CENSORSHIP AND REVIEW PROCESSES: 
THE CASE OF GÜNTER KUNERT

Carol Anne Costabile-Heming

In 1994 Patricia Herminghouse addressed whether literature in the German Democratic Republic could afford an alternative, genuine Öffentlichkeit and called into question the often-acknowledged role of literature as Ersatzöffentlichkeit, proposing that the censoring processes resulted in a “displacement of public discourse.”¹ In his discussion in this volume, Marc Silberman has problematized the concept of a “socialist public sphere” from a broad socio-cultural context, shedding light on the complexity of the concept—on the intertwining of public and private that occurred (behind the scenes so to speak) as intellectuals and ordinary citizens alike struggled to find a “voice” in a totalitarian society. In light of the controversies that have erupted in the 1990s regarding the extent to which writers, even critical ones, were complicit with the state, David Bathrick has emphasized that we should not forget the “historical contingencies” that governed the writers as well as their readers.² Thus, one cannot ignore the fact that the socialist public sphere did not intend to allow open discussion, in spite of varying definitions of “public sphere.”³ Despite this intent, the totalitarian regime in place in the GDR was not able to obtain absolute control over discourse.⁴ Indeed, the political and cultural climate often forced the party to compromise. Thus, the constellation of the socialist public sphere was not rigid, but elastic. If we examine the intersection of cultural politics and literary production, we can view GDR literature as a system composed of a complex web of interlocking structures. It was precisely the magnitude and complexity of the institutions of power that made the situation of literary production in the GDR unique. Through an analysis of the documentary information that abounds in the Druckgenehmigungsverfahren (authorization to print) and Stasi files, we can investigate simultaneously the hierarchical structure of censoring processes and their interlocking nature. From these documents, we learn that there were two very different visions of the public sphere in the GDR, the public sphere permitted and understood by politics and the open dialogue that the writers struggled to create. Research on the Druckgenehmigungsverfahren highlights the historical contingencies of which Bathrick spoke.
This essay will focus on the production history of texts by the former GDR writer Günter Kunert (*1929), a case study that illustrates the way that official and unofficial censoring procedures influenced the creation of the socialist public sphere in the GDR. Kunert serves as an excellent case study of censoring practices because of his unusual position in GDR literary history. Unlike many of his East German contemporaries, Kunert managed to exert a great deal of control over the direction that his literary career would follow. Early on, he established a profitable working relationship with the West German Hanser publishing house. While the majority of the GDR writers turned over the rights to their publications to East German publishing houses, Kunert retained the ownership of the rights to his texts. The Aufbau Verlag obtained only the rights to those texts published in the GDR and other eastern bloc countries. This business decision prevented the state from interfering with the publication of Kunert’s texts in the West. Although such publications were subject to official scrutiny and the acceptance of royalties from the West violated GDR law, Kunert never paid any fines for his western publications, was never arrested, and was generally granted permission to travel. Because Kunert received treatment not accorded other GDR writers, his case cannot be considered representative for all literary production in the GDR. I will argue, however, that the information available in Kunert’s files does indeed provide us with some insight into the institutions of power that guided the censoring processes in the GDR.

Under the official rubric of Kulturpolitik (cultural politics) the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR successfully managed to establish a type of normative aesthetics for literary and artistic production. Despite all efforts to control discourse, critical texts repeatedly slipped through cracks in the system affording readers a glimpse at some sort of “truth,” a situation that arose according to Herminghouse arose because of the “strategic location [of writers] outside the sphere of mass media, such as television and the press, where content and language were known to be subject to more direct party control.” Thus, prior to 1989, literature was one arena where critical discourse was possible. Documentary evidence has since revealed that writers actively engaged in critical discourse often became targets for the Stasi. As an extension of the State institutions of power, Stasi surveillance could serve to hinder this critical discourse. Yet, Klaus Michael has successfully argued that the clandestine activities of the Stasi also helped to foster this critical discourse.
This is but one example of the elasticity of the supposedly rigid socialist public sphere.

In order to reach any type of audience or “public,” texts and writers had to negotiate various levels of control. The pervasive hierarchical structure of control mechanisms extended from the SED Central Committee through the Ministry of Culture and down to the individual publishing houses. The Ministry of Culture supervised the Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (HV Verlage) [Administrative Authority for Publishing Houses and Book Trade], the regulatory board responsible for extending the authorization to print or Druckgenehmigung. Before a publishing house submitted a text to the HV Verlage for licensing, a series of pre- or internal censoring steps occurred that involved an editorial committee of the publishing house, a house editor or Lektor, and various internal and external reviewers or Gutachter. The review processes that the Stasi employed ran parallel to the predominant censoring processes. As politics and cultural policy often clashed, we can speak of a mixture of official and unofficial procedures at work. Indeed, the activities of inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (IM) [unofficial operatives] and cultural functionaries often overlapped: Many IMs held positions as Lektor, Gutachter, or editors within the publishing houses.

The censorship process followed a programmed series of steps. At its most basic level, authors practiced self-censorship, avoiding entirely those topics they deemed had no promise of publication. When an author chose to offer a text to a publishing house, the second level of censorship began. Each author worked in close cooperation with an editor or Lektor from the publishing house. This editor read the text for any problematic representations or taboo topics, dealing directly with the author. In order to receive the authorization to print, (Druckgenehmigung), each manuscript underwent a series of reviews or Gutachten; at least one internal and one external reader were asked to offer an opinion on the appropriateness of the text for the public and make a recommendation for publication. Final permission to publish any text rested with the HV Verlage. While this organization within the Ministry of Culture usually acted as the last instance of power, particularly difficult texts were often referred to the Central Committee for final approval.

