “An adoption should take place only under improved economic conditions, even if the purchase is delayed as a consequence.”²⁷

There is no doubt that these bottlenecks in the area of film imports were directly related to the larger economic woes which were sending shock waves throughout the state budgets in the GDR. By the late 1970s, as Andreas Malycha highlights, the indebtedness of the GDR to Western lenders had increased tenfold when compared to the early years of the decade—from 2 billion Valutamark (VM) in 1972 to 22 billion VM in 1979. As Malycha emphasizes, Honecker had increasingly run his social and consumer policies on a credit card and ignored the advice of his economic experts who told him that this course of action was unsustainable. Yet, money was running out, and the Ministry of Culture, and with it the film industry, were not spared by the late 1970s. Every stone was turned and all avenues were explored in order to generate more western currency during those years, including the sale of famous art works as well as rare books and editions. For the film sector, this meant that vital technical upgrades were delayed or cut, materials for color films were unavailable, and long-overdue renovations of movie theaters never took place. The only cultural sites which received funding were those prestige objects which were in the public eye and visited by tourists to the GDR, like the Semper Opera in Dresden, the famous symphony hall (Gewandhaus) in Leipzig as well as the German Theater or Pergamon Museum in East Berlin; the rest of the requests, which included the film infrastructure as well as the vast majority of movie theaters, went largely unanswered.²⁸

²⁷ “Der Mann, den sie Pferd nannten,” January 9, 1984, 7946C (the quote is from the memo from October 10, 1983) and “The Black Stallion,” July 30, 1981, 7979C; Filmarchiv Berlin.

²⁸ See Malycha, “Ungeschminkte Wahrheiten,” 286-287. On the proposed sale of valuable artistic items, see “Erhöhung des Exports und der Exportrentabilität kultureller Erzeugnisse in das nichtsozialistische Wirtschaftsgebiet,” January 24, 1977; the technical and material shortages for the film industry are discussed in a memo to Gerhard Schürer, November 27, 1978; and the privileged treatment of prestige objects are mentioned in a memo to Kurt Hager, March 4, 1980; all in BArch SAPMO, DY 30 IV B2/2.024/76 (Büro Hager).

The second major complication for East German cinema in the late 1970s was the increased political insecurity and fear in the wake of the drawn-out fight after the Biermann Affair. Concerned about its own domestic stability, GDR politicians clamped down on East German filmmakers starting in the late 1970s and especially in the early 1980s. This renewed curtailment suffocated domestic filmmaking under a blanket of restrictive policies, which left DEFA directors little choice but to focus on narrowly construed films focused on the private sphere and bereft of any social commentary or political relevancy. Simultaneously, the SED leadership was watching with consternation as other East European countries—even before Gorbachev's *perestroika* initiatives of the mid-1980s—were allowing ever greater freedoms to their respective filmmakers in terms of exploring previously taboo social and political topics.²⁹

All of this caused increasing tensions between Warsaw Pact countries in terms of their cultural cooperation starting in the late 1970s, when all of them seemed to be experiencing similar economic troubles and oppositional pressures. In 1978, for example, East German officials were complaining bitterly that they could not sell the required number of DEFA films to other socialist countries in order to fulfill expectations. Even more frustrating from their perspective was the fact that more and more socialist countries were offering their films to western, and especially West German, television stations first before they were even offered to their East German counterparts, which they attributed “to the national interest and economic profitability” of the respective socialist countries.³⁰

By the mid-1980s, these problems had deteriorated to a point well beyond repair. DEFA films were hardly finding any takers even among socialist countries, and GDR films were harshly criticized for being one-dimensionally focused on the private sphere with (often single) women in leading roles. In 1986, even the Soviet Union cut back to purchasing just two East German films, and countries like Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Hungary each only bought one DEFA production. The GDR reports emphasized two other increasingly powerful trends among socialist partner states: “Film as a product is gaining priority over political, ideological considerations” and all films from socialist countries were at an

²⁹ Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime*, Chapter 6 and Hans Joachim Meurer, *Cinema and National Identity in a Divided Germany, 1979-1989: The Split Screen* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 2000), 97-108 and Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in East German Cinema, 1949-1989* Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), Epilogue.

