Depictions of Social Dissent in East German Television Detective Series, 1970–1989

Christoph Lorke

Only a few weeks before the Berlin Wall was opened in November 1989, the East German magazine *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* published an article in which Werner Krecek—at the time the head of dramatic arts for East German television—discussed the natural human desire for security, safety, and shelter. He drew attention to “two popular detective series” (*Polizeiruf 110* and *Der Staatsanwalt hat das Wort*), emphasizing the importance of artistic contributions and their function as an instrument for guaranteeing the stability of the socialist state under the ruling Communist party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED).¹ The SED officials who oversaw television in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) considered these series not just entertainment but also a phenomenon with a huge social impact.

Following up on contemporaneous political claims, this article concentrates on the processes of social and moral engineering in the GDR orchestrated by the state within the context of television. These detective series represented fertile ground for depicting social contrasts in a manner appropriate to a socialist state. The Communist ideal of an egalitarian society was persistently and enthusiastically espoused in the GDR’s official political culture, with no space for social grievances. Nevertheless, social differences were constantly present in the socialist state, and, accordingly, forms of vertical social stratification also had a place in broadcast media.² The media relevance of this topic was reconstructed by reading film sources “between the lines” and analyzing the specific ways in which social reality was constructed.


*Journal of Cold War Studies*
Vol. 19, No. 4, Fall 2017, pp. 168–191, doi:10.1162/JCWS_a_00768
© 2017 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
The concept of social images is central to the article’s methodological approach. The images can be deconstructed by using film material and internal documents. Referring to social, psychological, and art-history models, social images can be defined as a mental conception of perceived, imagined, and supposed features of persons or social phenomena. Social images can act as microcosms of the production and reproduction of social inequality. Through their performativity, they represent the result of the struggle for interpretative dominance over the “appropriate” (or socially accepted) classification, presentation, and performance of social differences. We can also understand social images as a mirror and manifestation of effective public attention to and perception of social dissent. Therefore, they may help to dismantle contemporary constructions of social and symbolic order. To fulfill their politically intended communicative purpose, social images must be repeated constantly in the public sphere. Detective series were influential media for these images. The role and nature of both series in the context of GDR television will be discussed here. I will then examine selected episodes to illustrate the audiovisual representation of social grievances. The article is not intended to


5. The criteria for the selection of the relevance of the episodes for this research were whether and how social dissent was explicitly displayed. Seven broadcasts were evaluated after a systematic review of all episodes. For Polizeiruf: “Per Anhalter” (Hitchhiking), GDR television channel 1, 27 January 1974 (director: Hans-Joachim Hildebrandt), in German Broadcast Archive (DRA) Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID 023321; “Schuldig” (Guilty), GDR TV channel 1, 2 October 1978 (director: Rolf Römer), in DRA Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID 012700; “Verführung” (Seduction), GDR TV channel 1, 1 August 1985 (director: Peter Hagen), in DRA Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID 015502; “Flüssige Waffe” (Liquid Weapon) 18 December 1988 (director: Helmut Krätzig), in DRA Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID 028043; Staatsanwalt: “Zwei Promille” (Two per Mile), 22 December 1971 (director: Werner Röwelkamp), in DRA Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID 031063; “Felix kauft ein Pferd” (Felix Buys a Horse), GDR TV channel 1, 22 January 1976 (director: Vera Loebner), in DRA Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID 012529; and “Der Fall Petra Hansen”
determine the extent of social inequality in the GDR. Rather, it traces the line between the one-way propaganda against “anti-social” behavior and filmmakers’ attempts to express themselves artistically and to reach the public.

**Teaching Right and Wrong: Polizeiruf 110 and Der Staatsanwalt hat das Wort**

A new era of television programming began after Erich Honecker became General Secretary of the SED in 1971. The goal was to overcome “certain boredom” in the broadcast media at that time. Although the East German media were still restrictive in content and topics, the regime’s greater efforts to react to the audience’s demand for entertainment were noticeable. One main reason for this shift was the availability of West German television almost everywhere within the territory of the GDR. The Western programming offered a welcome alternative to the “ideologically suffused media, partly because they were seen through and recognized as blatant propaganda, partly because they were simply unattractive.”

In comparison to pluralistic societies where competing ideological models are publicly discussed, the monothematic socialist societies were able to propagate their social views directly. But how did the SED try to gain control of the symbolic order after publicly announcing the new entertainment role of the television as a fundamental part of leisure time in 1971? Taking into consideration viewer opinion polls, party functionaries could easily discern the audience’s preferences. Broadcasts of the detective and adventure genres regularly received the top ratings. Nevertheless, portraying

---


and explaining “crime” in state socialism was always a matter of problematic representation, especially after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. In the 1950s, class struggle theories did not discuss crime as an inherent socialist problem at all. The “socialist criminology” of the 1960s, with its typical relict and contamination theories, explained crime as a long-standing issue or a contagious disease originating from the capitalist West. Thus, crime was commonly situated within the substantially homogenous Manichaean friend-foe scheme consistently and strictly connected with the Western, capitalistic world. However, even when socialist conditions were not regarded as “criminogenic,” certain social circumstances, conflicts, and contradictions within East German society were considered to be the “exceptions to the rule.”

