



Between '(N)Ostalgie' and Ideology – New Perspectives on DEFA Children's Film

Ebert, S., & Kümmerling-Meibauer, B. (Eds.). (2021). *Von Pionieren und Piraten. Der DEFA-Kinderfilm in seinen kulturhistorischen, filmästhetischen und ideologischen Dimensionen*. Universitätsverlag Winter.

Abstract:

This review article discusses the volume *Von Pionieren und Piraten. Der DEFA-Kinderfilm in seinen kulturhistorischen, filmästhetischen und ideologischen Dimensionen* [Of Pioneers and Pirates: DEFA Children's Film in Its Cultural-Historical, Film-Aesthetic, and Ideological Dimensions], edited by Steffi Ebert and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2021). The author of the paper situates the volume in the context of research on children's and young adult media in the state-controlled environment of the German Democratic Republic and highlights the political, ideological, social, and cultural mechanisms of the production and reception of children's films in the GDR. She raises questions about the relationship between society, cultural politics, and children's film and calls for a broad interdisciplinary approach to the complex phenomenon of DEFA [Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft] children's film that includes historical, political, socio-cultural, theoretical, as well as film-didactic aspects. From this perspective, DEFA children's film not only becomes an important document of everyday life in the GDR, but also inscribes itself in the current discourses on remembering and forgetting.

Key words:

children's film, children's and young adult media, DEFA, film aesthetics, ideology and censorship in the GDR, Ostalgie

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Między „(n)ostalgią” i ideologią – nowe spojrzenia na film dziecięcy produkcji DEFA

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Abstrakt:

Artykuł recenzyjny omawia tom *Von Pionieren und Piraten. Der DEFA-Kinderfilm in seinen kulturhistorischen, filmästhetischen und ideologischen Dimensionen* [Pionierzy i Piraci. Film dziecięcy DEFA w jego kulturowo-historycznym, filmowo-estetycznym i ideologicznym wymiarze] pod redakcją Steffi Ebert i Bettiny Kümmerling-Meibauer (2021). Autorka artykułu sytuuje tom w kontekście badań nad mediami dziecięcymi i młodzieżowymi w kontrolowanym przez państwo środowisku NRD oraz zwraca uwagę na polityczne, ideologiczne, społeczne i kulturowe mechanizmy produkcji i recepcji filmów dla dzieci w NRD. Zadaje pytania o relacje między społeczeństwem i polityką kulturalną a filmem dziecięcym i apeluje o szerokie, interdyscyplinarne podejście do złożonego zjawiska filmu dziecięcego produkcji DEFA [Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft], które obejmuje aspekty historyczne, polityczne, kulturowo-socjologiczne, medialne i dydaktyczne. Z tej perspektywy film dziecięcy DEFA jawi się nie tylko jako ważny dokument życia codziennego w NRD, lecz także jako fenomen ściśle powiązany z aktualnymi dyskursami na temat zapamiętywania i zapominania.

Słowa kluczowe:

film dziecięcy, media dla dzieci i młodzieży, DEFA, estetyka filmu, ideologia i cenzura w NRD, nostalgia

The volume *Von Pionieren und Piraten. Der DEFA-Kinderfilm in seinen kulturhistorischen, filmästhetischen und ideologischen Dimensionen* [Of Pioneers and Pirates: DEFA Children's Film in Its Cultural-Historical, Film-Aesthetic, and Ideological Dimensions] attempts to take an in-depth and up-to-date look at DEFA [Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft] children's and young adult films and their significance from today's perspective. It was published in the *Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur/Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature* series, edited by Maren Conrad, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Anja Müller, and Astrid Surmatz, which publishes original studies on literature or media for children and young adults and seeks to unite a variety of approaches from literary and cultural studies and historically and theoretically informed research. The volume's editors are Steffi Ebert and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2021), who are recognised scholars in the field of children's and young adult literature.

The book touches on an important research topic that is still relevant today. DEFA children's films not only played an important role in the GDR, in terms of their themes and characters, but they are also crucial references for the history of the 20th-century ideas and important testimonies of a bygone era. For today's young audience, the films are essential for their understanding of history, and for sociologists and film sociologists, they can be important research sources. Last but not least, DEFA productions, whether adaptations of fairy tales or everyday stories, are part of Germany's cultural memory, and particularly of the collective identity of East Germans (Morsbach, 2014, p. 206). They gained prominence especially during the ostalgia [Ostalgie] wave in the early 1990s (Heiduschke, 2006, p. 3), but in addition to purely nostalgic values, DEFA films offer the children and grandchildren an insight into the biographies of their parents and grandparents and are therefore important documents of everyday life in the GDR (Felsmann, 2020) and part of the current discourses on remembering and forgetting (Assmann, 2013/2016, pp. 10–35).

