

# The Sandman who came in from the cold: GDR cinema in cultural exchanges with Sweden

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## **Abstract**

This essay uses the example of GDR film export to Sweden to examine specific objectives, internal planning, and results of GDR cultural policy in Sweden. The study is based on articles in Swedish daily press and technical journals and on internal documents of the East German bureaucracy. These case studies concentrate on the year 1970, the height of GDR cultural work in Sweden. The essay will first examine the situation in the Swedish commercial film market, while the last two sections will both focus on several special events held in the film club of the Swedish Film Institute (SFI).

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Prior to the GDR's international recognition, foreign cultural policy was an important means of overcoming its diplomatic isolation outside the Soviet camp. Even in its northern neighbour Sweden, the GDR used cultural activity to improve its reputation and campaign for the opening of diplomatic relations.<sup>1</sup> Cultural relations were used as part of a strategic public diplomacy approach (Mannheim), and were primarily aimed at ensuring optimized nation marketing (Langer).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, certain aspects of GDR cultural life were not only instrumentalized by the state's own leadership, but were also to a considerable extent received by the Swedish public as a political issue; that is, as events of political significance and occasions for political reflection.

Academic studies first focused on the GDR's relationship with northern Europe, and on cultural contacts in particular, in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>3</sup> This interest has revived in recent years.<sup>4</sup> However,

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- 1 See Linderoth, Andreas: *Kampen för erkännande. DDR:s utrikespolitik gentemot Sverige 1949–1972*. Lund 2002, 18.
  - 2 See Mannheim, Jaron B.: *'Strategic Public Diplomacy' and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence*. New York et al. 1994, 5f.; Kunczik, Michael: *Images of Nations and International Public Relations*. Mahwah N.J. 1997; Langer, Roy: 'Nation-marketing. Imagewandel durch Vermarktung? Zum Konzept des Nationen-Marketing'. In: Frank-Michael Kirsch et al. (eds): *Nachbarn im Ostseeraum über einander*. Huddinge 2001, 133–154. Public Diplomacy is also a central concept in the work of Nils Abraham: Abraham, Nils: 'Die außenpolitische Instrumentalisierung der kulturellen Beziehungen zwischen der DDR und Schweden durch die DDR nach der Anerkennung 1972 am Beispiel des DDR-Kulturzentrums Stockholm'. In: Mai-Brith Schartau und Helmut Müssener (eds): *Möten / Begegnungen*. Huddinge 2003, 11–34, (= Schwedische Perspektiven. Schriften des Zentrums für Deutschlandstudien 2).
  - 3 Eymelt, Friedrich: *Die Tätigkeit der DDR in den nichtkommunistischen Ländern, vol. 2: Die nordischen Staaten*. Bonn 1970; Lindemann, Hans und Kurt Müller: *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik der DDR. Die kulturelle Abgrenzung der DDR von der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Bonn 1974, esp. 140–155; Lübke, Peter: *Kulturelle Auslandsbeziehungen der DDR. Das Beispiel Finnland*. Bonn 1981; Saeter, Martin: 'Nordeuropa'. In: Hans-Adolf Jacobsen et al. (eds): *Drei Jahrzehnte Außenpolitik der DDR. Bestimmungsfaktoren, Instrumente, Aktionsfelder*. Munich / Vienna 1979, 501–512.
  - 4 Bohn, Robert (ed.): *Die deutsch-skandinavischen Beziehungen nach 1945*. Stuttgart 2000; Griese, Olivia: 'Kulturpolitik als Teil der Außenpolitik. Das Kulturprotokoll vom November 1969 als Beispiel für die auswärtige Kulturpolitik der DDR in Finnland'. In: Edgar Hösch et al. (eds): *Deutschland und Finnland im 20. Jahrhundert*. Wiesbaden 1999, 295–308; Griese: 'Die auswärtige Kulturpolitik von Bundesrepublik und DDR in Finnland. Aspekte eines Vergleichs'. In: Edgar Hösch et al. (eds): *Finnland-Studien III*. Wiesbaden 2003, 229–244; Griese: *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik und Kalter Krieg. Die Konkurrenz von Bundesrepublik und DDR in Finnland 1949–1973*. Wiesbaden 2006 (= Veröffentlichungen des Osteuropa-Institutes München / Reihe Forschungen zum Ostseeraum; 9); Muschik, Alexander: *Die beiden deutschen Staaten und das neutrale Schweden, eine Dreiecksbeziehung im Schatten der offenen Deutschlandfrage 1949–1972*. Greifswald 2004; Wegener Friis, Thomas und Andreas Linderoth (eds): *DDR og Norden. Østtysk-nordiske relationer 1949–1989*. Odense 2004. Also illuminating are various studies on the cultural activities of the GDR in other western capitalist states, including Pöthig, Charis: *Italien und die DDR. Die politischen, ökonomischen und kulturellen Beziehungen von 1949 bis 1980*. Frankfurt am Main et al. 2000, esp. 140–157; Wallace, Ian: 'The GDR's Cultural Activities in Britain'. In: *German Life and Letters* 53 (2000:3), 394–408; Lill, Johannes: *Völkerfreundschaft im Kalten Krieg? Die politischen, kulturellen und ökonomischen Beziehungen der DDR zu Italien 1949–1973*. Frankfurt am Main et al. 2001, esp. 279–312, (= Europäische Hochschulschriften, series 3, vol. 887; REMOVE THIS LATER REMOVE THIS REMOVE THIS), Pfeil, Ulrich: 'Zentralisierung und Instrumentalisierung der auswärtigen Kulturpolitik der DDR. Ein anderer Aspekt der Frankreichpolitik der DDR 1949–1973'. In: Heiner Timmermann (ed.): *Die DDR – Analysen eines aufgegebenen Staates*. Berlin 2001, 621–642. See also Pfeil, Ulrich (ed.): *Die DDR und der Westen. Transnationale Beziehungen 1949–1989*. Berlin 2001.

there remains a shortage of detailed case studies on the GDR's cultural activities and their reception in Sweden.<sup>5</sup>

This essay uses the example of DEFA film exports to Sweden to clarify the specific aims, internal planning and results of GDR delegations, as well as the arguments and judgements made as part of their reception in Sweden. This description is based on articles in the Swedish daily and trade press on the one hand, and on the internal documents of East German bodies, now available in the Political Archive of the German Foreign Office (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, PA) in Berlin, on the other. The topic will be explored in-depth in the selected case studies, rather than in a broader manner that would risk losing focus. These case studies concentrate on the year 1970, the height of GDR cultural work in Sweden. The essay will first examine the situation in the Swedish commercial film market, while the last two sections will both focus on several special events held in the film club of the Swedish Film Institute (SFI).

