Envisioning Socialism

Gumbert, Heather

Published by University of Michigan Press

Gumbert, Heather.
Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic.
As the Second Berlin Crisis reached a climax with the border closure of August 1961, East German authorities were in a position of renewed strength both in relationship to the West and in their relationship to their own citizens. The initial international diplomatic uproar over the Berlin Wall faded, but 13 August marked the beginning of a battle against dissent within the Republic. In particular, the drive to identify and root out border-crossers (Grenzgänger) had not only continued but gathered strength since 13 August. This campaign expanded to include other enemies of the state including so-called slackers (Bummelanten) and resulted in cases of outright repression of the population. For example, the State Prosecutor could detain those defined as “work-shy” for evaluation and rehabilitation. State authorities had allies in pursuing people identified as slackers or dissenters, while loyal FDJ members purged their troops of those who openly criticized the Wall, for example. Newspapers reported with approval malicious attacks on people for similar transgressions, and at least one person had to be admitted to the hospital. Some East Germans denounced their own coworkers for “insulting Comrade Walter Ulbricht” or calling for free elections. The airwaves were integral to this ideological battle. In the year after the construction of the Berlin Wall, government authorities worked on cutting off communication between East and West and making sure that East Germans could not watch Western television. Television officials reassessed the purpose and party line of broadcasts to ensure a politically more reliable program, and, at its most heavy-handed, the government simply banned programs from the airwaves.

In the political history of the GDR, the border closure and subsequent construction of the Berlin Wall is one of the quintessential examples of state repression of the population. Before it, people still had the relative freedom to
vote with their feet by emigrating to the West; after the Wall, they were simply held captive behind barbed wire and, later, a concrete wall. For some scholars, it was the events of June 1953 and August 1961 that truly forged the East German Republic, suggesting that the GDR existed only because of the force levied on the population living there. This is only part of the story. The Wall was a coercive instrument, but it was one of many tools used by the state to establish and maintain its power, disciplining the population to conform to socialism as defined by state authorities. In his book on the Berlin Wall Crisis, Patrick Major notes “the wall provided a literal ‘discipline blockade,’ but other ‘discipline mechanisms’ were available both before and after 1961, not least of which was the all-seeing secret police or Stasi, but also citizens’ own self-censorship.” At the same time, the state began to leverage the institutions of social power, key among them the party, labor, and education, to “incentivize” citizens to choose to conform. The institution of television, I argue, was chief among them. Hermann Weber has suggested that the crisis marked a shift in which “by adaptation to the constraints of a modern industrial society, the methods of rule in the GDR altered considerably: they shifted more and more from terror to neutralization and manipulation of the masses.” But what the study of television at this moment in time demonstrates is not simply the attempt to “neutralize,” “manipulate,” or even “incentivize” the population, but rather a much more complicated process of organizing consent.

In this chapter, I explore the strategies of coercion and consent mobilized by the state and the television service after 13 August. After the border closure the government began to reassess the value of the relative freedom of television signals between East and West Germany. Authorities reconsidered their program of explicitly targeting Western audiences with their own signals and, more important, considered ways to cut off the traffic in West-East television signals. But attempts to disrupt reception and even jam Western transmissions altogether—fairly plain examples of outright coercion—either never came to pass or made little impact on public behavior.

Despite this, such measures took on new life in narratives about the crisis of autumn 1961. On the face of it, changes to the political agenda for television broadcasting also exemplify top-down repression. Programmers increasingly intervened in the battle against “ideological border-crossing” and sought to further develop “class consciousness” and national pride. Prominent entertainers also succumbed to incidents of “censorship.” Finally, a good example of political repression of the television service seems to be the saga of Fetzer’s Flight, one of the world’s first television operas. Based on an award-winning East German radio play, it was an experimental production that broke narrative
Coercion and Consent in Television Broadcasting

conventions and used modernist visual devices to tell the story of one man’s conversion to socialism. The Agitation Commission censured it shortly after its premiere, setting off months of debate about how to represent socialism on television screens in the GDR and amplifying the larger debate raging among artists, state authorities, and audiences about the contours of the GDR’s new socialist national culture. The story of Fetzer has often been reduced to a case of simple political censorship, but the circumstances surrounding its censure are much more complex. In particular, they were shaped by an emerging consensus among programmers, government authorities, and viewers that defined television as a medium of light entertainment—a clear shift from the government’s vision of television in 1956.

Controlling the Airwaves

The Berlin Wall imposed a tangible barrier between the communist East and capitalist West, but one that did little to disrupt the transmission of ideas over the airwaves. By late 1961, though, authorities in the GDR sought to deepen the division by cutting off even this means of communication between East and West Germans. The DFF and Postal Ministry pushed back their plans to introduce a second television channel, previously intended to directly address the West German audience. In addition, the head of the Politburo’s Agitation Commission Albert Norden investigated the possibilities for curtailing broadcasting from the West. He explored the use of jamming transmitters (Störsender), which could interrupt television signals coming in from the West, and the potential for removing parts from existing receivers that allowed the reception of the West program. Technicians reported that, of these two strategies, the jamming transmitters had the greatest likelihood of success. They were relatively cheap and, politically, perhaps the most effective option, since they were least likely to elicit protest from—or even the attention of—the public. But, in the end, plans to use technology to deny the West German program to people in the GDR remained largely unrealized due to authorities’ reluctance to provoke widespread unrest over this issue. The only real option for state authorities was to exert moral pressure on television audiences.

The moral campaign against Western broadcasting hinged on attempts to convince people to not change the channel. But appealing to viewers in the clubhouses of the National Front or factory break rooms of the GDR had persistently failed. Then, in the first week of September 1961 authorities and activists set in motion the so-called Ochsenkopf Campaign (Aktion Ochsenkopf),
Fig. 3. GDR television’s reach into West Germany, 1962. Text on map reads: according to Bonn government information. BArch, Bild 183-A1204-0059-003/. (Photo: o.Ang.)
also known as the Blitz against NATO Transmitters (Blitz kontra NATO-Sender). This campaign sought to mobilize a mass movement of East Germans convincing their neighbors to reject West German and American media. Activists made arguments that equated listening to and viewing West media with letting the enemy into one’s own home:

What do you do with a burglar, who sets your home on fire and after that still wants to abuse your brother? . . . You wouldn’t ever willingly open the door for these bandits, settle down with them over a glass of wine or cup of tea to a peaceful “briefing”, knowing, as you do, their motives. . . . On 13 August we brought reason to the arsonists who wanted to transform our home into pile of ashes. . . . Now that the front door is locked, they try to get in through the back door. Their lying transmitters and channels have increasingly taken over the task of further preparations for war among our people.10

The Department of Agitation coordinated publicity for the campaign, contacting every major media outlet, from newspapers to radio and television. District leaders of the national youth organization Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend or FDJ) received a set of “talking points” in preparation for upcoming discussions with local residents, as well as instructions to report back on the details of those discussions, especially regarding who had been in attendance and the kinds of opinions they had voiced.11 FDJ members made the rounds of their communities, talking to television viewers and distributing pamphlets against West television. In some places, leaders went into the schools and led discussions about West television and radio, agitating against listening to RIAS and eliciting pledges from schoolchildren to renounce West media. In extreme cases, youths scrambled across rooftops removing antennas or adjusting them to hinder reception of Western signals.12

Press releases from the Department of Agitation and Propaganda applauded the success of the intervention. They described the work of the youth brigade Steinach, for example, which had renounced Western broadcasting, “Because we know that the class enemy wants to ideologically corrode the heart and brain through radio and television.” These youths’ antennae were tuned to socialism, claimed the Department of Agitation.13 Elsewhere in the Republic several hundred actual antennae had been readjusted; incorrigible television viewers had had their antennae forcibly removed. FDJ members in Gera distributed five thousand bumper stickers in support of the campaign with sayings such as “You’ll be smarter in a flash, if you try out our airwaves” and
“If you don’t want your mind to rust, turn your antennae to the east.” In Frankfurt an der Oder, groups of youths sought out people “known” to tune in to West shows and posted handbills on their front doors to draw their neighbors’ attention to their betrayal. According to the press release, “these measures were met with great approval among the people.”

