Envisioning Socialism

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Chapter 2

Inventing Television Programming in the GDR

In mid-1952, a young television worker named Günter Hansel arrived for his first day of work at the East German television service (DFF). Despite his youth and inexperience, his new boss immediately threw him into producing the news. Hansel, one of the service’s first employees, experienced “torturing uncertainty” when meeting television director Wolfgang Kleinert for the first time. Kleinert “threw a stack of pictures [at him and declared,] that’s tonight’s show.” Hansel stared at the pictures and wondered, “what is that supposed to be? . . . What is Television?”

In the early 1950s, television was still new, untested, and even unknown among wide swaths of the population. Nazi-era television broadcasts had reached fairly small numbers of people in cities such as Berlin and, after its conquest, Paris. But Germans were much more familiar with the existing media of film and radio, and those experiences defined their early expectations for television. Film, for example, had already familiarized audiences with moving images synchronized with sound, although projected on large screens in collective viewing environments. On the other hand, radio had accustomed audiences to understanding the home as a locus of reception. Radio (unlike film or television) seemed ubiquitous—receivers were inexpensive and widely available, and programming could be widely broadcast, across the GDR and into the Federal Republic.

Given these kinds of expectations, we might expect early television to have been a disappointment. Certainly, early viewers gathered, often in community viewing rooms, to watch relatively low-resolution images flickering across tiny screens. Lucky (or connected or wealthy) viewers watching from home, if they lived in good proximity to a transmission tower, were willing to forgive frequent problems with signal interference and did not mind the short program day, which in the early 1950s lasted no longer than the average
feature-length film. By the standards of established media, then, early television might have seemed vastly inferior. Writing about the early expansion of television, Raymond Williams described it as a “poor-man’s cinema” that could not begin to approximate the visual experience of film. But television’s early appeal lay less in the (by this time often larger-than-life) representation of the world as was the case with film, for example, and much more in its ability to transmit “reality.” Television observed the world and allowed viewers to do the same, broadcasting images and events, ostensibly unmediated, as they were happening. For this and other reasons, television was able to overtake both cinema and radio within a decade, spreading rapidly and (thus far) irrevocably into the homes of the industrialized world.

In the early 1950s, television workers in the GDR were just beginning to explore the potential of the new medium of television. Television’s appeal lay in the specific characteristics of the medium developed in the 1950s, but at this early date, they had yet to define those characteristics and figure out how to harness them with the resources available. In short, they had to “invent” television. Creating a new medium was not simply a question of discovering and developing technology—building television towers, improving signal reception, or revising broadcast standards—but an aesthetic and political question as well. Above all, early television workers at the East German television service (Deutscher Fernsehfunk, or DFF) had to forge a television program when no one was quite sure what that might look like. Indeed, what we know as television is, at its most fundamental, nothing more than the transmission of electrical charges from one place to another. Much of early television “programming” involved learning how to make those electrical charges represent the world in two dimensions. In the early 1950s, DFF staff experimented with the technical and aesthetic dimensions of television transmission and representation, gradually developing their own sense of its possibilities. As they grew more sure-footed, new programming allowed them to harness television technology, enabling it to become more than a curiosity for the burgeoning audience, and begin to establish the medium as an instrument of social, political, and economic power in the GDR.

This chapter explores the development of the DFF during the crucial period between 1952 and 1956. During this period, DFF staff faced a number of challenges as they learned what they could do with the medium. Many staffers had left work in other types of media and brought their preconceptions with them. Thus the expectations associated with radio, film, theater, and even Nazi-era television initially shaped television workers’ visions of the medium, as well as the administrative structure, conditions of production, and early pro-
gramming of the DFF. In the first two years of the service, broadcasts remained little more than experiments in form and content, as staff learned the possibilities and limitations of television. Yet the ideas and expectations of older media soon gave way as early experiments exploring the particular characteristics of television allowed new approaches to emerge.

This was especially true after the introduction of direct transmission equipment liberated television from the studio. In 1955, DFF staff took stock of their first three years of televisual experimentation and even set about codifying the lessons they had learned. Codification reflected the push toward an industrialized mode of production (which will be discussed in chapter 3), but it also represented a new sense—among DFF staff, at least—that television programming could also have a role to play in both domestic nation-building campaigns and the larger Cold War. By 1955, the DFF leadership paid more attention to the “messages” of television programming, which became the basis of their argument that this new medium could contribute to political agitation for a growing audience. They began to delineate the social purpose of television: it would not be an artistic medium or transmit simple entertainments. Instead, it would work actively to transform the ideas and values of the East German audience by transmitting high culture and hard-hitting, topical political features. But if television authorities had found one purpose for television, the audience had found another. At first simply fascinated by a new technology of live transmission, viewers embraced the new medium and soon began to demand more, specialized programming. By 1956 the contours of East German audience taste had begun to emerge, which had important consequences for the future direction of the program.

**Experimenting with Television**

By 1952, preparations for the new television service were busily under way in Berlin. That year, GDR authorities opened the first East German television studio in the southeast Berlin neighborhood of Adlershof, as well as the GDR’s first transmitter relay, which reached the city center. A bare-bones staff began hiring a small and youthful team to work on developing a social purpose for the new technology. Wolfgang Stemmler arrived at Adlershof for his first day of work as an editor in mid-November 1952 to find that he was one of only thirty employees of the new Television Center, a number that included the kitchen and waitstaff in the Television Center’s cafeteria. As late as the winter season of 1954–55, Stemmler alone comprised the department of entertainment pro-
gramming at the DFF. For many members of the small staff, working in television was their first real job. Many arrived to fill positions with vague job descriptions and often had to take on multiple roles. Maria Kühne, one of the DFF’s first announcers, also performed in early dramatic pieces and worked as an editor for the service. Otto Holub, who became a fixture of GDR television, was only twenty-four in 1952; he panicked when he discovered that he had been hired not as a director’s assistant, as he had been led to believe, but as the service’s first director. Most of the staff had never worked in television, although a few had some previous experience with the medium. The head of the Television Center, Hermann Zilles, previously had worked in radio. Director Hans-Erich Korbschmitt had worked both in theater and film. Though television was still relatively unknown, it appealed to a number of staff who came from film. Screenwriter and dramaturge Hans Müncheberg, for example, described the contemporary situation at DEFA as “utterly depressing,” while others saw in television the opportunity to enjoy greater artistic freedom while working on projects that would see the light of day. A few had previous experience in television elsewhere. Hans Mahle, former head of the Television Center had worked at the television broadcasting center in Moscow during the Nazi period. Back in Germany after the war, SMAD (Soviet Military Administration in Germany) charged him with the reconstruction of the media in the Soviet zone. He hired Nazi-era technicians, such as Ernst Augustin and Walter Bruch, to help with development of television. Their expertise was integral to early GDR broadcasting: Augustin built the television cameras used in the studio during the first two years, for example. Others had less technical experience with the medium: Walter Baumert, a screenwriter and dramaturge, recalled being fascinated the first time he had seen television, as a child in Nazi-era Berlin.