## **Failures in the commercial market**

With the establishment of DEFA in 1946 – and therefore long before the founding of the GDR – cinema had been monopolized and its ideological reliability largely ensured. From the end of the 1960s onwards, the SED leadership increasingly sought to use the undeniable propagandistic power of cinema in its foreign propaganda. In the Swedish commercial film market, however, DEFA met with little success. From 1946 to the 'Wende' in 1989/90, only twenty films were sold, only eight of those after the construction of the Berlin Wall.<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s, the most successful phase of East German cultural activity in Sweden, only three GDR films found a regular distributor, while in the same period no fewer than six Polish, 41 Soviet and 92 West German productions managed to do so.

If film reviews are used as a measure, the only notable success was Egon Günther's *Der Dritte* (1971), a portrait of contemporary womanhood and society. After the film had earned international acclaim at the Karlovy Vary and Venice film festivals, the SFI purchased it for the Swedish market. This was the first time that a slice of everyday life in the GDR was shown on Swedish screens.<sup>7</sup> The

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5 These remarks are based on the partial findings of my Magister dissertation, which is also intended to address this deficiency: Hermann, Tilo: *Kultur als Politikum. Zur Vermittlung von Kultur aus der DDR in Schweden um 1970*. Unpublished Magister dissertation, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 2006.

6 See Kwiatkowski, Aleksander: 'Udda filmer i Sverige. Ett litet lexikon'. In: *Filmrutan* (1969:1), 54–63; Wredlund, Bertil und Rolf Lindfors: *Långfilm i Sverige. Vols 4–8*, Stockholm 1979/93.

7 A detailed analysis of the film is provided in Blunk, Harry: "'Weil ich dich liebe" und "Der Dritte". Emblematische und symbolische Verweisung als künstlerische Mittel und ihre kulturpolitischen Implikationen". In: Blunk: *Die DDR in ihren Spielfilmen. Reproduktion und Konzeption der DDR-Gesellschaft im neueren DEFA-Gegenwartsspielfilm*. Munich 1987, 157–233, esp. 201–233.

thematic contradiction between official gender equality and the reality of enduring, outmoded conventions inspired considerable interest.<sup>8</sup> Critics were unable to agree on the actual state of gender equality in the GDR. While the film journalist Disa Håstad accepted the premise that women enjoyed economic equality, were integrated into the workforce on equal terms and were constrained only by the knee-jerk reactions of petty-bourgeois standards of sexual morality, critic Ove Säverman disagreed. At times, he argued, the film took a critical view of sex and relationships, but in the end was marked by an idyllic complacency; the problematic aspects figured merely as superficial irritants in an otherwise perfect system. Maria Ortman pointed out that, like many other East German films, *Der Dritte* was characterized by a form of naive conviction that exerted a banalizing and unoriginal effect, even when its dogmatic assertion that economic progress and the new relations of production would spontaneously give rise to a new man had been called into question. Even in the communist press, Kent Hägglund conceded that the film would not have any impact on the gender equality debate in Sweden – developments in both states were simply too different.

Nonetheless, GDR guides to the film concentrated on its motif of emancipation, in the hope of appearing more progressive than the Federal Republic. *DDR-Revyn*, for example, dedicated a richly illustrated review to the film and its lead actress, supplemented with a five-page report on the successful professional and social emancipation of women in the GDR.<sup>9</sup>

Though a popular success in the GDR, the film was withdrawn from the Stockholm cinema Grand after the first week.<sup>10</sup> Reasons for this included the relatively poor promotion of the film, the obscurity of its Swedish distributor, and the fact that its mid-August release date did not bode well for optimal attendance figures. To complicate the matter, the film needed a great deal of explanation, requiring more detailed knowledge of GDR history and daily life, as well as knowledge that few teachers or arthouse cinema operators even possessed. The filmmakers' need to

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8 Schiller, Hans. In: *Svenska Dagbladet*. 2 October 1972, 9; Schiller. In: *Svenska Dagbladet*. 14 August 1973, 7; Säverman, Ove. In: *Dagens Nyheter*. 14 August 1973, 9; Håstad, Disa: 'Kvinnan i de bägge Tyskland – tre exempel'. In: *Film och TV*. (1973:5/6), 50–51; Ortman, Maria. In: *Svenska Dagbladet*. 5 January 1976; Hägglund, Kent. In: *Ny Dag*. 17 August 1973, 4.

9 Thal, Brigitte: 'Aktuellt diskussionstema – DEFA-filmen "Den tredje": Den emanciperade eller likaberättigande också i kärleken?' In: *DDR-Revyn* (1973:3), 44–47. The 'DDR-Revue' was published by the East German foreign press agency Panorama in German, Danish, Finnish, Swedish, English, French and Italian between 1956 and 1990. It was the most important print organ for foreign propaganda in the GDR. See Abraham, Nils: 'Die Selbstdarstellung der DDR im Rahmen der Public Diplomacy gegenüber Schweden nach der völkerrechtlichen Anerkennung 1972: Das Beispiel des Magazins DDR-Revue.' In: Heiner Timmermann (ed.): *Das war die DDR*. Münster 2004 (= Dokumente und Schriften der Europäischen Akademie Otzenhausen; 128), 428–452.

