Wagner in East Germany: Joachim Herz’s The Flying Dutchman (1964)

By Joy H. Calico

Joachim Herz’s Der fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman, 1964), which he subtitled Film nach Wagner, is assured a place in film opera history because it is the first more-or-less complete Wagner opera on film. This unduly neglected film merits scholarly attention far beyond its novelty status as a cinematic first, however. Herz (1924-2010) was first and foremost a stage director; in fact, the “film based on Wagner” was his only foray into that medium. It exerted considerable influence on subsequent stage productions that have since become landmarks, including stagings of other Wagner operas by Harry Kupfer and Patrice Chéreau at Bayreuth, and by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle at San Francisco. To date, the small body of literature on Herz’s Holländer has focused on these two aspects of its history, but has not adequately considered the significance of the film’s original context. Herz’s film is a product of the Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft, better known as DEFA, which was East Germany’s state-owned and only film studio; furthermore, its production followed a public debate about Wagner’s place in the culture of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). It is a distinctly East German cultural artifact, produced at the intersection of opera and film, and within the milieu of GDR social and cultural political policy. This essay has three parts: a contextual overview of GDR opera and film culture up to the mid-1960s and Wagner’s place in it; a general examination of Herz’s film and his rendering of the character of Senta in particular; and an argument that Herz’s Der fliegende Holländer is also an homage to F. W. Murnau’s Nosferatu, making the high art of Wagnerian opera the Trojan horse whereby the horror film genre, otherwise virtually absent from DEFA repertoire, gained access to the East German screen.

OPERA AND FILM IN GDR CULTURAL POLITICS

Opera and film, as two separate media, figured prominently in East German cultural politics from the very beginning, when that region was still technically the SBZ (Soviet Occupied Zone). The primary role of opera houses was to produce Soviet opera and Russian and German classics, thereby preserving and promoting the classical Erbe, or German cultural heritage, on which the new socialist culture had to be based (although Verdi was also quite popular). Despite the close association of Hitler with the Bayreuth festival and with the composer’s descendants, and the resurgence of that festival just across the border in West Germany, there seems to have been little doubt early on that Wagner remained essential to East Germany’s cultural heritage. Already during the Allied occupation of 1945–49, the Berlin Staatsoper, the flagship East German opera house, had performed four Wagner operas: Der fliegende Holländer (1946), Tristan und Isolde (1947), Die Meistersinger (1948), and Parsifal (1949).

This was followed by a gap of six years at the Staatsoper, although when the company resumed residence in its newly reconstructed home on Unter den Linden in 1955, the work chosen to celebrate that event was Die Meistersinger. This hiatus also coincided with the founding of the East German state and the official transfer of power from the occupying Soviets to the SED, or the Socialist Unity Party. Some opera intendants (general directors) hesitated to stage Wagner in the zealously antifascist climate of SED-run denazification. Some, such as Walter Felsenstein, founder and intendant of the Berlin Komische Oper from 1947 until his death in 1975, avoided Wagner for other reasons. He himself directed no Wagner operas after 1934 and none were staged at his house until he invited his former student Herz to stage Holländer in 1962; that production would become the impetus for Herz’s film. Intendant Willy Bodenstein in Dessau had no such qualms, however; he programmed Wagner each season from 1950 onward and established the Richard Wagner Festival Week in Dessau in 1953. Bodenstein’s stated aim was to rehabilitate Wagner and present him “free from the misinterpretations and falsifications of fascism.” To that end he mounted twenty productions of Wagner’s...
Wagner in East Germany:
Joachim Herz’s The Flying Dutchman (1964)

operas between 1949 and 1957, and by the end of the 1950s Wagner’s operas were performed in the GDR more often than those by any other composer.¹