Documents contained in the permissions’ file for Günter Kunert’s Kramen in Fächern (1968) illustrate the licensing procedure (Fig. 1). The first page of the file indicates the plan year, information about the edition, size of the
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Erklärungen:

1) In die obere Hälfte des rechts danebenstehenden Feldes ist die Kurzbezeichnung der Bibliographie und in die untere Hälfte die Sachgruppennummer einzutragen.

Kurzbezeichnungen:
DNB = Deutsche Nationalbibliographie, Reihe A
DBB = Deutsche Biographie, Reihe B
Fbk = Bibliographie der Fachbänder

7) Die Stellungnahme des Verlegers zum Objekt soll enthalten:
   a) Begründung der Herausgabe des Titels
   b) Bemerkungen zum Autor, bei welcher von Lehrer von Ausbildung und von F
   c) Bemerkungen zum Überblick, wo hat er so, welche Werke sind z. B. von ihm bisher überarbeitet worden?
   d) Bemerkungen zu den Inhaltsverzeichnissen, wie vorne, nachher, fremden, fremden zuständig, der Titel unzugänglich? Für welche Schichten?
   e) Rezensionen verschiedenen Meistern über den Titel?

7) Es sind möglichst alle vom Verlag eingeholten Gutachten beizufügen, mindestens aber das von der Verlagsleitung und das eines weiteren Fachgelehrten.

1) Der genaue Papierbedarf ist für den gesamten Werk einzutragen, einschl. Vorsatz, Bezug, Schutzumschlag, aus dem Umschlagkarten, z. B.

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Es sind nur vollständige und druckbreite Manuskripte einzutragen!
Rezessionsberichte für Druckausgabe nicht erforderlich!

Anlagen: 2 Gutachten
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Figure 2: Page two Kramen in Fächern
printing and format for the proposed manuscript. Aufbau Verlag submitted the manuscript on March 1, 1968 and the authorization to print was granted on April 11, 1968—this review process extended over forty-two days. Further, a fee of 50 DM was paid to Dr. Werner Neubert for his services as an outside reviewer. The field for comments was left blank.

A second page shows the paper required for the desired printing. Additional information in this file includes a few handwritten notes and copies of the Gutachten. The information in these reviews serves several functions. First and foremost, they perform the function of literary review, addressing the aesthetic quality of the texts. Secondly, they have a political function, commenting on the acceptability of the point of view expressed for the socialist reading public. Thirdly, they provide historical background information on the author and his works in general, as well as situating the text under discussion into the context of GDR literature.

A comparison of the external (Werner Neubert) and internal reviews (Günter Schubert) indicates that Aufbau was very interested in publishing this manuscript. Closer scrutiny of the reviews reveals, however, that although Neubert and Schubert favored publication, they approached the text in different ways. Before evaluating the literary or aesthetic quality of the submitted manuscript, Neubert questions the admissibility of Kunert’s literary works within the cultural-political framework: “A reviewer of Kunert’s texts faces the task of accounting for the aesthetic-ideological subjectivity of this author, in other words, one must answer the question whether Kunert can assume a particular place in our editorial policy, which is simultaneously cultural policy”.

Thus, Neubert admits that he is no fan of Kunert’s literary works in general, and his subsequent remarks focus more on a political assessment than a cultural one. Neubert considers several texts objectionable, but deems the manuscript worthy of publication if Kunert agrees to remove the questionable texts. Parts of the review read as an attack, with references to Kunert’s pessimism and inability to integrate himself into society. The following paragraph is particularly illuminating:

The author remains true to the ideological-aesthetic positions that he has emphasized in previous publications. His poetic postulations, which are not free of feelings of resignation, are always characterized by a humanistic point of origin and destination. While Kunert’s place may not lie in the thematic, ideological-aesthetic mainstream of socialist literature, his
publication attempts should be judged primarily from the perspective of our literary-political possibilities for cooperation and integration against the main goals of our literature, which unequivocally includes the grounded criticism of his works.\textsuperscript{12}

Neubert takes a two-sided approach to Kunert and his texts that is particularly interesting for our purposes of examining the public sphere. One immediately notices that Kunert’s literary works do not comply with the sanctioned public discourse. At the same time, however, there is a concerted effort to (re-)habilitate Kunert for the GDR’s purposes. Because Kunert was deemed valuable, the parameters within which his texts were measured were somewhat elastic. Indeed, certain elements of Kunert’s biography and personal convictions (such as humanism) are over-emphasized, as is the desire for cooperation. Thus, the review portrays Kunert as someone who needs guidance. The underlying assumption is that if Kunert accepts this guidance, then his discourse will conform to that of the public sphere, thus making his literature useful to the cultural politicians.

