

Diese Briten, diese Deutschen: From Marx and Engels to Marks and Spencer. Documentary Filmmaking in Newcastle and Rostock

Martin Brady and Helen Hughes

Introductions

In 1987 a remarkable exchange took place between documentary filmmakers in the GDR and England. Invited by the Newcastle filmmakers' workshop Amber, the documentarists Barbara and Winfried Junge spent two weeks filming everyday life in North Shields, and a few weeks later Amber visited Rostock to report on life in the GDR. 'Der Wunsch, im Lande des anderen zu drehen war ein gemeinsamer', Junge reported to the GDR press, 'Das konkrete Angebot und das Thema kamen von AMBER. In diesem Workshop fanden wir Gleichgesinnte'.¹ 'So wie wir fühlen auch sie sich der Darstellung durchschnittlichen Lebens, der Lebensweise, der sozialen Bedingungen und der moralischen Befindlichkeit der arbeitenden Menschen verpflichtet'.²

In practice the encounter between these two groups appears not so much to have explored an affinity of viewpoints, as to have worried away at certain rather significant differences. The result is an intriguing if decidedly low-key pair of one-hour documentary films about two communities which turn out to have little in common beyond shipbuilding and fishing. What we are offered is a hesitant, friendly, if puzzled dialogue, which, in keeping with the ideological premise of the whole project, upholds the image of the GDR as a successful socialist country that looks after the well-being of its hard working citizens, whilst Britain is a crumbling capitalist society whose workers are living in constant fear of unemployment or underemployment. It comes as no surprise that there is no hint of the imminent mass-exodus of GDR citizens to the West. A timeless stability of difference is assumed and recorded.

1 Winfried Junge, 'Erfahrungen anderer Art', in: *Film und Fernsehen* 10 (1989), p. 7. The terms of the collaboration between Channel Four and the GDR Culture Ministry were set up by Murray Martin of Amber.

2 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 6.

From Junge's report, published in *Film und Fernsehen* in 1989, one senses that the most discussed difficulty was the title for this joint project. Known in the GDR simply as *Diese Briten, diese Deutschen*, the version broadcast in late May 1989 by Channel Four - after midnight in a series entitled *The Eleventh Hour* - bore separate titles for the two parts: 'From MARX and ENGELS to Marks & Spencer: an English journey' for the DEFA contribution and 'From MARKS & SPENCER to MARX & ENGELS' for Amber's film.³ This chapter sets itself the modest aim of introducing this project and reproducing extracts from key statements and documents.

Amber

Amber has summarized its history and philosophy as follows:

Amber was established in 1969 with the specific intention of creating a film and photographic practice in relation to the working class communities of the North East of England. [...] This approach has produced bodies of work which not only explore, record and celebrate working class experience in the region, but do so with imagination and with standards of artistic excellence which have been recognized and honoured many times, both nationally and internationally.⁴

Junge rightly identifies that Amber represents an alternative voice in a homogenized media landscape: 'In der Regel zieht dort nur das Ungeöhnliche die Aufmerksamkeit auf sich'.⁵ Amber's desire to listen to the workers and their programmatic 'opposition to state power' helps, for example, to explain their decision in this project 'to ignore the political dictatorship in Rostock'.⁶

Amber's approach to the politics, economics and aesthetics of cooperative filmmaking is linked to an ideal of independence, above all from commercial interests and party politics. According to Murray Martin, Amber has 'never been bound by any political banner' but admits to being

3 These are the titles as they appear in the films. Even Junge's report has different versions. We do get a fleeting glimpse of a Marks & Spencer store in the Junges' film, and in the commentary Winfried Junge concludes that in the North East 'Marks & Spencer are more welcome than Marx and Engels'.

4 For the latest text see: www.amber-online.com.

5 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 6.

