

Beloved Police State: Fantasy and Propaganda in Kolditz' *Geliebte Weiße Maus*

Billy Hamilton

Film Studies Association of Canada 17th Annual Graduate Colloquium

Propaganda, Censorship, and Digital Media

Saturday, February 28, 2015

University of Regina

“Craftsmen and musicians withstand every revolution.”

The German Democratic Republic has been described as “the most boring country on earth” (Volker Braun, qtd. in Bytwerk 1). The same, unfortunately, could sometimes be said of the country’s film output. The only film production company in East Germany was the Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), a government-run studio with a mandate based on the Soviet concept of “agitation,” or the dissemination of political messages to the masses (Paul 72). Entertainment value was therefore low on the studio’s list of priorities. Entertainment genres were derided as frivolous escapism, and musicals were viewed with particular suspicion due to their association with the capitalist world of Hollywood and with the glamorous spectacles produced by Ufa under the Third Reich (Rinke 184). Nonetheless, a handful of musical films were produced in the GDR, and they proved extremely popular with domestic audiences (Rinke 183–185).

This essay will focus on Gottfried Kolditz’ 1964 musical film *Geliebte Weiße Maus* (“Beloved White Mouse”), a light-hearted romantic comedy about a traffic cop named Fritz (Rolf Herricht) and a young lady named Helene (Karin Schröder) who drives past him each day on her electric scooter. Helene calls Fritz her “beloved white mouse” because of his spotless white police uniform.

At one point in the film, a character named Herr Simmel recounts what his father told him back in the time of the Weimar republic: “Study something dependable! Who knows what may come? Craftsmen and musicians withstand every revolution.” Filmmakers working on musicals at DEFA were likewise craftsmen and musicians. They were given the resources and the opportunity to make their own films, so long as they conformed to the thematic agendas assigned to them by the studio (Kohlhaase 112). *Geliebte Weiße Maus* offers a very interesting

example of the extent to which a film can simultaneously provide popular entertainment and fulfil the propagandistic goals of a totalitarian government.

“Ice cream, with whatever you want!”

In the GDR as in the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism was the official guiding principle for all art (Rinke 184). Nonetheless, a comparatively robust exchange of aesthetic ideas was permitted in East Germany, in part because of the participation of highly respected writers such as Bertold Brecht, Anna Seghers, Arnold Zweig, and Christa Wolf. Socialist Realism was not always restricted to the stylistic conventions promoted by Moscow, but sometimes taken more broadly to describe the style of “idyllic naturalism: true to life but more beautiful” (Kohlhaase 120–121).

It is only under such a broad definition that *Geliebte Weiße Maus* could be considered a realist film, for it is filled with fantasy and playful surreality. A vase of flowers spins and dances of its own accord as Fritz tries to decide where to put it. The subject of a renaissance nude comes to life to turn her back on Fritz at the art gallery. In the most notable fantasy sequence, Fritz and Helene are lifted into the air by a flying umbrella and go on a Mary Poppins-like flight over Dresden. When they land, Fritz collapses the umbrella down to the size of a drink ornament and hides it in its pocket.

The world the characters inhabit in *Geliebte Weiße Maus* is not the East Germany of reality, plagued by shortages and economic difficulty. Instead, it is an East German fantasy: a world where every woman has clean white high-heel shoes, every man has a bright new car, and even the police drive flashy convertibles. It is a world where Fritz becomes so overwhelmed by

the variety of ice cream dishes available at the café that he finally tells the waiter to bring him, “Ice cream, with whatever you want!”

Geliebte Weiße Maus doesn't hit any of the usual talking points of socialist propaganda, such as the need to increase productivity or the evils of imperialists, war-mongers, and saboteurs (Paul 72). Fritz and Helene win no victory for the socialist cause, not even a minor one such as the production of a socialist musical as in Kolditz' previous musical film, *Revue um Mitternacht* (described in Rinke 187-190). Nor do they undergo an awakening of class consciousness. The film's happy ending is Fritz and Helene's marriage. In many ways, it would be easy to see the film as escapist, apolitical entertainment.