Many contemporary legal experts in the GDR attributed such cases to “petty bourgeois ideology,” shattered families, or a lack of education and saw them as an obstacle in the process of the “complex development” of socialist society. The political response to these findings was to intensify efforts in the sphere of crime education and crime prevention. From the end of the 1960s, close cooperation between the Ministry of the Interior, the judiciary, and media professionals was evident. The result was an immense amount of legal propaganda, led especially by the law journal Neue Justiz, some 3,000 to 4,000 law reports per year in daily newspapers, audio plays and, of course, television detective shows.

The *Gegenwartskriminalfilm* (contemporary crime movie) *Polizeiruf 110* (1971–1990, 136 episodes) is the prototype of the socialist crime movie. Initially produced as a reaction to the West German *Tatort* (1970–today), *Polizeiruf 110* differed from its predecessor, *Blaulicht*, by presenting crime not only as a byproduct of the disreputable system of capitalism but also as a
consequence of “presentable” conflicts within East German society. According to the two-state theory, the focus of the series was much more on the individualization of crime, such as extortion, greed, fraud, recklessness, dishonesty, cowardice, material egoism, theft, inefficiency at work, alcoholism, and rape. The central political aim of the broadcast was not only to propagate socialist law and to foster the development of “socialist behavior” but also to convey the feeling of social security and shelter.

The Criminal Investigation Department in the Ministry of The Interior, criminalists, and several “societal partners” (gesellschaftliche Partner) were involved in the production of the films with the goal of achieving these objectives and guaranteeing authenticity. In practical terms, this meant that all dramaturgical and conceptual ideas of the author, director, and scenarist were under permanent political control, with post-production censors responsible for vetting scripts before the broadcast. This non-reciprocal relationship provides insight into the contemporary normative guidelines of the party’s concepts and understanding of (social) reality. The crime stories were fictional, but the settings chosen were real and recognizable. Run-down areas, damaged sidewalks, or neglected houses often served as the setting for these portrayals of social dissent. Thanks to its authentic presentation, the Sunday evening show regularly attracted audience numbers far above average and became an export hit in 35 countries.

By contrast, Der Staatsanwalt hat das Wort (1965–1990, 140 episodes) was a program based on real case files. Its origin followed the sixth SED party


Depictions of Social Dissent in East German Television Detective Series

Figure 1. “Per Anhalter” (Hitchhiking), GDR, TV channel 1, 27 January 1974.

conference offers insight into the two German states’ similarities “between entanglement and distinction.” The popular West German court show Das Fernsehgericht tagt (1961–1978) served as a model for the GDR production, using similar dramaturgic methods. The aim of the Staatsanwalt series was to explain the preconditions and causes of crime, focusing—like Polizeiruf—on individual failures such as emotional instability, egoism, drunkenness, greed, or “petty bourgeois behavior.” The show was made unique by its mixture


of documentary style and fictional plot followed by legal commentary by Peter Przybylski, who had attained a degree of prominence as a prosecutor and head of public relations at the East German Public Prosecutors Office and as a long-time editor of the law journal *Neue Justiz*. In each commentary he explained the legal basis, the sentencing, and the moral problems of the case portrayed in the program in order to meet the political goal of the broadcast. The patronizing, didactic tone of the second part of the program evoked a lukewarm reception. Nevertheless, the show enjoyed great popularity, consistently attracting audience ratings of 40–50 percent. As a combination of real-life authenticity, entertainment, and artistic value, the program was expected by party functionaries to contribute to the creation of “socialist legal consciousness.” The Ministry of The Interior considered the show successful in this regard. A review from 1978—classified as “confidential material”—portrayed the format as a suitable way to condemn and overcome behavior “foreign” to socialism through the resources of art. In this sense, “socialist attitudes” were supposed to act as the symbolic counterpart to “bourgeois morality.”