6 Murray Martin in email correspondence with the authors, February 2005. Hereafter referred to as 'Martin, 2005'.

'Humanist/Socialist'.⁷ Winfried Junge paints a rather engaging picture of Amber's working practice from a GDR perspective:

Man lebt und arbeitet miteinander, was - im Unterschied zu jenem deutschen 'leben, um zu arbeiten' - als harmonische Einheit begriffen wird. Sie begegnen Streß lockerer, wie es scheint, und achten einfach mehr darauf, den Ausgleich zwischen Arbeit und Reproduktion der Arbeitskraft nicht zu vernachlässigen. Kreative Arbeit wird in der Regel geendet, wenn Verkrampfungen auftreten könnten, die Fehlerquote größer wird, Freude an der und Abstand zur Sache nicht mehr recht gegeben sind. Als wir uns beispielsweise in der Vorbereitungsperiode nach stundenlanger Diskussion von Ideen und Möglichkeiten auf weitere Gespräche in die Nacht hinein einrichteten, um endlich zu den notwendigen Klärungen zu kommen, nahmen uns die Gastgeber, die selbst müde geworden waren, kurz entschlossen in 'ihren Pub' mit, den sie gekauft haben und betreiben. Aber nicht, um dort weiterzumachen, sondern um Domino zu spielen, sich mit Sangesfreudigen ins Hinterzimmer zu setzen oder bei einem Glas 'Amber', einer Newcastle Biermarke, mit Menschen der Gegend zusammenzusein: Relaxing...⁸

The pub was clearly much more than a place to relax. It was acquired as part of Amber's strategy to be involved in the lives of the community, not just to film it.

On the practical side, Amber covered the lion's share of the production costs for the project and provided the equipment. Of particular interest to the Junges was the use of 16mm cameras and stock, which enabled them to work faster and more spontaneously than was usual for DEFA documentarists. Their film eschews classical framing and immobility in favour of immediacy and a plasticity of movement.⁹ As far as the division of labour was concerned, Junge was clearly perplexed by the Amber practice of listing the names of the co-operative's filmmakers without specifying roles:

Der Zuschauer mag bedauern, nicht erfahren zu können, wer was machte. Aber das Prinzip verdeutlicht konsequent den kollektiven Charakter der Werkstattarbeit. Ein jeder hat sich nicht nur für alles verantwortlich zu fühlen und so das Ganze mit zu verantworten, er muß auch zu jeder Arbeit bereit und in der Lage sein, wenn ein Stab gebildet wird oder die Situation es erfordert. [...] Schließlich, so erklärt man uns, bekommen sie auch alle das gleiche Gehalt und ihren Anteil von dem durch gute Arbeit er-

7 'Martin, 2005'. Richard Grassick has noted that Amber's 'political positions internally are very diverse, perhaps reflecting a kind of red-green broad church that doesn't really exist politically in this country'. (Email to the authors, February 2005.).

8 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 9.

9 The film used a high speed colour film stock which was also new to Amber. For cinema presentation in the GDR the film was blown up to 35mm.

reichten Gewinn, sofern er nicht nach den Workshop-Satzungen in Investitionen und neue Projekte gesteckt wird.¹⁰

It is ironic that it is precisely the co-operative's independent spirit which has guaranteed its longevity, whilst the DEFA documentary was doomed to fall with the state of which it was an integral part. In retrospect Murray Martin has noted laconically that Amber was 'certainly more independant than the Junges and did not at all share their political vision'.¹¹

DEFA

Die DDR-Oberen, an einem positiven Selbstbild fast pathologisch interessiert, behielten den DEFA-Dokumentarfilm immer scharf im Auge. Dennoch wurde nach dem Zusammenbruch der DDR neben dem Kinderfilm gerade der Dokumentarfilm auch von westlichen Kritikern als herausragende Leistung der DEFA gerühmt.¹²

Thus Bärbel Dalichow and Ralf Schenk in their foreword to *Schwarzweiß und Farbe*, the comprehensive survey of DEFA documentary film published in 1996. These remarks, which open the volume, pinpoint the two principal areas of interest in viewing and studying DEFA documentary films. The 10,000-odd DEFA documentaries are a fascinating record of the state's self-image and the life of its citizens, ranging from Stalinist propaganda for solidarity and increased productivity (predominantly in the early years) to lyrical portraits of outsiders and outcasts (chiefly during the final years). They constitute a uniquely delimited body of work spanning the entire life of a country, produced at an average rate of one every two days.