In the \textit{Gutachten} by Günter Schubert, Kunert’s editor at Aufbau, we notice a different approach. Unlike Neubert, Schubert reflects immediately on the literary-aesthetic qualities of the manuscript emphasizing the precision of the language, “rich in imagery, but not flowery, full of similies, but not overloaded ... it is definitely influenced by poetic diction.”\textsuperscript{13} While the review does draw attention to Kunert’s morality, “The narrator, Kunert, is a moralizer; he wants to improve. Capitalism, war and fascism have eroded moral and ethical standards,”\textsuperscript{14} Schubert also regrets that Kunert seems to give warnings without offering any concrete solutions. Despite this deficiency, Schubert concludes that, “Kunert’s manuscript has a place in the ensemble of our literature. His humane conviction, his staunchly antifascist and anti-capitalist tendencies, and his exceptional formal qualities speak for a quick printing.”\textsuperscript{15}

These two reviews provide clear examples of the elasticity of the public sphere. Schubert deemed the manuscript worthy of publication; Neubert found the manuscript problematic, but deemed Kunert important to GDR literature. An additional note from Schubert in the file indicates that this manuscript is a serious revision of an earlier submission. An examination of the \textit{Druckgenehmigung} for the original manuscript reveals, however, that Schubert’s assessment had not changed significantly.\textsuperscript{16} While the original manuscript did not receive a \textit{Druckgenehmigung}, the revision did, most likely
because Kunert removed several texts and added others, changing the overall tenor of the manuscript. The political climate of the time is also an important factor. In 1965, central control once again became the main party focus; thus, literary works produced during the time were closely scrutinized. By March of 1968, the political climate was once again more relaxed.17

In the file for Eine handvoll Symmetrie, Horst Eckert also originally recommended the manuscript’s publication. On a separate page Schubert, provides background information on the manuscript—that the manuscript contains texts published in the West, that the publishing house and Kunert worked for approximately a year on the manuscript, that Kunert made certain changes, and that a discussion with representative from HV Verlage was to take place about the manuscript. Despite the positive reviews, two representatives from HV Verlage, Beer and Günther, rejected the manuscript. In addition, a meeting took place during which the editorial board of Aufbau discussed not only this manuscript, but its relationship to Kunert. In a memo recording the proceeding, Beer wrote, “Concerning the continued work with the author it was agreed that Comrade Caspar would conduct a discussion with Günter Kunert shortly under the following conditions: Comrade Kunert will be reminded with acuteness of the seriousness of the position that he has expressed in his latest literary works.”18 Here we can see that even attempted threats were used as a means of squelching critical public discourse.

From his Stasi files Kunert learned that Lektoren from Aufbau reported on his activities, his plans, his political convictions and his spouse. Indeed, both Werner Neubert and Günter Schubert were operatives of the Stasi.19 Thus, the manner in which Neubert ponders Kunert’s appropriateness for the GDR in the aforementioned manuscript review, actually grew out of a larger political context. Scattered throughout Kunert’s Stasi files are sentiments similar to those Neubert expressed. A Stasi report from May 7, 1969, approximately one year following the authorization for Kramen in Fächern, depicts Kunert as “one of the leading writers of the GDR, who for more than ten years has affronted the cultural policy of the SED and the government of the GDR and wants to prevent the establishment of socialist-realist aesthetics in GDR literature.”20 Such sentiments prompted cultural-political confrontations with Kunert. In a “Treffbericht” (meeting report) from August 13, 1970, IM “Martin” [Hermann Kant] wrote: “He [Kant] is of the opinion, that it must be made clear to Kunert, if he is a member of the party, that he has to act according
to party statutes." Such information clearly demonstrates the way that cultural policy and political goals intersected. The threatening tone of the report is disturbing; equally disturbing is the lack of clarity with which “Martin” speaks: no mention is made of how the confrontation with Kunert was to take place, nor who would confront him. Similarly, the actual consequences of the threat are not clearly explained.

While both of these Stasi documents address Kunert as a person and his position in socialist society, other documents illustrate how the Stasi tried to control the effect that Kunert and his texts would have. In December 1976, Kunert was invited to give a reading in Berlin at the Jüdische Gemeinde. His Stasi files indicate that the Stasi was aware of the scheduled reading and decided to take the following measures:

- Only those people who had received an official invitation would be allowed to enter.
- KUNERT would be advised to restrict his comments to his own literary activities and to avoid any other types of explanations.
- Those present were to ask questions pertaining only to Kunert’s activities as a writer.

Since this reading took place shortly after the protest of Wolf Biermann’s expatriation, we can speculate that the state wanted to create a semblance of normalcy in cultural affairs. Thus, the institutions of power did not try to ban the reading, a measure that would only succeed in causing more controversy. Instead, the Stasi undertook measures to ensure that neither Kunert nor the ensuing discussion reflected on anything other than Kunert’s literature.

The Druckgenehmigungsverfahren and cooperative efforts with the Stasi enabled cultural politicians to steer the direction that literary production would take. On the surface, this procedure was established to guarantee that the socialist point of view was interpreted and represented appropriately in literary works. In reality, these procedures made it possible for the state to coordinate, control, and license all aspects of literary production. Cultural activities thereby became part of the planned economy, whereby the state was able to guide the thoughts of its citizens/readers.

The availability of documentation from the Druckgenehmigungsverfahren and the Stasi enables scholars to understand better the complexity of the censorship process. While both instances of power were designed to limit the public sphere, we must also view these censoring procedures as a process, in
Buchlesung des Schriftstellers Günter KUNERT am 11.12.1978 in der "Jüdischen Gemeinde" Berlin

Durch eine zuverlässige inoffizielle Quelle wurde bekannt, daß am 11.12.1978, in der Zeit von 16.00 bis 17.00 Uhr, im Gemeindehaus der "Jüdischen Gemeinde" Berlin unter Leitung ihres Vorsitzenden Dr. KIRCHNER eine Buchlesung mit dem Schriftsteller Günter KUNERT stattfindet.