The volume does not represent a new field of research, as DEFA children's film was examined quite early from different angles in the GDR in order to explore the dramaturgical and pedagogical possibilities of a socialist film art for children.¹ However, it was the establishment of the DEFA Foundation in 1998 that paved the way for its multifaceted collection and research activities, which continue to this day.² Recent years have seen growing academic interest in DEFA children's films, especially in the United States. One important reason for this is the establishment of the DEFA Film Library by Barton Byg at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1993, which has made the films widely available to North American audiences in order to encourage popular and scholarly interest in East German film heritage. *Von Pionieren und Piraten...* inscribes itself in DEFA's history of research and is for the most part based on the materials assembled by the DEFA Foundation. The contributions date back to the conference of the same name, which was held in February 2019 at the Media Research Institute of the University of Halle and brought together

¹ A first bibliography on this early research, by Hellmuth Häntzsche, was published in 1962, another, by Joachim Giera, followed in 1986. However, it should be noted that in West Germany only a few publications were dedicated to East German children's films (Wolf, 1969).

² Worth mentioning here is the encyclopaedia of DEFA feature films published by Franz-Burghard Habel (2000). The growing recognition of children's films is also evidenced by the two handbooks, *Palgrave Handbook of Children's Film and Television*, edited by Casie Hermansson and Janet Zepernick (2019), and *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Film*, edited by Noel Brown (2022).

researchers from different theoretical backgrounds and disciplines.³ Including the editors' introduction, the volume contains 14 papers by just as many authors – from prominent literary and media scholars and media didactics, mainly from Germany (one contributor was from the USA) through representatives of other disciplines (e.g. ethnology) to those who work in non-university cultural fields. The book thus offers an interdisciplinary approach, as practised in North American studies on DEFA film,⁴ which includes cultural-historical, film-aesthetic as well as ideological aspects.

On the one hand, the volume involves cultural and historical analyses of individual DEFA children's films, on the other hand, it seeks to take a closer look at the potential of the films for the current discussion about film production for children – not only in terms of its aesthetics, choice of subject, ideological orientation or instrumentalisation, but also its production and distribution settings. The case studies of the volume illustrate the social and political control of DEFA children's film production (Ebert, 2021, p. 97), and likewise, they present the films as the result of collaborative artistic work that is determined by economic and technical conditions, aesthetic and stylistic preferences as well as cultural and political contexts (p. 96). In doing so, the contributions highlight the relationship between society, cultural production, and film, offering insights both in the "socialist mode of production" (Szczepanik, 2013, p. 113) and the instrumentalisation of children's films as a tool of education (Berghahn, 2005, p. 20). The definition of DEFA children's film is deliberately very broad and encompasses fictional films with children as an important but not exclusive target audience. However, the volume avoids the question of how to define children's films, which is still a controversial issue in research (Blessing, 2014, 2016; Ebert, 2018; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2012, 2013).

The chapters cover a wide range of topics, theoretical questions, and film genres. While two contributions address fairy-tale film, the other essays deal with different film genres: puppet film, fantastic film, contemporary film, and film series. The children's films discussed in the volume come from different historical periods, from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s. The contributions examine the relationship of DEFA films to films of the Weimar Republic as well as the influence of contemporary concepts of childhood on the GDR children's film, with a focus on both the post-war period and 'arrival in everyday life' [*Ankunft im Alltag*], as well as the political, social, and cultural changes in the

³ A detailed discussion of the conference can be found in Felsmann (2019, pp. 55–60).

⁴ One example is the East German Summer Film Institutes, organised by the DEFA Film Library, which promote interdisciplinary, innovative thinking about East German film.

