Activism to Protect Species and Speech in Jörg Foth’s *Biology!*

By Reinhild Steingröver

*Biology! (Biology!)* begins and ends with a mediated image. In the opening scene, introduced by a high-school student’s energetic “Film ab!” (Roll it!), a short about an endangered bird called a European Dipper is being projected in biology class. Accompanied by the prominent humming of the projector, the camera hovers close to the water’s surface in a long tracking shot mimicking the search for the endangered bird. At the end of the film, the ultrasound image of a soon-to-be-born baby fills the screen, raising the question of how humanity’s current abuse of nature, resulting in the extermination of animal species, will impact future generations of our own species. The classroom screening about the catastrophic impact of animal habitat destruction spurs the tenth graders to undertake activism by creating a photo documentation of the Dipper’s fate. Predictably, this leads to a clash between the young generation, outraged at the short-sighted destruction of a wetland preserve, and a factory director, who lays claim to a privileged use of natural resources. The film does not limit itself, however, to a narrative about hypocritical backroom politics, corruption and nepotism that indicts all adult authority figures (politicians, business leaders, teachers and parents). Instead, it frames this conflict by calling attention to the role of film and media discourse itself, a subject director Jörg Foth consistently addressed in both his films and his efforts for reform at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films.

The Director

Born on October 31, 1949 in Berlin, Jörg Foth counts as one of the fourth and last generation of film directors at East Germany’s DEFA Studio for Feature Films. Foth initially trained as a chef and, after three years of military service in the Volksmarine (navy) and a year-long internship at East Germany’s DFF television studio, began studying film at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (HFF, or Academy for Film and Television) in Potsdam-Babelsberg in 1972. He belonged to a group of young filmmakers who, throughout the 1970s and ‘80s, advocated strongly for reforms at the film school and DEFA Studio. The group consisted of young artists from across the film studio who—under the motto “We want debut films before [we’re] 40” —demanded less censorship and control from above, improved training conditions, access to international film culture and earlier opportunities to realize their own aesthetic ideas and topics. Their experience at the DEFA Studio differed fundamentally from those of previous generations, as the studio had become more and more bureaucratized and mistrustful of its younger talent under Director Hans Dieter Mäde. Many film workers around Foth voiced frustration over being a well-educated but superfluous workforce. Scriptwriter Carmen Blazejewski described the generational dilemma as follows: “When I arrived at the Feature Film Studio in 1981, the boat was full. There were forty-four directors under contract... [and only] sixteen feature-film productions per year. There was no room for the youngest generation. We were superfluous, not needed.”

This feeling of being unwanted and mistrusted was widespread among the fourth and last generation of directors, who had pushed new aesthetic concepts and approaches beginning with their student films. Foth’s diploma film *Blumenland* (*Flower Land*, 1976) demonstrates this generational conflict in both form and content. The film portrayed GDR youth who spent their days making artificial flowers in Saxony’s recently collectivized flower industry, while tentatively dreaming of forming a rock band in their free time. Foth chose the title *Flower Land* after Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler—who had to approve student films (usually


2 Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler (1918-2001) was an East German television journalist. A member of the State Television Committee of the Council of Ministers and the Television Chief Commentator, he was especially known as the hardline author and host of the notoriously propagandistic program *Der schwarze Kanal* (*The Black Channel*). Broadcast 1960-89, this show was created to respond to West German television and featured a very manipulative and vitriolic style of commentary in its reports.

Less known is that, as of 1980, Schnitzler headed the Social Council of the Hochschule für Film- and Fernsehen (HFF, or Academy for Film and Television) in Potsdam-Babelsberg; in this capacity, he was involved in script approvals, production permits and recommending student films for broadcast. (See the Märkische Volksstimme *Potsdam*, Dec. 20, 1969, for the announcement of his appointment.) Thank you to Ulrike Rolnick and Susanne Reiser from the Filmuniversität Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF confirming this information.
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broadcast on GDR television)—refused to sign off on the original title, Ostermädchen Postermädchen (100 Jahre) (Easter Girls, Poster Girls (100 Years)), because it contained the English word “poster.” Even with a new name, the film was broadcast only once, not twice as was customary for student films. The film’s aesthetic, which juxtaposes highly stylized sequences accompanied by electronic sounds with deadpan talking-head interviews, was so unusual that students and others at the film school placed bets as to whether the film would be officially sanctioned; and Foth’s mentor, the director Ulrich Weiß, suggested calling the film a “documentary revue” to explain its unusual approach. In the GDR, this expression of a new aesthetic direction by one of its then youngest directors was undesired, and thus stifled.