A long-overdue discussion of Wagner’s role in GDR culture finally got underway in the pages of the journal Theater der Zeit in July 1958,² at roughly the same time as the Fifth Party Congress of the SED met. Emboldened by a thaw in the wake of Khrushchev’s visit to the GDR in August 1957, critics and readers alike voiced a wide range of opinions. Theater der Zeit continued to showcase the controversy through the December 1958 issue, one month after Khrushchev demonstrated unprecedented Soviet support of the GDR when he delivered an ultimatum to the western Allies demanding their withdrawal from Berlin in six months.¹⁰ Critic Heinz Bär questioned the retention of all of Wagner’s operas in the repertoire, noting the apparent compatibility of certain works with fascism during the Third Reich, and critic Erika Wilde agreed that some works remained in the repertoire only because they had become part of a sacred cultural heritage that needed to be questioned. Reader responses ranged from outrage (“First of all she is unmusical, and secondly she has either disowned her German-ness or she is no German at all”) to pragmatism (“If one is committed to preserving German opera then one cannot abandon Wagner because the repertoire is limited, and he is beloved the world over”) to strategic rehabilitation (“When the Nazis deified Wagner in order to monumentalize their own façade of culture, they had no concept of the changes Wagner had undergone in order to become a revolutionary fighter in 1848”).¹¹ Of the themes that emerged in that debate, Wagner as Revolutionary found the most currency, and his early works—those that preceded his Swiss exile in 1849—were deemed relatively unproblematic; hence the enduring popularity of Der fliegende Holländer. According to statistics compiled by Peter Kupfer, there were 227 productions of Wagner operas in the Soviet-occupied zone and GDR between 1946 and 1965; fifty-six of those were productions of Holländer, in thirty-two different cities, resulting in at least 1,237 performances of Holländer in the first twenty years after the war.¹²

The cultural political agenda for film, however, was different. The occupying forces needed to control the public sphere, and while western Allies focused on print media and radio, the Soviets turned their attention to film.¹³ This was facilitated by the fact that SMAD (the Soviet Military Administration in Germany) controlled Potsdam-Babelsberg, home to the studios in which so many classic and Nazi-era Ufa (Universum-Film AG) films had been made. During the initial stages of the occupation the Soviets screened imports and even some Nazi-era films out of necessity, as resurrecting the production industry proved more difficult than jumpstarting theaters and distribution, but they quickly established that the DEFA aesthetic would make a clean break with that of the previous regime. In October 1945, the Central Administration for Public Education charged Filmaktiv, a group of experienced filmmakers, with developing a plan for the resurrection of the industry. Goals were clearly articulated: East German feature films were to be educational, but not manipulative; and they should be as entertaining as Hollywood movies. Dramatist Friedrich Wolf “appealed for a form of critical cinema that would address the problems of the transitional period and which would assist in bringing about a ‘new and better Germany.’”¹⁴ Walking this fine line produced a strong realist tradition with a commitment to contemporary social issues. Filming for the first project began on January 1, 1946, although SMAD did not grant DEFA a license for film production until May of that year, and the company released three feature films in its first year of operation, all of which exemplify this aesthetic: Wolfgang Staudte’s Die Mörder sind unter uns (The Murderers Are among Us), Milo Harbich’s Freies Land (Liberated Land), and Gerhard Lamprecht’s Irgendwo in Berlin (Somewhere in Berlin).

As with opera companies, however, once the SED assumed leadership in 1949, DEFA found itself in a new relationship with the state. The primary role of the opera companies was not to produce new works but to tend the standard German and Russian repertoire, which meant that intendants could invoke an opera’s membership in the German canon as justification, even where Wagner was concerned. DEFA had a more serious problem, however, in that it needed appropriate new scripts, and under the SED it became increasingly difficult to obtain approval. After its promising start, the company released just thirty films in the first
four years of the 1950s. The film industry was particularly susceptible to the vicissitudes of Soviet bloc politics, and such events as Stalin’s death and the June uprising, both in 1953, and Khrushchev’s renunciation of Stalin in 1956 had immediate ramifications for DEFA. The thaw precipitated by the latter, and encouraged by the Soviet leader’s 1957 visit to the GDR, ended for DEFA in July 1956—at the same time the Wagner debate got underway in the pages of Theater der Zeit—when Minister for Culture Alexander Abusch made it clear that allusions to other types of realism, such as Italian neo-realism, were inappropriate and would not be tolerated. Allan notes that “Abusch’s intervention marked the beginning of a new period of stagnation and a stark decline in the popularity of DEFA films, a decline that was to be exacerbated by the influence of television.”

