

MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS



A New Train on Old Tracks: Director Kurt Maetzig on Founding the DEFA Studio

In the immediate postwar period, our thoughts about the Ufa Studio were based on what we had seen in movie theaters during the War. We wanted to clearly distinguish the newly-founded DEFA Studio from the Ufa tradition and from how we experienced Ufa.

Intellectually and artistically, we wanted a new start. We were motivated by a strict antifascist attitude; we were striving for democracy and wanted our films to contribute to the process of democratization as well. At the time we were much less aware of the fact that our own pasts still tied us to old German traditions, including the Ufa tradition.

Right after the war, I almost took it for granted that I wanted to work somewhere that offered an opportunity to make a radical break—that is, with the developments that had led to fascism—and to implement this break through practical film work. This existed here in the east. At the beginning there was a lot of freedom.

My first filmwork consisted in a few little documentaries and, more importantly, the creation of the weekly newsreel, *Der Augenzeuge (Eyewitness)*. This beginning made sense. The technical conditions were set up relatively quickly—which much more difficult for feature film productions—and there was an enormous need for information on film. At the time there were still no magazines or television; nobody knew what was going on in the country or how things looked. Everywhere there was not only physical hunger, but also a “hunger for images.” So the conditions for a weekly newsreel were good. But we did not want a remake of the old weekly newsreels. We wanted a new type of newsreel ... because the [Nazis’] victory fanfares, hollow pathos and lies still droned on in our ears.

Marion Keller and I came up with the name *The Eyewitness* for the newsreel series, and we came up with the slogan “See for yourself—Hear for yourself—Judge for yourself.” *Eyewitness* was supposed to represent a personified viewer. The name itself was somewhat different from *Die Deutsche Wochenschau (The German Weekly Newsreel)* or the like. *The Eyewitness* wanted to clearly distinguish itself—both textually and stylistically—from what had been fed to people, especially during the war years. This meant doing away with pathos and steering towards a non-suggestive, more distanced and softer language of images and sound. Above all, it wanted to encourage viewers to convince themselves of the truth, rather than listening to slogans from above. These were things that set us apart from what the *Wochenschau* had been under the Nazis. At the same time, from today’s point of view they stood just as much in opposition to what the *Eyewitness* later became, once Stalinist cultural policy began to take root in East Germany.

And there were still de facto links to Ufa traditions. You can see it, for example, in the artistic means of expression employed in my first feature film, *Ehe im Schatten (Marriage in the Shadows)*. These led to the fact that, despite intellectual distancing and the many differences in content, the film is similar to an Ufa film in appearance. At the time, we primarily understood “distancing” in two ways. On one hand, it obviously meant distancing ourselves from the militaristic and *Durchhaltefilme* (films about staying the course) to which Ufa had contributed during the war. On the other hand, it meant distancing ourselves from so-called pure entertainment films, which were out of touch with real life and were meant to distract people from their problems. Back then we thought we had managed to make a radical break. But, in reality, we had not. Many streams of tradition—both positive and negative—flowed into our films and continued to for a long time.

MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS

I would like to illustrate this with an example. I soon became aware that the camera work in *Marriage in the Shadows* was idealized. The traditional lighting that an experienced cinematographer like Friedl Behn-Grund used for people—he was known as a very good photographer of women, because he beautified the women with light—had the effect of smoothing and beautifying the image. In this case, it merely smoothed over contradictions and got in the way of a realistic style of filmmaking. We gradually realized that what we called the „Ufa syle“ always had to do with idealizing, touching-up, corrupting reality. These were the stylistic devices used to create the illusion of a perfect, healthy world.



During the shooting of *Marriage in the Shadows*: director Kurt Maetzig, cinematographer Friedl Behn-Grund and actress Ilse Steppat.

I approved this approach at the time—partly out of insecurity, partly to cater to the habits of the viewers I wanted to reach. But already in my second film, *Die Buntkarierten* (*Girls in Gingham*), I tried to develop my own expressive language. It is hard to free oneself from such traditions, even if you don't like them. At the studio, I fought against sugarcoating things—by means of costuming, make-up, powder and wigs—for decades.

It is known that with the first DEFA film, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*), Wolfgang Staudte tried to find a way out of this conundrum by going back to expressionist traditions in film and painting. Those in theater also tried to change performance styles, because in this domain too there was something called the Ufa style. It was a certain spoken modulation, a kind of „exaggerated“ chanting sound, often mixed with an overtone of Viennese schools of performance. Those who studied at Hilde Körber's performing arts school also had something artfully artificial in their language and gestures, which I would also include among the stylistic means used in Ufa films. Directors like Erich Engel and Slatan Dudow put a lot of effort into overcoming this style.

MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS

The Ufa tradition also appeared in another arena, and from a very different angle—namely, basic economic and organisational structures. Ufa—here I am intentionally talking about only the production sector—was a huge film production company with its own vast grounds, workshops and complete technical apparatus, and with full-time employees who, over time, had formed stable crews and in this way were able to develop and nurture different artistic signatures. We sought to emulate all this, without always being aware of the roots of this tradition.

Ultimately, there were also production groups at DEFA, just like at Ufa. We felt this organisational structure was useful, good and worth keeping. That's why I was angry and upset when, under the influence of Stalinist cultural policies, they started to overdo centralizing the DEFA Studio. In a 1956 essay, I advocated for a decentralized structure with production groups; included was the following sentence: "In socialism we don't have the right to organize ourselves in a less sophisticated way than was already the case under capitalism." If you read the article today, you are aware that this applied not only to DEFA and the film industry. This article basically criticizes the over-centralized form of a primitive planned economy and attempts, at least in the domain in which we had some influence, to advocate for structures that Ufa had already developed.