**Stable Constructions: Imagining the Biography of the “Ideal” Perpetrator**

The representation of “exceptional cases” in both series is closely correlated to parallel developments in politically sanctioned criminal law. Hence, the images of criminal “otherness” were remarkably consistent, even monotonous. Without exception, they were always connected with the attribution “asocial.” Beginning in the early 1960s, lawyers, scientists, and politicians

---


21. For the discourse on “Asociality,” see Matthias Zeng, “Asoziale in der DDR: Transformationen einer moralischen Kategorie” (Münster: LIT, 2000); Sven Korzilius, “Asoziale” und “Parasiten” im Recht
increasingly made the connection between deviant behavior and social fraud, incorrect handling of monetary resources, leisure activities that were not “meaningful,” and so on. After the reformation of the country’s criminal code in 1968, the label “asocial” (Criminal Code, Section 249) could even lead to prosecution. Apart from the continuities with the past, some specific trends in GDR television emerged. The programs invariably depicted “asocial” individuals as unworthy, lazy, parasitic, and uncultivated. Both series portray criminals in a similar way: as connected to broken families, of modest or low education and poor academic performance, frequently changing partners or openly promiscuous, alcoholic, or having a juvenile work-camp past (Jugendwerkhof). The same argumentation and descriptions are to be found in much of the GDR’s contemporaneous sociological and medical-sociological literature.

Almost all perpetrators on both programs left school after the seventh or eighth grade, possessed only limited verbal skills, and had certain job profiles (predominantly as unskilled or semi-skilled workers, cleaning ladies, window cleaners, garbage collectors, coal shovellers, or laborers), which situated the characters at the lowest rung of the social structure. This reflects the highly social and didactic dimension of the series in relation to the “working class,” whose members constantly strove to improve themselves and better their social standing. Younger workers were presumably the main targets of these media efforts.

One significant example of these program characteristics is the Polizeiruf episode “Hitchhiking” from 1974. Youth delinquency was not a completely new subject in GDR television and media. Several earlier Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) productions had focused on this topic, such as Berlin Ecke Schönhauser (1957) and Die Glatzkopfbande (1963). However, “Hitchhiking” was the first episode of Polizeiruf to focus on this specific underprivileged social group as a central topic in response to the increased...
interest in the topic at the time. The episode emphasizes how a lack of education disrupted the socialist order. The didactic aim of the producers was to contrast social outsiders with the “masses of young people living properly and purposefully, working and living meaningfully.” In doing so, they constructed a strikingly flat dichotomy of “good” and “bad” youth. The political intention behind this episode was to portray an authentic-seeming reality that also conformed to the socialist ideology and to highlight the societal rigidity concerning deviant behavior. The message was highly didactic and served as a “warning” to the audience by outlining which backgrounds and motivations could lead to juvenile delinquency. The dramatic adviser for this episode pointed out factors that influenced the life and the criminal career of the deviant perpetrators: above all, broken families, bad role models, and an ethos and morality of “non-socialist origin.” All of these qualities are found in the character of “Rolle,” a young man who leads a youth gang. Growing up in an “asocial” environment, he is exposed to the bad role model of his mother and her frequently changing partners, and he engages in consumerism and absenteeism. This character is reminiscent of the traditional discourse on the lumpen proletariat in contrast to the “worthy” laborer, combined and updated with characterizations specific to the contemporary political environment, such as having Western role models. As is often stated in the historical discourse of divided Germany, analysis of both states is impossible without taking into consideration their shared roots and their interactions.

25. As former examples for the public and media relevance, see Susanne Felz, “Rowdys vor Gericht. Ein Prozeß, der Fragen an uns alle stellt,” Neue Berliner Illustrierte, 30 July 1972, pp. 18–21. “Asocial” behavior was a secondary theme as well in the Polizeiruf episode “Nachtresor” (Night Safe) from the same year: GDR TV channel 1, 30 September 1973 (director: Helmut Krätzig), in DRA Babelsberg. For the desired impact, see Dramaturgieanalyse Nachtresor, 17 March 1973, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt. The DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) was the state film studio in the GDR.


during the period of ideological competition.\textsuperscript{30} Situating the images from “Hitchhiking” in a Cold War context, “otherness” was often seen in relation to the negative connotations of the “other side”; for example, by explaining social misery with “backward petty bourgeois behavior.” The GDR was a border region during the Cold War, and although the significance of its geopolitical location subsided after 1961, the topic remained relevant in television productions.\textsuperscript{31} The continued significance of actions such as planning to flee to West Germany, listening and dancing to Western music, consumerist behavior, or selling or possessing smuggled Western goods demonstrated that the GDR persisted in projecting its anxieties onto “the West,” endowing it with symbolic meaning.

The majority of viewers liked “Hitchhiking.” With 65.2 percent ratings and a score of 2.78 (on the higher end of the scale), the episode reached the upper third of the rankings.\textsuperscript{32} Forums held after the sneak preview of each episode provided additional insight into the public response to the subject matter and its presentation. In the case of “Hitchhiking,” two forums took place several days before the official broadcast, with the participation of the producer, advisers, and actors. A hundred students from Berlin schools attended one forum, and 120 functionaries from the Free German Youth (FDJ) attended the other. The main topic of both discussions was the rigid polarization of “good” and “bad” and the neglect of the influence of macrosocial factors.\textsuperscript{33} The reaction of the program controlling body was similar.\textsuperscript{34}

The roots of criminal behavior, social decline, and their relation to the socialist order remained key issues for further television productions. One remarkable example is the \textit{Staatsanwalt} episode “Felix Buys a Horse” (1976). Based on a dozen criminal files, the production intended to prove that


\textsuperscript{31} Thomas Lindenberger, “Divided, but Not Disconnected: Germany as a Border Region of the Cold War,” in Tobias Hochscherf, Christoph Laucht, and Andrew Plowman, eds., \textit{Divided, but Not Disconnected: German Experiences of the Cold War} (New York: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 11–33.