Es wird mit den Erwartungen von ca. 70 bis 80 Personen gerechnet. Der Gemeindebau hat Plätze für 80 Teilnehmer.

Durch die HA XX/4 wurde inoffiziell darauf Einfluß genommen, daß

- nur solche Personen eingelassen werden, die in Besitz einer von Vorsitzender der "Jüdischen Gemeinde" herausgegebenen Einladung sind,

- KUNERT vor Beginn der Veranstaltung von Vorsitzender darauf hingewiesen wird, lediglich aus seinem schriftstellerischen Schaffen zu berichten und keine anderen Erklärungen abzugeben,

- die anwesenden Personen nur solche Fragen aufwirfen, die die schriftstellerische Tätigkeit des KUNERT betreffen.

Durch die HA XX/4 wird die Veranstaltung unter operativer Kontrolle gehalten und über deren Verlauf berichtet.

Figure 3: Buchlesung
which the boundaries of public discourse were not static. Because of the cooperative relationship that existed between Lektor and author, a certain amount of negotiation took place. Depending on the political climate, writers were often able to expand the public sphere to allow for critical discourse. The information in the Druckgenehmigungs-verfahren serves as a way to explain the historical contingencies that guided literary production in the GDR. Indeed, this documentary information illustrates that binarisms such as “good” and “bad” or “state supporter” and “critic” are too simplistic. The complexity of the Literatursystem points to a vast gray area that still needs further investigation. In offering us the chance to analyze the documentary information, Günter Kunert grants us the opportunity to open up his texts, break down the final barriers to understanding literary production in the GDR, and (re)contextualize the socialist public sphere as it existed in the GDR.

NOTES


3. See for example the contributions in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992).

4. In his essay in this volume, Marc Silberman addresses exactly this point. Bathrick has also discussed this in The Powers of Speech.

5. Scholars have undertaken a project to examine the various power structures that influenced literary production in the former GDR. Because of the numerous layers of influence ranging from writers and their organizations through the party structure, they have opted to speak of a “system” of literary production. See Ulrich Meyszies, “Das Literatursystem der DDR. Kontexte und Voraussetzungen einer neuen Literaturgeschichte,” in Studies in GDR Culture and Society 14/15, eds. Marga Gerber and Roger Woods (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996) 111-126.


8. The distribution of paper was strictly regulated in the GDR. This enabled the censors to deny permission because of a lack of paper or to keep the production run small.

9. Emphasis in original: “In ausgeprägter Weise steht der Gutachter gerade bei Kunert vor der Aufgabe, die ästhetisch-ideologische Subjektivität dieses Autors ins Kalkul zu ziehen, also mit
die [sic] Frage zu beantworten, ob Kunert einen bestimmten Platz in unserer Editionspolitik, die immer zugleich Kulturpolitik ist, einnehmen kann.” Druckgenehmigungsvorgang, Aufbau-Verlag, Ministerium für Kultur. BA Abteilung Potsdam, 2092, Bd. 1968 H-M.


11. “bildreich, aber nicht blumig, voller Vergleiche, aber nicht überladen...Sie ist spürbar beeinflußt von lyrischer Diktion.”

12. “Der Erzähler Kunert ist Moralist, er will bessern. Kapitalismus, Krieg und Faschismus haben die moralischen und ethischen Werte brüchig gemacht.”


14. Indeed, the final sentence reads the same except for the inclusion of the word schnell in the 1968 review.

15. The party would initiate tighter controls following the events of the Prague Spring in 1968.


17. IM “Köhler” and IM “Richard” respectively.

18. “Kunert gehört zu den führenden Schriftstellern der DDR, die seit mehr als 10 Jahren Front gegen die Kulturpolitik der SED und der Regierung der DDR machen und verhindern wollen, daß sich die sozialistisch-realistische Kunst in der Literatur der DDR durchsetzt.”

19. “Er ist der Ansicht, daß hierbei unbedingt erreicht werden muß Kunert klar zu machen, wenn er Mitglied einer Partei ist, sich auch entsprechend dem Statut der Partei als Genosse zu verhalten.”

20. Kunert is half-Jewish. He has always attributed the certain degree of freedom he received in the GDR to this status. He believes that because he and his family suffered under the Nazi terror and because the GDR viewed itself as anti-fascist, the State was therefore more careful in applying repressive tactics.


“KUNERT vor Beginn der Veranstaltung vom Vorstand darauf hingewiesen wird, lediglich aus seinem schriftstellerischen Schaffen zu berichten und keine anderen Erklärungen abzugeben.”

“Die anwesenden Personen nur solche Fragen aufwerfen, die die schriftstellerischen Tätigkeit des Kunert betreffen.”

63
PARAMETERS FOR INSTITUTIONAL AND THEMATIC INTEGRATION OF FILMMAKERS FROM THE FORMER GDR

Barton Byg

My title divides the production conditions for Eastern German filmmakers from the stories they have to tell as a practical device. It is clear however, that those with the most resources most often get their stories onto film, and those stories that are seen to “represent” or reach the widest, most affluent market are seen as the stories worth telling. The particular dynamics of these media market realities are fascinating in contemporary Germany.

