

Part II

FREEZES AND THAWS: CANONIZING DEFA

The study of East German cinema has one big advantage over many other national cinemas: it is a closed field. As a result of German unification in October 1990, the national cinema of East Germany ceased to exist, and not much later, in 1992, DEFA folded operations when it was sold and renamed. Once the funds to finance the last productions had dried up, the last chapter of DEFA as a film producer had been written. East German cinema lasted from 1946 to 1992.

However, in these 46 years, DEFA produced almost nine thousand films overall, of which almost eight hundred were feature films. In the 2001 printed lexicon of DEFA feature films by Frank-Burkhard Habel, a synopsis and a brief analysis of each film covers 758 pages.¹ These numbers alone indicate that it takes a substantial amount of time to at least read about, if not view, these films. Without guidance, one would be lost in this film jungle, not knowing where to begin watching. If required to restrict oneself to a limited number of films, how can one still get a relatively accurate impression of DEFA film?

As such a first impression will be a lasting impression, it is important to select carefully and choose films that make the viewer long for more. At the same time, it is important to select those productions that left the most impact at the time of their release or those that are still watched by many viewers. Finally, in the case of East Germany, such a canon of films must take into account the political circumstances and influences accompanying each production coming out of the centralized film monopoly. With few exceptions, DEFA cinema equals the cinema of East Germany, and the dozen films that make up the canon of this book are influenced by the day-to-day politics of that socialist nation.

If there is one DEFA film that belongs in every canon, it is the very first feature film, Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*, 1946). It is, one could say, a bookend to the rest of the films. It opens the short-lived genre of the predominantly East German rubble films, shot in the remnants of Germany's bombed-out cities. These rubble films tell tales of loss and hope, coping with the Nazi past, and rebuilding the nation—at this time, though, divided into four occupation zones and the four sectors of Berlin. Almost equally uncontested is the second

feature, *Die Geschichte vom Kleinen Muck* (*The Story of Little Mook*, Wolfgang Staudte, 1953). As East Germany's most successful film ever, with over 13 million viewers, it is another film by Wolfgang Staudte, one of DEFA's eminent directors of the "first hour"; it is also the best example of a transnational director who also worked for West German companies and left DEFA at a time when politics were taking over. Released in 1953, a year of major strikes, unrest, and violent riots in East Germany, the fairytale film barely reflects the beginning of a series of alternating "freezes" and "thaws" in East German cinema; the former were periods in which DEFA filmmakers had to follow strict guidelines for filmmaking, set by politics, and to endure harder censorship than during the periods of "thaw." *Mook* also represents a large batch of fairytale films and films produced for children that became one of DEFA's hallmarks in the years to come, and a genre that many other nations admired East German cinema.

The film *Berlin—Ecke Schönhauser* (*Berlin Schönhauser Corner*, Gerhard Klein, 1957) stands for the group of Berlin films that address the topic of the divided city from an East German perspective, trying to translate ideological borders into film. While DEFA produced a number of these films, *Berlin—Ecke Schönhauser* allows an easy comparison with films about teenage rebellion from other nations in Europe and overseas. Similar comparisons may also come to mind with DEFA's first sci-fi film, *Der schweigende Stern* (*Silent Star*, Kurt Maetzig, 1960). No DEFA canon would be complete without a science fiction film, and this one in particular, as it marks the birth of East German genre film. Director Kurt Maetzig, another founding member and perhaps the most eminent person of DEFA, also directed the film *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit Is Me*, 1965). This film was among the first to fall victim to another period of ideological freezes, and became the eponym to the group of the 1965 East German feature films often known as "rabbit films," which were all banned as result of a political turn. While other films, such as *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*, Frank Beyer, 1966), would have been good alternatives, Maetzig's film allows better insight into the parallels of East German cinema and other European new waves.

The selection of *Heißer Sommer* (*Hot Summer*, Joachim Hasler, 1968) is again easy to justify because it belongs to the genre of the musical film and allows insight into the lighter side of DEFA cinema like few other films. At the same time, its eminent status due to its immense popularity raises the question of the role of entertainment cinema in a socialist society, and in particular makes us wonder why the musical film was merely DEFA's stepchild if it was so enjoyed by audiences.

Choosing a film from DEFA's most beloved genre, the "Red Western," proves to be much more random: most of them featured one star, Gojko Mitic, who was then typecast into the role as Native American. The selection of *Apachen* (*Apaches*, Gottfried Kolditz, 1973) hinged upon the fact that it is one of the three subtitled East German "Westerns with a Twist."² In the same year, benefitting from a new "thaw" period that had started in 1971, another one of DEFA's eternal blockbusters, *Die Legende von Paul*

und Paula (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, Heiner Carow, 1973), came out. As this film set new standards in the depiction of gender imbalance in East Germany—and dared to show sex scenes on-screen—challenged the liberties of artistic freedom. It is as much a landmark of DEFA as the 1974 anti-fascist film *Jakob der Lügner* (*Jacob the Liar*, Frank Beyer, 1974). This film is unique because it belonged to one of DEFA's largest and longest-lasting genres, was East Germany's only nomination for an Academy Award, and had the questionable honor of being "remade" in Hollywood.

Solo Sunny (Konrad Wolf, 1980), on the other hand, represents a much smaller group of films that could be subsumed under the umbrella term "women's film." Once more, this film stands out against others because of its director, Konrad Wolf. Instrumental in East German cinema as part of another generation following the foundational members, Wolf's oeuvre influenced much of DEFA's filmmaking for many years; however, *Solo Sunny* remains a very special film because it differs from his other movies and was his last film before his death. DEFA's last film *Die Architekten* (*The Architects*, Peter Kahane, 1990), the other bookend (to the first film *Die Mörder sind unter uns*), is also a special film that deserves, if not requires, to be studied as a historical document in two ways: one, as a document of an East Germany in dissolution (Kahane was frantically trying to capture authentic images while the opening of the Berlin Wall made his film superfluous), and two, as a testimony that in fact concludes the history of DEFA as East Germany's national cinema. However, including *Letztes aus der Da-Da-eR* (*Latest from the Da-Da-eR*, Jörg Foth, 1990) shows how the end of socialist East Germany meant a coda for DEFA in a democratic East Germany that allowed a final glimpse at the potential of cinema that had it not been influenced, regulated, and manipulated by East German politics. Like no other of the films of the political turn, Foth's film represents the angst of giving up the past, which, although not great, was familiar, and offered the chance to turn East Germany into a democratic society, whereas unification with West Germany would turn it into an appendix. It turned out that Foth was right, and in retrospect, *Letztes* anticipated the problems of East Germany's missing legacy in united Germany.