

EUCE Research 2006-2007  
Working Paper



TEXAS A&M  
UNIVERSITY

*CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF  
POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR*

*Larson Powell  
Assistant Professor  
European and Classical Languages  
Texas A&M University*

# CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

---

DR. LARSON POWELL  
EUROPEAN AND CLASSICAL LANGUAGES  
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

## INTRODUCTION: CIVIL SOCIETY AND YOUTH CULTURE

Civil society in the EU today is a two-edged sword. Although popular revolt against “real existing socialism” was seen as a “rebellion of civil society against the state,” the “antipolitical politics” advocated by Havel and others has led in many cases to an abandoning of the public sphere to unchecked market power and a consequent depoliticization of youth. This popular-culture driven depoliticization and departicipation is not limited only to Eastern Europe, but is a larger European phenomenon. Many contemporary commentators continue to write of a “democratic deficit” seen not only as a European problem, but as a side-effect of globalization everywhere. Although the events of 1989 have put an end to the Cold War division of Europe, the persistence of populism and anti-capitalist politics in Poland and Slovakia and the appeal of the PDS in Germany (especially the East) variously show that the process of post-Communist reform is still an ongoing process. This is a matter of some importance both for the eastward expansion of the EU and for the coordination of foreign policy between the EU and the US: the continuing differences between some older and newer EU members regarding US policy in the Middle East or women’s reproductive rights, or regarding the mentioning of religion in the EU Constitution, may all be correlated to differences between post-Communist societies and those further west. Within Eastern Europe itself, variations along the political spectrum may also be linked to the different patterns these countries followed in 1989.

The centrality of Polish Catholicism, the theater strikes in Czechoslovakia, and the role of churches and alternate popular culture and underground in the GDR all contributed to shaping these countries’ current political culture.

Youth culture plays an important role within the formation of civil society, both politically and economically. The EU has accordingly begun to recognize this role. At its 2762nd Council meeting in Brussels on 13-14 November 2006, the EU Council for Education, Youth, and Culture stressed the importance of “a better knowledge and understanding of youth” and that “the development of youth policies was conditional upon reliable information - both quantitative and qualitative - through independent research” (14965/06, Presse 309, p. 19). It was mentioned that that “the role of culture is growing in importance” and thus a study of the EU “economy of culture” would be important to achieving the Lisbon agenda. As the study performed for the Commission by the consultant KEA European Affairs notes, “the role of the cultural and creative sector within this context,” i.e. of R&D investment to achieve the goals of Lisbon, “is still largely ignored.” (See the executive summary at [www.kernnet.com/kea/index.html](http://www.kernnet.com/kea/index.html).) KEA’s study shows how culture “drives economic and social development” and “promotes European integration.” The EU has recognized that the audiovisual sector is a key aspect of this cultural domain, devoting €755m to supporting Europe’s film industry over the next seven years under its new MEDIA 2007 programme. The audiovisual sector is one where the challenges of the New

---

**LARSON POWELL**, Assistant Professor of German in the Department of European and Classical Languages, College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University, received his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Previously, he taught at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Fordham University. His first book on modern German poetry, *The Technological Unconscious*, will be published by Camden House in spring 2008; a second book on post-1945 media art (electronic music, radio plays, film) is in preparation. He has published and lectured in German, French and English, on German film and literature as well as on musicology, psychoanalysis and philosophical aesthetics. This working paper included here will be a chapter in a monograph on Konrad Wolf.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

Transatlantic Marketplace must be urgently met (see COM (98) 125 on this marketplace, or EUROSTAT statistics on the Audiovisual Sector in the European Economic Area).

There is a perceived need for studies on film that can address these questions and show how EU audiovisual culture can “forge a sense of belonging as well as to spread democratic and social values” (KEA study, p. 2). EU policymakers need qualitative research to develop youth policies, including those affecting the EU economy of culture in its transatlantic and global context, for Lisbon’s goals of growth and integration. Such research project would study how youth culture in audiovisual media functions for social integration and innovation within a context of modernization in Eastern Europe. Scholarly work has shown the importance of the “social capital” of culture for the development of civil society. The remarkable public success of many films is directly tied to their attractiveness of content, their emphasis on cultural creative energy. These films succeeded in tapping into creative energies in youth culture that need to be harnessed for the EU today, where the cultural sector continues to be an important economic growth area (€654 billion in 2003, 19.7% value added growth in 1999-2003, 12.3% higher than the rest of the general economy) To study films with public impact will both help to preserve and evaluate an important part of the EU’s diverse cultural heritage and draw lessons for how EU policy on audiovisual culture may help achieve larger EU policy goals in the future.

My working project studies the formation of an alternative civil society in the last decade of East Germany through the lens of film. What follows will concentrate on the work of Konrad Wolf, the most important East German film director, and an important political and cultural figure as well. Wolf was President of the East German Academy of Arts in Berlin and brother of the famous playwright Markus Wolf; their father was the Communist playwright Friedrich Wolf, who took his family into exile to Moscow in 1933, only returning with the Red Army after the war. Wolf has recently been the subject of an important biography (*Der Sonnensucher*, by Wolfgang Jacobsen, one of the deans of German film studies), which aroused some controversy about its treatment of Wolf’s collaboration in censorship. Wolf’s films were often not only important representations of daily life in the GDR

(according to the doctrine of socially responsible realism demanded by state doctrine), but also interventions in public discussion and debate. Those discussions were, as part of the paradoxical socialist “public sphere” (*Öffentlichkeit*), heavily monitored by the state and Stasi agents. As in the Soviet Union, film and literature bore considerable political responsibility in a society where the media were so controlled. Film – according to an oft-quoted maxim of Lenin “the most important of the arts” – thus not only served as an “imaginary community” (in Benedict Anderson’s somewhat overused phrase), but also had a representative function as a stand in for a civil society otherwise not allowed to develop.<sup>1</sup>

