Envisioning Socialism

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Chapter 6

Reaching Consensus on Television

In August 1961, just days before the construction of the Berlin Wall and while the DFF was still working out the final storyline for Fetzer, the department of television drama of the DFF filmed the final scene of a new mini-series, Revolt of the Conscience (Gewissen in Aufruhr). Hans Oliva wrote the script based on Rudolf Petershagen’s widely read memoir of the same name published first in 1956. In five parts, the story followed the life of Nazi officer Ebershagen. The series began with the battle of Stalingrad, which Ebershagen barely survived, and continued with his decision to surrender the city of Greifswald to the Red Army without a fight in the spring of 1945. His eventual return from postwar captivity to become a champion of German unity was followed by his subsequent arrest and “show trial” at the hands of American intelligence officers, and, finally, his ideological conversion and decision to settle in the GDR.

The series aired in September 1961, one month after the construction of the Berlin Wall. It featured a large cast, including Bruno Carstens and Alexander Papendieck, familiar to television audiences from their roles in the crime thriller The Blue Light, which may help to account for its wide popularity among East German audiences. It was also released widely in the eastern bloc and found receptive audiences in Cuba, Sweden, and Austria. In 1962, it appeared on Soviet television screens. Soviet television scholar Alexander Prokhorov argues that Revolt revolutionized Soviet television producers’ approach to serial production and its role in structuring leisure time. He writes that, for Russian TV critic Sergei Muratov, “Gewissen in Aufruhr created a shock: ‘We simply did not know that a film can last five evenings in a row’ . . . [A]n entire week’s schedule could be organized not only around work, but also around television programming—the screening of a mini-series.” Unlike Fetzer, then, Revolt found acclaim among audiences and state authorities in the Department of Agitation and Propaganda, the Politburo, and beyond. It became the standard by which the value of other DFF programs was measured. In the GDR and elsewhere, Revolt facilitated the emergence of television as a medium not just of information but of leisure and entertainment as well.
That *Revolt of the Conscience* would enjoy such success was not self-evident in the summer of 1961. It had taken the author and dramaturge Wenzel Renner some time to find a home for the project. Producers at the East German film studio DEFA were torn about the political implications of the plot—it is a story in which the hero was a (former) Nazi officer—and a similar narrative had led to fierce discussions several years earlier with the release of DEFA’s *The Devil’s General*. That story had also presented a situation in which viewers could identify with military insubordination in an era in which GDR authorities were trying to build the National People’s Army. In the end, the Politburo struck the *Revolt* script from DEFA’s plan. But the material interested television producers, who felt that it could appeal to the pan-German audience and who had the relative freedom to adopt such a screenplay. When the series aired in September 1961, the broadcast became an event unmatched by any previous television program. Despite DEFA’s early fears, *Revolt of the Conscience* even appeared in cinemas: the DFF released a two-part version in movie theaters, to reach viewers who did not yet have access to a television set.

The making and ultimate success of *Revolt of the Conscience* represented a watershed in the shifting political status of the television service in the GDR. The steady development of the medium in the 1950s had led the SED to recognize that television was a “new and meaningful political-cultural factor” in the GDR, but had done little to prove its ideological power in a palpable way. *Revolt of the Conscience*’s striking success made the advantages of television apparent in dramatic fashion: it could reach more people, more quickly than any other medium in the Republic. The faulty reportage of the Hungarian uprising had demonstrated to government authorities the potential power of disseminating their own message through television to meet the Western challenge in 1956. The success of *Revolt of the Conscience*, by contrast, compelled SED authorities to discover the potential for reaching the domestic viewing audience, increasingly drawn to television in droves. It also contributed to an emerging consensus about how best to depict socialism on screen. Both *Fetzer* and *Revolt* told stories of socialist conversion, but in very different ways. *Fetzer* gave rise to debates about television aesthetics, narrative form, and the “new hero” of socialism, a term coined to refer in a disparaging way to characters such as the *republikflüchtige* Harry Fetzer. By contrast, *Revolt of the Conscience* found acclaim for “bringing the past to life” in a “realistic” and “convincing” work that made viewers feel that Erwin Geschonneck (playing Ebershagen) “had actually lived through” the events depicted.

That viewers and others identified precisely this distinction between the
two programs both fueled and reflected a larger debate going on in Party conferences and in the Agitation Commission, which continued to roil the DFF in the early 1960s. Artistic works like *Fetzer*, but also plays, poetry, and even industrial design, troubled the SED for their depiction of socialism and, especially, “the new socialist man.” At the Sixth Party Congress, Walter Ulbricht, Kurt Hager, and others disparaged the state of the East German arts: in their haste to liberalize (due to ongoing destalinization), artists were ignoring all that socialism had accomplished. GDR artists were not alone in this. In May 1963, Czech artists convened the “Kafka Conference,” with participants from across the eastern bloc and the West. The conveners sought to rehabilitate the author and, more widely, the legacy of modernism as avenues for a new socialist culture. Indeed, it set off a new wave of liberalization in certain parts of the eastern bloc, especially Czechoslovakia—but not in the GDR.

Between August 1961 and December 1965, the battle against the progressive socialist artistic past was won on East German television screens. The public response to *Fetzer* and government pronouncements on the “right” direction for cultural activity shaped internal debate about the direction of future television productions. Where the “rules” for television had been fairly fluid and unstable in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the larger debate delineating the acceptable contours of socialist national culture now produced narrative stability on East German television. This narrative stability coalesced around new types of programming that left the televisual aesthetics of the 1950s behind, fully embracing the “live” potential of television, while telling stories of East German socialism in a way that appealed to both audiences and political authorities. New programs told a certain kind of story about the lived experience of socialism. There were conversion stories, such as *Revolt* and, later, *Dr. Schlüter*. But increasingly the DFF focused on the problems and triumphs of viewers’ everyday lives, in the topical “investigative” program *Prisma* and light entertainment programming such as *With Open Hearts*, for example. Following up the success of *Revolt of the Conscience*, the release of the historical mini-series *Dr. Schlüter* in 1965 made television a role model for other GDR media. During the Eleventh Plenum of 1965, where Honecker and Ulbricht excoriated GDR cultural institutions, television escaped relatively unscathed, and *Schlüter* received rare praise. Television had become the preeminent medium of socialist realism in the GDR. By the end of the decade though, the exigencies of the television industry had begun to take their toll. Increasingly, the DFF relied on programming produced elsewhere with unexpected consequences for the socialist national project.
Disciplining “Socialist” Culture

