

# Interview with Jörg Foth: Director of *Latest from the Da-Da-R*

by Hiltrud Schulz



**After an initial assistantship as a director with GDR television, you moved to the DEFA Feature Film Studio. When was that exactly? Considering that a transition from television to DEFA was not easy, how did this change come about in your case?**

The differences between television and DEFA had to do with the fact that television was a part of the state apparatus that was primarily responsible for propaganda, while DEFA was a state-owned enterprise—a so-called *VEB*<sup>1</sup>—which met its annual production plan more like a business in a cultural industry. All East Germans who wanted to study at the Academy for Film and Television had to be delegated by a film or television company and had the obligation to go back to that company for at least three years after they were done studying.

In my last year in the Navy, GDR television announced in the papers that it was seeking director-interns. In addition to GDR Channel 2, there would perhaps be a third channel. (This never came about, however.) I applied to the television station as a directing intern, spent a year there, was delegated to study directing, and returned at the beginning of 1977, six months late. But I couldn't handle working there for three years. The television was revolted by my student films, and I was revolted by television. I left after a year—sooner than was permitted—and, with a diploma for directing in my pocket, I got a job at the post office (zipcode 1055 Berlin) as a telegram messenger . . . until Ulrich Weiß brought me to DEFA.

Uli Weiß had met me at the Film Academy, when he mentored me during a case study of a scene from "The Master Builder," by Ibsen. Uli had also prepared me for the defense of my student film *Blumenland*. He said: "You have to tell them what it is. It's a 'documentary revue.' If you don't tell them that, then they won't know what it is and won't accept it." Uli was still at the DEFA Documentary Film Studio in 1978, but he was allowed to shoot his second feature film after *Tambari* as a guest director at the Feature Film Studio. By chance, the Feature Film Studio didn't have an assistant director for him as he began preparations for *Blauvogel*. One got sick, another had just fled to the West. But preparations had to get started. So Uli brought me from the post office to the Feature Film Studio. I got a limited contract as an assistant director, which after *Blauvogel* was changed to a permanent position. I owe Ulrich Weiß thanks for many things—probably for everything that worked out for me in life to get me on my feet.

**Since the start of your time at DEFA, you advocated for the younger filmmakers in the studio, tried to get the younger DEFA generation integrated as equals into DEFA structures. Why did this generational problem even exist? Was it already an issue in the first years of DEFA's existence?**

Ulrich Weiß is seven years older than I am; but, for DEFA standards, his films were conceptually and stylistically very young. The studio's vetting of *Blauvogel* was a shock for me. I felt incomparably better at DEFA than in television. But in the *Blauvogel* vetting session there was a lot of screaming, and hair-raising accusations were made against Uli. Racism. Cynicism. Disdain for people. That was my formative DEFA experience: a great film that he couldn't have made anywhere else—and then this administrative panic, these neuroses about art, these suspicions and interferences.

Why there was a growing generational problem since the mid 1970s, I don't know. Probably everyone was afraid of something. And the higher the position and greater the responsibility, the crazier was the fear of not having performed, of being guilty, of being punished, of losing one's position or privileges—whatever. Certainly, the year of the banned films—the *Kahlschlag* of

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1965—and the turnover in studio management is a caesura, after which everything was different from before. The young filmmakers of the 1960s, who debuted after this catastrophe, tried to turn away from the traditional type of film and toward more noncommittal genres, to lighten the pace. The focal distance got longer and longer; the music gurgled along uninterrupted; the heroes lived in modern apartment complexes and had to be positive. A new era had begun. The Wall was no longer discussed much; it stood and divided the world, as if definitively. You adjusted and began to play in your own half, as if it were the whole.

Only with the films of Uli Weiß, Rainer Simon and Siegfried Kühn did cinema once again gain in profile and provocation. Once more there was trouble and the control and censorship mechanisms were ratcheted up again—in the choice of subject matter, directorial assignment and project development. It wasn't a traditional generation conflict in DEFA, after all. We didn't rail against Grandpa's Cinema, like in the Oberhausen Manifesto;<sup>2</sup> only the management's mistrust of increasingly younger generations kept growing. As of 1980 it became increasingly difficult for those who had graduated in directing to shoot their own first films. Seven, eight years would go by between getting the diploma and making the first film, which was meant to yield a somewhat less rebellious start.