The SED’s definition of television’s purpose—to occupy the airwaves as “territory” in the Cold War through the apparatus of transmission (but not production or reception)—shaped the conditions under which DFF staff worked in the early 1950s. They operated with outdated equipment and through chronic shortages of production materials. In January 1953, one month after the “official” beginning of the test program, the DFF owned just one “iconoscope,” a television camera made obsolete by the development of the orthicon in the late 1940s. There were paper shortages that made duplication of everything from memos to rehearsal schedules to scripts impossible. The government had not provided the service with television receivers currently in production, which they needed to produce a program, using them as monitors during broadcast, for example, and for training purposes. None of the DFF’s employees owned
their own sets. Precisely those people who *should* have been watching for reasons of professional development could only do so on a set in the DFF cafeteria, at a public viewing room just outside of the DFF campus, or at the House of German-Soviet Friendship in the center of East Berlin, and only if those rooms were open when the program began after seven o’clock in the evening.\(^{13}\) Even the group responsible for building “studio technology”—its mandate was to (re-)engineer existing technology—did not receive any sets.\(^{14}\) In lieu of building their own technology then, the DFF would have to import some of television’s most basic technology for the foreseeable future.

That television’s initial mandate had little to do with programming was also clear in the experimental nature of early DFF transmissions. Broadcasts lasted not more than two hours a day, and they were transmitted only five days a week during the first two years. Television transmissions did not reach very far, and viewers who lived outside Berlin only gradually began to receive them. Early broadcasts consisted primarily of images of the DFF’s station identification or a clock in the first few months. Gradually the service began to include some filmed material, but broadcasts remained short, utilitarian, and repetitive. Early on, the service procured three DEFA films for broadcast, including one entitled *Horses* and another on the subject of tooth care. They were shorts of little more than several minutes of material that were transmitted in perpetual rotation.\(^{15}\) The monotony led Hermann Axen, head of Agitation, to demand that television workers seek out other material.\(^{16}\)

One option for television employees was to create programming themselves, but the widely varying backgrounds of the new television staff meant they had very different expectations and ideas about the kinds of things that television could and should do. Ernst Augustin, for example, took his lead from his experience with television during the Nazi period. Nazi producers had used television primarily to transmit variety programs, in which diverse acts—a ballerina, a singer with accompanist, or a juggler, for example—performed for the camera. The Nazi-era television studio consisted of a set of raised platforms, or stages surrounding the television camera, which stood in the middle of the room. In this configuration the camera simply transmitted the action as if merely observing it (rather than constructing it for the viewer). This reflected the contemporary conception of television as “televised theater” transmitted by a few (because they were costly and scarce) studio cameras.\(^{17}\) As the chief engineer overseeing the construction of the Television Center, Augustin followed those same principles in designing the Adlershof studios, and those conditions in turn shaped early experiments with programming.\(^{18}\) Television workers later recalled feeling that the entire complex had been misconceived. They found the
studio spaces were too small, and there were no designated (or otherwise available) spaces for rehearsal, makeup and costume changes, or set design and construction.

By 1952, the first of five planned performance spaces was near enough to completion to use as a broadcast studio.19 It was small, about forty-three square feet. The camera occupied one-quarter of the room, allowing only a few people to fit into the remaining space at one time. The iconoscope was bolted to the floor, could not be swung left or right, and could capture only close and medium shots of its subjects (transmitting pictures of the head and torso, for example).20 Spotlights generating excessive heat flooded the room with bright light for the sensitive camera.21 Such studios had been planned and mostly built before the GDR had developed any television programming, and it had been designed in accordance with contemporary—though quickly outdated—expectations of television. This was the space early television productions had to negotiate.

While Augustin created the conditions for early variety shows, former film workers, such as Hans Müncheberg and Wolfgang Luderer, began producing elaborate stage plays more along the lines of the film narratives to which

Fig. 2. Television Studio, 1952. BArch, Bild 183–17697–0002/. (Photo: Hans Günter.)
they were accustomed. Those who came from radio, by contrast, were more comfortable with the aural than the visual dimensions of the medium. They even submitted scripts for broadcast with no indication of any visual component for the program. In other programming, pictures simply illustrated the spoken word. One early example was the “slide series,” for which producers made slides from still photographs and transmitted them over the airwaves with accompanying voiceovers. Stories for Bärbel consisted of stories read from illustrated children’s books with accompanying slides made from the original illustrations. This strategy was also the genesis of Current Camera (Aktuelle Kamera). A photo-reporter provided enough stills for a daily ten-minute segment, which, in altered form, later became the nightly news program and survived until the end of the Republic.

The “slide series” reflected the experimental nature of early “original programming” as staff reconciled their expectations of television with what they actually had to work with. The makeshift and ultimately unsustainable nature of such experiments is exemplified by sports “coverage” transmitted in 1952. Günter Puppe and a colleague developed “an endless number of photos” to comprise the visual element of a broadcast reporting on a recent boxing match. They supplemented the still images with voiceover commentary. Puppe recalled, “Wolfgang . . . began to describe the match, . . . with bombastic pronouncements, with great speed and fervor. . . . slide after slide of grim, sad-looking, frozen boxers flickered over the screen.” Puppe described this as “tragi-comic”: “we actually believed that if one put together enough slides, with a moving commentary, one could bring still pictures to life.” As this incident suggests, the slide series was ill suited to the medium of television. The concept—animated audio reportage with a visual element tacked on—was defined by the model of radio. It was prohibitively expensive for the television service and did not last long. A report from the mid-1950s had to explain for its reader what the slide series had been.