“Against dialectic, one is powerless.”

Nonetheless, *Geliebte Weiße Maus* serves a propagandistic purpose. The designated political goal of the film was to promote a positive image of the People's Police, an organization which had become curiously unpopular since the construction of the Berlin Wall three years before (Morton). But even beyond this specific goal, the ideal version of the GDR that the film presents conforms to and enforces Marxist-Leninist doctrine in many ways. The film therefore serves as what Jowett and O'Donnell define as “integration propaganda” — propaganda which serves “to maintain the positions and interests represented by ‘officials’ who sponsor and sanction the propaganda message” (315).

Feinstein describes the criticism that some DEFA films, such as Klein's *Berlin: Ecke Schönhauser* (1957), drew from the cultural ministry for focusing too much on the lives of misfits and troublemakers, rather than providing “positive heroes” by depicting the “normal, class-conscious worker” (70). Films with too much emphasis on the negative were felt to be

harmful and misleading, like obsessing over the one pickpocket in a city of a hundred people (54). Erich Honecker, a high-ranking member of the socialist party who was destined later to become the leader of East Germany, made the same point at the party's Eleventh Plenum in 1965:

The German Democratic Republic in which we live is an honest, upright state.

Within its borders there are clear-cut notions of ethics, morality, and decent behaviour. . . . If we are to increase productivity — and thereby raise our standard of living still further — we cannot afford to propagate nihilistic, defeatist, and immoral philosophies in literature, film, drama and television.

Scepticism and a rising standard of living are . . . mutually incompatible. (qtd. in Allan, 13)

Geliebte Weiße Maus was guilty of no such scepticism. If anything, its main characters' problems stem from being *too* perfect and law-abiding. Fritz and Helene long to get to know one another, but they never have a chance to speak because she is a perfect driver who never commits any traffic infractions, and he is too professional to interrupt her for any other reason while on duty. Finally, Helene decides to break a law deliberately, and Fritz seizes the moment to invite her out — not for dinner, but to the driving school where he teaches. Here, he tries to hint at his true feelings by asking Helene about the “*Herzstück der Straßenverkehrsordnung*” — the central provision of the traffic law, a pun on the German word *Herz*, meaning “heart.” But to his frustration, she has the provision in question memorized, and rattles it off word-for-word in a single breath. As the film goes on, both do become tempted to bend the law for the sake of their relationship. Fritz fabricates a health concern so he can confiscate some flowers from a secretary and give them to Helene. Helene goes a step farther, falsifying a police statement to protect Fritz

from allegations of misconduct. But Fritz' conscience won't permit such deception, and he insists that they both go back and confess everything to his superior officer, Hauptmann Gabler (Jochen Thomas).

The film's antagonists, Frau Messmer (Marianne Wünscher) and Herr Simmel (Gerd Ehlers), are portrayed with certain traits of bourgeois decadence. Messmer dotes on her fluffy poodle, Simmel likes to dance the Charleston, and they both like drinking wine. On the whole, however, they too are good citizens. Indeed, it is their sincere belief in egalitarianism that drives them into conflict with Fritz and Helene. They launch a complaint against Fritz after seeing him give a ticket to Messmer but not to Helene after a traffic disruption in which both were involved. Messmer feels it is time someone stood up for the rights of older, less beautiful women, as she declares in her song, "A Hymn for the Women." Simmel aids her because, as he repeatedly proclaims, he has "an inborn sense of justice." Presenting their complaint to Gabler, he speaks with evident pride of the fair laws of his country: "Captain, before our laws, every citizen is equal. The poor, and the rich; the pretty and the... and the not quite exactly... suited to the taste of an officer of the People's Police."

