In August 2020, film director Jörg Foth was interviewed about his film Biologie! (Biology!) by Hiltrud Schulz of the DEFA Film Library.

After your feature film debut, Das Eismeer ruft (The Arctic Sea Calls, 1983), and your co-production, Dschungelzeit (Time in the Jungle, 1987), you made the youth film Biology!. How did this film project come about?

It was customary at the DEFA Studio that a debutant director first shoots a children’s film. Children’s films weren’t as expensive, and the risks—in terms of content—could almost be excluded. To meet its yearly production plan, the studio had to produce twelve feature and four children’s films. The Arctic Sea Calls was the second children’s book—after Ede und Unku (Ede and Unku)—by the great author Alex Wedding. She wrote it while in exile in Prague in 1934, and Malik Verlag published it when she fled to London.

Hanus Burger had filmed an adaptation of it for the Barrandov Film Studio in 1961; but the DEFA Studio commissioned me to make another version after my concept for Moritz in der Litfaßsäule (Moritz in the Advertising Pillar) was rejected and that project was given to Rolf Losansky. In my concept for Moritz in the Advertising Pillar, children would have played not only the children’s roles but also those of the adults—in suits and costumes, eyeglasses, ties, makeup, nail polish, cigars, beer, purses and briefcases, etc., and with adult mannerisms and quirks. I shied away from contemporary films at DEFA because, except for two or three of them, they were just getting cuter and cuter.

After The Arctic Sea Calls, I got a so-called “junior director’s” contract, which on one hand guaranteed me three of my own productions within five years, but on the other hand obliged me to also continue working as an assistant or co-director. I immediately got an assistant director assignment for Die Grünsteinvariante (1984, The Grünstein Variant) by Bernhard Wicki; and then I co-directed Time in the Jungle with Tran Vu, which dragged on for almost five years.

I left DEFA to work in theater in late 1988 and interned for director Christoph Schröth’s production of William Tell at the theater in Schwerin. We discussed the possibility of my staging Christoph Hein’s Passage or Sewan Latchinian’s Berlin on the experimental stage, after the premiere. But after Tell premiered, Schröth left for the Berliner Ensemble, and I would have had to start the whole conversation again with the new director.

It was at this point that DEFA dramaturg Erika Richter contacted me, saying I could return to the DEFA Studio if I would make a young-adult adaptation of the novel Wasseramsel [European Dipper] by Wolf Spillner. She explained that DEFA’s general director, Hans Dieter Mäde, was on extended sick leave and wouldn’t be coming back to the studio, so nothing stood in the way of my directing a second film of my own. 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.

Biology! and other films of yours were produced by the Babelsberg Artistic Production Group (KAG). How did you get into the KAG? What was the process for being accepted into a given DEFA KAG?

The Moritz in the Advertising Pillar project was offered to me by the Johannisthal KAG. After it was given to
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Rolf Losansky, my second offer—for *The Arctic Sea Calls*—came from the Babelsberg Group. But it could have happened the other way around. As a director, you weren’t automatically accepted into the dramaturgical production group that developed the material; but if the collaboration went well, the participants would be happy to work with each other again the next time. I made three films as part of the Babelsberg Group: *The Arctic Sea Calls, Time in the Jungle* and *Biology!*. All three films went wrong; but I always ended up in the same group. The ideas I suggested to DEFA were realized in neither the Babelsberg, nor any other KAG.

*Biology!* addresses issues surrounding environmentalism and nepotism in the GDR. These were controversial topics and not officially discussed at the time. Were there moments when you thought that the film wouldn’t make it to the movie theaters? Why were you interested in issues having to do with the ecological movement and environmentalism? The history of environmentalism in the GDR is also closely connected to the church. Did you ever think of including this aspect of things in the film?

No, I didn’t think the film wouldn’t make it to the cinemas. Because, for financial reasons, censorship had already been frontloaded into the early stages of the film’s development. A finished film no longer had to be banned, as project ideas and material development were being controlled and, if necessary, terminated. I also couldn’t have imagined that there would be no cinemas left that were allowed to show DEFA films when *Biology!* was released the following year.

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. Ulla calls for human morality on behalf of nature, which is precisely why she can be so ceremonially and solemnly cast out, with such cynicism, at the roll call.

How did the collaboration work with the author Wolf Spillner, who wrote the youth novel on which the film is based? Did he have a lot of influence on the script? To what extent does your film adaptation deviate from the book? How did the decision come about not to use the title of the book, which was very well known in the GDR, but instead the title *Biology!*? And how did you find the two main actors: Stefanie Stappenbeck, who plays Ulla, the young environmental activist, and Cornelius Schulz, who plays her boyfriend Winfried?