³⁰ On the reduced sale of DEFA films, see “Einschätzung der Planerfüllung I. Quartal 1978,” May 3, 1978, page 5; BArch SAPMO, DR1 12855 and “Rechenschaftsbericht 1977,” page 14; BArch SAPMO, DR1 15199b.

artistically low level, which led to “a higher import of western films” in all countries of the Warsaw Pact.³¹

GDR cultural officials basically gave up on enforcing any consistent, politically driven policy when it came to the import of western and especially American films in the early 1980s. Their only insistence was that the movie drew crowds and made money. In a 1983 report, SED officials conceded that the situation was so obvious that even the public had begun to participate in the discussion. “Questions about the purchase of films for the use in the GDR film program have increasingly been discussed in the public in the last year and a half,” the report highlighted, and it went on to point to the increasing use of film on GDR television as a major factor influencing film purchases, since viewers were expecting bigger and better films in movie theaters. GDR officials also criticized contemporary films from socialist countries, which they viewed as too critical or outright hostile to socialist societies and ideology. More than ever, as the internal analysis conceded, GDR cinema was dependent on the import of western entertainment films, “because of their high viewership and high economic profitability contribute to the fulfillment of the target goals of GDR cinema.” Western films which guaranteed at least one million viewers (*Millionenfilme*) were becoming absolutely vital in order to sustain the East German film industry, even though they were becoming harder to afford on the GDR’s restrictive budget. In the process, East German officials were willing to throw overboard most political reservations, now officially accepting previously rejected films like *The Towering Inferno* (US release, 1974) or *Once Upon a Time in the West* (US release, 1968). In the most sobering part of the report from an official East German perspective, the authors admitted that “the majority of films from capitalist countries interpret their heroes, their history and their worldview not in line with our ideological perspective,” but the GDR cultural officials had run out of viable alternatives.³²

The third major challenge to East German cinema in the late 1970s was the overpowering nature of television competition, especially since the East German film industry had to contend not only with East German, but especially with West German, television as well. The dynamic unleashed by the 1973 decision to allow free access to West German television in the GDR was felt ever more powerfully in the film sector by the end of the decade and especially in the 1980s. In order to compete with the rapidly escalating film offerings on West German television in the 1970s, East German television was left

³¹ “Einschätzung der Verkaufsvorführung für die sozialistischen Länder vom 22-25.9.1986 in Neubrandenburg,” pp. 9-10; BArch SAPMO, DR 1 13239.

³² “Zu Problemen der Zulassung und des Ankaufs ausländischer Spielfilme für den Einsatz in den Filmtheatern der DDR (Positionen und Aufgaben),” no specific date provided; quotes are from pp. 1-11. BArch SAPMO, DR1 14971a.

with no option but to follow suit. What this meant for the East German film industry was that it encountered ever greater pressure to satisfy heightened audience expectations and demands.³³

One of the most important findings of the youth survey of 1980 was that East German youth watched six times as many films on West and East German television by the end of the 1970s compared with films they watched in movie theaters, and the vast majority of these TV films were from the West. As in the movie theaters, they preferred adventure, comedies and entertainment movies of all kinds as well as films that dealt both with contemporary and utopian themes. West German television was only too eager to satisfy this demand. For example, the two main West German television channels (ARD and ZDF) broadcast a combined 332 films in 1977. Only 5% of these movies were from socialist countries, yet nearly 50% originated from the United States. At the turn of the decade, these numbers had further increased and, not to be completely outdone, East German television had joined in the fray as well. By 1980, East German viewers could watch 644 films per year on GDR TV, 31% of which were western imports. By 1988, East German television was showing 983 films per year and by then 56% of these were western imports.³⁴

In light of these trends, it might be fair to ask why the GDR continued to insist on a film import policy and even bothered to select specific films. Why even have restrictions on Westerns, science fiction and horror films in the 1970s, for example, when you knew that GDR viewers had easy and constant access to films from all three genres on West German television? And why fret over which films to exhibit in East German movie theaters by the early 1980s when most films would, in ever shorter succession, be shown on either East, or more likely West, German television? Did the GDR film import policy really provide control over what East German viewers saw or was it more of a reassurance for those in charge to feign a sense of control? These questions can only be answered either by an intense detachment and silo-mentality on the part of the leading GDR cultural officials or an intentional and stubborn unwillingness to confront hard facts. Both tendencies were certainly at play, but there is

³³ For very helpful overviews on this topic, see Peter Hoff, "Wettbewerbspartner oder Konkurrent? Zum Verhältnis von Film, Kino und Fernsehen in der DDR," in: *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* (No. 3/4, 1985), 33:437-455 and Claudia Dittmar, "GDR Television in Competition with West German Programming," (No. 3, 2004), 24: 327-343.

