
“Walls Have Never Held Us Back”: 60 Years of Student Films at the University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf

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Abstract

Owing to its location, the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF is particularly well suited to reflect audiovisual cultural heritage. It is situated in close proximity to the Babelsberg film studios, which has a tradition of filmmaking that goes back more than a century, and the University, which is the oldest of its kind in Germany, has benefited from the studio's mythos. With the creation of an endowed professorship for audiovisual heritage in June 2013, as well as the initiation of a new program of study devoted to film heritage (to *Filmkulturerbe*), the Film University is positioned to assert the importance of securing and maintaining audiovisual heritage. On this basis, a scholarly project (supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* [DFG]) has been dedicated to studying the university's filmic heritage. Student films from 60 years of the school's history, with a particular focus on the films from the GDR era, are being analyzed in the context of film history and in terms of institutional history as well. The research takes stock of how the student films have been archived and transmitted, and it also examines the school's own narratives about its history. Both film historical and aesthetic readings of selected films are conducted with reference to recent debates about DEFA cinema. In addition to the research project on student films, a number of other initiatives are underway, ones that pay particular attention to questions of preservation and digitization.

Audiovisual Heritage and the Film University

Owing to its unique location and its unusual structure, the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF is particularly well suited to reflect the audiovisual cultural heritage to which UNESCO dedicated a commemorative World Day (October 27) in 2005. In 2001 Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) became the first film selected for inclusion in UNESCO's Memory of the World Program, and Lang had filmed a large part of that work in the Babelsberg Studios, which today boasts an uninterrupted tradition of more than 100 years of filmmaking. Film production began on the property in 1912, and the studio now represents a site of film memory *par excellence*. Because the Film University is located adjacent to the studio property, it benefits from Babelsberg's mythos. The university's tasks include defining the spectrum of "audiovisual heritage," advocating for its maintenance, and keeping that heritage on the scholarly and public agendas. It therefore stands to reason that an endowed chair for audiovisual heritage with precisely this charge was established in the spring of 2013, and will be responsible for initiating a new program of study in "Film Heritage" together with several cooperating institutions in the Berlin/Brandenburg area. Inspiration for this new program also comes from the fact that the Potsdam Film Museum, which was founded in

1981 as the first of its kind in Germany, became part of the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF in July 2011, thereby occasioning a unique combination wherein a school, production facility, research unit, museum, archive and repertory cinema all find themselves connected as parts of a single institution.



The Film University's new building close to the Babelsberg film studios
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The History and Heritage of the University

In accord with a decision made by the Council of Ministers the “German Academy for Filmic Art” (*Deutsche Hochschule für Filmkunst* or DHF) was founded in 1954 in Potsdam-Babelsberg. Its task was to educate young people to work in the GDR’s state owned film studio known as the DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*), which was founded in 1946 in the Soviet occupation zone. Forerunners of this new German film school included Moscow’s All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) and the Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU). The Third Reich’s planned German film academy served as an additional source of inspiration. For the rising filmmakers of the GDR, the university’s name represented a pragmatic combination of two conflicting areas of inquiry: film’s craft and its artistry. Prior to its inception, there had been disputes as to whether one could learn the art of film in an academic setting, and opinions were divided among the DEFA’s directors. The university enrolled its first students in November 1954, and they moved initially into Babelsberg Palace, which turned out to be somewhat ill suited as a location for a film school. However, despite the lack of technology and poor conditions, the first cinematic works of later well-known directors, including Jürgen Böttcher, Kurt Tetzlaff, Hermann Zschoche and Ingrid Reschke, were produced there in 1956-57.

A student film heritage thus began to take shape, albeit erratically and unsystematically. With the expansion of the television industry the GDR's media landscape grew, and because they were educating an increasing number of students to work in the television industry, the DHF was renamed the College of Film and Television (the *Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen* or HFF). Many of the school's films were now produced in cooperation with East German state television (the DFF) and they were included as short reports during the daily programming. This changed the production process, and thematic and stylistic freedoms were to some extent narrowed through television's influence. Films during this period were primarily produced with an eye to the short term, and only a few "classics" such as Celino Bleiweiß's *The Game* (*Das Spiel*; 1962) contributed to how the school represented itself at festivals during the following decades. Prototypical in shaping that history was the 25th anniversary retrospective at the 1979 Oberhausen Short Film Festival, which consisted of twelve films from the 1960s and 1970s. The program included works by prominent DEFA directors Volker Koepp and Christa Muehl, as well as films by foreign students, such as the Jordanian director Ahmed Rohmi. Bleiweiß's *The Game* had an anti-fascist theme, as did Konrad Weiss's documentary *Flames* (*Flammen*; 1967), which dealt with the Herbert-Baum-Group, and Peter Kahane's *Trumpet, Bell, Last Letters* (*Trompete, Glocke, letzte Briefe*; 1978), both of which were on the program at Oberhausen.

