Creating Socialist Perspectives:
The Wild West in the East German Imagination

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1 A Trabant parked next to tipis as East Germans participate in “Indian Week” in 1973.

[ Abstract ]

Since the nineteenth century, images of the American frontier and the Wild West have captivated the German imagination. Over time, German fascination with the American West has evolved as an altogether different destination from the one known within the United States. It is a setting manned by familiar characters, but whose roles are atypical. The goal of this paper is to explore how the American frontier was once a cultural emblem, political device, social release, and a mirage for citizens in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Its authenticity, or in-authenticity, much depended on which side of the German-German border one stood. In the Federal Republic, the Wild West was a pop-culture genre. While in the Democratic Republic, it validated the extent to which socialist ideology politicized East German society, even absolving Germans of their Nazi past.
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Millions of Germans know Karl May, the nineteenth-century Wilhelmine author whose cowboy and Indian sagas introduced the American West as a romantic setting in the German imagination. At the time, few other cultural heroes rivaled May’s fictional Winnetou in popularity. In Germany, the Apache Indian chief, Winnetou, was as much a household name as the Lone Ranger was in America. Whereas for Anglo audiences Charles Dickens presented the vilified Native American as a “Noble Savage,” it was Karl May who lionized him as a heroic icon for Germans. It is with Winnetou that one can begin to understand how the East German authorities utilized the American frontier as an important setting to contrast its capitalist nemeses and prove their own ideological righteousness. If long-standing fascination with the Wild West was to survive in the public imagination after the partition of Germany following World War II, the East German authorities needed to mold the western genre so that it reflected the socialist narrative. Despite their overwhelming popularity, the East German Democratic Republic (GDR) banned Hollywood westerns in East German theaters. Instead, the government sanctioned filmmakers and entertainers to reinvent a new type of western that exclusively fit into a socialist narrative.

As Cold War politics set in, the reasons for rejecting Hollywood films and American cultural imports were almost entirely political. Nevertheless, interest in frontier stories, cowboy images, and the Native American tribal culture had hardly subsided despite the genre’s capitalist origins in the United States. Countless reasons can explain why the GDR did not follow either Karl May or Hollywood wholly as models for their own type of western designed for cultural consumption. First among them were the associations of American western films as reflections

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of political imperialism. The East German government did not endorse these westerns, for they glorified rebellious cowboy characters and subtly promoted territorial expansion. These themes were viewed as inherent components of the capitalist historical narrative. Aside from Hollywood’s westerns, the East German government could not also adopt Karl May’s vision of the frontier. Karl May’s frontier stories had appealed to the imagination of Adolf Hitler and the GDR refused to ignore this in their puritanical effort to disassociate from the fascist Nazi past. Aside from his fond readings in childhood, it was Hitler himself who demanded that his generals renew their courage by reading May’s Winnetou after the Waterloo experience at Stalingrad. In the East German anti-fascist state, Karl May was too much of a “cowboy mentor of the Führer,” as accused by Klaus Mann, and whose fiction characterized the Blut und Boden ideology exercised under the fascist regime.

Even after two world wars and the GDR’s reluctance to approve of the genre in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the classical tradition and memory of the Wild West in the public imagination remained strong. Authorities needed to create storylines and characters that embodied the true spirit of socialism if the state was to allow interest and fascination with the frontier to continue its existence in the East. The state’s version of the frontier rendered itself quite different from both the versions imported from Hollywood and inspired by Karl May’s Wild West. For a country that broadcasted its solidarity with liberation struggles worldwide, the frontier was the perfect setting to prove that America was in fact a nation steeped in colonial and

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3 The accusation that Karl May’s work laid the foundation for Hitler’s territorial aggression and the Blut und Boden ideology first appeared in an article written by Klaus Mann in 1940. See, Klaus Mann. "Cowboy Mentor of the Führer," Living Age 359 (Nov. 1940): 221.
4 Blut und Boden, or “Blood and Soil” refers to an ideological phrase that characterized the Nazi philosophy of ethnic and national superiority. It was a characteristic principle in the concept of Lebensraum, which called for a German “living space,” justifying territorial expansion.
oppressive capitalist regimes. Though Karl May was officially banned in the East, it was his most successful protagonist, Winnetou, who reversed the roles of the traditional cowboy and Indian, hero and villain dynamic. Following this rendition, Germans historically associated the Indian, not the cowboy, as the hero. This adaptation created a premise where a socialist narrative was naturally fitted for an East German interpretation. Solidarity with the heroic struggle of the American Indian was therefore bonded as an ideological mission.

The eventual adoption of westerns as a genre in DEFA\textsuperscript{6} film despite their American origins is extremely curious and paradoxical, however. Why did the GDR adopt the frontier as an important setting for so many stories in popular entertainment when they viewed US cultural imports as a form of kitsch? I have examined the goals and methodology of several visual mediums from the East German public narrative including DEFA Indianerfilme. I have also used the popular Digedags comic, from the Mozaik youth magazine, as a representation of non-film mediums and as evidence of the broad fascination of the imagined American setting. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the artificially imposed portrayal of America through the frontier, and to uncover the existing paradoxes inherent in that goal.

