

“At the Border Movie Theaters: With Rubbish for Freedom!” (April 1956)

Abstract

Until the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, it was fairly easy to cross the border in Berlin. Young East Germans took advantage of the situation and attended special daytime screenings of Western films in West Berlin cinemas located near border crossings. These screenings were supported with West German tax revenue. In light of that, this April 1956 newspaper article criticized border movie theater programs, which consisted largely of entertainment films with no cultural pretensions.

Source

Next door, along the huts in the shadow of brick factory façades, “genuine pepper” and other spices, intestines, and binder twine for combine harvesters are offered for sale. On the other side of the street are advertised the “spiritual goods” that are offered to visitors from the East “cheap and in good quality”: *A Bullet Waits – The Angel of the Rowdies – With an Iron Fist – King of the Rocket Men – Hot Lips, Cold Steel*: movie titles from the so-called border movie theaters, the kind you find at Potsdamer Platz, on Brunnenstraße, near Warschauer Brücke, and at nearly all border crossings. And the weekly market, which is actually open the entire week, is usually also found right there.

Chains and ropes are strung when the next showing is half an hour away. In long lines of hundreds, as during the Reichsmark period, the waiting crowd in front of the entrance. Admission: 25 Pfennigs (West) or 1.50 DM (East) it says at the box office. “Please have your IDs ready to be checked!” Chewing gum is the most popular item at the counter of the candy stand in the lobby. An “Extra,” handed out free of charge at the entrance, provides information about the upcoming program.

... to Dixieland

The air in the theater is thick enough to cut, a whiff that takes your breath away, but no disadvantage for the box office, as three to four shows – “Special shows for visitors from the East” – are on the schedule from 9 am to 3:30 pm. The narrow doors, opened each time for only about 20 minutes, do manage to turn over the audience, but not to refresh the air. The cleaning ladies cannot rid the market of the flat illusion every two hours. But this does not bother the visitors. Only a few are older than 25; hardly anyone is over 40. Here people come with a briefcase from the vocational school or go the theater because of the convenient opening times. The loudspeakers playing the music, which is just as “hot” as the atmosphere, blare out the syncopated Dixieland a little louder than in other movie theaters. That is unavoidable, for otherwise one would not be able to make out a melody among the audience’s rhythmic foot stamping.

... a good idea

When the idea surfaced six years ago that visitors from the Soviet-occupied territories should be “culturally looked after,” as they say, those behind the idea primarily wanted to show all the films that are profitable. There was even a willingness to make sacrifices. The authorities waived the entertainment tax, the film distributors did not even charge any fees, and about two dozen movie theaters near the sector border were given the privilege of having special screenings with these allowances. To avoid unfair competition, the only condition was that they were not to show films that were currently running in the evening at other theaters. But the owners of the movie theaters could choose freely among the

reruns, some of which were not even three months old.

What is known as the dictatorship of popular taste promptly began. The *Fahrraddiebe* [*Bicycle Thieves*] or *Schwurgericht* [*Trial by Jury*] remained empty. Texas serenades with three pistols and fifteen dead bodies had a full house. But the cause lay not with those visitors from the East, who said, understandably enough: "I don't want a problem film but light entertainment when I go the movies in the West. I have plenty of problems at home." Those visitors don't have time to go to the "special showings" that are restricted to about four in the afternoon. In the evening, the border movie theaters show the "normal program" at non-discounted prices. "Nobody would indemnify us if our seats at the special showings remained empty," they argue. But young people, vocational students, who have time to go to the movies in the morning, dictate: "We want to see Westerns." And the program accommodated them.

There were hardly any special showings that were not attended under these conditions; and there are those familiar with the industry who have demonstrated that hardly a border movie house is in poor condition physically. In fact, many of these movie houses have been able to open new theaters in other districts. That prompted the association of film distributors about three years ago to demand from theater owners a fee for the "East movies" as well, half of the usual rental fee. Still, some of the border theaters tried to show a comedy of real quality instead of a trite one. However, they had financial success – the basis of every movie theater – only if their surroundings brought them enough interested viewers, not only "toughs" whose idea of a good time is a knockout. Anyone who has time only in the late afternoon or in the evening has no choice but to go to the other Western movie theaters, in any case. It would be appropriate to have "special showings" of higher quality for these Eastern visitors, who are even paying the higher admission prices, even if certain discounts are given for the regular shows. But they are handicapped.

We do not want to address the sanctimonious arguments by the Eastern press, which claims that young people were being incited to criminal acts by the films. And the problem would be hardly less controversial if the theater owners were not able to say that every film shown has already been reviewed by self-regulation, so that there cannot be any concerns. However, in spite of this there is little doubt about the value of these celluloid products meant to document the West's "cultural aid." Why should one propagate something that is controversial even here?

Less would be more!

As long as the taxpayer does not contribute from his own pocket one need not raise the question whether a different choice in programming would be appropriate or not. But the annual entertainment tax of 20% amounts to about 600,000 DM for the approximately 2.5 million visitors to the border theaters. Why should one subsidize something when the furnishings of the movie theaters suggest that their survival is not at stake? A few owners of border theaters are saying that attendance would be no smaller at a ticket price of 30 Pfennigs, and it would not even be necessary to forego the entertainment tax, because it is covered by the revenue. To be sure, an amount of 600,000 DM hardly registers in a budget for the city of Berlin of two billion. However, even that sum does not seem appropriate to finance crime stories. That leaves the question: should one not reduce the number of border theaters to one or two per sector? On the condition, however, that they show really good films, and do so even in the evening program as "special showings" for Eastern visitors?

Source: Werner Berger, "In den Grenzkinos: Mit Schmarren für die Freiheit!", *Blickpunkt* 51, April 1956, pp. 16–17.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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