10 The film was nonetheless used extensively in the work of the GDR Cultural Centre. Not only was it shown repeatedly in the Centre, but it was also used during GDR Weeks of Culture. This was finally brought to an end in 1980 with Armin Müller-Stahl's emigration to the west, after which *Der Dritte* was banned for export.

disguise sections potentially critical of the system was barely mentioned even in film reviews. The way in which director Egon Günther played with the expectations of East German audiences by alienating the familiar paradigm of conflict resolution (wrongdoing – appeal to socialist consciousness – insight – correction)<sup>11</sup> was missed by every reviewer, and was of no interest to the Swedish public. Films were judged purely according to Swedish / western viewing habits.

In short, DEFA films did not enjoy a good reputation in Sweden. They were certainly considered technically proficient, but were seen as all-too ready to identify with party goals.<sup>12</sup> Productions alternated between staunch propaganda and shallow entertainment, in order to give the East German public at least one means of escape from the daily grind. A 1973 report by the state film commission cited film production in the GDR as the epitome of propagandistic exploitation of a mass medium:

In the 1950s and 1960s [...] almost every film – including cartoons and short films – more or less openly exhibited the latent internal tensions between the two German states, as well as the critical attitude of the GDR towards several developments in West Germany and West Berlin.<sup>13</sup>

This impression was regularly confirmed by those directors and film scholars dispatched to Sweden, when they gave lectures in the GDR Cultural Centre, at universities or at the Film Academy. Konrad Schwalbe's address in Lund, for instance, responded to the prevailing negative view of film production in the GDR. Building on proletarian-revolutionary and humanist traditions, he claimed, as well as on Soviet examples, socialist cinema would

convey strength, courage, vitality and drive; it will be based on truth and will develop consciousness [...] An important characteristic of cinema in our developed socialist society is the fact that we are not only witnesses to the revolutionary processes of today, but we contribute to the formation of a vital socialist internationalism with our work for the masses.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, the only two articles in Swedish journals to focus on East German cinema in detail reflected this trend. The author Dieter Jakobik, himself of German descent, wrote two pieces for the

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11 See Blunk, Harry: 'Zur Rezeption von "Gegenwartsfilmen" der DEFA im Westen Deutschlands'. In: Blunk and Dirk Jungnickel (eds): *Filmland DDR. Ein Reader zu Geschichte, Funktion und Wirkung der DEFA*. Cologne 1990, 107–118, 112.

12 See, for instance, Olsson, Sven E. In: *Arbetet* 1. October 1968, 2.

13 'Under 50- och 60-talen [...] speglas i nästan varenda film – både långfilm och kortfilm – mer eller mindre öppet den latent, inre spänningen mellan de bägge tyska staterna liksom DDR:s kritiska attityd gentemot en rad företeelser i Västtyskland och Västberlin.' In: *Samhället och filmen. Betänkande av Filmutredningen*. 1968, Del 4 Stockholm 1973 (= SOU; 1973:53), 103. All translations from Swedish sources [into German] by the author.

14 '[...] förmedla kraft, mod, livsvilja och livsglädje, bygga på sanning och väcka medvetenhet. [...] För vår filmkonst inom det utvecklade socialistiska samhället har det blivit ett vik-tigt kännetecken att vi inte bara är vittnen till våra dagars revolutionära processer, utan att vi deltar i utformningen av den levande socialistiska internationalismen med våra verk för massorna.' Riksarkivet Stockholm SE/RA/770032, vol. 1:6: Information paper by the Literary Studies Institute of Lund University.

film magazine *Filmrutan* looking exclusively at GDR productions, and which cleaved to an impeccably dogmatic socialist line of argument.<sup>15</sup> As Managing Editor Bertil Wredlund was forced to admit, the magazine's financial difficulties had left it short of good writers.<sup>16</sup> The pool of writers with the required knowledge and linguistic competence to handle this rather exotic subject was also limited, with the result that biased articles were accepted. For example, Jakobik wrote:

In the eastern zone liberated by the Red Army, work began on constructing a new antifascist-democratic society, while in the western zones 'denazification' turned into a great farce [...] The fascist past was never overcome in West Germany. [...] As the guiding force in society, the party of the working class helped artists develop the correct perspective on their work, criticized bourgeois tendencies and clichés and led open and in-depth discussions with filmmakers.<sup>17</sup>

## **The Sandman wins the hearts of Swedish children**

The late 1960s saw renewed debate in Sweden on the relationship between children and culture, which raised awareness of the value of producing films appropriate for children and taking advantage of their pedagogical potential.

There were complaints about a severe lack of appropriate films, which was ascribed, among other things, to producers' fears about the poor profit potential of such films and a limited import of foreign titles.<sup>18</sup> The matinee screenings at cinemas were dominated by short spy thrillers, westerns and adventure films, whose glorification of war and violence had a harmful impact. Therefore, it was argued, domestic production should be stimulated, imports increased and dubbing subsidized.<sup>19</sup> The selection of children's television programmes was also seen as unsatisfactory. As a result, Sveriges Radio purchased episodes of the *Sandman* (*Sandmännchen*) programme, which had been produced since 1959 for the East German *Deutscher Fernsehfunk* (DFF). The first episodes were broadcast on the children's programme *Halvsju* in autumn 1971. Due to ratings success, the series was continued in the following years. It not only inspired a range of children's books, but in the long-term even transformed traditional images of the Sandman, as an investigation of primary

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15 Jakobik, Dieter: 'Östtysk filmkonst värd att upptäckas'. In: *Filmrutan* (1972:2), 78–82; Jakobik: 'Det nya livets mångfald och rikedom'. In: *Filmrutan* (1972:3), 99–103.

16 See 'Filmrutan söker skribenter'. In: *Filmrutan* (1972:3), 123.

17 'Det nya, antifascistiskt-demokratiska samhället började byggas i den av Röda Armén befriade östzonen, medan "avnazificeringen" blev till stor fars i västzonerna [...] Det fascistiska förflutna övervanns aldrig i Västtyskland. [...] Arbetarklassens parti som samhällets ledande kraft hjälpte konstnärerna att utveckla de riktiga perspektiven på sitt arbete, kritiserade borgerliga tendenser och klyschor och förde uppriktiga och inträngande diskussioner med filmskaparna.' Jakobik (1972:2), see note 15, 78f.