The astonishing volume of work was generated by a well-oiled production studio, enthusiastic distribution drives, which in the early fifties included Soviet-style film trains, and the decision in 1950 to oblige cinemas to show a *Kulturfilm* before the feature 'für die weitere Entfaltung des demokratischen Bewußtseins des deutschen Volkes'.¹³

Wilhelm Roth, amongst others, has gone so far as to assert that DEFA documentaries of the '70s and '80s constitute, artistically at least, the most

10 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 8. Junge feels compelled to reveal that Murray Martin is head of the group, Peter Roberts the cameraman, Richard Grassick the writer, and Ellin Hare the editor.

11 'Martin, 2005'.

12 Bärbel Dalichow and Ralf Schenk, 'Zum Geleit', in: Günter Jordan and Ralf Schenk, (eds), *Schwarzweiß und Farbe* (Berlin, 1996), p. 7.

13 Günter Jordan, 'Die frühen Jahre: 1946 bis 1952', in: *ibid*, p. 40.

significant body of such work worldwide.¹⁴ However, to quote Günter Jordan, all DEFA documentary film was 'kraft seiner Institutionalisierung, permanent "Kunst im Auftrag" und also, im Allgemeinverständnis von Kunst, ein Widerspruch in sich'.¹⁵ He goes on to ask a fundamental question, a rather obvious one perhaps, but one which continues to dog the discourse:

Ab wann, wie, wodurch emanzipiert sich der Dokumentarfilm von seinem (äußeren) Auftraggeber? Oder tut er das gar nicht? [...] Dokumentarfilm war nicht nur obrigkeitserlaubter Film, aber er war auch dort, wo er gegen den Strich ging, konformer Film.¹⁶

It needs to be stressed that in the case of the *Junges* we are unequivocally not dealing with the 'Elemente von Subversivität und Gegenöffentlichkeit'¹⁷ that preoccupy commentators on GDR culture in general and on film in particular. It is clearly unlikely that filmmakers deemed in any way problematic or subversive would have been afforded the opportunity to travel to England to make a film. As Barbara Junge candidly notes in the voiceover, 'you can't just come because you want to'. It goes (almost) without saying that we are dealing here with Jordan's 'obrigkeitserlaubter Film'.

The *Junges'* reputation rests on nothing less than the attainment of a cinematic world record: the filming of the progress of the children of Golzow beginning in 1962 with *Wenn ich erst zur Schule geh'* and continuing beyond the end of the GDR into the twenty-first century. This remarkable *Langzeitbeobachtung* is not only an invaluable and detailed sociological document, but also represents a considerable contribution to film history. Indeed, both at home and abroad the significance of their achievement in Golzow has tended to obscure their other films, relegating them to the status of occasional pieces. In the case of *Diese Briten, Diese Deutschen* this tendency is aggravated by the fact that historic events were to make this 'experimental balloon' almost instantly obsolete.¹⁸

14 Günter Jordan, 'Statt eines Vorworts', in: *ibid.*, p. 12.

15 Jordan, 'Jahre', p. 11.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

17 *Ibid.*

18 www.amber-online.com/html/marks_and_engels.html. Accessed 23 October 2004.

Diese Briten, diese Deutschen

Arriving in Newcastle in late 1987 the Junges discovered a region under the yoke of Thatcherism and depressed by unemployment and the downturn in the shipbuilding industry. Amber filmmakers for their part discovered that their colleagues in Rostock had job security, good wages, guaranteed child care and, intriguingly, were being given limited new freedom to travel.

The Junges' film about North Shields bears witness to the longevity, and to some extent the flexibility, of the trademark 'DEFA style'. The interviews with labourers, the insistent commentary, even the Engels quote with which the film ends had been the stock-in-trade of mainstream DEFA documentaries for forty years. It also demonstrates that the DEFA 'method', with its readiness to listen to the *vox populi*, could also be used to telling effect 'im kapitalistischen Ausland' where the media were not used to listening to 'Normalitäten'.¹⁹ The Junges' film is also a sociological document of some interest from a British perspective, a record of the fallout of the middle years of Thatcher's reign; interesting also in that it manages to make North Shields look somehow like an outpost of the GDR, albeit without the supportive social net and articulate workers.

