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Film 265: German War Film

Socialist Realism and Self-Authentication in Post-War East German Film

The end of the Third Reich in 1945 presented Germany with the question of how to begin rebuilding infrastructure, political and social systems, and artistic production. The years following the war, particularly after the construction of the Berlin Wall, saw the development of two distinct national cinemas in Germany – one in capitalist West Germany, and one in socialist East Germany.[[1]](#footnote-1) The goals, content, and style differed notably, however they both had to address the same question: how to make films again after the National Socialists misused and abused the power of cultural production. On this point both the FRG and GDR agreed; representations in film should provide a moral compass, but the extent of German film’s role in society was contended among the allied powers.[[2]](#footnote-2) However it only took until 1946 for the new film production studio in East Germany, DEFA, to rise from the ashes of the National Socialist UFA and produce its first film, *The Murders Are Among Us*. *The Murders Are Among Us* does not shy away from discussions of the Third Reich, however it notably omits the horrors of the Holocaust, even though one of the characters was in a concentration camp. This was DEFA’s challenge – how to create meaningful representations of the second world war in cinema, while providing moral direction. Of particular interest in these representations is how authenticity is established, or more directly, why should we believe what we are watching is accurate and truthful? If DEFA films were to provide a moral orientation to viewers, then how are they to convince the viewers that the moral stance in the film is worth heeding? The following discussion will show that two DEFA films, *The Murderers Are Among Us* and *I Was Nineteen,* argue for their authenticity by inviting the viewer into the protagonist’s head, while simultaneously validating the protagonists as valuable and trustworthy moral guides. Furthermore, these films use this method of self-authentication to justify and validate their depictions of Nazi war-crimes.

The DEFA studios were tied closely to the governmental party in the GDR, The Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). The SED had the ability to censor films and did so in waves, however it had nevertheless an investment in producing art: “In the GDR, art generally, and film art specifically, were conceived not just as entertainment but as ways of shaping and molding an entire society. Hence, party leaders were keenly interested in artistic developments, sometimes seeking to encourage and at other times hinter them.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In this way the SED censorships tried to promote films that supported the ideological goals of the state. However the censorships were inconsistent and fluctuating, with distinct periods of liberalization and restrictive measures. For example, Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953 was followed by a period of liberalization, while the 1956 anti-Soviet protests in Hungary were followed by a crackdown. These transitions happened within a matter of years, creating a volatile industry – a film could begin production under a period of liberalization, but become subject to censor by the time it was finished. The most infamous measures are those which came out of the Eleventh Plenary in 1965. The plenary banned every DEFA film, 12 in total, in that year. Despite having to operate in an unstable censorship system, DEFA developed a body of anti-fascist films, what Stephen Brockmann calls DEFA’s “most significant contribution to German cinema.”[[4]](#footnote-4) By 1999, DEFA had produced over 7,500 films.[[5]](#footnote-5) These films constituted the Socialist Realist genre, which Marc Silberman summarizes as, “a combination of explicitly articulated philosophical assumptions about the didactic nature of art and a set of normative guidelines for judging the quality of specific works in fulfilling the didactic project.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Socialist Realism functioned thus as a moral compass and pedagogical tool. The SED understood the value of film and supported the arts, but with the caveat that cultural productions reinforced Socialist ideology.

Socialist Realism calls for authenticity and believability, because without these characteristics, the film would fail in its didactic intentions. Gil Bartholeyns points out that authenticity ought not be confused with historicity. Historicity is the part of a film that determines its place in time and space. This includes location, costume design, and speech patterns. Bartholeyns argues that authenticity has nothing to do with historicity; a film need not have historically accurate information to be authentic and express a truism. “One should not let oneself be deluded into believing that the only way for the past to come back to life on the screen be through strategies of fidelity, for the apparent is too deceptive of the past’s inner truth, or soul… In fact, directors have sometimes seen history and its representation under the sole angle of ’reality.’”[[7]](#footnote-7) This idea, that reconstructions of the past can be authentic without being historically accurate is of particular importance when thinking about DEFA films about the second world war. Photographic media such as film, in contrast to nonphotographic media, benefit from increased credibility because there is the underlying assumption that the camera captures live events.[[8]](#footnote-8) The camera provides an unbiased visual representation, as opposed to, say, a painter’s hand. That is not to say that film is unmediated; a decision still must be made as to where the camera goes, what is seen, and what is not seen. Nevertheless, the action that the camera captures indeed did happen. In this way, although film is a representation like all other media, it is one that can draw a viewer into a reality that can be imagined through visual and auditory elements. Bartholeyns terms this phenomenon, when a film’s representation of reality becomes the viewer’s reality, the disappearance of the camera. The reality that is presented to a viewer need not reflect a historicistic one, but rather tap into a “collective imagination.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Bartholeyns’ construction of authenticity will be particularly useful in analyzing films in Socialist Realism and their relation to reality.