GDR as reflected in children's films. The volume pays particular attention to the often-hidden criticism of the social circumstances of film production in the GDR. The film *Insel der Schwäne* [Island of Swans] by Herrmann Zschoche (1982) illustrates the important role of censorship in the publishing practice of the GDR, whereas *Daniel und der Weltmeister* [Daniel and the World Champion] by Ingrid Meyer (1963) reflects the propaganda and ideological instrumentalisation of children's films in the GDR. This resonates with current discussions about the relationship between information and propaganda, the effects of which are also evident in children's media. The essays examine DEFA children's films from the perspective of film and media studies, film aesthetics, and the media theory of remediation. In terms of media history, the book's focus is on the question of the production circumstances, cinematic concepts, and technical means and possibilities. From cultural-historical perspective, the papers explore the potential of films to better understand people and their environment, investigating whether films can serve as historical documents, which is one of the core questions of research on DEFA films. As Barton Byg (2002) points out: "A fundamental inadequacy of film criticism since 1989 has been the fact that the films of DEFA are primarily valued as evidence of the history of the GDR" (p. 1). The dominant view, which reduces DEFA films to documents 'explaining' the GDR, is therefore subject to criticism and replaced by the concept of cultural memory (Heiduschke, 2006; Morsbach, 2014, p. 205; Wagner, 2014). This comes into play in the contributions that adopt film-didactic approaches to examine the reception of children's films from a socio-cultural viewpoint and discuss to what extent DEFA children's film can be part of the children's historical education. Other theoretical approaches deal with gender representations in DEFA children's films.⁵ Although this volume does not provide a coherent and complete picture, the authors attempt to summarise existing approaches to DEFA children's films and its aspects.

The chapters revolve around four thematic areas, corresponding to the volume's four sections: changing images of childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, the political framework of DEFA films for children between cultural education and ideology, media transformations (literary film adaptations, media networks), and media reception. The first three contributions demonstrate that the image of childhood⁶ in early DEFA children's films is grounded in a variety

⁵ DEFA films have recently been examined from a gender studies perspective (Stewart, 2018; Wrage, 2018).

⁶ For the term 'image of childhood' [*Kindheitsbild*, *Kindheitskonzept*], see Verena Stürmer (2014, pp. 15–34).

of traditions and has many political and ideological undertones. Using Gerhard Lamprecht's film *Irgendwo in Berlin* [Somewhere in Berlin] (1946) as an example, Werner C. Barg (2021) illustrates the influence of Weimar cinema on early DEFA children's films and thus draws a traditional line from the interwar period to the 'reconstruction film' of the 1940s and 1950s. In her case study of Heiner Carow's *Sheriff Teddy* (1957), Sonja E. Klocke (2021) emphasises how precisely the film portrays the social situation of the time, especially that of children, and points out that although Carow's film aims at cultural education and delivers an aesthetic interpretation of reality, the intention to bring the film in line with prevailing norms is as explicit as in "comparable Western products" (p. 67).⁷ Christian Rüdiger (2021) deals with Wolfgang Schleif's *Die Störenfriede* [The Troublemakers] (1953), commonly referred to as the first DEFA children's film, and examines the ideal of socialist community that is conveyed on an affective level. He analyses the rhetoric of affect based on music and sound design, thus highlighting an aspect of DEFA children's films that has been the focus of research in recent years (Felsmann, 2013; Powell, 2016).⁸

Even after 1960, ideological issues played an important role in the production of children's films as they were adapted to new political conditions. In her analysis of the films *Die dicke Tilla* [Fat Tilla] (1981) and *Moritz in der Litfaßsäule* [Moritz in the Advertising Column] (1983), Steffi Ebert (2021) examines the extent to which national and individual images of childhood interact and even contradict each other. She emphasises the appropriation of terms such as child, childhood, and family by state institutional policies from the beginning of the GDR and demonstrates that both films contrast with the official concepts of the GDR child, which promoted children's personal responsibility, independence, and cognitive abilities as well as a fundamental harmony between generations and between family and society (p. 101). The social reality depicted in the films is far removed from any government guidelines. Ebert considers this multi-layered interpretation of everyday life to be the most important value of the children's films she analyses (p. 111). Another attempt to revisit DEFA children's films is made by Sebastian Schmideler (2021), who questions the stereotypical West German view of East German film productions. His methodical

⁷ All translations, if not otherwise indicated, are made by the author of the paper – Beate Sommerfeld.