One of the most striking features of Amber's Rostock film is the fact that in eschewing commentary and overtly ideological glosses, it comes closer in style and content to those GDR documentaries which went 'gegen den Strich', certainly much closer than any pre-1989 films of Barbara and Winfried Junge. In addressing, however circumspectly, issues of stress, overwork and alcoholism, one is reminded of such landmark works as Karl Gass's *Feierabend* (1964), a startlingly frank depiction of bored and frustrated workers at leisure, and Eduard Schreiber's films *Abhängig* (1983) and *Rückfällig* (1988), which dared to confront the joint taboos of alcohol addiction and loneliness in the GDR. 'Durch *Rückfällig* wehte bereits Peterstroika-Luft', Elke Schieber has claimed.²⁰ Although the Amber collective may have captured something of this fresh breeze in Rostock, the Junges were clearly not breathing the same air in Newcastle!

The Amber co-operative left it to the Junges to characterize *Diese Briten, diese Deutschen* on their website. The result is tentative and makes no great claims for the project, concluding 'The films show something of

19 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 6.

20 Elke Schieber, 'Im Dämmerlicht der Perestroika: 1980 bis 1989' in: Jordan and Schenk (eds), *Schwarzweiß*, p. 195.

the daily life of working people in two comparable towns, coastal communities with shipbuilding and fishing. Comparable? In this divided Europe it is still a glimpse of another world'.²¹

What certainly comes across strongly in both films is a strong sense of cultural distance and difference. Even after the films were made the strangeness of the experience remained: 'Wir arbeiten schließlich diesseits und jenseits einer Grenze, die Europa durchschneidet. In verschiedenen Welten'.²²

Diese Briten

The Junges are, as has already been noted, much more 'present' in their film on account of their profuse commentary. They frame their enterprise as an investigation into nothing less than the decline of the British Empire: 'To think Queen Victoria ruled a quarter of the human race. Land a hundred and forty times bigger than these islands' they enthuse. This task of cinematic historiography is carried out by filmmakers from a country in which 'having a job is a human right'. 'Britain, Sceptred Isle,' they begin:

We came with Shakespeare's words and Elgar's music in our heads. *Pomp and Circumstance No.1*, 'Land of Hope and Glory', an Empire March which doesn't quite match what we have to report. For us it's simply British. And we hired a car and record here on the north-east coast the big miners' strike of 1984/85. A battle lost, experience gained. We have heard of the oil that flows in from the North Sea and is replacing the coal that since the dawn of industry was shipped out across all seven seas. We can see nuclear energy and new technology pushing out the coal, the oil and the jobs. Land of Glory, but what kind of hope?

The Junges discover very quickly that in Britain few of the workers have even heard of the GDR. 'I'll be honest with you: what I know about Germany is what I get from my parents because they fought in the war' says one interviewee. Another has been on holiday to Bulgaria where he met some East Germans who 'seemed to be quite happy with the work situation'. Thus, although the theme of understanding between the nations of the world – a leitmotif in GDR documentaries recording life in other socialist countries – is certainly touched on, it does not quite gain the momentum the Junges might have been hoping for.

Despite being shot in only a few days, the Junges' film manages to touch on a very wide range of topical issues. In the order in which they

21 www.amber-online.com/html/marks_and_engels.html. Accessed 23.10.2004.

22 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 7.

appear, we hear about the fear and reality of unemployment in a 'working class city', the downside of the common market, unhealthy life styles ('he looks older than he is' Winfried Junge remarks of a man in a pub), the status of women ('too often the passive object of unwelcome gazes'), advertising, drug abuse, the failures in social housing ('I wonder why the British don't like this kind of housing' Winfried Junge ponders when faced with the demolition of a system-built tower block), the imposition of charges for school dinners, social inequalities in the classroom, the function of school uniforms, the political illiteracy of dinner ladies, the trouble with privatization ('Margaret Thatcher only promises to make capitalism strong for the new millennium'), inadequate transport provision, charity collections to support a local children's hospital and mental health services, the privatization of council services, the crippling cost of higher education for working class students, and the north-south divide. On the plus side we see pensioners contentedly singing in the pub and some particularly fine prize leeks.