I take it as a given that German cinema in the east and west relies on government subsidies to exist, and this has been true since the 1950s. A radical reliance on market demand would have virtually shut down Germany’s domestic film production long ago. The present optimism over recent box office successes, although a potential for future rebuilding, seems more likely to be the exception that proves the rule. Does an increase of the domestic share of the box office from 8.5 percent to 17.7 percent (while U.S. releases remain at an 80 percent share) reflect a trend? The U.S. title of the biggest German hit of recent years gives the answer, “Maybe, maybe not.”

What are the conditions for production for “easterners” in a united German cinema? Investment capital and even, to a lesser degree, the cultural capital in the German east is not in eastern hands. If only about 5 percent of the capital in eastern Germany is held by easterners, this will have the expected effect on the capacity for private investors to support film production. Given the fact that production of even “West German” or “European films” is a risky business, it is obvious that major investment in eastern film production is not forthcoming. As in the west, the source of funding for most films relies on State film boards, the regional television stations and some European and Federal funds (such as the Ministry of the Interior). On the whole these resources are limited, to the point that even multiple major players representing several western European nations can hardly produce a “minor” film in comparison to Hollywood. Since most film subsidies are regional, and one source is derived from box office receipts, the new states also have a smaller share: even with an increase in film attendance recently, their returns for 1995 were only 141 million DM as against 1.042 billion DM in the old states. (Another discrepancy arises from lower
ticket prices, about 2 marks less than the federal average of 9.5 DM.) Even where these funding institutions are available, easterners are at a disadvantage. The project-subsidy model is familiar to the westerners but foreign to easterners, who, in the GDR had a very reliable and centralized funding source, and who still tend to work in groups with a certain continuity and security. As the Oberhausen festival programmer Helmut Krebs put it, “Young filmmakers focus on film schools and TV-projects. For them the aspect of ‘Kollektiv’ (regarding GDR tradition) and social interaction during their work seems to be more important than in the West.” In regards to film funding, Krebs reports that since unification no special measures have been taken to open film production to young artists. “There does not exist a special funding for young people or newcomers.” A system of scrambling for grants and subsidies, as is also familiar for independent cinema in the U.S., rewards those individuals who can establish contacts and a track record with funding agencies; it is not in the interest of such people, however, to share their expertise in working the system. Thus, in a situation where information is power, competition is rewarded over cooperation.

In the initial years after unification, institutional continuity with the GDR faced a number of setbacks. The “Studio Babelsberg,” now managed for the French concern CGE by the West German director Volker Schlöndorff, has severed virtually all ties to its GDR predecessor DEFA with the exception of a fraction of the technical staff. The DEFA documentary studio was also dismantled after an initial attempt at continuity after 1990. Despite this lack of institutional continuity, however, a number of individuals and groups with film experience have become independent producers with an eastern flavor, primarily in Berlin/Brandenburg, Leipzig and Dresden. Subsidies for production by such companies are in decline, however, and not much private capital is available. Because of this, feature film-making has become nearly impossible for most eastern producers, while documentaries are much more common. A substantial 16mm documentary can be produced for about 300,000 DM, of which a producer has to come up with at least fifteen percent in private funds. A feature would cost at least ten times that. Economic trends are also working against the viability of these documentaries, since television stations are now paying less for broadcast licenses—a fifty percent decline since the early 1990s, from 1000 to 500DM per minute. On the other hand, the price to use archival footage for such films has gone up to 2500DM/minute. To paraphrase the
worn out life insurance saying, GDR film culture is literally worth more dead than alive.

If we turn from production to distribution, the U.S. dominates all of Germany, east and west, with few exceptions. Indeed, even the recent box office boom of German productions has relied on marketing through American distributors in Germany. Therefore, most future potential for both production and exhibition of “eastern” films comes from television (as it did for the “New German Cinema” in West Germany). ORB and MDR, broadcasters in Brandenburg and Leipzig, respectively, have cooperated on film productions made by artists with GDR roots, and MDR as the largest broadcaster in the east (serving Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Thüringen) has produced the most material from an explicitly eastern point of view (for example Die Trotzkis (The Trotzkis), Das war die DDR (That Was the GDR) and an eastern episode of Tatort (Scene of the Crime) from 1992, “Ein Fall für Ehrlicher” (A Case for Ehrlicher), the latter two for the ARD.\(^\text{12}\)

It is ironic that those institutions with the most continuity since the GDR were most state-dependent under socialism—radio and television. The struggle for the youth radio program Jugendradio DT64 until 1993 is perhaps a paradigm for what will ensue in film/tv production.\(^\text{13}\) The audience identified with the broadcaster because, despite its strict control by the state, it had become over time an indispensable part of their everyday lives and a functioning example of mass youth culture. In insisting that the state continue to provide this service, the audience was also acting consistently with the philosophy behind the anchoring of the right to public media in the west German Basic Law, which has its origins in the enlightenment concepts of education and the state in the German tradition. This reliance on the state, in the case of radio and television as a source of media is thus not limited to the east. As in the west, television is already and will remain a major source of production support for film in the new states. It also will be involved in the exhibition and distribution of the eastern film legacy, in cooperation with the DEFA Stiftung and the distributor that will continue to work on its behalf, Progress Film-Verleih GmbH.

