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Mothers, Comrades, and Outcasts in East German Women's Films (review)

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Mothers, Comrades, and Outcasts in East German Women's Films. By Jennifer L. Creech. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. Pp. xxi + 280. Paper \$38.00. ISBN 978-0253023018.

The tension between gender and socialism is inherent in many DEFA films. The first DEFA children's film, Gerhard Lamprecht's *Irgendwo in Berlin* (1946), ends with a group of boys helping Gustav's father rebuild his automobile workshop. The only girl present, Lotte, is tasked with holding Uncle Kalle's coat and does not participate in the reconstruction efforts. The scene's implication that women would be excluded from building East Germany's future is a gender-blind oversight on the filmmaker's part. At the end of Konrad Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* (1964), Rita chooses to subordinate her sexual desire to the collective good by returning from Berlin-West. Yet GDR studies with a feminist bent have engaged more extensively with GDR women's literature than with DEFA films. Although several excellent articles have addressed how women are portrayed in DEFA films, more research in the vein of Jennifer Creech's *Mothers, Comrades, and Outcasts in East German Women's Films* will help to round out conclusions drawn from literature alone.

Creech's book focuses on selected DEFA women's films that belong to the post-Kahlschlag *Alltagsfilm*, which the author argues represent the filmmakers' attempts to deal with the politics of the personal and are not to be dismissed as "a retreat from political engagement" (32). Creech observes that DEFA film narratives shifted from the public sphere in the 1950s to the private in the 1960s and 1970s. The women's films she discusses are well placed to expose the underlying contradictions between the socialist claim of emancipation and women's unfulfilled desires. They offer realist, not socialist realist, representations of the "woman question." The author applies Western feminist concepts to these DEFA films and in turn revisits those foundational concepts through the lens of socialist women's films.

Since feminism is a fraught concept in socialist countries, a feminist-oriented critique of the dominant socialist ideology is often covert. Creech's goal is to tease out and make explicit such implicit critique by analyzing how these films work both narratively and visually. The preface begins with a detailed analysis of the opening scene in Egon Günther's *Der Dritte* (1972), foreshadowing the close analysis of scenes and sequences that will be an important part of the book. In the introduction, Creech also delineates key contexts for her analysis of DEFA women's films. In her conclusion, Creech compares DEFA women's films with Berlin School films by Christian Petzold and Maria Speth.

Chapter 1 focuses on one of the first East German *Frauenfilme* of the *Alltagsfilm* genre, Egon Günther's *Fots Weib* (1965), and the critical potential of female desire. Creech discusses *Fots Weib* as an East German NewWave film within the context of the Italian, French, and West German New Waves, which discovered the feminine as a discursive tool for political engagement. Using Laura Mulvey's and Kaja Silvermann's theoretical approaches to gaze and voice, Creech asserts that "the female protagonist does not function as the object, but rather as the subject of gaze and of voice" (39), and indeed that *Fots Weib* had anticipated those approaches before they were formulated.

Chapter 2 focuses on two DEFA women's films—Evelyn Schmidt's *Das Fahrrad* (1982) and Hermann Zschoche's *Bürgerschaft für ein Jahr* (1981)—that posit motherhood and reproduction as forms of critical resistance against socialist regimentation of progress and productivity. Creech uses Julia Kristeva's theory of "women's time" to analyze the cyclical temporality of motherhood, which contravenes the socialist notion of progressive and ideological time. The author compares these two DEFA films with West German feminist films as well as with East European films, in which motherhood is associated with loneliness and abandonment.

Chapter 3 discusses the importance of interpersonal relationships in Iris Gusner's *Alle meine Mädchen* (1980) and the female (viewing) pleasure that the all-woman brigade derives from their camaraderie. Creech draws on Adrienne Rich's notion of the "lesbian continuum," referring to the orgy sequence in particular, whose homoeroticism was unusual in the heteronormative GDR. Creech observes differentiated perceptions of collectivity in different cinemas. In West German women's films, female communal living is embraced as an empowering expression of individuality. In East European cinema, by contrast, the top-down communal life and work of female laborers appears rather confining and alienating. The community of women coworkers portrayed in *Alle meine Mädchen* lies between these two extremes.

Chapter 4 is devoted to an important DEFA women's documentary directed by Felke Misselwitz, *Winter adè* (1988). Creech explains the tight political control over documentary films in the GDR and how documentary filmmakers such as Jürgen Böttcher, Winfried Junge, Gitta Nickel, Volker Koepp, and Misselwitz herself managed to avoid overt criticism of the contradictions in real existing socialism. *Winter adè* uses the talking-head technique that allows "real women" to share their life stories and personal experiences of gender difference in daily life in the GDR. The memorable stories of Christine and Margarete, for example, have no place in the socialist discourse of harmony and would otherwise be silenced if not for Misselwitz's film. Thus *Winter adè* succeeds in achieving the sense of authenticity and truthfulness for which it strives.

In summary, Creech has selected five DEFA women's films and offered perceptive readings while drawing in other films for comparison. Creech has a knack for intricate close readings of scenes and sequences, although it is not always clear how the copious details she lists serve the arguments at hand. If any further criticism is in order, the book could have benefited from some careful proofreading. But these are minor quibbles which are far outweighed by the merits of the book. Overall, Creech practices a form of critical film analysis that also attends to aesthetic and formal aspects. She combines thorough and insightful analysis with a rich catalogue of intertextual references to other films. The book is relevant for scholars and students of women's studies, film studies, and GDR studies.