My project will result in articles on *Solo Sunny*, Wolf’s last film and a landmark in German film history, and on an eventual planned monograph on the director. Not only receiving a Silver Bear at the Berlinale for its artistic quality, it was also the subject of considerable public discussion regarding its portrayal of its heroine, a counter-culture dropout pursuing a not very successful career as a pop singer. This was hardly the sort of subject official government authorities wanted to hold up as a model, and many older people in the GDR felt the portrayal of Sunny to be offensive to their ideal of the upstanding socialist citizen. *Solo Sunny* has thus been seen as an important index of social change in East Germany, as a depiction of the subcultural scene that had arisen in the 1970s. Historians have argued that this popular subculture contributed significantly to the undermining of state-socialist authority as much as did political dissidents.<sup>2</sup>

In the past two summers I visited Berlin, aided by grants from my department and from the EU Center at Texas A&M University, to look at archival materials both in the library of the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (HFF) in Potsdam (the former E. German film school, still named after Konrad Wolf!) and also in the German Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*) and those of the Berlin Academy of Arts. My project was to define the formation of a public sphere within the confines of the ostensibly state-regulated society of the GDR. I sought to look at an exemplary case of this, seeking to determine how viewers responded to Wolf’s film by looking at reader letters to newspapers and publicity releases. East German film could not respond to the demands of its public through box-office sales, as in capitalist societies. Instead, there were carefully

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

monitored public discussions in newspapers and at schools about new films. Film was seen as linked to the education system, not as commercial. One of the most important instances of this was Lothar Bisky's Leipzig Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, or Central Institute for Youth Research (ZIJ). Bisky was not only an important figure during the GDR, but has also managed to survive in public life after 1989, first as head of the HFF (1986-1990) and now, together with Oscar LaFontaine, as head of the newly-reorganized left political party and successor to the PDS, Die Linke. Transcriptions of these public discussions and reports of the ZIF can be found in the library of the HFF.

My research moved to a second stage as I realized that public discussions in newspapers (and even the research on youth) could not be taken at face value. Reader letters in newspapers were not only carefully selected by the state, but also often written by agents. Behind the scenes, a covert discussion went on which I could only find in the microfiches of the Bundesarchiv (SAPMO – Stiftung für Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR – the central archive for GDR historical research). My second visit, in summer 2007, was thus devoted in large part to archival work. I worked at three main archives: the Bundesarchiv on the Finckensteiner Allee, the film archives at the Fehrbelliner Platz, which contain the discussions around the permission to release films (in German, Zulassungsprotokolle), and the Konrad Wolf dossier at the archives of the Berlin Akademie der Künste (Robert-Koch-Platz). There are additional materials at the Film Museum in Potsdam I plan to look at in 2008.

My planned articles will not only help elucidate the film's form and content, but also contribute to understanding the sociology of the internal collapse of state socialism, and the birth of an apolitical, dissatisfied subculture within it, a subculture that has survived the end of the Cold War and continues to define relations of East and West. It is significant that Sunny is not a dissident; she does not want to leave, but stay in East Germany. Her position, and that of the film's implied addressee or audience, might help us understand the cultural self-definition of former East Germans today, and their continued ambivalences regarding modernization. Sunny's deliberately provocative behavior must be understood as a means of carving out a private sphere of spontaneity apart from the official

good citizenship models encouraged by state socialism. (My article(s) will analyze this behavior with the help of Erving Goffman's discussions of "civil inattention" and "frame analysis.") Such spontaneity is a key element in the definition of civil society, along with its role in defining political discussion. Civil society is also a crucial concept in contemporary work on the EU integration. Scholars at different EU research institutions are engaged in defining concepts of "cross-border civil society" As the European Civil Society Network states, such a society, and its public space "may well be as decisive for the future of European integration as new forms of transnational governance" (in the words of CiSoNet, funded by the European Commission and directed by East German historian Jürgen Kocka at the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin). The contribution of popular culture and media such as film to forming this public space needs to be further researched. - In addition, my projected article will contribute to the ongoing debate in Germany about the ambivalent role East German intellectuals and artists played in political life. Wolf was, like Bertholt Brecht, a complex figure conflicted between his roles as a talented artist and a believing Marxist who both spoke up for intellectual and cultural freedom, yet had to stand by his party and state even when he may not have been in agreement with it. His loyalty was a result of his experience in the anti-Fascist struggle, as a young man in the Red Army. The contentious reviews of the aforementioned recent biography of Wolf (*Der Sonnensucher*, by Wolfgang Jacobsen and Rolf Aurich) show how disputed this terrain still is.

I will now first give a characterization of the film, in several sections (II-IV.), before moving in conclusion to the question of how it was received and its effects on the politicized public sphere of 1980, based on my archival research in Berlin (V.).