I also argue that this adaptation of Karl May’s nineteenth-century classic was in fact a declaration of the GDR’s philosophical realignment to reclaim early-modern culture and literature (à la Karl May) as part of the new modern discourse in the socialist Germany. By reclaiming or returning to these pre-nationalist ideas, the GDR asserted its existential and philosophical alignment with the Weimar tradition that emphasized and supported classical humanism. A modern return to the classics stood in the face of the preceding Nazi-fascist era which had condemned Weimar’s intellectual schools and had glorified the cowboy, not the

\textsuperscript{6} Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft, or DEFA. The East German film and production company.
Indian. By embracing classical concepts including the re-imagination of the ‘noble savage,’ the GDR simultaneously stood as the cultivator of ‘high culture’ in contrast to its federal counterpart across the border, which celebrated mass imported pop-culture. For a state with artificial origins that continually sought out evidence of its authenticity, these claims to classical German ideas provided proof of cultural and political legitimacy while establishing what one could call socialist humanism.

**Ambivalence, Rejection, and Acceptance in the GDR**

In the immediate postwar years, German access to American cultural imports translated into wide availability and circulation of western images in popular culture. This was obviously more the case in the West German Federal Republic (FRG), but even in the East, American imports emerged. However, towards the end of the 1940s, German-produced westerns became more widely available. Despite their popularity, many Germans rejected the westerns as a form of American cultural colonialism, a sentiment heightened by the Allied occupation. Critics viewed the genre as poison for youthful minds, condemned them for glorified rebelliousness and violence. They disapproved of what seemed to be evidence of more hegemonic displays of cultural importation.\(^7\) During this hiatus with the historic western love affair, much ambivalence surrounded imports of American culture, an ambivalence that would largely define the German relationship with American consumerism. During this period “Americanization” was met with both fascination and rejection. It is within this premise that we understand the German embrace (and dismissal) of the frontier genre.

Though many Germans in the FRG rejected images of the American West, authorities in

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the GDR initiated an anti-American dialogue that outright rejected westerns on grounds that they promoted “lawlessness and violence.”\textsuperscript{8} This is a subject covered by Uta Poiger’s analysis on German masculinity and the \textit{New Western Hero}. She cites the trial of Werner Gladow and the prosecution of the notorious \textit{Gladowbande} as evidence of the East German indictment against westerns for inspiring violence and gun-slinging among young men.\textsuperscript{9} Attacks on westerns gained significant attention from anxious East and West German officials worried about idle, unemployed, and demilitarized youth. As a result of the war, this generation often lacked father figures and patriarchic role models. The rebellious cowboy, nonetheless, was not the male role model that the state wanted youth to aspire towards.

That is not to say that there were not champions of the frontier genre – mostly in the Federal Republic – some of whom claimed that, “westerns provided an outlet for the excessive energies of young men and thus fulfilled an important societal function.”\textsuperscript{10} That rendering, however, largely fell on deaf ears in the GDR. In the early postwar years, it was obvious that growing public fascination of western images required state attention. By 1952, one study found that one third of West German youth viewed the western hero as a model archetype.\textsuperscript{11} This figure was likely similar at least for East Berlin adolescents, given the popularity and abundance of the well-documented border theaters.

The Hollywood westerns produced during the 1930s and 1940s that glorified gun-toting cowboys were only just releasing in Germany in 1950. It is understandable that authorities did not want to elevate these protagonists as models for their youth. As Poiger points out, however,

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 150.
\textsuperscript{9} The so-called ‘Gladow gang’ was responsible for armed robberies in the late 1940s in East and West Berlin. Werner Gladow was sentenced to death after being caught in East Germany. It was often said he mimicked American gangsters. Uta Poiger cites this case in reference to the \textit{New Western Hero}, as she mentions in the cited article. See Ibid, 149.
\textsuperscript{10} Poiger, "A New "Western" Hero? Reconstructing German Masculinity in the 1950s," 147.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 152.
an early paradox arises that did not register with critics: though anti-American sentiment led East German officials to reject the genre, they “failed to recognize that these outlaw westerns often located a source of social injustice in powerful capitalist institutions, such as railroads and banks.” Poiger continues, “Collapsing images of the Wild West, of American gangsters, and of the Nazi past was one way for East German authorities to reject American influences.” This may have proven true in the early postwar period, but circumstances led to a very different approach as the years progressed.