After graduating from the HFF, Foth was delegated to work at the television studio. The environment there was much more ideological and controlled than at the film studio, and he soon realized that he could not work there. In 1978, Foth therefore requested that his contract be terminated, preferring to deliver telegrams than to direct TV programs. Weiß brought Foth back to the DEFA Studio for Feature Films by hiring him as assistant director for his film Blauvogel (Bluebird, 1979)—Weiß’ contrarian contribution to DEFA’s unique version of the Western genre, in which Native American characters were appropriated to symbolize the socialist struggle against “capitalist” cowboys. Finally, in 1983, Foth had the chance to direct his first film: the children’s story Das Eismeer ruft (The Arctic Sea Calls, 1983), based on a popular novel by Alex Wedding. In the film, Foth juxtaposes a true story of the 1934 shipwreck of the Soviet vessel Chelyuskin with a fictional expedition by a band of young children from Prague who go to the ship’s rescue. While the young explorers never make it further than a few miles and return home after one night away, the spirit of their adventure catapults them into worlds far beyond their reach. Foth communicates this impression by projecting archival footage of the 1934 disaster onto a large world map that the children carry with them. Sitting in a field as night approaches, the hapless campers remain glued to the map, where the film projects the far more dire hardships of the stranded Russians. When the Russians are saved by a daring air rescue, the children return home in a parallel plot development; as they cruise down the Vltava River into Prague on a raft, the film’s soundtrack blends in the jubilation that greeted the rescued Russians upon their triumphant entry into their home city and international radio broadcasts by Soviet, British, French and German announcers, while the children are welcomed home much like returning heroes.

Despite the critical success and innovative aesthetic of this film, Foth had to wait another five years for his next feature film project. During this period, many of his ideas were rejected. Instead, he directed a few short but important films with the Kinobox Artistic Group at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films, all involving music: Rock ’n’ Roll (1987), Tuba wa duo (1988) and Ach Du Jehovah - Ein Hans Dampf und Wurst Dokument (Oh Dear! A Jack-of-All-Trades Document, 1988). Foth’s next solo feature film project was Biology! As noted above, one of the stylistic trademarks of The Arctic Sea Calls had been the use of archival film and audio footage to evoke a world of adventure and fantasy from the perspective of children. In the opening sequence of Biology! we find a parallel reference to archival projection onto a world map, when a tenth grader turns a large map over to project a nature film on its back in biology class. Foth emphasizes acts of visual documentation throughout the film: from the classroom film screening in the beginning and the high schoolers taking photographs during their excursion, to the use of archival television footage, early computer photoshopping and finally at the end, the ultrasound image of a baby in utero. But from the start, Foth also emphasizes the global context of this film: environmental destruction and the discourse about it.

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1 Apprentices were called “Ostermädchen” because their school year ended at Easter.
2 See H. Glenn Penny or more recent work on DEFA Indianerfilme (Westerns).
3 Foth co-directed Dschungelzeit (Time in the Jungle), a co-production between the GDR and Vietnam, with Vietnamese director Tran Vu in 1987, but he does not consider it his own film.
4 Tuba wa duo was based on a play by Hans Eckardt Wenzel, one of the two clowns who later starred in Foth’s 1990 film Latest from the Da-Da-R.
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Environmentalism in East Germany