In the view of the DFF, the “slide series” was as close as the service got in its first few years to achieving simultaneity (Aktualität), although, in fact, there was not much that was “simultaneous” or “live” about it. (It probably was the closest the DFF got to representing the outside world during this period.) For most new television workers, nothing in their previous work had prepared them for the live nature of the early medium. Television is always live, of course, in that transmission and reception happen almost simultaneously. That made it at once unforgiving and ephemeral: “second takes” were impossible, but at the same time, once transmitted, the image and sound vanished. Most contemporaries agreed that visual simultaneity was television’s most compelling charac-
teristic. But this was also its most disappointing feature during the early broadcast era. For most people, “live” connoted the spectacular capture of life’s fleeting moments, perhaps a game-winning goal or a speech at a political demonstration. The DFF could not yet capture that kind of “live” because it could not transmit outside the studio.

Transmitting film was one means through which the DFF could simulate the “live” and was often used while the service experimented with other early television forms. But film stock was expensive, and the feature films that could be shown on television often were as well. Programmers were resourceful and found they could acquire older feature films on the cheap. The DFF’s first film series consisted of old silent films that the actor Ludwig Trautmann had found in his cellar. One employee “bought” a Soviet film with two bottles of vodka. Gradually, the DFF expanded the kinds of programming it transmitted over the airwaves to include on-air addresses, excerpted performances from films, operas, and the circus, dramatizations of novellas, and its first quiz show. Increasingly the service experimented with programming that consisted of mixed forms—live performances intermingled with filmed excerpts of their own programming, theatrical, or feature film performances. The show *Theater and Film Mirror*, for example, used filmed excerpts of theatrical performances intercut with live discussion to advertise contemporary productions of Berlin’s cultural scene.

As they experimented with new types of programming, DFF staff learned to negotiate television’s other particularities as well. Paradoxically, television’s visuality proved unexpected, even for television workers who came from film or theater backgrounds. DFF staff had to learn to “transmit for the eyes.” Specifically, television’s visual field proved much smaller in scale than that of film or theater, and much narrower, though deeper, than theater. Television workers had to take into account the small size of contemporary screens. Although early television cabinets were often fairly large, built to contain the bulky cathode ray tube, the screen on which the television broadcast appeared was very small. Film could rely heavily on both visual scale (as seen in epic films such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, released in 1962) and the representation of in-depth detail, but television’s small screen limited the scale and detail comprehensible to the viewer.

DFF staff learned to work with televisual space by experimenting with new forms and subjects. During one incident, the DFF went on location to film performers of the Friedrichstrasse circus. They shot the action in extreme long shots, that is, from a distance that would allow them to capture all the action on the stage in the frame. The small visual field of the television receiver meant
that the resulting images were almost incomprehensible. When transmitted, contemporaries described the figures as so tiny that the program gave viewers “the impression of sitting in the last row.”  

In general, television workers began to discover that less detail allowed the image and message to be better understood and make a greater impression on the audience. But DFF directors also learned that they could manipulate this sense of space. Preparing to broadcast an opera performance in a cramped studio, Otto Holub realized he could create the illusion of space. Staff built a stage in the small studio and dressed the room with a variety of props representing a small concert hall, such as a set of theater seats. Holub positioned the camera as far back in the studio as possible. During the broadcast, the conductor directed the performance while kneeling in front of the “stage”—on camera he appeared to be standing in an orchestra pit. The whole illusion gave the impression of much greater depth than existed in the studio.

The incorporation of film clips allowed the DFF to manipulate both televisual space and time during a live broadcast. Though expensive, film offered television producers several advantages. Filming outside the studio, television workers could begin to represent a world that the small studio spaces would not allow. Incorporating filmed excerpts offered live performers and set dressers a window of opportunity to make costume and set changes in the studio during the broadcast. The live studio performances would have been easily distinguishable from filmed excerpts, due to their spartan sets, flat two-dimensional space, and the length of each shot, prolonged by the inability to cut between perspectives. But contemporaries experimented with introducing a new, more dynamic visual style, through such means as the so-called Körperblende (body blend). This allowed the production to transition from one scene to another through a modified fade: an actor approached the camera, darkening the shot; in the next scene the action began with the actor (or a different one) walking away from the camera “fading” the action back in. This technique could both “cut” the scene and change the camera’s perspective on the action, by allowing an opportunity for minor changes to the set or costume, thereby creating a greater sense of motion, space, and elapsed time than normally allowed by single-camera, live productions. Through such experiments DFF employees began to define what could be done on television and develop their own televi-sual style.

The success of televi-sual style and representation also relied upon those who worked the control desk, in the studio or the transmission wagon. They too had to learn the possibilities and limitations of their equipment. It took practice to achieve seamless, or even steady, soft fade-outs and quick transi-
tions between cuts, for example. Technicians had to be prepared to deal with the idiosyncrasies of their machines. Early television cameras had to “cool down” between rehearsal and show time so they could reliably transmit the evening broadcast. Staff constantly had to monitor the quality of the picture, with attention to the fact that early electronic cameras conveyed colors “unpredictably,” resulting in reportedly “ghastly” shades of grey appearing on the television screen. Tele-cines, the machines that turned filmed images into the electrical charges enabling television transmission of feature films and the like, had to “warm up,” taking twelve seconds to begin transmitting images. It required a delicate sense of coordination to help synchronize the transmitted images with the commentary of a speaker located in a different room, not to mention to seamlessly blend the transmission from live action to filmed excerpts, or vice versa.