But these were press releases and, as such, they were crafted to suggest the greatest possible success for the agitation campaign, despite the very real difficulties—and even failures—the campaign had suffered. Reports of measurable successes at the very least were matched by incidents of lukewarm success, but more often overwhelmed by examples of complete failure. Behind the scenes the Agitation Commission lamented that some districts took the task more seriously than others. In some places, people enthusiastically participated in the campaign even if they understood neither the issue nor how to approach the public about it. Leaders complained that many participants never grasped the principal task of the campaign. Activists were supposed to prevent “ideological border-crossing” by making the dangers of the West media clear through persuasive discussion. Instead, they approached it as a simple matter of repositioning antennae.

Many of the youths and their mentors in the FDJ refused outright to take part in the Aktion, which also hampered its success. In Neubrandenburg, for example, only 30 percent of the “troops” supported the campaign. Some youths argued that the campaign was an unnecessary attack on people’s individual rights to property and privacy. FDJ members of the Freienwalde District asserted, “we are not ready to help out in adjusting the antennae, because we can’t change anything about private property.” One youth from Halle asked: “How can I get to the antenna of someone who proves to be incorrigible? He could press charges against me. That is trespassing.” Another young woman declared simply that “whoever doesn’t want to see or hear the West, won’t turn it on.” Members of the FDJ and the larger public also defended their “right” to watch television, with arguments like “That is limiting my personal rights,” or “You don’t have the right [to do this].” Others took positions that directly challenged the state: “Then make a law about it,” challenged one, while others charged, “These are Nazi-methods.” Still others appealed to reason, downplaying the threat identified by the state, asserting, “The broadcasts are not so dangerous. We just want to listen to music,” or “one should be able to watch and listen to sports, music and entertainment,” and “one has to inform oneself from all sides.” Some criticized the East German “alternative” (“GDR Television must be improved”), implying that the problem would not exist if the DFF program were better. Thus, the campaign violated some citizens’ sense of eth-
ics and, unsurprisingly, put them on the defensive about their own viewing habits. Responses to the campaign also revealed gaps in the state’s attempts to transform East Germans’ worldviews. The program to create a national, socialist culture had been under way since at least 1958, but such comments reflect the tenacious persistence of the language and values of liberalism.

The Ochsenkopf campaign, however, achieved profound, symbolic power that far outpaced its actual impact during those first weeks of September. At the time, radio, television, and most newspapers, with the exception of the youth newspaper Junge Welt, did little to publicize the campaign. Even the Department of Agitation admitted that the campaign had raised awareness and stimulated discussion against the reception of West media, but it had not unleashed the anticipated mass uprising against the threat of RIAS. Thus the campaign could only be seen as truly successful if it were understood as simply the beginning of a long-term operation. Yet, the long-term outcome was not the one Agitation authorities had envisioned. Instead, their own press releases “produced” popular German and scholarly memory of the incident, ultimately “confirming” the view that the SED could not rule without terror: in one recent evaluation, for example, the Ochsenkopf campaign “showed that [the SED] was prepared to use overt intimidation, violence, and humiliation against members of the population involved in activities (such as tuning in to Western media) that it had arbitrarily condemned as being hostile to the state.” The campaign was ill conceived, haphazardly implemented, ineffective, and short-lived, yet people “remember” this having happened to them, their families, and friends, in far greater numbers than the incident involved. This has become part of a larger scholarly narrative of the lengths to which the SED was willing to go to repress the liberal legal and political rights of individuals, as well as the organs of communication. But there were other strategies, pursued more tenaciously, that held more consequential implications for organizing consent in the GDR.

The ideological battle set off by the 13 August crisis had implications not just for the television infrastructure but also for programming. Just like the Hungarian uprising of 1956, this crisis caught the DFF off-guard, and it was under pressure to continue to provide programming in an uncertain political climate. This time, though, the Department of Entertainment reacted quickly, organizing and transmitting a special broadcast of more than two hours that day that incorporated “news, commentary, entertainment, and film.” Later in the week, it staged an elaborate entertainment program, The Clock Strikes Thirteen (Nun schlägt’s dreizehn), broadcast from multiple locations that celebrated the border protection measures. At the Berlin People’s Theatre (Ber-
Heinz Quermann, the popular moderator of the variety show *The Laughing Bear*, interviewed construction workers who had helped erect the temporary barriers dividing East from West. Meanwhile, another well-known DFF personality, Erika Radtke, chatted with soldiers at the Brandenburg Gate, while perched on a National People’s Army tank. The Department of Television Drama could not adjust so quickly, hampered as it was by the longer production schedule of dramatic works. On the evening of the thirteenth, the DFF broadcast the department’s scheduled programming from the comic opera in Moscow; later in the week, they replaced scheduled dramatic programming with a well-known (and known to be politically reliable) television play, *Flight from Hell (Flucht aus der Hölle)*, first broadcast to critical praise in 1960.

What followed was a period of transition during which programmers, artists, Party officials, and even audiences reevaluated what was possible on television. It took weeks after the border closure for the various departments of the...
Coercion and Consent in Television Broadcasting 113

television service to produce revised schedules based on the new political situation. The new task of the DFF was to “deepen [the understanding of] the true power relationships, of the tangible defeat of German militarists,” and to emphasize the superiority of the GDR over the West. These goals shared clear continuities with the guiding principles of shows broadcast before the construction of the Berlin Wall, including renewed efforts to publicize the GDR’s peace plan and expose the Nazi pasts of powerful figures from the Federal Republic. But true to the aggressive campaign against dissent already under way, it was the tenor of the programming that changed. New, stronger language delineated the principles of a new program. Youth programmers noted that the action had demonstrated the state’s strength to wayward youths. Now, the task was to address their questions, which ranged from being cut off from the movies and pulp fiction available in West Berlin, to questions about the military draft and whether or not they would be required to shoot their own relatives in the course of military service. In the process, they would fight “ideological border-crossing” and develop class-consciousness.

These two, interrelated principles—preventing ideological border-crossing and inculcating class-consciousness—became the cornerstone of the program. Programming completed the transition from the representation of pan-German themes (geared toward preparing Germans for reunification on the basis of socialism in the early to mid-1950s) to the creation of a new, specifically East German consciousness. The department of entertainment programming pledged to produce programming that among other things “developed a new Heimatgefühl (national pride, patriotism).” This was a particular, militarized, patriotism: the department of television drama vowed to expose the “false ethos of general love of the Fatherland, togetherness, brotherhood, and pacifism.” Television in the GDR began to turn inward. The politics of demarcation took over the airwaves, even before the explicit statement of that goal in the National Document of 1962 and, ultimately, in the new constitution of 1968.