Biology!, considered one of the DEFA Studio’s first feature films to tackle environmental concerns head on, was developed in the context of a growing environmental movement in 1980s East Germany. Relatively early on, the GDR had interestingly anchored environmental protection in its constitutional revision (1968), passed legislation to preserve natural resources to ensure economic development in harmony with environmental preservation (1970) and established its Ministry of Environmental Protection and Water Management (1972). Historian Astrid Kirchhof summarizes: “At the beginning of the 1970s, the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) approved a comprehensive environmental program with an endowment of seven million marks and established a Ministry of Environmental Protection and Water Management.” However, these measures consistently aimed at multiple use—i.e., the use of land and resources for economic growth as well. Historian Scott Moranda explains: “All economic and public uses of the land could coexist, officials in the Ministry for Environmental Protection insisted, as long as the government and industrial firms coordinated and planned together. The SED, furthermore, quickly silenced any approach to conservation that did not embrace multiple use.” At the same time, the government shifted its economic policies towards the production of consumer goods in order to satisfy its citizens, who were well aware of the higher living standards in West Germany.

Environmental laws were thus quickly ignored. The priority placed on energy production through lignite brown coal mining and the manufacturing of consumer goods led to catastrophic levels of pollution in air, water and land, which in turn fueled environmental activism. On March 6, 1978, high-ranking representatives of the Protestant Church met with Erich Honecker after negotiations about the relationship between church and state. The Church declared that it shared humanistic goals with socialism, called itself “the Church in Socialism” and acknowledged the SED’s authority. Tantamount to a sort of détente with the government, local churches could now offer safe gathering places for social critics and dissidents working on environmental and other causes.

Environmental activists in the GDR were most often also active in other dissident groups addressing the issues of human rights and peace. As Dieter Rink has concluded, however, its numbers were small: “Hampered by conditions of partial illegality, the environmental groups were unable to reach a large public. Compared to the size of the overall population, they had a very small number of members.”

The church’s early concern for preservation of the environment was rooted in Christian ethics, but it offered a productive context for non-Christian environmental activists as well. Activists ran the gamut: from preservationists working semi-officially with the GDR’s Kulturbund (Culture League) groups on nature preservation projects;12 to citizens working within their parishes to raise people’s awareness about resource and energy consumption, the protection of local land and species, and campaigns against nuclear power and weapons; to more critical individuals seeking to document illegal pollution, official hypocrisy and unsustainable energy policies. In 1980, the SED established the Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt (GNU, Society for Nature and Environment), in part to gain more control over the work of activists, who were mostly shielded by the protected spaces of churches. With a sizeable membership of 57,000 by 1989, the GNU nevertheless contributed to many aspects of conservation, including undertaking species counts and surveys on local land use impact. Church-based activists continued working on educational campaigns, bike rallies—like the 1983 Halle bike protest, with 149 riders—or “pilgrimages” to call attention to river pollution. In 1983, the stationing of nuclear weapons in both East and West Germany by the USSR and USA galvanized peace movements.

5 Rink, Dieter. “Environmental Policy and Environmental Movement in East Germany.” CNS 13 (3) September 2002. 73-90. 84.
6 Rink, 82.
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and environmental protests; then, on April 26, 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in northern Ukraine further intensified these protests on both sides of the Wall.

A 1982 government ban on making environmental data public and the lack of documentation on pollution levels in state media led activists to establish “environmental libraries” in various cities in the GDR as of 1983, most prominently the *Umweltbibliothek* (UB) established in East Berlin in 1986. These organizations built on transnational networks to gather literature, produce unofficial publications—such as the *Umwelt-Blätter* [Environmental Pages]—and educate citizens outside of official government organizations. In 1988, the grassroots activist *Grün-ökologisches Netzwerk Arche* (Green-Ecological Ark Network) was founded. UB and Ark members worked with environmental groups in West Berlin, such as Robin Wood and the West German Green Party to exchange information and resources and, in rare cases, organize joint events in the East, such as bike rallies or kite flying events.