### **GENRE: WOMEN'S FILMS, CONSUMERISM AND SOCIALIST SOCIETY**

Women's films in East Germany remain a disputed topic, to the point where their very existence as a genre is denied, even by women scholars (such as Christel Gräf) and women filmmakers (such as Helke Misselwitz).<sup>3</sup> For much older scholarship on East German film, the male genre or style of

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

neorealism provided the key, with the result that even a film like *Divided Heaven* could be subsumed under neorealism, thereby marginalizing its female author and heroine alike. Nonetheless there exists not only important and still under-evaluated work by women directors, but also a substantial corpus of films about women, many of which date from the decades of the 1970s and early 80s. That these films spoke for a larger real concern with the problems of women in the GDR during that period is generally admitted; whether and how we might see them as a unified body of work, or even a subgenre of DEFA film, is less so. This is partly due to the fact that GDR culture was for so long interpreted as being no more than a reflection of GDR political and social 'realities,' and not in aesthetic terms, as Wolfgang Emmerich has pointed out. It is also due to the complexity of the films themselves, however. Konrad Wolf's 1980 *Solo Sunny* is an exemplary instance of this complexity, one which reflects a deep ambiguity in the self-definition of the East German film industry relative to its audiences. I will begin with some film-historical and immanent questions of genre, then move to placing the film in the historical context of spectatorship, consumption and the peculiar relation between public and private dramatized by the film. We will need to pay close attention to questions of women as spectators here, because the peculiar position of women in GDR society was a focus of film production during the last decades of DEFA, during a time when the GDR state shifted its emphasis from an earlier revolutionary Utopianism to a (failed) attempt at providing its citizens with consumer gratifications comparable to those available in the West.

If Andreas Huyssen once structured his influential reevaluation of mass culture through a strategy of "Adorno in reverse," it may look as if we now need to understand *Solo Sunny* as "1970s feminist film criticism in reverse." For precisely the paradigm of women-as-spectacle and consumer object once so sharply criticized by Annette Kuhn, Tania Modleski, and Mary Anne Doane, among others, appears to be actively sought for by the film's heroine. In this, Sunny is distinct from the protagonists of other DEFA women's films, who are concerned partly with career problems, like Karla (in Hermann Zschoche's 1965 feature of that title), or happiness in the private sphere, as in *Der Dritte* (Egon Günther, 1972) and *Die Beunruhigung* (Lothar Warneke, 1981). It is certainly significant that virtually every one of those films contains a

crucial scene of its female protagonist in front of a cosmetic mirror. In this respect, *Solo Sunny* takes one tendency within DEFA women's films to its logical conclusion. Briefly: the film narrates its heroine's pursuit of a career as a popular singer, frustrated not only in her public aspirations by the shabby sexism of her fellow musicians and general audience indifference, but also in her private desires by the self-sufficient coldness of her bookish lover Ralph and the boorish if good-natured attentions of Harri the cab-driver. Against all of Sunny's efforts to profile herself both onstage and off is opposed the unremitting hostility of her environment, whether in the grimly provincial dives where she plays on tour, or the old women's surveillance-society of the dilapidated East Berlin back courtyard world she inhabits. The only consolation and support she finds is from her co-worker Christine. Significantly, Sunny has no family, since she is an orphan, and unlike many protagonists of East German women's films, she is not a single mother, either. The 'solo' in the film's title is thus ambiguous: although the director stated in interviews that he wanted to plead for the right of everyone in the country to 'have their own solo,' the film does not conceal the high costs of solitude.

It might be possible to read this film as a melodrama of failed stardom. Not only does Sunny try again and again to capture the attention of her audiences, but she also seeks deliberately to provoke in her private life as well, acting the part of the diva offstage, desiring to be desired both as star and as unusual, individual or provocative. This extends from her outré clothing, which reminds one of New Wave fashion in its eclecticism and campy collage of quoted styles<sup>4</sup>, to her deliberately melodramatic concealment of a knife in the bed of her lover, her constantly provocative talk and behavior, down even to her suicide attempt, which the film leaves deliberately unclear – that is, whether it was meant to succeed or not. Clearly she wants high dramatic 'excess'<sup>5</sup> in any form she can obtain it. There are a number of reasons one could adduce for this, one being the film's interesting position in time, between the 1970s films of career-women seeking professional fulfillment and the drop-outs and misfits of the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> The old psychoanalytical topos of femininity as masquerade<sup>7</sup> is very much applicable to Sunny, who is so strong-willed as to be overbearing, and whose staged "femininity" might well be a mask or act she is trying to put on or put over on her audiences. One might also ask whether

the film should be seen as an example of a camp or even queer aesthetic.

### A 'CRITICAL' MELODRAMA?

We might thus work out a reading of *Sunny* that would combine elements of genre theory, feminist film criticism and the history of consumerism in the GDR, presenting *Sunny* as a sort of one-woman 'rebel with a cause' against the grauer Alltag of her country in the name of stardom, consumer desire and that current fave among academic catchwords, "agency." Many recent film studies have profiled discussions of women's films against the development of consumerism in post-war West Germany (more on this in section IV). So far, so up to date. However, there would be many problems with this reading, both in terms of genre and in terms of the film's relation to GDR women's history. I will begin with genre.

One problem is methodological, and was implied right away in my formulation, "a melodrama of failed stardom," which sounds clever but is in fact potentially confusing. Star vehicles and genre films like melodrama are, as Andrew Britton noted in a pointed critique of Richard Dyer, very different things. The star vehicle depends on the genre system and may draw on varying genre elements in different proportions. Solo *Sunny* not only has aspects of melodrama, but also of the artist/performer genre and, importantly, of comedy as well. Renate Kröbner, who plays *Sunny*, had risen through the ranks of DEFA in the late 1970s in a number of different genre films, paired with male DEFA stars like Manfred Krug and Winfried Glatzeder.<sup>8</sup>

Nor could we work with the methodological opposition of melodrama to star vehicle made by some Western European and American feminist film critics, who noted that star vehicles and melodramas tend to treat their often female protagonists rather differently – that is, if melodrama heroines are frequently idealized sufferers, star vehicles are about pleasurable spectacle.<sup>9</sup> It appears that the sorts of binary oppositions with which Western 1970s and 1980s feminist film theory worked simply cannot be taken over without some modification in discussing DEFA films. Another such opposition is that between narrative and spectacle. In the

work of Laura Mulvey and Linda Williams, for instance, the reduction of woman to passive spectacle and fetish is opposed to male agency in narrative. The protagonists of DEFA women's films, however, are shown as being quite actively in charge of their own lives, however much resistance they may meet with from their male-dominated environments.<sup>10</sup> Thus the film leaves the causality of *Sunny*'s continued frustration undecided: is it her indifferent environment – as in a melodrama – or is her own performance itself too much, mismatched to its environment?

