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# The Emergence of a New Film Industry

EGON LARSEN

EGON LARSEN is a writer. A journalist in Germany until 1935, later a newspaper correspondent in Prague, he has lived in London since 1938. In the war years he wrote radio scripts for the BBC European Service and served as a civilian officer with the OSS. Although now working primarily in educational film and radio, he has written several popular technical books, and another book, *Spotlight on Films*, is soon to be published. His "Report on Germany: The Emergence of a New Film Industry," appeared originally in Volume 17, No. 66, of *Sight and Sound* (Summer, 1948), published by the British Film Institute. It is reprinted here, with a supplementary section on the most recent German film production.

YOU CAN still go to the pictures in Berlin for the incredibly low price of one mark, in one of the little flea pits which have provided the Berliners with screen entertainment for the last fifty years. They have survived the bombing and street fighting better than the few large West End cinema palaces, which are mostly in ruins; so are a large proportion of cinemas in the provinces.

Out of that mark only a few *groschen* are returned to the producers, just enough to buy a couple of iron nails on the black market. Everything is still desperately scarce, from canvas and paint to camera parts and film cement. Raw film is a major problem, especially in the Western Zones. Only recently the Americans arranged for some standard stock imports from the United States to be coated in Germany; but emulsions differ so widely that a costly and complex scene for a Russian-licensed film had to be reshot this summer, at a cost of 70,000 marks, because of faulty emulsion. Substandard stock is almost unobtainable.

In 1932-1933, the last pre-Nazi year, Germany produced 140 feature films,

supplying all central and northern Europe with screen fare. In 1946, production was down to four features. Apart from a few selected films, there are no sales to foreign countries yet. But the worst thing is that even in Germany itself a German film cannot be shown nationally: Russian-licensed pictures are excluded from the Western Zones, British- and American-licensed ones from the East, except in individual cases in which an exchange of films has been arranged; and with inter-Allied relations being what they are, this is a rare event. Only the Berliners can see films from either side of the Iron Curtain.

*Films with a message.*—These restrictions and difficulties have not succeeded in choking the German film industry out of existence. On the contrary, production is going on at full speed, and no fewer than forty feature films are being made in 1948-1949. Russians, Americans, and British alike (the French seem to have different opinions), and most of the German film workers themselves, realize that the film can be a powerful factor in shaping a new Germany. It can help, encourage, advise, warn; it can explain the past and show the way to a better future; it can relieve and give a deeper meaning to the bitter present. How have the German film makers set about the task of delivering these messages?

The first, surprising impression, after seeing a number of new German films made under various licenses, is that the Iron Curtain does not, or not yet, di-

vide the German film makers ideologically. There is no Hollywood escapism in American-licensed scripts and no dialectic materialism in those sponsored by the Soviets, but a common denominator of realism in almost every German postwar film. As under the circumstances there is little chance of a get-rich-quick career in film production, the ranks of the German film workers are relatively free from people who regard film production as just another means of making big money. You need considerable enthusiasm to write, direct, or produce films in Germany today, and such enthusiasm usually springs from the conviction that you have to express important ideas in your medium.

Most German film makers seem to be aware of the fact that their compatriots are still extremely ignorant of the crimes committed at home and abroad with the active or passive assent of the German people during the Nazi regime. A substantial proportion of films are, therefore, aimed at showing German audiences what they were unable or unwilling to see while it happened. Some films probe even deeper into German history, explaining the fateful mistakes made by Germans, and laying bare the roots from which a peaceful renaissance of the people could spring in our time. Quite a number of films deal with the theme of present-day life in beaten and occupied Germany, and with the spiritual and material means of overcoming difficulties. In this latter category, screen writers and directors often display a genuine sense of humor reminiscent of the best traditions of pre-Nazi German film making.

*Germans want to say "Yes."*—Thus it seems almost physically impossible for

German film makers to touch anything that does not bear some relation or other to reality, past, present, or future; and the occupying powers on both sides of the Iron Curtain are encouraging the film workers in this attitude.