18 See *Samhället och filmen. Betänkande avgivet av Filmutredningen 1968, Del 1* (SOU 1970:73), Stockholm 1970, 45.

19 See *Filmen – censur och ansvar. Betänkande avgivet av Filmcensurutredningen*. Stockholm 1969, (SOU; 1969:14), 91; *Samhället och filmen* (SOU; 1970:73), 49.

school children in the 1980s discovered.<sup>20</sup> However, the episodes broadcast in Sweden were for the most part simply entertaining, while in the GDR their pedagogical component was more pronounced.<sup>21</sup>

As early as 1972, the Sandman made the jump to Swedish cinemas. The feature *John Blund på nya äventyr* consisted of the two episodes *Drömsanden i fara* and *John Blund griper in*, as well as two Soviet cartoon shorts around 50 minutes long in total. This premiered on 9 September 1972 in Göteborg and two weeks later in Stockholm. Its success with young audiences was remarkable: in the cinema Bio Sture, for example, the feature was screened several times a day over an eight-week run.<sup>22</sup> It was not only the Barnfilmkommitté, an organization founded by committed parents, teachers and the psychologists' association, who reacted positively; critics also seemed to be impressed by the feature's humour, poetic imagination and child-friendly tone. Only the critic Jonas Sima was less impressed.<sup>23</sup> The films were, he claimed, humourless; *John Blund* a 'weedy twerp like most East European puppets'; and the dubbing actors, well known from the television series, limited their performances to a 'peculiar falsetto squeaking'; this last, at least, jibed with the opinion in *Ny Dag*.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, Lilian Öhrström stressed in an in-depth review that the Sandman went through his adventures without becoming vindictive and without anyone's coming to harm – as unusual as it was welcome at a time when Walt Disney's depictions of atrocities dominated the children's market.<sup>25</sup> Öhrström identified the main character as a 'good-natured moralist', whose ideology was more than a match for evil. At the same time, she translated this struggle between good and evil into Marxist terminology:

I might say 'an egoist witch with capitalist methods' or 'an imperialist band of robbers', because that is what we are talking about here. But the film doesn't handle its themes quite so clumsily. It instils a sense of justice which, I hope, everyone can agree with. As a result, the film doesn't only have something to say to children.<sup>26</sup>

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20 See Terenius, Margareta: *Jon Blund. En etnologisk studie av Jon Blund och med honom besläktade sömnväsen*. Dissertation, Uppsala 1983, (= *Studia Ethnologica Upsaliensis* 10), esp. 114–119.

21 *Ibid.*, 137.

22 See Wredlund, Bertil: *Filmårsboken 1972*, Stockholm 1973, 57; also *Svenska Dagbladet*. 23 September 1972, 26.

23 'John Blund är en torrboll, liksom de flesta östeuropeiska filmdockor. För resten: "Den välkända rösten" är svår att uppfatta; på bion hör man mest konstiga falsettpip.' Jonas Sima. In: *Expressen*. 24 September 1972.

24 Hägglund, Kent. In: *Ny Dag*. 6 October 1972, 9.

25 Öhrström, Lilian. In: *Dagens Nyheter*. 24 September 1972, 22.

26 'Jag skulle kunna säga en egoistisk häxa med kapitalistiska metoder eller ett imperialistiskt rövarband. För det är det det handlar om. Men så klumpigt uttrycker sig inte filmen. Den indoktrinerar till en rättskänsla som, hoppas jag, alla kan ställa sig bakom. Därmed angår filmen inte bara barn.', *ibid.*

Outside the cinema, however, the reviewer remarked with disillusionment that despite the 'true' values endorsed in the film, an unexpected range of merchandise stood ready in the form of Sandman figures, posters, pyjamas and so on. This commercialization was condemned by the children's film committee as cynical and inconsiderate.<sup>27</sup> DEFA was only indirectly involved in this, however. It had sold the marketing rights for the whole of Scandinavia to Sten Carlberg, an extremely enterprising partner of Sveriges Radio whose wife produced the Halvsju children's programme.<sup>28</sup> The GDR Cultural Centre also took advantage of the Sandman's popularity, stocking East German toys, picture books and records for its youngest visitors.<sup>29</sup>

On the whole, Swedish opinions showed a tendency to associate GDR children's films with education, guidance and child-friendly form language, while American cinema, on the other hand, was associated with mindless entertainment, poor role models and commerce. Swedish television therefore remained interested in children's films from the GDR until 1989.

## **Image advertising and propaganda**

While the commercial film market remained closed to East German narrative and documentary films for the most part, therefore, alternative distribution channels needed to be found. From the 1960s onwards, the German-Nordic Society (DENOG)<sup>30</sup> attempted to use propaganda films specifically for informational purposes, initially in the form of special series in arthouse or niche cinemas. In 1961, films were able to be screened in 32 Swedish towns for the first time.<sup>31</sup> The Swedish-GDR Society (Gesellschaft Schweden-DDR) was able to act as distributor, after the GDR had granted it the distribution rights for a series of films.<sup>32</sup> Film screenings also became an integral part of the annual GDR culture weeks in Swedish municipalities from 1971 onwards.

From 1967 onwards, the premises of the Stockholm GDR Cultural Centre were also available for film screenings. This was not always a straightforward process, of course. Copies of recent films were difficult to obtain and subject to heavy tariffs; films were very often screened without Swedish subtitles, with the result that children's films required simultaneous interpretation; and within a few

27 See Munkesjö, Anders and Eva Wikander: In: *Expressen*. 29 September 1972, 33; Munkesjö and Wikander: 'John Blund Försäljnings AB'. In: *Chaplin* 14 (1972:7), 265–267.

28 *Ibid.*, 265.

29 See Lindemann und Müller 1974, see note 3, 146.

30 DENOG (part of the Liga für Völkerfreundschaft umbrella organization from 1961), in conjunction with the Foreign Ministry's Department for Northern Europe, had responsibility for planning and running activities in the Scandinavian states. In 1980, it was replaced by individual societies for the different Nordic countries. See Herbst, Andreas et al.: 'Liga für Völkerfreundschaft der DDR'. In: Gerd-Rüdiger Stephan et al. (eds): *Die Parteien und Organisationen der DDR. Ein Handbuch*. Berlin 2002, 804–807.