⁸ Although in the introduction to the recent anthology on DEFA cinema, *Re-Imagining DEFA: East German Cinema in its National and Transnational Context*, the editors, Séan Allan and Sebastian Heiduschke (2016), claim that film music is "surely one of the most underexplored areas in DEFA research" (p. 13).

evaluation deals with the popular TV series *Spuk im Hochhaus* [The Haunted Skyscraper] (1981–1982) and focuses on the depiction of everyday family life and related gender roles as well as images of childhood, highlighting the critical examination of the social reality of the GDR in DEFA film (see also Richter, 2016, p. 96). In particular, he emphasises the deconstruction of the ideal of the socialist collective, the ethos of the socialist performance, and belief in progress and technology (Schmideler, 2021, p. 127). As the author argues, the series, which does not conceal the problems of socialist everyday life and deals with deviations from the socialist norm using elements of children's fantasy literature, offers an aesthetic alternative to the West German view of East German life in the 1980s. Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer (2021) compare the picture book *Daniel und der Weltmeister* [Daniel and the World Champion] (1962) with the film of the same title (1963) in order to explore the complex relationship between ideology and propaganda. The authors demonstrate that GDR propaganda portrayed the athlete Täve Schur as a proletarian hero in order to encourage its citizens to work hard and emphasise the importance of the collective (p. 153). Although the picture book seeks to socialise its readers into the rules of conduct required by society and is therefore engaged in propaganda, the underlying ideology is, however, not tied to any specific political model. The propaganda component is more present in the film than in the book, since it promotes socialism and the GDR.

The following chapters also apply the concept of remediation to DEFA productions and focus on one of the relevant aspects of DEFA children's films that the volume examines: their intertextual and intermedial dimensions. Many DEFA films are literary adaptations (see also McCallum, 2017); the original versions had to be adapted not only to the film medium, but also to the requirements of the censorship, especially with regard to the postulates of socialist realism. This is especially true of DEFA fairy-tale film. As Qinna Shenn (2015) points out, DEFA film attempted to implement a new fairy tale tradition in line with socialist values and political demands. Multiple DEFA fairy-tale films refer to *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [Children's and Household Tales] by the Grimm brothers by transferring them into the political context of the GDR (Schwabe, 2016). Michael Brodski (2021) examines the ways Grimms' fairy tales were reshaped to meet the cultural and political demands of state institutions, highlighting the "media control" (Fiedler, 2014) practised in the GDR. Henrike Hahn (2021) also makes a comparison between the literary original and the film adaptation, focusing on the difficult search for identity in Benno Pludra's young adult novel *Insel der Schwäne* [Island of Swans] (1980), which was not preserved in the film due to censorship interventions. Pludra's

open-ended story does not correspond to a typical socialist development novel, as the protagonist does not become a socialist character. The film administration forced some positive changes in Zschoche's adaptation of the novel, especially at the end, so that the film reduces the complexity of the characters depicted by Pludra. These contributions reveal the mechanisms that governed the DEFA film production and raise probing questions about the workings of DEFA film and its distributed agency. The paper by Jeanette Toussaint and Ralf Forster (2021) examines a successful media network centred around the popular character BUMMI and investigates the transfer of this character from a children's magazine to cinema and television. However, the authors' opinion that the films avoid direct ideologisation and instead present "the modern achievements of construction," which makes them "suitable for today's use" (p. 218), seems problematic.

The following three contributions address the reception of DEFA children's films. Andy Räder (2021), using archival materials, presents the film experience of children in the GDR between 1961 and 1965, while Marie Christin Krämer (2021) examines the cult status of the fairy-tale film *Drei Haselnüsse für Aschenbrödel* [Three Hazelnuts for Cinderella] by Václav Vorlíček (1972) from the perspective of media culture and highlights the role of nostalgia and multimedia marketing of the film. In the film adaptation, Cinderella appears as an androgynous character, which "brings a modern, more complex, and ambiguous image of women into play" (p. 250). The cinematic remediation of the fairy tale thus falls between nostalgia and renegotiation of gender attributions and allows for both affirmative and critical readings reinforced by fan practices⁹ that accompanied the broadcast of the film on West German television. Krämer's contribution demonstrates the potential of a media culture approach that goes beyond the film itself and takes into account the specifics of the genre, production contexts, intermedial chains of circulation, the paratextual framing of reception, and film appropriation (p. 261). Carolin Führer (2021), finally, discusses the role that DEFA children's film could play in school film didactics, and proposes an integrated approach from the perspective of memory culture and film aesthetics with a focus on the child audience. As she notes, historical films in school education often serve to come to terms with the past, without considering the aesthetic quality of films and the complexity of remembering on an individual and social level, which is subject to changing (discursive)