This mosaic of issues is integrated loosely into a historical narrative which impressionistically paints a picture of correspondences and reiterations with a very broad historical brush. The voiceover points out the legacy of colonialism in the buildings and technical achievements of the city – its bridges, its docks, its housing. Elgar unites the disparate images and observations:

We are on our way to find out what it's like when work is in short supply. Surely the music belongs perhaps most of all to the people who actually built the power and glory of the Empire who still are building today. German, East German thoughts, thoughts from a socialist Germany.

The Junges decide to speak directly to the workers in English and couch their interviews as 'English lessons': 'You have been filmed already?' they ask, 'It's allowed to speak about politics here in the break or not?' The workers come up with frank statements in response: that Mrs Thatcher is to blame for the unemployment, that the future is to be in computers and electronics and not traditional industries, that they are suffering because their jobs are not subsidized as they are in other countries, that they are not interested in politics, and that the government must be changed. The interviewees are framed, in typical DEFA style, full frontal in medium and close up.

The Junges film a queue of people waiting for the benefits office to open – again a familiar image from late '80s Britain when, as they point out, unemployment was running at 26% in North Tyneside. In a somewhat strained effort at comparison the commentary runs: 'We know a bit about

queues too. Who can resist them when something's on sale that you can't always get. Nothing special here. Just the usual. Old age pensions and premature pensions. The dole. [...] It is hard for us to understand what an unemployed centre does when we don't have any unemployed'. 'How do people without jobs look? As though they don't want one?' On occasion the tone lapses into conspicuous irony; on being taken one morning to the docks to film people at work in the fishing industry they muse 'This morning's lesson is about a free Common Market'. In such a market the fishermen of other countries fish Britain's waters, whilst the British are given decommissioning grants. Another concept that is 'hard to understand'. There are also sequences which capture the tawdry side of the English at play: the camera gleefully lingers on a prominent case of 'builder's bum' at a pool table, and we see Friday-night revellers drunkenly mooning.

At some points it is difficult to separate the Junges' agenda in making this film from that of their hosts. The approach of both parties to their chosen material is based on common precepts, a documentary procedure which combines what Klaus Wischnewski termed 'forschende Haltung als *conditio sine qua non* von Realismus' and what Brecht called 'eingreifendes Denken'.²³ The Junges felt free to develop their own style 'without compromising',²⁴ and in his article Winfried Junge later goes so far as to claim that 'AMBER akzeptierte ebenso wie CHANNEL FOUR TELEVISION [...] unsere artikulierte persönliche Sicht als Verfremdungseffekt von unbekanntem Reiz'.²⁵ It is an approach, however, which has its critics, not least as regards the Junges' heavy reliance on commentary. Fellow documentarist Eduard Schreiber laments a 'verbale [...] Über-Kommentierung aussagestarker Bilder' in certain Junge films,²⁶ a tendency to augment empirical observation with a grand historical perspective. Of their 1974 film *Keine Pause für Löffler* Schreiber concludes: 'Der Zuschauer hört, wie er etwas zu sehen und zu verstehen habe. Dies wird zu einem durchgängigen Prinzip des Films – eine bei Junge nicht selten zu bemerkende Tendenz'.²⁷

According to Jürgen Schebera in his *Film und Fernsehen* review, *Diese Briten, diese Deutschen* compounds this problem with some misreadings:

23 Jordan, 'Jahre', p. 9.

24 Amber Online: op. cit.

25 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 10.