Social conditions during the crisis complicated—or sometimes cleared the way for—the task of switching ideological gears. Even as late as 1961, some DFF workers lived on the other side of the border in West Berlin and were now cut off from Adlershof. One prominent example was Gerhard Wollner, who portrayed one of the key personalities on the beloved entertainment program The Laughing Bear. Audiences first heard this long-standing program on the radio in 1954, and, after 1955, it was simulcast on East German television. It was a variety show conceived in the context of the June uprising of 1953 that sought through entertainment to bring more listeners to the project
of—at the time—German reunification on the basis of (socialist) democracy.\textsuperscript{36} It was one of the first shows the DFF had transmitted from outside of the studio. It featured artists from across Europe and employed three moderators, the so-called three \textit{Mikrophonisten}. Each moderator represented a Cold War constituent of Germany: Heinz Quermann represented East Germany, while Gustav Müller and Gerhard Wollner represented West Germany and Berlin respectively.\textsuperscript{37} Wollner, who lived in West Berlin, did not continue with the show after 13 August; he was replaced by Herbert Köfer, who became a well-loved television personality.

The show lost one of its most celebrated and well-liked characters in a very public way and, although other artists helped fill in the gaps, the show soon ran into a different set of difficulties. By February 1962, efforts were under way to discipline the remaining moderators’s humor. In one such incident, Quermann had written a gag capitalizing on a joke that was reverberating across the Republic. Television favorite Eberhard Cohrs had become so popular that he appeared on a number of different shows, including a musical variety show called \textit{Amiga-Cocktail}. In one episode of that show, Cohrs poked fun at the state system of food distribution. Coffee had become scarce in the GDR, and the state agency for trade had attempted to deflect criticism for the shortage of coffee beans by blaming Atlantic storms for cutting the GDR off from its Brazilian suppliers. Cohrs lampooned the shortage, announcing: “Now we’ll hear a coffee-bean song: ‘A ship will come.’" It was reportedly a deliciously naughty moment for the studio audience.\textsuperscript{38} Quermann prepared to refer to the incident in a subsequent episode of the \textit{Laughing Bear}, in a joke that played on the word \textit{Streuung} (“spreading” or “distribution,” but which could also mean “deviation”).\textsuperscript{39} The straight man in the bit engages in innocent wintertime small talk, asking about the \textit{Streuung} (here referring to salting of the roads). Through wordplay his partner turns it into a discussion of Cohrs’s “deviation.” The joke even goes further than Cohrs’s original infraction by suggesting that his “punishment” for this infraction was to work for the very agency responsible for the distribution problems.

The moderators hoped to capitalize on the buzz surrounding the incident, but the increasing visibility of television and its personalities brought programming more closely under the scrutiny of authorities and, as artists came into conflict with state goals, what was possible on television began to change. This particular joke caught official attention and was cut. Heinz Quermann, a hot property for the DFF who participated in a number of different programs, did not take kindly to the new strictures and began to threaten to quit the show. Herta Classen, director of the Berliner Rundfunk, took the matter up with
Quermann. For Quermann it was a matter of expectations, which were different on television than they were in other cultural venues across the Republic. He argued,

You imagine it’s so easy, for me to demand clarity and cultural-political progressiveness from the artists. . . . But these people travel the whole year long through the Republic and there is no state authority taking exception to the kinds of jokes they push out there. Now [the artists] say: one has to have taken part in the “Bear”, and then you know, what you can’t do.  

Quermann argued that the state set an impossible task for visiting artists—to divine the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable on television—when few of them had yet been on television. The standards of good taste and acceptable humor clearly varied depending on where and when these performers appeared elsewhere in the Republic. In their study of cabaret and satire, for example, Sylvia Klötzer and Siegfried Lokatis demonstrate that the size of the audience mattered: the smaller the venue in the GDR, the greater the freedom for political humor. Yet by this time, the “venue” of television was expanding exponentially. As television’s audience grew, so did its potential for challenging the government.

The problem for Quermann was not just the size of the venue, but also that the rules for acceptable humor were unstable and particularly unpredictable in the wake of the Second Berlin Crisis. In a letter written to the Department of Agitation later that month, he suggested regular meetings between state authorities and artists to clarify the boundaries, by discussing current topics such as:

What must Humorists know in future when it comes to jokes about women, mothers-in-law etc. in line with the communiqué “The Woman, Peace and Socialism” [which had been released by the Central Committee in January 1962]. . . . Indications must be given to what extent humor (heitere Muse) can intervene helpfully in certain things (special problems of agriculture, trade or industry). Frank details must also be given as to what topics at the time are best not dealt with publicly (for example problems of supply).

The bit about the “mothers-in-law” likely came from an encounter Quermann had with Gerhard Eisler, head of the Broadcasting Committee. Eisler had warned him to quit with the jokes about “our brave women” and “mothers-in-
law,” then summoned Quermann to his office to receive a copy of August Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism* for his edification. Thus, the tone of the letter suggests Quermann’s frustration with the absurdity of the situation, which could lead to very serious results for artists, especially freelancers without institutional support, who could not possibly be expected to keep up with the Party line. But Quermann did not directly challenge the right of state authorities to find certain jokes in poor taste; instead, he couched his criticism in terms of the difficulties facing artists and state authorities in putting together a mutually acceptable, politically reliable program. The mechanism for this was not top-down, state censorship, but through cooperative efforts between the artist and the state. Quermann finally warned that the point of these discussions was not to homogenize art, but to inform artists about real social problems to avoid mishaps in the future. The Department of Agitation agreed with Quermann’s suggestions and set the first meeting of the Central Committee and twenty-five freelance artists for the afternoon of 5 April 1962. State authorities did not simply exercise veto power over programming in development or on the airwaves. Instead, there was still room to work through thorny issues of acceptable taste collaboratively.

State authorities’ apparent tolerance was due, in part, to the tension between the desire to win audiences through increasingly popular television personalities, yet limit their power to undermine the state with their performances. The head of the Politburo’s Commission on Agitation and Propaganda, Albert Norden, wrote to Gerhard Eisler, Chairman of the State Broadcasting Committee, to express precisely this frustration:

Dear Comrade Eisler!

We can’t afford another appearance by Eberhard Cohrs in *The Laughing Bear*, as it happened last Wednesday. You know that I have discouraged the attempts to eliminate him. His current manner can only be understood as revenge for the attacks to which he was exposed. But it can’t go on like this. If he wants to feature only unpolitical humor (like the successful business with his driving)—He’s welcome! But when he shoots off political jokes and directs them *exclusively* against the GDR, then it’s obnoxious. On the other hand, we should do everything to keep this so extraordinarily loved comic. My suggestion: it would be great, if you would take a half an hour of your time to help him go beyond the tip of his nose to recognize the way things are in the whole of Germany and the world . . .
Norden clearly recognized the value in cultivating popular performers like Cohrs. The confrontations revealed in these documents suggest several important points about the status of television entertainment in the GDR. State authorities and television personalities alike were clearly aware of the importance of popular entertainers: on the one hand, Quermann was reportedly willing to use his reputation to push through his artistic vision. On the other hand, authorities as senior as Albert Norden recognized the desirability of keeping popular personalities like Quermann and Cohrs on the radio and television and were sensitive to the scandal that could erupt from what would be a very public dismissal. These incidents also demonstrate the complicated nature of censoring a live medium. A producer caught one “error” before it went on the air, but several others had to be “corrected” after the fact. It should be noted that this kind of “censorship” was not specifically socialist in nature but rather exemplified the problems live television posed to broadcasters in the GDR and elsewhere.49

The debates over television infrastructure and artistic license outlined here speak to the nature of SED control over television at what was a very specific period of crisis and transition. The consequences of 13 August included the discussion of direct efforts to limit the infiltration of Western ideology into the GDR. The SED considered authoritarian interventions to more tightly control East German society, including jamming Western broadcasts and forcing East Germans to accept a more circumscribed world of communication. Yet these measures remained mostly unrealized. Much more important and of greater long-term consequence for East Germans was a new focus on using—and shaping—television narratives to shore up political commitment to socialism. Programmers sought to work with a sharpened ideological message that focused on strengthening East Germans’ class-consciousness and discouraging ideological border crossing. But artists like Quermann had to experiment with what that looked like on screen. The following year, the broadcast of Fetzer’s Flight shifted the rules of the game once again, as audiences also began to define the shape of East German television narratives.

