



GERMAN CULTURE COURSE

German Film & Television

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

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German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why German Film & Television? Scope & Sources

Every New Year's Eve, millions of Germans sit down to watch a short black-and-white British comedy sketch, Dinner for One, that most people in Britain have never heard of. That one oddity says a lot about German television: it has its own habits, its own favourites and its own way of borrowing from elsewhere. German film is better known abroad, but in a patchier way: a few silent classics, some famous war films, a handful of recent prize-winners. This opening chapter explains why the whole subject deserves a course, sets out what the course covers, and shows how to read the sources. It also says how the course handles the Nazi years, which cannot be avoided. Dates and titles are given from general knowledge and checked as each chapter is written.

Why German Film & Television?

Germany was one of the first countries to show films to a paying public, built one of the largest studios in the world, produced some of the most influential films of the 1920s, and then saw its film industry used by a dictatorship, wrecked by war and split in two. After 1945 it rebuilt, in different ways in West and East, and it later produced a new generation of directors who became famous abroad. Television followed its own path, shaped by a decision after the war that broadcasting should be organised by regions and kept away from central government. Few national screen cultures contain so much history in one place, which is why this course treats film and television together.

The question for the whole course

How has German screen culture dealt with its own history, and how much of it can be separated from politics? The chapters follow the screens from the silent era to the streaming age, and the capstone in Chapter 10 comes back to this question.

A One-Paragraph Version

Public film shows in Berlin in 1895 are often cited among the earliest in the world (check the claim), and the studio UFA, formed in 1917 and based at Babelsberg near Berlin, became a

centre of the film industry in the 1920s. The Nazi government took control of the industry in the 1930s. After 1945 West Germany and East Germany developed separate film and television systems, with the East German state studio DEFA on one side and a regional public broadcaster on the other. New German Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s brought international attention, and since reunification in 1990 German films and series have been successful abroad again. These are the basic facts, and each is developed in later chapters.

What the Course Covers

Chapters	Theme
2–3	Expressionism and the UFA years; Weimar sound cinema and the Nazi screen
4–5	West Germany after 1945; DEFA and the East German screen
6	New German Cinema
7–8	Television: ARD, ZDF and the crime series Tatort; the screen epics such as Heimat and Das Boot
9–10	Reunification, contemporary cinema and streaming; confronting the past on screen

What the course leaves out

This is a cultural history, not a catalogue of every film. It does not rank directors, list award winners or require you to have seen the films. Plots are explained only as far as the history needs. The sibling course, Japanese Film & Television 1, takes the same approach to another national screen.

Scope: Germany at the Centre

The course is built around Germany. German-language film is bigger than Germany, since Austria and Switzerland have their own film industries and many film-makers moved between the three countries. Where a figure or film is inseparable from the German story, the course names it and says where it comes from. It does not give Austrian or Swiss film a strand of its own.

Two States on One Screen

From 1949 to 1990 there were two German states, West Germany (the Federal Republic) and East Germany (the German Democratic Republic), and each made films and television for its own audience and its own purposes. West German cinema was commercial and later state-supported; East German cinema was run by the state studio DEFA. Television in the West was organised by regional broadcasters and a national second channel, and in the East it was a state service. Many viewers in the East could receive Western television, which makes the story more complicated still. Chapters 4, 5 and 7 take these parallel histories in turn.

Handling the Nazi Years

How this course handles it

The Nazi period is covered factually, in Chapter 3 and again in Chapter 10. The focus is on how the regime controlled film and used it for propaganda and entertainment, what happened to the people who worked in the industry, and how later German film and television confronted the period. The course describes this material in order to understand it and does not admire it.

Record, Reputation and Memory

Film history is full of claims that sound firmer than they are. Three kinds of claim need different handling.

Record

Release dates, studio foundations, ratings and legal facts that appear in archives and reliable reference works.

Reputation

"The greatest film ever", "the first horror film", "banned in Germany". These are judgements and slogans, often repeated for decades, and the facts behind them are usually more complicated.

Memory

What viewers recall of a film, a series or a Saturday-night show. Good for atmosphere, unreliable for the year, the cast or even which country made it.