26 Eduard Schreiber, 'Zeit der verpaßten Möglichkeiten', in: Jordan and Schenk, (eds), Schwarzweiß, p. 139.

27 Schreiber, 'Möglichkeiten', p. 154.

die Crux scheint mir in ihrem Kommentarsatz zu liegen: 'Wir waren nur wenige Tage hier, aber wir wissen wovon wir reden'. Hier wird jener ein wenig dozierende Duktus spürbar (sonst gar nicht Junges Art!), der sich leider durch den ganzen, viel zu aufwendigen Kommentar zieht. Gelegentlich auch mit Fehleinschätzungen, etwa die Kommentierung des neuerbauten großen City-Centers, das freilich ein typisch kapitalistisches Kaufhaus ist, darüber hinaus aber auch ein wichtiges Kommunikationszentrum, von dem es uns freuen würde, verfügten unsere Neubaustädte über vergleichbare Einrichtungen!²⁸

For a British audience - and a Channel Four one at that - there is undoubtedly an excess of voice-over. For a GDR audience, however, explanations were certainly needed for the weird customs of life under capitalism. Moreover, as in their confessional commentary to certain post-*Wende* films, including *Drehbuch: Die Zeiten* of 1993,²⁹ these comments are at times self-reflexive and self-critical. The final sequence, which overlays workers leaving a factory with a passage of Friedrich Engels, would even appear to be an allusion to documentary film history, echoing the legendary shots of what might be termed 'the first workers' film', the Lumière Brothers' *La Sortie des usines Lumière* of 1895.³⁰ Barbara Junge recites the following passage:

I've tried to lay before my German countrymen a faithful picture of your condition, of your sufferings and struggles, of your hopes and prospects. I wanted more than a mere abstract knowledge of my subject. I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your everyday life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances. I found you to be more than mere Englishmen, members of a single isolated nation. I found you to be men, members of the great and universal family of mankind who know their interests and that of all the human race to be the same. Though my English may not be pure, yet I hope you will find it plain. (Frederick Engels, 1845, in his preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England from Personal Observation and Authentic Sources*).

Misunderstandings

Before turning to the Amber film, it is worth noting here that perhaps the most striking difference between the interviewees in the two parts of this film is the apparent inarticulateness of the English workers compared with their Rostock colleagues. Whilst there were clearly linguistic barriers to be overcome, and Junge acknowledges these in his article, one senses that the

28 Jürgen Schebera, 'Diese Briten - diese Deutschen. Social Commentary anno 1988', *Film und Fernsehen* 1 (1990), p. 8.

29 See Schreiber, 'Möglichkeiten', p. 139.

30 This Lumière film had already been invoked a few years previously in another documentary attempt to understand the aftermath of colonialism, see Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Zu früh / Zu spät* (1980/1).

filmmakers were interviewing people who would not normally expect to be asked to formulate a political position. In the opening commentary of their report, the Amber directors rightly question the selection criteria for the workers they were invited to film in Rostock. However, what the Junges do identify is a deficiency in political education amongst the English workforce. The dock workers and the dinner ladies are in no doubt that Thatcher is to blame for their job insecurity, 'don't emigrate to Britain' one of them advises the GDR audience, but, as Winfried Junge points out, 'democracy needs practice, even the socialist kind'.

In defence of the English workers it could be pointed out that the DEFA method of interrogation - the ubiquitous 'are you happy' line of questioning - may have seemed unduly intrusive and vague. Certainly the women crane drivers interviewed in Rostock by Amber sound almost prattling in comparison. It appears that Winfried Junge sensed this disparity himself:

Wenn DDR-Bürger 'westlichen' Fragestellern und Beobachtern gegenüber sitzen, ergeben sich übrigens noch immer zusätzliche Hemmungen, die erfahrungsgemäß durch ein betont staatsbürgerliches Verhalten und allgemeine Antworten kompensiert werden. Der Rostocker AMBER-Film ist davon nicht frei, zeigt aber, daß alles in allem ein recht ungezwungener Kontakt zwischen den Gesprächspartnern zustandekam.³¹

Let the People Talk!