If we turn now to look at the film itself, its structure also multiply contradicts its own melodramatic aspects. This is surely not by chance from a director who knew his Brecht well.

Firstly: the narrative has nothing of melodrama's dramatic reversals and chance meetings, but is instead episodic or epic, consisting of a series of vignettes from *Sunny*'s life. The end, although guardedly hopeful, is still open-ended and not at all decisive. Secondly: the editing, too, contributes to this epic, being far removed from the dramatic fluidity of Ophüls' camerawork, or the nervous mobility of the end of Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. Thirdly: the *mise-en-scène* often distances itself, and thus the viewer, from *Sunny*'s performance. We are invited to see *Sunny* from an ironic, even slightly comical, distance, although without any cynical or trivializing condescension. Thus one cannot find the Manichean opposition of innocent virtue versus conniving evil typical of melodrama, nor even the progression from innocence to knowledge Peter Brooks saw in the genre. What might be seen as melodramatic would be *Sunny*'s search for recognition, her desire to be known, as Stanley Cavell had it. In the language of current Critical Theory, *Sunny* wants *Anerkennung* or recognition, a term central to Hegel's phenomenology and recently further developed by Habermas' successor Axel Honneth.<sup>11</sup> *Sunny*'s behavior may be melodramatic, but the film's direction is not. This sort of omniscient direction may be a historical trace of DEFA didacticism.

One might recall in this context Solo *Sunny*'s debt to Fassbinder. Konrad Wolf was very much aware not only of Hollywood film, French and Soviet New Wave, but also of what was going on on the other side of the Berlin Wall. *The Marriage of Maria Braun* predated Solo *Sunny* by only a year, and

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

Solo Sunny received exactly that Silver Bear award at the Berlinale that Fassbinder coveted in vain for his own film. Although Solo Sunny is in some ways less complex than Fassbinder's melodramas, lacking their dimension of historical retrospective and intertextual quotation of 1950s film, as well as the typical masochistic double-bind situation<sup>12</sup>, there are also similarities. Wolf, like Fassbinder, worked for a filmic institution that had to work hard for its audience, and genre formula was one way to reach for the latter. Fassbinder's women, like Sunny, are also very much playing roles, as outsiders who are nonetheless too active and clever to be mere mute melodramatic victims.<sup>13</sup> As in Fassbinder, the complexity of this performance both asks for and also renders difficult spectator identification (this will need to be returned to again). And just as Fassbinder had to reach his German public through the detour of Hollywood formula, Wolf reached for an East German public through a double loop, namely through Fassbinder's Hollywood. I believe that without Fassbinder's example, Wolf would not have been able to make Solo Sunny. It is a testament to Wolf's continued openness as a director that he could continue to learn from others so late in his career.

Solo Sunny thus now emerges, like Fassbinder's Brechtian melodramas of the 1970s, as a critical or reflexive form of melodrama, in that it both bids for spectator identification of a popular, i.e. directly emotional, nature, and also simultaneously requires a more distanced, detached evaluation. The difference between Fassbinder and Wolf is the difference between irony and humor. Where Fassbinder underlines the self-pitying melodramas of his figures with heavy irony, Wolf interrupts or breaks them with comic moments – again perhaps a Brechtian aspect. The comic elements of Sunny are in fact not misogynistic, since they are optimistic: they show where tragedy will not work, and are thus inseparable from the guarded hopefulness of the film's end.

Let us now look at my second problem, namely the social context of GDR women's history against which the film profiles itself. This is especially pertinent given that film studies has, at least since the 1990s, moved away from the sorts of generic constructions of women's films defined through psychoanalytic theories of the viewer, and toward more concrete historical investigations of

spectatorship. My research in the Berlin archives thus participates in this move to the historical spectator, and helps fill a gap, since there is still much less research on German (especially East German) audiences than on Hollywood ones. However, my approach is less "culturalist" and more rooted in sociological theory – an area that has been neglected by much film studies.

### **SPACES OF CONTINGENCY: INTERACTION IN SOCIALIST SOCIETIES**

As is well known, Fassbinder's melodramas refer back not only to Douglas Sirk, but also to German films from the 1950s, films that have been recently analyzed in terms of female consumption and postwar citizenship. Given the current vogue for GDR consumer studies, and given that feminist film scholarship has often compared female film stardom to commodity aesthetics, it would seem logical to see Solo Sunny in this context as well. In such a reading, Sunny would stage not only "the desire to be desired," but also, if you will, the desire to be a commodity, the ultimate desideratum. We could then see Sunny as a belated version of the 'woman empowered by consumerism' who has been depicted by Victoria de Grazia, Erica Carter, Heide Fehrenbach and others.<sup>14</sup> Thus we could link Sunny up to a GDR equivalent of that "cultural consumption" Uta Poiger has chronicled in her reception history of popular music in postwar Germany.