Finally, early televisual experimentation began to develop a language of representation, conventions that became the “rules” of making television. Television transmissions were essentially composed of images devoid of context, and staff had to figure out how to make them comprehensible for their audience. Experimentation produced an intricate web of visual conventions shared by television producers and their audiences that helped viewers understand particular shots or scenes, not to mention whole shows. These conventions were not instinctive but had to be developed. For example, in 1955, camerawoman Hanna Christian discovered the Bildachse or “180 degree rule,” an important visual convention for the naturalistic representation of sports broadcasts and interviews. The principle of the rule was (and is) to position cameras in such a way that cutting between perspectives did not disrupt audiences’ perception of the scene, but instead replicated it. In the case of an interview or a sports event, for example, the perspective of the camera had to replicate closely the point of view of someone in attendance. No one would watch a tennis match from both sides of the court; representing the game that way on screen jarringly violated the reality effect and confused the viewer. Yet this is just what Christian did. She prepared to film her first soccer match by positioning cameras on either side of the midfield line (on the sidelines of each team’s “territory,” which is “normal” for sports coverage); she also put cameras on either side of the field, crossing the imaginary line of perception. Cutting between shots from one side of the field to the other resulted in one player seemingly running “down” the field, then, in the next shot, running upfield. Thus, players on the field running toward the goal appeared on the receiver instead to be running every which way. Cutting between these points of view produced contradictory images and non-naturalistic representation. If Chris-
tian’s initial placements of the television cameras seem an egregious mistake to us today, it only demonstrates how well entrenched conventions of visual representation have become in our own world. It took time for conventions to develop defining the “correct” way to frame sporting events, as well as for viewers to learn to see it “correctly” as well.48

Not just for Hanna Christian, but also for most early television workers, the decisive shift of their young careers came when television technology enabled them finally to leave the studio. In 1955, the DFF acquired two transmission trucks, allowing the service to transmit live programming from elsewhere, including the soccer field, the State Opera, the National Gallery, the People’s Enterprises (Volkseigene Betrieb, VEB), and the People’s Chamber of government (Volkskammer). The trucks were equipped with orthicon cameras, the industry standard, and could transmit much clearer, sharper images with less light than those in the studio. The mobile cameras proved so superior to the studio cameras that directors of studio productions tried to appropriate them for use inside the Adlershof studios as well. At the same time, newer receivers came on the market, with larger screens and better resolution, making the transmission of scenes from the out-of-doors, the stage of the State Opera, or meeting halls the size of the People’s Chamber a more visually appealing experience than it had been on the tiny Leningrad. Taken together, these two developments brought about a sea change in the possibilities of early television programming. Without these changes, popular programming such as the variety show The Laughing Bear (Da lacht der Bär), which the DFF later televised from the 2,500 seat Sport Hall in the Stalinallee, could not have been so successful.49

**Codifying Television as an Instrument of Political Power**

In 1955, after three years of experimentation with the medium, DFF staff prepared for the introduction of its “official program” in 1956. With the official program, the service began broadcasting three hours a day, a slight increase over the daily two-hour broadcasts of the previous three years, but this was part of a more general trend in the expansion of broadcasting over the course of the 1950s and did not represent a sharp discontinuity with the “test program.”50 Nor did the types of programming the DFF prepared change much. Even the political shift to greater recognition of the program and its place in the broadcast universe of the GDR had nothing to do with the onset of the official program but was instead provoked by the events of the Cold War later in the year. But for DFF staff this represented an opportunity to make their case for the
social and political purpose of television programming. In a series of reports, DFF staff reported on the lessons that television workers had learned in the first years of television broadcasting.

In “Thoughts on the Dramaturgy of Television,” Werner Fehlig, the first director of the Department of Television Drama, defined television as a new and distinct communicative technology within the universe of the existing media forms of radio, film, and theater. While each medium had its own specific and valuable properties, television, he wrote, “stands between film and radio as something completely new, the perfection of the invention of broadcasting.” Fehlig identified four characteristics of the medium that differentiated television from the other media and, therefore, made it an important means of political agitation. First, television was a visual medium that fulfilled its audiences’ desire for the extraordinary and unmediated experience of witnessing social, cultural, and political transformations unfold. Television was not theater, which could establish a strong personal relationship with the audience over the course of a specific play. Television workers needed to learn “Fürs Auge senden”—to broadcast for the eyes. To that end, the close-up and the spoken word both played important roles in contextualizing the televisual narrative. Second, he noted the popular appeal of visual simultaneity, or Aktualität, the “coincidence of event and experience” that the audience expected from television. Third, each piece of television programming was only a small part of a larger, perpetually changing, television “flow” (Programmgestaltung). Individual parts of the daily schedule could be enveloped in a variety of programming that helped the audience to interpret contemporary events. Finally, television enjoyed a privileged mode of reception: the audience tuned in to television in their homes, where they were most vulnerable to a persuasive, personal address, which would allow television to connect with their “inner essence” (inneres Wesen). Thus television’s mode of address should avoid “mass scenes, excited . . . plots, quick scenes and sudden cuts.” Instead, the conditions of reception called for a “more contemplative tempo.” Fehlig thus began to codify the important lessons of television production. DFF staff had learned that television could draw an audience by offering an intense viewing experience.

This and other reports submitted in 1955 mark a turning point in the television leadership’s vision of the television program, which, after years of experimentation, had become more coherent and clear. In addition, since such reports also made their way up through the bureaucracy of media control, to the State Broadcasting Committee and the Agitation Commission of the Central Committee, they also represented an attempt on the part of the television leadership to entrench television in the minds of the authorities as another impor-
tant part of the East German media universe. Fehlig explicitly defined television as an important political tool that could serve the socialist revolution in Germany: it would not simply reflect reality, but rather present the dynamism of revolutionary development in the GDR. Indeed, Fehlig argued that “where the struggle between the New and the Old is seen, where the first indications of the new, better and more beautiful life can be found, which claims victory over the Old, the television cameras of democratic broadcasting also must be there.” Therefore, television could serve as an effective medium of political agitation, contributing to the SED’s nation-building campaign under way since at least 1952.