Amber's Rostock film has a looser, more free-flowing and exploratory structure than the Junges' film. Visually, the most pronounced difference is the palette of rich, orange-gold colours and the bright sunlight, all captured with a noticeably more mobile camera and an eye for strikingly beautiful compositions. Acoustically the film is also rich and varied, intercut with snatches of upbeat music, news reports, laughter and even the contented whistling of a steel-worker in the docks. Whilst explicitly aiming to capture 'an objective picture of Rostock' it is also liberally peppered with up-beat verdicts on life in the GDR, which contextualize and relativise the more critical pronouncements on the overlong-working days and lack of free-time the women workers have for their children: 'I enjoy life', 'I'm committed to this country', 'Everyone has a right to work', 'As a woman I can earn quite a lot', 'I feel at ease', 'We don't have to worry about getting ill', 'We are secure in peace', 'You can look forward to having children'. Even when the thorny issue of foreign travel rears its head

31 Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 10.

we are informed that 'things have loosened up'. Amber's film is, in summary, an overwhelmingly optimistic and buoyant portrait of life in the GDR: 'We deliberately made a positive celebratory film but we do not think that we were naive' Murray Martin has noted.³²

Diese Deutschen

It begins with an atmospheric montage of shots of the transition from day through dusk to night shot from a driving car. Off-camera the team voice their hope that they will be able to get an authentic picture of life in a Communist country and we hear a news report on talks in Moscow on nuclear disarmament between The United States and the Soviet Union. Will they be able to make the decisions on who appears in the film, the Amber team wonder?³³ They discuss their aims over hand-held images of well-stocked shop windows and opt for jobs, health, women and childcare as the themes the filmmakers relevant to their audience in the North East. Alongside home-movie-style shots of their hotel room we see an open copy of Peter Wright's *Spycatcher*, banned in Great Britain at the time of filming, light-heartedly underlining the issue of censorship in both countries. The tone of this opening sequence is relaxed and even comic, as they express their hope that a rather lowering building is not in fact their hotel, and we hear a keep-fit programme on the radio. They also make the decision to try to get away without using commentary and to let the people talk. In his review, Jürgen Schebera applauded Amber's 'sehr stimmige Schilderung des DDR-Alltags'.³⁴ Murray Martin recalls that, on viewing the Amber film, the GDR Minister of Culture stood up and said 'I only wish our filmmakers were as skilled at making films about socialism'.³⁵

The structure of the remainder of Amber's film is neat and straightforward. Titles introduce the two sections, focusing on two different groups of workers. The first is a brigade of women cable-crane drivers. 'Working with cranes is a woman's job here,' the supervisor explains as he takes the lift up to the dizzy heights of the crane operating booths. 'They do it well and they need the jobs. They want to work. As long as they can see and hear well and suffer no vertigo the work suits them'. 'Working

32 'Martin, 2005'.

33 Murray Martin remembers that the first week of shooting was spent 'dodging the PR demands of the authorities', information from 'Martin, 2005'.

34 Schebera, 'Commentary', p. 8.

35 'Martin, 2005'.

with women is no different from working with men,' he concludes. The atmospheric, autumn-tinged shots of the women operating the cranes on a misty day reinforce the aura of well-being and job satisfaction: 'I've worked as a crane driver for twenty-two years and I love it. You get so interwoven with the job that – well put it this way – it flows automatically'. One of the women explains how she wanted to train to be a hairdresser, but as she was not at the top of her class had no chance to enter what was the most popular profession. She was offered a trial at operating the cranes and got hooked. The filmmakers ask the women about their pay and whether they are members of the Communist Party. One is, but the other felt free to choose not to: 'I don't want to join the Party and there aren't any special reasons for that,' is the straightforward response.

The question of how everybody comes to have a job in the GDR is discussed at length. The foreman explains how even those who have difficulty with regular work are accommodated, although he stops short of explaining the penalties for those deemed to be anti-social. The brigade is patiently supportive of its weaker spirits:

In our brigade we have someone who has an alcohol problem. [...] We know each other. We don't want to lose this person. We're offering him a regular job and he ought to take advantage of it. He shouldn't start on that slippery downhill slope, addicted to drink, no job and then rotting in a corner somewhere.