Despite ambivalence and rejection of the western cowboy as an American-only trope, fascination with Native Americans was not crushed. To the contrary, they became quite revered. The war had not erased Germans’ fond memories of Winnetou, and the growing popularity of westerns in entertainment did not subside. It was thus necessary for the state to ‘come to terms’ with the western genre, although not with the American version. By the latter 1950s, state opposition to westerns began to subside. Rather than endorsing frontier heroes such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid, the GDR re-projected an American history that highlighted the struggles and oppression of minority groups in the US. Since authorities couldn’t beat Hollywood’s imports, per se, they made them their own.

The location of the Wild West as well as the American South as frontier settings allowed the GDR to introduce solidarity with Native Americans as well as blacks who resisted forms of American colonialism and expansion. Conceived notions of Indian genocide and black slavery became a mantra in the East German frontier films. Not only did the frontier still exist as a setting of both fantasy and romance, but also the hero protagonists fell in line with socialist dialogue. As stated previously, the paradox lies in the fact that the state rejected the American

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12 Ibid., 151.
13 Ibid., 155.
cowboy as hero, yet ultimately adopted both the genre and setting to inspire their own romantic adventures.

Images of the west proliferated in both the GDR and FRG, and evidence of public interest gained international attention. American newspapers even noticed the renewed German fascination. All sorts of new Indian related themes emerged, whether in toys, art, or cinema. In 1960, an Indian museum was founded in Bamberg, West Germany. In 1968, The Washington Post reported that twice a month, East German gatherers visited the grave of Sioux Chief Edward Two-Two, dressing in Indian attire to commemorate his resting place. There were even Indian clubs and societies that studied, dressed, and performed in Indian attire. Several years later, the East German American Indian Museum boasted their 180,000 visitors a year in the town of Radebeul, outside Dresden. The state supported the museum, but not on the grounds of its original 1928 mission to honor Karl May, whose books were formally banned for glorifying “imperialist ideals.” Rather, the museum dedicated itself to the “centuries long freedom struggle and the demands currently being made with increasing force by the American Indians for unreserved recognition of their civil rights.” By 1977, the same town hosted its annual Indian festival outside Dresden, full with war dances and knife throwing, all of which was performed in full Indian regalia. Though the ritual began in 1956, the festivities and their popularity gained significant international attention. Some groups even raised money for their solidarity missions abroad.

These developments were not necessarily an indication of heightened popularity as much as growth in new types of political activism. Fascination and appreciation of the frontier was not new, but displays of interest in public space coincided with new forms of public and political engagement. In a decade where the green movement and environmentalism was increasingly vibrant, the Indian even represented a prototype or pioneer for ecological conservation. Gerd Gemünden analyzes the relationship between Indians and ecology as one that nostalgically recalled “a pre-capitalist social and economic model, a fascination also clearly evident in the agrarian, simple and überschaubar life of Indian tribes.” Such a model indicates a tangible and philosophical return to early-modern romanticism, resonating in contemporary forms of civic humanism and naturalism, much in line with socialist modernity. This modern vision found a very receptive audience eagerly searching for a contemporary Winnetou. As the state’s attacks on westerns began to subside, the projection of a new frontier emerged in the socialist imagination, most evidently taking form in DEFA film productions.

Entertainment and Indianerfilme

Propaganda and ideological messaging formed the backbone of the entire media and entertainment industries in the GDR. With the state’s direction and support, DEFA produced scores of western type movies that mimicked the American genre, conveying, however, a very different message. These Indianerfilme, Osterne, and Red Westerns, as they were called, were filmed in various Soviet republics such as Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and even Cuba. The ideological undertones were obvious and as one DEFA official stated: “We knew full well that we had to set ourselves apart from the capitalist movies of the same genre. In

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21 Ibid., 399.
doing so, we were nevertheless forced to use at least part of the elements that makes this genre so effective.”

What set the DEFA films apart was the “materialist perspective of history…[to] make the focus on the historical truth the guiding theoretical principle.” The importance of retelling history in the East German scripts lay in their belief that by understanding the ‘true’ American past, one could see the undesirable and oppressive elements of capitalism while affirming the righteousness of socialism.

One of the most important elements of the state’s propaganda was to give socialist history the moral high ground. In doing so, the GDR could also legitimize its existence both culturally and politically. Following this view, DEFA did not actually have to distort American history as much as retell it. This starkly contrasted Hollywood film producers who did have to consciously “rewrite and deliberately distort historical facts to couch its films in plots acceptable for home audiences.” DEFA went to great lengths to craft a socialist narrative against U.S. culture by highlighting remnants of past colonialism and oppression, ironically through the stories’ American origins and American frontier setting. In the end, as popular German film director Wim Wenders expressed, “Americans have colonized our unconscious.” Ultimately, the American psyche had significantly more influence on the Democratic Republic than the state would acknowledge. It is most telling that the GDR continued to feel the need to prove itself as the ‘better Germany’ by harping on its non-Americanized state of being. But in doing so with such an outwardly repetitive mantra, it invariably could not deny the very American influence

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22 Ibid., 400.
23 Ibid., 400.
that it rejected. Though certainly not restricted to film, this points at the insecurity of the GDR, and the evidence is certainly not limited to film. Film does, however, provide an excellent window into the East German psyche.