31 Linderoth 2002, see note 1, 140.

32 See Wredlund und Lindfors, vol. 5, 1979, see note 6.



years of acquiring the space in the Mäster Samuelsgatan, it became clear that the projectors were outdated and liable to break down. While the cinema in the Cultural Centre could seat up to 80 people, visitor numbers generally fell well below that level, often to single figures.<sup>33</sup> Since these were generally regulars in any case, the reach of these screenings was severely limited. Nonetheless, feature films were often combined with documentaries about the GDR.<sup>34</sup>

Using the monthly programmes archived in Stockholm and Berlin, it is possible to compile a profile of the Cultural Centre's film programme. This reveals a clear thematic shift in the films advertised around the mid-1970s. The dominance of historical-political material from the early years (the workers' movement, antifascism, fascism, the formative years of the GDR) came to an end, its proportion of the films screened falling from 57 percent in 1972 to around 23 percent in 1973–76. In contrast, the proportion of films dealing with contemporary everyday life in the GDR (particularly those exploring women's lives and relationships) rose from 10 to 32 percent. The key year in this respect was 1974, which saw a series of films dedicated to women's equality in socialist society, a theme continued the following year in a series of DFF productions. The number of film screenings was doubled in 1973, after the potential of children as a new target audience had been discovered. From this point until 1976, the proportion of children's films screened remained on average 28 percent. For the most part, these offerings were ideologically worthy titles such as *Vom Hühnchen, das den König heiraten wollte*, *Herr Röckle und der Teufel*, based on motives from Karl Marx, or *Drei Geschichten um Teddy* (meaning Ernst Thälmann).

There is therefore little evidence of any short-term effect on the Cultural Centre's film selection of the cultural-political thaw following Ulbricht's removal. The productions shown also remained as recent as before. In the first half of the period examined here (1969–72), the films screened were on average five years old; in the second half (1973–76), they were four years old. The thematic reorientation of 1973/74 was intended to boost the Centre's appeal to younger audiences. This was of course hampered by the fact that no film could be shown in Sweden that was proscribed in its country of origin: Konrad Wolf's film *Die Sonnensucher* (1957/58), about the Wismut AG uranium mine, was able to be shown only once its screening ban in the GDR had been lifted in 1972.

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33 Admittedly, arthouse and niche films in Stockholm were normally able to count on audiences of only 30 or 40 people in any case. See the conservative estimate in: *Samhället och filmen* (SOU; 1970:73), 20.

34 Abraham, Nils: 'Østtysk propaganda i Sverige. DDR:s kulturcentrums roll i østtysk public diplomacy gentemot Sverige efter 1972'. In: Wegener Friis und Linderoth 2004, see note 4, 307–328, 316.

## First contact with SFI:s filmklubb – propaganda films

As a result of these difficulties, the GDR sought to co-operate as closely as possible with the Swedish Film Institute.<sup>35</sup> The Culture Ministry had made its first contact with the SFI in 1965. At a meeting in Stockholm, Deputy Director Christer Frunk responded favourably to the suggestion of mutual film events.<sup>36</sup> As a result, Swedish film festivals were held in East Berlin as early as October 1965.<sup>37</sup> Further negotiations were delayed, however, not least by the complicated procedures of the GDR bureaucracy. Officially, of course, the negotiations were led by the State Film Archive (Staatliche Filmarchiv), but unofficially Camera-DDR and numerous other state agencies were involved: the International Information and Northern Europe departments of the Foreign Ministry; the Culture Ministry's film department; and their respective party organizations.

Agreement was eventually reached on a series of documentary films to be screened in the SFI's film club in the first half of 1969. Following the defeat of the Prague Spring, however, and in light of the role played by the GDR in that defeat, the Swedish side promptly cancelled the screenings.<sup>38</sup> Only once the international situation had eased could *Politisk propagandafilm från Östtyskland* be presented in late autumn 1969. The series ran in the Stockholm film club (21 October to 8 November) as well as student film clubs in Uppsala (24 October to 21 November) and Lund (4 to 24 November).<sup>39</sup> The East German side bore the costs for the prestigious appearances by filmmakers and for the official receptions, while the SFI was responsible for the screenings and programme brochure. The text of this twelve-page, small-format brochure was written by Gösta Werner, President of the Swedish Film Academy and key organizer of the screenings. Werner began by describing, not uncritically, the historical development and typical focus of propaganda cinema in the GDR:

These films are above all intended to serve the aims of present political struggle, and the most important East German target is obviously Nazism in both its old and new guises – the latter in West Germany. The past ten years have seen a whole range of these films produced, of varying quality and in many different forms.<sup>40</sup>

35 Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PA); MfAA C 1236/72: Maßnahmeplan Schweden 1968, 46–50.

36 See PA MfAAA 7793: Bericht Irene Gysi vom 6.4.65 an MfAA, Länderreferat Schweden, 144–164, here 153.

37 Lindemann und Müller 1947, see note 3, 147.

38 See PA MfAA C 1239/72: Schreiben K.-H. Lindquist, SFI, an Gerd Springfeld, Hauptverwaltung Film, vom 19.9.1968, 134.

39 14 films were shown, among them Andrew and Annelie Thorndike's *Du und mancher Kamerad, Urlaub auf Sylt, Unternehmen Teutonenschwert* (banned in Sweden and the Federal Republic in 1959 due to attacks on NATO General Speidel), and *Du bist min*; Joachim Hellwig's *Ein Tagebuch für Anne Frank, Chanson von der Spree* and *Protokoll für Einen*; as well as the H&S productions *Der lachende Mann, Piloten im Pyjama* and *Der Präsident im Exil*. See: Programm SFI:s filmklubb hösten 1969.

