

**Dangerous Liaisons? Film and History**

by Benita Blessing

History Department  
Ohio University



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In their compelling essays on how to use films as an instructional medium for teaching GDR history, Professors Thomas Adam, Catherine Plum, and Gregory Witkowski have demonstrated how to go beyond the common practice of selecting a film or two to use in the classroom in order to break up the readings a bit and keep students interested. These instructors have instead analyzed individual films about East Germany and offered insightful and, more important, concrete suggestions about how to incorporate these cultural artifacts into a larger, cohesive history curriculum. They have not, however, championed films as a better or more effective pedagogical tool than other sources. Indeed, they have laid out a number of obstacles regarding the use of film in the classroom.

It is these obstacles in using films in history instruction that I would like to address more thoroughly. Despite many historians' mistrust of a director's ability to portray accurately historical ideas and events within two hours of images and story on a screen, a large body of films has regularly made its way into German history classrooms since at least the end of World War II. Few scholars can imagine teaching a course on modern Germany without at least showing a clip of Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 *Triumph of the Will* and, until the recent success of *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), students themselves have typically asked instructors if they will ("please please please") get to see the 1985 West German television mini-series *Das Boot*. So why do instructors fret, for instance, that *Swing Kids* (1993) and its unhappy-yet-happy ending will forever ruin our students' chances of understanding the nuances of collaboration and resistance among young people during the Third Reich? Why worry that students will think that it was common practice (a la *The Legend of Paul and Paula*, 1973) for desperate couples in the GDR to hack down their lovers' doors with an axe to the applause of their elderly neighbors? Viewed in this sense, no wonder that instructors (and even students) find that films can be problematic in history classes.

And on a practical note, we all know that the announcement of a "film day" continues to suggest to some students a reason for skipping class or, equally troubling, a chance to sleep during class.

The essays here suggest how historians can negotiate the persistent tensions inherent in using films. Their answers rely on a question that we do not ask ourselves explicitly enough: what is it that we want our students to take away from watching a film – either a clip or the movie in its entirety? This question is at the heart of the essays by Adam, Plum, and Witkowski. Plum observes that many West Germans after the *Wende* realized that the GDR was a "foreign world." *Good Bye, Lenin!* can help students understand that even the filmmakers themselves realized that life on the other side of the Wall (either side) could not be reached merely by driving across a former border. With this revelation, Plum gets at some of the issues of film-making itself, an area largely ignored by historians. For example, she notes that the timing of the making of the film itself is crucial to understanding the film's portrayals of East German consumer society. An understanding of when the film appeared also helps us recognize that time had to pass before filmmakers could be ready to engage the topic of the GDR and unification. Such discussion points bring students and instructors back to the historical work of analyzing primary sources. As Plum notes, this kind of contextualization encourages students to think critically "beyond the parameters of the film itself," a difficult, yet key task. Indeed, Plum's approach to the teaching of this film – distributing themes and questions before the film that serve as discussion points in subsequent classes – suggests that the most important work in using films in classrooms begins after the showing of the film, perhaps even days afterwards, when students have had time to process the many levels of information and interpretation. Such a pedagogical detail is not self-evident – in our haste to get through our teaching material, it is far too easy to allow film to stand alone with

only a minimum of attendant discussion, possibly even in the form of an instructor's explanations that allow little room for student input. In her thorough and thoughtful lesson on the GDR and the consequences (intended and unintended) of the *Wende*, Plum makes a strong argument for slowing down our use of films in class, allowing them to become the center of desired learner outcomes rather than a potential replacement for a lecture.

Still, a list of themes does not ensure critical analysis, and leaves me with the question of whether this sort of approach relies too much on the instructor's interpretation. Plum describes the mother Christiane as having been a devoted communist – but Christiane only took on this role after she elected not to join her husband's on his flight to the West. What would happen if, tweaking this model of film use slightly, the instructor asked students to come up with themes before and after the screening? Alternately, what if the students were assigned a brief amount of time to summarize the plot after having seen it? In such a modification of this lesson plan, Christiane's decision to lie to her children about their parents' lives might be the key moment for some, while the subject of currency reform and its economic consequences might be an important plot line for other students. In essence, what I am asking of Plum's lesson plan is to push the envelope even further by helping students learn how to use films in their learning – a slightly different objective than using films in teaching.

Of course, the use of film in a classroom ultimately begins with the instructor's decisions about what films to select. Witkowski, in his choice of *The Legend of Rita*, offers an important contribution to the use of film in classrooms, not least reminding us that the films we choose as instructors should be ones that best enhance our syllabi and classroom themes – and there are many films to consider. Moreover, his recognition that not only the best-known films can be essential in studying a society is an important reminder that we have an obligation to our students to expose them to more than the usual suspects of cultural documents. Witkowski worries that students might tire from being exposed to too many films and provides solutions to this potential problem. He suggests instructors rely on film-clips or discussing films during lectures when their importance can be conveyed without actual images. I would suggest that what is at stake is not the sort of film overload that can cause students' eyes to glaze over at the sound of one more DVD being inserted into the media set-up. Instead, it is a more complex dynamic that Witkowski both solves in one instance and complicates in another. First, Witkowski's choice of "Rita" almost certainly eliminates the possibility that this is the second, third, or even fourth time a student has seen a particular film (whether in another class or even at the cinema). Certainly, students at all

levels can benefit from multiple viewings of a film. Yet many of our students have seen the same films in German classes, film classes, or even other history classes, and – no matter how well put-together a lesson – many of those students will inevitably and (dare I say) understandably simply tune out (or skip that class altogether). Following Witkowski's explanation of his choice of film, it would seem wise that we initiate a dialogue with our students about the films that we intend to spend some time on in class, and perhaps entertain alternate films. I do not suggest that we allow students to change the course of a planned screening based only on their knee-jerk reactions. But we have little to lose either in a large lecture class or an upper-division seminar by conducting even a minimal amount of research into the knowledge students bring with them into class. A quick check of hands might lead an instructor to decide that, since almost all eighty students have watched, for instance, *Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser* (1957) in one or two other classes (I draw this particular example from my own experience), the lesson will either need to be fine-tuned or, perhaps, might be changed to incorporate a different film altogether.

