

Restored: *The Russians Are Coming*

Ralf Dittrich worked with the DEFA Foundation Berlin and ARRI Media Munich/Berlin on the restoration of Heiner Carow's feature film *Die Russen kommen* (*The Russians Are Coming*) for more than two years. The production of the movie was stopped in 1968. However, the director used several of the original scenes from the movie for a different feature, *Karriere* (*Career*, 1970), from which he later distanced himself. *The Russians Are Coming* was reconstructed and premiered on December 3, 1987. Three decades later, the movie is now available in a digitally restored version that considered all existing elements of the film. Hiltrud Schulz, of the DEFA Film Library, interviewed Ralf Dittrich about the reconstruction of the movie in 1987 and the background story of the latest digital restoration. The resulting 2K DCP of the film premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2016 and was part of MoMA's To Save and Project Festival of Film Preservation in November 2016.

From 2014 to 2016, you worked on the restoration of Heiner Carow's feature film *The Russians Are Coming*. In what other digital preservation or restoration projects did you participate before?

Most recently, I supervised the digital preservation of several of the so-called "Plenum films" for the DEFA Foundation in Berlin. These were movies that were banned in 1965-66 in the context of the 11th Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED Party. They were completed in large part and/or could be screened only in 1989-1990, after the end of East Germany. Among these digital preservations, the most elaborate project was the 4K-restoration of Jürgen Böttcher's only feature film, *Jahrgang 45* (1966/1990, *Born in '45*), which was completed in 2015. As of 2014, after careful research, work on *The Russians Are Coming* ran parallel to the restoration of Böttcher's film.

How did the restoration of *The Russians Are Coming* come about?

This restoration must be seen in connection with the intensive efforts by the DEFA Foundation to provide digital accessibility to as much of its film archive as possible. It was clear from the very beginning that work on *The Russians Are Coming* would be much more elaborate than for many other digital preservation or restoration projects. Heiner Carow's movie, which was denied state approval before it was completed in 1968, has a special position among the banned DEFA movies. Unlike with other banned movies, the greater portion of the original negative was missing; and yet, the movie was nevertheless completed and released before the end of the GDR.

Can you say something about the complicated history of this movie?

Work on *The Russians Are Coming* stopped during the final editing phase in 1968; but in the internal production logic of the DEFA Studio, the project was not completely banned, but rather continued, in a radically altered form, in the movie *Career*. In a new script—which Carow wrote with Hermann Herlinghaus, instead of the original screenwriter, Claus Küchenmeister—the story of young Günter Walcher, a fierce supporter of Nazi ideology, embedded in a frame story that depicts Günter Walcher 20 years later as a mid-level manager, an opportunist and careerist in 1960s West Germany. About 30 minutes of footage shot for *The Russians Are Coming* can be seen in *Career*—and the only original negative material of the original film that we have today consists of these 30 minutes. After the completion of *Career*, the rest of the original negative and other residual materials were recycled, as was common practice at DEFA after a production was completed.

Surprisingly, *The Russians Are Coming* was then included in DEFA's 1986 production plan and then released in 1987...

It was possible to complete the movie in 1986-87 because fragments of a 1968 work print and parts of a dupe positive of this work print had survived. There are various, partly contradictory legends about the origin and storage of materials, which cannot be resolved down to the last detail. In any case, these two materials and the scenes used in *Career* made it possible for Heiner Carow and editor Evelyn Carow to piece the movie together like a puzzle.

The image quality of the different elements varied radically. A work print—and a dupe positive of a work print even more so—is a transitory, utilitarian product of the filmmaking process; it is made quickly, with no fuss and no importance attached to quality during its duplication. Such materials are thus totally unsuitable as source elements for additional duplications, as they can have extreme stress marks, massive scratches, dirt, visible splices, entire stretches of black frames, markings drawn and pressed on the frames, etc. The majority of these defects cannot be eliminated with analog technology.

Other, equally important problems included very hard contrast, little or no details in dark or light areas and extreme fuzziness. Back then one of the most important objectives was to give the movie the greatest possible visual consistency, that is, to avoid extreme differences in visual quality when combining the various elements. This meant that better materials—especially parts of the original negative—were used only where they could be implemented coherently. Moreover, the better materials had to be adjusted to fit the poorer ones. In addition, adjustments were only possible by means of analog duplication—a very complex and not very delicate procedure.