40 'Dessa filmer riktar sig först och främst mot aktuella politiska kampmål, och den främsta östtyska skottavlan är självfallet nazismen i gammal eller ny skepnad – det senare i Västtyskland. Det har under de gångna tio åren producerats en hel rad sådana filmer av växlande kvalitet och även i växlande form.' PA MfAA C 1239/72: Politisk

Werner was more circumspect about the central message of the documentary *Der Präsident im Exil* by Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, the Association of Sudeten Germans and its chairman:

The film contains scenes of political assemblies in West Germany of a clearly revanchist nature, and as a whole engages in a scathing attack on a political view that the film's creators claim is right at home in contemporary Bonn.<sup>41</sup>

He also acknowledged that the films by Joachim Hellwig, *Protokoll für Einen* and *Chanson von der Spree*, had been viciously attacked by the party for their alleged formalism.<sup>42</sup> Since SED rhetoric included self-critical statements concerning the use of outdated approaches in its repertoire, however, this comment no longer caused any resentment. At the very least, there is no evidence of any negative interpretation from the East German side. On the contrary, the internal appraisal of Gösta Werner's dedication was extremely positive, and his agreed commission of 8000 (western) DM was readily transferred.<sup>43</sup>

The Political Archive of the Foreign Ministry contains two travel reports of the sort that cadres approved for travel were required to submit to GDR authorities.<sup>44</sup> Directors such as Joachim Hellwig and the Thorndikes were dispatched to Sweden in a bid to cultivate contacts with important filmmakers' organizations. Annelie and Andrew Thorndike hailed the meetings as a breakthrough 'of significance for the international work of the GDR in Sweden [...] beyond the realm of cultural policy.'<sup>45</sup> Up to that point, they argued, the Cultural Centre's scope of action had been severely limited. They stressed that although most events attracted only 20 to 30 attendees, which made for a fundamentally static visitor base, the SFI's advertising and organizational leadership now allowed them to reach hundreds: artists, students, academics, and anyone interested in film. Their opinion of the discussions, however, was somewhat ambivalent:

None of those involved in the discussions came across as defenders of the capitalist system.

Everyone who spoke affirmed their commitment to their idea of socialism and communism.

However, these ideas were anything but ideologically homogeneous. [...] The people who

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propaganda-film från DDR, 1, 114–119.

41 'Den innehåller dessutom bilder från politiska möten i Västtyskland med klar revan-schistisk innebörd och utgör som helhet ett våldsamt angrepp mot en politik, som filmens upphovsmän hävdar hör hemma i dagens Bonn.', *ibid.*, 8.

42 *Ibid.*, 3f.

43 See PA MfAA C 1239/72: *Kostenabrechnung Filmveranstaltungen*, 112.

44 General information on these reports can be found in Klussmann, Paul Gerhard, 'Berichte der Reisekader aus der DDR'. In: Voigt, Dieter und Lothar Mertens (eds): *DDR-Wissenschaft im Zwiespalt zwischen Forschung und Staatssicherheit*. Berlin 1995, 131–140; Gries, Sabine: 'Die Pflichtberichte der wissenschaftlichen Reisekader der DDR'. In: *Ibid.*, 141–168.

45 PA MfAA C 1239/72: Reisebericht Annelie u. Andrew Thorndike v. 13.11.1969, DEFA-Dokumentarfilme in Schweden, 86–99, 88.

clearly shared our position to a certain extent [...] were in a tiny minority. Production workers barely put in an appearance.<sup>46</sup>

While the group rapidly lost interest in aesthetic matters, political questions were generally brought to the fore. The discussion on the impact of artistic work was in full swing in Sweden, as the Thorndikes recognized, and societal change was an ongoing concern for many. Social criticism was such a central question for western artists, and had been 'generalized more or less schematically', to the point that GDR filmmakers were also expected to criticize conditions in the GDR.<sup>47</sup> Back home, the couple reported it had therefore been argued that, 'in this specific case', there had to be a 'class-oriented clarification of the relationship between artist and state, between intellect and power'. On the reaction of the Swedish participants, they stated that 'our argumentation, though it certainly wasn't always accepted immediately, provided considerable food for thought'.<sup>48</sup> The fronts in this respect were in fact problematic: on the one hand, criticism of the social-democratic establishment, of bureaucracy and of imperialism were a common concern for Swedish filmmakers; even catchwords such as thorough revolution and anarchism were popular. On the other, the Thorndikes believed that an unmanageable 'ideological muddle', a 'striking unworldliness; a seemingly almost naive abstraction of thought; an utter disregard for all the questions that need to be asked when one is seriously planning to change the world.' These were not favourable conditions for the global revolution, nor was this an especially flattering evaluation of prospective allies.

As the discussions had revealed a shocking lack of information about life in the GDR and other socialist states, the Thorndikes claimed to have reported – as they were certainly instructed to do by their superiors – on the 'democratic participation of workers in the GDR [...] particularly in the production process'; on 'factory collective agreements, production consultations, production committees, and training and promotion opportunities', in order to explain 'what freedom and democracy truly mean in our state'.<sup>49</sup> Overall, the couple stressed that intellectuals and students exhibited both a great demand for information and an openness to new arguments. However, these groups were hardly best placed to effect fundamental change to societal relations in Sweden, they asserted with staunch party reasoning, since they had no contact with the working class or the communist party. At most, they would be able to assert some influence on public opinion on the question of recognition of the GDR, concluded the Thorndikes in an almost consolatory tone.

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46 Ibid., 90.

47 Ibid., 91.

48 Ibid., 92.

49 Ibid., 93f.

Joachim Hellwig also reported that the discussions connected with the film screenings revolved mostly around political topics, such as the question of Sweden's recognition of the GDR or the Bitterfeld Way. Out of approximately 250 cinemagoers, some 25 took part.<sup>50</sup> This did not prevent unwanted disruptions, however. German emigrants attempted provocation by asking aggressive questions, but their submissions were rebuffed by the students. Also noteworthy in this respect was the fact that the documentary series was presented at the Uppsala student film club with the title *Östtysk politisk film*<sup>51</sup>, thereby avoiding the term 'propaganda', preferred by the SFI yet carrying negative connotations.