There are, however, multiple problems with such a reading. Firstly, the GDR's attempt at becoming a consumer society had arguably come to an end by the mid-1970s. The TV advertising program "Tausend Tele Tips," begun in 1960, was abruptly halted in 1976. Secondly, even before this, GDR ad culture was in constant contradiction with the consumer shortages of real existing socialism.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, it would be glaringly inaccurate to claim that GDR consumerism could somehow be 'empowering,' given that Erich Honecker's policy after coming to power in 1971 was to pacify the populace through greater availability of imported consumer goods! As this example shows, we should beware of importing "culturalist" interpretative models from studies of Western European and American cinema without being aware of the specific social and institutional context of Eastern Europe. It is still interesting to contrast the cheery

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

optimism of the film that made Manfred Krug a star, *Auf der Sonnenseite* (Ralf Kirsten, 1962), with star vehicles like *The Legend of Paul and Paula* and *Solo Sunny*. If, in *Paul and Paula*, there is still hope for rebuilding in the GDR, it has vanished by the time of *Sunny*. If female stardom came later to the GDR than male, it may also have had to do so in a peculiarly critical or reflexive form. I would even argue that *Sunny* marks the end of the GDR's attempt at creating its own consumer and star culture, an attempt which may be dated back to the early 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

*Sunny* cannot make herself into a desirable consumer product in a culture that did not have the overall medial dispositif for such a strategy. For the same reason, she cannot enter into the cold contractual relationships of a *Maria Braun*, as analyzed by Elsaesser. To assert that her behavior can only be explained through reference to these familiar consumer coordinates would be to wipe out the historical context of the film and see it through exclusively Western lenses. What *Sunny* can do is something else, to which all of her attention-catching strategies, deliberate provocations and making scenes, are only a means.

It has frequently been noted that GDR society was characterized by an ideology of *Gemeinschaft* or community, and of enforced solidarity. In the language of sociological modernization theories, the GDR did not differentiate out its various social subsystems, whether artistic, economic, or scientific, preferring to keep them all under the domination of the political system. Society was viewed as a single organization with its summit in the State.<sup>17</sup> Given this, any spontaneity on the part of individual subsystems was suspect and highly restricted.

Not only that, but social interaction itself was subject to an unusual amount of regulation. We can see this vividly depicted in *Solo Sunny* when *Sunny* is forced to answer for her "male visitors" to the police, to whom her aged neighbors have tattled. The state here serves as an authoritarian guarantor of a certain kind of highly regulated 'community.' In historical terms, the independence of individual interaction from social organizations is a late development, one analyzed by writers as distinct as Durkheim and Sennett. One problem with state socialist societies like the GDR was precisely the lack of independence of interaction from state organization. It is precisely this independence of

interaction that *Sunny* is seeking. Her deliberately outrageous behavior, her excess candor, her disregard for what Erving Goffman called "role distance," are all means to provoke shock and spontaneity on the part of others, to break through the massive, grey "civil inattention" – another term from Goffman<sup>18</sup> – that was so typical of socialist societies. Another sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, has noted that the distinction of interaction and organization depends on what he calls "articulated contingency." He adds:

The autonomy of the interaction system can however be so restricted that its course becomes colorless and uninteresting, and leaves no possibility open other than making mistakes.<sup>19</sup>

There we have it: *Sunny*'s deliberate "mistakes," her constant violation of unstated rules of communal 'solidarity.' Even things like fashion or consumption are, in this view, less worthwhile in themselves – because they supposedly give 'agency' to other subjects, a problematic notion – than because they open up spaces of articulated contingency, spaces where one cannot predict the outcome of interaction. This is the freedom *Sunny* wants. Her extremism, her uncompromising stubbornness, are a typical trait of Wolf's protagonists, which marks them off as authentic in heroic isolation from their context. I am thinking of Gregor Hecker in *Ich war neunzehn* (1968), for whom the end of the war becomes a kind of Existentialist test of his inner truthfulness. This heroism also distinguishes *Sunny* from other female figures in GDR women's film, like the heroine of Evelyn Schmidt's *The Bicycle* (1982), who has nothing of *Sunny*'s histrionic grandeur about her, or even from the central character of *Die Beunruhigung*, who thinks much more than she acts out.

### RECEPTION HISTORY

All of this background helps us to understand the real reception history of *Sunny*, how – despite the absence of unambiguous genre formulae or a culture of consumption, two aspects often tied by film and social historians to questions of women's self-definition – the film met with such a strong identificatory response, especially (but not only) among younger women. If one reads the letters to the *Berliner Wochenpost* from February to April of 1980, contemporary viewers of the film indeed

saw it largely in the terms I have been sketching in. Sunny is recognizable as kin to Paula from *The Legend of Paul and Paula* in her “Glücksanspruch,” her claim to happiness; this claim is seen in terms of having personality (W 5/90, 01.02.1980, p. 7) , i.e. being able to articulate one’s public action in spontaneous terms. On the one hand, many viewers, especially women, claimed that Sunny was one of them; on the other, Sunny is seen as unusual, as not average. This combination is, as Richard Dyer has noted, typical of stars. One woman wrote: “Sunny is a woman who has an image [Bild] before her, of herself, of her relations to others...” (W 17/1980, 25.04.1980, p. 14). Another wrote that she saw the moral of the story as: “One can’t give up one’s I [Ich], one must fight one’s way through.”

All of this leads one to see that the director Konrad Wolf’s adaptation of the moral form of audience address typical of many DEFA films, especially of anti-fascist films, to Sunny worked quite well. Despite her apparent rebellion, the earnestness of Sunny’s claims to happiness stands directly in the tradition of socialist morality. This earnestness is poles apart from the knowing, winking, ironic conspiracy with the audience’s fantasies typical of Western European and Hollywood star vehicles, whether *The Blue Angel* or *Gilda* or even *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. Sunny naively believes in her role as authentic, and this gives her a pathos and a vulnerability different from that of a Dietrich or a Rita Hayworth. It is this peculiar moral of authenticity that allowed for Sunny’s success with GDR viewers. It is also this perceived authenticity that links Sunny to other films of the time. I would suggest that we see Solo Sunny, along with a number of other GDR films I have very loosely and tentatively termed “women’s films,” as examples of what Barbara Klinger has called a local genre.<sup>20</sup> This will allow us to develop further the analysis of DEFA film without simply projecting onto DEFA the “ideology of genre,” in whatever mythopoietic form.<sup>21</sup>