The pendulum swung again in 1961, when East German artists experienced a certain creative emancipation with the building of the Berlin Wall. This liberation, and a new course at the German Academy for Film [now: Konrad Wolf Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg] designed to improve the quality of scripts, meant that Herz’s foray into filmmaking coincided with, and was surely facilitated by, a historic moment of innovation in the industry. Screenplays had to be approved by the Minister for Culture, and that office was apparently amenable to audience-friendly genres such as comedies, thrillers, various musical films, and reinterpretations of some classic texts, such as Heinrich von Kleist’s Der zerbrochene Krug (The Broken Jug), revised as the script Nachts sind alle Kater grau (At Night All Tomcats Are Gray). Herz’s Holländer represented both a reinterpretation of a classic text and a music genre. It is certainly no accident that cinematic opera was enjoying something of a heyday in the USSR at the time as well. That spirit of openness prevailed in the GDR until the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee in December 1965. The SED’s vociferous criticism of DEFA at that time resulted in the banning of eleven films in 1965–66, all finished or nearly finished feature films, and threw the industry into paroxysms of self-criticism. Herz’s film was made in 1964 and spared the public humiliation of the eleven Regalfilme, also known as the Kaninchenfilme (rabbit films), because Kurt Maetzig’s Das Kaninchen bin ich (The Rabbit Is Me) was deemed the most egregious offender.

Despite East Germany’s investment in both opera and film, it did not produce a tradition of opera on film. Perhaps this is due to the fact that opera production was primarily a medium for preserving and reproducing the canon, while film was primarily a medium for new work. To the best of my knowledge, three such projects preceded Herz’s Holländer: Mozart’s Figaros Hochzeit (Marriage of Figaro) in 1949, screenplay and direction by George Wildhagen; Otto Nicolai’s Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor (The Merry Wives of Windsor) in 1950, also directed by Wildhagen; and Albert Lortzing’s Zar und Zimzimmann (Czar and Carpenter), directed by Hans Müller in 1956. The opera-film hybrid was not universally acclaimed, however; in 1951 eminent music critic Karl Schönewolf had complained about Wildhagen’s productions. He feared that the combination of opera and film would destroy both media; that the artistic unity of the musical work would be irrevocably broken and dissolves when rendered in film; and that music would inevitably be reduced to a servant art, subservient to the film image. It is no accident that the first three opera-films were works by canonical Austro-German composers, or that all three operas were comedies. Wagner and Beethoven may have outranked Mozart, Nicolai, and Lortzing in terms of musical cultural politics, but these choices are consistent with DEFA’s charge to edify through entertainment by producing comedies that also happened to be, or could be said to approach the status of, German cultural Erbe. Musical edification and entertainment on film would take the form of classic operettas in the 1950s, and then a dozen or so Schlagerfilme (popular music films) in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