Having established the idea of the west and the frontier as the backdrop, it was necessary to recast the Indian as a character with whom the audience could easily identify and find solidarity with. In contrast with Hollywood westerns, the Indian was the protagonist, as Karl May established in the classical tradition. DEFA, however, made the Indians’ historic struggle for civil rights a reappearing motif that was thematic in all Indianerfilme. Hence, the capitalist-imperialists represented the savage warmongers, and the Native Americans were again cast as ‘noble,’ based on the early-modern portrayal. Fighting off the cowboy idol and reconstructing the Indian as hero alluded to GDR desires to also resurrect classical concepts of humanism in socialist form. Winnetou and his white sidekick, Shatterhand, a German emigrant, and their friendship of coexistence represented a part of civic humanism that fell alongside Weimar. Such a reconstruction under socialist conditions also necessitated the importance of a hero collective, where the entire tribe allied together for a common cause.

This shift negated the myth of the lone cowboy, which had arisen in the wake of the First World War, who rebelled against authority and confronted his challenges alone. Marline Otte argues that the war directly altered the way Germans identified with cowboys. Entertainment culture and cowboy circuses had shifted away from the pre-war displays, which portrayed Native Americans alongside the Buffalo Bill types as part of a collective. She writes, “This new aesthetic genre introduced a solidarity hero into the ring. Whereas the display of foreign tribes and a multitude of sensual experiences had been particularly popular among pre-war audiences, the post-war spectator seemed to appreciate the lonely rider-particularly in his fully masculine
This was partly because of the exodus of American Indians as actors in German circuses and public entertainment during the war, Germans themselves began to fill the shoes of Buffalo Bill, Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. It was in this period that Erich Rudolph Otto Rosenthal, a.k.a. Billy Jenkins, rose in popularity and anointed himself “King of the Coyboys.”

Authoritarian symbols and sentiments of power became synonymous with the German cowboy who tamed eagles in front of audiences highly in tone with German nationalism, the eagle itself a symbol of the times. Though Jenkins himself was part Jewish, he became an entertainer for Hitler’s court, training his birds to mimic the pose of the Iron Eagle. The connection, therefore, lies between the singular super-cowboy and his unilateral and aggressive character and the hyper-nationalistic militarism under the Nazis. This relationship was one that the GDR needed to reject and cleanse the genre of its fascist association and reclaim its cultural legitimacy as purely socialist and moral. It becomes apparent that the early modern conception of May’s Winnetou and Shatterhand represented the GDR’s adoption of classical pre-nationalistic visions that stressed the collective hero and sacrifice over the lone cowboy.

In German entertainment under DEFA guidance in the GDR, the ideological undertones then began with altering the symbolic setting of the western frontier. Not only is the frontier backdrop the most effective because of the narrative that East German filmmakers wanted to retell, but also because of its symbolic purpose. In the American mind the frontier is viewed as a place of rebirth, renewal, and opportunity; a place where one can rewrite his or her tainted past. For these same reasons, the frontier was a perfect setting for Germans who needed to cleanse their own national history and whose own historical setting was an undesirable one to recall. But

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28 Ibid., 538-539.
29 Ibid., 540.
in the same regard, filmmakers set up the American scene as one which “no doubt embodie[d] a
dream betrayed, a land of disenchanted and social inequity, a place where furious wheeler
dealing produces a vicious circle of materialism.” Germans could explore their own identity
through these films and images of the US, which “function[ed] as a playground for the
imagination, as a mirror that reflects and intensifies the preoccupations and imported conflicts of
its visitors.”

DEFA also fueled the perception that the US, as the oppressor in Indianerfilme, assumed
the role of perpetrator in real life, which was an ironic accusation. Glenn Penny describes it as a
“rhetoric of genocide” that appeared in the scripts of Indian activism and solidarity. Calls of
genocide not only alluded to American aggression against Indians, but also conjured sentiments
of German victimhood. Thus the audience associated victimhood with Indians and with
themselves. As an artificially formed state, the GDR relied on its creation myth that it was in no
way a continuum from the Nazi regime and its entire existence denied any role in the tainted
German past. Although the state intended to clear the conscience of a guilt-ridden people, the
sentiment of German victimhood is one full of paradox.

Frontier images and stories certainly resonated with Germans who were less than keen to
reenact their own past. For the audience, the Wild West served in much the same way as the pre-
industrial frontier served the American imagination – as a place where one’s past could be
forgotten and one could start anew. In the GDR’s historical adaptation, their own history was
rewritten, and the villains were identified as fascists and capitalists. The imagined frontier
allowed the audience to avoid confronting their roles in the recent German past, deflecting all
responsibility to a different culprit: the fascist-capitalists in the West. One could say that these

30 Ibid., 606.
31 Ibid., 606.
32 Penny, "Red Power: Liselotte Welskopf-Heinrich and Indian Activist Networks in East and West Germany," 467.
films played with and rejected the West German concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung,*\(^{33}\) or the ‘coming to terms with the past.’ For when the audience viewed themselves as victims and not perpetrators, they were not at all ‘coming to terms with the past,’ but rather alternating it into one where they escaped the shadow of culpability.