**Fetzer’s Flight**

In December 1962, the DFF celebrated its tenth anniversary with a schedule of special programming.50 Included on the agenda were two short television plays resulting from the collaboration of author Günter Kunert and director Günter
Stahnke. The first to premiere, on 13 December, was the television opera *Fetzer’s Flight*. The central figure of the show is an East German teenager who flees the GDR, murdering an innocent man in the process. Haunted by his crime and hunted by West German authorities, he takes no pleasure in the “freedoms” of the West and returns to the GDR. This was a television version based on an award-winning East German radio opera first broadcast in 1959. This version featured leading actors from the Berliner Ensemble and the “very best” musicians.\(^5\) Media critic Gisela Herrmann, spouse of Agitation Commissioner Joachim Herrmann, greeted the premiere with anticipation.\(^5\) So did Horst Knietzsch, correspondent for the national daily *Neues Deutschland*, who wrote, “(w)hat this collective is presently developing will certainly result in fodder for the discussion of the theme film-opera. But not only that; questions about the presentation of conflict in television films, image composition and montage will be raised. . . .”\(^5\) Despite widespread pre-broadcast acclaim, a groundswell of protest broke out soon after the broadcast leading to widespread public discussion among viewers, artists, members of the Agitation Commission, and eventually the SED leadership. In reaction to the furor, the DFF shelved plans to air Kunert and Günter Stahnke’s second television play *Monologue for a Taxi Driver* (*Monolog für einen Taxifahrer*),\(^5\) and Kunert and Stahnke reportedly “distanced themselves from the film.”\(^5\)

The *Fetzer* program demonstrates that what we have defined as political censorship is often actually the result of very different pressures. We see the ban on *Fetzer* as top-down censorship, but in fact something quite different was happening: the show broke down narrative conventions and used modernist visual devices, but it was really the inability of the show to tell a clear story that appealed to the viewer. Viewers began to claim the right to be entertained. Through such confrontations with the different, and not always competing, concerns of the state and the public, television began to emerge as *the* medium of socialist realism.

The saga of *Fetzer* began in 1959, when Günter Kunert and Kurt Schwaen began working on an opera together in honor of the tenth anniversary of the GDR.\(^5\) Kunert was a young poet, on his way to becoming an important contemporary German author. Kurt Schwaen, twenty years his senior, was an established composer of chamber music and orchestral works. Radio DDR broadcast the opera in the evening program on 30 July 1959.\(^5\) Contemporary reviews described it as a “work of contemporary art that went beyond just a radio show” and demonstrated that opera composed specifically for the radio was something new and different than the stage operas that had long been transmitted by radio.\(^5\) The radio version replaced “the visual elements of tra-
ditional opera... with acoustic ones,” “communicate(d) more with the radio audience,” and much more effectively interpreted feelings through just sound and word. Reviewers deemed it “the first socialist radio in Germany” and even “the first opera of socialist realism.” Fetzer went on to win recognition at an international competition of the International Radio and Television Organization of Eastern European states (OIRT), adjudicated by a jury headed by the renowned Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich. Cultural institutions in the GDR and abroad, including the State Opera and the DFF, approached Kunert and Schwaen to discuss producing the work.

Despite such positive attention, reviewers did have reservations about the radio opera. In general these had less to do with the music and language, and more to do with telling the story of Fetzer. Before the broadcast in July 1959, discussion of the opera at a press conference with members of the Association of German Artists (Verband deutscher Künstler, or VdK) was generally positive, though punctuated with some “carping” about Kunert’s libretto, described as text that “Brecht would have recognized,” in particular for its distancing effects. Later reviews of the work, sometimes written by the very same members of the VdK, amplified these concerns. It was “topical” and “of high artistic quality,” reviewers noted, but the opera was too “symbolic” and abstract, due, in part, to the use of a Greek chorus and a third-person narrator, typical Brechtian devices. Reviews also worried that the line between dream and reality was not always clear, muddying the message. Finally, Kunert had not “trusted the simple psychology of the story,” making it “overcomplicated,” and trying too hard to present Fetzer as a “typical story.” So Fetzer was widely acclaimed as inventive, but it pushed the boundaries of storytelling in radio a little too much.

Production of the radio version had been a fairly quick, painless affair, but that was not the case for the stage or the small screen. In March 1960, Schwaen still anticipated an April premiere for Fetzer in the State Opera, only to get bogged down over the course of the summer in a number of meetings with its head dramaturge, Werner Otto, on questions about the libretto. Otto complained that Fetzer was “too epic, too diegetic, [and] not dramatic” enough, so Kunert set about revising the opera to expand Fetzer’s backstory and include more characters associated with a “work brigade,” for example. The television production of Fetzer was a similarly fraught, though much more drawn out, two-year saga, during which Kunert, Schwaen, and the director Günter Stahnke—none of whom had worked in television before—chafed at the “shameful handling” of the negotiations on the part of the DFF.

Difficulties in negotiations with the DFF centered on two issues particular
to the television service and to the artists’ inexperience with the new medium: the working conditions of the television service and debates over content and representation. Kunert and Schwaen had worked together before and continued to do so after the Fetzer scandal, but they were just getting their feet wet in television. Stahnke had some experience with film, first as a film critic and, more recently, working as a director’s assistant for DEFA; he worked on Fetzer as a first-time director. As a result the three artists were perhaps unprepared for the conditions of working for television, especially, their status as independent contractors, DFF budget issues, and the very different production schedule. The artists had not expected to work for so long without a contract: Schwaen first signed a contract in January 1962, for example. They had also expected higher compensation. By February 1961, Stahnke and Kunert had received DDM 6,000 for a draft script; they proposed to complete the work for another DDM 4,000 apiece, which was about twice the price the television service was willing to pay for authorship.

The monies spent to produce the work dwarfed their honorariums—the DFF proposed a budget of DDM 100,000 just to film a test scene that would determine the fate of the television version of Fetzer, a stunning number for the artists, who had expected they could finish the whole film for that sum. Finally, the whole production took far longer than the artists had expected. The DFF notified the artists that it would delay the start of production until they had submitted a complete script with music. In February 1961, Schwaen was shocked to discover that the DFF’s production schedule would stretch into 1962, a full three years after the broadcast of the radio opera. Schwaen objected in his diary, “who would be interested in a project such as that?”