It was not until the mid-1970s that the process by which student films were turned over to the archive became formalized. An official directive mandated how at the end of the production process the films found their way into the university's film archive, which was held responsible for the "storage, ordering and provision of the university's copies¹." This first attempt to control the preservation of film heritage, prior to the first major retrospective of student films at an international festival, indicates that perceptions about the value of the school's productions were starting to change. Films subsequently made at the HFF were now seen as part of a distinctive history, particularly since the first graduates had by now become known and seasoned staff either at the DEFA or in the German Television industry, and their debut films could thus be seen in the light of later works. By the time of the Oberhausen retrospective a film-historical perspective also found its way into student projects at the film school. To take one example: prompted by the school's renaming as the "Konrad Wolf" Academy of Film and Television the film



Manfred Hildebrandt and Heinz Mentel, students from the *Deutsche Hochschule für Filmkunst*, at the shooting of a student film in the 1950s
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The entrance of the *Deutsche Hochschule für Filmkunst* in 1962
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The Debut—Attempt at a Dialogue (Das Debüt—Versuch eines Dialogs; 1985) reconstructed Wolf's student days in Moscow, and it included interviews with his companions and colleagues.

But it was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and particularly through a systematic process of indexing and cataloging, that the HFF's film heritage was turned into an independent inventory of sources, usable in different contexts. From the perspective of historical documentary films and TV documentaries, the school's films and footage were now called "material fragments" and they were viewed as documents about life in the GDR. In some cases these films were also starting points in the cinematic search for historical connections. Along these lines, Marcel Neudeck's *We Rebuilt an Entire City (Wir haben eine ganze Stadt umgebaut; 2004)* deliberately recalled Volker Koepp's *We Built an Entire City (Wir haben schon eine ganze Stadt gebaut; 1968)*. Neudeck's film, which features a construction brigade, is a filmic reflection on the tension between past and present. Based on Koepp's observant portrait of peasant workers, Neudeck depicts how the same men again excavate and modify apartment blocks that were built in the 1960s. In yet another film, *We Were so Free, a Film about a Film (Wir waren so frei—ein Film über einen Film; 2008)*, the HFF graduate Thomas Knauf reconstructs the story of cameraman Lars-Peter Barthel's banned and ultimately abandoned film project *Experiments (Experimente; 1981)*.

The Collection: The Scope of the Archives

Today, the Film Library of the HFF—which was, in July 2014, renamed the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF—is home to a continually growing catalogue of films of different genres and types. It currently contains approximately 4,000 films from all six decades of the school's history. Among the archived films, one finds exercises from the very first years, some of which were produced in the context of thematic seminars, as well as graduation projects partially produced in conjunction with external funding partners. The majority of student films are short films. Only in the last twenty years has the number of feature films grown. Selecting which films are held in the archives and are preserved in analog or digital formats has often been left to chance. Thus, from both a historical perspective and with regard to the preservation of the newer, emerging student film heritage, questions remain about archival voids and gaps. In certain cases, we can reconstruct the history of those films that were produced but did not make their way into the archives. Included among those are some missing works that were made under the influence of Italian neorealism such as Jürgen Böttcher's film exercise *The Boy with the Lamp (Der Junge mit der Lampe, 1957)*². The period from 1954 to 1989-90 in particular includes a history of banned films and politically motivated censorship. Some films could only be rescreened after 1990, especially films that were canceled in the production phase or prohibited immediately after their completion. Many of those, such as Thomas Heise's *Why Make a Film about these People? (Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?, 1980)* survived in the archives and thus we can isolate traces of the repression that also shaped the university's daily life since 1989.

Beyond the films, there are also a number of documents that bear witness to the history and traditions associated with the school's film heritage. As with the film archive, these too are mostly preserved in the university library. The library's holdings include original publications about the history of the university from the past six decades, as well as intermittently published promotional brochures and syllabi. On the basis of these publications the school's educational objectives and curricula can be partially reconstructed. Contemporaneous materials in the university's press release archive complement these documents. These include reports on key events and developments in the history of higher education, and reviews of individual films written for specific festival programs. Of great significance in this regard is the International Leipzig Documentary and Short Film Festival, where HFF films were screened annually in their own special programs (with the exception of 1965), up until 1989. An online filmography maintained by the university's library contains the programs from those festivals as well as relevant clippings from Leipzig's major press publications³.