Although *Fetzer* triggered one of the most important controversies ever to beset the television service, it was but one work caught up in a much larger controversy already unfolding over socialist values and how best to represent them in socialist art. The Fifth German Art Exhibition opened in September 1962, for example, exhibiting new, modern, socialist design. Walter Ulbricht complained about the “grey-ness” on display.\(^\text{10}\) In October, the Academy of the Arts hosted a *Lyrikabend*—an evening reading of new poetry. The evening re-invigorated poetry. Over the next few months a number of other similar events took place, drawing large, enthusiastic audiences to hear experimental works and, beginning in 1963, also drawing scrutiny from the government.\(^\text{11}\) Lyric poetry became an important medium for the articulation of controversial attitudes, and poetry evenings became an important space for open discussion and debate among artists.\(^\text{12}\)

October also saw the premiere of a new play that became the focal point of the rising wave of criticism that caught *Fetzer* in its undertow. Renowned playwright and dramaturge of the German Theater (Deutsches Theater) in Berlin, Peter Hacks, opened the latest version of his work *Problems and Power* (*Die Sorgen und die Macht*). The play depicted industrial workers who confront the problem of quantity over quality in the products they make in their factories.\(^\text{13}\) The contradictions of socialist development are at the heart of the play but are resolved by means of a “happy ending,” in which the protagonist “becomes a positive collective hero.”\(^\text{14}\) Nonetheless, the play unleashed a powerful debate among SED leaders, who described it as “cold,” “without life experience, identification or illusion,”\(^\text{15}\) and claimed that it “alienated the audience from political sympathy and commitment.”\(^\text{16}\) Commenting on the debate, literary critic Peter Demetz noted that, “at present, the odds weigh heavily against the heritage of Brecht. The regime condemns Hacks and ardently favors . . . Kleinadam (sic) and his new play *Millionenschmidt* in which the pressing problems of productivity in the construction industry are handled in the expected way. There is a highly positive bricklayer who converts his ideal colleagues to better work; and the state conventions remain absolutely loyal to the theater of Dumas the younger.” He predicted, “(Friedrich) Wolf and Brecht are dead, a new generation of playwrights has emerged but it is still yesterday’s battle they fight.”\(^\text{17}\)

This larger public debate shaped the television controversy. Kunert had become a fairly easy target by this time, having fallen under scrutiny for “reactionary” works, including an appearance at the 11 December *Lyrikabend* of the
Academy of Arts just days before *Fetzer* aired, and was castigated in the press and behind the scenes. The Agitation Commission arranged for a private viewing of Kunert and Stahnke’s other work, *Monologue for a Taxi Driver*, as soon as the film was “in the can.” Afterward, the play was quietly withdrawn from the television schedule, and the Agitation Commission called a meeting of DFF staff to discuss both works. At least a hundred DFF staff attended the meeting, which was an attempt to discipline television workers by “revealing” the reactionary nature of the two shows. Producer Gerhard Scheumann tore apart the plays, accusing the authors of imbibing Heidegger’s “Atom Bomb philosophy.” Kunert and Stahnke reportedly “distanced themselves from the film.” Having dealt with the authors, the Commission moved on to everyone else who had a hand in the film, holding meetings with the DFF’s Party organization (*Betriebsparteiorganisation* or BPO), the department of Dramatic Arts, and the Party Committee for Radio and Television, until it was satisfied that the matter had been brought to a close.

In turn, *Monologue* and similar works fueled discussion about the future of socialist culture in the GDR as the SED sought to discipline other East German artists in early 1963. In mid-January, the SED met in Berlin at the Sixth Party Congress to discuss the new economic plan. It was the first such meeting since 1958, at which the Party had announced the economic and cultural “struggle for socialism.” That congress mandated a tighter relationship between the artists and the people, a call that was renewed at the Bitterfeld Conference of 1959. Artists were to delve more into the lived experience of socialism in the GDR, and the people were meant to “storm the heights of culture . . . recognize their leading role,” and get more involved in artistic creation. Now, in January 1963, they could survey the results of that campaign. There were some notable successes: modern technology meant that art, broadly conceived, could be disseminated much more widely, particularly through the medium of television. Artists of all stripes were probing “new themes and problems,” and proving themselves “true helpers of the party and our state.” But socialist realism was under attack by artists like Peter Hacks, Stephen Hermlin (progenitor of the *Lyrikabend*), Peter Huchel (editor of *Meaning and Form*), and Günter Kunert.

At the Sixth Party Congress, Walter Ulbricht set out the terms the Party would mobilize throughout the spring of 1963. He warned broadly of the influence of Western decadence in the GDR and “revisionist thinking” among certain intellectuals, and against “ideological coexistence.” Artists were depicting a “gray and drab” vision of socialism, dwelling on the struggle and contradictions of socialist development, rather than celebrating all that East
German socialism had achieved or representing socialist life in all its diversity and beauty. “Formalist” experiments demonstrated artists’ conviction that “their individualistic perception is more important than the conception of the community.” By definition, certain narrative forms and modernist devices could not appropriately celebrate socialism and were unacceptable. The interior monologue Kunert used in Monologue, for example, could never represent the beauty of socialist life, because it made “capturing the lifelike connections of living people” impossible.27 Art should instead “educate the reason, as well as the strength of feeling (Gefühlskraft) of our working people,” and “(the) present should become more beautiful than ever before through the collaboration of artists and the working people.” Artists could create successful works of art that grappled with the conditions of contemporary life demonstrating their socialist loyalty: not in heavy, modernist experiments, but through light entertainment. Artists should satisfy the simple desire of the people to be entertained and do so using the material that was right in front them, including stories and songs germane to the socialist world of East Germany.28 The most prominent example of this, for Ulbricht, was none other than Revolt of the Conscience: a “fantastic example of the fact that an artistic work can determine the thoughts and feelings of the people.” It was a “masterwork” that “gave . . . people . . . around the world the answer to the question of the development of a new journey.”29 Revolt was a program that suggested a new narrative of East German socialism.