I did not know Wolf Spillner or his book. The DEFA Studio did not task me with returning to Spillner’s original text; rather, I was to start with the scenario, which had the same title as the novel, that had been developed and written by Gabriele Kotte, Wolfgang Müller and various film directors. The scenario had been shelved and was like a sunken boat that needed to be salvaged. Of course, I didn’t adapt the scenario as it was; that wouldn’t work before finding the locations and casting the roles.

Wolf Spillner and his book had spent five years with scenarists and directors, and probably suffered a lot because of all the discussions and changes they considered. He was accordingly skeptical and even ironic in response to my approach to the material; but, at the end, he was probably glad that the book had finally become a film. My changing the title of the film from *Dipper* to *Biology!* most clearly expresses how I shifted the story. Less idyll and romance, more toughness and disillusion.

Your film poetically portrays teenagers’ first experiences with love, including their first sexual experiences. Ulla is an educated girl who knows about sexuality. In one scene, she goes to a gynecologist to get a
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prescription for birth control pills. (In this scene, by the way, Helke Misselwitz—who was by then already very well-known as a documentary filmmaker—plays the nurse!) To my knowledge, Biology! is the only DEFA film that addresses contraception for young girls so openly; in the GDR, contraceptives were free of charge as of 1972 and were often prescribed to girls as young as 16. Did these scenes already exist in the novel, or did you add them to the script? You also provide commentary in this scene, by having the doctor ask Ulla: „You’re informed about the possible side effects of the pill?” Could you say something about the meaning of this scene?

With the abolition of Paragraph 218 outlawing abortion and contraception in 1972, girls and women were given back their constitutional right to equality and self-determination over their bodies, and thus their unconstrained dignity; after this point, they could obtain legally regulated contraception, in the form of the pill, as well as the free medical termination of unwanted pregnancies. Sexual liberation and social revolt seem to be interdependent. Look at the pictures of Marianne on the revolutionary barricades in France, the photos of Uschi Obermaier in West Berlin’s Kommune 1 and East Germany’s nudist beaches, which are now subject to bans and restrictions again. The GDR put an end to centuries of humiliation and violence against women—and thus, life is so ironic, also to itself.

What role did music play in the film for you? The song “Langeweile” (“Boredom”) was written by the East German rock group Pankow and, in the film, performed by the band The Breads. This 1988 song was very popular among GDR youths and mirrored the living situation of many young people there in the late ’80s. There’s also a wonderful scene in which Ulla’s boyfriend Winfried visits her and goes through her record collection. We see album covers of Bob Dylan, Rolling Stones, John Lurie, Chuck Berry and Tracy Chapman records. Such a record collection would have been very unusual for someone in Ulla’s generation. Was it possible to buy these records in the GDR? And the Rolling Stones’ record Steel Wheels? That was only released while you were working on the film in 1989—you were very up to date in your selection!

Yes, it would have been an unusual record collection for someone in Ulla’s generation in the GDR, but she got those records from her father. Even though the black-market price for one album was 100 East Marks, there were many such record collections in GDR homes.

Christoph Theusner wrote the film score and recorded it on the acoustic guitar. He had also composed the score for my co-production Time in the Jungle and recorded it along with Sony Thet. I met Christoph at the Baltic Sea in the summer of 1965. We hitchhiked back to Berlin together. He played in the beat band Rhythmus ‘65. Because the band was banned in Berlin, they performed at the Waßmannsdorf Bierkrug ballroom, near Schönefeld, and at the guest house by the lake in Rangsdorf. Their specialty was the Hollies, Searchers and the Bee Gees (before they got into disco)—like their song “New York Mining Disaster 1941,” with vocals, acoustic guitars and folk beat. Christoph founded the classical-folk-jazz band Bayon, along with musicians from all over the world; it was at the end of the Beats, but long before the term “world music” existed.

From the “medieval punk band” Tippelklimper, there emerged The Inchtabokatables and Corvus Corax. Corvus Corax still organizes massive knight games. The Inchties were on fire during the 1990s; they played punk violin and their shows were explosive witches’ dance floors. But by using only acoustic stringed instruments and with an unerring folk foundation, they remained true to their folk roots of speed punk, just like Bayon. Pankow was the most offensive pun in the GDR. Punk challenged the government for their city. Punk conquered the state with this band name. The song “Boredom” is from the 1988 album Aufruhr in den Augen [Riot in the Eyes]. When I asked Robert Beckmann to play “Boredom” in Biology! in 1989, Tippelklimper had
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already split up. The Inchties hadn’t yet sorted through some legal matters, but they had gotten together, written songs and were already performing. During the final production, when I asked Robert what I should call his band in the credits, he said The Breads: “Give us this day our daily bread.” The music in Biology! ranges from Christoph Theusner’s Rhythmus ’65, one of the first Beat Bands of the GDR, and concerts with Bayon, to Pankow’s Riot in the Eyes, the highlight of GDR rock ‘n’ roll, and to Robert Beckmann’s The Inchties, the last GDR Beat Band.