But, as scholars of GDR cultural policy have shown, the contours of the cultural struggle for a new and better world had long been a matter of debate among government officials, artists, audiences, and others, both in the GDR and abroad. In particular, the boundaries between the acceptable “New” and the unacceptable “Old” were not always clear. Since at least 1950, the SED had defined “culture” and cultural activity as integral to achieving the enormous economic undertaking that lay ahead for the state. Cultivation, and even relaxation (Erholung), would prepare East Germans for their industrial tasks. The SED founded cultural centers, community clubhouses, and lending libraries, promoted higher education in the arts, and fostered museums, theaters, and publishing houses. At the time, authorities such as SED leader Walter Ulbricht expected that pretty folk songs and pictures of beautiful, happy, selfless (socialist) people would comprise GDR culture. In 1952, cultural policy began to harden when the SED embarked on a concerted campaign to build socialism. In this context, “socialist realism” became “not just one creative variant among others, but rather the only possibility, the only method that [could] lead to the growth of a great German national art.” Socialism realism had been the guiding principle of socialist art in the Soviet Union since at least the 1930s, but the basic principles were contested and not easily defined. In the GDR in the 1950s, it was associated rather amorphously with “partisanship,” “belonging to the people,” and certain ideas about “socialist man,” for example. During the period of destalinization (1953–56) some artists tried to (re-)interpret it as an element of the humanist worldview. But in 1956, the SED clarified that socialist realist art was by definition “consciously partisan,” and, by 1962, “socialist realism” had become an aesthetic category unto itself: that is, not just the subject matter, the story, or the composition of a work, for example, could qualify it as “good art,” but criticism now also took into account its level of partisanship (which mattered as much or more). The SED encouraged artists to build on the acceptable part of the German artistic tradition, which it increasingly
identified as the German classical heritage. That is, it privileged the work (and thus the values and worldviews) represented in the literary tradition of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the world of Goethe and Schiller (and the “rising bourgeoisie”), and not that of Baudelaire or Beckett (representing the “declining bourgeoisie”).

Given the technological mandate for television and the relative lack of attention paid to programming at the time, television was not a factor in this debate in the early 1950s, but as DFF staff began to seek an expanded role in the agitation program of the state, these principles were influential in the types of programs they developed. The most important types of programming that emerged in the first years of service were television drama, “topical” (political) television, and entertainment. Dramatic programming was the most well-developed aspect of the program, often adapted from theater, film, and even radio, as producers began to develop television-specific drama. Topical television was the most explicitly televisual aspect of the program, and, to DFF staff, it seemed to have the most political potential, rooted as it was in the immediate and seemingly unmediated “transmission” of everyday experiences. It could potentially grapple with the big geopolitical issues of the day; paradoxically, it was the type of programming with which the DFF enjoyed the least success, precisely because simultaneity was so difficult to harness. Finally, the television service had its most “uneven” experiences with entertainment television. Socialist authorities defined “entertainment”—in literature, on the radio, or on television—as worthless, vapid kitsch. This conception of entertainment was similar to that of contemporary West German television workers. Television staff at NWDR, for example, reported that the British model was “more appropriate” to the system they were hoping to build than the American model. Where the American system dangerously flooded viewers’ lives with daylong programming, the British system offered a shorter program day of not more than a couple of hours in the early 1950s. The popular entertainments, such as quiz shows, games of skill and chance, and other audience contestant competitions found on American television, were not well-suited to the average “lower profile, reserved” German and would not satisfy what they saw as Germans’ greater need for knowledge and insight. Yet DFF staff developed entertainment programming, because it solved their most important problem: how to come up with enough cheap programming to fill the television schedule, which by the mid-1950s was expanding to capture the pan-German audience. Another advantage was that it combined elements of the dramatic tradition with the simultaneity of topical television. They soon learned how important “entertainment” television would be: even early on, viewers flocked to entertainment
programs. For DFF staff, entertainment proved to be the means to raise the profile of television service in the GDR.

Television drama was the most abundant type of programming to be found on the DFF schedule in the early years of service and included both guest performances and, increasingly, original DFF productions. In this, it approximated the experience of television service in other industrialized nations. The DFF hosted numerous theatrical ensembles, including the companies of the German Theater (Deutsches Theater), the People's Stage (Volksbühne), or the Dresden State Theater (Staatstheater Dresden), among others, which would perform excerpts from their own repertoires in the studio. Furthermore, the television service produced a new play each week; actors generally performed each play live two or three times for television audiences over the course of a week. Television writers wrote scenes based on material taken from literature, theater, and operas, from contemporaries, such as Brecht, but also classics of the German canon, such as Goethe or Schiller, or the Russian tradition, such as Alexander Popov or Alexander Pushkin.

Dramatic pieces from theater, film, and even radio seemed readily adaptable to the technical conditions of early television, but they generally failed when they were conceived simply as theatrical pieces playing before a camera. Television had a hard time doing justice to the artistic conceptions of guest productions, and theater directors rarely took into consideration the fact that television was a medium with different rules. Unfamiliarity with the technical conditions of the studio led to confrontations between theater artists and television producers. During the rehearsal of a guest performance of the Berliner Ensemble in 1953, actress Helene Weigel insisted that, in keeping with the principles of Brechtian realism, the audience be able to see the actors’ feet. This condition meant that the production consisted entirely of long shots, which, given the cramped space of the studio, was difficult for television producers, and it was likely unappealing to viewers watching on their sets at home. Original DFF productions, by contrast, were small in scale, short, and took place on sparely dressed sets. Most shows used just two actors, who performed as closely together as possible (while attempting to avoid the creaking floorboards!).

At this early date, marrying DFF staff’s enthusiasm for the political task with the inexorable rules of “broadcasting for the eyes” was still difficult. For example, they created a television version of Alexander Pushkin’s Boris Godunov to transmit at the 1953 Leipzig trade fair, where GDR television was on public exhibit for the first time. DFF director and novice producer Hermann Rodigast wrote a treatment with just five scenes. The story traces the rise and
fall of the eponymous prince and includes a massive battle scene. But Rodigast “could hire only seven extras for this production” with which to stage the battle. The director “constructed the scene so that the actors ran out of the different forest paths toward the camera, then disappeared behind a thick tree, put on another wig, grabbed a different gun, to appear as a mass of fighters.” Rodigast described the preparations as “more than comical . . . [that] quickly almost became bad theatre,” although the resulting scene appeared “astoundingly good” on the monitor. Since the DFF’s only television camera was bolted to the floor of the smallest studio and could not be moved into the larger studio needed for the production, television workers had to film this hourlong show.