At the end, the content of the movie was substantially commensurate with what had been intended in 1968. Aesthetically, the result was of great originality and extremely appealing. The critics applauded the movie for its innovative handling of black-and-white, for its extremely harsh contrasts and for the consciously deployed graphic effects of the images. Carow himself identified with his movie, stating in its opening scene: “Looking back at my early childhood, it’s as if I were watching images from an old movie.” He stressed on several occasions that it had been important for him during the completion of the movie to establish a temporal distance to the time of the movie setting, i.e. 1945, by means of a special aesthetics.

At the same time, many details that Carow had intended to be part of the film in 1968 were missing. Dark and light areas were deficient in gray-scale values, resulting in black or white areas that had hardly any detail and sometimes totally bled. In some parts the characters were surrounded by a halo. Numerous flaws and traces of handling the material were also obvious, of course. And much less of Jürgen Brauer’s fascinating camera work and the innovative handling of the widescreen Totalvision format, the East German version of CinemaScope, was visible. The history of censorship had literally burned itself into the images.

Were any members of Heiner Carow’s original film team involved in the current digital restoration?

There was no active cooperation with former participants. Unfortunately, a planned cooperation with cameraman Jürgen Brauer did not materialize. Given the very complicated situation of the material and the sketchy information concerning its past history, from our earliest preparations we tried to involve people who’d dealt with the movie at various points in time. My most important contact and consultant prior to and throughout the restoration was Evelyn Carow, who had edited the movie in 1968. She had played an important part in preserving some materials and, aside from her husband, Heiner Carow, she was certainly the most involved in completing the movie in 1987. During long conversations with her, I tried to find out how this was done. I was more interested in the practical procedure than in events that led the movie to be returned to the DEFA production schedule almost 20 years after it was rejected by the government. It turned out that various layers of memory got mixed up and interfered with each other, however—on the part of Evelyn Carow and even more so with other participants. As a result, it was very difficult to figure out exactly how they’d worked in 1987 and what elements they’d had to draw on.

Which film historical sources were available to you in planning the restoration?

Documents about the movie can be found in various archives, especially in the Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archive), the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts) in Berlin and the Potsdam Film Museum. However, these documents refer primarily to the genesis of the movie until 1968, the refusal of state approval and the work on *Career*. What really mattered to us was information concerning the completion of the movie in 1987 and the path travelled by the surviving elements afterwards. Information on this was very sparse. This is why the recollections of contemporary witnesses bore a special meaning.

What cinematic and film historical objectives did you pursue in the 2016 restoration?

Before inspecting the existing elements, we assumed that the 1987 version of the movie should be our reference point, in regard to both editing and aesthetics. Based on numerous preliminary conversations and given the film's unusual production history, we also assumed we would not find a matched negative, but rather an edited positive. We expected that we would be able to work directly from the positive elements and thus reduce generation losses, which had been inevitable in the 1987 analog duplication process. In addition, we wanted to be relatively conservative with retouching so as to selectively achieve a certain improvement of the visual quality. We thought that the restoration would not change the basic nature of the movie. All in all, we had a rather conservative approach.

At this point we had no exact notion—or rather, in several aspects we had false information—of how finishing the movie had proceeded in 1987. We were only familiar with the existing theatrical prints, and our ideas about the quality of the source elements that had been used were based on these. When we finally got hold of the elements preserved in the Federal Archive, however, we were dismayed to learn that there was no edited positive, but only a seemingly jumbled hodgepodge of various elements. When we previewed these, however, we were surprised, even fascinated by the picture quality of the surviving parts of the work print. This was entirely unexpected! We discovered details in the images, including facial expressions and gestures, which we had never seen before.

We soon realized we had to decide whether our goal should really remain to simply produce a digital copy of the 1987 version. All of a sudden, we found ourselves caught in the middle between a 1968 movie that had never existed, and a 1987 movie that had filled the lacuna in film history. It was clear that we would not be able to, nor did we want to reconstruct the movie in its originally intended form. But should we forego everything we had just started to discover, which could not be seen in the 1987 version?

After a thorough and tedious survey, during which we examined every element worth considering for our restoration, we decided to steer a middle course. That meant assembling the movie anew from various components, and proceeding in a far more compartmentalized way—sometimes frame by frame, instead of scene by scene—than was possible in 1987. Thanks to the digital technologies that are now available, we were able to join and adjust various elements and to make the transitions softer and less obtrusive than in 1987. We were now able to include elements of better quality, even if they were not available for a complete scene. We used the work print as our reference to determine an average image quality. It was our aim to find, in combination with the other elements, a line that oscillated around this average and gave the movie a good rhythm.