What emerged from my archival research in Berlin was that the success of Solo Sunny proved to be a disturbingly uncontrollable runaway horse from the point of view not only of the GDR State, but even from that of the director Wolf himself, who after his initial satisfaction at having reached his public so effectively began to worry that the discussion over the film was bearing too much political weight! It is very clear from my readings

of the newspaper reviews and letters to the editor that a considerable public discussion of the film did take place, and one which was not entirely staged or managed by Party officials. How did the State respond to this? To what extent was this public debate in fact encouraged by the State as a legitimation of its rule?<sup>22</sup>

On this, extant documents are not entirely clear. The historical background should be sketched in a little here. A few years before the release of Sunny, in 1976, the popular singer Wolf Biermann had been forcibly expatriated from the GDR for his reform socialist opinions: his passport was revoked during a concert trip to West Germany, and he was not allowed to return. This provoked a wave of protest from many writers and intellectuals in the GDR, including Christa Wolf (author of *Cassandra* and *Divided Heaven*); Konrad Wolf, however, took the side of the State against Biermann. By 1978, this controversy had cooled to the point where a new course of relative openness could be envisaged by the regime. This was the period when Heiner Carow was producing his controversial marriage drama *Until Death Do Us Part* (1979). In the discussions between the functionaries Kurt Hager and Hans-Dieter Made, one sees a desire to tolerate a certain amount of controversy, as long as it was kept within limits. Thus Made wrote to Hager on March 26th, 1979: “I think it urgent that although we may evaluate [Carow’s] film critically in some of its artistic exaggerations, within the whole spectrum of our film productions, we may claim it for us as a proof of a wealth of conflict.” Hager wrote at the same time: “We will accept problematic film scenarios in appropriate dosages, so that they do not endanger the development of the main line.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the State wanted a little conflict, a little initiative from its citizenry, but not too much. We can see the same desire for moderation in Made’s notes from January 18, 1979, where he states why the GDR did not want to make a film of Klaus Mann’s novel *Mephisto* (which was eventually made in the West by Istvan Szabo in 1981): Made saw the novel as too controversial, and did not want the DEFA studio to get drawn “into the processes of scandal-making” – i.e. precisely the sort of publicity often sought by film studios in a market economy.

What is most striking is that Wolf himself, after initial satisfaction, began to feel uneasy about the ongoing discussion of the film. This emerges clearly in a discussion with Wolfgang Kohlhaase

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

(the scriptwriter), the poet Franz Fühmann, and others on June 24th, 1980. Konrad Wolf noted: “there is now a kind of overburdening of the film,” i.e. the film was made to bear too much political weight, to stand in for too much lacking freedom in the rest of civil society<sup>24</sup>. Fühmann went on to add that this was true of all art in the GDR. It emerged in the discussion that Wolf was almost afraid of the demand made for *Lebenshilfe* (practical advice for life) which people addressed to his film, and pointed out that more was being read into it than he had intended. This was of course a direct result of the politicization of every sphere of life in socialist society, of the lack of differentiation between the public or political and the private spheres.

The result of this is that when Gunter Agde wanted to publish a selection of the newspaper reviews and letters, together with a transcript of the aforementioned public discussion with Wolf and Kohlhaase, Wolf and the Berlin publisher (Henschel Verlag) began to drag their feet by the end of 1980<sup>25</sup>. The nascent public sphere, evidence of cultural energies from a civil society that could not entirely be regulated, was thus stopped off before it could take on too much life of its own. Agde confirmed in conversation with me this June that there must have been opposition to this publication at the time. (A likely candidate would be Roland Bauer, first Party secretary of the Berlin Bezirksleitung, a hardline Stalinist known for his censorship of theatrical productions.)<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that there would have been backpedaling at this time from the Party, since this was a time of economic crisis in the GDR, and also the time when the Solidarity movement was peaking in Poland (1980 was a year of workers’ protests, and in 1981 General Jaruzelski would impose martial law). When Rainer Simon’s 1981 *Jadup und Boel* was banned, it was clear that the last brief window of liberalization in DEFA that had begun around 1977-1978 was over. (Christa Wolf, a personal friend of the director, was of the opinion that Konrad Wolf died in 1982 at a point when he could see no way ahead for him or for his country.)

We should however beware of facile or self-righteous finger-pointing here. The managing of public opinion, including film, is a phenomenon to be found not only in Communist countries. Researchers on American film have documented in some detail how Cold War governments warily looked upon any signs of critical independence on

the part of Hollywood directors, and tried to contain their public resonance<sup>27</sup>. State intervention in the public sphere is as old as the latter itself, and need not always be pernicious (as current debates about whether European governments should intervene in debates about religion and ethnicity to prevent hate speech show). Moreover, as the beginning of this paper showed, concern over a “democratic deficit” or a devaluation of the public sphere is a larger problem of modernity, also not restricted to the managed societies of the formerly socialist east<sup>28</sup>.