The second important issue of the negotiations had to do with telling Fetzer’s story. By this time, television staff had defined a number of rules they felt made effective television, rules that governed editing, narrative, and character development, for example. It was difficult for Kunert to adapt Fetzer to these rules, conceived as it was for radio. Indeed, by the end of the “scandal,” the most prominent conceptual difference that emerged seems to have been the problem of how to tell Fetzer’s story in a way that would appeal to an audience that was watching the story unfold. The radio production contextualized, described, and acoustically suggested Fetzer’s path but left the audience somewhat to its own imagination to envision the story. Television’s ability to show the audience Fetzer’s story called for a different treatment much more focused on character development. This was particularly important to DFF staff for two reasons: first, they argued that the central problem of the opera—Republikflucht in the late 1950s—“happily has been overcome” and was no
Coercion and Consent in Television Broadcasting

longer topical per se.\textsuperscript{70} Second, Fetzer was a murderer, and viewers needed a reason to root for him.

The wrangling began in July 1960, when the Department of Music and Dance requested extensive revisions to the script. DFF staff suggested expanding Fetzer’s backstory with detail that would be familiar to the television audience. Perhaps Fetzer had decided to leave the GDR because he had done something wrong within his work brigade, but it had never come to a resolution through collective debate, for example. They also thought the audience would not believe that West Germans would approve of the murder of a train conductor, suggesting that Kunert kill off a member of the People’s Police (\textit{Volkspolizei}) instead.\textsuperscript{71} These concerns were all about developing the central character in a way that television viewers would be able to suspend enough disbelief to both enjoy and be edified by \textit{Fetzer}. Despite this debate, the authors won out: the libretto of the television version changed little from the radio version, suggesting that, at some point, the authors went back to the original and left some of the more expansive elements of the story behind. This would prove a hollow victory.\textsuperscript{72}

In the months before the broadcast, the DFF was able to generate considerable buzz in the press. The DFF distributed admiring press releases in \textit{Fernsehdienst}, invited journalists to visit the set, and reached out to viewers through the television magazine \textit{Rundfunk und Fernsehen}. Sybill Mehnert, the reviewer at Stahnke’s former employer \textit{Junge Welt}, wrote that the film was “awaited with great excitement. . . . It is the first attempt of the DFF to grapple with the conflicts of our time with the means of modern opera.” She asked, “Will it succeed?”\textsuperscript{73} Most reviews offered a short synopsis of the opera (taken directly from \textit{Fernsehdienst}), and a few began the interpretive process for the viewer. Heinz Linde of the \textit{Wochenpost} described \textit{Fetzer} as a story about a young man who needs to decide for himself where he belongs. \textit{Fetzer}’s storied background—the fact that it had won recognition as a radio play, that the creative team of Kunert, Schwaen, and the cameraman Werner Bergmann were nationally decorated artists, and the high profile of the actors involved in the production, including Fred Düren, Gerry Wolff, Horst Kube, Erik S. Klein, Rudolf Ulrich, and Christel Gloger—inspired the press.\textsuperscript{74} Many reviewers anticipated the performance of Ekkehard Schall, a noted actor from the Berliner Ensemble and Bertolt Brecht’s son-in-law.\textsuperscript{75}

Part of the buzz surrounding the broadcast resulted from anticipation that \textit{Fetzer} would break with the conventions of both opera and television. In April 1962, when \textit{Fetzer} was still in production, critic Horst Knietzsch considered the possibilities: “knowledge of diffuse passages of the film doesn’t let any-
thing conclusive be said. But one thing that’s already noticeable is the desire of the contributors to overcome the conventions of film composition and to enrich the means of expression of film art.”76 Manfred Heidel of the Neue Berliner Illustrierte described the opera as “one of the boldest, most interesting and courageous experiments in the artistic area,” that was reimagining how to bring together image and sound on the small screen. Early reviewers suggested that perhaps a “new genre (was) being discovered for the small screen.”77 In the Wochenpost, Heinz Linde anticipated, “maybe—and we wish this for the entire collective from our hearts—[this is] a new way to emulate how one can make modern opera artistically convincing for film and television—or will it be an entirely new genre of dramatic musical?”78 Opera posed difficulties for screen productions because, unlike film and television (generally), it was non-naturalistic. Singing appeared to viewers as “grotesque mimicry,” destabilizing the reality effect that was so important to (especially) television programming. An earlier production of Fidelio had worked to minimize this effect simply by not showing the singers singing, a strategy the Fetzer production used as well. The choice to depict the actors responding silently rather than with their faces screwed up as they burst into song might have been one of the elements most noted in pre-broadcast reviews, but at the moment of reception it was one of the most startling (and, indeed, alienating) elements of the production for viewers nonetheless.79 It was one of a number of aesthetic choices that became contentious issues over the next month.

On 13 December 1962, viewers finally could judge for themselves.80 Before the broadcast, the buzz suggested that this was one television production that would meet widespread approval and admiration. Certainly, Fetzer had many of the elements of a good story: a protagonist faced a moral quandary and came to the “right” decision; the action was suspenseful and essentially composed of an extended chase scene; it allowed for a little bit of vicarious danger—embodied in the depiction of the decadent West—and, it even included a topless dancer (Astrid Much)—very risqué in comparison with contemporary programming in the FRG and the United States. Instead, Fetzer set off a wave of criticism that reverberated for several months, both fueling wider debates about the representation of socialism and pulling the television service into those debates.

Criticism began soon after the opera aired, coming from several quarters and growing quickly. The BZ Am Abend the following day described an audience of “curious onlookers” who were treated to a “terrifically successful” piece, especially due to the efforts of Schwaen, Stahnke, Bergmann, and the
actor Ekkehard Schall, while lamenting it had “stirred the reason, but not the emotion.” But some viewers were much less generous. One viewer wrote to the *Berliner Zeitung*, “to come right to the point, we, me and four other people who watched it were very bored by it. Colleagues with whom I talked about it today said it’s not understandable why people would give this to us . . . we are of the opinion that this piece did nothing for the esteem of the DFF.”

Later that week, Kurt Schwaen was scheduled to speak at the State Opera. He was unhappy to report, “everything went great [until] finally we were supposed to talk about *Fetzer* as agreed. The opinion was negative; nobody liked it.” Werner Otto, who had earlier negotiated with Kunert and Schwaen to bring *Fetzer* to the stage of the State Opera, “liked it least.” Schwaen defended the work “but it was hopeless to achieve something here.” He left exasperated and disappointed “although there was lots of applause.”

Negative criticism rarely touched the music, but Schwaen closely followed the debacle. By the end of December, he believed that the rising din of criticism in the press had reached the level of a “smear campaign.” “Vicious criticisms of the opera . . . irrelevant, insulting, sycophantic. . . . Nauseating,” particularly in the *Berliner Zeitung* and *BZ Am Abend*, incensed him.

He wrote an open letter to the *BZ Am Abend*, expressing his great surprise at the paper’s coverage of *Fetzer*, given that its reviews of the radio opera from July 1959 had deemed it “contemporary material in a partisan artistic form of top quality.” For Schwaen, the press had begun to shovel “buckets of dirt and viciousness made worse through stupidity and arrogance,” which was compounded by colleagues from the VdK who had begun to use the “old vocabulary” of socialist realist criticism: “decadence,” “cool, without emotion.” He was similarly exasperated that Radio in the American Sector (RIAS) was reporting the *Fetzer* debacle as an example of SED repression of artistic expression.