To be honest, I never understood how fundamental the unspoken reservations about us were back then. I mean, we weren't a resistance movement and had no plans to topple the GDR—no one's fantasies went that far. We wanted no more and no less than to be a little more cheerful. But exactly this—this need for normality and a breath of fresh air, the desire to be young, to dance, to live and love—was the greatest danger for the increasingly senile GDR. Whoever wanted to live and operate outside of its ceremonies and rituals clashed with it and was considered suspect.

November 4, 1989 was unique in our left half of the world. It was nothing but a laugh-demonstration . . . that the State—totally monitored and armed, by the grace of our ally—couldn't withstand. So frayed were the nerves of the government, so great was their awareness of its own demise. The leadership's awareness of injustice must have been so immense that they smelled the threat of counterrevolution behind all lightheartedness. The communal laughter on November 4, 1989, as we demonstrated for two constitutional clauses—freedom of speech and freedom of assembly—became the physical end of the state. The GDR was laughed to death by its people, as if someone had shouted: "The emperor has no clothes."

## **When did the idea of a studio for younger filmmakers within the DEFA Feature Film Studio come about?**

That happened over the course of many different discussions, events, ways of working. The fall of 1982 must certainly be seen as its hour of birth. That was the first attempt to list the entirety of problems for younger filmmakers, in training and practice, and demand solutions from all the responsible institutions and administrations. In addition to problems of structure and principle, there were more and more opaque problems, which made Angelika Andrees, Jan Bereska and Karl-Heinz Heymann leave the Feature Film Studio. They led to the arrest of Sibylle and Hannes Schönemann and their emigration from the GDR. And Evelyn Schmidt was to be the next one forced out of the studio. Six young feature film directors (including Ulrich Weiß, because he was between generations) out of, all together, fifteen. Alone, each of us only had two choices: either self-destruction by impatience, or self-destruction by patience.

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The minister of film, Horst Pehnert, came GDR television, from where he made his career as the renowned creator of the biggest East German entertainment show, *Ein Kessel Buntes*. His anger at the "49-ers," as he calls us in his vain little 2009 book, *Kino, Kunst, Konflikte*, must have been of pathological proportions and seems to continue to this day. Contrary to the Western fantasy of progress through oedipal patricide, an immeasurable hope for stagnancy must have plagued the fathers of the GDR. In order to achieve the satisfaction of a country-wide stagnation, they were ready and willing to kill their children. "Oh God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son, [. . .] Well, Abe says, 'Where do you want this killin' done?' God says, 'out on Highway 61.'"<sup>3</sup> We absolutely had to pull together and we needed a group. We built it step by step until 1989. That it first became possible for us when the rulers probably already knew that we wouldn't be able to enjoy it for long doesn't matter. We had achieved it and used it. We had done what we could. Including *Herzsprung* (1992) by Helke Misselwitz: four films.

## **Were you in contact with younger directors in other countries? If so, particularly from East European countries back then?**

Students of directing at least took part in the student film festival in Babelsberg, to which film students from other countries came with their films. Sometimes they were also sent with their films from Babelsberg to other student film festivals or to a CILECT festival.<sup>4</sup> Student films were regularly screened at the international Leipzig Documentary Film Festival, but also sometimes at the Forum of International Young Films in West Berlin. Long-lasting working and personal relationships seldom arose this way, however. And after our studies, we sat in the waiting room. For young colleagues from abroad, that was even **less** interesting than the GDR already was as a whole.

## **Your film was the first one shot by the so-called "DEFA Nachwuchsgruppe" (Young Filmmakers Group), which was finally formed on January 1, 1990, after a long struggle. Could you say something about how this group came about, how it was structurally integrated into the DEFA Studio. Could this group decide on the film production on its own?**

