

Directors Andreas Voigt and Gerd Kroske on *Leipzig in the Fall*



Andreas Voigt, you joined the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films in 1978 as a dramaturg, writer and, later, as a director. Can you say something about the role of documentary film in East Germany? Did it fulfill the role of a “cinema of truth”?

Andreas Voigt: There were documentaries on television and in theaters. I'd rather not talk about television. It is not worth it. Television was the propaganda machine of the government and party.

It was different with cinema. There was less censorship and more freedom. Here, life in this little country of the GDR – its everyday, its life stories and fates – were more often the center of attention. There's a range of films you can still watch with a clear conscience. These documentaries provide us with information, impressions and feelings about a time that is past, a country that no longer exists, and whose people participated in the change of a political and economic system – something that is a rare occurrence in a person's lifetime.

In the last year before the end of the GDR, a few good documentaries contributed to the societal discussion, as well as theater productions and books, especially when they talked about people's thoughts and feelings, about their hopes and dreams . . . when they talked about what is, and not about what should be or what had been decreed.

But “cinema of truth” is too big a claim to make. I think this kind of cinema was more powerful and vital in countries like Poland and Hungary. This is also certainly so because rejection of the existing system was stronger there than in our country. Identification – or at least accommodation – with existing circumstances was much more pronounced in the GDR.

Gerd Kroske, as of 1987 you were a dramaturg and writer at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films. How would you describe the atmosphere in the studio at that time?

Gerd Kroske: The situation was tense, with very weird approvals and rejections of film projects by the studio management and the film department [at the Ministry of Culture]. In the year of the *Wende*, 1989, it became clear that film topics were now possible that would have been hopeless a short while before. At the same time, however, there was a new generation coming up in the studio that demanded more. Because repeating the experience of older, recognized colleagues – whose films were amputated by the imposition of changes, if not outright banned, and who were increasingly broken by the experience – felt like no future at all, at least not for me.

But I had already experienced the studio in a more loyal phase, during the gradual softening of ideology at the end of the 1980s. The documentaries produced at this studio were why I wanted to work there at all costs. I absorbed these documentaries, in which there was a highly developed language of images that was not reflected in either journalism or other films. The cinema of feature films had to enter into an odd alliance with documentary film, because at movie theaters, as a rule, a documentary was shown before the feature film was screened. At the same time, there existed highly engaged film clubs, which made sure that these documentaries had an audience. The audience saw the truthfulness in the really good films, which in turn were honored by fair-minded film discussions. Most often, these film discussions centered less on the

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films than on the problems in the country. The films generated something inspiring and, above all, encouraged people to dare adopt a different point of view on life. Maybe it's because of this that documentaries had a special status.

Leipzig in the Fall was not planned, as was usual, by the studio. Normally, it was not possible to spontaneously initiate a documentary film at the studio. How did the documentary Leipzig in the Fall come about?

Andreas Voigt: In the week after October 7, 1989 – the 40th anniversary of the GDR – we filmmakers of the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films were sitting in Neubrandenburg. Like every other year, our national documentary film festival was taking place there. It was a wonderful fall in a little nest of a town in the north; the leaves were slowly turning colors, and the mild sun tried to make everything more bearable. The first mass demonstrations had already taken place in Leipzig, Berlin and Dresden. We sat in this idyll. It was a grotesque situation. We talked like crazy, articulated demands and wanted to get involved in what was happening on the street. The following Monday, in the early morning of October 16th, I met with a few colleagues in the DEFA Documentary Film studio conference room. I had drafted a letter. *(See document 1)* We briefly discussed and then signed it. I took this letter to the interim studio manager (the manager was sick) and told him: “We must shoot now.” He understood what I meant; he was as worked up as we were. To be on the safe side, he declared the shooting was “for archival purposes.” *(See document 2)* That means: if things had worked out differently, the material would have simply disappeared into the archive.

There were very few video cameras at the time. We had our heavy 35mm technology. And this is what we set off with. There were three teams. Petra Tschörtner and other colleagues filmed in Berlin, and Róza Berger-Fiedler went with a team to Dresden. Sebastian Richter and I immediately decided to go to Leipzig, where we had filmed my very controversial Academy thesis-film, *Alfred*. I knew the city and I liked the atmosphere and vibe there. I wanted to go back.