The attack on modernism continued in the party newspaper Einheit, reaching a fevered pitch in March 1963 and dividing the artistic community.30 The Stasi reported that artists were taken aback by the vehemence of the debate, and many considered themselves personally attacked. Artists were taking sides, and rumors were flying. Some distanced themselves from Kunert and Hacks, while others sought to turn one or both of them against the Party. Staff from the satirical magazine Eulenspiegel invited Kunert to strike back at Heinz Quermann, who had ridiculed his poetry at the Sixth Party Congress (and also been involved in the “Laughing Bear” sketch lampooning Fetzer described in chapter 5).31 Kunert demurred, although the magazine published at least one deprecating cartoon, ridiculing a thinly veiled Quermann for knowing nothing about art. Someone tipped off Kunert that one of his detractors had been an SA man at the same time Kunert had been “sitting in a concentration camp (KZ).”32 But Kunert, once defiant, kept his cool. He described the criticism of his work as “thoughtful” and “sensible.” He was, however, “particularly depressed about Baumert,” who had congratulated Kunert on “his great opera” one day, knowing that his own derogatory review, “Kunert’s Flight into Schematism,”
would appear in *Neues Deutschland* the following morning.33 Overall, the mood was bleak.

A conference held in the last week of March sought to confront this malaise by clarifying the direction of cultural policy. Discussions ranged widely, from the cases of Kunert and Hacks, to the emergence of generational conflicts in the artistic community, to the role and leadership of the Ministry of Culture. Gunter Stahnke undertook an exercise in “self-criticism”; Kunert, loath to attend, already had taken sick leave in the countryside.34 Walter Ulbricht denounced “backsliders,” “modernism,” “bourgeois decadence,” and “ideological coexistence.”35 Newly minted Central Committee member Kurt Hager outlined a vision of a partisan culture in which artists did not embellish, whitewash, or distort socialism, but rather “communicate(d) the optimism of our socialist worldview that comes from the true love of life” and venerated “socialist” values, including respect and propriety, consideration, prudence, forbearance, and esteem for the community. He declared that artists falling afoul of policy (such as Kunert) should not be drummed out of their vocations; the Stasi, however, doubted the artists believed Hager’s call for second chances.36 The conference mollified some artists and brought Kunert rhetorically back into the fold. But most important for authorities, it set out to put an end to the public debates that had been going on for months: the Television Committee reported, for example, that “the main task now is to advise about creative problems and help the artists to be effective on radio and television as defined by socialist realism.”37

The notion that these debates had successfully headed off the challenge to socialist realism was sanguine, indeed, and betrays the SED’s miscalculation of the contemporary cultural-political context. For the SED, “modernist” influences came from the West; increasingly, though, they were coming from the East as well. Similar debates were raging in the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc, but sometimes with very different outcomes. The international Kafka Conference of May 1963 was one such example. Participants from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, France, and the GDR met to discuss the possible rehabilitation of Kafka and aspects of modernist literature, such as the problems of realism and alienation, in socialist art. The East German delegation, fresh from the disputes described above, was the lone holdout speaking against it.38 The conference opened a space of transnational discussion that complicated the ability of national socialist parties like the SED to control the terms of the debate.39 It also set off a sort of “counterculture” in parts of the eastern bloc.40 The ramifications for East German television were profound. During the Second Berlin Crisis, the SED had sought to prevent border
crossing—both physical and ideological—by cutting the GDR off from the West. One of the conditions that made this possible was opening the country to the East, binding the GDR more closely to the socialist bloc, and shifting East Germans’ attention away from the pan-German future that had been the focus of the (early) 1950s. In 1958, the SED had even mandated that television raise awareness about the “fraternal socialist countries,” a requirement the DFF duly met with programming that reported on the advance of socialism outside of the GDR. By the early 1960s, though, they had also come to rely on programming from those countries. And the eastern bloc was turning out material that was not so reliable.

The Agitation Commission began to realize this contradiction when, in March, Commissioners returned to the DFF. They were surprised to find little had changed since the Fetzer affair, and, worse, the DFF staff was “displaying a lack of political instincts.” The DFF had broadcast two dubious films, two days running. One, a French crime thriller called On a Dangerous Mission, was highly objectionable. It “contributed to” rising youth criminality in the FRG, and it was morally suspect: “the hero, an unsurpassed ‘superman,’ is a drunk and disreputable womanizer, who picks up everyone from the general’s daughter to the whore and emerges from every malicious adventure as a resplendent victor.” The problem with the French film seems clear, but the second film, Stolen Bombs, was a Romanian film that had already enjoyed a first run in East German cinemas. The DFF did not anticipate a problem. But the Commissioners found it to be “inferior in the confusing form of Fetzer’s Flight” and reminded DFF staff that they were responsible for vetting the programming they sent over the airwaves.

The Commission recognized that dramatic programming in particular was subject to a long production cycle that was measured in months rather than days, resulting in some of these missteps, but it did not appreciate the wider context in which the DFF made programming decisions. In 1963 television producers still faced the same overwhelming conundrum they had in the 1950s, that is, how to fill the television schedule while also fulfilling its political mandate. That mandate, to provide a differentiated, topical program that not only reflected socialist life in a way that East Germans could identify with but also appealed to the West German audience, was increasingly difficult to accomplish. It was also contradicted by the Agitation Commission’s own demands, still made in 1965, that the DFF broadcast more crime thrillers (and romantic movies), even from the West, to distract East German viewers from West German crime thrillers broadcast in the same time slot in the television schedule. Since the Fetzer scandal, or more broadly, the cultural scandals of 1961 through
1963, the relative freedom of the DFF to find material wherever it could was gone. Feature film exhibition in the GDR previously had been more closely supervised than television, which meant that such films were already vetted and ready for television transmission; now the tables had turned. The DFF imported films from socialist countries because they fulfilled the mandate to expand coverage of and film exchange with neighboring socialist countries. But by the mid-1960s, even this was a political minefield for the DFF. The film department had come to see its purpose as finding cheap, varied programming with which to “fill gaps” in the schedule. Producers, accustomed to ordering films because they happened to be available, now had to pay closer attention to the politics of the works. In the DFF’s view, this was complicated by the fact that socialist film companies had begun to produce works specifically for the Western television market, which they could sell for hard currency. This made it harder not just to find politically acceptable programs from the eastern bloc countries but also to buy the exhibition rights. Socialist countries often sold programs to capitalist countries with non-compete clauses, making those films unavailable for purchase and exhibition in places like the GDR. The DFF noted that West German broadcasters ARD and ZDF were buying up whole annual film catalogues, which kept them from the DFF regardless of whether the West German channels broadcast the films or not. But they took the task to heart and attempted to remove any film from the schedule that deviated at all from the party line, even if that meant broadcasting “boring and artistically insuffi-
cient films. . . .”