The Young Filmmaker Group that finally became a reality at the end of 1989, led by Thomas Wilkening, was the result of all of our efforts throughout the 1980s. In 1990, we received ten percent of the studio budget and could choose how these 3.5 million GDR marks were to be used. With this money we shot *Letztes aus der DaDaeR* (*Latest from the Da-Da-R*) for one million and *Banale Tage* (*Banal Days*) by Peter Welz for 1.5 million. With the remaining million, we began to shoot *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (*The Land beyond the Rainbow*) in 1990, with the hope that if we'd already begun the film, we'd get ten percent of the studio budget in 1991 as well. This is what happened, and Herwig Kipping's film, which had become somewhat more financially ample, could be finished, and the subsequent film, *Herzsprung* by Helke Misselwitz, started. In the meantime, the overall circumstances and conditions in the country had changed so much that the reasons for making our group had disappeared. Until the mid 1990s, euphoria prevailed everywhere, all doors stood open, everyone wanted to have made something with someone, project after project came into being. Suddenly we didn't need our group anymore. And as DEFA was buried by [the West German director] Volker Schlöndorff, on behalf of a French mineral water conglomerate, and its name erased from the company register, no more money would have come from there anyway. Within DEFA, our group's status corresponded to that of the four other artistic work groups, except that we had nothing to do with centralized procedures like

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material development, training and film vetting. We were free. We knew that this was a utopia. And we knew that we had to shoot faster than it would last.

## **Who belonged to this group? Could one just simply become a “member”? Or was the group intended for a specific generation?**

Our group evolved out of the so-called Feature Film Young Directors’ Workshop, in which we regularly met throughout the 1980s to discuss our projects in their various stages of development. As this circle was open and often met with guests from other arts, in the end our group also remained open. It was one of our professed goals to end the sorting of people into operational cages. One shouldn’t have to become a member with us; anyone could come who wanted to and had a proposal to make.

Herwig Kipping had already fled from television and wouldn’t have had a chance to shoot a film without our group. And Helke Misselwitz, who was employed at the Documentary Film Studio, at least had an easier time shooting *Herzsprung* because of our group. And Peter Welz, who came out of the Film Academy in 1989 and shot *Banal Days* with us, became the DEFA feature film director whose debut came in by far the shortest time.

Our group was not limited to our generation; of course people of all ages could have come. There were also people in our circle who did not make their films in our group—such as Peter Kahane’s *The Architects* (1990) or Andreas Höntsch’s *Der Strass* (1991). Both films came about within the artistic work group in which they were normally developed. In any case, we didn’t think that the regular channel of DEFA development and dramaturgy was ineffectual as a whole. There were directors and materials that were in harmony and completely compatible with this traditional DEFA. We just wanted to also have other possibilities—aside from DEFA as it existed—other possibilities, other authors, materials, concepts, to have other actors and musicians at our disposal—in order to express ourselves and let off steam.

## **With regard to your film, did the production proceed completely independently from the “big” studio, or did the studio retain any decision-making powers?**

No, the DEFA Feature Film Studio had nothing to do with even a single decision related to making my film within our group—other than that we produced the film in the studio, with its workers and facilities, which we paid for with the money we’d gotten, like anyone else.

## **You had already worked with Hans-Eckardt Wenzel on the film *Tuba wa duo*. How did the idea for the film *Latest from the Da-Da-R* come about on your part?**

Until the beginning of the 1980s, I tended to be more solitary and skeptical. I lived in Berlin and worked in Babelsberg. The long commute between the two worlds and long absences working as an assistant director in film crews prevented me from getting involved in any third milieu, be it an artistic or other circle in Berlin or Potsdam. I had family, some friends and my job. But during a year-long sickness in 1981-82, I began to get restless, wanted to change something, roll up my sleeves in some way. Irina Liebmann—whose scenario, “*Das Männerloch*,” I really wanted to film because it was hilariously funny—was responsible for bringing Wenzel/Mensching and me together. She was convinced that we belonged together. In any case, as the organizer of the Young Directors’ Workshop I had already begun to open up “our part” of DEFA and connect with other people in the mid-1980s. I was convinced that if we wanted to improve

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our situation, we would have to do it together. Every form of our isolation had to end; all who were affected and had the same mentality had to get onto the same page.

When I succeeded in shooting the short film *Rock'n'Roll*, as a guest at the DEFA Documentary Film Studio—this was during a lag of several years waiting on a coproduction with Vietnam—and then saw Wenzel's piece "Tuba wa duo" on stage, with the two orchestral musicians Georg Schwark and Michael Voigt, I suggested it to the KINOBOX documentary film group, where I had made *Rock'n'Roll* and also *Ach Du Jeh*. The shortness of the film and the musicality seem to have helped in getting it made.