HERZ’S FILM NACH WAGNER

Joachim Herz’s film began life as a stage production. Recent accounts of his role as an opera director on the East German stage credit him with having single-handedly rescued Wagner in the GDR, beginning with his production of Die Meistersinger at the Leipzig opera house in 1960. According to Herz, his work was not
calculated to appease the state and its concerns about Wagner’s late works or their prior association with the Nazis; rather, his agenda happened to manifest itself in an aesthetic that was consistent with, and therefore could be construed as supportive of, the realism expected on the stage at that time. He described his stage production style for Wagner as “theatrical realism,” taking as his point of departure Felsenstein’s notion of realistic music theater. This style resulted in the invitation from Felsenstein to direct Der fliegende Holländer onstage at the Komische Oper in 1962. The success of that production, with its original 1843 ending, and a subsequent production in Leipzig with the revised 1860 ending, prompted an invitation to stage the opera at the Bolshoi on May 14, 1963, the 150th anniversary of Wagner’s birth. This remarkable event signaled a number of firsts: it was the first production of Holländer in that house in nearly sixty years; the first staging of any Wagner opera at the Bolshoi since Eisenstein’s Die Walküre in 1940; and it was the first time a foreign director had staged an opera there. The fact that a production of Holländer at the Maly Theater in Leningrad in 1957 had been the first Wagner opera of any kind staged in the Soviet Union after World War II speaks to its significance in the Soviet bloc context. Herz’s successes with stage versions in Berlin, Leipzig, and Moscow led to the opportunity to commit his interpretation to film in 1964.

The film marks its share of firsts, as well. As previously noted, it appears to be the first more-or-less full-length Wagner opera on film (the score is judiciously pruned to a cinema-friendly 102 minutes in length). According to Herz, it was also the first time four-channel stereo sound was used in a European film, “enabling the ‘voices’ to issue from the separate cast of miming actors wherever they happen to be in the screen space” and “the ghostly crew [to be] heard as though from the rear of the cinema.” The audio was pre-recorded by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and Opera Chorus, with each soloist’s voice on a separate track. As was standard in Soviet cinematic opera of the time, the parts are played by actors rather than the singers whose voices are heard, and the occasional lapses in synchronization are minimal, given the film’s vintage. The truly astonishing technique of the film is not its audio, however, but its sophisticated cinematography, particularly for a neophyte director coming out of the stage tradition. (Herz’s debts to the films of Murnau, Pabst, and Bergman are quite apparent; the homage to Murnau will be discussed in the next section.) The high level of technical skill is surely due to the fact that the DEFA system, which was modeled after that of the GDR theater, assigned a dramaturge and film advisor to each production, and those assigned to Herz were Lotti Schawohl and Peter Ulbrich, respectively. While they were virtually unmentioned in interviews and reviews, the Märkische Volksstimme of Potsdam credited Herz’s “apparently positive collaboration with talented cinematic advisor Peter Ulbrich” with “this unmistakably Wagnerian conception of cinematic solutions... such that one cannot imagine it more beautifully upon the screen.” More will be said about this below. Wagnerian opera may also have lent itself more easily to cinematic adaptation than some others because film is the medium best able to create the seamless transitions from one scene to another that the composer wanted. This is seen in the opening sequence, in which Senta and the viewer are transported through the boarded-up window out to the ocean below, and later into the flames of the fireplace.

Herz co-authored the screenplay with set designer Harald Horn and left the basic story intact, but drastically altered the perspective so that Senta displaces the Dutchman as the main character. Wagner’s Dutchman and his crew are cursed to wander the seas forever, and he may venture on land only once every seven years, when he can try to gain the love of a good and faithful woman who will save him (a favorite Wagnerian trope). He meets a man named Daland and asks for hospitality; Daland is delighted when the conspicuously wealthy stranger enquires about his daughter, and agrees to hand her over in marriage. As it happens, Senta is already obsessed with the legend of the Flying Dutchman and, despite being in a relationship with Eric, she is drawn to the stranger and not opposed to this arrangement. Later the Dutchman hears Eric accuse her of infidelity and realizes that she may betray him also, so he returns to his ship to keep her...
from sharing his fate. In Wagner’s opera Senta proves her love for him by throwing herself into the sea, whereupon they are united for eternity. Herz’s Senta proves far more independent. 35