However, the part to be played by the Allied Film Control Officers was—and to some degree still is—greatly misunderstood by the Germans. The first question they asked was invariably, "What films do you want us to make?" and they were surprised at being told that that would be their own affair. "The Germans at first thought we wanted them to say 'Yes' to everything," I was told by one of the officers at the British Control Commission's Film Branch in Berlin. "Then they got to know us better. The procedure now is that we give our O.K. to the story, and censor the shooting script for policy, that is, from the point of view of general rules laid down for education, instruction, entertainment, and so on, by the Control Commission. What we cannot do is improve on scripts; unfortunately a large number of submitted manuscripts are totally unsuitable as to quality."

Today, Mr. S. C. Haig Brown, head of the Berlin film branch, is on the best of terms with German film workers, who regard him as a sincere friend, not as their taskmaster. He tries to help them get what they need, such as raw film stock, which is partly brought over from Britain; when I was in Berlin, negotiations were just going on with the Russians to get some stock from factories in their zone.

At present, about fifteen production units are licensed by the British. Unfortunately, there are no large studios in the British zone of Germany or the

British sector in Berlin, so these units have to make use of the freely offered American hospitality to shoot in the former EMELKA studios at Geiseltasteig, near Munich—the only German studios which survived the war without a scratch,—and in the former UFA studios in Tempelhof, in Berlin's American sector. Smaller studios exist in Göttingen, Cologne, Oldenburg, and Hamburg, where also most of the dubbing of English films for German audiences is done. New studios are being built in Düsseldorf. The smallest British-licensed studio is one housed in a former school in the Berlin West End, where the visitor can admire the incredible adaptability of German technicians, including the rigging up of an old dentist's chair as a camera stand. Here, shooting goes on at the record rate of four and one-half minutes' screen time a day.

*Sense of humor.*—When I said that recent German films show a genuine sense of humor, I was thinking of a specifically Berlin type of self-irony which finds an outlet in the, so far, best British-licensed picture, *Film ohne Titel* (*Film without Title*). I discovered only two weak points in this film: one, its disingenuous title; two, its unnecessary introduction of the story proper, showing director, script writer, and oldtime star, Willy Fritsch, discussing the difficulty of finding a suitable subject for a film, until the script writer tells the actual story. It is a good one and could easily have stood on its own legs. A country girl—this was Hildegard Knef's last role in her short German career before she went to America—moves into the overcultured home of an art dealer after the house of his business partner, where

she has worked as a maid, is destroyed by bombs. In the course of a new air raid the art dealer's home is also hit, and the two spend the night together on the only remaining couch (no, he does not take his blanket into the bathtub or to the doorstep, as he would have done in an American movie). They lose each other in the turmoil of the last days of the war, until they meet again on the farm of the girl's father. Now the tables are turned: the former housemaid is the much-coveted farmer's daughter, and he the poor "displaced person." In the end he starts a new life by making utility furniture.

Helmut Kautner, who made a name for himself as director of the British-licensed *In jenen Tagen* (*In Those Days*), the story of an old motor car told in seven episodes, wrote the script of *Film ohne Titel*, which was directed by his pupil, Rudolf Jugert. There are numerous "touches" of subtle humor in picture and dialogue, which show that there is something universally human about seeing the funny side of things even in times of catastrophe. Kautner and Jugert poke fun at Allied bombs and the crumbling Nazi war machine, but most of all at the Germans themselves. I was surprised at how well this film, in spite of that risky self-irony, went down with an average audience when I saw it in a Berlin suburb.

At present, Jugert is making a new comedy, *Hallo, Fräulein*, dealing with American-occupied Germany in the days of nonfraternizing; also, one should imagine, a risky subject.

*Return of Erich Pommer.*—Although the Americans have Geiseltasteig and Tempelhof at their disposal, American-licensed feature production has taken

more time to get into its stride than that sponsored by the British, and it is quantitatively less ambitious. As to quality, their aims are high enough. "Reestablishment of the motion picture industry is essential to peacetime German economy," declared the Military Government program of August, 1947, "and newly produced German films will be exported. . . . Films produced must support the reorientation program, and their export to pay for imports of food and critical raw materials will be encouraged. . . . The film industry in Germany is to be reconstituted on a democratic basis, in an independent, decartelized form under the supervision and control of Military Government. . . . German governmental action must be in support of Military Government principles. Government-controlled or subsidized film industry would be contrary to these principles. . . . Policies governing the development of the German film industry within the fused U. S. and British zones will continue to be considered jointly by U. S. and British Military Government officials. . . . Particularly strict requirements have been established in connection with denazification of the film industry. Thus, Germans permitted to engage in the industry in important positions must possess high political and moral standards in addition to professional qualities."

