



**Jennifer L. Creech.** *Mothers, Comrades, and Outcasts in East German Women's Films.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. xix + 280 pp. \$38.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-02301-8.

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**Commissioned by** David Harrisville (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Jennifer L. Creech's fabulous and provocative monograph *Mothers, Comrades, and Outcasts in East German Women's Film* sets out to accomplish a large mission: to restore the East German film industry, Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft or DEFA, from an increasingly sidelined position in postunification German memory. While DEFA has long interested scholars, its role as a state-sponsored artistic institution has colored the public's perception of the enterprise. Creech suggests, however, that DEFA directors may have subtly criticized the communist state more than previously thought. She asserts that "women's films"—understood as films about, by, and for women—can be read as spaces of negotiation with the state.

More than that, Creech wants to rescue "women's films" from marginalization within the study of DEFA films. DEFA's liminal position between state-run institution and a space for artistic expression has long attracted scholarly interest. Still, only a few works, by scholars such as Gisela Bahr, Irene Dölling, Susan Linville, Ingeborg Majer-O'Sickey, Ingeborg von Zadow, and Andrea Rinke, have assessed women's films in the GDR. Her study therefore sits at an interesting crossroads. On the one hand, it sets out to build on this scholarship and offer new insights into the questions of to what extent East German "women's

films" and DEFA directors engaged feminist thought, and how they used film to shed light on women's status in the GDR. On the other hand, she seeks to intervene in the larger historiography by placing these films in a much broader international context. She proposes that East German women's films offer a lens into the relationship of East to West. Furthermore, this study aims to "demystify the cultural homogeneity of the Eastern bloc" (p. 6) and establish DEFA and other Eastern European film production companies as legitimate filmmakers in their own right.

Creech uses East German "women's films" to interrogate four key issues at the core of socialist gender policies: the tensions between bourgeois and socialist marital and familial norms, motherhood, women in the labor force, and the everyday alienation of socialism. Each chapter centers on one or two case studies, with occasional references to similar films. Her first chapter, for example, examines Egon Günther's *Lot's Wife* (1965), a New Wave-inspired film about an unfulfilled and loveless marriage between Katrin, a teacher, and Richard, a naval officer and loyal SED member. Unable to convince her husband to grant her a divorce and barred by East German law from pursuing a divorce for reasons other than abuse or adultery, Katrin resorts to stealing so he will be forced into leaving her. The film, released right as

East Germany loosened its divorce restrictions, had a decidedly political agenda, one that walked a fine line between critiquing the party and allowing the party to use the film as a talking point for the necessity of its reforms. Creech concludes that the film ultimately subverts and predates Western feminist theories of the male gaze and female emancipation.

Creech then moves on to the topic of mother-daughter relationships as depicted onscreen in the GDR. According to Creech, East German films revealed motherhood to be “a central signifier in the dialectical tension between production and reproduction” (p. 90). Creech asserts that since socialism was, at its core, a teleological progression toward utopia, filmic representations of socialist motherhood stood to disrupt this image, because they depicted motherhood as cyclical, not linear. To illustrate this argument, she compares and contrasts the films *The Bicycle* (1982) and *On Probation* (1981). In the former, a single mother, frustrated with her life, quits her job, commits insurance fraud, and then moves in with a lover to support her daughter, although none of these acts ultimately lead to her self-fulfillment. In the latter, a young single mother has her children taken away from her because of neglect and she must prove herself to be a responsible parent. Ultimately, she gives the children up for adoption. Both cases address the issue of public and private responsibility and failure, a significant issue in the socialist republic and one, Creech maintains, that deserves deconstruction.

Having covered marital relations and maternal responsibility in great detail, Creech shifts into the zone of collectivity and pleasure. DEFA directors of films such as *All My Girls* (1979) knew that their female viewers worked in high numbers, so they sought to appeal to that audience by depicting their workplaces and female camaraderie. Creech points out, however, that the directors did not always portray the industrial workplaces in the best light, nor did they weave

in socialist ideology about motherhood. Ironically, while the films depicted collectives, Creech asserts that they really showed individuals’ emancipation from the group and the realization of autonomy. To this end, Creech also applies queer theory to her analysis, arguing that viewing the film from the perspective of Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum” illuminates same-sex relations in the workplace in the GDR as part of socialist identity formation. In doing so, the film discourages viewers from voyeurism and challenges them to identify with the female subjects on screen. Finally, Creech turns from fiction to fact, with an analysis of East German documentary filmmaking. Specifically, Creech homes in on Helke Misselwitz’s *Goodbye to Winter* (1988), a documentary that used the everyday lives of East German women as a subtle social critique of the GDR’s official narrative of gender equality.

Alongside her analysis of women’s films from a feminist perspective, Creech examines the ways East German directors used different filmmaking styles, often imported from the West, such as New Wave cinema in the 1960s, in their film aesthetics. She interrogates different film techniques and tropes that signal the directors’ critiques of, or conversely, support for the East German government. She pays close attention to the audience, as well as the context in which the films developed. Finally, Creech reminds us that East German film production never occurred in a vacuum, but rather was in a constant dialogue with the West and the rest of the Eastern bloc, by describing appropriate film plots from both spheres of influence.

Creech has delivered a well-written and fascinating study of feminist films under state socialism. Her descriptions and analysis of the films are rich and convincingly argued in elegant prose. This reviewer wondered, however, if Creech’s study was too wide in its scope at times. For instance, her comparisons to Western and Eastern European films at the start of each chapter were

intriguing, but often served primarily as a foil to the discussion of East German films, which are the real heart of each chapter. Additionally, the structure of the chapters was occasionally uneven. The first chapter, for example, had a separate conclusion section that other chapters did not have. Despite these minor criticisms, the book as a whole provides the reader a plethora of fabulous material and insights that firmly establish Creech as a leading expert of feminist and socialist film. Those interested in feminist/women's films, the study of socialism, or historical film studies will be excited to delve into this wonderful study.

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