The opera’s opening sequence is entirely male dominated: Daland’s ship casts anchor, the Norwegian soldiers come ashore, the Steersman sings his famous watch song, and the Dutchman is introduced with a powerful monologue about his fate, echoed by his crew. By contrast, the film opens with Senta reading the Dutchman legend alone in her room, and without music; the Overture and first scene are then reduced and drastically rearranged to draw the viewer’s focus to her rather than to the Dutchman. When the action finally moves to the Dutchman, he is sometimes visibly singing and sometimes carrying on an internal monologue, and he a rather slight, unimposing figure. Herz’s critique of the bourgeois society that traps Senta is evident from this opening sequence, when a shot with a wide-angle lens from on high creates a sense of extreme claustrophobia, exacerbated by the busy Biedermeier era wallpaper. Her father and the housekeeper monitor her very closely at all times. The ambient sound of waves crashing on the shore grows ever louder; she runs to the window, which is boarded up; and the roaring wind eventually gives way to the D-minor music of the Overture. Senta fades away, and the camera takes the viewer through the window and outside to the ocean below. Her fascination with the story of the Dutchman triggers an obsessive dream, in which the power of her longing literally conjures him forth, so that most of the opera takes place in an extended dream sequence. Herz visually articulates the contrast between suffocating bourgeois reality, which is shot in standard ratio (approximately 4:3) and Senta’s expansive fantasy world, which is shot using a widescreen process (approximately 2,35:1), identified by the filmmaker as CinemaScope. Anamorphic widescreen would also result in some distortion, particularly around the edges of the film, an effect that reinforces the unreality of Senta’s fantasies. The ending is also important for Herz’s conception of Senta. After the Dutchman returns to his ship in order to spare her life, she awakens in front of the fireplace to discover she has dreamt the whole thing. The Dutchman’s portrait in hand, Senta exits the house into the liberation of the great outdoors, escaping forever the bourgeois constraints of patriarchal expectation.

THE UNDEAD

Far more unexpected than this refocused gender reading in a 1964 DEFA film is the introduction of elements from the horror film genre, although making the connection between the undead, a standard trope of horror, and Wagner’s opera is not difficult. Herz even alluded to this in 1963, when he told an interviewee that the film was intended for people who have a horror of opera, and used the English word “horror” in a statement otherwise given in German: “viele Menschen, die vor der Oper einen Horror haben” (many people who have a horror of opera). 36 When Wagner composed Holländer in 1840–41 the undead were quite trendy as an element of the German Romantic fascination with the supernatural. The first literary account of the Flying Dutchman’s story is probably still the most famous: Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” of 1798. By 1812, the legend had cropped up in German literature, and Wagner’s source was a treatment by Heinrich Heine. The undead were especially popular in German Romantic opera in the form of vampires; Wagner had conducted Heinrich Marschner’s opera Der Vampyr (The Vampire) and certainly would have known Peter Josef von Lindpaintner’s opera of the same name (both of 1828). 37 Marschner’s opera exercised a particular fascination with audiences, and it remained in the repertoire of European houses throughout the nineteenth century. Wagner’s link to the undead is open to multiple interpretations. Perhaps the most literal is Ken Russell’s version of Wagner as the undead in his 1975 film Lisztomania. Wagner drinks Liszt’s blood as a metaphor for stealing his musical material and then creates a Frankenstein/Hitler creature to terrorize the world with his music until Liszt returns from heaven to destroy it in his “Love-powered, organ-piped spaceship.” 38 Wagner associated his Dutchman’s state of undeadness with a range of wandering figures as diverse as Ulysses, Prometheus, and Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. Michael and Linda Hutcheon analyze the symbol of the Wandering Jew for Wagner in 1842 as follows:
Wagner in East Germany:
Joachim Herz’s The Flying Dutchman (1964)

[It] seems to have represented precisely this positive figure of the alienated artist, the outcast outsider, and the heroic rebel with whom Wagner himself clearly identified. However, there is no doubt that the composer’s anti-Semitism led him to reinterpret the Wandering Jew in more negative terms within the next decade. But at this point, in 1842, this was still a figure that commanded Wagner’s respect and engaged his imagination . . . The Wandering Jew, then, was the figure upon which Wagner consciously modeled his tortured undead Dutchman.  