The Agitation Commission fell back on the habits of the 1950s and, taking an instrumental view of the problem, investigated the DFF leadership. Commissioners found the director of the DFF Heinz Adameck to be “self-
important.” They complained he made decisions himself outside of the frame-
work of collective leadership, and often “forgot” to invite Georg Puppe, leader of the Party organization in the DFF, to important meetings of the leadership. The weekly talking points disseminated by the State Broadcasting Committee often did not make it past the television leadership into the individual depart-
ments of the DFF. But at least Adameck was politically competent. Puppe, likewise, was competent and commanded the respect of the membership, but he was not a true representative of the Party’s interests, instead toeing Ada-
meck’s line on most issues. They found that partisanship (Parteilichkeit) and “being of the people” (Volkstümlichkeit) were in short supply at the DFF, espe-
cially in the departments of International Relations (responsible for concluding agreements for film exchange as above), Television Drama, Entertainment, and even Sports. The report criticized the “inadequate political-ideological” educa-
tion of DFF sports reporters, the evidence for which was the “one-sided admi-
ration” and “obvious favoritism” of the (capitalist) Canadian hockey team in
their World Cup match against (socialist) Czechoslovakia.48

It took at least another year to sort out the DFF’s ideological affairs. In-
deed, six months later, Commissioners returned to discover that nothing in
particular had changed. Commissioners put this down to the fact that DFF staff
felt no pressure to make substantive changes before the new Fall-Winter pro-
gram, due to the belief—among television producers, no less—that “no one
watches [television] in the summer.” Documentation from viewers increas-
ingly discontented by that summer’s viewing schedule proved otherwise.49 The
Agitation Commission shook up the party leadership within the DFF to exer-
cise greater control over ideological discussions, introducing new staff posi-
tions intended to contribute to future programming conceptions at the televi-
sion service. Thereafter the DFF met the mandate to bring television closer to
the viewers by reaching out to citizens’ groups and creating a whole new, more
“scientific” (or at least more methodical) Department of Audience Research
that, beginning in 1964, began to publish an internal journal of its findings.50
As the scandal came to a close, the SED brought television broadcasting more
closely under the control of the Party leadership by appointing DFF director
Heinz Adameck to the Central Committee, a position he held until 1989.

Projecting Socialist Culture

In a number of meetings over the course of 1963, then, the Agitation Com-
mission had lobbied television producers to create television programming that
displayed greater political partisanship and to do so in a manner that would
appeal to audiences, while taking measures to make sure they followed through.
The DFF developed two new programs that successfully fulfilled this mandate.
A new “journalistic” treatment of socialism in East German society, Prisma,
emerged from the Department of Economics. A very different show was With
Open Hearts (Mit dem Herzen dabei), produced by the Department of Entertain-
tainment programming. Despite the differences between these programs, their
significance was essentially the same: both encouraged audiences to under-
stand themselves as part of a larger socialist collective, and each contributed
toward shaping the ways of thinking and behavior of viewers in the GDR.

The DFF introduced the “investigative” magazine show Prisma in March
1963. One of the most popular and long-running shows on East German tele-
vision, Prisma ended only after the DFF was dismantled in 1991.51 Gerhard
Scheumann, founder and first moderator of the show (1963–65), unabashedly modeled *Prisma* on the first West German political magazine *Panorama*, reportedly going so far as to analyze the timing of the show with a stopwatch. The format of *Prisma* resembled the West German program, but the content differed dramatically. Unlike *Panorama*, which dealt with “big political events” and often confronted prominent public figures on air, *Prisma* sought to delve into “the real problems . . . with which socialist society is grappling”—the problems of everyday life. The *Prisma* editorial department cast the program as an intermediary “between the pinnacle and the rank-and-file” of GDR society that could also work to close the gap between the two groups. DFF viewers actively participated in this project, mailing in their complaints, questions, or comments on wide-ranging subjects, including work conditions, the environment, the availability of consumer goods, and life in the socialist home. Viewer correspondence often asked *Prisma* to help expose the contradictions behind the triumphal rhetoric of socialist successes broadcast by shows such as *Current Camera*.

From its inception, the Agitation Commission recognized the potential of the show to be both politically effective and widely popular. They praised the Department of Economics’ shows for “winning the hearts and minds of the audience . . . being for them aide and advisor, with particularly effective (massenwirksam) shows in the prime time program of the DFF.” Such shows “do not deal just with economic questions, but rather make the viewer aware what the all-embracing (umfassend) construction of socialism means.” Like DFF staff, the state also envisioned that the show would mediate between the Party and the DFF audience, helping them to understand the ideas and policies of the state and generally facilitating the development of socialism in East Germany.

The show lived up to the Agitation Commission’s expectations of it, and it came to enjoy a special place in GDR society. One of the most cited examples of *Prisma’s* ability to appeal to viewers and even effect change was the show’s intervention on behalf of a young woman who was denied entry into the teaching profession. As a young child, bullies had tossed her into deep water although she could not swim. The traumatic experience had left her terrified of water. At school she refused to swim in gym class and received a failing grade as a result. Despite high marks in all her other classes, this failing grade disqualified her from attending teachers’ college and achieving her dream. *Prisma’s* report on her case unleashed vigorous debate across the Republic. Viewers were divided as to whether the girl had been treated fairly or not; this debate was especially striking among teachers, many of whom felt that *Prisma* had undermined their authority to give grades. In the end, the young woman went
on to study education and become a teacher, a result that viewers directly attributed to the show.\textsuperscript{57} It was this kind of story that led viewers such as Walter R. from Dresden to claim, “your shows have often led to restoring people’s rights or dealing with known shortcomings. That’s the reason why I trustfully turned to you with my concern.”\textsuperscript{58}

The furor surrounding this episode of \textit{Prisma} exposed the contours of (at least) three visions and three centers of power, even if they were disproportionately influential, operating on the television program. The DFF was an institution set between the state and the people, and it mediated a vision of socialist Germany that coexisted uneasily with the vision of state authorities and expectations of East German citizens. The state set out a mandate for programming with popular appeal that could also “uncover contradictions” and “demonstrate solutions” in a way that focused on the positive development of socialism.