\textsuperscript{32} Sehbeteiligungskartei, n.d., in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.

\textsuperscript{33} Letter, Bereich Unterhaltende Dramatik vom 8 Februar 1974, betr. Forum mit ca. 100 Oberstudierenden, dem Film- und Fernsehclub des Hauses der jungen Talente am 21 January 1974; and Forum mit ca. 120 functionaries from the FDJ in Berlin, 22 January 1974.

\textsuperscript{34} Heide Hess, Einschätzung der Sendung “Per Anhalter,” Tagesprotokoll vom Sonntag, Chef vom Dienst, Programmbeschreibung, 30 January 1974, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.
“asocial” behavior in the GDR was not caused by social factors, as was considered to be the case in “capitalist countries.” The didactic goal of the film was to point out that “asociality” not only exists in a “compressed form” in one “specific segment of the population” but also may spread within a “socially intact environment.” The show was expected to increase the audience’s awareness of how to prevent such social phenomena. The conclusion was that excessive alcohol consumption, disorderly personal circumstances, frequent job changes, and absenteeism from work could lead to illegal activity.\(^{35}\) Labor in the East German “workfare state” was understood not as a right but as a responsibility shared by all citizens.\(^{36}\) Felix exemplifies the lifestyle condemned by political dogma: constant job changes, little motivation to work, useless leisure time activities, and poor money management. His erratic, unorganized attitude is represented by his delinquent child support payments and rent arrears. Felix’s character—he is an idler who bets on horse races, which ultimately leads to robbery—was met with collective rejection, at least in the official discourse.\(^{37}\)

The image of “asocial” behavior of female characters in the series was closely connected to the socialist concept of motherhood. The three female characters discussed below unite the established image of the single mother in the 1970s and 1980s: vulnerable, immature, and overburdened with work, social commitments, and the raising of children. In the case of Emma—a minor character in “Hitchhiking”—“asociality” takes on a female dimension. As a part of the “asocial” milieu around “Rolle,” which includes his similarly depicted mother, Emma represents mental, social, and sexual “waywardness.” The program’s implicit didactic message of how the “asociality” of the mother reflects on the future of the child is evident. At the end of the story, Emma is convicted for absenteeism, her child is sent to an orphanage, and “Rolle,” the adult son of an “asocial” mother, is in prison.

Five years later, the cleaning lady Petra from the Staatsanwalt episode “The Case of Petra Hansen” (1979) was the first female main character in a criminal story of “asociality.” She displays a minimum of employee morale,

\(^{35}\) Ingeborg Nössig (dramaturge), Recherchenbericht, 23 August 1974. See also Konzeption, December 1975, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftenbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.


\(^{37}\) Apart from the viewer’s letters, see, for example, Hermann Schirrmeister, “Müßiggänger,” Tribüne (Berlin), 27 January 1976.
spends long nights on the dance floor, and has many sexual partners. According to internal documentation, this behavior constituted “dangerous future prospects” for her daughter. 38 Her role as a mother is epitomized by the statement “me first and then everything else.” Her attitude contradicts the socially accepted image of the good mother and caring wife. This episode was awarded a score of “very good” by the Television Drama Section and was supposed to evoke the viewer’s consciousness of socially disrespectful, “disturbing” behavior, which was expected to be punished, according to the internal documentation and Przybylski’s commentary. 39

Such controversial topics attracted substantial public attention. Filmmakers were responsible for creating messages that confirmed or corrected existing social images while using a well-established system of moral and ethical value judgment. The number of convictions (Criminal Code, Section 249) increased during the 1970s. Consequently, the fight against “recidivism” and “asocial” behavior was included in the SED Party Program of 1976. 40 Numerous contemporary sociological and juridical investigations provided empirical evidence for this political goal. 41 The topic of “asociality” in other Staatsanwalt and Polizeiruf episodes reached a climax at the beginning of the 1980s, when the programs shifted to depict how all rungs on the social ladder could be accused of behaving “asocially.” 42