The material basis for a continuity with the Erbe or “heritage” of GDR filmmaking thus consists of the following:

1. The television stations as exhibitors of previous works and as producers of new ones (ORB, MDR and to a degree NR).
2. The *DEFA-Stiftung* (DEFA Foundation), expected to be created in 1997, which will own the rights to all DEFA films (with few exceptions) as well as distribution rights for the Five New States at least for about 3000 films from Eastern Europe. The DEFA collection contains about 750 features, 2300 documentaries and 750 animation films.\(^{14}\)

3. Progress Film-Verleih GmbH, the successor to the GDR’s film distribution company, privatized only as of July 1 of this year, and to be owned in part by an MDR company and another East German production company that grew out of GDR Television (Pro-Vobis). Income for the work of Progress and the *Stiftung* will come from distributing the films mentioned above, with two thirds going to the work of the foundation to “maintain and restore” the films. It is not out of the question that further productions could also be stimulated if not supported by this work.\(^{15}\)

Small repertory theaters in urban areas of the five new federal states continue to represent GDR film history to steady audiences, as do the programs of the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Film Museum in Potsdam. In a climate of great vulnerability for any film publication, the journal *Film und Fernsehen* survives, partly with help from the Brandenburg government and mostly due to the dedication of its editor Erika Richter. In addition to the group continuity offered by *Verbände* (associations of film artists), the staff, students and traditions of the Film and Television Academy in Babelsberg retain strong connections to the former GDR. Although this source of identity may be weakened when the school moves to new quarters at the Babelsberg Studios Media Complex, it will also represent virtually the only connection that the institution will still have to its forty-seven years of eastern German production. Furthermore, the film school is a major production source for short films by young artists. The Leipzig Film Festival has survived unification, counter to some predictions, and still serves as a venue for eastern productions and, like the former East itself, as a window to eastern Europe and the so-called third world. Other eastern festivals have also continued, and even new ones have emerged.\(^{16}\) At other festivals in western Germany, eastern productions are relatively well represented, particularly documentaries. A major example is the Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, which featured a selection from five years of film subsidy in Saxony this April, and the “Young Cinema Forum” at the Berlin Film Festival, that showed a total of seven “eastern” productions this year out of nineteen German films. The emphasis of
all the above festivals, East and West, has been on documentaries, partly as a reflection of the reality of eastern film production. In the Berlin festival’s list of “New German Films” for 1997, feature films from the East make up a tiny minority of the titles, with the relative success of Helke Misselwitz’s Engelchen (Little Angel, 1996) being the exception to the rule.  

A quite modest but relatively stable basis is thus present for film production in eastern Germany. What kinds of films are likely to be made under these conditions? The central contradiction of eastern German filmmakers is the fact that western Germans and the rest of the world had only a short-lived interest in their life experience—virtually limited to the impulse to escape the GDR that is seen to culminate in the tearing down of the Berlin wall. Outside interest in the pre and post-1989 experience of actual easterners has radically declined, while at the same time, the need for easterners to tell their stories or have their stories represented seems to be increasing.

One example of this is the exhibition of films made in the former GDR that enjoys a significant degree of popularity on the two eastern regional television channels (MDR and ORB) and in small film theaters here and there in the new states. The major campaign of the distributor Progress for 1997-8 is the program “Erzähl mir dein Leben” (Tell me about your life), which explicitly addresses the deficit felt among Easterners in seeing their own history represented in public media. This campaign also connects with the plea of President Roman Herzog in 1995 for east and west Germans to tell each other their biographies in order to reduce prejudices. As a Munich film distributor of DEFA films said: “The DEFA-Films are the eastern biographies.”

Another aspect of the contradiction between representations of recent events by easterners and westerners is the dramatic difference between the film images of the end of the GDR. Western films consistently identify the historic turning point as the opening of the Berlin Wall, with the familiar image of crowds streaming across the border as an obligatory climax. Eastern films have conspicuously lacked such images and even more significantly, have lacked any consensus on or even belief in a single “turning point” that sealed the fate of the GDR and symbolized the rapid process of German unification. On the contrary, eastern German productions beginning with the spontaneous handheld camera work of documentary film students in Leipzig in 1989 stay so close to events and experiences of individuals and groups in local settings that any grand sweep of historical image-making is impossible. Here is thus the
What Remains? East German Culture and the Postwar Public

thematic counterpart to the economic forces in favor of documentary over fiction: in the GDR, especially in the 1980s, a laconic style of documentary film-making developed (partly on the basis of earlier *cinema-verité* approaches abroad) that allowed for a certain degree of political and aesthetic independence from state ideology.

The dynamic under which this approach functioned is quite fascinating: The filmmakers and the audiences for such east German documentaries were always acutely aware that state ideology was present in the production of any image by the state-supported camera. Thus, a commentary by the filmmaker was either redundant (if it were to support the state) or impossible (if it were to tend toward overt critique or opposition). Instead, any critique or opposition had to come from the seemingly “objective” depiction of life in the GDR as it really was. The results were at times simply stunning: aesthetically sophisticated films that investigate the irreducible gap between personal experience and public history, and the contradictions of the film medium itself in speaking for and to the “subjects” of history in a socialist state.