It was not the only program to do this in the early 1960s. Programming such as \textit{Your Second Shift} (\textit{Ihre zweite Schicht}), which can almost be described as a sort of “infomercial” for women, dealt with the problems women faced in everyday life now that they had to work and keep house. One episode asked women to identify their least favorite chore. The resounding consensus (at least, as it was shown on-screen) was the “Great Wash” (\textit{Grosse Wäsche}, or the day that women laundered the family linens and clothing). Many East German women still did this by hand, which required heating and hauling water, scrubbing linens, wringing them by hand, hanging them to dry, and so on; it was a task that took most of the day. The program introduced the state’s solution: the state laundry. The program utilized a number of strategies—“man-in-the-street” interviews with women, short interviews with “state authorities” from the Party member responsible for the local laundry to the laundry supervisor, tours of the facilities, and even featured viewer letters that both lauded and complained about aspects of the laundries—to introduce, advertise, and even improve the service.\textsuperscript{59}

But both \textit{Prisma} and \textit{Your Second Shift} demonstrate that the characterization of television as mediator between \textit{two} poles does not recognize the many fissures in the categories of “state” and “people.” Former Agitation Commissioner Eberhard Fensch described in his memoirs the complexity of arbitrating conflict over television programming. \textit{Prisma}, in particular, struck many nerves, and he fielded complaints from state authorities, artists, DFF staff, viewers, and all sorts of other interested parties—including foreign dignitaries—protesting either the program or the way they were depicted in it, just like the teachers above. An episode about the housing shortage brought complaints from the local authorities of the state construction agency, while (different) city
authorities complained about an investigation into lax oversight of environmental damage there, for example. The Agitation Commission thus did not just operate in the interests of the state but also mediated conflicts among and between the DFF and a number of other groups. Historian Andrew Port argues that there were “serious frictions and fundamental divisions” among and within social groups in the GDR. Port contends that it was precisely these divisions that accounted for the longevity and relative stability of the regime. These (sometimes) played out on East German television screens, perhaps buttressing the power of the state by performing (and reinforcing) existing social divisions that Port identifies.

Television producers sought to engage their viewers in topical issues, and Prisma is but one example of how they struck a chord with the audience. The audience enjoyed it and came to trust in it, and it contributed to a culture in which people could openly discuss issues of “socialist development.” The state (loosely) set the agenda, and television projected some element of the state’s vision. But the variety of “viewing positions” made it difficult to tailor a particular message to be received in a particular way. Such debate shaped the ways in which the state and the television service could envision socialism.

After the teacher-training episode, Scheumann met with the head of the DFF and Agitation Commission authorities and agreed to smooth things over; in the next episode he reassured GDR educators that they had the DFF’s support. Scheumann remembers this as one of many “retractions” he made on the show, but in the larger view, it was simply part of the conversation. Indeed, such “retractions” even allowed viewers to believe that the show was “on their side,” interceding between them and “the state.”

Prisma was critical of the SED, at least in a limited way, and officials gave the show some leeway over the course of the 1960s due to its popularity among viewers and the political advantage to be gained from supporting “critical journalism” on television. When he left the show in 1965, Scheumann left behind the so-called Prisma Testament, a document that he hoped would one day unleash open discussion of the difficulties of investigative journalism at the DFF, an institution that “(was) an instrument for the leadership (Führung) of society on the one hand (and) an institution of public opinion (öffentliche Meinung) on the other.” In the Testament, he described the significance of Prisma, in part, as showing audiences the larger context that helped explain policies that otherwise viewers would never have understood. He noted that this had been difficult when he had been faced with bureaucrats who advised him that some topics were better left alone. Defending the right of the author to “his own opinion,” Scheumann asserted (just as Quermann had done a year before) that
it was often unclear “what leeway (Spielraum) institutions of public opinion had in relationship to officials of the socialist state apparatus.”

*Prisma* did not fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of the state or prominent state authorities, although it often presented a different picture of social problems than the authorities might have wanted. Ina Merkel argues that the function of *Prisma* as a “critical” program not only eased the relationship between the audience and the state, but fulfilled a second role, as “a sort of buffer between viewers and a television service that hardly lived up to its role as a public (öffentlich) institution.” For Merkel, although *Prisma* reporting challenged specific aspects of the GDR society, it ultimately preserved the system by sustaining consensus among viewers based on the hope that, through the application of reason, the system might change. But should we expect otherwise? In 1963, even television in other countries could hardly be described as centers of hard-hitting journalism that regularly confronted the political powers-that-be. Television in the FRG had only recently weathered the attack on broadcasting independence that was Konrad Adenauer’s attempt to set up his own (state-directed) television service. The British Broadcasting Corporation, a much older “public institution” until then fairly narrowly conceived as a medium of education and edification, was, in the 1950s and early 1960s, not interested in “get[ting] deeply entangled in politics as a presenter of the news or as an organizer of a forum of argument.” Broadcasting historian Anthony Smith argues that it was only in the first half of the 1960s that “the BBC pioneered daring forms of television satire, instituted professionalized political interviewing, and adopted traditional journalistic standards in its current affairs programs.”

The wider significance of *Prisma* lay not in its potential to interrogate, unsettle, or otherwise undermine the state but rather in its ability to project a coherent vision of socialist society in the GDR. Government authorities, television producers, and a variety of viewing publics shaped this vision. The deeper significance of television in general, and *Prisma* in particular, was that it re-envisioned the socialist community of the GDR. The show was but one example of programming that both reflected the new social and economic conditions of the GDR and projected a set of values defined as “socialist.”

*Prisma*’s ability to encourage viewers to understand themselves as part of the East German community was surpassed by a new entertainment program, *With Open Hearts*. For some time, the DFF and Agitation Commission had called for new ideas in the realm of entertainment, shows that could break the mold of the studio-produced game show. *With Open Hearts* fit the bill: it was a recurring variety show unlike anything previously seen on East German televi-
sion. The show was a sensation created to celebrate socialism and model socialists. *With Open Hearts* sought to honor ordinary East Germans for embodying “socialist” values such as hard work, devotion to *Heimat*, or teaching their children the value of *Familientreue*. This vision of socialism, which emphasized decent living, consideration for others, moderation, and a “work ethic,” would not have been out of place in other German times and spaces. It was anchored to socialism only through geopolitical context and a cultural compromise that privileged nationalism and political partisanship over ideological conviction.