42. Thematische Vorschläge für die Gestaltung der Reihe “Polizeiruf 110,” n.d. [1978], pp. 1–2, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt. See also Guder, Genosse Hauptmann, pp. 161–184. Further examples include the following Staatsanwalt episodes: “In Kost und Logis” (Room and Board), 8 January 1980; “Schwarze Kunst” (Black Art), 16 December 1980, ID 0121128; “Nachtpartie” (Night Game), 27 October 1981. The latter was the 75th episode of the serial. See Peter J. Fischer, “Von der ‘Sucht’ ums Glück zu spielen: Zur 75. Folge ‘Der Staatsanwalt hat das Wort’: Ein Gespräch mit Dr. Peter Przybylski,” Thüringer Neueste Nachrichten (Erfurt), 25...
In the episode “Seduction” (Polizeiruf 110, 1985), the 18-year-old seamstress Ramona is the main character. She is the mother of a 2-year-old son, Sebastian, who is no longer under her custody. She left school after the ninth grade with the worst grades and spent several years in a Jugendwerkhof for the attempted murder of her father, who had tried to rape her. Ramona is presented as a loving mother but also as unstable, immature and irresponsible, and unable to use her little money appropriately. Ramona has no milk at home but gives her son hard bread and soda for lunch and buys him ice cream infused with liqueur—all these actions are subtle references to her educational deficit. “She can’t do anything,” her caring mother says, confirming Ramona’s inability to manage her life. With this background, Ramona is in a vulnerable position with respect to criminal activities.

The female dimension of “asociality” is mainly characterized by failure as a mother, moral and sexual vulnerability, and economic ineffectiveness. In contrast, alcohol plays a key role in the male construction of social “otherness.”

October 1981. This development not only was observed in the Staatsanwalt serial, but was a GDR-wide media phenomenon. In addition to the Polizeiruf episode “Guilty,” see “Mancher geht, wann er will,” Prisma, 13 May 1980 (director: Hannes Zahn), in DRA Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID 003343.
Figure 3. “Flüssige Waffe” (Liquid Weapon), GDR TV channel 1, 18 December 1988.

The pub as a meeting point and bacchanalian house parties, such as those seen in “Hitchhiking” or “Guilty” (Polizeiruf 110, 1978), symbolized undisciplined, unrestrained behavior and a need for instant gratification. An early prototype of this image is the episode “Two per Mille” (Staatsanwalt, 1971). The story about the 40-year-old alcoholic Jupp Klenke, who relapses after starting a new job delivering coal is based on the real story of a father of five in Magdeburg. The goal of the broadcast was to highlight the danger of alcohol abuse and to emphasize the importance of close family bonds. Alcohol abuse was a major social problem in the last decade of the GDR—the number of alcoholics under medical supervision was around 200,000. Accordingly, alcoholism was an important topic in TV series of the time. The climax of this trend was “Liquid Weapon” (Polizeiruf 110, 1988), an episode about the difficulties of reintegrating into society after a prison sentence and an alcoholic

past. The main character, Herr Kegel, finds neither support nor understanding for his addiction to alcohol in his social environment. This leads to his relapse into alcoholism. The episode intended to explore and overcome “traditional bourgeois attitudes” and to demonstrate the ability of the socialist society to provide “ideal conditions for preventing alcoholism.”

The attention devoted to alcoholism on television evoked compassionate reactions from doctors, families, and concerned persons. The trend in television in the late 1980s to depict alcoholism as part of a complex web of social problems was a consequence of similar dynamics in other segments of society, where value was increasingly placed on making nuanced social diagnoses.

**Marginal Urban Spaces and Social Milieus: The Example of Prenzlauer Berg**

An important dimension of the visualization of social dissent in the series is the representation of living conditions—housing, urban spaces, and commodities—and their symbolic meaning in terms of inferior social status. The party’s housing program caused a severe imbalance in urban housing planning, particularly after 1971 (the “Unity of Economic and Social Policy”). On the one hand, huge apartment blocks (Plattenbau) were built in peripheral urban areas; on the other hand, existing buildings with historical value in the inner cities were neglected. In older buildings, features such as water pipes, indoor toilets, and gas or electric stoves were disproportionately missing. Consequently, party functionaries and skilled workers gradually left these areas, preferring the newer buildings on the periphery. This exodus led to a significant concentration of socially underprivileged groups in the old city centers; social decline became a phenomenon observable “in the middle of the

---

46. Werner Krecek to chief dramaturge Erich Selbmann, 29 July 1988, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt; and “Flüssige Waffe,” Polizeiruf.
A glance at these sociospatial differentiations reveals a clear border between socially respectable and disreputable areas and milieus. A striking example of this segregation was the East Berlin borough Prenzlauer Berg, with its widespread unfavorable living conditions. The area was classified as a “social flashpoint” by several contemporary sociological studies as a result of the high concentration of marginalized social groups—the elderly, unskilled workers, people with little school education, large families, and “asocial” people. In the movies of the 1950s and 1960s, Prenzlauer Berg is depicted as a sociospatial mirror of deviant behavior among youths. In later years the area became a symbol of social exclusion throughout East Germany. One stated intention of Polizeiruf was to present crimes committed in all regions of the country in order to avoid the impression that certain areas were particularly criminalized and at the same time to emphasize the omnipresence of the police, “good” citizens, and social order. However, the repeated appearance of Prenzlauer Berg in Polizeiruf led to the creation of the image of a socially underprivileged borough.