⁹ Allan and Heiduschke (2016, p. 16) stress the importance of fan movements around DEFA films, one of the most active of which is centred on Vorlíček's *Drei Haselnüsse für Aschenbrödel*.

conditions (p. 268). Therefore, history lessons should acknowledge emotionally moving film images with their very own aesthetics and take a closer look at how children and young adults who are socialised by media experience these film productions emotionally and aesthetically.¹⁰ By filtering historical events through children's eyes, films offer emotional and aesthetic ways of processing history that go beyond the norms of the official discourse on memory culture (p. 277). Informed by current discourses, Führer's film didactics offers promising perspectives, which nevertheless lack the distinction between the films' affective strategies and their emotional processing by the child audience.

This last part of the volume is supplemented by an interview with Walter Beck. In it, Steffi Ebert and Andy Räder (2021) interrogate one of DEFA directors, who devoted his work almost exclusively to children's dramas – and continues to do so by means of archival memory work. From a practitioner's point of view, Beck emphasises the social purpose of socialist education in the GDR – a “wishful thinking” more or less realised by pedagogical means (p. 294) – and highlights the dilemmas of children's filmmakers who refused to view film solely as an instrument of education (p. 294). In addition to the archival work of DEFA, this kind of contemporary testimony can be an important source of media archeology, as it goes beyond a purely material-related approach, adding an individual, biographical, intellectual, and evaluative dimension. The thirty-year process of coming to terms with DEFA's history may thus also be shaped by subjective memories, since many of these witnesses conform to the canonised culture of remembrance and speak out publicly (p. 22). Beck's didactic approach informed by social discourse on historiography and memory as well as his insider knowledge seem valuable, even if a fundamental criticism of the functioning of DEFA film in the GDR can hardly be expected from its former employees. This critical reflection is also absent in the other papers collected in the volume, which barely question the role of DEFA as such in the state system of the former German Democratic Republic.

Overall, the volume *Von Pionieren und Piraten...* makes an important contribution to research on DEFA children's films. It calls attention to the political, ideology-driven, social, and cultural mechanisms of the production and reception of children's films in a state-controlled artistic environment. Based on the archival work of the DEFA Foundation, the volume goes far beyond a documentary claim and proposes new readings of DEFA film from the perspective of today's debates and discourses. Both the theoretical framework and case studies

¹⁰ Bodo von Borries (2016) addresses the importance of emotional and aesthetic components of historical education.

proposed in the volume makes it a valuable reading for those interested in history, media studies, and media culture history, demonstrating once again that such a complex research field as DEFA children's film requires a broad interdisciplinary approach. The attempt to bring together cultural, historical, aesthetic, film, and ideological aspects of DEFA's productions for children is an ambitious undertaking, the execution of which – despite the careful arrangement of the contributions and an in-depth and instructive introduction – sometimes leaves me with an impression of disparity. Apparently, the editors attempt to depict a balanced picture of DEFA children's film that goes beyond a simple confirmation “that the GDR was a dictatorship producing only political art meant to prop up the regime” (Byg, 2002, p. 1) or the ideas nurtured in the ‘West’ to bring DEFA films into line with the GDR official concepts and policies. The essays collected in the volume demonstrate that films of East Germany's state-owned film company DEFA, which always bore the stigma of being permeated with propaganda, represent a valuable artistic film heritage when it comes to feature and animated films, fairy tales as well as documentaries. However, after decades of the DEFA Foundation's existence and intensive research on DEFA film legacy in Europe and the United States, I doubt whether such proof is actually needed.

In addition, the desire for a new, updated look at DEFA productions is only partially fulfilled. The volume neglects the question, what it means to re-evaluate DEFA film in a post-unification context and fails to take advantage of the new historical perspective that German reunification requires with regard to both the present and the past (Byg, 2002, p. 1). When it comes to DEFA's “afterlife” (Heiduschke, 2006) in reunified Germany, the phenomenon of “(N)Ostalgie” (Berdahl, 1999, p. 194) should be examined in depth, in order to learn the reasons for the new popularity of GDR children's films since the 1990s, the interests they serve, and the narratives of the past they offer. Moreover, Anglo-American studies on DEFA film should be considered more broadly. Going beyond the German realm and drawing a clearer parallel with the Anglo-American studies on DEFA film would benefit the volume under review. Given the wide range of issues addressed, an index of topics and persons would be beneficial for further research on this subject.

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