The issue of the scarcity of goods in the GDR – already touched on by Barbara Junge in relation to the thorny issue of queuing – is also brought up by the filmmakers' questioning. They ask one of the older women how she found the shops in the FRG when she visited, and present her response as a voiceover. What we are shown is her sitting with her husband in a peaceful and idyllic allotment, bringing in fresh vegetables, slicing up a huge plum cake, and cracking open a bottle for her English guests. The well-stocked shelves she describes seem somehow rather vulgar in contrast to this scene of simple domestic bliss:

Well, we were a bit bowled over by it. They've certainly got all sorts of things. But they can't buy all the things on display. People pick and choose and only buy what's completely necessary. We always eat good butter here, but there they had margarine on the table. I was astonished to see that. There's also the inequalities. Some people have lots of money but others have to be very careful to choose cheap goods. That was the impression I got.

The other group of workers we are introduced to is from a co-operative in Warnemünde that replaced the many private boats that fished the North Sea. With 16-hour shifts and 4.30am starts it is, not surprisingly, difficult to recruit new workers to the co-operative. This notwithstanding, the film-

makers manage to convey the appeal of the life at sea with their images of the men sitting cosily in their cabin or standing at the helm, the open sea all around. The women in the factory, who process the fish for sale, complain that they don't have enough time for their children: 'Everyone wants to have a child,' says one woman explaining her situation in a discussion around a table at the factory, 'but it could have been nicer. I mean, I'd like to do more with her but the kindergarten does it all. I'm out of the house for twelve hours and for twelve hours my daughter isn't with me. Then I just throw her into bed. Honest, I don't get anything out of my child'. The images show one of the women dropping her daughter off at a cheerful, well-equipped nursery on her way to work. 'It's nice to be at home sometimes,' adds another of the women, 'but I'd go mad if I was at home all the time. Something would be missing'.

On the radio we hear a report on the New York stock market crash of 19 October 1987, set against images of a convivial workers' get-together with accordion accompaniment. To emphasize the point a fisherman explains that they don't have to go out to sea in dangerous weather as the fish prices in the GDR don't fluctuate according to the catch as they do in the West. Capitalism, it is implied, forces the workers to risk life and limb, just as its massive oiltankers are polluting and destroying the Baltic.³⁶ There are complaints, however: the failure of fathers to do their share of the childcare and housework, the cost of cigarettes, coffee and children's clothes, and isolation in the new housing estates.

The issue of the freedom to travel is left to the final section of the film, appropriately enough entitled 'Leaving'. 'What is socialism?' ask the filmmakers. A safe job, guaranteed health care and childcare, is the answer: 'Well basically it's for young people too,' declares one of the women. 'And as soon as you finish school there's a guaranteed training course. That's especially important. Basically you don't have to worry even if you aren't such a brain at school. Everything's taken care of'. And the final advice for England is not to dismantle traditional industries.

The only threat on the horizon is war and the only unfulfilled desire is to travel. 'How far can we go?' the filmmakers ask the skipper as the boat heads out to sea. 'Well the boat goes along the coast a bit and then sails back into harbour,' he replies. 'What would it be if the boat kept going? Would people want to come back?' The skipper replies: 'Yes, well, everyone loves home, don't they?'

36 Martin claims that this was the one encounter where they were 'captured by articulate party members' furnished by the authorities, information based on 'Martin, 2005'.

Endings

Since the *Wende* Junge has readily acknowledged that he had always seen his GDR films as contributions to an on-going chronicle of the construction of socialism. In this he conformed to the general line of DEFA documentaries. *Diese Briten, diese Deutschen* is an important footnote to this chronicle because it views the achievements of the GDR from without. Although the project was heralded as an opportunity 'durch gegenseitige Information unzutreffende Feindbilder abbauen zu helfen',³⁷ it develops into something rather more subtle. The result is two stubbornly polite films that act as a kind of unintentional precursor to the more urgent and agonising process of mutual discovery that was to begin two years later, when 'East Germany, as the British innocently call our German Republic', became five new *Bundesländer*.³⁸

³⁷ Junge, 'Erfahrungen', p. 7.

³⁸ The authors would like to express their thanks to Winfried Junge and also to Amber for making a copy of the films available for study and answering some 'searching questions'.