Rodigast, like the authors of the original play (Pushkin) and the subsequent opera (Mussorgsky), conceived his Boris as a big, political, theatrical show thematically centered on an enormous battle. Yet for the production Rodigast could command only a small studio and no more than fourteen actors; meanwhile, viewers had to watch this improbable scene on a tiny screen. Theater and television drama occupied a privileged space in the schedule as components of the high cultural enterprise of cultivation that was so dear to the SED. Television was not quite ready for this spectacle, but the potential political value was clear.

It took some time for theater to be adapted and emerge as television drama, but the live nature of television seemed ready-made for “topical” television. Yet engaging the “live” was harder than it seemed. Early topical television included programming such as Current Camera, which explored the presentation of current events. For the “topical-political” editorial department of the Television Center, Current Camera proved that television could contribute to political agitation. The show was conceived to be explicitly political, unlike much other DFF programming. It could broadcast SED decisions to viewers, “explain (those) decisions to the people and fill them with enthusiasm to put them into practice” through coverage of such diverse areas as politics, economics, culture, and sports.

Reporting on current events and engaging the audience in contemporary issues were the goals guiding each episode. Each show consisted of two news items at the top of the show that displayed current events, as well as five or six others that concentrated more on deconstructing contemporary problems. The DFF modeled the program closely on the DEFA Wochenschau, a newsreel series that film audiences saw before feature film presentations in movie theaters. The television version of the newsreel had one apparent advantage: it could present much more current information, since it was broadcast four times per week (on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays). Mobilizing tele-
Envisioning Socialism

visual simultaneity relied on a certain flexible spontaneity, as well as the technology to capture images outside the studio. But planning for each installment of the Current Camera began six weeks in advance of the actual show, when department staff met to formulate a set of general ideological questions that would guide the show. The final conception for the show normally would be set as early as three days in advance. Moreover, the DFF could not transmit pictures from outside the studio until late 1955. The service learned, though, that it did not necessarily have to provide instantaneous images to fulfill the viewer’s expectation of immediacy; providing the perception of simultaneity could be enough. One filmed segment that reported on Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov’s quick stop in Berlin was first broadcast on Aktuelle Kamera several hours later. The DFF concluded that “recordings with original sound, which give the viewer the impression of original reports achieve the greatest effect.”

Most important was that the DFF not seem indifferent to the audience desire for the “live.” A viewer from Kleinprausitz reminded the DFF, “for those of us who work in agriculture, your weather service is more valuable than the radio reports, because the weather situation is elaborately explained in depth on the weather map. Would it not be possible, in the interest of agriculture, to transmit the weather service daily and, best . . . shortly before the beginning of the evening program?” This viewer appreciated that he could see explanations of the weather, but wanted to see that day’s weather. “Topical” could not just be recent, it had to be more current. A viewer from Leipzig elaborated on this problem in a letter of complaint in which he described his own conception of topicality: “I say, current is what has happened in the last 48 hours—that’s what we want to see, but there’s still so little. On Sundays you always only transmit repeats. Sport reports are current on Sunday evenings—not when first broadcast on Tuesdays . . .” The televisual characteristics of simultaneity and verisimilitude seemed to be the easiest to exploit—just point the camera and transmit the picture—and the most politically effective, drawing large numbers of viewers to television. But “live” television—the spectacle, that is—was difficult to achieve in the way viewers wanted to see it.

The third area of programming development was “entertainment,” which, on the face of it, did not seem able to fulfill the overall goals of political education and socialist nation-building. But entertainment programs emerged and grew quickly in number because they readily adapted to the conditions of early television production. Mostly small productions, they fit easily into the smallest of the DFF studios and were easy to transmit with the iconoscope camera. In addition, such programs offered viewers a sense of the “live” even though the shows never left the studio—in the early years, at least. Entertainment pro-
Inventing Television Programming in the GDR

Programming was simple, it was cheap, and it could help fill up the expanding television schedule. Early DFF shows were simple variety acts produced in collaboration with performance groups from around the GDR, such as the Berlin Thistle (*Berliner Distel*) or Leipzig Pepper Mill (*Leipziger Pfeffermühle*) cabaret ensembles, or adapted from radio (just as they were in other emerging television nations). Variety programs, which did not include much action, quickly bored DFF staff (and, they thought, their viewers as well), and they began to develop original programming, from game shows to musical revues and variety shows. By 1956, game shows were especially popular, and the service consistently received mountains of viewer mail in response to questions or puzzles posed in DFF programs. With that, the DFF learned to value entertainment programming: it could attract a large (and growing) audience, and, increasingly, they could transmit explicitly political messages in an entertaining, satirical, and non-threatening manner.

Television entertainment in the GDR and elsewhere performed an important nation-building function in the early broadcast era. Taking a transnational view of television entertainment, media scholar Richard Paterson argues that entertainment programming offered viewers “pleasures in the face of the problems of life” that could either “reconcil(e) audiences to the status quo . . . or lead people to question and criticize the status quo by reference to the ideal world in the entertainment utopia . . .” It could “create a shared community in which at its most banal viewers can share catchphrases or points of conviviality and laughter.” DFF programming achieved this indirectly, and increasingly through programs with a deliberate political message. In January 1953, the DFF introduced its first game show, quizzing viewers on a variety of topics. The moderators challenged viewers to identify slides of well-known German landmarks, such as the cathedral in Ulm or the Zwinger palace in Dresden, and tested their knowledge of the young GDR, asking them to identify the new East German Wartburg automobile, and awarded prizes to the winners. The musical revue *Out of the Request File* (*Aus unserer Wunschmappe*) solicited viewer requests in the television weekly before each show, then played the songs on the air. Such requests ranged widely, including operetta and popular hits (*Schlager*), though moderators replaced what they defined as “kitschy *Schlager* melodies” with “good beloved” songs. They soon found that the show was highly popular—it was “an important ‘point of connection’ to the audience”—and it allowed the DFF to educate and improve viewer taste.