The whole industrial area in the middle of Germany, around Leipzig, Halle and Bitterfeld, was really exciting. Conflicts there had been building for many years because of the enormous environmental damage and the desolate living conditions of many workers, who lived there under the most difficult conditions. Here, the gap between the postulated socialist ideal and the hard, gray reality was particularly clear. In comparison to Leipzig, Berlin was a much more mediated environment, a “protected area.” These reasons contributed a great deal to why the protest movement developed in this area. In addition, the Saxon mentality, which is very particular, should not be underestimated. Berlin is Prussian. Leipzig is almost as relaxed as the Mediterranean.

We started shooting the Monday demonstrations on the afternoon of October 16th. The first scene we shot is the one that opens the film. What we did was put DEFA stickers on our huge, black 35mm “Arri” cameras, so the demonstrators could see who we were. When they saw that we were from the DEFA studio, they accepted us as their own. The demonstrators formed a path so that we could walk through the masses with our cameras, as you can see in the film. There were two demonstrators at the end of the path holding a sign with the words “Freedom of the Press.” This image impressed me a lot.

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We stayed until Tuesday und decided to continue to shoot in Leipzig and collect more material. We had not yet considered making a film.

Gerd Kroske: The studio management was completely overwhelmed. And they were also over-run by events. The bosses realized that new times were possibly on the horizon. At the time, the studio's ideas for films still had to be submitted to the film department at the Ministry of Culture, which would then issue a declaration regarding which films the studio would produce in its annual plan. Like a factory for nuts and bolts. That excluded every form of spontaneous film work from the start.

But in fall 1989 the pressure in the studio became so great that the management realized it had to give in to it. At the end they said: "You can shoot, but we don't have film stock left" . . . because the 35mm film stock was allocated as well. Then the director of the film factory in Wolfen gave us film stock, because he found it plausible that his employees might go to the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig and we wouldn't be able to shoot for lack of film stock. The support of the studio only picked up once it became clear that "the mantle of history" was settling over the area.

You both co-directed the film together. How did your collaboration start?

Gerd Kroske: I had been in Leipzig for few weeks in late summer 1989 to do research among street cleaners for my film *Sweep It Up*. Andreas Voigt had filmed his *Alfred* film in Leipzig. So we were both very familiar with the city and the people. And Sebastian Richter, the cameraman, too. We each had our own personal contacts in the city and put them together to document the situation there. Everything came together very easily, as we all were filled with the same feeling of a new time coming and knew that it was a point in time in which one could do a lot, if one did not chicken out. It was a wonderful and anarchic combination.

The character of the Monday demonstrations – which in summer 1989 had mostly been about leaving the country – was changing more and more. Every week more people were joining the demonstration. Nights, at the city's public works office, I saw how flat-rate city workers cleared away the banners left from the demonstration.

It was simmering, bubbling up everywhere, and you couldn't resist filming it. On top of everything, West German television was reporting on the demonstrations, while we, ourselves, could not. Finally, I also had a very personal motive; namely, the "blank spot" in DEFA film history represented by June 17, 1953 [the East German popular uprising]. These events that took place in summer 1953 were not documented by former DEFA colleagues. I always felt that this was embarrassing and did not want to repeat this situation myself.

Andreas Voigt: It was an incredibly flickering, exciting, anarchically-beautiful and hopeful time. This short moment of uprising, until the fall of the Wall. In those days, no one knew that this would come to pass.

It was also a time in which everybody wanted to do something – an atmosphere that really encouraged community. I met Gerd Kroske at the studio shortly after our first shoot on October 16th and asked him if he'd like to join us. As of October 23, he was on our team. We wrapped up

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shooting on November 7th; in the end, this was decided by the fall of the Wall. We knew this was the crucial break: now the world will change; we have to edit the material really fast. And we did so. We worked on two editing tables at the same time, with two editors: Karin Schöning and Manuela Bothe. As we mention in the final credits, the material was edited in 10-12 days, and *Leipzig in the Fall* became the opening film of the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival in November 1989.