With this mandate, the show capitalized on a longer-standing narrative of socialist heroism: the “myth” of Adolf Hennecke, propagated since 1948. Modeled on the Soviet Stakhanovite movement, the “Hennecke movement” emerged in the context of a government drive to increase production and kick-start the East German economy. The idea was to initiate a competition, then celebrate a worker who had broken productivity norms in hopes of triggering a broad-based movement of workers seeking to emulate him. The chosen worker, Adolf Hennecke, had a good reputation among his fellow miners and a good work ethic—he surpassed his quota on the job fairly regularly. On 13 October 1948, he reached the end of his shift having completed 387 percent of the day’s quota. He was lauded by state authorities and rewarded with a new car. The press told his story widely, and the narrative was preserved in East German schoolbooks. Tracing the trajectory of the Hennecke myth, historian Silke Satjukow has shown that the immediate outcome of Hennecke’s accomplishment was to alienate his coworkers (and other East Germans), who derided him as a “scab” (*Lohndrücker*) and refused to look him in the eye or associate with him. But, within a week of his accomplishment, reports of other similarly extraordinary feats had begun to emerge. Over time, workers indeed began to aspire to such top performances. Satjukow argues that workers learned the lesson that they were not “just” employees but active collaborators in socialist industries, and that their accomplishments could lead to professional and social prosperity. Such individual feats of productivity were not enough for the government, though, which really wanted to raise the collective achievement of workers. The SED ended this “competition” after just one month and implemented instead a competition between newly formed “worker brigades.” Satjukow argues that “socialist heroes” like Hennecke were not “chosen” people nor did they have extraordinary gifts (which, she argues, made them different from the heroes of traditional societies). Instead, they were examples of “the common person, who did what was right for socialist society over and over, every day.”

*With Open Hearts* drew from this narrative and, just as the Hennecke
myth had done, mediated a social contract in which the values and goals of the state became the hopes and ambitions of the audience.

*With Open Hearts*’ honorees were representatives of the mass of working people in the GDR, often nominated by their coworkers and neighbors. In 1966, moderator Hans-Georg Ponesky described the show as “honoring especially deserving workers before the entire socialist community of the GDR.” He said,

> Our thanks (go out to) . . . Party activists and independent citizens. Everyday heroes, who oftentimes anonymously and unselfishly established, developed and maintained our current condition, the advantages of socialism. In our show people who shrug off the doubtful, careful ‘But why me’ take center stage, with the realization ‘I just did my duty, like any other . . .’.  

The show encouraged people to take pride in the routines of work and everyday life. Ordinary citizens also took part in each episode of the show, sometimes numbering in the thousands.

Broadcast in front of a live audience in halls such as the large “Friedrichstadt Show Palace” (the Friedrichstadtpalast in Berlin), but also from a countless number of locations around the Republic and even abroad, no two episodes were alike. The DFF broadcast the first episode of the series in part from a new housing development (*Neubauwohnung*) where the producers of the show had modified the plumbing. Hidden cameras observed the residents when they returned home to discover beer flowing straight from their taps. Another time, a trader (*Kaufmann*) arrived home from a business trip to discover his house had been renovated. On another episode, a traffic officer in Magdeburg faced gridlock comprised of more than one thousand cars. The cars turned out to be the gag: her commanding officer arrived to promote her on the spot. One show began before a live audience when the moderator blindfolded the episode’s lucky subjects. They climbed into a new Trabant, which, unbeknownst to them, was itself loaded onto a helicopter. They were flown to the highway and sent on their way for a vacation abroad.

*With Open Hearts* was a spectacle that “advertised” socialism. Indeed, in the larger program, the show performed a similar function to the overt advertising program *A Thousand Tele-tips* (*Tausend Teletipps*). *Tele-tips* consisted of commercial spots featuring both live and animated characters, interspersed with “advice” films, that promoted East German consumer goods including cosmetics, clothing, foodstuffs, leisure goods, or household appliances.
Reaching Consensus on Television

SED leadership had embraced television advertising in 1960 as another aspect of its competition with the capitalist West: it could distract East German citizens from the excess of consumer commodities promised by West German advertising and provide a counter-model both of “better products” and socialism itself. Similarly, With Open Hearts presented narratives of socialist success: that of the individual (who won a promotion, for example), but also those of the state. Each episode exhibited the fruits of the GDR’s own “economic miracle”—the Trabants, newly built or renovated apartments, exotic vacations in the socialist East, and even private helicopter flight, all made possible by socialism.

It was part of an effort on television to make use of the “live” in large spectacles of entertainment. One episode in particular demonstrated the spectacular (and highly entertaining) nature of segments of the program. Moderator Hans-Georg Ponesky introduced the honoree, Herr Stahlberg, “an excellent train driver,” to the studio audience. By means of a “hidden camera” and microphone the audience watched as Ponesky awoke the sleeping shift worker in his bed and invited him to join the broadcast at the Friedrichstadtpalast. The gag was that he did not even have to get out of bed: a team dismantled his bed, took it out the street, and rebuilt it on a motorized platform complete with steering apparatus. Cameras accompanied him as he “drove” to the Friedrichstadtpalast. The “bed” made its way down Karl-Marx Allee, children skipping alongside, while DFF sports reporter Wolfgang Strobel “called the race” with stirring commentary from the sidelines: “I must say that is a sight . . . It’s phenomenal! Bent deeply over the steering wheel this bed-phantom is chasing us down with great speed! It’s reached at least 12 kilometers an hour! . . . This bed-machine is so fast this will be a new track record. Drivers from Ferrari and Lotus can’t hold a candle to this. . . .” This scene was intercut with shots of Ponesky on stage and viewers in the studio audience, beside themselves with laughter, hooting and guffawing at the sight. This kind of programming built on technical expertise first practiced in programming such as The Clock Strikes Thirteen, broadcast in the week after the border closure in August 1961, transmitting feeds from interior and exterior locations. A similar show—Play Along!—demonstrates just how spectacular such programming could be. Each episode, conceived to celebrate the GDR’s anniversary and broadcast on 7 October in the mid to late 1960s, comprised an entire day, multiple locations, and a variety of scenarios, including “exciting live reports from the D43 (highway) between Wittenberg and Jüterborg,” for example. They reached the largest viewing audiences yet for the Department of Entertainment at the DFF. The 1966 episode involved 578 television workers—fully one-quarter of DFF
staff—and over two million citizens from around the Republic. And the DFF broadcast such huge spectacles at a time when, media historian Gerd Hallenberger argues, entertainment shows in the FRG only tentatively engaged with the West German world.  