One of my projects that didn’t get much love at DEFA was called Tanzwut [Dance Mania]. I wanted to gather all these wonderful East German musicians together and organize one of those medieval dance epidemics as a big-screen spectacle. It would have been inspired by the children who danced from Erfurt to Arnstadt on July 15, 1273 CE. But the studio’s leadership was either still respecting the beat music ban of 1965, or was still nursing their wounds from the last DEFA musical, Zille und Ick (Zille and Me), which was filmed in 1981-82, or both. Heiner Carow, born in 1929, had almost managed to film Paule Pankow with the band Pankow, which would have been the only DEFA rock musical. But even he didn’t succeed.

Like in The Arctic Sea Calls, you use documentary footage in this film. At one point, Ulla’s parents have the TV on, which is broadcasting an Augenzeuge (Eyewitness) newsreel. The segment is # 1950/24 and features an interview with John Scott Peet, a British journalist who defected to the GDR in the summer of 1950. In the excerpt we see, he says: “...the time will come when all journalists can be honest and decent people, instead of the scribes of warmongers like today.” Why this clip with John Scott Peet? What interested you about Peet? And how did you find it?

I had brought documentary film material back from Moscow for The Arctic Sea Calls and had also used documentary film clips in Time in the Jungle. As an assistant director, I had often had to search for documentary footage or photos for the films of other directors. I love finding treasures in archives; every single document is better than a history book and the opposite of a mnemonic device. Peet’s defection to the GDR was a great moment in the Cold War. It was easy to find the episode of Eyewitness, in which Peet explained himself in the language of the times and of his place of refuge, the GDR. In 1989, all the television stations were broadcasting reviews of how everything had started 40 years earlier anyway. So why not remind our prospective viewers of such a defector of the first hour? That’s how the GDR had began—as the justified hope of many people around the world.

The film was shot in the last months of the GDR’s existence. The last day of shooting was October 31, 1989, only nine days before the Wall opened. How did the tension in the country affect working on the film, as well as its release and premiere in 1990?

The first day of filming was August 16: the anniversary of Elvis’ death, a bad sign. The last day of filming was October 31, my 40th birthday: an even worse sign. A 40-year-old filmmaker shooting a DEFA film about contemporary issues for young people who don’t give a hoot about the country and who love nothing more than E.T., Dirty Dancing and glitter makeup. During our coffee breaks in August and September, we heard news from Hungary and Prague. In October, Egon Krenz replaced Erich Honecker as head of state. The dream was over—the dream that this country could still somehow be improved or saved. And yet, it was unimaginable that the GDR would disappear without a trace. But three days after we finished shooting, between 500,000 and one million people gathered at Alexanderplatz in East Berlin to demonstrate in favor
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of adding two articles to the constitution of the GDR: one for freedom of speech and one for freedom of assembly.

No one in this parade of laughter and smiles was asking to open the Wall. But three days after we started work in the editing room, the Wall fell, and a state that had previously submitted to the East made a beeline to submit to the West. The police and army got new clothes, the city halls had different regulations and, from one day to the next, teachers said the opposite of everything they’d said before. A whole half-a-country defected to its bigger brother, a shining mirror image.

Biology! was approved in January or February 1990, I can’t remember. It must have happened in passing, some stamp somewhere, and it was done. But in March, after directing three of my own films (the studio wrongly counted the co-production Time in the Jungle as my own film), my previous contract as a junior director was replaced and I was given a permanent position as a director at DEFA. This was valid until the position was terminated, in September. The unforgettably depressing Berlin premiere of Biology! took place at the no longer heated Babylon Cinema on December 15, 1990.¹ Fifteen people who had worked on the film, along with some relatives, sat in the audience—all of them coughing and sneezing and wearing coats, scarves and hats.

Only a few weeks before, on October 7, there had been an equally unforgettable, but exhilarating premiere at the same venue. The Babylon Cinema was bursting at the seams for Letztes aus der DaDaeR (Latest from the Da-Da-R), and there was even applause, etc., after great songs like “Shanty” and “Halb und Halb” (“Half and Half”). I had shot Latest from the Da-Da-R in six weeks during the spring of 1990. It was the first of the last four DEFA films; they were not picked up by the GDR’s only film distributor, PROGRESS, which was absolutely unheard of. Finally, in the summer of 1990, the Filmverlag der Autoren stepped in to distribute my film, and the distribution company Basis took on the other films: Peter Welz’s Banale Tage (Banal Days), Herwig Kipping’s Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen (The Land Beyond the Rainbow) and Ulrich Weiß’s Miraculi.

So, as a now 70-year-old, I experience the current DVD release of Biology! as a little miracle. Thank you!

—Translated by Hasret Eleby

¹ Biology! premiered on September 20, 1990 in Schwerin and its official release in theaters was on October 12, 1990. This was the Berlin premiere.