Delivering a much more deliberate political message increasingly underpinned conceptions of DFF entertainment programs. A new film series incorporated excerpts from old and new feature films to “demonstrate the path from
manuscript to script to finished film.” One innovative aspect of the show was that it invited the critique of East German writers and a handful of viewers that would be incorporated into each episode. Producers hoped that the show could draw pointed conclusions about “good” and “bad” creative forms through the combination of film excerpts, expert criticism, and lay commentary. A second show was conceived that could appeal directly to East German workers, who could view the program on their factory’s television. In it, lay “actors” would entertain a specifically working-class audience “through the use of humor. Two workers [will] dramatize typical goings-on in the factories in front of the television camera.” East German performance groups and lay artists could supplement such skits with “popular-scientific” filmed segments depicting production methods, appearances, and other acts cultivating “the cultural heritage (Kulturerbe).” Such shows demonstrated the emergence of a specific notion of television entertainment, focused on political agitation for and among viewers, long before the SED demanded that art integrate East Germans and their experience of everyday life, at the “Bitterfeld Conference” in 1959.

The trend toward didactic entertainment was the Television Committee’s attempt to win viewers and mandate a steadfast political direction for future programming. The Television Committee conceived shows that experimented with the medium of television as a means to appeal to, and even create, a specifically “socialist” audience. They coached the television audience in the fundamentals of the socialist cultural heritage, first by illustrating “good” and “bad” cultural products, and second, by modeling “typical” behavior in order to cultivate a community of like-minded workers. The shows were not simple tools with which to manipulate viewers but demonstrated the real desire on the part of the television service to reach out to its audience. By 1956 they undertook an even greater effort to discover the audience. Staff left the studio to make the rounds of television viewing rooms across the Republic, in the interests of improving television programming and expanding television’s audience.

Discovering the Audience

By October 1955 the DFF began to make concerted efforts to discover its audience. A new Department of Outreach took on the task of establishing a “good connection” between viewers and the DFF. They approached this problem with a three-pronged strategy: publicizing the program, collecting and analyzing viewer mail, and meeting the audience by visiting existing public television facilities and inviting regular viewers to “town hall” meetings to discuss the
program. Through such rudimentary audience research, the DFF hoped to discover how television had been incorporated into the political work of the mass organizations and the daily lives of East Germans. Key to this task was the assumption that local officials had even noticed television, and the belief that, by working with the audience, they could improve the program and the political impact of television on East German cultural and social life. This effort began in November 1955, when an employee of the Department of Outreach undertook a three-week trip to district offices of mass organizations and television rooms in some of the major centers of television reception, including Leipzig, Halle, Erfurt, Lichtenberg, and Berlin.

Most of the television facilities were in the regional clubhouses of the National Front and ranged in size and sophistication from a viewing arrangement in one small room to facilities that occupied freestanding buildings. On the road, DFF staff realized that local officials had responded in a wide variety of ways to the introduction of television. In rare cases, local officials had embraced television, setting aside space for the receiver, outfitting rooms in a comfortable way, advertising the program, and faithfully supervising the use of the television. But other officials were indifferent. They were completely unaware that they could acquire television sets with public funds and, often, could not imagine how television could possibly prove helpful to their agitation campaigns. Even where television rooms did exist, there was widespread apathy, and sometimes antipathy, toward television. Some officials had simply plugged the television into the nearest electrical socket, left it untuned to receive programming, cursed the flawed reception, and allowed it to fall into disuse. DFF staff feared that, at any given time, approximately one-quarter of sets in public viewing facilities were “out of order,” sometimes because their keepers were unfamiliar with the receiver, and at other times because of the apparent long wait to have a set repaired. Few facilities advertised the television program, though this hardly mattered given the scarcity of programming in the early years. (Early viewers were fascinated by the technology, so the television schedule was not as important as showing up sometime after 7:00 p.m. to check out what was on.) Some facilities allowed television viewing only a few times a month, fearing interference with other club activities and meetings. A few community leaders had not bothered to pick up the set designated for their area. Yet, the crotchety supervisor of one such clubhouse rejected the suggestion that his set should go to another district where it would get more use, decrying the impact of such a loss on his own district: “You can’t do that to the district of W—.”

Television may not have become as integral to the agitation efforts of the
National Front as the DFF had hoped, but it was spreading quickly across the GDR to become an important element of social life. More television rooms opened every month, while the number of privately owned sets also rose. People planned social events around entertaining with their television sets: “The show with Charlie Chaplin was great (knorke). My parlor was full of people and everyone laughed themselves crazy. . . .” Rising numbers of people wanted their own sets. In Frankfurt/Oder the DFF found the anticipation of television had reached a “sort of television hunger.” The waiting list for a new television there was so long that the local chapter of the national youth organization (FDJ) went around the state wholesaler, buying their sets from a private retailer instead. Requests that the DFF schedule programming for shift workers grew in number, confirming rising viewership. The DFF’s audience expanded, even across the border: “I can assure you with great pleasure that you have a great many viewers over here,” wrote a viewer in Berlin- Reinickendorf. “The program is good and topical and not made just for the top Ten Thousand.”

New television owners proved easy to please, while experienced viewers were more discriminating. Researchers described audiences in vacation lodges of the national trade union, mostly made up of first-time viewers, as “hardly critical.” They reported that television had aroused such excitement among vacationers that most intended to buy a television when they got home. The staff members who supervised the use of FDGB televisions, on the other hand, were more judicious in their comments, calling for more opera and theater in television.

Television’s impact differed in urban and rural areas. In Berlin successful television rooms could draw sixty to eighty people on a good evening. The television room at Naugarderstrasse 12 in Prenzlauerberg reported two thousand visits a month in early 1956 (over sixty viewers a day, on average). It drew so many viewers that on some evenings not everyone could get a seat. In Berlin, television seemed to appeal especially to children and teenagers, who were interested in children’s programming, game shows, and sports coverage. Some authorities thought that television’s appeal among youths could be a means of preventing the emergence of “latchkey kids.” Others believed that television had the power to keep kids out of West Berlin cinemas, although, given the variety of entertainments in Berlin, television could not hold youths’ attention for very long. There were skeptics though, who thought television was too much trouble: television rooms drew rowdy teenagers, so-called Halbstarken, who damaged sets or modified them to receive Western broadcasts. Teens monopolized the room on evenings when crime thrillers were scheduled. Before the show they were raucous and disruptive, making it impossible for others to
enjoy, or even hear, the program. When their show began, however, they paid rapt attention. If television had begun to draw social outsiders into the purview of the mass organizations, it was also the case that local officials did not always see this as a good thing. Television rooms in Weissensee and Potsdam began restricting the use of the sets to active members of their organization, rather than allow potentially disruptive kids access to “their” television.