You worked on the restoration with colleagues from ARRI Media in Munich/Berlin. Which source elements did you finally have available and use for the restoration?

To a great extent the elements available to us were the same as those used in 1987; unfortunately, however, some elements that were evidently available at that time seem to be missing today. Thus, in a few places we had to resort to the poorest of all elements, in terms of visual quality: a dupe negative created in 1987 as the source element for duplicating theatrical prints. Initially we had considered this only as our editing reference. It is an irony of history that this movie, which had already been mistreated, was again partially lost after its belated completion. It is impossible to know whether this happened shortly after its release at the end of the 1980s, or later, on its way to the Federal Archives amidst the chaos of the post-unification period.

The movie was restored in 2K. What were the reasons for not choosing a 4K or even 6K restoration?

Ideally, the condition of the available source material determines which digital resolution will be used. In the very special case of *The Russians Are Coming*, a resolution above 2K would not have made sense or benefitted the movie, because the bulk of the elements we had to work were low-resolution. As I mentioned before, our reference was the work print; that included no picture information that we could not render adequately in 2K.

What special digital restoration methods were necessary and what was the result?

We basically employed no methods that were different from other restoration projects. The challenge was rather to develop a concept for the deployment of common technologies. Just like the filmmakers in 1987, we set our sights on giving the movie the greatest possible aesthetic uniformity, a rhythm and flow. This—more than what was possible to achieve through retouching and color grading—guided our decisions. With retouching, in particular, not everything that could be done technically made sense conceptually; with some problems we also had to forego extensive digital retouching—massive scratches, for instance, would have been prohibitively expensive to erase. In general, we did not make decisions based on predetermined principles, but rather considered how to proceed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the concrete context.

Color grading was of special importance in obtaining a consistent look. It was our primary tool in working to match different elements to minimize visible discrepancies in picture quality as much as possible. We undertook several tests to explore the possibilities and the limits of our grading tools. Based on how each element responded to the technologies at our disposal, we then drew up the short list of the source elements we would use.

In some sequences—e.g., near the beginning, when Günter chases the Russian forced laborer—we moved back and forth between different elements and at times accepted shifts in the middle of a take—even quite visible ones—in our attempt to get the most we could from the original negative. In other sequences, we worked for long stretches with relatively bad material. For the scene in an attic, where Günter stands guard in the last deployment and the figures are often barely detached from the black background, we had many snippets available with clearer details; but we deliberately gave them up, since they would have disrupted the visual rhythm of the scene.

Were any missing images recreated?

Extrapolation and interpolation of single frames and sets of frames have become routine methods of digital processing, but remain controversial from an ethical point of view when it comes to restoration. Besides, they always carry the risk of generating digital artifacts. One thing that significantly influenced the flow of the movie was a great number of black frames, which repeatedly interrupted film sequences in the form of black flashes. After abandoning a conservative approach to the project, we had to decide whether we should remove or replace these black frames. We did it, whenever it was technically possible to do so without forming artifacts, and the rhythm of the movie was substantially improved.

It is known that black-and-white ORWO material has a special, unique graininess. This movie was shot on black-and-white ORWO film stock. Did this play a role, especially in an effort to approximate the original black-and-white contrast and atmosphere of the movie?

Indeed, there are DEFA movies where the grain substantially influences the characteristics of the movie as a whole. For example, we restored Böttcher's *Born in '45* in 4K in part because it was important for us to depict the original, at times very striking grain as well as we could. With *The Russians Are Coming*, the question of the characteristics of the movie was much more complex. The grain is only one element among many. The various generations of material differ greatly in their look. This was not intentional, but rather resulted from the complicated genesis of the movie. Managing the grain in this project was subordinate to our goal of giving the movie visual consistency.

Can one say that the current version represents Heiner Carow's original intent from 1968?

In terms of content, yes—but this was already the case in 1987. Aesthetically, the movie cannot be reconstructed in the form that was intended. This movie has its special history. The wounds that time inflicted upon it remain visible, and this is how it should be. Our parameters were very narrow due to the original material. In many places, however, I think we succeeded in making visible things that had hardly been visible before.

Translated by Sigrít Schütz and Skyler Arndt-Briggs.

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