This, of course, is a formidable problem in post-Hitler Germany, with thousands of technicians banned from the studios because of their Nazi past, and it will take some time before Mr. Eric Johnston, President of the Motion Picture Association, will see the realization of his demand that Germans

should again be "competitors in the film markets of the world."

On the administrative side, the American authorities could not have done better than to send Erich Pommer, Germany's "classic" producer from *Caligari* to *Vaudeville*, to Berlin to get German production in their zone on its feet again; it is much regretted in Germany that Pommer is now returning to America. "We are giving technical help, but we are not responsible for the artistic contents of American-licensed films," he told me. He has succeeded in getting the ruined Tempelhof studios in working order; five to six American- and British-licensed films will be made here during 1948-1949, with another dozen to be produced at Geiseltasteig. He is "not very happy" about the different licensing procedures in the British, American, and French zones, and hopes for a trizonal licensing machinery.

"Production is going on with very young and unexperienced technicians," he said. "We aim at making B-class directors into A-class directors as time goes on. But on the whole I am sure that Germany will be a very interesting film country again. So far, these people are used to obeying; they must be taught to take risks. I believe in educating the public through the cinema. The Germans must make films which have some connection with the times and show a way into the future."

*The story of the Jews.*—So far, there has been only one outstanding film from American-licensed production. It is called *Lang ist der Weg* (*Long Is the Road*), and scripting as well as direction have been carried out by teams each composed of one Jew and one non-Jew to assure appropriate hand-

ling of the difficult story, that of the Polish Jews under Nazi occupation (script: Dr. Kuelb and I. Becker; direction: H. B. Fredersdorf and M. Goldstein). It starts in Warsaw's Jewish quarter in 1939, and shows its inhabitants going through the hell of air raids, occupation, persecution, deportation and, finally, extermination in the gas chambers. A young man and a girl are among the few survivors, but the real heroine is the boy's mother, who returns to the ruins of Warsaw to search for her son, until her mind becomes clouded. She is finally discovered among the liberated prisoners at the Dachau concentration camp, and the film ends with an optimistic scene of the son plowing his own soil.

In contrast to some German politicians, who think the time is not yet ripe to confront the German people with such stories, it is a fact that all over Germany, with the possible exception of Bavaria, this and similar films on the treatment of the Jews under Hitler have made quite an impression on audiences. The feeling of remorse at what has been done by Germans, the feeling of shame and, sometimes, of guilt—emotions considered indispensable for Germany's spiritual recovery,—are known to have been displayed in the cinemas more than on any other occasion.

"*Trümmerfilme.*" — *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen* (*Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*) tells the story of a non-Jewish actor and his Jewish wife (a theme which seems to be a favorite one with German film makers). Directed by Harald Braun under American license, it is considerably less effective than it could have been because the story is confused by too many flashbacks. It is

centered on the recovery of a piece of jewelry from the ruins of a fashionable Munich hotel. Its most memorable impression is the atmosphere in the basement bar of the hotel during an Allied air raid, but the deaths of the unfortunate actor and his wife leave the spectator cold.

Old-timer Hans Albers, once the favorite UFA screen hero, came out in a *Trümmerfilm*, as the Germans call pictures with ruins as main settings, playing the part of the black-marketeer father of a war-blinded soldier. There is a remarkable sequence in which the soldier, riding through shattered, desolate Berlin in a van, imagines what the town looked like as he remembers it from prewar days: with shining shop windows, gleaming lights, rows of cars and carefree people. . . .

*Sponsored documentaries.*—Who would have thought that it would be the Americans, of all people, who would now be introducing the documentary film into German cinema? "The development of a documentary-film industry is regarded as an integral part of the program," says the Military Government. Erich Pommer in particular turns out to be deeply interested in the documentary, and the new ones he showed me should prove useful indeed for the reorientation of German audiences. One of them, *Hunger*, explains—much in the vein of Paul Rotha's *World of Plenty*—the reasons for the world shortage of food; it is mainly aimed at rural audiences, encouraging them to speed up food production. Another one, *Es liegt an Dir* (*It's Up to You*), tells the story of Germany's national mentality from 1919 to 1948, setting a potentially peaceful Germany against the Nazi

Third Reich with its burning of the books and its attempt at world conquest. It shows, in brilliant juxtapositions, what German audiences cannot be shown often enough: how Germany prepared for and started the war, and how the war came home to their country, with the consequences only too well known to the German people. This two-reeler was made by Wolfgang Kiepenheuer, son of a prominent German publisher, with excellent music by Wolfgang Zeller.