How many hours of material did you shoot? Were other film teams also in Leipzig to document these important events?

Andreas Voigt: I believe we shot almost 12 hours of material. For us, this was a lot. The common shooting-ratio was from 1:5 to 1:7. That was already a lot.

Gerd Kroske: Yes, our use of the film stock was very efficient. That's why we worked on two editing tables, just so we could manage all the material. Actually, GDR television should have done our film work; but at that point they still didn't dare to go out from their studio in Adlershof into the new reality. I remember that students from the Academy for Film and Television Potsdam-Babelsberg were also shooting in Leipzig.

How did you manage, already in October 1989, to get so many people to speak openly about the political situation in the GDR – for example, the soldiers who were deployed during the demonstrations?

Gerd Kroske: We put the officers in the police barracks under a lot of pressure. They were very insecure and unsettled about their future. Their orders became more and more superficial and senseless. We must have appeared to be very confident (which none of us really was, but they didn't notice). Somehow the generalized uncertainty contributed a lot to making us seem so convincing. And the recruits picked up on the impetus and didn't hold back with their opinions. I found them very brave; because we left the barracks after filming, but they had to continue with their military service.

Everybody hoped for this openness and time after time, as we shot, it was a joy to experience people sharing their thoughts so freely. So wonderfully free of fear. This was a gift. The people also respected that we came from DEFA and this helped to create an authentic atmosphere as well.

Andreas Voigt: Above all, it was due to the times. In the last years of the GDR, conflicts and problems had grown inside most of us and it simply had to come out. These policemen were in the same kind of situation. They had to serve for 18 months. These were young men, who had lived in this country with all their conflicts, and they talk about it in the film as well. It was a kind of therapy that starts by screaming everything out.

That was one thing. The other thing is that anybody who sits in front of a camera very quickly feels whether the person behind the camera is honest – if he or she is serious, truthful. It is al-

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ways your own attitude that becomes visible in every image, every scene you shoot. In those days it was important to us to make a film from the point of view of people on the “bottom,” from the perspective of the people on the streets. We also wanted to be “one of them” and we clearly wanted to create a picture of a situation, a moment that would later prove to be a lasting image of a past time. A congealed moment captured in a 24th of a second by our 35mm camera.

Andreas Voigt, you have returned to Leipzig several times and shot five films altogether, documenting ten years in the history of a city. What roles did the fall 1989 demonstrations play, in particular, for the city and for East Germany as a whole? How did the situation of the city change after the Wende?

Andreas Voigt: The formidable demonstrations (at times, there were 300,000 people on the streets in Leipzig at the Monday demonstrations) were the beginning of the end of the GDR. Of course, however, they were not its cause.

Leipzig was not as much destroyed during WWII as many other German cities. A lot of old architecture survived, got dilapidated, decayed. The GDR lacked the resources to rebuild the city. And, shortly before it could pull itself together in a last effort to address this decay and replace it with horrible architecture, the GDR itself went under.

Today, Leipzig is a place I like to return to. A lot was invested in the city over the last 20 years and it has become a lively place. The many unemployed factory workers of the post-*Wende* period, and those “left over” from “back then” have mostly retired; and those who live on the margins of society today are hardly present in the public awareness. As Bertolt Brecht once said: “... for you don’t see the ones in the dark.”

After the powerful existential ups and downs of the *Wende* period and the first years thereafter, by the end of the 1990s we had all arrived at an apparently straightforward and safe plane. For a while now this plane has started showing increasingly deep cracks, fault lines are becoming visible. New abysses are opening that allow us to see what lies underneath, and is still far from over.

Again a good time to make documentaries. But do we want them?

Gerd Kroske, you too returned to Leipzig – in 1990, 1996 and 2006 – to work on your 3-part documentary, Sweep It Up. What has happened to the drive for change of people in Leipzig?

