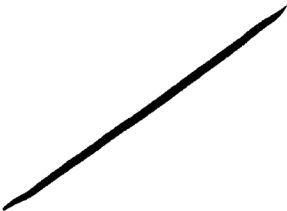


NEGOTIATING DOMINANT STATE IDEOLOGY AND INDIVIDUALIST DESIRES:

THE CINEMATIC
PUBLIC SPHERE OF THE
GERMAN DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC

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Abstract: Common perceptions of the former Eastern Bloc often characterize the socialist societies as overly oppressive, where stringent political censorship categorically denied freedom of expression. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the socialist public sphere reveals more nuanced patterns. This essay examines how cinema functioned as a unique space where citizens of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) could critically reflect on their everyday experiences in manners that departed from the dominant ideology prescribed by the state. I start by critiquing models of the socialist public sphere previously proposed by David Bathrick and Michael Meyen and offer an alternative model in which popular cinema plays an indispensable role in articulating authentic daily experiences of ordinary GDR citizens. Through an analysis of Heiner Carow's cult film "The Legend of Paul and Paula" ("Die Legende von Paul und Paula," 1973), I argue that the East German state studio DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) offered filmmakers a certain degree of artistic license despite frameworks of limitation, and that the film serves as a space for discussion where individualist desires find expression despite official constraints on the fulfillment of such wishes.

Keywords: socialist public sphere, cinema and everyday experience, DEFA, The Legend of Paul and Paula, Heiner Carow.

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In a 1968 radio address titled "Resignation," Theodor W. Adorno disparaged Soviet-type societies for leaving no room for dissenting views at all:

In Russia and in the orthodoxy of other countries the malicious derision of critical critique became an instrument so that the existing conditions could establish themselves so terrifyingly.... Critique was not tolerated anymore except for the criticism that people were not yet working hard enough (Adorno, 1998, p. 290).

Indeed, the autocratic Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) seemed to preclude any opportunities for critical-reflective discussions in the public sphere. The state's tight control over its populations through omnipresent surveillance and censorship of mass media created an oppressive environment that was the direct opposite of the ideal public sphere as envisioned by Jürgen Habermas, namely a domain where public opinion can be freely formed, and the access to which is in principle open to all citizens (1989, p. 231). Nevertheless, a closer examination of the GDR's media landscape reveals that alternative spaces where private persons could converse about matters of common concern did exist alongside with, in addition to, or sometimes within the officially sanctioned public sphere.

Traditional Definitions of the Public Sphere

As Habermas observes in his seminal book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991, p. 1), the term "public sphere" invokes a multiplicity of meanings. The original German word *Öffentlichkeit* is both a spatial concept that refers to "the social sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by and in this process," and an "ideational substance or criterion" denoting "openness" (Hansen, 1993b, p. ix). Private persons constitute a public "when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion" (Habermas, 1989, p. 231). Habermas's model designates three types of ideal public spheres in bourgeois society: the political public sphere (*politische Öffentlichkeit*), which

allows for public discussions on the practices of the state (Habermas, 1989, p. 231); the literary public sphere (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*), which functions as an arena where private individuals exercise reason and engage in criticism of public authority through art and literature (Habermas, 1991, p. 51); and representative publicness (*repräsentative Öffentlichkeit*), which is defined as “the display of inherent spiritual power or dignity before an audience” (Burger, 1991, p. xv) by institutions such as the Church and the court (Habermas, 1991, pp. 5-14; Miyamoto, 2013, p. 109). In all three types of the public sphere, institutions and practices of mass public communication are indispensable tools for the exercise of democratic politics (Garnham, 1992, pp. 360-61).