³⁴ For the 1980 youth survey, see section "Kino," BArch SAPMO, DR1 4826. For the 1977 statistics, see Bisky und Wiedemann, *Der Spielfilm—Rezeption und Wirkung*, 40 and for the 1980s statistics, Dieter Wiedemann, "Wo Bleiben die Kinobesucher? Daten und Hypothesen zum Kinobesuch in der neuen deutschen Republik," Peter Hoff und Dieter Wiedemann, eds. *Medien der Ex-DDR in der Wende* (Berlin: VISTAS, 1991), 89. Peter Hoff that the high percentage of Western import films on GDR TV was a trend from the mid-1980s through the latter part of the decade: "Wettbewerbspartner oder Konkurrent?," 454.

also little doubt that the detachment from reality increased on the part of the SED leadership circles as the 1980s progressed.³⁵

What was sure is that this escalating entertainment war between East and West German television put enormous pressure on the GDR film policy. As mentioned above, one consequence of this was that films in movie theaters had to be unique, which often led to an emphasis on American blockbuster films especially by the 1980s. Just as important was that combined with the financial restrictions, this television competition made the selection of films more difficult, since US films appeared on West German television with ever shorter delay times. By the late 1970s and the early 1980s, DEFA Export officials could no longer wait three or four years to import an American film unless they wanted to risk the chance that GDR viewers would see it on a West German TV channel first. The film *Cabaret* (US 1972), for example, was released on GDR movie screens in 1975 only to be available one year later on West German TV. In similar cases, *The Front* (US 1976) was released in the GDR in 1976 and shown on the first channel of FRG television in 1978 and *Missing* (US 1982) likewise was first seen in East German movie theaters in 1983, followed by its West German TV debut in 1985.³⁶

The fourth and final development responsible for the gradual cultural capitulation of the GDR cinema on the part of East German officials was the fact that East Germany was being sucked into an international film culture heavily dominated by Hollywood imports, especially American blockbuster movies. Because of the GDR's close proximity and continuous cultural interaction with its West German neighbor, what happened to East German cinema in the 1980s was not all that different to what happened in other West European countries during the same decade. As Joseph Garncarz highlights, this was the overwhelming trend which had played out in West Germany since the early 1970s. During the watershed decade of the 1970s, Hollywood films were beginning to dominate West German movie theaters—and by extension West German television. Beginning in 1973, as he points out, the United States and West Germany already shared two to three films in their respective list of top-ten movies; after 1983 that overlap of top-ten movies further increased to 3 to 5 films per year. Likewise, after 1973

³⁵ For a discussion of the increasing detachment of GDR leading officials, see Wiedemann, "Wo bleiben die Kinobesucher?," 82-83.

³⁶ On the increased reliance on US blockbuster films in the 1980s, see Stott, *Crossing the Wall*, 240-241. For the viewing dates of films of West German television, see Irmela Schneider and Christian W. Thomsen, eds. *Lexikon der britischen und amerikanischen Spielfilme in den Fernsehprogrammen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1954-1985* (Berlin: Wissenschaftsverlag Volker Spiess GmbH, 1989), *Cabaret* (546), *Front* (250) and *Missing* (318).

and through the late 1980s US films consistently comprised the majority of films shown on West German television with roughly 40-50% of the FRG TV film offering.³⁷

This trend was not limited to West Germany alone, even though it happened earlier there and more pronounced than in other West European countries. Even in countries with more robust film industries, like France and Italy, a very similar development occurred in the 1970s, although delayed by about 5-8 years. By the late 1970s, the domestic market for French films decreased from 75% in the early 1970s to 55% towards the close of the decade. By the 1980s, it further shrank to 35% of films shown in France. American films, by contrast, surged to 45% of market share in France by the late 1970s and captured a dominant position with 55% of market share by the 1980s. By the 1980s, the top ten film lists between West Germany, France and Italy showed a 30-40% overlap.³⁸

While Garncarz argues that value changes were predominantly responsible for these enormous cultural readjustments, economic factors significantly contributed to these rearrangements as well. In West Germany at least, the rise of an increasingly international and Hollywood-dominated film culture in the 1980s was aided by the vastly increased power of US distributing companies who often functioned as gatekeepers to the West German market. As Hans Joachim Meurer highlights, West Germany became the focal point of US major studio companies and their respective distributing networks in Western Europe. This led to a heavily Hollywood-dominated market by the late 1970s and into the 1980s. For example, in 1979 West Germany alone produced 11% of all of Hollywood's feature film export revenue, and by the 1980s a few American distributing companies controlled about 70% of the film market in the FRG. Also very similar to the DEFA, the vast majority of West German films of the late 1970s and 1980s were not profitable and partially financed by a levy imposed on ticket sales in West German theaters. Like its East German neighbor, West German films during these years were to a significant degree subsidized by the mass appeal of US box office hits.³⁹

³⁷ Joseph Garncarz, "Populäres Kino in Deutschland: Internationalisierung einer Filmkultur, 1925-1990 (Habilitationsschrift, 1996), 133 and 152.