The day following the *Fetzer* broadcast, the Agitation Commission made it clear to Adameck that this was not the sort of programming that belonged on East German television. Adameck appeared on television two days later to openly apologize. It was a failed experiment, he conceded, since the audience was having difficulty with the aesthetic components of the opera: “understandably, nothing unintelligible is desired, in the music, or in the whole method of composition.” Music, for example, “must stay in the ear . . . ” it should be “folksy (volkstümlich) and melodic.” But the rising hue and cry in the press and among viewers convinced the Commission that more had to be done to head off further public debate. They asked Walter Baumert, an up-and-coming DFF director, to publicly disavow the opera. The result was a screed pillorying
Envisioning Socialism

Fetzer in the national daily *Neues Deutschland*. “The results were staggering,” Baumert wrote. “The masses of the television public reacted with uncharacteristic great disgust” at the fatalist and abstruse work of an unbelievable, limited chump and hardened criminal . . . For 54 minutes one asks oneself despairingly how the author expects one million workers before the television screen, who devoted their honest strength to the building of socialism, with any seriousness to identify the schizophrenic figure of a murderer with their own comrades, colleagues and friends.91

Fetzer was hardly the positive hero the authorities hoped to see in socialist productions. Baumert’s critique followed same general narrative as the wider criticism in the press. What made this critique different was the fact that a television “authority” wrote it, invoking incredibly vehement language that both damned and dismissed the show, and the fact that it appeared in the “Party paper” *Neues Deutschland*. The piece sought to demonstrate to the television audience that the DFF and the Party were aware of, and agreed with, such criticisms. Baumert further promised that the DFF would “continue to follow the path we’ve taken with such works as *Revolt of the Conscience, Naked among Wolves* . . . and *The Blue Light*,” which had been much more popular with audiences. Three days later the DFF “apologized” in a completely different way: an episode of the variety show *The Laughing Bear* lampooned Fetzer when the moderators presented an old, broken-down bicycle to the audience, asking what could be done with this useless relic. Their answer was to pour vanilla sauce over it, put it on display, and call it “Fetzer’s Flight.”92 It was a small moment, but it played out in a huge forum—a show that broadcast on television and radio through the Republic—sending a clear message to the audience about the future of television entertainment.

Pre-broadcast press reviews heralded Fetzer’s premiere as a great new experiment in television opera and a true-to-life account of the tribulations of living on the front lines of the Cold War, but the broadcast challenged audiences with its stark music and images and complex structure.93 The opera began with a decisive warning shot of bold trumpets and staccato piano and a fade in to the bright lights of West Berlin at night. Flashing neon lights advertise shoes, women’s hose, furniture, currency exchange, and the department store C&A. Fetzer appears, glancing anxiously over his shoulder. The neon seems to follow, dwarf, and overwhelm him. A man in a car watches; his car
telephone betrays him as an agent of the West German government. The music is too frantic to be jaunty and seems to chase after Fetzer. Fetzer evades the West German agents, hiding behind a neighborhood café. Safe, he continues on, comes upon a fishing boat, asks for shelter. His fear of the police gets the better of him, and he tells his story to the fishermen.

At this point, the program tells Fetzer’s story in a series of flashbacks. Hanging out by the train tracks, Fetzer hopped a train going West on a whim. He faced his first moment of decision when confronted by the train driver: he would not “let (Fetzer) slip through” (the border) and, after a short struggle, the driver fell to his death on the tracks. Having crossed the border, Fetzer found himself wandering among the neon lights of West Berlin. He lived in close quarters in a refugee camp, where his nightly dreams were so vivid that they raised suspicion among his bunkmates. The police investigated and, learning of his crime, they offer him two choices. He could “confess” that he had killed for his freedom, be held up as a hero and propaganda symbol for the freedom of the West, and live the life he had come to West Germany to live, or he could refuse and face a pauper’s death. In this second decisive moment, Fetzer goes along with the authorities, and they outfit him with the riches of the West: a leather jacket, evenings at the cocktail bar. Having convinced himself of the rectitude of his ways, he is taken by surprise when Gesa, the wife of the train driver, arrives at the camp to confront him with his crime. Faced with his guilt, Fetzer leaves camp in the middle of the night, with the West German authorities in hot pursuit. He finds the fishermen and takes refuge on their boat. Having told his story, Fetzer finally decides to return to the GDR and rows for home with one of his confessors.

In telling this story, the production team made many convention-breaking aesthetic decisions that were unfamiliar on television, and perhaps even for the average filmgoer. The narrative is complicated: Fetzer’s Flight tells two stories— that of Fetzer’s flight from the GDR and that of his flight from the West German authorities. These two stories are woven together so that the narrative unfolds out of chronological sequence. The opera uses a framing device: it begins and ends with Fetzer’s flight from the West German authorities, and includes flashbacks to this narrative throughout. But only the first of these flashbacks is indicated through the use of a fade. Otherwise, the present and past narratives are fairly seamlessly intertwined. There is also a short scene depicting the explosive aftermath of an atomic bomb blast that appears toward the end of the film without warning or, seemingly, reason (but which was meant to suggest the imminence of nuclear catastrophe). This narrative flow
was very different from contemporary televisual storytelling, which relied heavily on an orderly sequence of shots to make the dramatic action understandable to viewers.

The discontinuous narrative was one of many modernist and “distancing” effects the production used in the camerawork, editing style, and mise-en-scène. For example, Stahnke used point-of-view shots that forced the audience, used to voyeuristically observing television action from behind the fourth wall, to take Fetzer’s place during his most traumatic experiences. We see this during his struggle with the train conductor (played by Fred Düren), when Düren “fights” with the camera, for example, and when Fetzer fearfully boards the fishing boat, in a high-angle shot as the camera unsteadily descends the boats’ steps toward the fisherman seated at his dinner table. Viewers, used to watching an orderly sequence of medium and close-up shots of people and their faces, were instead confronted with a seemingly random flow of shots, often in extreme close-up, of feet, hands, clothing, and even inanimate objects.

Fig. 5. Broadcasting the tenth anniversary program of the DFF, December 1962: Fetzer “dreams” of the West. *Fetzers Flucht* (dir. Gunter Stahnke, 1962), frame capture.
around which the action took place, most notably lamps, light bulbs, and lanterns. Stahnke used high- and low-angle shots, intensifying the mood of fear or menace in particular scenes (as above). Some scenes were shot askew; in some shots, parts or the entirety of the actors’ heads lay outside the film frame. Superimposed images suggest Fetzer’s innermost thoughts: when Fetzer imagines the West, for example, the screen is filled by an extreme close-up of his right eye, over which images are superimposed of him and his expensive car, or surrounded by beautiful women, representing the riches of the West. The editing style was differently paced than most contemporary television, with both long and increasingly rapid short cuts, smash cuts, and a disorienting circling swish pan.95

There were many other startling shots that similarly broke the “rules” of televisual representation as they had been developed over the past decade, creating visually stunning—or deeply confusing—tableaux. Stahnke used rear projection to alienate Fetzer from the onscreen action. In the very first scene,
Stahnke projected a film consisting of short, two- or three-second shots from a variety of perspectives of the lights of West Berlin by night. At first it seems to be a conventional establishing shot, but then Schall steps onscreen in front of it, appearing literally overlaid onto the changing street scene and destabilizing the established perspective. Schall’s figure is entirely out of scale and synchronization with images appearing behind him. Later, Stahnke used mirrors to capture and complicate the action of the story. When Fetzer tries on his new leather jacket, for example, what might have been a one-shot of Schall is actually a four-shot: a double paneled mirror revolves out of a wall cabinet, and, in the left-hand side of the frame, we see Schall with his back turned; in the middle third of the frame we see Schall and Rudolf Ulrich (the Western agent) reflected in the mirror face forward; in the right-hand third of the frame Schall appears alone, face forward, reflected in the second mirror. Not just Fetzer’s conscience, but also the representation of his person is split by his dilemma.