Largely based on modern histories of bourgeois France, Britain, and Germany, Habermas’s model needs to be qualified when applied to socialist societies of Eastern Europe. In the context of the GDR, as in the rest of the Eastern bloc, the state-controlled political public sphere was charged with the task of presenting the citizens with images of a progressive socialist society, educating them about the necessary steps to achieve such ideals, and convincing them of the legitimacy of the paths undertaken by the ruling party (Gamsa, 2014, p. 559; Haspel, 2003, p. 242). The artistic intelligentsia, especially the literary writer, became “officially commissioned purveyors of governmental policy” and “spokesperson for issues of moral, philosophical, social, and above all political significance” (Bathrick, 1995, p. 30). Such a model conceives mass media as organs of the state rather than instruments for critical-reflective debates at the individual’s disposal. The democratic openness of the political and literary public sphere was therefore jeopardized, in that citizens were expected to follow top-down imposed commands and ideologies of the SED with little chance for dissenting views. Nevertheless, as Alexander Kluge famously claimed, no oppression is total, “so that one can crawl under the fence [erected by corporations, censorship, and authority] at any time” (1981, p. 214). Indeed, there existed alternative spaces open for maneuvering in the GDR beneath this façade of absolute dictatorial control; the “Ersatzkommunikation” (substitute communication) and “informelle Netze” (informal networks) (Haspel, 2003, p. 242) developed by East German citizens became powerful arenas where potentially subversive ideas could be readily presented and discussed.

Models of Alternative Socialist Public Spheres

In his book *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (1995, p. 34), David Bathrick proposes a different model of the GDR’s public sphere, which is divided into three parts: besides the censored public sphere of the state, the media of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), especially television, constituted a second public sphere, which contributed to the gradual creation, orchestration, and homogenization of the consumer policies and political needs of East and West Germany. The third public sphere refers to “unofficial public enclaves or counterofficial voices” of “literary writers, the Protestant Church, the feminist, peace, ecology, and gay movements, as well as members of the underground culture scenes,” who sought to “break into or establish dialogue with the officially dominating voices” (Bathrick, 1995, p. 34).

Although Bathrick's study highlights important cases of resistance and praises the agency of individual citizens, his tripartite model exaggerates the power of Western media. As Michael Meyen argues (2011, p. 15), not only was West German television only available to selected populations in particular areas of the GDR, but its journalistic programs on East German politics and society were likewise impregnated with ideological underpinnings and biases and restricted in thematic variety and scope, so that GDR spectators often received Western news programs with reservation and skepticism. Moreover, East German audiences clandestinely viewed Western television mainly for access to politics-free entertainment and Hollywood cinema (Heiduschke, 2013, pp. 23-24), rather than using it as a channel for democratic debate. In this sense, Western media were devoid of traditional functions of the public sphere in the sense that they did not contribute to the expression of the public opinion of ordinary GDR citizens; the nonalignment between the communicative power of Western media and the administrative power of the East German state resulted in the fact that the former did not achieve any immediate political efficacy by exerting direct influences on SED policy.

In addition, Bathrick's conception of the oppositional literary public sphere is in several ways limited in scope. Marc Silberman points out that Bathrick's analysis focuses primarily on voices of privileged intellectuals in East Berlin, while paying little attention to "normal" citizens and social movements beyond the GDR's capital (1997, p. 11). Although writers and artists such as Heiner Müller, Rudolf Bahro, and Robert Havemann courageously opposed state monopoly of the political public sphere by voicing out critical opinions, their actions immediately resulted in punitive measures such as ban on publication, forced expatriation, and even jail sentence, which restricted the impact of their work and relegated their resistance to isolated, individualist cases of discontent that did not really change the functioning of the dominant socialist public sphere (Silberman, 1997, p. 15). At the same time, a large part of the GDR population was simply not interested in *belles lettres* in the 1970s and the 1980s, the main period of focus in Bathrick's study, to the extent that "critical discussion and literature gradually migrate[d] into ever smaller and fragmented spaces of reception among a minority of specialists" (Silberman, 1997, p. 15). Consequently, even though the literary public sphere in Bathrick's model did provide an alternative space for the discussion of oppositional views among GDR intellectuals to a certain extent, the popular outreach and impact of such a public sphere is subject to question.