Stuart Schulberg (the brother of Budd, who wrote *What Makes Sammy Run?*), Chief of the U. S. Documentary Film Unit, is also building up a documentary series, *Zeit im Film (Our Time in the Film)*, on the lines of *March of Time* and *This Modern Age*, to be produced in Stuttgart. The first of this series, *Die Zeitung (The Newspaper)*, has just been completed under the direction of Wilhelm Reglin. In Berlin, H. B. Fredersdorf has begun to make a series of documentaries on psychopathological disturbances as a result of the war, with the ambitious intention of showing neuroses, psychoses, and psychoanalytical treatment on the screen—after all that misrepresentation in psychological thrillers for the last ten years!

There is also some British-sponsored documentary activity, as was to be expected after Arthur Elton's work as Film Adviser to the Control Commission. *Black Market, V.D., Transport, The Rights of Man, Local Government* and several films on art appreciation are completed or in production. They were all "farmed out" to numerous small units of young German film makers, which have sprung up in the last year or two. The Russian-licensed DEFA, too, has embarked on a sub-

stantial program of shorts, but they prefer to call them *Kulturfilm*; indeed, they are produced more on the instructional lines of the old UFA *Kulturfilm* school of Dr. N. Kaufmann than on the lines of our own argumentative documentaries.

Sponsored by all four occupation powers, the German Africa explorer, Hans Schomburgk, has been able to complete his documentary on the Dark Continent, *Frauen, Masken und Dämonen (Women, Masks, and Demons)*, which was partly shot by cameraman James Hodgson, F.R.P.S.

*UFA into DEFA.*—The French have so far been very reluctant in encouraging German production under their auspices. Two or three feature films are in production in American-licensed studios, mostly with French film workers coöperating; one of them is made simultaneously in a German and a French version. But when the new studios at Remagen, with three brilliantly equipped stages, are in working order (presumably this winter), production will start at full speed.

It is little known that Roberto Rossellini's Berlin documentary, *Germany, Year Zero*, was a French-sponsored production which was carried out with the help of Russian-licensed DEFA. France's Film Officer of the Mission Culturelle, M. V. Beguin Billecoq, believes in coöperation between French and German artists and technicians.

Film production in the Soviet zone is monopolized in DEFA, which has inherited most of what was left of the UFA: the headquarters at Berlin's *Dönhoffplatz*, and the vast studio complexes, partly ruined, in Neubabelsberg and Johannisthal. DEFA is producing more than half of Germany's films,—twenty in 1948–1949. The Rus-

sians have made the German film workers their pampered pets, giving them extra food parcels and Ration Card No. 1. But what about the spirit of the old UFA?

There is little doubt that centralized production facilities are, under present circumstances, a great asset in Germany. DEFA is attracting most of the artistic and technical talent for permanent or temporary work. The Russians, and their German Communist friends, are wisely refraining from exerting any thought control among artists, apart from the basic requirement that former active Nazis must be excluded. Film stories, although nearly all related to present-day German conditions, or analyzing historical developments, are free from dogmatic reasoning, and the Russians don't expect DEFA to turn out another *Potemkin* or *October*.

Many old hands are now working for DEFA: Gerhard Lamprecht, of *Emil and the Detectives* fame, who directed *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*) in 1946; Erich Engel, who is now shooting *Affaire Jakob Blum*, the story of an anti-Jewish judicial scandal under the Weimar Republic; Gustav von Wangenheim, who spent the war years in Moscow and is now completing his film about the 1848 revolution; S. Dudow, who directed the famous leftist film *Kuhlewampe* in 1931, and has now embarked on a near-Wellsian Story, *Weltuntergang* (*End of the World*).