This is in direct contrast to David Huc’kvalle’s analysis, which traces the vampire theme in Wagner’s anti-Semitic vocabulary as part of a nineteenth-century stereotype of the Eastern Jew and takes Marc Weiner’s work as a point of departure. 

The continuous wandering is less relevant to the present argument than the requisite state of undeadness that accompanies it. Slavoj Žižek describes this Wagnerian condition as “the very opposite of dying—a name for the undead state of eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless, repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain.” He lists the Dutchman, Wotan, Tristan, and Amfortas as paradigmatic Wagnerian heroes whose past sins have condemned them to this fate and for whom the so-called second death of peace is their only desire. These characters do share the fate of suffering and the eventual second death, but only the Dutchman is truly appropriate in the context of Herz’s attempt to bring opera to the big screen via horror. While the undead may be tragic, they are not horror material if they were not once human, or could not visit the same fate upon one of us. Wotan, Tristan, and Amfortas leave much suffering in their wake, but theirs is a solitary fate; their sin does not cause others to become undead. The Dutchman, however, has an entire crew of the undead, and stands to bring his curse upon women across the centuries.

German Expressionist cinema had had its own fascination with the undead. Barton Byg has written that the German Expressionist legacy manifested itself elsewhere in several genres—gangster films, film noir, and horror movies—but that the East German film company did not “do” horror. Rather, Byg sees the “stylized socialist realism” of DEFA film as the particular East German descendant of the Expressionist aesthetic. That is precisely what happens in Herz’s Holländer, in which Herz pairs his “theatrical realism” with a nod to that most famous of German Expressionist films, Murnau’s Nosferatu (1922). To the best of my knowledge, only one review from 1964 makes this observation, but the homage is quite explicit. The subtitle of Murnau’s film is Eine Symphonie des Grauens (A Symphony of Horror), and it is not far from there to the obsession with the undead that characterized the original, Romantic musical context in which Wagner first conceived his opera. A review of Werner Herzog’s 1979 Nosferatu pointed out that “the constant motifs of the horror film are all prefigured by both cinematic expressionism and German literary Romanticism,” and in hindsight, that connection is apparent in Wagner’s opera.

Several plot elements facilitate this connection, because the story of the Dutchman is really a kind of vampire tale, but the literal, visual allusions Herz makes to Murnau’s Nosferatu are quite specific. The visual tropes that associate the vampire with archways and the female protagonist with windows, for example, recur throughout. The use of on-location shots is another commonality. Nosferatu is atypical of most German Expressionist cinema because it is filmed outside, on location (compare the more typical The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari). The ability to stage action outdoors is a great asset when so much of the opera is concerned with nature, such as wind and sea, and Herz takes full advantage of this in his Holländer. There is a beautiful scene in Murnau’s film in which Ellen awaits the return of her husband at the beach, amid sand dunes and burial sites marked with crosses; Herz’s film has several seaside scenes, and the action passes repeatedly through a cemetery in the dunes as well. Murnau’s film returns several times to images of characters reading The Book of the Vampires, and Herz frames his film with Senta’s reading of the Dutchman legend; both books state that the sacrifice of a woman pure of heart is the only way the undead can finally die in peace.
Finally, the most explicit allusion to that classic film occurs on board the ship, in the scene in which the undead crew is roused from its sleep. The shot of the sailors emerging from below deck is virtually identical to the iconic scene in which Nosferatu climbs out of the ship’s hold: the initial position of the hands on the deck, the close shot of the slowly rising ghastly white face, and then a view of the crewman on deck, filmed from behind and below. Herz capitalizes on the effect by having several members of the undead crew emerge in this way, and then lurch zombie-like toward the tavern where the sailors are carousing. Dressed in rags, wearing white makeup, and sporting skin in various degrees of decay, the undead stagger toward the unsuspecting revelers. The stark contrast, and separation, of good and evil shown in the night outside and the well-lit tavern inside is breached when the zombies begin breaking into the inn.