Building on Bathrick's research, Michael Meyen proposes a more nuanced model that divides the public sphere of the GDR into four categories or "arenas": the censored, officially orchestrated public sphere of the state and the sphere constituted by Western media are subsumed under the category of mass communication. The second arena refers to the public sphere created by particular events and gatherings (*Veranstaltungs- und Versammlungsöffentlichkeiten*), such as theater and concert performances, religious services, and oppositional activities including protests and demonstrations. Meyen focuses more of his essay on the third category of public sphere, which describes "internal" and "closed public spheres" (*interne, geschlossene Öffentlichkeiten*), including readers' letters to the editorial offices of mass media, as well as small-scale discussions within the Party itself. The last

arena, called “encounters” or “small public spheres” (*Encounter, kleine Öffentlichkeiten*), incorporates informal, situational occurrences in businesses and “subcultural groups” (*subkulturelle Gruppen*) such as women’s circles, as well as within the family (Meyen, 2011, p. 14).

The virtue of the third and the fourth category of the public sphere in Meyen’s model lies in the fact that they take into account a great variety of relatively more intimate spaces where critique could be discussed with a close circle of acquaintances (such as in the family or in an interest group), and where citizens’ opinions could be potentially heard and addressed by party functionaries, as in the case of audience letters to newspaper editors and radio program directors. However, the very exclusivity and intimacy of these semi-closed public spheres violate the basic definitions of a “public.” Michael Warner asserts that a public “is never just a congeries of people,” but “it must first of all have some way of organizing itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse” (2002, p. 51). The public is also a relation among strangers, so that “our partial *nonidentity* with the object of address” preconditions public speech (Warner, 2002, pp. 55-58, emphasis in the original). Under this paradigm, the intimate communications between family members and individual readers’ letters addressed to managing editors do not amount to public discussions and do not contribute to the formation of public opinions but are merely private conversations about public matters.

Taking the strengths and limitations of Bathrick and Meyen’s studies into account, I suggest that alternative socialist public spheres beyond state control must be open spaces where matters of general concern to ordinary citizens could find expression without immediate penalty by the Party. Such a public sphere must have a broad popular base in order to generate an attentive public ready to engage in critical-reflective discussion. The cinema was precisely the medium on which this alternative public sphere in the GDR could be based.

Towards a Cinematic Public Sphere of the GDR

In their book *Public Sphere and Experience*, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge criticize Habermas’s bourgeois model of the public sphere for its pretensions to rational universality (Jay, 2014, p. 167) by proposing a proletarian counterpublic sphere that takes into account the “context of living” (*Lebenszusammenhang*) of marginalized and disempowered groups in capitalist society, such as workers and women (Negt and Kluge, 1993, p. 6). Understanding the public as a “social horizon of experience,” Kluge conceives the cinema as a public sphere, whose aesthetic devices can encourage viewers to mobilize their own experience and comprehend the “lived relationality of social and material, affective and imaginative re/production” (Hansen, 2012, p. xiv). Film has a particular affinity to experience and to the spectator since it “takes recourse to the spontaneous workings of the imaginative faculty” of humans through montage (Kluge, 1981, p. 209). By encouraging the viewer to draw connections between fiction and documented reality, disparate realms and registers of experience (Hansen, 1993a, p. 206), film has the power to carry pieces of information from one place to another with a degree of abstraction, thereby establishing lines of communication between individuals in the public sphere (Kluge, 1981, p. 212).

Generating an intersection between two types of space, namely “the local space of the theater and the deterritorialized space of the film projected on screen” (Hansen, 2012, p. 55), cinema functions as an ideal arena where spectators can temporarily transcend their immediate social horizon to experience events that exceed local, national, and temporal boundaries. Indeed, at its most creative, cinema can “unsettle the received meaning of our conventional world and disclose possibilities once unimagined” (Jay, 2014, p. 169).