The production amplified Fetzer’s psychological state—his uncertainty, fear, and isolation—through the mise-en-scène as well. Sets were very spare, establishing a stark, inhospitable mood. Exterior locations, such as the cobbled road down which Fetzer flees the West German authorities, the river location where the crew shot the boat scenes, and the courtyard of the refugee camp, were stark, barren, late winter landscapes, often filmed in wide-angle shots in which the horizon could not be seen, a very claustrophobic style. Other “exterior” locations, such as the train wagon where Fetzer struggled with the train driver or the neighborhood café, were conspicuously interior sets. The “train wagon” was a large, wagon-sized wooden box filled with “coal bricks” swaying in the rhythm of a moving train. The café was little more than a simple structure on a soundstage, a fact easily betrayed by the plywood floor (visibly nailed down) and urban skyline silhouette constructed in the background. (We know it is a café in part because Fetzer takes a moment to gaze ambivalently through the window at the petit-bourgeois gnawing his wurst and drinking his pils—a character sketch that could have been straight out of George Grosz’s 1919 work Germany, a Winter’s Tale.) Interior sets, such as the refugee camp quarters or cabin of the fishing boat, were similarly spare, but much closer, cramped spaces, expressing Fetzer’s sense of confinement. Modest curtains and a simple table gave the barest indication of the purpose of Gesa’s quarters, while the “shop” where Fetzer acquired his leather jacket consisted of no more than walls, mirrors, and a chair. These choices were not taken simply to make the most of few resources but rather were aesthetic decisions that focused the audience’s attention away from the plot of the work and toward the implications of the characters’ thoughts and actions. Of course, they were also per-
fectly suited to the conditions of early television, when simple set details transmitted much more effectively than cluttered, large-scale sets.

Such aesthetic choices may have been thoughtful attempts to compel viewers to empathize with Fetzer and experience the cold and desolate alienation from the homeland, but this narrative style was new and unfamiliar, making it difficult for audiences to know how to respond. Post-broadcast reviews charged that the production had paid too little attention to establishing and developing individual characters, their origins, intentions, and motivations. This “weakness” resulted from a number of factors ranging from the acting style to the confrontation of the conventions of opera with those of television. The acting was incredibly restrained, even cold. Christel Gloger (Gesa) shows no emotion when she realizes Fetzer murdered her husband, nor when she confronts him in the camp. Horst Kube (the fisherman) is stony-faced and appears threatening or sympathetic only due to context. As noted above, song replaced “dialogue,” though the audience almost never sees the actors singing. Indeed, we often do not see their mouths or even their faces, but rather eyes and noses, or hands on cigarettes, bricks, and other inanimate objects. Given these conditions, Fred Düren and Ekkehard Schall (the conductor and Fetzer, respectively) achieved great rapport in their short scene together, a testament to their abilities to communicate emotion without much “acting” at all. There is only one moment in the opera when the audience can see an actor singing—the West German agent is speaking to Fetzer—but rather than allowing the audience to identify more fully with that character, it further disrupts the “reality effect,” especially since the actor, Rudolf Ulrich, breaks the fourth wall and sings directly into the camera. The effect is incredibly jarring: it does not appear “real,” an effect heightened by the fact that the sung words were not synchronized with the image of the actor singing.

The innovative narrative style and camera work, the austere, minimalist mise-en-scène, and the seemingly dumb and uncommunicative nature of the characters were all elements of the opera discussed with enthusiasm in pre-broadcast cast reviews, but once realized on-screen were deemed too inaccessible, too pitched to the audience’s “reason” and not their “emotion.” Critics and viewers wondered how Fetzer came to his decisions. This suggested, in part, that the narrative flow confused them: after all, Fetzer already made all his choices before the narrative even begins, and the opera is a tale of what happened afterward—of his flight from the West German authorities and the retelling of his story to the sympathetic fishermen. That structure was not necessarily clear after one viewing, however. The opera, then, contravened a number of contemporary conventions. It did not offer a conventional story, and it told
that story without the emotion or pathos viewers had come to expect of melodramatic screen narratives. The production relied not on naturalistic enactment (action and dialogue), but on images and the chorus, a modernist mise-en-scène, and experimental editing to express the thoughts, emotions, and deeper meaning of the drama. Contemporary television relied on the "reality effect" to make the story intelligible and draw the audience in, but Fetzer was built around subverting reality effects.

Scholarly critique of the events that led to the censure of Fetzer and the banning of Monologue for a Taxi Driver has argued that the affair was, above all, about political ideology. Günter Agde and, more recently, Henning Wrage have described the wave of letters to the press and the DFF as a campaign "obviously organized ... by the higher echelons" of the SED because the Party faithful did not like the politics of Fetzer.99 For Agde, the plot of Fetzer dealt with material that was "politically suspect"; even the representation of crossing a border, which was impossible for many East Germans at the time, was impossible for the SED to accept. For Peter Hoff, it was inconceivable that a program about Republikflucht—taboo, after the Wall—could be broadcast "just sixteen months after the construction of the Berlin Wall."100 He argues that there was enough ambiguity in the play that government officials could not be sure that audiences would not identify with the Fetzer who chose to leave and not the Fetzer who renounced that choice. There is a related school of thought that the decision to censor the opera and their second play, Monologue for a Taxi Driver, came from Walter Ulbricht himself, the very next day.101 By this account, Fetzer’s fate had everything to do with timing: the plot was inopportune, and the broadcast occurred at a moment when artistic experiments drew unwanted attention. In fact, it took some time for the DFF to make this decision: they continued to advertise Monologue—not just in the television magazine sent out to viewers, but also through press releases that continued through the middle of December.

But the politics of Fetzer could be said to be true: it dramatized and celebrated values promoted by the SED at least since the "Ten Commandments" of 1958, for example.102 Both the textual and visual message of the opera reinforced those values. The film set the tone from the very opening shots, in which Fetzer runs, apparently frightened, from the bright lights of the capitalist West. An almost identical scene later on (in flashback), in which Fetzer drinks in this spectacle this time with curiosity, only amplifies the viewers’ sense of Fetzer’s fear: once fascinated, Fetzer now “knows better” and has to find a way to return home. In the end, according to the narrator and the chorus, Fetzer “recognizes himself as his own enemy” and decides to turn himself in for his crime, in the
process “liberating himself” by returning to the GDR. *Fetzer* even passed one early political test with flying colors: the head of the DFF, Heinz Adameck, a member of the Central Committee, reportedly “loved” it.\textsuperscript{103} Henning Wrage agrees. For Wrage, though, that is all the more evidence that “the GDR nomenclature often persecuted precisely those who believed in the socialism of the land in the most engaged way.”\textsuperscript{104}

In his encounter with television, Kunert’s situation exemplifies the growing power of television to define the way socialism could be envisioned in the GDR. Similar criticisms were flying in literary quarters, for example, and literary censors even denied publication of some of Kunert’s poems in the early 1960s. (They were later published in revised form.)\textsuperscript{105} But literary scholar Holger Brohm argues that Kunert’s troubles with the state would have dissipated, were it not for the television version of *Fetzer*. The *Fetzer* affair, of course, was a blow to Kunert;\textsuperscript{106} even so, it was not the end of his literary life in the GDR. He went on to publish extensively in the GDR and the West, and he continued to contribute passionately to artistic debates in other GDR cultural forums, notably the explosive “poetry debate” of 1966 that splashed across the pages of *Forum*\textsuperscript{107} For literary scholar Ingrid Pietrzynski, Kunert was a “master” of the medium of radio. She writes, joyfully, “with increasing confidence, he conquered artistic forms of representation and experimented with the use of different artistic media,” and laments that the debacle over the television version of *Fetzer* reshaped Kunert’s art. He left the legacy of Brecht—didactic theater and “erzieherpose” (educator position)—behind, and his work was no longer “future-oriented” and “utopian.”\textsuperscript{108}