CONCLUSION

In Herz’s Film nach Wagner, the cultural capital of Wagnerian opera is put at the service of another German medium with an equally distinguished, albeit shorter, tradition: Expressionist cinema. Each had been problematic at some point in early GDR history, and yet Herz’s fusion was successful because he recognized yet another problematic genre, horror, as common ground, and then emphasized their respective horror features to mutual benefit. Der fliegende Holländer originated in German Romanticism’s fascination with the undead, a theme that subsequently found its classic twentieth-century German manifestation in Murnau’s Nosferatu. Horror was not among DEFA’s approved genres, and the East German press ignored the obvious homage to Murnau’s film, presumably because the fickle winds of cultural politics meant that the party line on Weimar-era culture was subject to change, but the references would have been apparent to anyone who had seen Nosferatu. Apparently the otherwise problematic horror genre was acceptable when it entered East German cinema in the Trojan horse of German high culture. There are plenty of ways to stage the Dutchman’s crew that do not involve out-and-out horror elements; in fact, this author has never seen a production of Wagner’s opera that made such extensive use of zombie effects as Herz’s film does. Conversely, the horror film genre may have been the Trojan horse whereby the problematic Richard Wagner was smuggled into GDR culture as well. As documented in Theater der Zeit, even some East Germans who valued Wagner’s music conceded that its association with the Third Reich gave them pause. That regime’s relative indifference to Holländer, coupled with the opera’s irrefutable grounding in the German Romantic tradition, made it a safe choice as representative of Erbe. Happily for cinemophiles, this particular piece of the German cultural heritage also happened to feature the undead.

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Wagner in East Germany: Joachim Herz’s *The Flying Dutchman* (1964)

**NOTES**


2. This project would not have been possible without the generous assistance of several people. Paul D. Young, Associate Professor of English and Director of Film Studies at Vanderbilt University, viewed the film with me and first recognized the connection to *Nosferatu* and kindly advised on technical issues. I am grateful to Barton Byg, Evan Torner, and Hiltrud Schulz of the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for giving generously of their time, expertise, and research assistance. Renate Göthe, director of the newspaper clippings archive of Konrad Wolf Academy for Film and Television in Postdamm-Babelsberg, very kindly responded to numerous queries and provided copies of their press clippings concerning Herz’s film.


4. Newly composed opera, on the other hand, was the subject of the first major cultural political crisis in the GDR, when Brecht and Paul Dessau were accused of formalism in their opera *Lukullus* in 1951. On this controversy, see chap. 4 in Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).


10. This speech triggered the Berlin Crisis (1958–62). The full text is available in English translation as “Address by Nikita Khrushchev on GDR and *Das zwölfte Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg: DEFA-Spielfilme* (October 1958): 40–41.


15. Ibid., 7.


Wagner in East Germany: Joachim Herz’s *The Flying Dutchman* (1964)

23. For a list of DEFA films deemed important by the art music establishment up to 1959, see Karl Laux, ed., *Das Musikleben in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1945–1959*, 348–51. There were also two noteworthy composer biopics in this period: Johann Sebastian Bach (1950), directed by Ernst Dahl; and Ludwig von Beethoven (1952), directed by Max Jaap. The latter was made to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the composer’s death and employed a host of prominent musicologists as advisors. It was awarded the national prize.

24. Karl Schönewolf, “*Ober im Film,*** in: *Musik und Gesellschaft, 1* no. 4 (1951): 11–13. These complaints are not unique to film; some of the same anxieties surface in critiques of live opera productions today, particularly those of the Regieoper persuasion. Detractors fear that the visual stimuli of interventionist stagings will undermine the integrity, primacy, and/or authority of the music.