As the most popular form of entertainment in the GDR (Stott, 2016, p. 19), cinema had a much broader reach in the general population of the East German state than other cultural sectors. Officially film was charged with the tasks of re-educating the German people “to achieve an understanding of genuine democracy and humanism” (Berghahn, 2005, p. 17), organizing the masses towards the struggle for socialism, elevating their cultural niveau, and strengthening their preparedness for political battles against capitalism (Schittly, 2002b, p. 9). In practice, SED policy oscillated between hardline ideological indoctrination and strict censorship on the one hand, and periodic leniency towards unconventional artistic expression on the other hand. Between 1946 and 1953, the film studio DEFA was guided by a relatively liberal production policy in the Soviet Occupation Zone and later in the nascent state of the GDR (Heiduschke, 2013, p. 10-11). After the studio had been nationalized in 1953, however, the state put increasingly more restrictions on the subject matters portrayed in DEFA productions and prompted directors to follow the style of socialist realism, which frequently depicted exemplary heroes in the struggle for the establishment of an idealized socialist society (Schittly, 2002a, p. 25-26). This stringent limitation of artistic freedom caused a decline in spectatorship by the early 1960s, to which the Party responded by rejuvenating DEFA functionaries and loosening its censorship measures. The brief period of stylistic innovation, which could have become East Germany’s own version of *nouvelle vague* cinema, was abruptly terminated when the SED banned nearly all DEFA productions dealing with sensitive contemporary social issues after the eleventh plenum in 1965-66 (Allan, 2019, p. 139). In the 1970s and early 1980s, the GDR enjoyed a period of relative stability as the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 helped reduce Western influences on the domestic population, and as the regime consolidated its authority (Schittly, 2002a, p. 27-29). It was during these two decades that filmmakers increasingly employed specific techniques to both negotiate the dominant ideology of the censors and express wishes for a reformed, democratic, and better socialist society that would accommodate individual desires, without having their works banned or withdrawn from the theaters. Compared with television, radio, and the press, film was the least closely censored mass medium of the GDR (Berghahn, 2005, p. 50).

The mere inclusion of subtly critical or potentially subversive messages in films does not necessarily allow these works to constitute a counterpublic sphere, since it was not the intention of the GDR directors to subvert the functioning of the state-controlled cinematic apparatus. Rather, these messages demonstrate that the seemingly impermeable public sphere of the regime could be instrumentalized to portray ordinary experiences and voice out everyday concerns of East German citizens. Indeed, the GDR’s national cinema lived to a certain extent up to its ideal of being an “art by the people and for the people,” in that the images on screen were closely intertwined with

the people's daily lives of working and living in the socialist state (Berghahn, 2005, p. 51). DEFA filmmakers were not glamorous celebrities out of the reach of the general public; instead, they would consciously cultivate a close rapport with audiences by actively engaging in dialogues with ordinary viewers about their films (Berghahn, 2005, p. 51). The cinematic public sphere of the GDR functioned as an arena of debate where the state's version of an idealized socialist society could be contested by alternative images of real-life experiences, discontent, and longings for a different future. This constant clash between ideal and reality is both a recurrent theme in the diegesis of DEFA films and an issue of general concern among the East German public.

Taking the historical and political background of the DEFA studio into account, I suggest that the cinematic public sphere of the GDR exhibits the following characteristics: first, despite the SED's assertions of its intransigent policy on the subject matters and ideological messages that DEFA productions must convey, film directors ingeniously devised ways to communicate alternative views of life under socialism by focusing on authentic daily experiences of GDR citizens, rather than strictly adhering to the idealizing style of socialist realism. Second, the East German film industry's vacillation between blooming periods of innovative artistic style and periods of stagnation, where the public showed declining interests in politically informed films with overtly propagandistic intents, suggests that the cinematic public sphere of the GDR was an arena of constant negotiations between the desires of audiences and filmmakers and the political intents of the ruling SED. Third, film enjoyed a unique status in the GDR both because of its broader appeal among the general public as compared with literature, and because of the medium's specific affinity to experience, as Kluge argues. Heiner Carow's 1973 film *The Legend of Paul and Paula* precisely embodies these characteristics of the cinematic public sphere.