The conditions under which Wolfgang Staudte’s *The Murderers Are Among Us* was differed slightly from the later DEFA films. Staudte had originally pitched his film to the French and American occupying forces, but they refused to make the film, and Staudte therefore brought it to the Soviets.[[10]](#footnote-10) *The Murderers Are Among Us* belongs to the genre of Trümmerfilme, which use destroyed German cities as a backdrop. Although an early example of Socialist Realism, *The Murderers Are Among Us* bears more resemblance to the expressionist films of the Weimar Era, and borrows from the American Western as well. The shadowy, dark environments and off-kilter camera angles are a nod to expressionism, but the heavy soviet influence is visible – Staudte was made to change the ending of the film to conform to the Soviets’ wishes that justice is handled by the courts and not civilians. The film therefore belongs in part to Socialist Realism, as it has a pedagogical purpose.

*The Murderers Are Among Us* tells the story of Dr. Hans Mertens’ pursuit of justice after the war, while handling his own trauma from it. The opening of the film shows Mertens walking through the rubble in Berlin among makeshift graves, which is followed by the introduction of Susanne. Susanne, the viewer quickly finds out from a discussion between eavesdropping neighbors, has survived a concentration camp. *The Murderers Are Among Us* glosses over this point – it is never further developed or explained, and it is not completely clear why the National Socialists took her. The viewer knows only that it was because of her father. Mertens has been occupying Susanne’s old apartment, and they thus meet when she returns home, intending to reestablish normalcy and start life again. Mertens does not have the same mindset. It slowly becomes clear that he is tortured by his memories of the war, specifically his former captain, Ferdinand Brückner. Brückner, having survived the war, continues to profit from it by making kitchen goods from helmets. The viewer finds out that Brückner is the subject of Mertens’ trauma, as Brückner ordered the execution of a number of Polish people, including men, women, and children.

Staudte brings the viewer into Mertens’ mind, in order to understand his trauma and make it believable and real for the viewer, in a complex combination of character development and flashbacks. Staudte keeps the viewer emotionally distant from Mertens at first. It is clear that he is troubled, but not why. Additionally, there is no external narration, so the viewer is initially left guessing. The viewer’s understanding is developed in large part by two flashbacks. In the first, on a visit with Brückner, Brückner presents Mertens with the pistol, which Mertens had given him to commit suicide should he be captured. Brückner says, “Es ist ein eigenartiges Gefühl, wieder mal eine Waffe in der Hand zu halten,“ as the camera zooms in on Mertens’ face. Mertens confronts the camera, looking directly into it and by extension directly at the viewer. The viewer is thus invited into the mind of Mertens. The camera stabilizes with Mertens in focus as the sounds of bombs, destruction, airplanes, sirens, gunfire, and screams fill the soundscape. Staudte here develops Mertens’ story purely with auditory information. The viewer now knows that Mertens has seen (or perhaps here, heard) the frontline of the war. This flashback validates Mertens’ trauma and also his character; the sounds of war are evidently what he hears in his head. Staudte forms a connection between Mertens and the viewer in the flashback: both parties are able to experience the horrors of the war together. The flashback is an abstract amalgamation of war sounds. Yet the scene, by making it real for Mertens, does not necessitate a historical basis – it is authenticated by the viewer’s connection with Mertens.

While the first flashback is purely auditory, Mertens’ second flashback is more akin to showing one of his exact memories. It is here, that the full extent and complete understanding of Mertens’ character and his goals in the film become concrete. The second flashback is brought on by a speech Brückner gives on Christmas. The camera again zooms in on Mertens’ face as Brückner speaks, but this time the image dissolves into a shot of soldiers dragging a man into a crowd of other people, who are presumably Polish, with Brückner’s speech still heard. This transition simultaneously establishes where and when Staudte is taking the viewer, and that the viewer is entering Mertens’ memory. The scene shows what is most likely the largest source of Mertens’ trauma, and why he believes Brückner does not deserve to live: Brückner gives an order to kill innocent people. Mertens pleads with Brückner to no avail. The scene ends with soldiers and captains singing a Christmas song over the images of the Polish men, women, and children being executed, and a shot of the written report which enumerates 36 men, 54 women, and 31 children killed with 347 rounds of ammunition.