All in all, I believe that the organisational structure of German film as it existed at the end of the 1920s was very functional. It lasted throughout and beyond the Nazi period. DEFA then followed this route, more or less. In particular, I mean the principle of building up a technical basis for production consisting of workshops, equipment and highly qualified experts, who over the course of decades worked in one of the more than fifty film professions represented in the same workshop. Of course, the efficacy of film production cannot exclusively, or even primarily be judged based on economics; because we are talking about mass production in an artistic arena, intellectual and artistic quality and productivity come first. That's why the production structures of big companies like Ufa—which could also be found at Tobis, Terra and Bavaria—are very useful. However, we cannot overlook the fact that this organizational form also makes it easier for a centralized authority—be it on the part of the state or other powerful groups—to take over. This was probably the main reason why the DEFA production structures were destroyed after 1990, although it was done in the name of industrial inefficiency.

Whatever the reason, today film production at the former Ufa-DEFA grounds in Babelsberg is much harder to get going than after 1945. I remember a conversation that I had shortly after the war, in 1946, with the former Ufa production manager, Erich Pommer, who had come back from the US as cultural officer in charge of film. He told me that he envied us in the Soviet zone, because we had already started making films. He also had plans to produce films in Germany again himself, but thought it would take a long time, because the Americans had thousands of their own films to distribute, which they planned to show before thinking about producing films here.

Things turned out quite differently, however. In order to catch up with the rapid upswing of film production in the Soviet zone, the western Allies soon awarded production licenses. But at the time I spoke with Pommer, this was unforeseeable.

In 1945, the destruction of all large, important concerns in Germany, including in the film industry, was the declared intention of the Allies. Pommer also spoke about the problems that this would bring for the film industry. In the early years, this policy was taken more seriously in the west than in the east. Maybe the contradiction can be explained as follows: while the priority of the western countries was to destroy the forms of production, the priority of the east was to intellectually destroy fascism and overcome militarism, racism, imperialistic modes of thought and the Nazi dictatorship. But here too it probably soon became important that a big company would work better in developing a centralized authoritarian state.

MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS

For me, the conversation with Pommer was very informative and insightful. I got a clearer sense of what it meant that even the chief of production at Ufa had had to flee the Nazis in 1933 and emigrate to the USA ... that he too represented an Ufa tradition that was in sharp contrast with the films produced at the studio after 1933. It was clear we had a lot in common with this antifascist. He himself had no aversion to us and he was a welcome guest at the premiere of the first DEFA film, *The Murderers Are among Us*.

My feature film debut, *Marriage in the Shadows*, not only built on Ufa traditions stylistically, although unconsciously. I also produced the film with film artists, technicians and craftsmen who had worked in former film companies including Ufa. Where else would they have come from? A huge number of actors, directors, cinematographers, technicians and craftsmen flocked to the young DEFA Studio, because it was the first production company to start work after the destruction of the war. So you had your choice. When it came to weeding out those who had fetched and carried for the Nazis, we only excluded a few people, mainly authors and directors.

This also corresponded to the general mood in Germany at the time. I remember when Veit Harlan, the director of *Jud Süß (Jew Süss)*, showed up at the premiere of *Marriage in the Shadows* at the *Waterloo Cinemas* in Hamburg, indignant viewers asked him to leave the cinema. We would not have worked with him, that's for sure.

There was also no catalog of criteria of political guilt available. We decided on a case by case basis whether we could work with somebody; most of the time we said yes with an open heart. It went so far, for example, that for *Marriage in the Shadows* I worked with the composer Wolfgang Zeller, who had also written scores for outright Nazi films. But he too was looking for a new beginning, and we made it possible for him.

Like most of Ufa's real estate, buildings, files and equipment, its administrative offices were in the Soviet sector, on Krausen Strasse in Berlin. The office building stood right on the border between the zones, so you could enter it from both sides. In addition to administrative offices, the technical departments, editing rooms, etc., were also there. In the first months after the war—when things were still unclear and the building had not yet been assigned to DEFA—Ufa people moved everything they could out of the largely destroyed building, so that there was very little left.

Once DEFA had moved in, these people came back and said there was a vault in the basement. It was a space the size of several rooms, where there were Ufa files that they wanted to take back to the west. Their identification was that they had the key to the vault. We let them in and they took the files. That was possible at the time, because Berlin was still undivided. The confrontation came later.

This text is based on a conversation that took place between director Kurt Maetzig and film historians Rolf Aurich and Hans-Michael Bock; this summary version was drafted in German by Aurich and Bock and authorized for publication by Kurt Maetzig.

It was first published in German in *Das Ufa-Buch: Kunst und Krisen, Stars und Regisseure, Wirtschaft und Politik* (transl. *The Ufa Book: Art and Crisis, Stars and Directors, Economics and Politics*); edited by Hans-Michael Bock and Michael Töteberg in collaboration with CineGraph – the Center for Film Research in Hamburg – and published by Zweitausendeins (Frankfurt/Main, 1992).

We thank Hans-Michael Bock for his permission to translate and publish this text in English.

Translated by Hiltrud Schulz and Skyler Arndt-Briggs, DEFA Film Library at UMass Amherst.