The Fantasy World of The Legend of Paul and Paula

When Erich Honecker replaced Walter Ulbricht as the General Secretary of the SED in 1971, the new national leader announced a more liberal policy towards artistic modes of expression: "Provided one starts from an established socialist standpoint, there cannot, in my opinion, be any taboo subjects for art and literature" (Berghahn, 2005, p. 196).¹ Taking this clue of relative leniency in censorship, DEFA films about contemporaneous matters in the 1970s gradually shifted from the portrayal of an idealized future socialist society to the depiction of present everydayness. Whereas the ideologically informed *Gegenwartsfilme* (contemporary films) of the previous decade imply a strong sense of historical progression by addressing the present as "a mediating stage between the past and the future" in the realization of socialism (Feinstein, 2002, p. 6), the *Alltagsfilme* (everyday films) of the 1970s focus on diurnal, immediate, and individual concerns (Feinstein, 2002, p. 220). The model heroines of the 1960s are mostly socialist superwomen who exhibit political rectitude, work in prestigious jobs in traditionally

1 "Wenn man von der festen Position des Sozialismus ausgeht, kann es meines Erachtens auf dem Gebiet von Kunst und Literatur keine Tabus geben."

male-dominated industries, while fulfilling their domestic roles as mothers and wives (Rinke, 1999, p. 185-86). By contrast, the female leads in DEFA films of the 1970s are often unskilled female workers who take little interest in politics, and who reveal human strengths and frailties (Dölling, 2001, p. 79). The inclusion of such imperfect but more realistic figures allowed the audience to identify with the heroines and the difficulties they encounter in the filmic narratives.

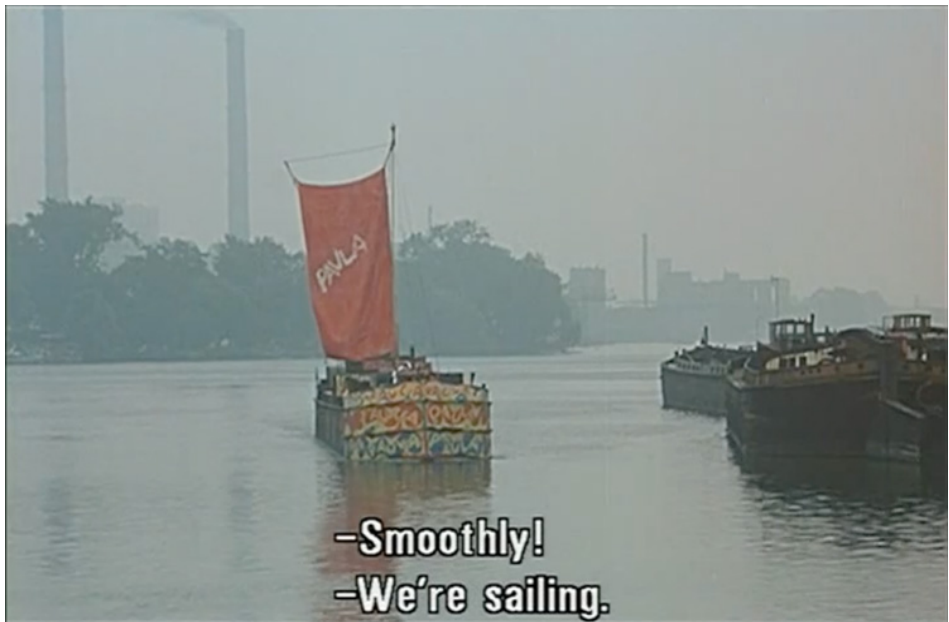
Director Heiner Carow also voiced a similar intention to depict characters whose daily experiences and emotions would resonate with that of the audience through a “cinema that concerns everyone”:

We must answer the questions that [young people] have with different answers than we were given, perhaps deeper answers about people themselves, how they think and how they feel, what they think about truth, about morality. And so we have to transform our artistic expressions and make new films with greater popular appeal. Our task will be to [...] make cinema into a form of stronger and greater revolutionary social debate. (Dennis, 2012, p. 66)

The Legend of Paul and Paula recounts the love story between a lower-class single mother of two children, Paula, and a married man Paul, who works for the GDR’s foreign affairs department. One of the greatest appeals of the film is the fact that it depicts “the productive power of love” in a way that both elicits strong audience identification, especially among women spectators (Mühl-Benninghaus, 2012, p. 175), and expresses subtle critique on the dominating regime. Specifically, Carow uses fantasy as a rhetorical device to achieve these two goals. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Negt and Kluge argue that fantasy is both a process of wish fulfillment and a defense mechanism through which workers could cope with “the shock effects of an alienated reality” (Negt and Kluge, 1993, p. 33-35). Living a life that offers nothing beyond work, sleep, and childcare, the heroine Paula in Carow’s film demands an imaginary journey away from the confines of her immediate social milieu, but with disastrous consequences.