One of the effects of the fall of the Wall has indeed been that scholars are increasingly viewing the cultural and political histories of the two Germanies as much more linked than Cold War ideology would have permitted one to think. Viewed thus stereoscopically, East and West Germany may be seen to have responded often to very similar problems of modernization, despite their surface differences. Within film studies, this has meant new interpretations of DEFA film through the lens of stardom or genre formulae, aspects once thought irrelevant to film in a socialist society. Yet as the preceding has shown, these interpretations should still be tempered by a continuing awareness of institutional and structural differences between East and West. My working paper has thus sketched in a different approach to film than the primarily “culturalist” one now dominant in American film studies; the difference lies in another form of interdisciplinarity, one with greater openness to other fields such as history or sociology, and that thus does not reduce these last to the familiar literary models of text or semiotics alone. Yet a renewed engagement with social history and concrete spectatorship need not mean a complete turn away from the insights of earlier film studies (including psychoanalysis or genre theory)<sup>29</sup>. The complexity of cultural and political questions involved in film not only as mirror of society, but also as a form of active social intervention, requires a corresponding richness of method – especially when one seeks to understand film and film culture in a larger, comparative European context.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

### REFERENCES

- “An Konrad Wolf erinnern,” Konrad Wolf (Archiv-Blätter Nr. 14), ed. Torsten Musial and Kornelia Knospe, Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2005, p. 25.
- Beutelschmidt, Thomas Cf. Sozialistische Audiovision. Zur Geschichte der Medienkultur in der DDR. Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 1995.
- Britton, Andrew. Katharine Hepburn: The Star As Feminist. New York: Continuum, 1995: p. 160ff.
- Brooks, Peter. The Melodramatic Imagination. NY: Columbia University Press, 1985: p. 29.
- Cavell, Stanley. Contesting Tears. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996: p. 19.
- Ehrenberg, John. Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea. NY: NYU Press, 1999, p. 173.
- Elsaesser, Thomas and Michael Wedel. “Defining DEFA’s Historical Imaginary: The Films of Konrad Wolf.” New German Critique, Winter 2001, pp. 3-24.
- Feinstein, Joshua. The Triumph of the Ordinary. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Glenn, John. Framing Democracy: Civil Society and Civic Movements in Eastern Europe. Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Goffman, Behavior in Public Places, NY: Free Press, 1963; Frame Analysis, Cambridge: Harvard 1974.
- Huyssen. “Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner.” After the Great Divide. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 16-43.
- Jacobsen, Wolfgang and Rolf Aurich. Der Sonnensucher. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2005.
- Lang, Robert. American Film Melodrama. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989: p. 3.
- Lindahl, Folke. “The Dissidents and the Antipolitical Ideology of Civil Society.” N. Graham and F. Lindahl, eds., The Political Economy of Transition in Eurasia. Lansing, MI: U Michigan Press 2006, 95-137.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. “Is there a ‘Democratic Deficit’ in World Politics? A Framework for Analysis.” Government and Opposition 39 (2) April 2004, pp. 336-363.
- Poiger, Uta. Jazz, Rock and Rebels. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Vaubel, Roland. “Disproportionately Undemocratic.” Wall Street Journal. 30 July 2007, p. A14.
- “Versungen und vertan? Rückblicke auf 40 Jahre DDR-Literatur und Geschichtsschreibung der DDR-Literatur,” Oxford German Studies 27 (1998), pp. 141-168.
- Wolf, Konrad. Direkt in Kopf und Herz. Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1989.

### NOTES

1. Compare Andrzej Wajda’s claim in 1980 that “a new consciousness for Poland will be born in the cinema” (“Some Thoughts on the Duty of Our Profession to our Country and our Epoch,” Polish Perspectives, vol. 24, no. 1, Warsaw 1981, 49-54). This was however less true of the GDR.
2. See Konrad Jarausch, „Aufbruch der Zivilgesellschaft,” lecture at Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Berlin, 28 Oct. 2004, Gesprächskreis Geschichte Heft 55, Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2004, p. 7 citing Detlev Pollack, Politischer Protest, Opladen 2000. There is already a considerable literature on the implicitly political effects of popular culture in the East, including Ute Poiger, Jazz, Rock and Rebels (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
3. According to Gräf, “‘Frauenfilme als spezifische filmische Kategorie [hat es] im DEFA-Spielfilm

- nie gegeben.” (Helmut Pflügl / Raimund Fritz (Red.): *Der geteilte Himmel: Höhepunkte des DEFA-Kinos 1946-1992*. Wien: Filmarchiv Austria 2001, vol. II, p. 107). Misselwitz claimed in an interview with Christiane Mückenberger that Winter ade was “kein Frauenfilm” (see Mückenberger, “Dinge ins Rollen bringen. Motivationen und Visionen von Regisseurinnen im DEFA-Dokumentarfilm“) (<http://www.hdf.de/de/publikationen/blickwechsel/mueckenberger.html>).
4. New Wave popular music may be dated from circa 1978-1986, but was short-lived in Germany, and may not have arrived in the East until on into the 80s with bands like Die Vision; Nena and Lena Lovich had to emigrate to the West. See Galenza, Ronald; Havemeister, Heinz, *Wir wollen immer artig sein...Punk, New Wave, HipHop, Independent-Szene in der DDR 1980-1990* (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1991); also *Melodie & Rhythmus : Bilder aus 20 Jahren DDR-Rock. Fotografien von Herbert Schulze. Mit einem Essay von Michael Rauhut* (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf 2001). Sunny, of course, did not have access to the plastic and spandex typical of capitalist New Wave fashion.
  5. “Excess” is a technical term in film studies, used to designate “over the top” effects beloved of melodrama, or even any effects accenting the emotional over the narrative or structural (see Kristin Thompson, “The Concept of Cinematic ‘Excess,’” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Studies Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, NY: Columbia, 1982, pp. 130-142).
  6. I am admittedly simplifying a bit here, for Paula in *The Legend of Paul and Paula* (Heiner Carow, 1973) is already clearly interested more in the private than the public sphere.
  7. See Doane, *Femmes Fatales* (NY: Routledge 1991), *passim*, with reference to Joan Riviere.
  8. I.e. the comedies *Die unverbesserliche Barbara* (1977, dir. Lothar Warnecke), with Eberhard Esche; *Zünd’ an, es kommt die Feuerwehr* (1978, dir. Rainer Simon), with Winfried Glatzeder; *Feuer unter Deck* (1977, dir. Hermann Zschoche), with Manfred Krug, and the melodrama *Bis dass der Tod euch scheidet* (1979, dir. Heiner Carow).
  9. As Mary Ann Doane put it, “As spectacle, the female body is sexuality; the erotic and spectacular are welded.” Melodramas, though, “by deerotizing the gaze...disembody their spectator.” (*The Desire to Desire* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], p. 19.)
  10. Their relation to the camera, and to the spectator, may admittedly be complex: Jutta Hoffmann, for instance, is clearly erotically playing to a male gaze in certain of her roles, whereas the stark physical depiction of breast cancer in the first shot of Warneke’s *Die Beunruhigung* just as clearly defies that gaze.
  11. Honneth, *Der Kampf um Anerkennung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994); see also the debate between Honneth and Nancy Fraser on this question.
  12. See Elsaesser, *Fassbinder’s Germany* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 1996). We might however see a different kind of double bind in DEFA films, since all GDR citizens were always seen both as private and as public figures, given that there was no aspect of life in which the state was not interested (on this, Dirk Baecker, *Poker im Osten* [Berlin: Merve, 1988], p. 61).
  13. Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* (New Brunswick, Rutgers, 1989), p. 137 on search for an audience, and characters playing roles.
  14. Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The Sex of Things* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996); Erica Carter, *How German is She?* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1997); Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
  15. See, among others, Annette Kaminsky, *Wohlstand, Schönheit, Glück. Kleine Konsumgeschichte der DDR* (Munich: Beck 2001);

