

“Dangerous Kitsch”: East German Criticism of *Heimatfilme* (February 15, 1952)

Abstract

Part of the GDR's mission when constructing a state was to define itself as the “rightful” Germany and establish moral superiority over West Germany. East German leadership went about this a number of different ways, and culture became an important battleground in the contest for moral superiority between the two Germanys. This article in the East German daily *Berliner Zeitung* took aim at the popular West German genre of *Heimatfilme*, decrying them as kitschy and shallow, with little to contribute to discussions on the social challenges that postwar Germany faced. Films in the GDR, produced by the DEFA film studio, were also overwhelmingly positive and celebratory of GDR society, but focused on themes of anti-fascist resistance, the involvement of big business in war, and the need to identify the perpetrators of the war to achieve peace for a postwar society. Instead of addressing these themes with any subtlety, East German films tended to be didactic and instructive, staking out their themes and lessons very clearly. *Heimatfilme* faced critique from both the East and the West, but recent scholarship has contended that films in the genre actually wrestled with the problems of postwar Germany in more ways than previously acknowledged.

Source

Dangerous Kitsch

Notes on Two Films

What is self-evident no longer gets a mention. Maybe that is why the danger of kitsch is rarely discussed, or only as a side note. Yet it is necessary to call it by its name, particularly when it makes as shameless and predatory an appearance as it has now done in some films.

When the Evening Bells Ring (*Wenn die Abendglocken läuten*) and *The Heath is Green* (*Grün ist die Heide*) certainly seem like harmless film titles, designed at most to soothe squares with their emotional kitsch, or arouse in city dwellers sentimental memories of their country vacations. They are films that tread the groove, that you do not take seriously, and which you reject solely on the basis of good taste.

They are more than that. They are worse than that. They attempt to infiltrate a sphere of experience that is barely satisfying as art and thus is abandoned to kitsch with a passive shrug of the shoulders. By sphere of experience I mean the love of homeland. A genuine, grand, legitimate feeling was rendered inactive for creative ventures, for works of art and literature. It lost the power to build community and became a sterile expression of personal sentimentality or of a petty bourgeois sense of blessed unity. So there is a gap into which entire swathes of kitsch can infiltrate, hornet-like swarms of lies and fakes. What constitutes film kitsch? Linking the unique fates depicted in some sensationalist plot with questions of our time. Cinematic romanticism is unabashed by any kind of reality. *Heimat* films do not really tackle the issue of displaced persons, with its multi-layered social challenges; they do not address real conflicts of the postwar era. Instead, these western productions have the following vision of the present day.

When the Evening Bells Ring we'll be married, one film claims, if I heard correctly. A young musician cannot marry the daughter of the schoolmaster, because it would make a wealthy landowner angry, since said lord loves her himself, and marries her. But when he realizes that their child is not his, but fathered by the musician, he leaps onto his horse—being a famous jockey—and rides in a steeplechase,

although the doctor has forbidden him to ride because a piece of shrapnel from a war injury is dangerously close to his heart. Willy Birgel wins the race, obviously, and equally obviously, topples dead from his horse at the end of it. So he is riding for Germany by riding for his caste, to prove its gallantry and chivalry. Some 20 years ago, when director Alfred Braun mounted a production of Bertolt Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards* for Radio Berlin, he could hardly have imagined that he would one day be ringing these evening bells. Aribert Wäscher plays the young composer's publisher. Who would have imagined that he had such bad musical taste and would publish those kinds of "pop songs"?

In *The Heath is Green*, the hero is called Hans Stüwe instead of Willy Birgel. He is not a jockey, but a poacher. He has "lost" his forest in Silesia, so he has resorted to shooting deer at the edge of Luneburg Heath. A young game warden tracks him down, but the poacher's young daughter confronts him. The warden is sidetracked by love. Father promises not to use his weapon again and, when a policeman is fatally shot, the improved-version poacher discovers someone choking a deer with a snare. That someone is the wild animal keeper for a traveling circus who feeds his lions and tigers venison. To provide a showcase for lyrics from Heath poet Hermann Löns, three merry vagabonds trek about the heath, and there is a traditional marksmen's fair, so that Silesian songs can also be sung. Oh, and the movie is in color, so that the heath really is green.

Maxim Gorky's play *Yegor Bulychov and Others* has a trumpeter and a "divine" jester who purport to cure diseases with their hocus-pocus. Our hero, who poaches for sentimental reasons, is nothing more than that kind of grotesque, macabre effigy of superstition and demise. But here, it is portrayed positively and the film is playing in dozens of West Berlin theaters, while you would search in vain for a screening of Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine*.

A film like this both defies and insults any genuine feeling. Giving us the emotional suffering of a hunter who becomes a poacher for "love of homeland"—instead of realistically portraying the difficult lot of displaced persons in the West and unemployment! It really could not be worse. It was a pity about Margarete Hagen, who played a "beldame." All the other actors seemed to be right at home. As did the director Hans Deppe.

Source of original German text: Herbert Ihering, "Der gefährliche Kitsch: Bemerkungen zu zwei Filmen," *Berliner Zeitung*, no. 39, February 15, 1952.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

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