A note on accuracy

Dates, titles and names in this course are given from general knowledge and checked as each chapter is written. Where a point is uncertain the text says so. Before quoting a date or an award elsewhere, check it against a film archive or a reliable reference work.

Where to Watch and Read

- **Film archives and festivals.** The German film archives and the major festivals, above all the Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale, founded in West Berlin in the early 1950s; check the year), publish programmes and histories.
- **Broadcaster libraries.** The public broadcasters keep online libraries of older programmes and have documentaries on their own history.
- **Restored classics.** Many silent and early sound films have been restored and released on disc and online, often with commentary.
- **Books and documentaries.** Look for histories of German cinema and of German broadcasting, which put individual films in context.
- **Subtitles.** Most of what is discussed is available with English subtitles. Dubbing, which is very common in Germany for foreign films, is a topic of its own.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

In three sentences, explain why German film and television can count as a window on German history. Use at least two points from this chapter.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Sort these into record, reputation or memory: (a) UFA was formed in 1917; (b) a film is called "the greatest German film ever made"; (c) your recollection of a German film seen long ago on television.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose a German film or series you believe you know. Write down the year, the director and one thing you remember, then check each against a reliable source and note any corrections.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Early cinema:** public film shows in Berlin in 1895 (check)
- **UFA:** studio formed in 1917, based at Babelsberg
- **1949 to 1990:** two German states, two screen systems
- **New German Cinema:** 1960s and 1970s, international attention
- **Scope:** Germany-centred; Austria and Switzerland only where inseparable
- **Nazi years:** covered factually in Chapters 3 and 10
- **Handling sources:** separate record, reputation and memory

Next chapter: Expressionism & the UFA Years, which looks at the silent classics and the studio that made them.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Expressionism & the UFA Years

In the 1920s, German silent film was among the most admired and imitated in the world. Painted shadows, crooked streets, a vampire climbing a staircase and a robot built in a laboratory all come from this period, and their influence on horror, science fiction and thriller films is still obvious. This chapter looks at the studio system that made them, the style called Expressionism, three directors whose names recur in every history, and the way the best talent was drawn to Hollywood. Dates are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked, and the chapter also says what is reputation and not record.

UFA and Babelsberg

The studio **UFA** (Universum Film AG) was formed in 1917 by merging several film companies, with support from the German government and military, during the First World War. A reason often given is that the authorities wanted a strong German film industry to compete with foreign propaganda and entertainment (check the detail). After the war it became the largest German studio, and it worked mainly from a site at Babelsberg, near Potsdam on the edge of Berlin, where film-making had begun in the early 1910s. Babelsberg is often described as the oldest large-scale film studio in the world, though that kind of claim should be treated as a boast (check).

Why Babelsberg matters

A single large studio site, with its own workshops, sets and technicians, allowed ambitious productions such as *Metropolis*. It also gave directors the resources to experiment with lighting, sets and camera movement. The studio still makes films today.

What Expressionism Means

Expressionism was an artistic movement, found in painting, theatre and writing as well as film, that favoured inner feeling over realism. In film, it is usually recognised by distorted, stylised sets, strong contrasts of light and shadow, exaggerated acting and stories about madness, fear

and authority. The label was applied by later critics, and not every film now called Expressionist was made with that name in mind.

Film	Director	Why remembered
<i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> (1920)	Robert Wiene	Painted, crooked sets; a story told from the point of view of a narrator whose reliability is questioned
<i>Nosferatu</i> (1922)	F. W. Murnau	An unauthorised vampire film; the shadow of Count Orlok on the stairs
<i>The Last Laugh</i> (1924)	F. W. Murnau	A film told almost without title cards, with a camera that moves freely
<i>Metropolis</i> (1927)	Fritz Lang	A huge city of the future, a robot, and a very expensive production

Caligari

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) is usually the first film named in any account of Expressionism. A hypnotist and a sleepwalker are linked to a series of murders in a town of painted, crooked buildings. Robert Wiene directed, from a script by Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz. The ending, in which the story is revealed to be told by a patient in an asylum, was reportedly added in the course of production and changed the meaning of the whole film, a point on which accounts differ (check). Even so, the look of the film, with sets that appear to lean and slant, made it a landmark.