Another central pool of documents is located in the collection of the Potsdam Film Museum. This includes many meters of records of the university's dramaturgy department from the 1970s and 1980s. Starting with these documents, we can reconstruct the development of particular film projects, some of which were not implemented. Based on the so-called "thematic charts" (*thematische Pläne*) generated annually for film production, we can draw conclusions about their planned content and about which students were involved. Annual reports from the school's staff provide information on material organization, shooting, and any difficulties or problems with a film's production. Examining these sources together with the films yields clues about the development and transmission of particular films, all of which provides starting points on which to base an independent history of the university.

Recounting the Story: Diverse Versions of the University's History

A review of the in-house publications in which the HFF outlined its own sixty-year history (for the most part, publications commemorating the university's anniversaries) only partly enables to reconstruct a linear story of progress from the school's founding to the present. It provides an overview of quite varied perspectives. Particularly after the change of the political system in 1989-90 new narratives were



The archive of the Film University and its collection of student films
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developed to represent the institution with an eye to continuity and renewal vis-à-vis the changed political conditions brought about by reunification and the recent past. While the publications of the 1960s and the 1970s emphasized the building of the new institution and the development of an ideologically defined socialist film art, the first publication after 1989 omits a discussion of the school's history, promising a comprehensive written work-up in the future⁴.

It took ten years for that promise to be fulfilled: two essays from 2004 provide a critical summary of the school's history until 1989 and they then document how the organization institutionally secured and re-profiled itself after the Berlin Wall's fall. The desire for profiling the university in terms of its measurable successes such as student numbers, festival awards, and the reputation of former students emerges in the next anniversary publication statement: a collection of portraits of the HFF's renowned graduates.⁵ That publication also includes essays on Sybille Schönemann and Thomas Heise, which exemplarily address the repression to which students were exposed during the communist era. The university's political strategy of presenting the HFF's story in a critical way, while tailoring it to the needs of the present, provoked responses: in 1994 Axel Geiss initiated conversations in which former administrators, teachers and students controversially discussed their memories⁶; in 2008, at the initiative of directing-professor Helke Misselwitz, there was a "Thomas Brasch Night," which officially rehabilitated the poet and filmmaker who had been expelled in 1968 for political reasons; and, in a lecture to mark the school's 60th anniversary, Misselwitz recalled the Stasi's surveillance of Petra Tschörtner during her studies at the beginning of the 1980s. Misselwitz touched on a controversial issue: a number of graduates criticized the university for failing work through the chapter of the film school's history that included the Stasi.

Drawing Conclusions: Research on the University's History

As yet there has been no systematic account of the university's history. Its archives have been partly assessed in the context of ongoing institutional research on German film schools in general, and at certain points they have been examined as part of appraisals of East German cultural and educational policy. A reception of the school's heritage in film historical terms has, until now, been limited, and if anything, the school has only been examined in the context of DEFA film history. The focus, as with most of the research on East German history that emerged after 1990, has been mainly on the dictatorship, and the school's films were treated primarily as functions of the GDR's political history. Monographs in the classic art and film historical style—even studies of the most important DEFA directors such as Konrad Wolf and Jürgen Böttcher or of those who grew up in the GDR such as Thomas Heise—are still few and far between. Accordingly and considering the school's long tradition, only little research has been done regarding the early work of the university's *autoren*. This can be perhaps seen as an indication that the historical status of East German films and of the DEFA's most interesting figures has still to be clarified.

The present research project (2013-2016) on the history of HFF films from 1954 to 1992 thus investigates the school's history from both film-aesthetic and historical perspectives. The university's heterogenic heritage—with its changes, defects and strategic aims—thereby will be included in the conceptual research. Furthermore the planned publication opens up an extensive body of student films for further research on the subject of East German Cinema and DEFA. Recent scholarship on the DEFA takes a comparative approach and discusses East German cinema in the context of international art cinema⁷. This can be seen as a response to the narrow way of looking at DEFA films in terms of political history, especially in terms of the polemical debates about art's value (or lack thereof) in an ostensibly unfree society. A more nuanced discussion of DEFA films, directors and conditions of production, permits the international context of GDR filmmaking, particularly in terms of international influences, collaborations, and festivals, to come into view.