The Film

*Biology!* tells the story of 16-year-old Ulla, who is preparing a photo exhibit about the endangered habitat of the European Dipper for her school’s science fair. Under the tutelage of her amiable but worn-out biology teacher, who is also the county’s functionary in charge of environmental protection, Ulla’s class ventures into the wetlands in search of this rare bird. The innocent biology project quickly turns political, however, when the teenagers discover an unauthorized site for the construction of a weekend house and trout hatchery in the midst of the protected wetland. It is the personal project of the director of a nearby chemical factory. It becomes clear that the project has not gone through the required approvals and regulations; but the local mayor quickly covers up the transgression and pressures the biology teacher, in his role as “environmental protection officer,” to retroactively grant the necessary permits. To no avail, Ulla confronts the mayor, the factory director’s wife and her own sympathetic but cynical parents. At the same time, a romantic relationship develops between her and Winne, the only teen with a computer… who, she later learns, is the factory director’s son. In an attempt to force the construction to stop, Ulla enlists Winne to fabricate photographic evidence of a Dipper in the wetlands. When Winne ultimately confesses, Ulla’s public shaming exposes the hypocrisy of town functionaries, who lecture her about honesty and good citizenship while disregarding environmental laws for their own personal gain.

*Biology!* was filmed from August 16 to October 31, 1989—during the very last months before the fall of the Wall on November 9. At this time, dissident protest had developed from focused work on peace, the environment and other causes, taking place mainly within the protected spaces of Protestant Churches, to a broader focus on civil rights, free speech, free elections and freedom of movement. For the first time, critics who had voiced specific complaints in their respective institutions, including Jörg Foth at the DEFA Studio, found their decades-long experience of tilting at proverbial windmills amplified in ever-growing public demonstrations. Foth has explained his choice of the title *Biology!*—instead of the original title of the book by Wolf Spillner—as rooted in his desire for “less idyll and romance, more toughness and disillusion.” Changing the title thus signaled a transition from a very particular small issue (the fate of the Dipper), to a more general critique of environmental policies for all species (i.e., biology).

Analogously, in the early 1980s environmental activism had typically centered on small scale responses to local issues, such as tree planting initiatives, in order to lessen the risk of state retaliation. Now, in contrast, the protests mobilizing across the country encouraged many to publicly articulate their discontent—even though the fall of the Wall and the end of the GDR could not yet be anticipated. On

14 Moranda, 172-73.
15 Kirchhof, 639.
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November 1, 1989, the day after shooting wrapped, East Berlin’s UB activists announced a joint bicycle protest with Robin Wood activists from West Berlin. The goal was to stop the trial run of the Schöneiche waste incinerator, near Potsdam, which was to earn hard currency in exchange for processing garbage from West Berlin… under conditions that would not meet West German environmental standards. “We do not intend to become a semi-colony of West Germany,” the East German activists proclaimed. Neither East, nor West protesters made it to the incinerator before being arrested; having expected as much, they had fortified themselves with ample quantities of fresh garlic to shorten the police interrogations, a favorite technique of East German punks. West German protesters were simply expelled from the GDR; but East Germans were arrested and continued to be harassed by the Stasi, even after the Wall had fallen.

Of special importance for Ark Network activists in exposing the actual extent of environmental pollution was the use of unofficial media in the GDR, as well as West German media. In one undercover campaign, in collaboration with allies in West Berlin, Ark members smuggled a VHS camera into the East to record the catastrophic conditions at toxic dump sites around the industrial Lausitz region. Ulla’s act of “culture jamming,” or guerilla communication—i.e., her falsification of photos to protect the nature preserve—mimics the Ark Network’s guerilla action around the city of Bitterfeld. While the Ark activists circulated the tape among environmental groups at churches in the GDR and smuggled it into West Berlin to be broadcast in part in 1988, Ulla seeks public exposure of her cause by displaying her “evidence” at a science fair.