The episode “Guilty” (Polizeiruf, 1978) offers detailed insights into housing issues—dilapidated houses, dark hallways, and creaky stairs. This realistic


51. Apart from the DEFA productions Berlin Ecke Schönhauser (1957, director: Gerhard Klein) and Jahrgang 45 (1966, director: Jürgen Böttcher; the screening of the movie was prohibited), the Staatsanwalt episode "Bummel-Benno" (Strolling Benno), Staatsanwalt, 14 December 1966 (director: Horst Zaeske), in DRA Babelsberg, Potsdam, ID: 088762, focusing on absenteeism, is situated in a side street of Schönhauser Allee.


53. In addition to the analyzed episodes, another worth considering is “Der Kreuzworträtselfall” (The Case of the Crossword Puzzle), Polizeiruf, GDR TV channel 1, 6 November 1988 (director: Thomas Jacob).
representation of a socially deprived milieu was praised by the Department of Dramatic Arts. The main character, the former yardmaster Jochen Schober, lives in Prenzlauer Berg. He left school after the seventh grade but nevertheless achieved—according to Captain Peter Fuchs—a “reasonable career.” Because of his alcohol consumption at work, he loses his position and slides into social decline. The character of Schober combines many types of politically despised behavior—absenteeism, laziness, and vulgar speech, as well as uncontrolled and violent anger. This episode is remarkable because it was the first to deal explicitly with the spatial and social marginalization that accompanies social decline, low income, and “asociality.”

“successful presentation of the social milieu.”\textsuperscript{55} The episode received not only a high audience rating of 65.9 percent, an above-average evaluation, and numerous positive reactions from the audience regarding the realistic plot, but most of the viewers’ letters also praised the convincing pictorial language and the accurate social details.\textsuperscript{56} Some spectators even stated that it was “the best Polizeiruf episode ever.”\textsuperscript{57} A person from the small northern Thuringian town of Camburg wrote that he had experienced something similar and thus was able to empathize with the protagonist. An impressive example is the letter of the chairman of the Social Commission in Berlin, who was responsible for housing in the borough. He praised the realistic portrayal of the grim living conditions in the Sophienstraße and Neue Schönhauser Straße district (“an area with horrific old buildings”) and its social environment: many elderly people, no youths, casual workers in the wholesale vegetable market, a couple of prostitutes, and only a few party functionaries. The chairman remarked that this realistic program touched many of his colleagues on an emotional level.\textsuperscript{58}

Officials responsible for monitoring GDR television programs reacted critically, however. The supervisor remarked that, even if this episode showed an “astonishing increase in realism,” there were no “reasonable workers” in the district; for example, Eva Rickelmann, Schober’s former fiancée, is an alcoholic and bottles are omnipresent in her apartment; Spiering, the protagonist’s only friend, is corrupt and a convicted receiver of stolen goods.\textsuperscript{59} By portraying macrosocial deficits and thus implying the guilt and hypocrisy of socialist society (represented in one scene by the contrast between the calm, peaceful Christmas music in the background and a noisy fight and cries for help from

\textsuperscript{55} Protokoll zur Abnahme “Schuldig,” 27 August 1978, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.
\textsuperscript{56} Bericht über Foren zur Sendung “Schuldig,” 28 September 1978, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.
\textsuperscript{57} The reviews were throughout positive, specifically highlighting the realistic presentation of the daily life of social outsiders and the artistic design. See, for example, Kurt B. Hermann, “Schuldig,” Ostse-Zeitung, 3 October 1978; Constanze Pollatschek, “Schuldig,” Märkische Volksstimme, 4 October 1978; Lilo Plaschke, “Schuldig,” Das Volk, 6 October 1978; and “Wahrhaftige Figuren,” Norddeutsche Zeitung, 9 October 1978.
\textsuperscript{58} Letter to the department Dramatische Kunst, Vorsitzender der Sozial-Kommission des WBA 26/27, 8 October 1978, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.
the protagonist), “Guilty” was the most controversial episode in the history of *Polizeiruf*. After its premiere the episode was censored, not least because of its portrayal of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and the highly problematic housing situation. The screenwriter, director, and actor Rolf Römer—who was the husband of the lead actress, Annkathrin Bürger—was banned from all directing positions until the collapse of the socialist regime. Given how the episode violated the norms of presentation, these consequences are hardly surprising.