Television was particularly popular in small towns and rural areas. A National Front television room in Schkeuditz near Leipzig could report on average three thousand visits a month between January and April 1955, which was even more than in Berlin. In small villages with few, if any, other entertainments, such as Gröbers (near Leipzig), the television room became the center of social life. For many people, television became the medium through which they could experience the cultural life of the metropolis. One viewer from Leipzig noted that broadcasts from the Berlin operas and theaters were “always an experience, since here in the countryside we have few opportunities to see good performances.” Others lauded lighter entertainment such as the variety programs, circus entertainment, game shows, music revues, shows broadcast from the factories, and film series. Such shows “bring rural folks relaxation and pleasure” of the kind rarely found where they lived, and The Laughing Bear (Da lacht der Bär), an entertainment show simulcast on radio and television, was “awaited with bated breath.”

By 1956, viewer mail and rudimentary audience research confirmed that television had begun to affect reception of other media especially in rural areas. Research suggested that radio lost listeners to television in the first year of television ownership. Those who had owned both television and a radio for more than one year chose whichever medium was broadcasting their preferred programming, usually entertainment or sports. Entertainment always won out over educational programming (Bildung, or self-cultivation). There was relative consensus among viewers that, although they enjoyed watching old films on television (The Blue Angel, Battleship Potemkin, or Girls in Uniform, for example), they really wanted to see current films and did not want to have to wait to see them until months after the theatrical release. But people were willing to replace cinema visits with television, so it should come as no surprise that film theaters had begun to lose customers. The director of the Department of Culture in the district of Suhl (the person responsible for the dissemination of television there) knew of no public television rooms in his district. But as an officer of the local cinema, he reported with some dismay that ticket sales had been declining since the introduction of television to the nearby FDGB vacation lodge. Vacationers, at least, preferred to stay in to watch televi-
sion to going out to the cinema. In Erfurt, viewers meeting with the DFF claimed they no longer went to the theater as often, since the television actors (who were often regular players from Berlin’s major companies) outshone their local theater company. While television’s ability to draw audiences from other leisure activities would be music to the ears of any television executive today, the DFF reminded their audience that television was simply a new factor in the cultural life of the GDR with no designs on displacing theater or cinema.

The audience had definite opinions about what should be broadcast on television. In general viewers were tremendously self-interested: they wanted to see things that fulfilled their desires and corresponded to their worldview. This meant, for example, that sports fans wanted to see lots and lots of sports coverage; it also meant that some viewers deemed programming such as *What You Won’t Find in Mother’s Cookbook* (*Was nicht in Mutters Kochbuch steht*) inappropriate for general viewing. Instead, viewers suggested that such programming should be broadcast in a special “women’s show,” segregated from the rest of the program schedule. Audience taste tended toward the low- and middlebrow. For every viewer demanding more broadcasts from the State Opera House in Berlin, there were many others who wanted more entertaining variety shows, crime thrillers, and game shows. They would not accept just any entertainment; one viewer wrote to complain about the “primitive entertainment . . . (dumb) questions and observations” offered by the *Laughing Bear* and asked, “(I)s it really impossible to raise the level of the program?” This viewer did not reject entertainment but had become more discriminating in his taste. Other viewers just wanted to win prizes. But they did not want *everyone* to win prizes and complained that the DFF awarded prizes too generously.

In their programming taste, then, the East German audience approximated most other audiences in the industrialized West. They were not apolitical, but they were self-interested and sought out types of programming and viewpoints that approximated their own worldview. They flocked to entertainment programming. This picture of the East German audience, laid bare in rudimentary audience research in 1956, persisted right through the life of the GDR. The DFF sought to use this knowledge to balance audience desire with its own agenda of political agitation. The revised program schedule of 1958 thus reflected some but not nearly all of the lessons learned from audience research. The new daytime schedule included repeats of the previous evening’s programming for shift workers, for example. As the schedule expanded, the DFF abandoned the transmission-free Monday evening, instead transmitting “women’s programming” at that time. The television weekend began on Saturday evening (since most viewers worked six days a week until 1965) and was comprised of
the “evening-filling entertainments” requested by viewers. On Saturday evening the DFF broadcast extravagant variety entertainment shows with live audiences, while more sedate theatrical productions (original programming of the DFF or transmissions from Berlin theaters) appeared on Sunday evening.

Conclusion

Developing television as an important communicative medium required not only the development of the technological foundation of the service but also the creation of a notion of what television could be. In the first several months of service, the DFF program consisted of experiments in form and content, as inexperienced staff learned the possibilities and limitations of television. The difficulties they faced included tight resources, as well as the conceptual challenges posed by a medium with which few East Germans had had any real experience. In 1952 expectations of television were still shaped by preexisting media: theater, film, radio, and even Nazi-era television. By 1956, however, the experiments of the early years had yielded results. Television staff were able to codify the lessons they had learned about the new technology, and did so in part to make a case for the political usefulness of television for their superiors in the State Broadcasting Committee and the SED. And, as DFF workers “invented” television, they became more adept at creating effective programming and reaching out to the small, but growing, audience. For their part, the audience had definite opinions as to what should appear on television, and they were not afraid to share them.

Although television was not yet nearly as powerful as radio or film, DFF workers had established that it was a very different kind of medium. For the DFF leadership, at least, television promised to participate in the revolutionary transformation of East German society. Still, at the outset of 1956, television remained the stepchild to radio broadcasting and the press, especially in the estimation of the SED. It was not until the geopolitical upheaval of 1956 that events transformed the SED’s vision of television and the medium’s potential contribution to SED politics. By 1960, television had emerged as one of the most important tools of mass political agitation of the SED.