Securing Our Heritage: The Legacy of the Film University in the Digital Age

In July 2014, to mark the anniversary of their 60th anniversary, the theme of which was “Walls Have Never Held Us Back,” the Potsdam Film School was elevated from the status of an arts academy (*Kunsthochschule*) to that of university. This was hardly an inevitable development; it comes from the university’s unusual research strength and its degree programs in media studies. The re-naming of the oldest film school in Germany and the current focus on questions of film heritage have only intensified the reappraisal of the school’s past. Other German film schools in Munich, Berlin and Ludwigsburg are likewise at a critical point at which their own history is becoming perceptible and coming to the fore. In the interest of fostering exchange on this basis and reflecting on collaborations that can affect the collective evaluation of our respective heritages, the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF organized a workshop devoted to this topic in September 2014.

The university has already taken steps to make the transition from analog to digital film production and archiving. Passive archiving is no longer possible in the digital age; we cannot simply place films on the shelf and hope that they do not decay. Digital files must be constantly checked and transferred if they are to remain readable. A film school has to respond to these challenges, if it hopes to have a digital legacy. Coordinating the digital workflow demands a consideration of archival practices from the very beginning of a film’s production, and these practices can only be maintained if all parties involved are appropriately sensitized to new needs. For this reason, the film university has made archiving one of the themes in our lecture course on the basics of media technology, a course that is required for all students, regardless of their major.

Translated from German by Brad Prager

Biographies

Prof. Dr. Chris Wahl is Heisenberg Endowed Professor of Audiovisual Heritage at the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF and director of the research project “Regional Film Culture

in Brandenburg” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). He is the author of *Multiple Language Versions Made in Babelsberg. Ufa’s International Strategy, 1929-1939* (2014).

Dr. Ilka Brombach is a research assistant for the project “Regional Film Culture in Brandenburg” since summer 2014, and her work centers on the student film archive at the Film University. She is the author of

Eine offene Geschichte des Kinos: Autorenfilme von Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Wim Wenders, Christian Petzold, Thomas Arslan, Michael Haneke. Filmlektüren mit Jacques Rancière (2014).

Dr. Tobias Ebbrecht is lecturer for Film and German Studies in the Department of Communication and Journalism and at the Center for German Studies at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Until summer 2014 he was responsible for the student film

archive of the Film University within the project “Regional Film Culture in Brandenburg.” He is the author of *Geschichtsbilder im medialen Gedächtnis – Filmische Narrationen des Holocaust* (2011).

Notes

¹ “Auszug aus der Arbeitsverordnung des Archivs und der Expedition des Produktionszentrums,” Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen der DDR, April 1975.

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² Claus Löser, “Im Dornröschenschloss. Dokumentarfilme an der Babelsberger Filmhochschule,” in: *Schwarzweiß und Farbe. DEFA Dokumentarfilm 1946-92*. Eds. Günter Jordan and Ralf Schenk. Berlin 1996, p. 345.

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³ <http://www.filmuniversitaet.de/de/bibliothek-mediathek/veroeffentlichungen/40dokwo.html>

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⁴ Dieter Wiedemann, “Ein Blick zurück—nicht nur im Zorn—, ein Blick nach vorn—nicht nur im Übermut—40 Jahre HFF Potsdam-Babelsberg,” in: *Jahrgänge. 40 Jahre HFF, Konrad Wolf*.“ Eds. Egbert Lipowski and Dieter Wiedemann. Potsdam 1995.

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⁵ See *Book of Fame. Ein Kaleidoskop erfolgreicher HFF-Alumni. 55 Jahre HFF Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen, Konrad Wolf*.“ Potsdam-Babelsberg. Eds. Dieter Wiedemann and Klaus-Dieter Müller. Potsdam 2010.

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⁶ The documentary is located in the University’s archive. See Axel Geiß: *Jahrgänge—Gesprächsrunden 40 Jahre HFF (Teil 1-6)*. Potsdam 1994.

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⁷ See *DEFA international. Grenzüberschreitende Filmbeziehungen vor und nach dem Mauerbau*. Eds. Michael Wedel et al. Wiesbaden 2013; *Film im Sozialismus – die DEFA*. Eds. Barbara Eichinger and Frank Stern. Wien 2009; and, *DEFA at the Crossroads of East German and International Film Culture*. Eds. Marc Silberman and Henning Wrage: Berlin 2014.

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