Glenn Penny refers to Michael Geyer’s assessment\(^ {34}\) that Germans even during the 1950s saw the United States as the perpetrator and associated themselves as victims of American ‘colonization.’ Cause for such sentiment could be attributed to the placement of atomic weapons in the Federal Republic and public opposition to the American nuclear militarization.\(^ {35}\) Partly because of the memories of the Allied fire bombings but also because of the tradition of “German lore,” “… one did not need to refer to Dresden, because there was a more traditional case that one ‘knew:’ the Americans had exterminated the North American Indians.”\(^ {36}\) The case that Geyer speaks of, of course refers to the century old portrayals of America’s cultural and race wars against Indians. In the old German press, the nineteenth-century westward expansion described the Indians’ removal as “*Vernichtung,*” “*Ausrottung,*” and “*Zerstörung,*” or annihilation, extermination, and destruction.\(^ {37}\) The *Indianerfilme* recast the old frontier as a place that resonated with very contemporary sentiments and ideas. Activists for international liberation struggles, the African American civil rights movement, as well as anti-war, anti-nuclear, and pro-

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\(^{33}\) This term refers to the original West German concept of ‘coming to terms with the past,’ in reference to the German experience of World War II. While this idea is seen as a process that came about in the postwar years, the concept has been applied in the years since the fall of the Wall and the demise of the East German state. It is, therefore, very much an ongoing process of managing the past and it continues to be a controversial term for its implications and meaning in the contemporary Germany.


\(^{35}\) Penny, "Red Power: Liselotte Welskopf-Heinrich and Indian Activist Networks in East and West Germany," 467.


\(^{37}\) Penny, "Red Power: Liselotte Welskopf-Heinrich and Indian Activist Networks in East and West Germany," 468.
environment groups could easily identify with the DEFA storyline. With their narrowed audience, DEFA retold Indian history as a narrative that actually mirrored their own past, as well as one that resonated with their present.

**The German–American Relationship**

Under the surface of the ideological narrative are further important signs about the East German psyche. As created by the state, the American landscape became a fantasyland projected as a place opposite of Marxist values. In this regard, DEFA *Indianerfilme* are extremely interesting, but they are full of inconsistencies. The adaptations in DEFA studios are important to address because in reality, DEFA “did little to question established genre conventions” – conventions being those established by the Hollywood variety. Thus, “a certain degree of Americanization was willingly accepted if its employment would help gain favor with home audiences who had begun to show less and less interest in DEFA’s political fables.”38 The nature of this type of decision is extremely telling about the cultural landscape and the political dynamic among East German citizens. Politically speaking, when the GDR constructed the Wall and began to fill its store shelves with a greater variety of goods, it ultimately revealed a point of weakness that parallels a similar concession in DEFA. It implied that its citizens, though not outright indicting socialism, wanted similar options of consumer goods just as their counterparts enjoyed in the FRG. By putting a more diverse selection of goods on the shelves, the state could not deny the affect of American-styled consumerism into their socialist society. In the same regard, DEFA, though they officially viewed Hollywood with disdain, was forced to acknowledge and accept American influence on their own work and provide these films to a demanding public.

Within the context of film, several theories can describe the overall conflicted German relationship with America. Eric Rentschler identifies three tangible theses that describe the *Amerikabilder* (pictures of America) in the German imagination. He describes the American-German relationship as one that is characterized by borrowing, interdependence and dependence on historical, sociopolitical themes. The first among three of the established explanations for the relationship is described as “The American Friend Turned Fiend.” In this case, American cultural imperialism is a threat to traditional values and culture, where the occupiers are “ambassadors of materialism.”

Second is the “Love-Hate Syndrome,” identified in the FRG as the indulgence of popular culture in the postwar years. In this scenario, film “provided identification figures for a fatherless society,” and served as an ersatz *Heimat*, or homeland, for adolescents of the fifties.

The third thesis is similar to one that Uta Poiger addresses as well, where film contained elements of “Historical Amnesia and Escapist Tendencies.” Rentschler writes, “Unable to come to terms with their parents’ past and ill-equipped to confront the social realities of the present, German filmmakers revert to foreign landscapes and other film cultures, anything to take their minds off their own history.” Again the notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* arises in the context of film and the paradox shows itself once more. Germans who could not manage the pains of their own history resorted to a revisionist’s recreation where they themselves are victim, not perpetrator. Rentschler describes each of these three relationships, finds flaws with each, and produces a reinterpretation that explains American influence in the New German Cinema of the FRG. Arguably, his conclusions and the three theses he rejects are equally

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40 Ibid., 605.
41 Ibid., 606.
42 Ibid., 606.
applicable in understanding the GDR. None of the above explanations clash with how we have seen DEFA’s own paradoxical and conflicting relationship with American influences.