We shot *Tuba wa duo* on an October weekend in 1988, on the roof of the house in which Thomas Plenert lived back then. The film received state approval in January 1989, after we had substituted the word "future" for the word "peace."<sup>5</sup> In addition, the film was rated "valuable" by the commission responsible for such things; but it was not publicly screened in the GDR. With the strange fate of *Tuba wa duo* and, as of October 1989, the first hint of a possibility of soon being able to produce independently within the DEFA Feature Film Studio, I spoke with Wenzel/Mensching about the idea of adapting their two Da-Da-R specters for the cinema. With *Tuba wa duo* I had realized that it works to create an on-screen spectacle from this kind of material. And it was clear to me that *Da-Da-R* could exhibit the rigor that had been blocked from us before.

**The screenplay for your film was written by Steffen Mensching und Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and based on the two programs, "Latest from the Da-Da-R" and "Altes aus der DaDaer" ("Old News from the Da-Da-R"), that Mensching and Wenzel had staged since 1982. These programs would have been subject to constant change, corresponding to the political changes in the country. How were the individual scenes for the film selected?**

At the beginning of 1990 it was clear that our group in fact existed within DEFA and we could make what we wanted. Wenzel/Mensching, Thomas Plenert and I sat down together at a table and gathered all the building blocks that we wanted to take from the various Da-Da-R programs, either because they were still relevant to the new situation, or in the event that filming allowed an extra association to be made. This yielded a series of songs and closed scenes. But both kinds of material had to be brought down from the stage and sent out through the country; it had to be brought out from behind the scenes into real life; it had to play out in the middle of the real downfall. To do this, we needed meetings, third parties, the public, choruses and locations, sites which had the potential to blend theatrical scenes and reality. This work on the script at the green table went really fast and as if from our gut. And we only watched one single film together, so as not to stumble into the adventurous abyss that stood in front of us completely blind and inexperienced: Pasolini's *The Hawks and the Sparrows*.

**Did Mensching and Wenzel write extra scenes for the film?**

All scenes that contain third parties or choruses were written for the film or adapted from existing duo scenes. The ferryman's song on the Acheron—"Vain. Vain. Vain. A dynasty dies out, the other one comes. But the earth remains eternal"—was introduced to the shanty. The biblical killing text in the slaughterhouse was first written during the completion: "Father, I am afraid because you have a knife. My son, come, expose your throat, we must do it." A completed scene with a fawn was not used in the film. Two of our planned locations were not accepted by the authorities at the time; it was April 1990 and everything was still GDR. After they read the

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screenplay, we were not allowed to film the award ceremony scene, “The Honor Is Mine,” in the ballroom of the State Council building on Marx-Engels-Platz (Schlossplatz, Berlin). So we shot it in the great hall of the Academy for State and Law, across from the DEFA Studio.

And the clowns were not allowed to arrive at the award ceremony in a helicopter and land on Marx-Engels-Platz. Except for the rope ladder after the first breakfast, we therefore gave up on a helicopter motif that was in the screenplay. For example, at the end of the “Thank-You Chorus”—when the clowns go crazy on the stairs leading up to the kitschy, decked-out stage of the House of Culture and desperately shout “thank you, thank you, thank you”—a model helicopter came flying through the hall to catch them and fly them back to prison.

And the management of the LEUNA plant forbid us from filming the “Hell” scene in the factory . . . after the clowns were already costumed and masked. The film crew was on location and ready to go. We had, in fact, gotten the authorization to shoot that day; but when they saw the clowns, the factory management suddenly shied away from the idea that these two clowns would go through the factory. The workers might have felt ridiculed. A German flag already flew from the chimney here, in April 1990. The management probably feared for their lives. So we only filmed on the pedestrian bridge from the railway to the factory and shot the actual “Hell” scene in the cement works in Rüdersdorf, where prisoners had still worked until recently.

Our pace, and also the pace of improvisation were a DEFA record. The preparation, filming and completion each took four to five weeks. In each case, that was only a third of the time that was usual at DEFA, although we had chauffeured a large crew—as was customary at DEFA—throughout the country. It was breathless. We’ll never see that again.

## **Irm Hermann, the famous Fassbinder actor, plays the prison matron Margot in your film. How did this casting come about?**

We only used the name Margot during the preparation, in the script, when we didn’t yet know who would play the part. Later it seemed too small to us, too real, too concrete. In the credits, the muse of the clowns is still only listed as “She.”