Among the new talent that DEFA has attracted is Wolfgang Staudte, who made *The Murderers Are amongst Us*, postwar Germany's first international success; Boleslav Barlog, who will direct the screen version of a Hebbel poem, and has made a name for himself as a theatrical producer in the

American sector of Berlin; Erich Freund, who has been directing a very impressive miners' film, *Grube Morgenrot*, based on incidents during the Nazi regime, and reminiscent of Pabst's classic *Kameradschaft* in its realistic pit scenes. Freund spent the war years in London, where he ran a small but highly successful refugee theater in Hampstead.

Writers are as scarce at DEFA as they are in the other zones. Among the old-timers, Fritz Schiefert and Georg C. Klaren are the most prominent ones; Klaren has been successful with his beautifully produced *Wozzeck*, from the dramatic fragment by the romantic poet, Georg Büchner, who died in 1837, only twenty-three years of age.

Probably the greatest gain for DEFA is Kurt Maetzig, who wrote and directed *Ehe im Schatten* (*Marriage in the Shadow*), his first film and so far the most successful one of Germany's new production. Like *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen*, *Marriage in the Shadow* tells the story of a non-Jewish actor and his Jewish wife, based on the tragedy of an unfortunate artist couple who took their own lives under the Hitler regime. But, unlike the American-licensed picture, it tells its story straightforwardly, concentrating only on the human side of a great love under the most adverse conditions. All the cruelty and sadism of the Nazi system, all the tortures brought to bear on human souls by an infernal State machinery, are revived in this immensely moving film, and put on record for all those Germans who refused to see what was going on in their midst. It is a modern Tristan-and-Isolde legend, but its heroes are ordinary people. The film contains the most impressively reënacted smashing of the Jewish



shops in 1938, a scene of savage realism; to enable Maetzig to shoot it the Russian authorities granted him an extra supply of glass, one of Germany's scarcest commodities, to be smashed up by the stormtroopers! Maetzig's next film will be *No pasaran*, the story of the German contingent in the Republican army in Spain's civil war.

UFA's inheritance is most evident in DEFA's new *Chemie und Liebe* (*Chemistry and Love*), which is somewhat reminiscent of *Metropolis* with its Utopian setting, its process shots of semi-American skyscrapers, and its somewhat naïve handling of the big business vs. progress theme. The opening shot of skyscrapers towering over a little old church makes it clear that the director, A. M. Rabenalt, had Wall Street in mind as the seat of the two rival companies of his story. There is, however, much humor and satire in this film, in contrast to the beastly earnest of *Metropolis*, although it all ends with the finally combined companies blowing up the whole town with their new explosive—while hero and heroine escape into a better future in a helicopter, taking with them their invention: how to make synthetic butter directly from grass, thus avoiding the cumbersome cow.

*Eins-zwei-drei—Corona*, directed by Hans Müller, is a children's film, beginning with shots of kids carrying on their little black market among the ruins of a German town, and ending with the first night in a circus worked by the whole youthful gang as artistes, musicians, electricians, and clowns. *Corona*, one of the war's waifs, is the central character, charmingly played by seventeen-year-old Eva Ingeborg Scholz.

At the time of writing, A. M. Raben-

alt is shooting a historical picture, set in the time of the Thirty Years' War, entitled *Das Mädchen Christine*. It is the story of a young girl who falls in love with a general and follows him disguised as a cornet—an anecdotic tale stressing the moral that war will always corrupt and brutalize and that the common people are bound to be its principal victims. The difficult problem of the D.P.'s—"New Settlers," as they are now termed in reception areas—is the subject of Arthur Pohl's film *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*), now in production in the DEFA studios. It should, when shown, help to foster some good will, so far singularly lacking among the resident German population, toward these unhappy refugees from the East.

Thus the panorama of Germany's new film industry, which is emerging slowly from the ruins, unrolls itself before the visitor's eye. Granted peaceful development, it should not be long before some more worthwhile films will come out from that beaten and shattered country. It must be pointed out, however, that most of them will have limited appeal only, and will not mean much competition on the international film market because of their concern with purely German themes. But they may inspire film makers everywhere with their realism and their new approach. At present, German film makers are still busy studying world film production of the last fifteen years, and they are extremely lucky inasmuch as Berlin is today the most international of film towns. Since 1946, forty British, seventy Russian, eighty American, and more than a hundred French films have been shown in that town—more than at any other place in the world.