Adding to the complex nature of westerns is the somewhat recurrent juxtaposition of the visual and textual narrative, often containing contradictory messages. Though the rhetoric presented itself as non-racial and supportive of civil rights struggles and liberation movements, the Red Westerns visually perpetuated explicit racial stereotypes. It certainly seems the case that, “like most Western views of Third World native, Aboriginal, or tribal cultures, the East German Indianerfilme participated in forms of ‘othering’ that are imbricated in strategies of domination, appropriation, and stereotyping.” By portraying Indians exclusively in regard to their resistance against whites, the films denied them an autonomous existence. Visual elements of racism continued to exist right alongside the rhetoric that called for racial harmony. The GDR’s actual depictions of Indians furthermore reinforced images of the permissive “other” as the archetypical ‘red hero.’ Native Americans, however, were not alone in the East Germans’ textual-visual ideological conflict. Depictions of blacks often yielded to stereotypes despite the state’s affirmation and support of the African American civil rights movement.

**The American South as a Frontier Setting**

While at the forefront of the frontier genre one can easily conjure up images of cowboys and Indians, another frontier apart from the American West existed that was often lumped into the GDR’s propagandized version of the U.S. That additional setting was the American South, which was also commonly depicted only through historical constructs. This included the antebellum plantation or Reconstruction setting, where one could easily place Scarlet O’Hara in the imagination. The perspective, however, would not romanticize the agrarian ‘good old days,’

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43 Gemünden, ”Between Karl May and Karl Marx: The DEFA Indianerfilme (1965-1983),” 401.
44 Ibid.
but would likely reenact *Birth of a Nation* only for the purpose of vilifying it. Much like the western genre, the epic narrative that claimed the East German imagination did not romanticize these periods as nostalgic, but rather emphasized the theme of colonial marginalization. In this setting, moreover, it was the southern African American who took on the same role as the Indian in the west.

If one thinks in historical terms, as the GDR most certainly claimed to have done, one can easily understand the correlation of the southern setting as a frontier. Interestingly, out of all the southern states, Louisiana had a penchant for stirring up fantasy. Thinking of the Louisiana Purchase and the territories that it encompassed, one can see why the state made sense as part of re-imagined westward expansion along the frontier. It was Louisiana, therefore, that represented the entire South in this genre, whereas a southern Atlantic state such as South Carolina or Virginia could not. Despite the authorities’ best attempts to depict the U.S. as place steeped in slavery, inequality and marginalization, a number of instances prove not only curious, but also hypocritical.

As noted previously, fascination with the frontier setting did not limit itself to film. Turning to the East German *Digedags* from the *Mosaik* youth comic, one can see many of these images. The protagonists of the comic, Dig, Dag, and Digedag comprise the storyline’s main cast, whose plot setting is often located in a romantic or exotic foreign destination. One of the series in the comic is devoted to their adventures in America, taking place most notably in the antebellum South (specifically Louisiana) as well as the American West. Comics, much like Hollywood style films, encountered stiff resistance and rejection by the East German authorities during the early postwar years, where they were considered ‘*amerikanische Primitivkultur*.’ Their popularity, however, required that the GDR adapt their own versions, ones disassociated
from the capitalist imports from the U.S. In 1955, the GDR youth organization, the Free German Youth (FDJ), approved plans to publish a socialist adaptation.\footnote{Catrin Gersdorf, "The Digedags Go West: Images of America in an East German Comic Strip," \textit{Journal of American Culture} 19 no. 2 (Summer 1996): 35-36.}

\textit{Mosaik}, created by Hannes Hegen, therein became one of the most popular comic magazines read by youth. American cartoons such as Donald Duck inspired Hegen, a great admirer of Walt Disney productions. He then set about inventing his own storyline beginning with several series taking place in Rome, Byzantium, and Venice. Hegen then shifted the \textit{mise en scene} to America. Because of his affection for the comic as an artistic production, Hegen paid considerably less attention to socialist messaging than the state probably desired. We are thus left with evidence of state sponsored comics intended to vilify the U.S., but in reality, there are numerous contradictory examples between the visual and written narrative.\footnote{Ibid.}