In sum, the GDR's representatives at the Stockholm talks praised the documentary series as a 'worthy contribution to the 20th anniversary', and estimated the number of viewers achieved at around 1500.<sup>52</sup> For the first time, the GDR had succeeded in establishing contacts with authorities and representatives of the Swedish film industry. Authorities were particularly hopeful of cooperation with the socialist-oriented yet non-partisan Filmcentrum, founded by independent filmmakers in 1968, especially through greater exchange of socially critical documentaries. By 1970, Filmcentrum was home to around 80 percent of all Swedish filmmakers.<sup>53</sup> The organization incorporated documentaries, shorts and children's films into its lending programmes for schools, youth groups and trades unions, thereby offering an alternative way for GDR films to raise their profile in Sweden.<sup>54</sup> As part of the Folkets Bio programme launched by Filmcentrum in 1973, productions such as the historical compilation film *Du und mancher Kamerad*, by Andrew and Annelie Thorndike, or *Der Krieg der Mumien*, a documentary about the Chilean junta by Heynowski and Scheumann, were shown at irregular intervals.

In the following years, the documentary was also used to develop and maintain contacts with distributors, who, it was hoped, would spread the word about GDR cinema. The trade mission therefore prompted the Foreign Ministry to invite journalists Disa Håstad (*Dagens Nyheter*), Jürgen Schildt (*Aftonbladet*) and Stig Björkmann (*Chaplin*) to Leipzig for the 15th International Documentary and Short Film Week – as well as to pay for their travel and accommodation.<sup>55</sup> Also invited, though without travel expenses covered, were SFI Director Bo Jonsson, internationally

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50 PA MfAA C 1239/72: Bericht Joachim Hellwig v. 28.10.1969: DEFA-Dokumentarfilme in Schweden, 100–104, here 100.

51 Ibid., 102.

52 PA MfAA C 243/71: Ergänzung zum Bericht über die Durchführung des XX. Jahrestages der DDR in Schweden, HV, vom 18.11.1969, 1–4, here 1.

53 *Dagens Nyheter*. 25 October 1970, 14.

54 PA MfAA C 1239/72: Schreiben Heino Bock an Peter Lorf, Leiter des Bereiches Presse und Information im MfAA, v. 15.1.1970, 83–85.

55 See PA MfAA C 370/74: Schreiben Claus Wolf, HV, an Ranft, MfAA Abt. NE, v. 6.7.1972, 23f.

renowned documentary filmmaker Erwin Leiser, journalist Ulf Gudmundson, representing Filmcentrum and Sveriges Radio, as well as Gösta Werner.<sup>56</sup> Naturally, offering these figures a personal impression of actually existing socialism ran the risk of losing their diffuse sympathies or their interest in any form of collaboration. Gösta Werner, for one, wrote following his trip to Leipzig that the Film Week had degenerated from an artistic festival to a political exhibition.<sup>57</sup> As independent art forms, the short film and documentary had lost all meaning, now serving only as vehicles for conveying political themes such as Vietnam, the liberation movements of Latin America, racial conflict in the USA, and the good fortune to be able to live in the Soviet Union. By Werner's reckoning, 204 of the 310 films shown had a clear anti-American thrust.

### **DEFA films in the SFI:s filmklubb**

Spurred by the success of the propaganda film series, plans began as early as 1969 for a DEFA feature film series, which eventually launched in April 1972. For the first time, Sju filmer från DDR, as the series was titled, were given a wider forum in Sweden. The SFI again bore the costs of import, duties, printing of brochures and posters, and cinema hiring, while the GDR funded the delegates' travel, the press conferences and the official reception.

The SFI seemed interested in closer relations with DEFA's foreign trade division above all, in order to develop opportunities for the sale of Swedish films.<sup>58</sup> Much to the displeasure of the East German side, the film club management apparently saw the DEFA feature series merely as an expression of diversity and cosmopolitanism. 'Constant contact [...], discussions, suggestions and oversight did, however, make it possible for us to develop the film festival into an [event] that was internationally informative and which met our objectives,' the management stated. A further point of contention was the level on which negotiations took place. The discussions were initially led by high-ranking representatives of both sides: GDR Deputy Culture Minister Günter Klein and SFI Director Bo Jonsson. To the East Germans' annoyance, however, the Swedish side delegated the talks to junior officials as quickly as possible.<sup>59</sup>

The films shown as part of the programme had been selected as early as November 1971 by Anna-Lena Wibom, who had in the interim been promoted to programme director.<sup>60</sup> The selection focused

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56 See PA MfAA C 370/74: Einladungsliste, 25.

57 Gösta Werner. In: *Svenska Dagbladet*. 18 February 1972, 4.

58 See PA MfAA C 388/74: Diskussionsbeitrag für die Kulturattachékonzferenz [Sommer] 1972, 19–29, 24f.

59 See PA MfAA C 386/74: Claus Wolf, Bericht zur Entwicklung der kulturellen und Wissenschaftsbeziehungen mit Schweden im Jahre 1971, 8–26, here 11.

60 PA MfAA C 370/74: Aktenvermerk v. 10.11.1972, 5–7, here 5.

on the works of directors Konrad Wolf (Ich war 19; Goya), Egon Günther (Lots Weib; Abschied) and Günther Rucker (Die besten Jahre), supplemented with two recent productions (Horst E. Brandt's KLK an PTX – die rote Kapelle and Osceola by Konrad Petzold). Once the plans of the West German competition became known in Stockholm, the Goethe Institute urged the SFI to add entries from the Federal Republic to the selection, which would have diluted the specifically East German character of the event. The suggestion was vehemently rejected by the GDR side.<sup>61</sup> The Swedish organizers opted not to combine East and West German productions, a decision that was less an expression of solidarity with the GDR's need for self-expression, and more the product of their desire to continue with a plan that they had been following for some time, one based on exploring a country that remained largely unknown even to cinephiles, without expressing a view on this matter of international law. Nonetheless, the references to the GDR included in the advertising, in the cinema foyers and in the programme met with satisfaction from the East German side, serving as they did as confirmation of official relations between GDR authorities and Swedish institutions.<sup>62</sup>