In “Seduction” (*Polizeiruf*, 1985), Ramona’s rundown apartment on Kollwitzstraße, an old, unrenovated building area in Prenzlauer Berg, is shown. The apartment of the other main character, Brigitte, is intended to contrast with Ramona’s apartment by symbolizing greed and wastefulness. According to the instructions of the chief dramaturge, Ramona’s apartment was furnished and decorated in a “modern, but not rich” style, particularly with regard to

---

the bathroom, in order not to exceed the average living standard. After the episode was broadcast, it received “very good” feedback from the Television Drama Section (Bereich Fernsehdramatik). The social accuracy of the portrayal of these living conditions was deemed the greatest achievement of the episode, and the episode was regarded as one of the “highlights” of the series by the chief dramatic adviser. The reviews praised the depiction of underprivileged neighborhoods.

Social and Symbolic Contrasts: Representing the “Socialist Order”

The circulation of symbolic forms was an object of tight political control under state socialism. Detective stories served as a stage that allowed the contrasts of criminal and non-criminal, “bad” and “good,” asocial and social to be acted out. Within the context of the homogenous society of the GDR, crime was considered something of an exception, an anomaly in a social fabric that was generally represented as healthy and intact. The functional complementarity of the main characters in the detective series implicitly refers to the inherited catalog of bourgeois virtues: the “social outsider” who represents individual violations of the “socialist norm”; and the benevolent state represented by friendly, reliable, and polite policemen who offer hope and alternatives for all potential lawbreakers. This contrast was intended to illustrate that crime and social problems are societal atavisms, exceptions, and absolutely “foreign” (wesensfremd) to socialist nature. The internal demand of the politicians was to associate the honest and hard-working characters within an intact society with the “good” side. The shows put special emphasis on the social and professional skills of the investigators, who were expected to function as role models in accordance with socialist ideals. The combination of a strong audience reception, moral input, and the dramaturgical design, along with the impact of the broadcast intended by the government, played


63. For example, Peter Hoff, “Soziales Umfeld genau und sorgfältig erforscht,” Neues Deutschland, 13 August 1985; and Mimosa Künzel, “Verführt” und auf die schiefe Bahn geraten,” Neue Zeit, 16 August 1985.
an important role in the process of getting approval by the Ministry of the Interior.\textsuperscript{64}

Against this backdrop, the investigators had to be representatives of the state’s authority, betraying no personal traits and emotions, appearing morally impeccable, and acting methodically, purposefully, competently, correctly, and logically. These character profiles were standard not only in the earlier program \textit{Blaulicht} but in East German crime literature.\textsuperscript{65} Their role was described in an internal memorandum from the Criminal Investigation Department in 1976 that required investigators to have an “extraordinarily high moral standard” and to be “ideologically sound.”\textsuperscript{66} To present the viewer with society’s reaction to social problems, episodes of \textit{Polizeiruf} and \textit{Staatsanwalt} also show symbolic counterpoints to crime and social deviance, including neighbors, friends, partners, investigators, and institutions such as the FDJ. These symbolic counterpoints are typically used as favorable personifications of the nature of socialism, emphasizing the importance of societal control and alertness. The character of Lieutenant Vera Arndt from “Guilty” (\textit{Polizeiruf}, 1978) is one of the few exceptions to the homogenous representation of “good” professionals. The episode presents Arndt in a serious professional crisis provoked by the everyday confrontation with the “dark side of society”: “failed lives” and “asocial” people.\textsuperscript{67} The empathy of Captain Fuchs toward his colleague’s difficult emotional situation and Fuchs’s attempt to explain Schober’s failure are intended to illustrate the “humanity of the system.”\textsuperscript{68} In the case of Arndt, the viewer sees that the main way of withstanding a personal crisis is with the help of close family ties. Although this was undoubtedly unintended, the portrayal of the “ideal” family embodied typical bourgeois values—cleanliness, edifying leisure activities, sobriety, normative sexual behavior and child raising, and obsession with efficient labor. Consequently, the counterpart of these values serves to define the

\textsuperscript{64} Klaus, “Sonderfall,” pp. 120–121.


\textsuperscript{66} Hauptabteilung Kriminalpolizei, Notiz, 2 October 1976, pp. 1–2, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.

\textsuperscript{67} As she surprisingly honestly admits, “I believe, I have chosen the wrong job.”

\textsuperscript{68} Eberhard Görner (dramaturge), Einschätzung zum Szenarium, 30 September 1977, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt.
“enemy within,” which has the potential to disturbed the imagined socialist idyll.