Geliebte Weiße Maus presents the GDR not only as a nation of honest, well-meaning people, but as an enlightened nation where emotional judgements are ruled by studiously acquired knowledge. East Germany "prided itself on its self-awarded name *Leseland DDR*, or 'The GDR: Land of Readers'" (Bytwerk 115). In 1968, when an official tribute book was released to celebrate the seventy-fifth birthday of Walter Ulbricht, head of the socialist party, the picture on the cover showed him sitting reading a book (Bytwerk 29). The same scholarly virtue is possessed by Hauptman Gabler in *Geliebte Weiße Maus*. While complaining about Fritz' conduct, Simmel makes an offhand reference to the 1810 novella *Michael Kohlhaas*, by Heinrich

von Kleist. Gabler not only recognizes the book, but responds instantly with a pertinent quotation from Kleist about the dangers of being misled by one's own intuitive sense of justice.

Finding himself intellectually outgunned, Simmel replies with a very interesting statement: "No, no, no! We don't want a discussion! You know how it is. Against dialectic, one is powerless."

Marxism-Leninism was always, in theory, a scientific ideology. In a socialist society, therefore, disagreements were to be resolved through rational discussion. East Germany's ruling party was organized as a hierarchy of committees, which were to reach consensus through discussion at every level, thereby providing the supposed democratic basis of the GDR (Bytwerk 66). In practice, the only acceptable conclusion was that endorsed by the higher levels of the party, and GDR propagandists told as many lies as necessary to lead people to the right conclusions. But it was nonetheless steadfastly maintained that the precepts of Marxism-Leninism were objective truths which could be demonstrated by honest argument, and that disagreement could be addressed through further education (Bytwerk 51–52).

Simmel's claim, then, is an affirmation of party doctrine: "Against dialectic, one is powerless." And this affirmation is borne out in the film's conclusion. Having grasped the causes and nature of the conflicts between the main characters, Gabler orders them all brought to his office, sits them down in a row of chairs, and lets them start arguing. Then he smiles, turns to the camera, and sings a relaxed, cheerful song about the silly fights people get into. "You can get ahead by using your elbows," he sings, "But that won't cut it in this day and age. With paragraphs, you can clear up a lot." Partway through the song, he stops to listen to the argument, remarks, "The discussion is still in full swing. Give me just a little more time," and goes back to singing. By the time his song is done, all animosity has vanished. The characters wave off their

previous complaints with smiles and laughter. In the socialist utopia, there are no true enemies, only misunderstandings that can be resolved through dialectic.

“Here at my intersection, every child recognizes me!”

The twin concepts of *Heimat* (“homeland”) and *Vaterland* (“fatherland”) were used in official GDR ideology to describe a citizen’s relationship to the state (Blunk 204–205). The concept of *Heimat* referred to a personal and emotional connection to one’s home. Many DEFA films promoted the image of the GDR as a beloved *Heimat* by emphasizing the visual attractiveness of East Germany (Blunk 208–210). In *Geliebte Weiße Maus*, Günter Haubold’s cinematography presents the city of Dresden as a beautiful, almost dreamlike, environment. As Morton describes it, “Everything is bright and airy, and seems like it was filmed in the sunlight — even the indoor scenes. There are no shadows in this film.” Fritz’ love for his homeland is also evident in the film’s cheerful opening song:

At my intersection, I direct the traffic,
 as though it were a great symphony orchestra!
 At my intersection, I provide the rhythm,
 so everyone can drive magnificently.
 At my intersection, every child recognizes me!
 Lots of the drivers are like the children too.
 At my intersection, where every man knows me,
 I feel like a conductor.

Fritz speaks of his intersection in equally glowing terms throughout the film — always as *my* intersection, a place he is happy to be or to which he is eager to return.