Film director Jörg Foth was not a member of environmental groups: “I was a member of neither the environmental movement, nor a church group. Group rituals of any kind always suffocated me. My subject matter was the person, the individual who can’t stand their circumstances.” As a film director and author, he focused on the constriction of free expression within the film studio. At DEFA, Foth had never wanted to direct a film in the so-called Gegenwartsfilm genre (films about current issues) because he did not believe that a truthful portrayal of the GDR’s current reality was possible. His depiction of Ulla’s struggle to protect the endangered bird in Biology!—which clearly deals with contemporary issues—is thus concurrently a struggle for free expression in media, a core concern in all the films he directed starting as a student in the 1970s.

The film’s repeated long tracking shots of the wetlands, for example, are matched by equally long sequences of mediated images: 16mm film projection, photography, televised images and computer animation. In 1989, personal computers were just beginning to enter into public use in the GDR. In the film, only Winne, the privileged son of a factory director, has a personal computer—which enables him to falsify images of the Dipper to help Ulla expose the self-serving acts of those with political and social privilege. By framing the central conflict in Biology! as being not only about the environment, but also about access to the media, Foth simultaneously spotlights the fate of precious natural resources and critiques the official discourse about it. This continues his focus on the conflict between the individual and institutionalized power and is why the most powerful scene in Biology! does not center on the fate of the Dipper, but rather on the utter humiliation of the young activist, Ulla. The devastating public punishment for her photographic forgery is staged in front of a full assembly, which literally lines up politicians, teachers and parents for a merciless reprimand. Ulla is presented as isolated and silent, like the spectacle of a medieval pillory. In stark contrast to the opening tracking shot across the wetlands, Ulla is destroyed in full view of her peers as a
warning and deterrent to them not to call out the glaring hypocrisy of the adults. While the adults plainly manufacture documents to create reality according to their interests and views, Ulla’s act of culture jamming is condemned not just as dishonest, but as an assault on the socialist community. As was the case with environmental activists in the GDR, the adults in the film studiously avoid engaging with the actual environmental concern Ulla is raising, and instead accuse her of being a troublemaker.

The build-up to the final scene begins early, when Ulla’s mother warns her daughter not to get involved in the illegal building scandal, saying that “others have been broken in the face of such contradictions.” Undeterred, Winne and Ulla discuss the possibility of fabricating proof of the Dipper’s presence in the wetlands. Winne describes the mechanics of photoshopping to Ulla by referring to the process as computer “visualization” and “re-animation.” Though he warns her that doctoring the photos would be “falsification,” Ulla understands the process metaphorically—as visualizing and re-animating an endangered ecosystem—and maintains that doctoring reality is not falsification, but rather a visualization of the bird’s unseen struggle for survival. When Ulla returns home after this exchange with her boyfriend, Foth inserts a televised rebroadcast of a 1950 Augenzeuge newsreel featuring the British journalist John Scott Peet—who was defecting, as the West put it, to the GDR—as he declares: “I’m sure that, someday, the time will come when all journalists can be honest and decent people, instead of the scribes of warmongers.” Foth, who frequently uses archival documentary clips as a stylistic technique in his work, here draws attention to the idealistic hopes and beginnings of the GDR, when Western journalists might defect in order to join the “better German state.”

Ulla’s act of falsifying evidence to advance her cause mimics the fabrication of retroactive building permits by politicians to protect their interests. The glaring contradiction between official discourse about protecting the environment through economic progress, and the reality of extreme pollution and decrepit housing stock is clearly articulated throughout the film. We glimpse a brief image of a dead sheep near a stream in the woods; instead of exploring the cause of its death, a worker quickly picks it up and drives it away. In another scene, we learn that Ulla suffers from tick bites from an infestation resulting from bird excrement falling through the roof of the family’s dilapidated house; when she tells her stepfather about it, he refuses to engage with her argument and instead corrects her classification of ticks as arachnids, rather than insects.