Gerd Kroske: You don’t feel much of the impetus for change from back then. The system was completely replaced and it was not successful in integrating the majority of people in such a way that they experienced the creation of a new sense of meaning in their own lives. This is a huge shortcoming and many people experience a decrease, rather than an increase in quality of life. In this former industrial triangle of Leipzig-Borna-Halle in particular, hundreds of thousands of jobs disappeared. There is a horrifyingly high unemployment rate, and children are growing up without ever experiencing their parents working; and these children also know that they will not be able to find work in their future. They also don’t learn how to work anymore. In this

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respect, this society is drifting further and further apart. I'd rather not speculate about the results. I think that films tell the story better. A serious rupture took place. You can feel it physically and people are afraid again. Heiner Müller once referred to this atmosphere as a "blight" that covers the countryside.

Leipzig in the Fall – A DVD Release by the DEFA Film Library

This interview was conducted in July 2009, by Hiltrud Schulz of the DEFA Film Library.

Original documents, courtesy of Andreas Voigt.

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Berlin, 16.10.89

Antrag an die Studioleitung

In Anbetracht der jetzigen gesellschaftspolitischen Entwicklungen in der DDR ist es unsere Pflicht als Dokumentaristen, diesen Prozeß zu begleiten.

Zum einen, um mit Filmen in diesen umfassenden Dialog einzugreifen zum anderen, um Material zu sammeln, Ereignisse festzuhalten, die später als Dokumente dieser Wochen und Monate von großer Bedeutung sein werden.

Diese Zeit können wir nicht tatenlos vergehen lassen, wir können sie auch nicht verbringen mit Recherchen für literarische Unterlagen. Es muß jetzt gedreht werden.

Wir fordern die Studioleitung auf, Material und Technik bereitzustellen und mehreren Drehetüben die notwendigen Arbeitsmöglichkeiten zu schaffen.

Andreas Voigt
Joachim Tschirner
Wolfgang Dietzel
Lew Hohmann
Karlheinz Richter

R[óza] Berger-Fiedler
Sebastian Richter
Marco Mundt
[illegible]
Petra Tschörtner

Verteiler:
Studioleitung
Gruppenleitung "document"

Berlin, October 16, 1989

Application to the Studio Management

Considering the current sociopolitical developments in the GDR, it is our duty as documentary filmmakers to accompany these events.

On the one hand, to engage through film in this sweeping dialogue; and, on the other hand, to collect material and records of events, which will be of great importance in the future as documents of these weeks and months.

We cannot let this time pass by without doing something, and we cannot spend it on research for project proposals. We must film now.

We demand that the studio management make available film stock and equipment and that several film crews receive the necessary opportunity to work.

Andreas Voigt [director]
Joachim Tschirner [director]
Wolfgang Dietzel [cameraman]
Lew Hohmann [director]
Karlheinz Richter [cameraman]

R[óza] Berger-Fiedler [director]
Sebastian Richter [cameraman]
Marco Mundt [producer]
[illegible]
Petra Tschörtner [director]

Cc:
studio management
management of the group "document"

Leipzig in the Fall - A DVD Release by the DEFA Film Library

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VEB DEFA-STUDIO FÜR DOKUMENTARFILME
DIREKTION, 1088 BERLIN, OTTO-NUSCHKE-STR. 27/32

Träger des Vaterländischen Verdienstordens in Gold

BETRIEBSTEILE: 1086 BERLIN, OTTO-NUSCHKE-STRASSE 32, PF-Nr. 1309
1502 POTSDAM-BABELSBERG, ALT NOWAWES 116-118

BETRIEBSTEIL:



Berlin den 16.10. 1989

Ihre Zeichen Ihre Nachricht Unser Zeichen

Arbeitsauftrag:

Kollege A. Voigt ist beauftragt, im Rahmen von Dokumentationsaufgaben Dreharbeiten durchzuführen.

H. Rüs ch
H. R ü s c h
Studiodirektor

VEB DEFA Studio für Dokumentarfilme
Otto-Nuschke-Str. 27-32
Berlin
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DEFA Studio for Documentary Films
Holder of the Patriotic Order of Merit in Gold

Berlin, October 16, 1989

Work Order:

Colleague A. Voigt is authorized to carry out filming in the context of documentation duties.

H. Rüs ch
Studio Director

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