As Wrage and Pietrzynski have argued, Kunert indeed seems to have been deeply engaged in questions of cultural identity and socialism in the GDR. And I would argue that *Fetzer* was a stunning piece of work, narratively, structurally, and visually.\textsuperscript{109} But within the emerging television culture of the GDR, being committed was not enough: it was instead about what came across the television screen. For the state, it was about managing the ways in which socialism was understood and envisioned by the audience. In other arts in the 1960s, it was possible to allow debates to circle around the same issues of representation, alienation, and narrative for years, with little movement on the part of the artists.\textsuperscript{110} But television could not operate that way. It was constrained by the demands of the production schedule, available resources, and the inexorable, relentless demands of the transmission schedule—television had to be on the air. Artists also had to concede that television productions emerged out of collective authorship (in which authors, but also producers, technicians, programmers, and others shaped the production), to a degree not
seen in most other arts. And, finally, television reached too large an audience to “flop” or to engage in effective debate. Kunert has suggested that he was attacked by “people who didn’t have the faintest idea of art and literature,” and that a much more productive critique could have come from a discussion in which viewers, critics, director, composer, and author could all take part.\(^{111}\)

That is likely the case. But what that demonstrates is that, by this time, television had come to be defined differently than as a medium of high “art” and debate. Television disciplined artists like Kunert—and Stahnke, who spent the rest of his career working in light drama (heitere Dramatik), later earning the “Chaplin prize” for entertainment television.\(^{112}\) Fetzer, and experiments like it, could have revolutionized cultural debate and identity in the GDR, not to mention the way we think about television in the West. But it did not. Instead, it mediated the “loss of the Lehrauftrag (educative mission)” in the drive for a socialist, national culture.\(^{113}\)

Fetzer’s crime was that it contravened the aesthetic “rules” of contemporary television. Agde admits that the overwhelming majority of the contemporary television audience preferred more traditional narrative styles and programming. Viewers responded to the “reality effect” and narrative conventions of melodrama that were central to contemporary television, so it was important that the story be told in a certain way, with a clear narrative, context, and character development. With its achronological timeline, the narrative was confusing and perhaps even, as one viewer suggested, “boring.”\(^{114}\) It is meaningful that seasoned media critics remained measured, even laudatory, even after the public outcry had gained momentum.\(^{115}\) One reviewer claimed: “The television film opera Fetzer was not ordinary. The screen has been drooling for such intensive and dramatic creative power of the camera. Ekkehard Schall’s expressive face, caught by the masterful camera was fascinating.” But less knowledgeable critics described Fetzer as underwritten, overstylized, conventional, confusing, banal, and “pantomime with music.”\(^{116}\) While the radio opera had begun with a long chorus setting the context of the story—the Cold War division of Germany—the television opera instead presented a work that was more a suspenseful story of a fugitive from West German authorities, told in a way audiences had difficulty following.\(^{117}\) In (melo-)dramatic television programming, character development allowed audiences to care about (not to mention follow) the story, but viewers and reviewers found this lacking. Kunert’s and Stahnke’s negotiations with the DFF had been so difficult in part because DFF staff anticipated that these were the areas that audiences would criticize, and they were right. At the time, Fetzer did not make good television: audiences did not necessarily understand or like it, which they expressed vociferously in letters to newspaper editors, letters to television service, and, in some cases, even
in discussion with the artists themselves. M.L. of Lichtenberg wrote to the Berliner Zeitung, “I kept asking myself how it could’ve come to this performance? How could such important actors be available? What exactly did the author and director think as they were preparing this performance. . . .”\textsuperscript{118} A viewer from Hohenleipisch wrote to the television magazine that the opera succeeded through its direction, artwork, and acting achievements, especially those of Ekkehard Schall, but “the narrative, the music, the singing—no I didn’t like that. I expected something completely different . . . [from] the term opera.”\textsuperscript{119} That this viewer could not accept this as an opera exemplifies why the tropes and conventions of narrative forms matter. A viewer from Dresden spoke directly to the formalism debate, describing \textit{Fetzer} as “crass monkey business”:

Forty years ago in Dresden there was a student organization that called itself the Dadaists . . . The public was ready for an end to this Dadaist phantom already after ten minutes. Compare this to the television opera \textit{Fetzer} . . . We workers have the right and the duty to raise the sharpest protest against it after a day of hard work we wish to see an edifying evening of entertainment, but not the products of the handful of surrealists, that waste our intellectual and material people’s goods and give offense in such a punishing way. In addition, those at the DFF should think to themselves . . . our shows are also seen abroad and in West Germany.\textsuperscript{120}

The latter viewer was particularly incensed by the “dadaist” and “surrealist” nature of the piece, rejected the non-socialist realist socialist past, and claimed his right as a worker to be “entertained.” It is possible that, as Wrage and Agde suggest, letters such as this came not from viewers but were instead “planted” by government authorities. But that would not change the way the letters defined the “problem,” nor that they both drew from and fueled wider discourse about what “socialist” television should accomplish. This was not the first time the DFF had heard the call for entertainment after a hard day’s or week’s work; the DFF viewership had demanded that sort of entertainment since at least the mid-1950s, and this demand had come to shape both the DFF staff’s and, as we will see in the next chapter, the SED’s definition of effective television.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Second Berlin Crisis opened a period of cultural ferment during which artists, government officials, cultural organs, and audiences probed the limits
of the SED’s new socialist, national culture, gradually delineating its contours. Early discussions of outright repressive tactics, including jamming Western signals or otherwise preventing “ideological border-crossing,” were deemed ineffective and left unimplemented. The GDR would have to rely on the appeal of its own program. To that end, authorities paid new attention to the messages and overall appeal of the DFF program. The DFF, which had, since the 1950s, worked hard just to put a full schedule of programming on the air, had finally reached a point at which they could experiment with television aesthetics and form. Experiments like Fetzer exploded the conventions of classical narrative storytelling and demonstrated new ways that the visual could be exploited on television. Unhampered by the conventions of traditional formats like the quiz show or the crime thriller, such programming could be revolutionary, reshaping the way (East) Germans saw the world and, in this way, could contribute to the state’s mandate to engage audiences in the construction of a new socialist culture in the GDR. But the DFF had managed to achieve this in a context of increasing ideological conformity, and the furor over Fetzer exemplifies the state in which this program of revolutionary change found itself after the Berlin Wall. Now that the border was closed, the state turned inward and encouraged East Germans to do the same. The balance between ideological commitment, so important to the campaign to build socialism in the late 1950s, and ideological conformity had shifted in favor of the latter. Fetzer did not fail at being ideologically reliable, but it did fail to be ideologically effective—to be comprehensible to and popular with the audience. Vigorous, public criticism led to calls for more “relaxing” and “entertaining” fare. This is an important distinction to make, because scholars and the lay public alike assume that censorship scandals such as Fetzer and Monologue happened because the state simply banned outright works it found unacceptable. Here, by contrast, is an example of an unsuccessful program that never aired again because it was palpably unpopular, not because it was politically suspect.