Ulla and her classmates continue to challenge the adult world about their environmental concerns. When they demand that the biology teacher take a stand against the corrupt system, he retorts by placing the burden onto the youngest generation: “Let me try to respond by asking you to act.” This is, by far, the most courageous position taken by any adult in the film, and Hansen later refuses to buckle under the mayor’s pressure; however, his entire demeanor exudes defeat and depression. After Ulla’s public punishment, he tells her that “things will become even more unbearable” if she continues her opposition. Foth’s systematic depiction of the numerous sources of social and structural oppression of dissent continues when a local mother confronts Ulla on the street and accuses her of prioritizing the well-being of a bird over her children’s need for outdoor space. As Moranda has shown, the conflict between preservationists and populations seeking land for recreational purposes added to pressures on the SED: “Land-use planners had to accommodate popular desires as best they could, and no one use of a landscape preserve could justify denying another resident his private pleasures. Earlier, conservationists promoted Erholung [rest and recreation] as a means to protect landscapes, but now Erholung justified uses of the land that threatened protection efforts.”

In the film, the mayor gives a forceful lecture on the power of economic progress to solve all conflicts of interest between nature and humans. This echoes the SED’s proclamation that socialism ensures the “harmony of economy and ecology,” while simultaneously alluding to the pressure in 1980s

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21 Moranda, 163.
22 Rink, 76.
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East Germany to generate hard currency through exports, such as “wild-caught fish, four-weeks old, a dollar on the international market.” The politician’s interest accurately reflects the East German government’s disregard for environmental concerns and prioritization of consumer and export goods production. From today’s vantage point, the struggle between tenacious Ulla, her defeated teacher, anxious parents and cynical politicians might appear tame, especially given the chronological proximity to the fall of the Wall. The film’s depiction of this foundational conflict is very clearly demarcated, however. And we must remember that the script had been in development for years, as different contributors sought to find a way to realize this film on important environmental issues. Nevertheless, like many other DEFA films of the years 1989-91, Biology! reflects a society that was already disappearing while the film was being made.

Ulla’s brash defiance contrasts with the more patient attempts made by Foth’s generation to effect reforms in the DEFA Studio over the course of the 1980s. Foth describes his decision to direct Biology!: “I struggled with my promise to never make a contemporary film for DEFA, but returned to the studio because I believed that, at that particular point in time, everyone had to do something for the young people of our country, so that they wouldn’t remain as compliant as we had been in my generation.”23 Within the larger context of Foth’s work, Biology! articulates the experience of futile efforts for reform and compromise within the system and the need for disruption through non-conformist methods. Despite the ease with which the state’s power isolates and punishes Ulla’s dissident behavior, the film’s last scene shows the defiant high schoolers forming a human chain to boldly prevent trucks from resuming work in the wetlands.

While Foth was depicting the much younger and less patient activists in Biology! as they boldly took control of the media discourse by any means necessary, he himself was also protesting in the public sphere. At the 1988 convention of the GDR Film and Television Workers Association, he delivered a much-quoted speech, “Unsere Welle war keine” (Our Moment Never Came),24 as a public protest against the silencing of the fourth and youngest generation of East German filmmakers.25 While his efforts did not yield the desired result—a smaller, dedicated “studio for film experiments” within the DEFA Studio—3.5 million Marks were granted to found a new artistic production group at DEFA, Gruppe DaDaeR,26 in January 1990. The demand for a studio for experimental films within the DEFA Studio for Feature Films speaks to a desire for more playful aesthetics and a more honest media discourse in the GDR.

The new DaDaeR Production Group, under the leadership of producer Thomas Wilkening, voted democratically to finance Foth’s Letztes aus der DaDaeR (Latest from the Da-Da-R, 1990), Herwig Kipping’s Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen (The Land Beyond the Rainbow, 1991) and Peter Welz’s Banale Tage (Banal Days, 1990). Though none focuses directly on environmentalism, many of the last films produced at DEFA document environmental destruction with graphic images of devastated landscapes, which also served as metaphorical depictions of the filmmakers’ disillusioned idealism. In Latest from the Da-Da-R, which was shot during the post-production of Biology!, viewers see images of polluted rivers and industrial ruins. In Ulrich Weiß’ Miraculi (1991), also one of the last DEFA films, the bird’s-eye shot of the camera hovers over a muddy crater, formerly the site of a picturesque lake. In the title sequence of Herwig Kipping’s The Land Beyond the Rainbow, the camera pans over seemingly endless miles of wasteland, the result of open-cast coal mining.27 The GDR’s economic need for the ruthless extraction of natural resources to fuel its planned economy in competition with the capitalist West, and the greedy use of officially protected nature preserves for personal gain, as in Biology!, are portrayed as trumping concerns for sustainability, transparency and equity. None