By contrast, the concept of *Vaterland* referred to a country which provided for its citizens in a broader, socio-cultural sense (Blunk 204). As we have seen, *Geliebte Weiße Maus* portrays the GDR as just such a state. The laws are just, the people are well educated, and consumer goods are plentiful. And since no benevolent fatherland is complete without a benevolent father figure, the film gives us Hauptmann Gabler, the wise and merciful police captain who solves everyone's problems in the end.

“Was it a big elephant, or a small one?”

Thus far, we have seen how *Geliebte Weiße Maus* constructed an elaborate propaganda image of an idealized GDR rooted in socialist doctrine, all without reducing the film's ability to function as enjoyable musical comedy. What none of this discussion has yet addressed is the effectiveness of such a propaganda image in shaping public opinion.

As Messmer and Simmel drive home from the police station at one point in the film, they are stopped by Fritz at his intersection. He asks why there is a huge dent the front of their car, and Simmel angrily responds that it looks like that because it was sat on by an elephant. “Uh huh,” Fritz replies. “Was it a big elephant, or a small one?” Thanks to some humorous circumstances involving a travelling circus, Simmel is in fact telling the simple truth. But we cannot fault Fritz for being sceptical. It's a pretty unlikely excuse.

The East German propaganda machine was ultimately a catastrophic failure. For all its sophistication, it could not produce genuine, widespread faith in the veracity of Marxist-Leninist doctrine or in the legitimacy of the nation's government. People merely pretended to believe, and ceased to do so as soon as the credible threat of force disappeared in 1989 (Bytwerk 160–169).

There is nothing insidious about the socialist ideals presented in Kolditz' film. Law-abiding citizens keep society functioning, open discussion is great for resolving misunderstandings, and benevolent police are the best kind of police. For that matter, flying around town on an umbrella is a nice way to spend a first date. What the propagandistic message of *Geliebte Weiße Maus* faces is a simple is/ought problem. Insofar as it depicts a desirable ideal, the film fails to depict a society which would have been recognizable to its viewers as the reality of life in the GDR. And conversely, were it to have depicted the realities of life, it would have failed to present a desirable ideal — or, for that matter, to serve as enjoyable entertainment. At best, all the film's fantasy GDR can hope to provide is something to work for, perhaps a manifestation of the final, indefinitely distant stage of communism. Or, in the mean time, something to pretend to believe.

What does one say to images of open, profitable discussion, in a totalitarian democracy where only the right thoughts are allowed? What does one say to images of plenty, in a planned economy suffering constant shortages of even basic necessities? What does one say to images of a kind and trustworthy police force, in a police state where people are routinely shot or arrested for trying to leave?

At a certain point, only one response is possible: “Uh huh. Was it a big elephant, or a small one?”

Works Cited

- Allan, Seán. "DEFA: An Historical Overview." *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999. 1–21. Print.
- Blunk, Harry. "The Concept of 'Heimat-GDR' in DEFA Feature Film." *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999. 204–221. Print.
- Bytwerk, Randall L. *Bending Spine: The Propagandas of Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004. Print.
- Feinstein, Joshua. *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949-1989*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Print.
- Geliebte Weiße Maus*. Dir. Gottfried Kolditz. German Democratic Republic. Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft. 1964. *Veoh.com*. Web. Accessed Feb 27, 2015.
- Jowett, Garth S. and Victoria O'Donnell. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Sixth ed. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2015. Print.
- Kohlhaase, Wolfgang. "DEFA: A Personal View." *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999. 117–130. Print.
- Norton, Jim. "Beloved White Mouse." *East German Cinema Blog*. eastgermancinema.com. Web. Accessed Feb 26, 2015.
- Paul, H. W. Propaganda in the East-German Democratic Republic: The Development of the Means and the Apparatus. *International Communication Gazette* 5.1 (1959): 57–86. Web. Accessed Feb 3, 2015.
- Rinke, Andrea. "Film Musicals in the GDR." *Film's Musical Moments*, ed. Ian Conrich and Estella Tinknell. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. 183–194. Print.