³⁸ Ibid., 138-151.

³⁹ Garncarz, "Populäres Kino in Deutschland," 304-338. Meurer, *Cinema and National Identity*, 112-113.

Conclusion

By the mid-1980s, the GDR film policy was a bundle of contradictions. Western, and in the 1980s especially American, import films had become the lifeblood of GDR cinema, yet the resources to buy them were dwindling, which meant that officials in the Central Film Administration were increasingly relegated to purchasing entertainment blockbusters which left only limited funds for other, culturally important film imports. In addition, still vainly chasing the mirage of the socialist cinema which was the ideal of GDR policy makers and deadly afraid of further political turmoil, SED cultural officials burdened, and ultimately suffocated, their own filmmakers with this failed and unpopular vision, which made DEFA increasingly irrelevant to the lives of the East German population. Because an equally restrictive import policy against progressive socialist films of the 1980s, it cut off the last avenue which might have ensured the continued relevancy of some socialist films. All in all, then, GDR officials inadvertently paid for their domestic political stability with the de-facto surrender of their cultural, ideological film vision.

Looking back from the vantage point of the mid-1980s, the potential opportunities of the first GDR Film Week in New York in November of 1975 must have seemed very far removed. At that time, GDR officials had still hoped to crack open the Western market for DEFA films, which in their rosiest view must have appeared like a feasible way forward. Yet in the ten years since those heady days, very few DEFA films had made their way across the wall in the other direction. In the United States, only four GDR films had been distributed in that ten-year period since 1975, whereas Great Britain, France and West Germany had purchased eight films each.⁴⁰

Instead, the cultural reach of an internationalized and heavily Hollywood-dominated film culture had been extended to East Germany by the 1980s. Like in West European countries, only a few—usually American—blockbuster films brought in the vast amount of film revenue. In the GDR in the late 1980s, 7% of new films gathered half of all film viewers in movie theaters. And although the number of overall American films did not increase significantly in the years during the 1980s, their respective audience share became ever larger since they were frequently at the core of the *Millionenfilm*-strategy employed by East German cultural officials. Finally, and probably not surprisingly, the top-rated films in the GDR in the 1980s significantly overlapped with the top-rated films in West Germany, although often with a few years delay. This trend became especially pronounced in the last years of East Germany's existence: in

⁴⁰ Meurer, *Cinema and National Identity*, 128-129.

1987, *Beverly Hills Cop* was the top-rated film in the GDR (it took the second place in the FRG in 1985); one year later, *E.T.* took top billings in East Germany (top-rated film in FRG in 1982) and 1989 *Dirty Dancing* gathered over 5 million viewers in East Germany to take first place (in West Germany, it had dominated the top-ten film list one year earlier).⁴¹

This increasing cultural convergence between the two German film industries—as well as much of the Western European film market—in the 1980s was highlighted by very similar trend lines: the international European film culture of the 1980s was an entertainment-driven and youth-dominated industry which feasted largely on American blockbuster movies. Because West Germany was in the lead of this internationalizing, US-dominated film culture and threw its large and powerful shadow across the wall, it penetrated the GDR’s cultural sphere palpably and deeply. As a consequence, East Germany was sucked into the cinematic cultural vortex of its political archenemy and cultural nemesis. Combined with the internal crises and tensions in the GDR in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these dynamics led to the surrender of the cultural film control on the part of the GDR leadership and the cultural capitulation of their film vision in the face of inexorable and overpowering economic, political and cultural trends.

⁴¹ On the increasing reliance of the blockbuster hits, see Wiedemann, “Wo Bleiben die Kinobesucher?,” 86. The comparison of top-ten films in East and West Germany is based on the tables provided by Meurer, *Cinema and National Identity*, 293-294. For a comparison of the movie audiences and industries in the two Germanys, especially in the 1980s, see also Elizabeth Prommer, *Kinobesuch im Lebenslauf: Eine historische und medienbiographische Studie* (Konstanz: UKV Medien, 1999).