We cast the parts exactly the same way we took it through the country. The film as a big farewell to dreams and nightmares between the Elbe and Oder rivers. And just as geographically distinctive sites and a revue based on current events both fit and—along with Täve Schur and Christoph Hein, Peter Dommisch and André Hennicke—contributed to and helped form our *Da-Da-R* world, I felt Irm Hermann also belonged.

I’ve lived with Irm Hermann as a filmgoer since *Katzelmacher*, which was shown at Camera—the theater of the State Film Archive—and I admired her at every opportunity I had to see her on screen or television. In my farewell to the *Da-Da-R*, it became clear to me that, without the Wall, Irm Hermann would not be the same for me as before. I went to her and told her about our project, and she acted in it—before we had West marks. Irm is extraordinary luck for everyone who encounters her.

## **How was it that you could get Christoph Hein and Täve Schur for the supporting roles?**

1989-90 was a time of people coming together. Euphoria binds. Everyone was open to everything. Täve Schur, the Lance Armstrong of the 1950s East Bloc—to whom I had to wave from the sidewalk as a school child, without actually having seen him—was at the time some sort of leader in the DTSB.<sup>6</sup> I made an appointment, told him about us and the pedagogically useful

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legends about him that I had been told in school, and said that with this film I wanted to say goodbye to a time that was my own. He was very happy to do it for us. After the DTSB, he opened a bicycle shop in Magdeburg.

Christoph Hein, like Heiner Müller and Christa Wolf, was among the most important voices in the GDR to help you keep your footing again and again. He knew Wenzel/Mensching very well and liked them a lot, so it was natural that he'd fill the role of the garbageman. His role corresponded not only to service sector occupations that allowed many GDR poets to survive socially—in jobs such as cemetery groundskeeper, church usher or building superintendent—but also to the loss of public and media image that would soon hit most GDR intellectuals.

**In various articles, the words of the garbageman (Christoph Hein) are emphasized: "The general stupidity/is drowning me./As I saw my country dying,/I discovered that I loved it." Were these words from Hein and did he identify with them? And how did you, personally, feel about this "dying of the country"?**

During the completion of the film I fancied I'd write the sources of quotations and allusions into the credits. Beckett, Flaubert, Hölderlin, Goethe, Marx, the Bible, Hans Albers, etc. But with the lesteing of every single song in readable tempo and our locations in order of their appearance, the credits were already long enough. And you couldn't really expect that the credits would be their own important chapter for the audience, as we hoped—an epilogue after the epilogue. At every screening I've been able to attend, it's quiet as a mouse when the credits are rolling. But at the time I decided against the citation apparatus. So we stayed with having the two specters, Meh and Weh, breathe world literature, sweat, bleed it—as if they had not only read the entire prison library from top to bottom, but also swallowed it whole.

Everything that Irm Hermann says in *Latest from the Da-Da-R* is Friedrich Hölderlin. The text that Christoph Hein recites as the garbageman is Gustave Flaubert, written on 11/14/1872 to Ivan Turgenyev. Also "When I saw my country die, I realized that I loved it," is taken from Gustave Flaubert's "Ivory-Tower Letter." It was written in the screenplay as is, before we knew that Christoph Hein was playing the role. For him, this text was an actor's speech—with which one identifies as much as possible. Otherwise one cannot play the text. Of course it is always a joy or wonder for an actor to discover something current, personal in a historical text, which could not have been written back then. Flaubert's longing for an artistic life in the ivory tower was extremely hated by GDR cultural functionaries; they saw the epitome of bourgeois decadence in it, narcissistic *l'art pour l'art* and the irreconcilable opposite of their "art is a weapon" socialist realism. At the time, Christoph Hein was so exhilarated by the Bargfelder edition of Arno Schmidt's works that he wanted to incorporate into the Flaubert the Schmidt sentence: "Half the nation is nuts, and the other half is not all there."