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

- Simone Tippach-Schneider, *Messemännchen und Minol-Pirol. Werbung in der DDR* (Berlin 1999); *Wunderwirtschaft DDR – Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren*, ed. Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (Böhlau: Köln/Weimar/Wien, 1996).
16. On DEFA's version of stardom, see Claudia Fellmer, "Armin Mueller-Stahl: From East Germany to the West Coast" (*The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Goktürk, London: BFI 2002, pp. 90-97). Fellmer notes on page 91 that film star polls were taken in the GDR from 1960 to 1982: the end of this star culture thus roughly coincides with the making of *Solo Sunny*. See also Stefan Soldovieri, "Managing Stars: Manfred Krug and the Politics of Entertainment in GDR Cinema," *Moving Images of East Germany: Past and Future of DEFA Film*, ed. Barton Byg and Betheny Moore, Washington: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 2002, pp. 56-71, and "The Politics of the Popular: Trace of the Stones (Frank Beyer 1966/89) and the Discourse on Stardom in the GDR Cinema." *German Popular Film*. Eds. Randall Halle and Maggie McCarthy. Wayne State UP: Detroit/MI, 2003, pp. 220-236.
  17. The point has been made by Detlev Pollack (see his *Dissent and Opposition in Communist Europe*, with Jan Wielgohs, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); see also Prue Chamberlayne, "Gender and the Private Sphere: A Touchstone of Misunderstanding between Eastern and Western Germany?" *Social Politics*, vol. 2 no. 1 (1995), pp. 25-36.
  18. "One gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design" (Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* [NY: Free Press, 1963], p. 84). No behavior could be more opposed to the society of the spectacle, of the mass media.
  19. *Soziale Systeme* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1984), pp. 571-2. On page 573 Luhmann interestingly contrasts conflict (state) and exchange (market) as means to articulate this contingency. The GDR favored the former.
  20. *Melodrama and Meaning* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994). As one reviewer nicely noted, "A local genre can have a local impact" (J. D. Connor, "Disappearing Inc.: Hollywood Melodrama and the Perils of Criticism," *MLN* 112 no. 5 [1997], 958-970, p. 970). In other words, local genres can contribute to the differentiation of social subgroups, rather than merely engineering false totalities (as in traditional Hollywood genre theory).
  21. Thomas Beebe, *The Ideology of Genre* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1994). This means also that to criticize DEFA for not producing a genre cinema (as some have done) is missing the point.
  22. See for instance the skeptical comments of Heinz Klunker, "Sunny politisch Sorgen herzungewisse," *Deutschland Archiv* 1980, pp. 1288-1299. The younger filmmaker Dietmar Hochmuth (b. 1954) wrote a newspaper letter under the pseudonym of "Ingrid Winter" (making fun of Sunny's main character Ingrid Sommer) as a sarcastic unmasking of what he saw as a controversy staged by the State.
  23. Both in SAPMO-BArch, DR 1 – 12862.
  24. Akademie der Künste, Wolf-Nachlass, 1665.
  25. See Agde's correspondence with Wolf, Akademie der Künste, Wolf-Nachlass (ohne Signatur), letter of Dec. 13, 1980.
  26. On Bauer's role in the theater, see Laura Bradley, "'Prager Luft' at the Berliner Ensemble? The Censorship of *Sieben Gegen Theben*, 1968-9," *German Life and Letters* 58 (1), 2005, pp. 41-54, and "GDR Theatre Censorship: A System in Denial," *German Life and Letters* 59 (1), 2006, 151-162.
  27. An instance: G. Tom Poe, "Historical Spectatorship Around and About Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach*," *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, ed.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE GDR

Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI 2001), pp. 91-102.

28. For a discussion of this disappearance of the traditional Habermasian public sphere, see Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1994).
29. In this, I am following the example of Judith Mayne (*Spectatorship*, London: Routledge 1995) and Janet Staiger (*Interpreting Films*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).



European Union Center of Excellence  
Texas A&M University  
Bush Presidential Library Center  
College Station, TX 77843-1245

Phone: (+1) 979.862.6701 ♦ Fax: (+1) 979.862.6705

Email: [eucenter@tamu.edu](mailto:eucenter@tamu.edu)

Website: <http://eucenter.tamu.edu>