The absence of a state as the foil for this approach has radically altered its effect but it is nonetheless both aesthetically powerful and telling in the post-unification context. Numerous directors who had established careers prior to 1989 and some who were just leaving film school at the time have continued to make the small-scale, down-to-earth portrait film the staple of their output. Examples of landscape and workplace documentarists include Volker Koepp (*Wismut* and *Wittstock, Wittstock*, 1997), Jürgen Böttcher (*Die Mauer* and *Martha*), and the continuation of Barbara and Winfried Junge’s long-term documentary project on the children of Golzow. This project, which predated that of Michael Apted in Great Britain (*Seven Ups*, etc.) and is more comprehensive, continues with this year’s *Da habt ihr mein leben—Marieluise, Kind von Golzow* (There you have my life—Marieluise, a child of Golzow), 1996. Somewhat younger directors have taken a similar approach, such as Gerd Kroske’s *Voksal: Bahnhof Brest* (Brest Railway Station), 1994, and the series of land and portrait studies by Andreas Voigt *Leipzig im Herbst*, (Leipzig in Autumn) 1989; *Letztes Jahr Titanik* (Last Year Titanic), 1990; *Grenzland: eine Reise* (Border Land: A Journey), 1992; *Ostpreussenland* (East Prussia Land), 1995; *Mr. Beerman, Life, Dreams and Death* (1995). Landscape films with some similarities to the understatement of Böttcher’s work include Andreas Kleinert’s *Verlorene Landschaft* (Lost Landscape)
and Eduard Schreiber’s bitter film evocation of the trash-heap of history, *Lange nach der Schlacht* (Long after the Battle, 1995). 22

Ironically, the lack of an authorial commentary now seems disturbing rather than liberating: The long documentation of the landscapes left behind by major socialist industries, and the workers who still are active in this “afterlife” of socialism still refuse to echo the presumed ideology of progress and meaning. Instead they leave it up to the audience to construct this meaning. On the one hand, as implicit in the GDR, this could be a quiet suggestion of political activism toward change—to give some kind of direction to the chaotic events depicted. On the other hand, the most likely effect seems to be to cement the Eastern group identity, as on based in part on loss of *Heimat*.

The problematic effect of the western production *Beruf Neonazi* (Profession Neo-Nazi), which was eventually withdrawn from distribution in some areas, is present in the neutral presentation of east German youth in such films as Thomas Heise’s *Stau—Jetzt geht’s los* (Now it’s boiling over, 1992) and Voigt’s *Glaube, Liebe, Hoffnung* (Faith, Charity, Hope, 1994). Whereas audiences could have seen such revelations of violent and chauvinistic tendencies as a challenge to the state’s claims of socialist progress before 1989. Since 1989, audiences are disturbed by the filmmaker’s same refusal to take a position vis-à-vis the views expressed by the interviewees. Thus, when a skinhead asserts in Heise’s film, “We’re not violent, the system we live in is,” the filmmaker offers no argument but lets the rationalization stand as the film’s last word.

The depiction of former GDR citizens as victims or as dangerous, non-integrated elements in society brings me to the last question of my presentation: What kind of stories from the east are of interest to the rest of the world and why? Contrary to the tendencies toward small stories and a micro-history from the eastern point of view, the western view does still seem to need the image of a monolithic socialism as a foil. This does indeed ironically perpetuate the state domination against which people struggled while the GDR existed. 23 Although it is ironic that the GDR appears more attractive now that it has vanished, in terms of national narratives and their representation in film fiction, this phenomenon is quite natural. To the extent that the GDR stands for an archaic and repressed part of the German character and now part of the German past, it shares much of the mythical force for popular culture found in representations of transgression, otherness, the lost mythical past, etc. In this
context, it is not surprising that the GDR or at least its working-class identity are connected in popular culture to minorities of one kind or another—especially blacks.

If one abstracts for a moment from the depiction of the GDR as a culture to the most transgressive image it has produced in recent years: the neo-Nazi skinhead, the connection to U.S. views of minorities becomes clear. Despite liberal sympathies regarding their victimization, young male gang members in the U.S. (mainly, but not only from minority groups) are perhaps the deepest object of fear for white mainstream media audiences. Although there are minority gangs in Germany, the parallel taboo group seems to be unemployed white working class youth, especially in the context of the East. Here, the troubling and obvious presence of racism and anti-Semitism is difficult but important to place into the political context. As Sandy Close has written regarding white youth in the U.S., “Yes, racial and ethnic friction is there—ask any high school student. But they’re insignificant compared with the friction one finds in one’s own family. The deepest anger of the skinhead, the anger of militia members, is not at blacks or immigrants. It’s at the white political class, the white figure of authority, their father or mother, for abandoning them. They have wound up as “alones” in America at a time when the worst position to be in is an alone.”

The role of blacks as fantasy figures of transgressiveness and freedom from the deadly constraints of modern industrial society has been well researched. Stallybrass and White also connect the exotic and erotic fantasies of white men at the peak of colonialism with an irresistible attraction toward servant women. A connection between former GDR citizens and such constructions of the “exotic” are present in numerous works—from comments by individuals in documentary interviews (Former East/Former West, by Shelly Silver, Heise’s Stau, etc.) to symbolic characterizations connecting blacks with the east in Keiner liebt mich (Nobody Loves Me), by Doris Dörrie, Herzsprung (Helke Misselwitz), and even indirectly in Andreas Dresen’s Mein unbekannter Ehemann (My Unknown Husband) and Wolfgang Menge’s television series Motzki.