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23 “Life’s Little Ironies,” interview with Jörg Foth.
24 Foth, Jörg. “Speech at the Fifth Congress of the Verband der Film und Fernsehschaffende der DDR.” Filmspiegel 19 (1989): 7. Foth delivered this speech instead of the group’s manifesto, which it decided not to deliver in the face of pressure from the SED.
26 This is a play on the German acronym for East Germany—DDR—and the avant-garde DaDa movement of the 1920s. In the title of the English-subtitled version of Foth’s Letztes aus der DaDaeR, it is transcribed as Da-Da-R.
27 This landscape is also prominently featured in the post-GDR film Verfehlung (The Mistake), made by the well-known (East) German director Heiner Carow in 1991.
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of these films could have been made before the fall of the Wall and the unraveling of the DEFA Studio for Feature Films. The stark depictions of environmental exhaustion signified the complete failure of the East German state to engage productively with its critics, who had actively worked for environmental, economic, political and educational reforms. The collapse of the GDR in November 1989 and the ensuing chaotic period until German unification on October 3, 1990 provided a rare historical opportunity for the production of these unfiltered last films.

The production of *Biology!*, in contrast, had been carried out very much according to normal studio processes, which involved many different divisions, censorship levels and economic constraints, as well as the incorporation of various political and aesthetic viewpoints. Unlike the almost concurrent *Latest from the Da-Da-R*, which Foth created very quickly and in collaboration with artists of his choosing, *Biology!* had been in development for years before it was offered to Foth to direct. While he had great influence on shaping the existing scenario as well as casting, he had not been part of the project from the beginning. In contrast to the brazen satire and playful tone of *Lastest from the Da-Da-R*—a musical odyssey of two clowns through iconic sites of the quickly vanishing GDR—*Biology!* captures a mood of resigned acquiescence, exemplified by teacher and parents. It documents the systematic silencing of the dissenting voice, similar to another of DEFA’s last feature films, *The Architects* (1990) by Peter Kahane. Ulla’s continued resistance against the defeatism of the adults and her decisive appropriation of new media tools, however, distinguish Foth’s film as more than a mere analysis of destruction, especially in the final image, as the high-schoolers’ human chain faces off with the truck. *Biology!* is an astonishingly up-to-date reflection on the complex struggles of an individual against many societal contradictions. Aesthetically, the film incorporates many techniques Foth used in his other films, including the use of archival footage, a subtle soundtrack full of popular music references and elegiac camera sequences, which offer wordless commentary on the cynical force of authority intent on preserving its power at any price. As such, the film has lost none of its relevance three decades later.

Jörg Foth finally received a contract as a full director at DEFA but was then terminated along with the rest of the studio’s employees when the studio closed a few months later. After German unification, Foth directed a number of films for television, including the documentary films *Prenzlauer Berg Waltz* (*Prenzlauer Berg Waltz*, 1994) and *Die Verweigerung* (*The Refusal*, 1996), and also worked in theater and publishing. In both the GDR and unified Germany, Foth’s work has consistently focused on exploring the intersections of personal and political history. As an artist, he has offered an innovative and playful aesthetic approach in his feature-length and short films, which favor music, clowns, puppets and children. In the last decade of the DEFA Studio, he spent much time and effort working for urgently needed reforms. Foth’s career was characterized by the push and pull of engagement in an attempt to effect change from within, realize his own aesthetic vision and refuse being instrumentalized by the studio hierarchy. In his 1988 short film *Oh Dear!*, a musician playing medieval instruments in village squares articulates a demand that programmatically applies to Foth’s overall oeuvre as well: “Whoever wants to play, should play.”

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28 “Wer spielen will, soll spielen.”