The show celebrated ordinary people and everyday life in extraordinary ways. It was a utopian vision of the GDR that represented a community of mutual cooperation and celebration, of partisanship (*Parteilichkeit*) and socialist duty. Audiences and state authorities alike loved it. Media historian Lutz Haucke described the show as “melodramatic emotional kitsch” and argues that it turned the “productivity principle” of socialism on its head: rather than rewarding East Germans’ creativity, it rewarded their sense of duty. For Hallenberger, the show did not capture the GDR “as it was,” but rather projected the official version of what the GDR was supposed to be as defined by the state. It “emotionalized” the GDR and sent the message that East Germans “who had done their duty and wanted to be rewarded for that, had to first subordinate themselves, indeed at the direction of the master of the game.” I agree that television, discouraged from exploring the contradictions of socialist development, embraced entertaining genres and transmitted a vision of East German society and values that had left the idealism of the 1950s behind. But what resulted cannot be reduced to an emotionally manipulative program of pacification through melodrama. Instead programs such as *Prisma* and *With Open Hearts* projected a socialist “dreamworld” that was defined not by the state’s vision of socialism but by a cultural compromise between previously competing visions of socialism that originated from a number of different (if disproportionate) centers of power. *With Open Hearts* and *Prisma* celebrated and naturalized the world of GDR socialism in the 1960s.

**Delineating Socialist Culture**

Debates about the aesthetic boundaries of socialist national culture unleashed in 1962 and 1963 resulted in a widespread consensus, among the members of the SED, the DFF, and the audience, rejecting unconventional works in favor of genres and narratives that were more stable and (politically) predictable. Television entertainment programs like *Prisma* and *With Open Hearts* marked the emergence of programming that turned away from engagement with the big, geopolitical issues of the day, as *Rendezvous Berlin* or *Blue Light* had done, in favor of the celebration of everyday life. They drew attention and motivation away from the mandate of the Fifth Party Congress to transform values
toward a program of reinforcing acceptable behaviors. Historical epics, such as *Revolt of the Conscience*, told stories of socialist conversion in “realistic” and familiar ways. By 1965, television had overcome the criticisms that surrounded the production of *Fetzer*, achieved greater popularity, and become one of the most important vehicles for the dissemination of “socialist” values.

That television had become a reliable weapon of political agitation was made clear during the Eleventh Plenum of December 1965. The Central Committee convened the meeting to usher in the “second phase” of the New Economic System, but, once again, the discussions that have garnered the most attention, from contemporaries and historians alike, were the speeches disparaging the state of GDR culture. The impetus for this had been the emergence of “youth criminality” by 1965. Where in the early 1960s the SED had allowed some space for the rise of a youth culture, they increasingly disliked the ways in which these youths spent their time—they were displaying an alarming lack of discipline, whether that meant they did not apply themselves to their studies or they staged drinking parties during the harvest draft, for example.

Erich Honecker, who would succeed Walter Ulbricht just six years later, defined these problems as resulting from the “negative influence of West television and radio,” which had encouraged young East Germans to behave “in the style of the reactionary corps of the West German student body.” But the domestic media, Honecker claimed, deserved their fair share of the blame: film, television, theatrical productions, magazines, and even literary works contributed to such behavior, with their representations of “anti-humanism,” “brutalities,” and sexuality as the prime motivating factor in human relationships. The GDR, he railed, was a “clean country . . . [with] immovable standards of ethics and morality, for decency and good customs.” He derided artists and others, even those who were generally loyal to the state, including Wolf Biermann, Robert Havemann, and Stefan Heym, for championing ideas that were hostile to GDR socialism. Honecker claimed that “in the name of an abstract ‘truth’ these artists focus on the representation of supposed deficiencies and mistakes in the GDR . . .” At the conference, authorities condemned and proscribed an entire year of DEFA productions, including *The Rabbit Is Me* (*Das Kaninchen bin ich*) and *Just Don’t Think I’ll Cry* (*Denk bloß nicht ich heule*). Like *Fetzer* and *Monologue for a Taxi Driver*, the fault of these films lay in their representation of social alienation. Their proscription led onlookers to define this as the beginning of a cultural “freeze” in the GDR, even though authorities like Honecker had spent several years honing and refining the language with which they launched their attack in December 1965.

In this context the SED lauded the television film *Dr. Schlüter* (1965). The
The five-part mini-series depicted the life and political transformation of a chemist: from his collaboration with the Nazis to his eventual immigration to the GDR and acceptance of socialism. The film denounced imperialism—"the greed of which led to the loss of humanist values"—and political detachment, by depicting a man who is buffeted by historical forces and ultimately recognizes the value of political partisanship. Unlike the forbidden DEFA films, Dr. Schlüter had overcome social alienation, depicting instead "the harmony of the individual and society." Yet the Eleventh Plenum held consequences for even Dr. Schlüter: the production team revised the last episode, still in production, to intensify Schlüter’s identification with not just socialism but also the state.

The tale of socialist conversion found in Revolt of the Conscience and Dr. Schlüter was a common narrative strategy in GDR literature in the late 1950s. Literary scholar Marc Silberman notes that during this period, a substantial body of anti-fascist literature appeared in the GDR, written by “young Nazis who ‘saw the light,’ young people who were not old enough during the Third Reich to resist actively, and soldiers who had never questioned the system they served.” But, Silberman argues, the cultural movement introduced by the Bitterfeld conference shifted focus away from the war toward the achievements of the socialist present in East German literature. He concludes that “the didactic function of providing . . . identificatory conversion stories had largely served its purpose.” That may well have been the case in the literary market, but the 1960s was the heyday of the conversion narrative on television, culminating in the stunning Paths Across the Country in 1968.