While shooting we had briefly considered whether this Schmidt quotation strays too far; but after the Welcome Money craze,<sup>7</sup> German unification continued to become more and more monetarily driven, up to the present economic crisis. The country in which we lived until 1988 was always somewhat split in two: the hopeful founding idea, from which the praxis was getting ever more distant—smaller glimpses of hope and course corrections included. It was dead and buried after the election fraud in May of 1988, at the latest; there was nothing left to love or even respect, nothing left to understand. The GDR didn't croak in 1989-90; that had happened long before.

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**Thomas Plenert was the cinematographer for your film. You already knew each other from your studies; and thanks to your student film *Blumenland*, for which Plenert was the cameraman, he was discovered by Jürgen Böttcher. You had worked with Thomas Plenert on several short films. What was particular to your collaboration on this film?**

During my studies, Thomas Plenert and I were a team; every meter of my film exercises and every meter of his camera exercises we shot and fiddled with together. We had learned to walk together—filmically speaking. We were swimming on the same wave, very intensely. The cameras we got our hands on didn't have it easy. The special thing about the *Da-Da-R* film was that we could shoot it together. In 1983, after my debut film, *Das Eismeer ruft* (transl. *The Arctic Sea Calls*), I was forbidden from working with Thomas. In the film I co-directed in Vietnam in 1984-88, the studio forbid me from working with Thomas. Same with the second film I directed, *Biologie!* (*Biology!*), in 1989—even though Thomas was allowed to film with other directors in the Feature Film Studio. Only when I filmed as a guest in the Documentary Film Studio was it no problem for us to work together. In the Feature Film Studio it only became possible in 1990, thanks to my own group.

**In articles, DaDaeR is always written in different ways. . .**

Yes, in the wordplay on the name of the state (DDR), the consonant sounds, including the vowel sound that goes along with it when pronounced, are written out and then changed so that instead of De-De you have Da-Da. In English that would not be so evident, because then you would have to write DaDaaR. Therefore the version DaDaR or Da-Da-R in English is perhaps quite good. But in the German DaDaeR, the connection between Dada and the DDR can be easily understood by anyone; only when the critics write the wordplay in the papers do false, perplexing versions come about. Especially when they have no clue that something like the Dada art movement existed. *Latest from the Da-Da-R* is a title similar to *News from Nowhere* from William Morris, or *Geschichten aus der Murkelei* by Hans Fallada.

**How long did you work on your film? The situation in the GDR changed very fast, as did the structures of film distribution. The only East German film distributor, PROGRESS Film-Verleih, became one distributor among many in East and West Germany. How did this situation affect your film? How many copies were made to start?**

*Latest from the Da-Da-R* had its premiere on October 7, 1990 in the Babylon cinema on Rosa Luxemburg Square. The path leading up to the premiere was turbulent. January production decision; February screenplay; March motif search; April shoot; May completion; June rejection by PROGRESS, the only film distributor that stood at our disposal. It goes without saying that, up until then, PROGRESS had taken all DEFA films; now, suddenly, for the first time, said no. [*To see how PROGRESS Film-Verleih got involved again, see the piece on marketing Latest from the Da-Da-R in the special feature entitled Original Trailers and Posters on this DVD.*] July preparations for self-distribution of a single copy. August develop a film poster and produce a movie trailer. Meanwhile, however, we discovered that *Filmverlag der Autoren* wanted to distribute our film; they also produced their own movie trailer and film poster.

German unification was originally scheduled to officially take place on October 15; so, with an October 7 premiere, we would still be bringing the film out into the world in the GDR. Out of concern for who knows what, however, German unification was moved up to October 3, 1990 so as

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to avoid the anniversary of the founding of the GDR on October 7. So our film first premiered four days after the end of the East German state.

*Filmverlag der Autoren* had given PROGRESS ten copies for distribution in the GDR [or rather, the new federal German states] and certainly the same number for distribution in the FRG [or the old federal states]. In the East, the film was a giant success with the public—with movie theaters filled to overflowing and applause in the middle of the film—while the leading East German film critics reacted as if allergic: some sanctimonious (Margit Voss), some helplessly irritated (Ralf Schenk), some infuriated and, for the last time, rigidly arguing for formalism (Henryk Goldberg). This negative tone from above was picked up, with variations, and spread seamlessly across the country. With two or three exceptions (Axel Geiß, Martin Hübner), the film was written off. In the West, it was the exact opposite. *Da-Da-R* was a giant success in the West German media. All the cultural and political magazines aired long clips on all the television channels and commentary on the film ranged from benevolent to enthusiastic. The same with the press from Hamburg (*Die Zeit*) to Munich (*Abendzeitung*), with the exception of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*. The viewing public in the West, on the other hand, seemed almost as perplexed and overtaxed by it as the press in the East did. The big film festivals, like the Berlin Film Festival and the Forum, and festivals held in Saarbrücken, Hof, Munich—which included all of Germany for the first time—refused to show *Latest from the Da-Da-R* and rejected the film, not only from their competitions, but also from their informational series about new German films of 1990-91. Since then, the film has survived in the alternative scene.