Nosferatu and Murnau

Nosferatu (1922), directed by F. W. Murnau, was an unauthorised adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, with the names changed. The author's widow took legal action and a court ordered the copies to be destroyed, but some survived, which is why the film can be seen today. The film's best-known image, the long shadow of the vampire creeping up a staircase, is often quoted. Murnau also directed *The Last Laugh* (1924), famous for a camera that moved through spaces, which was unusual at the time, and later went to Hollywood, where he made *Sunrise* in 1927 (check).

Fritz Lang and Metropolis

Fritz Lang made some of the best-known German silent films, including a crime serial about a master criminal, *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1922), and a two-part retelling of the Nibelung legend. His most famous silent film is *Metropolis* (1927), set in a future city divided between rich rulers above ground and workers below. The film is known for its enormous sets, huge crowds, special effects and a robot woman.

- **Cost.** It was among the most expensive films of its time, and its cost is often said to have strained the finances of UFA (check). A deal with American studios to share distribution is generally mentioned in this connection.
- **Cuts.** The film was shortened for release and for foreign markets, and for decades only incomplete versions survived.
- **Restoration.** A longer version, assembled with the help of a copy found in Argentina, was shown in 2010 (check the years).

Reputation and record

Metropolis is often called the greatest silent film, and a landmark of science fiction. The record is more mixed: the plot and its social message were criticised even at the time, and its fame owes much to its images and to the effort of restoring it. The reputation is real, and it is a reputation.

Other Currents

- **Realist films.** Directors such as G. W. Pabst made films about contemporary life, including *Pandora's Box* (1929) with the American actress Louise Brooks.
- **Comedy and costume drama.** Ernst Lubitsch made popular historical dramas and comedies in Germany before moving to Hollywood in the early 1920s.
- **Mountain films.** Films such as those of Arnold Fanck celebrated mountains and physical heroism, and are discussed again in Chapter 3 because of the later careers of some of those involved.

The Exodus to Hollywood

Many German film-makers, actors and technicians went to the United States in the 1920s, drawn by higher pay and larger budgets. Lubitsch and Murnau were early examples, and the movement continued, with a second and larger wave after 1933 for political reasons (Chapter 3). The effect was that German visual style influenced Hollywood, especially in horror and in the crime films later called film noir, which is why the British and American film vocabulary borrows so many German techniques.

A famous theory, handled carefully

The critic Siegfried Kracauer argued, in a book published in 1947, that the films of this period revealed a national mood that led towards Nazism. It is one of the most discussed books in film history. It is also widely criticised, because it reads later events back into earlier films and ignores much of the variety of the time. Treat it as an influential argument, not a proven fact.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what UFA and Babelsberg were, and why a large studio made ambitious films like Metropolis possible.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

List three features of Expressionist film, and name two films from the chapter with the director of each.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why Metropolis shows the difference between record and reputation, and why Kracauer's theory should be treated with care.

Quick Reference

- **UFA:** formed 1917; main site at Babelsberg near Berlin
- **Expressionism:** distorted sets, strong light and shadow, exaggerated acting, stories of fear and authority
- **Caligari (1920):** Robert Wiene
- **Nosferatu (1922):** F. W. Murnau; an unauthorised Dracula
- **Metropolis (1927):** Fritz Lang; very costly; restored versions in later decades
- **Hollywood exodus:** Lubitsch, Murnau and others, then a larger wave after 1933
- **Kracauer:** an influential but contested theory
- **Check:** founding details, restoration years and the Caligari ending

Next chapter: Weimar Sound & the Nazi Screen, which follows German cinema from the arrival of sound through the years of National Socialism.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Weimar Sound & the Nazi Screen

This chapter covers two very different stretches of time: the last years of the Weimar Republic, when sound arrived and German film was still among the best in the world, and the years of National Socialist rule, from 1933 to 1945, when the film industry was brought under state control. The second part cannot be avoided in any history of German film. The chapter describes how the industry was controlled, what was made, what happened to the people who worked in it, and how the period ended. It does so in order to understand it, and not to admire it. Dates and titles are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

How this chapter handles the subject

Propaganda films are described by what they were and what they were for, with their dates, but the chapter does not retell their content in detail or praise their technique. The focus is on control, the people affected and the way German film later dealt with the period (Chapters 4 and 10).