26. Carney, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 319–29. It should be noted that the section on Herz is the least objective segment of the entire volume.


29. Ibid., 419, n. 46. That production was conducted by Kurt Sanderling, who acted as translator for Herz’s staging at the Bolshoi.

30. Ibid., 326.

31. Regarding the Soviet tendency to use a “double actor-singer cast” see Egorova et al., “An Upsurge of Interest in Musical Cinema,” 187. The vocal and acting cast for Herz’s *Holländer* is as follows: Gerda Hannemann and Anna Pracnal as Senta; Rainer Lüdeke and Fred Düren as the Dutchman; Gerd Ehlers and Hans Krämer as Daland; Mathilde Danegger and Katrin Wolzl as Mary; Herbert Graedtke and Rolf Apreck as Erik; Hans-Peter Reinecke and Karl-Friedrich Höltzke as Steuermann.

32. I am indebted to Hilfrud Schulz for this insight. Correspondence with the author, October 25, 2007. Schawohl was dramaturge on at least three other DEFA films: *Vom König Midas* (1962); *Der Tod des Professors* (1973–74); and *Das Graupenschlössle* (1981–82). Ulbrich worked on at least five other DEFA films: as director and screenwriter on *Uns mahnt ein November* (1958) and *Sieben Sätzen über das Lernen* (1967); and as director of *Mit der NATO durch die Wand* (1961), *Acht Groschen* (West) (1968), and *Der Oktober kam . . .* (1970).

33. “Ober im Film: ‘Der fliegende Holländer’: Richard Wagner in filmischer Konzeption,” *Märkische Volksstimme*, June 1, 1965. This is one of approximately fifty reviews held in the clippings file of the Konrad Wolf Academy for Film and Television in Potsdam–Babelsberg, a copy of which Renate Göthe kindly supplied.

34. See Podroschko, “Senta, oder: Der fliegende Holländer von Joachim Herz.”


40. Huckvale, “*Wagner and Vampires.*”


43. “*Der fliegende Holländer,*” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 6, 1965. The critic says that the ship scene in particular puts him in mind of Nosferatu, and notes that the exterior of Daland’s house seems to come “straight out of the golden age of Swedish silent film.” The critic’s tone also suggests that, like me, he is dubious that Herz is entirely responsible for the result; he notes that Herz had said his only experience with film was as a filmgoer, to which this critic says “er ist ein sehr aufmerksamer Filmsucher” (he is a very attentive filmgoer).

44. The horror genre traits are described as follows: “Normality is threatened by the monster; the nocturnal world intervenes in the diurnal; the familiar suddenly becomes uncanny; the ‘monster’ must be acknowledged and confronted, which often requires use of magic or forms of preternatural power that are denigrated by the scientific establishment.” Kent Casper and Susan Linville, “Romantic Inversions in Herzog’s *Nosferatu,*” *The German Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (1991): 17.

45. Soviet cinematic operas were also “characterized by a passion for shooting on location,” although those locations were typically interior rather than outside. Egorova et al., “*An Upsurge of Interest in Musical Cinema,*” 187.
This fact, plus the recurring visual tropes cited above, persuade this reader that the homage is deliberate. It also suggests that Herz owed much to Ulbrich, Schawohl, and cinematographer Erich Gusko. Barton Byg, Founding Director of the DEFA Film Library at University of Massachusetts Amherst, describes this film project as an anomaly, lacking the standard DEFA apparatus, documentation, personnel, oversight, and paper trail. As an opera scholar I was delighted to discover that Ruth Berghaus was the choreographer. Planet Film Productions acquired the North American distribution rights of the film in the late 1970s. Since 1993, the DEFA Film Library has been the distributor of the film in North America and the digitally restored version of film has been available on DVD with English subtitles from the Library since 2013.


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Thanks to Joy H. Calico and Peter Christian Fröhlich (Indiana University Press) for giving us permission to use the text on this DVD.