For media scholar Peter Hoff, the achievement of Dr. Schlüter celebrated by the SED was that it depicted a utopian harmony between the individual and the state, which ultimately undermined television drama’s engagement with the lived conditions of socialism. The film presented “knowingly, a false . . . picture of reality that, in their increasing estrangement from social reality, the state leadership of the GDR took to be true.” In his study of East German film, Joshua Feinstein has identified a similar discursive shift, exemplified by the transition from “films of contemporary life” (Gegenswartsfilme) to “films of everyday life” (Alltagsfilme). Films of contemporary life evoked a society in transition from the present to the (in this case, utopian) future, while films of everyday life represented a world outside of time. For Feinstein, the increasing emphasis on everyday life after the Eleventh Plenum indicated that an increasingly conservative notion of the GDR was rendered on East German movie screens that “depended less on the future promise of universal emancipation and more on the cultivation of a collective identity. . . .”

But such interpretations rest on two assumptions: that the media re-
sponded primarily to the dictates of the state, and that the media do and should reflect social reality. Television, by contrast, responded to a number of pressures that made direct control impossible. As a broadcast medium it was both powerful and ephemeral: it could reach many more people more immediately than other media, but, until the advent of recording technology, the viewer was not likely to preserve it. Television could broadcast every minute of the day, but every broadcast minute represented the investment of a small fortune in human and material resources. Hundreds of people, experiencing the GDR from a variety of subjective positions, worked to develop an effective television program, overseen by a bureaucracy in which, at least until 1965, the leaders were either artistically talented or politically shrewd, but rarely both. Television could not force the viewer to tune in; it had to appeal to audience appetites. Works such as Schlüter were popular among authorities and audiences alike for these reasons. Second, the media rarely reflect “reality.” Even images that purport to be unmediated never are, but contain, at best, “bits of the real.” The examples of Prisma and With Open Hearts exemplify that representational culture does not necessarily function in the way that it is intended.

Television entertainment programs such as With Open Hearts, Dr. Schlüter, and even Prisma revealed the persistence, and even the triumph, of older patterns of media use that went back into the Weimar period. Historians such as Corey Ross, Peter Jelavich, Adelheid von Saldern, and Monika Pater have demonstrated that Weimar Germans were highly attuned to the media. For Ross, Germans lived in a media system that was “powerfully molded by older structures of class and milieu,” in which entertainment reigned supreme. Radio audiences, for example, “stubbornly insist(ed) on light music and entertainment,” while cinema audiences similarly demanded entertaining features. Historians Monika Pater and Adelheid von Saldern have identified similar patterns in early GDR radio. DFF audience research also demonstrated that the “need” for entertainment persisted into the postwar period. But in another way, television did seem to effect a shift in values among GDR audiences. The Weimar working class had sought out sensational, adventure films or “gripping flashy kitsch,” while middle-class audiences preferred dramas, particularly costume dramas, high-society flicks, literary adaptations, and Prussian-themed military films. Everyone liked films on local—even hyper-local—topics: Ufa reportedly even considered “equipping its cinema directors with small cameras for making local films about ‘topical matters of special interest’” to draw viewers into the cinema. In comparison, GDR television drew the line at sensationalism—although there is a case to be made that the aggressive, anti-Western programs directed against the “powers-that-be from Bonn” or even
episodes of *The Black Channel* (which, although they were conceived primarily for Western viewers, did find an audience in the GDR) were sensationalist features. But the predominantly “working class” audience of the GDR gravitated to the dramas and literary adaptations (such as *Revolt, Dr. Schlüter*, and a number of other examples) of Weimar’s middle-class audience. One of the goals of the Bitterfeld Path had been to overcome the distinction between bourgeois and working-class literature; it seems that television achieved that goal, if not quite how anyone might have expected.

Politically reliable and popular, the historical mini-series became one of the most popular and respected genres on East German television. This new genre helped define a new narrative about the creation of socialist man that was much more politically acceptable than Fetzer’s story and rang true to viewers, many of whom were more likely to identify with Schlüter than Fetzer. The popularity of such narratives made them ideal programming for the DFF: such entertainments represented a huge return on a modest investment, since they could draw viewers to the program, fill programming hours by means of repeated broadcasts, and be exported abroad, sometimes for hard currency.

**Conclusion**

Between August 1961 and December 1965, television played an ever-increasing role in the creation of the new socialist citizen. During that time it was shaped by a three-year debate over the acceptable boundaries of representation. As early as 1962 the SED defined the exploration of alienation from modern socialist society as “foreign” and “bourgeois” and suppressed non-naturalistic representation. At the same time, audiences revolted against the unconventional direction of *Fetzer’s Flight*, calling for more accessible works of light entertainment. This led the television service to abandon aesthetic experiments as well as programming that probed the acceptable limits of socialist lives, instead projecting a cultural compromise that was much more about building socialist nationalism than creating convinced socialists.

For media scholar Lutz Haucke, these developments, and the Eleventh Plenum of 1965, represented the death of the progressive communist artistic tradition: “the tradition of revolutionary proletarian art of the twenties, with its conception of the organization of life and art by the masses was finally discarded in favor of the representational culture of a totalitarian state socialism.” Instead, “in the state socialism of the GDR leadership the favoritism of . . . kitsch and sentimental edification, paired with the expansive growth of petty
bourgeois ideology had prevailed.” For Haucke, the Plenum represented the triumph of a *Party*-directed vision of socialism that jettisoned the revolutionary, grass roots transformation of popular culture in favor of warmed-over bourgeois values. In this view, popular “taste” had little to do with the kind of socialism that emerged after 1965.

Certainly, the story of East German television is about the failure of revolutionary proletarian art, in part. But this was no simple matter of the ideology or taste of a few Party leaders who enjoyed a totalitarian grip on the medium and its messages. Instead, television was a complex industry shaped by various constituencies, under pressure to provide a full program schedule to a mass audience of diverse subjects, that increasingly relied on an unpredictable international market in programming to do so. As a result, it was not well suited to be a medium of revolutionary transformation. In the GDR, as in other cultural contexts, television envisioned a very particular, specifically middle class vision of society. The DFF mediated the resurgence and resilience of (bourgeois) values such as *Heimat*, nationalism, hard work, and loyalty to the regime and family, as well as the return of cultural forms and genres such as melodrama. In this the audience was complicit in its own “repression.” *Fetzer*, a familiar story told in a radically new way, was a failure. But it was not so because the state banned it; it was due to the fact that people would rather have seen something else, and the television service obliged. State authorities wanted a politically reliable message, while audiences demanded to be entertained. As demonstrated above, “authorities” and “audiences” inhabited multiple and sometimes conflicting positions. In the end though, each got what they wanted.