The second obstacle that Witkowski mentions is the likelihood that students do not know how to analyze films critically. This problem is one that should be at the forefront of all use of films in history classes. It is not enough to spend a few moments explaining what one can and cannot take away from a film; students – and, according to all three contributions in this forum – especially undergraduates in survey classes – need to learn how to analyze a film in the same way they must learn how to analyze any other primary source or how to discuss the argument in a secondary source. We should directly address this issue in our teaching. I would even go so far as to state that many of us do not find it necessary to assign even a brief reading about film analysis and have ourselves done next to no reading about film theory.

This observation is problematic, and is not unique to historians' work with cinema. In a provocative attack on historians' use and abuse of art in explaining history, art historian Giovanni Romano accused historians who incorporated the plastic arts into historical scholarship of lacking the "right instruments" to do so. In his 1997 chapter on depictions of youth in the modern period, Romano noted that, "for those who attempt to travel beyond their discipline, it is valid to ask, as a preventive measure, whether they have a permit to drive outside the region."<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, it is not difficult to acquire the "right instruments" to think about how many historical treatments of cinema might be improved. There are a number of very accessible chapters, essays, articles, and books about films, the film industry, and film interpretation that would go far towards relieving students' difficulty with film. We might even be able to encourage them

to get excited about subtitles. Subtitles, for instance, need not only connote “an art film that is hard to understand” but could present a challenging and doable exercise on interpretation that students are ready and willing to tackle.

In my own classes, I have found it helpful to turn to those writings on film theory that are not straightforward histories of cinema. And, because film theory is not solely country-specific, I do not hesitate to look beyond Germany for appropriate texts. *The French Cinema Book*<sup>2</sup> for example, includes numerous chapters about how to interpret different aspects of film, appropriate for both students’ reading assignments and instructors’ preparation of lectures. The collection *An Economic History of Film*<sup>3</sup> provides an alternative collection of writings about the film industry in general; the essays there can encourage scholars to get beyond the false dichotomy of director/spectator. For more advanced students already familiar with how to view films as documents, Teresa de Lauretis’ *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*<sup>4</sup> and Judith Mayne’s *Women at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema*<sup>5</sup> provide critiques of both post-modernist and feminist approaches to film theory. And, for those instructors and students who (like myself) are no longer content to accept the standard (auteur-oriented) mantra that film portrays not reality but rather a representation of one person’s reality, I highly recommend the “other” Siegfried Kracauer book on film, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*<sup>6</sup>. Throughout this insightful work, Kracauer provides a much-needed salve for some of what ails us in using films in history classes: to wit, he suggests that films reveal reality to us – giving us at long last permission to ease up on warnings to our students that (to liberally paraphrase Kracauer) What you are about to see might endanger your view of history (cf. p. 3).

With this discussion of the need to acquaint ourselves and our students with film theory, I would like to finish with some comments on Adam’s contribution. In his essay on *Murderers are Among Us*, Adam sees the question of film as a source as central to the use of this medium. Of the three essays, Adam’s is most concerned with the multiple possibilities of film use. He states that it is not enough for students to use any fiction(alized) text, in whatever form, as a mere “backdrop to the history book;” and suggests instead that films (and their kin, novels) can “bring...a society closer to our students.” Similarly, Adam goes further in his thinking about films, reminding scholars and his students that literature and cinema are not so very different from traditional textbooks: they

offer arguments based on interpretations of evidence. Indeed, Adam argues that fiction is not somehow less authentic than textbooks. Instead, he demonstrates that authors and filmmakers serve an important function in helping us understand historical events and characters by allowing us to ask daring questions about ethics and agency that textbooks cannot address. Such an approach also allows scholars to look beyond the characters we see in films – to set designers, costume makers, and camera operators.

In sum, Adam uses novels and movies as solutions to the frustrations of history, and as a way to reveal that our discipline does not have all the answers. In fiction we can—indeed we must—step outside our comforting statistics, dates, and “facts” (for a moment at least) and imagine answers to the seemingly unanswerable. The moment of uncertainty, during which we dare to ask questions about a document that might otherwise go unasked, and which allows us to see a film from a multitude of angles and perceptions that go far beyond questions of historical accuracy, can turn what seems difficult about using films in classrooms into pedagogical challenges. So what do we want to have students take away from the films we show in class and talk about in lectures? A better understanding not only of history, but of *doing* history. After all, as demonstrated in these essays, cinema offers us an added benefit to our teaching beyond entertainment value – and that added benefit is not merely more knowledge about the facts.

Notes:

1. Giovanni Romano, “Images of Youth in the Modern Period,” eds. Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *A History of Young People: Stormy Evolution to Modern Times* vol. 2 (Belknap: Cambridge, Mass., 1997) p. 1.
2. Michael Temple and Michael Witt, eds. *The French Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2004).
3. John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, eds. *An Economic History of Film* (London: Routledge, 2005).
4. Teresa de Lauretis *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
5. Judith Mayne, *Women at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990).
6. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford 1960).

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