In these two flashbacks, the transmission of information is unmediated – it is delivered directly from Mertens to the viewer. They represent a growing connection between Mertens and the viewer as well. He is at first distant, then he shares what he hears, and finally he shares a full memory. In this way Staudte legitimizes Mertens as a character, because he becomes more complex, and has a relationship with the viewer. The camera, to again use Bartholeyns’ phrase, disappears; only the viewer and Mertens are left. Instead of watching a representation of a reality, the viewer sees and understands Mertens’ own reality in the context of the war.

The final scene of *The Murderers Are Among Us* is the supposed shootout of the western, but as previously mentioned, the Soviets required Staudte remove the killing of Brückner. Mertens confronts Brückner intending to shoot him, and as Brückner comes to understand this, he slowly backs away from the camera and Mertens. However, as the conversation happens, the perspective of the camera does not show Mertens. As Brückner backs away, he comes to look directly at the camera, and by extension the viewer. It becomes the viewer who is the shooter. This is yet another connection between the viewer and Mertens, which at this point has effectively condensed them into the same entity. Susanne snaps the viewer and Mertens out of a trance by running down a corridor calling out Mertens’ name, and stops Brückner’s death.

Historicity is perhaps in question in *The Murderers Are Among Us*. The ruins of Berlin, although in large part a set, are effective in communicating the setting, yet, outside of Mertens the film does not communicate adequately the experiences of Germans during the war. This is especially true in the case of Susanne. She is far too healthy and unharmed to have been interned in a concentration camp for three years. As for presenting authenticity, *The Murderers Are Among Us* uses a handful of techniques, primarily the validation of Mertens as a tortured character and letting the viewer slowly come to understand his trauma. Staudte uses this connection and mutual understanding to eventually portray Nazi war crimes as they relate to the post-war German identity and condition. *The Murderers Are Among Us* is just one example showing the tendencies of the Socialist Realism genre. The following consideration of a later DEFA film contrasts the authenticating techniques Staudte uses in *The Murderers Are Among Us*.

Konrad Wolf’s *I Was Nineteen* (1968) is perhaps more indicative and representative of the Socialist Realist genre, and therefore of DEFA films, and belongs to a body of Wolf’s semi-autobiographical work.[[11]](#footnote-11) The film follows Gregor Hecker, a teenager whose family fled Germany when he was a boy to live in Moscow. Now of military age, Gregor is in the Red Army in the final few weeks of the war. As Gregor’s unit moves through the area surrounding Berlin, he is confronted with the duality of his German and Russian identities. Wolf structures *I Was Nineteen* episodically; Gregor finds himself in a new situation in every scene, which are punctuated by Gregor’s narration and dates printed on the screen. In the first scene, Gregor is made commander, in large part because he is bilingual – it is his job to tell the German soldiers that the war is lost and to surrender to the Soviets through a loudspeaker. The details of Gregor’s journey are unimportant for this discussion. What is of interest is how Wolf develops his protagonist.

*I Was Nineteen* argues for its own authenticity in a number of ways, including borrowing

from documentary film’s aesthetic. These elements of documentary film necessitate a revisit to the discussion of authenticity, as documentary film presumes a realness and objectivity that fictional film does not. This is, of course, only true to a degree – documentary film can be just as biased as all other film forms. A hallmark of documentary film is a concentration on time and place. It relies less on creation, and more on presentation. Spence and Navarro posit the camera in documentary film as a witness.[[12]](#footnote-12) That is to say, the camera gains objectivity, and therefore believability. Another legitimizing convention of interest in *I Was Nineteen* is the addition of voice-overs and interviews. Voice-overs contribute a sense of matter-of-factness. They remove the need to tell a story through the actions of the characters in the film. Where works of filmic fiction may express information through dialogue or interaction between characters, documentaries might state the information. This does two things for the credibility of the documentary film. Firstly, it creates transparency and removes interpretation from what the viewer hears and sees – viewers see precisely what the makers of the film wished them to. Secondly, it creates a direct line of communication between the makers and the viewer.