Drawing conclusions about the reactions of the audience based solely on the information from the normative guidelines is difficult. Viewers’ letters, however, provide insight into the way the audience reacted to specific broadcasts and the social problems portrayed. These letters demonstrate considerable compassion toward the depicted alcoholics and their illness. Many of the people and medical professionals who wrote in had an empathetic response to this social problem and reacted with understanding to Herr Kegel in “Liquid Weapon” (Polizeiruf, 1988). A similarly compassionate audience reaction followed the broadcast of “Seduction” (Polizeiruf, 1985). A large number of viewers expressed empathy with the fate of the single mother Ramona. In one letter, a viewer stated that it was “really very difficult” to get by on “so little money” (500 Marks per month). He pleaded for more tolerance and no criticism without specific knowledge of the situation. Many viewers praised the fact that social dissent, which “may occur even in our society,” was shown at all. However, controversy about the depiction of social dissent persisted: “Is there anybody normal in our country?” asked a spectator after the broadcast of “Guilty” (Polizeiruf, 1979), criticizing the omnipresence of “degenerate drunken characters” such as a “lush cleaning woman” and a “depraved coal hauler.” Moreover, many statements from the viewers’ letters indicate that there was a broad consensus about the portrayals of the “other.” Resentment of “asocial” behavior and suspected benefit fraud was widespread in society.

The fact that some of the “asocial” characters were often displayed not only negatively and accusingly but also as impertinent, naive, and almost likeable, sparked internal criticism. Such representations were regarded by the controlling body as too sympathetic and therefore likely to mislead viewers. The episode “The Case of Petra Hansen” (Staatsanwalt, 1979) enjoyed good audience ratings (46.8 percent) and achieved a record evaluation (2.42; only “I Quit My Job” [Staatsanwalt, 1978] received a more positive response). More than 50 percent of all viewers’ statements asserted that the case was “not real,” because social reality was “much worse than depicted.” They also asserted that


70. Leserbriefe Schuldig, forwarded letter from the culture editors of Neues Deutschland, 4 October 1978, in DRA Babelsberg, Schriftgutbestand Fernsehen, DraKu, Polizeiruf 110/Staatsanwalt. For methodological complexities with this type of text, see Erving Goffman, Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

the topic of “asociality” should not be trivialized and that the responsible authorities should react “much harder and with less indulgence.”72 These reactions stand for the existence of images of “asocial” behavior and social dissent and the rigidity of the images of the “good” working citizens.73

Conclusion

When Deutscher Fernsehfunk, the state television broadcaster in East Germany, was disbanded, the broadcasting of Der Staatsanwalt hat das Wort was suspended. The 140th and last episode—ironically called “To the Bitter End”—was released in July 1991. Because of the popularity of Polizeiruf 110, it continued to be produced for television after a short break from 1991 to 1993. Still highly popular, it airs during prime time on Sunday evening eight to ten times a year. The old episodes of the series (available in DVD box sets or broadcast as reruns) evoke nostalgia and excitement among German viewers of today. Intended to serve as entertainment media but constrained by media policies and directives, these representations of what was originally intended to be “exceptional case crime” experienced a significant functional shift in the 1970s and 1980s. The representation of crime became a “normal” phenomenon in East German television as part of the serialized detective stories. In addition to the entertainment aspect of the programs, they contained meaningful symbolic material. The programs had to fulfill a “social mission” by communicating shared socialist values, norms and habits.74 “By controlling the public stage,” according to the ethnological research of James C. Scott about socialist societies, “the dominant can create an appearance that approximates what, ideally, they would want to see.”75

The symbolic order in the GDR underwent a fundamental transformation in the state’s last two decades. At the beginning of the 1970s, widespread social grievances were approached with caution. Remarkable efforts to describe social outsiders characterized the following period up until the final years of the socialist system, when a certain resignation became prevalent. Identity-forming images like those described in this article symbolized the

73. Lindenberger, “Asociality.”
ideal social order. TV series communicated the desired patterns of behavior and functioned as socially authoritative guidelines. Certain images could thus act as “social cement,” which stabilized and harmonized the process of collectivization within an imagined socialist community. Such film sources make it possible to deconstruct not only the perception of underprivileged social conditions but also the process of creating “self” and “other.” Moreover, they show how social order was negotiated in state socialism—by transmitting positive heroic narratives on the one side and displaying negative deviant biographies on the other. The political intention was to establish socially acceptable, “normal” models of living that would help the regime regulate, discipline, and control society. On this premise, if the individual behaved properly, he or she was rewarded with social security. Citizens who forfeited this symbolic advancement by engaging in “incorrect” behavior had to bear the consequences—verbal-symbolic exclusion, marginalization, stigmatization, or criminalization. The aim of social and symbolic policies was to create positive images of socially vulnerable people and to offer biographical ideals that could serve as role models and, simultaneously, deter inappropriate, deviant lifestyles.

To determine whether this function of the television crime series was unique to the GDR, it would be fruitful to look at transnational—Eastern and Western—perspectives in comparing deviations from the social norm and the expression thereof in symbolic forms. Both programs analyzed in this article acted in this sense as media for societal self-understanding, providing the audience with instructions on how to behave appropriately—how the audience did in fact act is another dimension of this question.