Because the GDR has no continuing history and because its past is potentially connected to Germans as victims rather than as Nazis or collaborators, it can represent an innocent childhood to post-unification “adult” Germans. As such, the representation of the GDR as “other” (an Other within the self) is parallel to the otherness encoded in romanticized images of women,
people of color, homosexuals and lesbians, and all other “Others” who are seen as separate from the dominant culture. The Turkish/German writer Zafer Senoçak has invoked a similar dynamic in his essay about the Turkish child he once was, but who never grew up. His German self is the adult, the Turkish one is the child. This perpetual childhood state as a defiance against the demands of German adulthood is at once a Romantic utopia and a stereotypical trap.

To the extent that easterners conveniently supply images of childlike innocence or transgressive, dangerous “otherness” to unified German culture, they will lack the power and influence that comes with adult responsibility for the future of the country and secures their control over their own images.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the following people who generously provided me with information for this essay: Helmut Krebs, Sigrid Lange, Helke Misselwitz, Erika Richter, Andrea Rinke, Klaus Schmutzer, and Hiltrud Schulz. For statistics, see Wolfgang Börnsen, “Deutscher Film im Aufwind. Der Berichterstatter der CDU/CSU-Bundestagsfraktion für Filmwirtschaft erklärt,” 5.6.1996 (www.cducsu.bundestag.de).

2. Der bewegte Mann, written and directed by Sönke Wortmann, nearly doubled the box office receipts of the most successful films of the early 1990s by selling some 6.5 million tickets in 1994 and thus accounted for a small box office boom on its own (“FFA intern,” www.movieline.de).

3. In looking for continuity within the east and reception by the west, I am concentrating on film production in the “major” and “independent” categories, which require a certain degree of production backing and distribution. On the more limited realm of underground (especially super-8) filmmaking and video, see the following, respectively: Karin Fritzsche, Claus Löser, eds., Gegenbilder. Filmische Subversion in der DDR 1976-1989 (Berlin: Janus Press, 1996); Uta Becher, “So schön kann Video sein. DDR-Bürger entdecken einen neuen Medienmarkt,” Medien der Ex-DDR in der Wende, Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft 40 (Berlin: Vistas, 1991): 100 - 113.

4. There are differences in the forms of the film offices and the stages of production they support. For an overview, see Lydia Trotz, Filmförderung in den neuen Bundesländern, Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft 48 (Berlin: Vistas, 1996), 41 - 58.

5. The European Union’s Garantiefond for 1996 amounted to only 310 million ECU (Börnsen). 1996 subsidies from the Filmboard Brandenburg were only 15.3 million DM spread over 56 projects (Filmboard Berlin-Brandenburg homepage, www.filmboard.de).

6. “FFA intern.”

7. The Filmboard Berlin-Brandenburg, with its subsidy of “packages” of films (Paketförderung), seems to have the most continuity with the GDR’s personal and production relationships.
10. Klaus Schmutzer, film producer, À Jour Film, personal communication with the author.
11. Schmutzer.
15. Trotz, 30.
18. Schuler: “1990 kaufte der WDR für die Dritten Programme der ARD noch acht Filme aus dem Giftschrank der Defa... Als die Sender im vergangenen Jahr 100 Jahre Filmgeschichte feierten, kam die Defa so gut wie gar nicht vor.”
20. The two films Das Versprechen (The Promise) and Nikolaikirche (Nikolai Church), which may well turn out to be the only films to depict a sweeping narrative culminating in 1989, typify the differences between east and west in content, production and distribution. Each film was written and directed by prominent figures, East and West: The Promise was directed by Margarethe von Trotta and co-authored with Peter Schneider. Nikolaikirche was directed by the GDR’s most prominent director, Frank Beyer, and written by Erich Loest, based on his own novel. The Promise uses a melodramatic love story to trace the high points of east/west separation, culminating in the reunification of a nuclear family at the Berlin Wall as it opens on November 9. Nikolaikirche uses similar conventions of narrative cinema, but traces a much broader and more differentiated spectrum of characters. Here, instead of a climax at the opening of the Wall, the film’s turning point is reached when the state security forces realize they are not able to use weapons against thousands of Leipzig demonstrators holding candles. Rather than focus on crowd’s streaming into West Berlin, Beyer juxtaposes the masses of candles with the representatives of state power hiding in their offices and turning out all the lights. The differing sources of funding are similarly revealing: The Promise is a German-French-Swiss co-production with financing from major film producers, television stations, and the European Union; Nikolaikirche relied on multiple funding sources as well, but it was mainly a domestic “made-for-television movie,” broadcast in two parts. In the U.S., The Promise had commercial distribution on film and video; Nikolaikirche...
Church is only available through German cultural organizations, courtesy of InterNationes (Bonn).

21. As a pendant to this, there seems to be a resurgence of local cabarets as a specific regional response to the globalizing impact of unification and the dominance of commercial media imports. Cf. Rinke 241.

22. As an aside, the development of characters on television shows a similar trend, according to Andrea Rinke. Initially, east/west stereotypes were quite crass in the shadow of the grand narrative of unification and conflicting identities (particularly competing resentments east and west). But as Rinke has written, by 1992 a Tatort episode produced in the East could “represent a distinctly East German work ethos, a way of life which had its roots in the close-knit small communities of the GDR, with no strict division between colleagues and friends; between people’s roles in their work or private environment.” Cf. Rinke 248.

23. Cf. Marc Silberman’s citation of Monika Maron in this volume.


26. Cabaret sketches in the east also have depicted easterners as “animals” or “aliens from another planet.” Cf. Rinke, 242.