*I Was Nineteen* uses this direct communication between the narrator, Gregor, and the viewer to create trustworthiness. Wolf creates the sense that Gregor is telling his story, in true Socialist Realism fashion, for the viewer’s benefit. The viewer comes on this journey with the narrator, as opposed to watching it. Gregor’s occasional voice-overs both place events in a believable reality, and also rope the viewer in: “The intertitles introducing each episode…not only signify the event as authentic but also suggest a personal, diary-like style for the narrative.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The camera work underlines the very personal aspects of the film. This is exemplified in the scene when a woman comes to Gregor in distress because somebody has committed suicide. When Gregor enters the room, the camera pans slowly, showing the room in its entirety, and thus what the viewer sees is what Gregor sees. Personal affects like pictures assert the believability of the suicide victim as a character. Wolf again plays with the positioning of the camera in the last shot of the film. The sequence first shows soldiers preparing vehicles to leave, which is a familiar occurrence elsewhere in the film. Then the vehicles begin to move, but this time the camera is stagnant and a truck drives away from it, with Gregor sitting in the back. Gregor is thus moving away from the viewer, as if leaving him or her behind. Additionally, this camera positioning stands in contrast to shots over Gregor’s shoulder, which are frequent in the film. A closure is reached – the viewer has travelled with Gregor, but now Gregor moves on.

Gregor’s relationship with the viewer throughout much of the film is impersonal, but this changes in a scene when the Red Army celebrates the end of the war. Gregor is drunk, and walks along a railing until falling off of it. As he lies on the ground, his mother’s voice begins to speak and chides Gregor for smoking and drinking so young, and Gregor responds to her. This conversation which the viewer is privy to is personal and out of character with the rest of the film – the viewer has not seen Gregor this vulnerable. With this conversation, Wolf accomplishes two tasks. First, he reiterates just how young the protagonist is. Secondly and more importantly, it gives Gregor depth as a character, and therefore validates him. He is not only a soldier, but also a son who has interpersonal relationships. Once the scene is over, the viewer has a new perspective from which to understand Gregor.

*I Was Nineteen* does yet more to assert its own authenticity. When Gregor’s troop reaches the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, there is a long-shot down the empty road leading to the gate. Gregor tells the viewer in a voice-over that there are no more living prisoners, but that he and the Soviet soldiers would still catch the guilty. A title appears on the screen, albeit abruptly, indicating to the viewer that documentary footage is about to be shown. Wolf then intersperses documentary footage of a prison guard explaining how the gas chambers functioned with close-ups of Gregor’s face in the shower, suggesting he is trying to cleanse himself. In this way, Wolf intertwines Gregor’s identity with the murdered prisoners at Sachsenhausen, while using documentary film aesthetics to authenticate what the viewer sees. The National Socialist crimes are therefore developed through a combination of Gregor’s character and documentary footage. *I Was Nineteen* makes evident the importance of portraying Sachsenhausen properly. The film not only gives the viewer the information, but also shows its effect on the protagonist. This three-directional conversation in *I Was Nineteen*, between the viewer, Gregor, and the factual information presented in documentary aesthetics,is what makes it so effective in developing its own authenticity and communicating the Socialist Realist didactic purpose in showing Nazi war-crimes.

Despite the pressures and stipulations of the SED, DEFA managed to produce films that progressed East Germany culturally. First calling on the expressionism of Weimar Cinema while incorporating the seeds of Socialist Realism in *The Murderers Are Among Us*, East German cinema began to take shape. Of utmost importance in this development was the acknowledgement of Germany’s National Socialist past, specifically how to understand and represent it in film. The previous discussions show that this task often took the form of creating authentic and believable protagonists through a process personalization and verification. *The Murderers Are Among Us* does this through Mertens’ unmediated flashbacks, while *I Was Nineteen* uses documentary film aesthetics. Both films have a pedagogical goal, which is implicated in Socialist Realism. These methods of self-authentication in turn authenticate the representations of Nazi war-crimes. The representations are nonetheless faulty, as both Staudte and Wolf brush the Holocaust aside. However, as Bartholeyns argues, authenticity has nothing to do with historical accuracy – films must simply assert their own realities. It is left up to viewers to determine whether or not those realities resonate with their experiences, and furthermore, the degree to which the representations are authentic.

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4. Ibid, pp. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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13. Silberman, pp. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)