**After its premiere in 1990, your film was often described by critics as “the swan song of the GDR.” Now, twenty years later, your film finally has English subtitles and is accessible to an international audience. When we screened the film on March 6, 2009 in Los Angeles, the audience saw the film more as a critique of personal restrictions and self-censorship – that was not only applicable to the East German context. How do you view your film twenty years later? And how do you see your film in an international context?**

The DVD release in the USA is great good fortune for this film. After all, up until now it hasn't had an easy life. But as you age, you believe you recognize comforting cycles evolving in life. When the Wall fell, our daughters were exactly the age that my wife and I were when the Wall was built. The world, which closed off to us, opened for our children at the exact age we were then. As a child and teenager—and even as a film student—American culture played a significant role in my life. It came at me like a busy, relentless one-way street. Now my film is available over there. I saw the *Da-Da-R* film twice in 2009 and at both screenings—in the public discussions that followed—I noticed that the film is not only memory, not only a special report from a special time in the past. The absurd needs and dependencies—which every single person in any kind of system can get him- or herself into—are played out and challenged on a generally accessible level. But *Latest from the Da-Da-R* is not only a critique, but also a self-portrait. There were many more people in the GDR than can, or want to remember it today—who tried once or twice with the GDR, before, sooner or later and with the best intentions, they didn't want to see the GDR any more. Our film also dedicates itself to the loss of hopes. The final renunciation of the GDR—in which only 20% voted NO in the May 1989 elections, but in the course of the next six months it caught hold of practically everyone—was no easy path. Even the most prominent of

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# Interview with Jörg Foth: Director of *Latest from the Da-Da-R*

An interview with Jörg Foth



émigrés since 1976, the first class émigrés so to speak, in front of the television cameras as they arrived in the West shed tears not of joy, but rather of loss. And the big, slow, Russian, romantic, country White Clown and the little, lively, American, big-city, underground Black Clown do a lot to keep these mixed emotions alive, this fairness to history and the present.

In the past 20 years I have focused more on the Third Reich than the GDR. Of course it is a bunch of nonsense to assert a continuity between national socialism and East Germany—like something researched under pressure and published in a glossy magazine. For one thing, the Cold War is over; second, people deal with those who capitulate somewhat less indecently; and third, the thesis “red = brown” is not fair to the victims of the GDR, and even less so to those of the Third Reich. On the other hand, however, the defects and distortions of the GDR were rooted in the injuries and defeats that leftist leaders suffered under national socialism. The keys to understanding the GDR lie in national socialism. It wasn't the people appointed by the Soviet Union to the East German government who had won against the Nazis, but rather the other way around. It was the losers of the 1930s who first—and in some cases until the very end—governed the GDR. They had not withstood the physical and intellectual violence of the Nazis. Even worse: in reaction to the Treaty of Versailles and the unforeseeable punishment of Germany after World War I, the people had turned to national socialism, and not to the concept of a Soviet Germany. Traumatized by this previous defeat at the hands of the Nazis, the GDR still wanted—with contrasting signs, symbols, slogans—to retroactively conquer them and, to do so, criminally availed itself of the torch-and-flag-hoopla from the Nazi box of sickening socio-moral tricks. The idea of the ethnically homogeneous community, infestation phobia, denunciation and the death cult are a few of the afflictions that existed before, as well as in the GDR. All of this plays a painful role in *Latest from the Da-Da-R*. Nazi-trauma and inferiority complex also account for official rhetorical regulations in the GDR; for example to call the Wall, which was built to prevent people from leaving the country, an “anti-fascist protective barrier.”

