The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Everyday Life in the East German Cinema, 1949–1989. By Joshua Feinstein. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2002. Pp. xiii + 331. $24.95. ISBN 0–8078–5385–2.

The film industry of the German Democratic Republic continued, as is well known, to use the studios and know-how of the very UFA complex that had ground out the products of the Hitler regime. Germany's Hollywood in the Babelsberg suburb of Potsdam, up to 1945 the largest commercial film studio complex in Europe, had been a part of the right-wing press empire of Alfred Hugenberg and, before that, the brainchild of the German military high command during World War I. As it had throughout most of its history, the studio (renamed DEFA — Deutsche Film AG in 1946) continued to be faced with the problem of paying its way by making large numbers of more or less forgotten entertainment products for mass consumption. Yet the very ability of film to reach a mass audience, particularly before the rise of television, continued to fascinate both the GDR's leadership and many of its artists. How could one use the opportunity to create a new cinema for a new society, not just as a blunt propaganda stick, but as the carrot of a new German socialist identity dangled before the people?

Joshua Feinstein's Stanford dissertation, now appearing as a monograph, approaches this question by concentrating on a certain genre of film produced between the late 1950s and the 1970s. From the end of World War II until Kruschchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956, the GDR film industry was most successful at producing depictions of "anti-fascist resistance" to Nazism (such as *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, 1946) while otherwise milling out mostly traditional celluloid entertainment. Opposing the Nazi past was one thing; creating "socialist present-day films" (*sozialistische Gegenwartsfilme*) as the SED party leadership kept demanding, quite another. Depicting the problems of everyday life in an evolving "socialist" society and providing uplifting or at least convincing answers to such problems was hard to do against the rapidly shifting ideological demands of the party.

The main focus of the book, as implied in the title, is, however, on the *Alltagsfilme* turned out chiefly in the 1970s. In these, "characters identify with East Germany not as the realization of socialism's universal mission but rather as a specific and unique place" (p. 111). Beginning with a film daring and avant-garde by GDR standards, *Der geteilte Himmel* (1964) involving Christa Wolf, films dealt with such "everyday" problems as personal separations by the Wall, the reality of everyday working and social life, *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (1965) and other themes that made the party leadership uncomfortable. Feinstein proceeds to analyze in separate chapters several films that struggled to portray the

"everyday" while not running afoul of the strictures laid down by the Eleventh Plenum of the SED in 1965. Despite such successes as *Spur der Steine* and *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, though, party tolerance was rarely more than grudging and, after the mid-1970s, with Honecker firmly in the saddle, not even that. Competition from television compounded the decline of DEFA from the 1970s on.

The book goes on beyond description to argue that "the East German cinema as a socially self-reflective medium was not a complete failure" (p. 217). The author is notably cautious and sometimes ambiguous in making claims for the cinema as an identity-building element in GDR culture (so obviously different from that of the Federal Republic). In his conclusion, for example, he claims, "For better or for worse, the cinema through its representations of the GDR as a specific place participated in the evolution of a civic discourse unique to that society" (p. 226). As a communicative system, though, filmmaking makes it "a poor vehicle for two-way communication under even the best of circumstances" (p. 222). Clearly the imprint of specific films or genres of films on the "public," as well as the shaping of filmmakers' viewpoints by the forces at work on them from the society in which they live belong to a dialogue appropriate for the new cultural history. In a society as relatively closed as that of the GDR, this interaction should be easier to study than in so-called open societies. And Feinstein does make a cautious case for that interaction existing, for — at least — an East German cinema that did more than merely capture party ideology on celluloid. Yet, as the author points out, DEFA went on importing foreign (including West German) technology and personnel to make its films into the 1960s. Largely unacknowledged is the fact that the GDR — particularly in the wide areas having access to West German television — was also less sealed off than many "fraternal-socialist" Warsaw Pact countries, sharing as it did a language and traditional culture with a highly developed capitalist counterpart across barbed wire. Can one ever measure the degree to which "another" German cinema (including the made-for-TV variety) beamed from West Berlin or Hof also shaped a specific GDR civic consciousness?

The book is nicely illustrated and provided with a full scholarly apparatus. At a minimum, *Triumph of the Ordinary* is a well-written and scrupulous account of the East German film industry in its heyday and contains several thoughtful and insightful analyses of major films turned out by DEFA. It will certainly be mandatory reading for those interested in the medium, in the cultural history of everyday life, and the SED's attitudes toward artistic creativity, censorship, and the ideological tasks of mass media. It also provides food for thought for those interested in filmmaking under a more complex etiology than pure artistic creativity on the one hand and bottom-line profit on the other.

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