The sense that the pursuit of personal fulfillment could be a potentially subversive and critical force is clearly exemplified in the film’s climactic fantasy scene, in which Paul and Paula have a dreamy, romantic date one night. The constant contrast between the public and the private, as well as the conflict between individual desires and demands of the state, stands at the center of this sequence. Right before Paul and Paula are about to have sex, Paul sees in a state of hallucination three of his colleagues, who are high-ranking state officials, sitting inside Paula’s apartment and spying on him and his partner. With some musical instruments at hand, the trio briefly plays a percussive, dissonant tune that sharply contradicts with the romantic atmosphere of the scene. The government functionaries’ intrusion into the private sphere of the individual symbolizes the omnipresence of state influence in the daily life of GDR citizens and serves as a meta-reflection on the SED’s limitation of the creative license of artists. After Paula helped Paul forget about the unwelcome guests, a dream sequence begins. In it, the couple begins to sail away from their immediate social milieu, just as in the establishing shot, a colorful, stylishly furnished boat bids farewell to the industrialized town in the background

(See Fig. 1). The flamboyant drawings on the boat, along with the eye-catching red flag inscribed with Paula's name, symbolize the heroine's unquenchable, uncompromising search for love, happiness, and passion, while standing in direct opposition to the drab and grey hues of the surrounding town, thereby hinting that the pursuit of private desires is inherently incompatible with the demands of society and the state. The protagonists' imaginary departure away from the progressive goals of socialism is further exemplified by the fact that the ship is staged as a pre-industrializing enclave, where passengers are dressed in traditional-style clothing and where elderly women knit woolen clothing by hand (See Fig. 2). In this sense, the protagonists' escape from socialist society is equivalent to a regressive turn away from the industrializing ideals of the state.



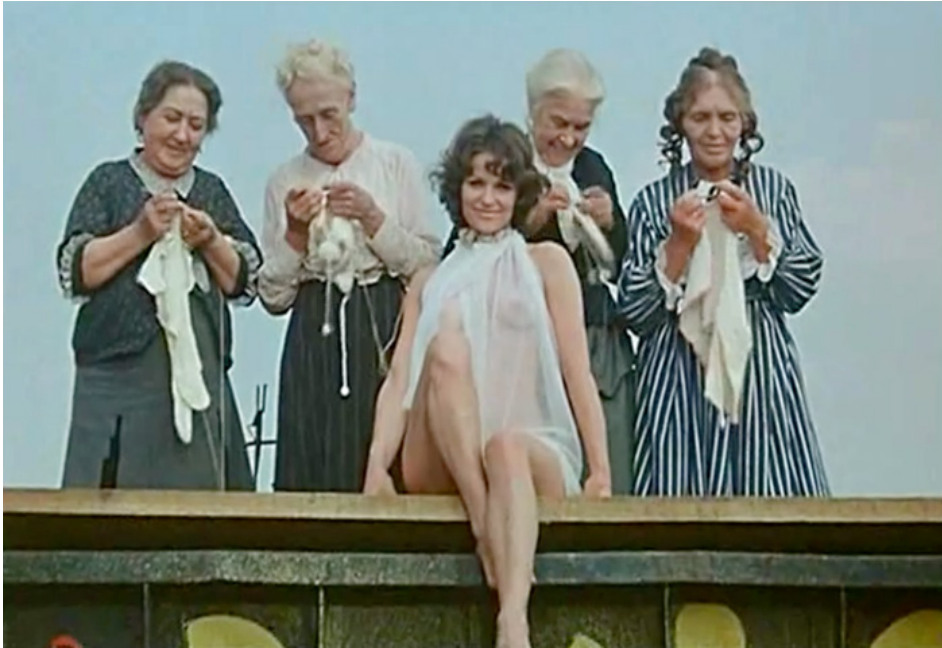
p. 137 *Paul and Paula Sail Away from Their Socialist Milieu / Fig. 1*

p. 138 / 139:

Elderly Women Knitting

Woolen Products by Hand / Fig. 2

Passengers Throw Flowers onto Paula / Fig. 3



Paula's rebellious desire to fulfill her individualist wish—to obtain absolute, unconditional love—rather than to make economic or political contributions to the state poses a potential threat to the dominant ideology of the SED. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the conclusion of the dream sequence foreshadows Paula's death in the final moments of the film. Towards the end of the fantasy sequence, Paul and Paula are seen lying in bed. The next shot shows sailors putting iron chains on the couple. Paula asks the others to be quiet through gestures, as if she wants to continue dwelling on this moment of lovemaking. A few moments later, however, other passengers on the boat begin to throw flowers and grass onto the bed while shouting at Paul and Paula in an unfriendly manner (See Fig. 3). Although Paula speaks imploringly, "I'm staying with you," she is soon completely buried, and one of Paul's colleagues lights up the flower bed with a torch, blowing Paula asunder. This abrupt, ominous ending of the fantasy sequence coincides with the tragic ending of the film, where Paula dies of childbirth just when she finds Paul to be the greatest love of her life. In this sense, the film suggests that individualist desires for love and happiness are irreconcilable with state demands and must remain a "legend" or "myth" (Brössel, 2020, p. 109) that could exist in the realm of fantasy but is unattainable in reality.



The subversive messages conveyed in the allegorical scenes of *The Legend of Paul and Paula* made the film a subject of hot debate during production and reception. DEFA's artistic director took the techniques and characteristics of the fantasy sequence to be a "particular problem" when reviewing the original scenario (Stott, 2016, p. 34). On the day of its scheduled premiere, the film had to be personally approved by Erich Honecker, who was the head of the state at that time, in order to be released (Mühl-Benninghaus, 2012, p. 175). On the one hand, the film achieved cult status: over three million out of seventeen million East German citizens had watched it in theaters by 1985 (Mühl-Benninghaus, 2012, p. 175). On the other hand, GDR film critics vehemently attacked the portrayal of socially unengaged protagonists who retreat into the private sphere and escape from the real challenges of socialist society (Miltzschitzky, 1996, p. 447-48). In fact, the film's mass appeal seemed so disconcerting to the Ministry of Culture that it restricted the film's number of screenings (Stott, 2016, p. 35). Nevertheless, the film's contradictory status as both "the most beautiful love story that [one has] ever seen in a DEFA film" (Stott, 2016, p. 33) and a "frauenverachtende Schnulze" (misogynistic, weepy melodrama) (Sander and Schlesier, 1974, p. 8) epitomizes the spirit of the public sphere, where audience desires and ideological doctrines of the Party are constantly under negotiation and debate, and where the expression of ordinary experiences and desires could acquire political significance.

Conclusion

The public sphere of the GDR differs drastically from the sweeping statement of total oppression and censorship by Adorno. In fact, it is a process of constant negotiation between dominant ideologies of an idealized, progressive socialist state and individualist desires for the portrayal of authentic daily experiences of general concern. Whereas previous discussions on the literary public sphere, small public sphere, and internal public sphere of the GDR focus primarily on intimate spaces where private individuals could converse about public affairs, the scope, potential impact, and broad outreach of such oppositional public spheres are subject to question. Cinema functions as a unique public sphere in the GDR both because of its particular affinity to daily experience of the masses and because of its popular appeal among the general public. With its creative use of fantasy, Heiner Carow's *The Legend of Paul and Paula* exemplifies the spirit of the public sphere in that it offers an arena of debate, where private wishes could find expression despite idealist narratives of the state. In this sense, the cinematic public sphere of the GDR could serve as a tentative model for investigating the cultural landscape of socialist societies during the Cold War.

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