As in 1969, East German film stars descended on Sweden. At the screening of KLK an PTX – Die rote Kapelle in Lund before an audience of film students and members of the Lund film studios, writers Wera and Claus Küchenmeister put in an appearance.<sup>63</sup> To Stockholm came the renowned director, Konrad Wolf. The two screenings of his film Goya to an audience of around 600 people was the highlight of the programme. Wolf was in great demand for interviews. Following a press screening of Goya, Margareta Romdahl was evidently very impressed by the film's narrative structure and contrasting sequences.<sup>64</sup> Her article reflected the director's desire to unify the individual and the Marxist dialectical principle. East German filmmakers, she wrote, were eager to move beyond both the film school and the triviality of mainstream cinema. The main obstacle to this, according to Wolf, was the financial constraints of the small domestic market. In addition, as the level of aesthetic achievement gradually rose, the need to reach a common understanding with the audience could not be neglected. Without further commentary, the Dagens Nyheter article quoted Konrad Wolf: 'Without resorting to violent means, we are working tirelessly with aesthetics in schools and universities and in the industry. Even when it comes to artistic questions, the working class is the heart of our country.'<sup>65</sup>

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61 See Diskussionsbeitrag Kulturattachékonzferenz, see note 58, 22.

62 See PA MfAA C 370/74: Claus Wolf, Bericht zur Durchführung der Filmtage der DDR v. 10.5.72, 29–33, 29.

63 See PA MfAA C 386/74: Bericht Claus Wolf, HV, für Nov./Dez. 1971 v. 29.12.71, 28–36, 29.

64 Margareta Romdahl. In: *Dagens Nyheter*. 11 April 1972, 15.

65 'Utan våldsamma medel arbetar vi träget med det estetiska i skolor och högskolor och i industrierna. Också när det gäller konstnärliga frågor är arbetarklassen landets kärna.', ebd.

Like the newspapers, Sveriges Radio's film journal *Filmrullan* was complimentary in its discussion of the DEFA films. The GDR also benefited from the opportunity to use the film series to inform the broader populace about general social and political themes, such as youth policy, education or women's emancipation.<sup>66</sup>

The GDR's objectives had expanded since 1969, however. Now, the plan was to find partners for the commercial release of DEFA films as well. Negotiations fell through, however, due to both costs and political-ideological differences, according to East German sources.<sup>67</sup> Just as obstructive, of course, were the East German reservations about running reciprocal – which, as always, meant uncensored – Swedish film events in the GDR. The Swedish side had hoped to agree on such events not only out of economic interests, but also because of a general desire to establish a mutual cultural exchange. From the SED's perspective, the risk of ideological softening and 'diversion' made this a contentious issue. In the year in which diplomatic relations were established between the two states, this refusal to move towards closer cooperation put the GDR at a decisive disadvantage in its efforts to qualitatively increase its cultural work in Sweden. At something of a loss, the International Information department of the Foreign Ministry instead advised that the Cultural Centre intensify its search for influential Swedish voices, and agreed with the Thorndikes' suggestion that Filmcentrum be given special attention. Other organizations related to international information, such as the trade mission and DENOG, were also asked to promote East German cinema.<sup>68</sup> These efforts did not have much impact on the Swedish public, however. While a Week of Swedish Cinema held in the GDR in 1974 had attracted audiences of 39,000, according to official sources,<sup>69</sup> the SFI was able to return the favour only with a very brief Kurt Maetzig retrospective in *Filmhuset* in May 1976. In the following years, the exchange of films was for the most part confined to television broadcasters in both states.

## Summary

GDR films were met with considerable resistance in Sweden. Hopes of making a profit by bringing DEFA productions onto the Swedish market therefore soon had to be given up. Both sides' priorities concerning cinema began changing as early as the mid-1960s, as they grew more pessimistic about

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66 Wolf, *Durchführung der Filmtage*, see note 62, 30.

67 *Ibid.*, 31.

68 PA MfAA C 1239/72: Schreiben Köhn an Heino Bock, HV Stockholm, 15f.

69 *Neues Deutschland*. 6 April 1974, 8. The size of the event was not only the result of the leadership's efforts to overcome the crisis in domestic cinema with more foreign entertainment, but was also a signal to its Swedish partners to intensify the film exchange.



the potential profitability of either market, and because a regular exchange had been established between Sveriges Radio and GDR television that led to significantly more effective distribution. Moreover, in Filmcentrum the GDR now had a partner that raised no objections to the propagandistic content of many productions; indeed, it expressly encouraged films that criticized capitalism or the United States. Last, the public engagement work of the GDR Cultural Centre in Stockholm hinged on feature and documentary screenings until the very end.

Only at the beginning of the 1970s did GDR productions start to be taken seriously. The *Gegenwartsfilm*, then still in its infancy, was received in Sweden with sceptical interest. While audiences still found these films obtrusively overloaded with ideological subtext, they also came to them for insights into a practically unknown form of everyday life. Feature films remained unpopular with the wider public, as their format often did not conform to western viewing habits. The public followed American trends, however much journalists and intellectuals might decry the commercialism, the import of mass culture and the isolation. From a thematic perspective, DEFA productions seemed extremely insubstantial as a result of the checks and censorship to which they were subjected. In comparison to societal debate in Sweden, their backwardness was obvious. The filmmakers' group, on the other hand, proved open to East German advances. Its members were inspired by Marxism above all else, vehemently critical of the negative aspects of the capitalist system, and preoccupied with many of the same important themes and concerns as GDR documentary filmmakers.

GDR cinema – like its literature and fine art, incidentally – was viewed primarily as the product of a cultural life led under socialist conditions. On the one hand, this was because German was the sole Germanic language beyond the Iron Curtain, and as such was more accessible and, thanks to the education system, largely familiar. On the other, the SED itself tried to develop a clear theoretical image, particularly since its efforts at demarcation (*Abgrenzung*) from the Federal Republic meant that its art could not be understood as 'national' in the conventional sense, unlike in Poland or Hungary, for instance. Only children's and young people's films were considered worthy of imitation. The socialist system of production had the advantage of being able to impart positive values, beyond commercial interests, to younger generations. The risk of ideological exploitation was evidently deemed worth taking.