But it is especially those moments in which we succeeded in having the two fictional characters come alive through documentary events that astoundingly prevent the aging of this film. The slaughterhouse worker, who in passing completes Karl Marx's sentence from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*—“Men make their own history”—with “but they do not make it as they please,” will still remain as believable, for a while, as it was at the time. We only shot this take with this worker one time. Or the shocket cow lying on the ground that shakes off its chains once more. Or the Walpurgis Night celebration in Schierke—the first one celebrated since 1961—after which you could climb Brocken Mountain again. Or the hikers among the Cold War radio interception facilities, which are visible for a moment during the song “Half and Half.” An audience in parkas with a new, suddenly less pressing relationship to art. And the Museum of Natural History with the extinct creatures of an earlier world, through which the clowns crawl and flee, as if under enemy fire. That is all so elementary, so existential, that anyone anywhere understands it. Always.

To classify one's own film is not the business of the director. But such independence and imperitence in content, conception and production of a feature-length 35mm film is quite a rarity. The genre of the music film was categorized with operas and operettas in the 1950s and, in the 1960s, became the flagship of DEFA with pop films and musicals. In the 1970s, DEFA did away with music films, as well as with crime films. *Zille und ick (Zille and Me)*, the last DEFA film with

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music, was shot in 1979. Almost all the colleagues from my generation sitting on the bench wanted to film at least one—if not two—rock musicals and in the 1980s worked on exposés and scenarios without getting a single project accepted. And the GDR was full of very good rock bands, with which the Amiga record company and the artist's management company earned good money internationally. *Latest from the Da-Da-R*—the last DEFA film whose filming was exclusively funded with GDR marks, without the cooperation of a single western television station—broke the resistance of this late DEFA against music films at the very last moment—corrected this official feeble-mindedness via the conceptual autonomy of our group. The century-long series of German revue films ends with *Latest from the Da-Da-R*.

1990 was not only a political and calendrical global turning point, but also a technical, medial, and cultural turning point. A really new time had begun once again, with totally new values, orientations and needs. Auteurist cinema is passé; it is not marketable enough globally for the distribution to sustain itself. Needed today are fairground-like mass spectacles with foregrounded screen and sound design, as well as sustained special effect fireworks. Good acting doesn't hurt, but more important is vacuous content and light digestibility. Life is hard enough without movies, and there's no relief in sight.

***The DEFA Film Library would like to thank Jörg Foth for this interview and for sharing his time and thoughts with us so generously.***

**This interview was conducted in July 2009, by Hiltrud Schulz of the DEFA Film Library.**

Translated by Jason Doerre and Skyler Arndt-Briggs, DEFA Film Library

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<sup>1</sup> VEB: *Volkseigener Betrieb* – literally, an enterprise or business that belongs to the people

<sup>2</sup> The Oberhausen Manifesto, entitled "*Papas Kino ist tod*" (*Dad's cinema is dead*), was presented by 26 short- and documentary filmmakers on Feb. 28, 1962, at the eighth Short Film Festival Oberhausen (West Germany). The expression was misquoted as "Grandpa's Cinema is dead" by East German scriptwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase and, probably, others. (See 12/20/2007 interview with Kohlhaase entitled "Großes Kino von der Straße" on [www.fluter.de](http://www.fluter.de).)

<sup>3</sup> From Bob Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited"

<sup>4</sup> The CILECT Festival was established by the FAMU film school in Prague in 1977 as a place for younger, more progressive filmmakers to share their work. It was supported in part by the international film school organization CILECT (Centre international de liaison des écoles de cinéma et de télévision). Continuing until 1991, it took place in Karlovy Vary, initially as an independent festival, and subsequently as a part of the renowned *Karlovy Vary International Film Festival*. In 2004, the Fresh Film Fest was instituted as a successor to the CILECT Festival.

<sup>5</sup> It was not permitted to use the word "peace" in any satirical context in the GDR.

<sup>6</sup> The DTSB (Deutscher Turn- und Sportbund, or German Gymnastics and Sports League) was an East German mass organization founded in April 1957. In 1989, it had about 3.7 million members—over 20% of the population of the GDR.

<sup>7</sup> Welcome Money (Begrüßungsgeld) is a reference to the West German policy of giving Deutschmarks to East Germans coming to the FRG for the first time; this practice gained a lot of attention in the weeks after the Wall came down on November 9, 1989, as so many people took advantage of it.