The \textit{Digedags in Amerika} series contains five subplots. They are entitled: “\textit{Karneval in New Orleans}” (Carnival in New Orleans), “\textit{Die Grosse Herausforderung}” (The Big Challenge), “\textit{Der Start Zum Rennen}” (The Start of the Race), “\textit{Die Erste Etappe}” (The First Stage), and “\textit{Die Nacht Auf Der Sandbank}” (The Night on the Sandbank). Other episodes that take place in the South include one called “\textit{Goldrausch in New Orleans}” (Goldrush in New Orleans) and another called “\textit{Unternehem Louisiana}” (Louisiana Company).\footnote{Hannes Hegen, \textit{Mosaik} 152-156, 177, 179.} Introducing the Digedags to the readers, the storyline begins by establishing New Orleans in its historical context:

The city of New Orleans is located at the mouth of the mighty Mississippi, the Old Man River. At about 1860 the Digedags came here on their adventurous journey. They became reporters at the “New Orleans Magazine.” It was the time of conflicts between the northern and the southern part of the United States,
which soon turned into a Civil War. The North with its natural and industrial resources had become rich by the work of European immigrants while the South with its vast cotton fields was still dominated by Negro slavery. Yet it was also the time of the big move to the West, the time of the gold and silver rush and the battle of the Red Indians for their hunting grounds. The Digedags were present everywhere and as reporters they wrote exciting stories for their newspaper.\textsuperscript{48}

The opening paragraph of this episode reads next to the page’s illustration, which depicts a newspaper clipping the Digedags have written for the New Orleans magazine. As seen in Figure One, it contains an image of a steamboat on the Mississippi River flying a Confederate flag and what appears to be a French colonial flag. Below that image is part of the English paper that reads: “Anti Slavery in Action: There are three million[s] of slaves in the United States of America. Every slave is a stolen man or woman.”\textsuperscript{49} The first page of this comic alone provides ample evidence of the socialist rendering of the U.S. The historical context and setting is established in New Orleans, an exotic destination where the story can unfold. Though the South is vilified for its practice of slavery, the North is not credited as being the land of the free, but is equally cast aside as a region exploiting “European immigrants” in a capitalist drive. The writers are also sure to mention the struggle of the “Red Indians” resisting the gold hungry westward expansionists.

\textsuperscript{48} Hannes Hegen, \textit{Mozaik} 152.
Translation from: Gersdorf, "The Digedags Go West: Images of America in an East German Comic Strip," 36-37.
\textsuperscript{49} See Figure 1.
As Catrin Gersdorf describes in her analysis of this comic, the socialist dogmas play out in a very predictable fashion. The Digedags are continually “expelled by the rich and welcomed by the social underclass. They are friends with slaves and freedmen.” As the plot unfolds, the trio befriends Jeremia Joker, a landed plantation owner who the Digedags discover is a secret supporter of the underground railroad. Gersdorf explains the significance of this “unexpected twist.” As the comic reveals, the white elite are generally portrayed as the oppressors, though the characters that befriend the Digedags, such as Jeremia Joker, reveal that not all of them fit the archetype. Between the visual image and the text, there are a number of nuanced contradictions. These inconsistencies show that though “the comic does not completely subvert official ideology, at least it partly disrupts it by inverting the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing.

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50 Gersdorf, "The Digedags Go West: Images of America in an East German Comic Strip," 37.
51 Ibid., 37.
stereotype.” The propaganda was not always simple and direct, making a true understanding of its intent sometimes difficult.

One could see this example as an incidence of contradiction, but a slightly different interpretation is possible. While the majority of the antagonists are illustrated and described as wealthy, greedy, racist, and aggressive, those like Jeremia Joker could also serve a very subtle purpose according to Gersdof. The existence of these “good” characters among the “bad” could send a message to socialists in America, who are “supposed to tear the veil of delusion from the real countenance of American imperialism, and to reveal its military aggressiveness as well as its exploitative, manipulative, and terrorizing tendencies.” This idea may seem plausible given Jeremia Joker’s secret actions to support the underground railroad. But given Hannes Hegen’s lack of enthusiasm for turning his comic primarily into propaganda rather than a creative success, Gersdorf’s alternative conclusion may have less merit.

The visual interpretations of the comic by themselves also create a sense of “othering” that echoes the portrayal of Indians in DEFA films. One of the illustrations from the episode, *Der Start Zum Rennen*, clearly supports this conclusion. The black characters in the adventures almost always take on stereotypical roles as servants, assistants, and workers. By itself, this may not be an inaccurate or strange visual depiction, but in cases that depict the private sphere of blacks – their homes, towns, and families – a very racialized sense of “othering” emerges. For example, in Figure Two, the Digedags venture into an apparently ‘native habitat,’ not unlike how a novel would describe an exploration into the ‘interior,’ or an encounter with the unknown indigenous tribes. This backwoods bayou village does not at all have any of the sophistication that is depicted in white towns that the Digedags travel through. Whereas store signs read

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52 Ibid., 40.
53 Ibid., 45.
‘Drugstore’ and ‘Tailor’ in some of the previously traveled towns, this one only has one storefront on the waters’ edge, constructed with a patched roof, the sign simply reading, ‘Bar.’ The disposition of the locals is also revealing. They are not illustrated as the righteous resisters of the southern planter, but rather, these black natives show a degree of primitivism. The children swim naked alongside the livestock and pigs, men drink at ease with large grins, the women hang their clothes to dry between the shacks. All are having a good time. It would appear that this scene echoes racial stereotypes, but most of all, the placement of these people in an unsophisticated setting only reinforces notions of racial superiority’s existence. Here lies yet another stark example of the visual-textual contradiction between preaching solidarity and reinforcing racist connotations.
The adventures, which seemingly draw from *Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn*, combine history and adventure, turning the comic into an educational as well as entertaining success. The American setting, as already established, contains both a “real as well as mythical component,” and the U.S. is “no longer the imperialist enemy, but it is also a place of adventure, fun and ardent desire.” Catrin Gersdorf reaches a conclusion much in line with conclusions one can draw from DEFA *Indianerfilme*:

“The *Mosaik* produced an image of America that is counterproductive to a politically motivated reduction of the US to Wall Street, Pentagon, and Washington as metonyms for the political, economic, and military imperialism of the American state. This, however, does not deny the fact that the *Mosaik* also provides its readers with ‘a socialist worldview and morality.’ The comic has subversive and affirmative effects at the same time.”

The American setting and the frontier carries yet one more interesting paradox, one that is another subject for analysis, but can be succinctly discussed in relation to East German travel.

**Conclusions: Unattainable Destinations in the Imagination**

It is no coincidence that only after the construction of the Berlin Wall and the sealing of the German-German border that authorities in the GDR began to support the production of westerns and other such narratives like the ones in *Mosaik*. While East Germans were prohibited to physically travel, it was their imaginations that demanded an outside escape from the stale monotony and the repetitive hues of grey that made up the Eastern Bloc. At least that is how many in the Federal Republic imagined life across the border. For citizens in East Berlin, the

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54 Gersdorf, "The Digedags Go West: Images of America in an East German Comic Strip,” 40.
55 Ibid., 42.
56 Ibid., 42.
Indians roamed freely compared to their own existence in the walled city. Gerd Gemünden describes these images as utopian fantasies. He writes, “the nomadic tribes move about in wide open landscapes … the tribe moving to a better hunting ground, the ultimate fantasy of the citizens of the GDR.” A decade after the Wall went up, the East German-Polish open border policy led to a boom in cross border tourism, but most of the travelers were moving from west to east, not east to west. East Germans hungered for travel, yet the state did not allow truly free travel.

This raises a question about the “eastern frontier.” Could Germans not have found transcendence to their east in the vast territories stretching towards the Caucasus? Eastern travel, unlike westward passage was not so strictly barred. Without delving into a discussion on Lebensraum and Blut und Boden, it could first be argued that a true frontier, expansionist, and colonial mentality have never really been innate in the classical German character. Just as Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis set out to model Anglo-American expansion, Albert Faust’s 1909 survey, The German Element in the United States, elaborated on the nature of German settlements. Contrary to the American entrepreneurial model of developing land, extracting resources, and then moving on, it was Faust’s view that German settlers have preferred permanency over expansion. Environmental historian Thomas Lekan supports Faust’s generalization that “the frontier ethic with a slash and burn mentality [was] inimical to Germans’ longing for permanency.” German American settlers favored permanency and they retained their sense of environmental conservationism. Their preference for forests over plains, stone

60 Ibid.
structures over wood structures, and nature over urban centers indicate that the German settler abroad reconstructed a model of settlement quite different than that of the American frontiersman. Faust’s 1909 survey exists as evidence of classical conservationism and naturalism, values enjoying a renewal in the GDR.

While the elements of the Wild West appealed to Germans, the reality of such a frontier in an Eastern European setting would never have gained traction. The frontier mentality, if it had existed towards the east, would have eliminated the ultimate purpose of the genre, which served as a vehicle for imaginative escape and transcendence. In addition, identifying and showing solidarity with native and marginalized peoples was a key component of East German versions of the Wild West. How could Germans identify with colonized and marginalized people to their east when the memory of German panzers lingered in the Caucuses? The American western frontier as a historically constructed setting was, therefore, the most successful destination that could serve the cultural and political goals of the GDR. This setting absolved East Germans of their Nazi past and provided justified legitimacy for their moral existence as a socialist state.

Just as the American frontier was an unattainable destination for real travel, in the end it was the “American Dream” that betrayed the East German audience.61 They could create the American setting as an imagined destination, but it could not exist as a real one. And though the state prohibited travel to these unattainable destinations, it sanctioned and provided the escape where imagined fantasies could play themselves out. As Eric Retschler writes, “America figures as a way station for travelers whose manifest destiny lies elsewhere.”62 For East Germans still looking for Heimat, they had certainly chosen an odd place to search for it, and though their feet were firmly planted in the GDR, they chose to be nomads in their imaginations.

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62 Ibid., 613.
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