The Arrival of Sound

Sound came to German cinema at the end of the 1920s, and by the early 1930s it had largely replaced silent films. For a time German studios were well placed, because they had strong technical expertise, a tradition of music and theatre and an audience across Europe. The change was disruptive, since it raised costs and the need for language-specific versions, and some silent-era stars did not make the transition.

Film	Director	Why remembered
<i>The Blue Angel</i> (1930)	Josef von Sternberg	Marlene Dietrich's breakthrough; a respectable teacher ruined by a cabaret singer; made at UFA
<i>M</i> (1931)	Fritz Lang	A hunt for a child murderer, with Peter Lorre; an early and inventive use of sound
<i>Westfront 1918</i> (1930)	G. W. Pabst	A realistic film about trench warfare

Film	Director	Why remembered
<i>Kuhle Wampe</i> (1932)	Slatan Dudow	A left-wing film with a script involving Bertolt Brecht

The Blue Angel and M

The Blue Angel (1930) was directed by the Austrian-American Josef von Sternberg and starred Emil Jannings and the then little-known Marlene Dietrich, in an adaptation of a Heinrich Mann novel. Its success took Dietrich to Hollywood almost at once, and she became one of the great stars of the century. *M* (1931), Fritz Lang's first sound film, used sound as a story device: the murderer's whistled tune identifies him to a blind balloon seller. Both films are regularly cited as proof that German cinema, by 1931, had adapted to sound with confidence (check the dates).

1933: The Takeover

Adolf Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, and within months the new government set about controlling culture. Joseph Goebbels was made Minister of Propaganda and took charge of film. The film industry was reorganised under a state body, the Reich Film Chamber, and people had to be members in order to work (check the details). Several things followed.

- **Exclusion.** Jewish and political opponents of the regime were removed from the industry, which took away many of its leading writers, directors, producers and actors.
- **Control of content.** Scripts and finished films were subject to censorship, and the state could ban or order changes.
- **Control of the industry.** The government used funding and ownership to bring the studios under its influence, and UFA came under state control in the late 1930s (check), with the industry later combined into a single state-owned group.

What Was Made

The popular picture of Nazi film is of propaganda, and some propaganda was made. Two well-known documentaries by Leni Riefenstahl, one on the 1934 Nuremberg party rally and one on the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, were praised for their technical skill, and they remain controversial because that skill served the regime. Openly antisemitic films, such as *Jud Süß*

(1940), were made and shown, and are among the clearest examples of film used as an instrument of persecution. Chapter 10 discusses how these films are treated today, including restrictions on showing some of them.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that all films were like this. Most of the industry's output was entertainment: comedies, romances, musicals, costume dramas and adventure films, many of them with popular stars. Some were designed to keep morale up during the war; one lavish colour fantasy, *Münchhausen* (1943), was made for UFA's anniversary (check). The regime saw entertainment as useful, a way of keeping the public content, and audiences were large. Historians still debate how far these films carried political messages. The honest answer is that some did openly, some did indirectly, and some had little.

Two things at once

The industry was both a tool of propaganda and a producer of ordinary entertainment, and the two cannot be separated neatly. Many people who made popular films carried on working in the industry after 1945, which is one reason why the question of responsibility is still discussed.

The Exiles

Many of the best-known figures left Germany. Some were Jewish, some were political opponents, and some left because they did not want to work under the regime. The group includes directors such as Fritz Lang and Billy Wilder, the actor Peter Lorre, the producer Erich Pommer and, in her own way, Marlene Dietrich, who refused to return to Germany and later took American citizenship (check). Lang's departure is the subject of a well-known story about a meeting with Goebbels, which is often repeated and which Lang later described in a way that other accounts dispute, so it should be treated as an anecdote. Many exiles worked in Hollywood, in Britain and in other countries, and the effect was a transfer of skill that shaped other national cinemas. Others were killed in the persecution.

The End and the Aftermath

As the war turned against Germany, cinemas were closed, bombed or cut off. One of the last major productions was *Kolberg* (1945), a costly historical epic intended to encourage resistance,

made in the last years of the war (check). After the surrender in 1945 the Allied powers took over the industry. They shut down the state structures, examined the careers of film-makers, and restricted the showing of films judged to be propaganda, a category that remains in use (check). Some figures, such as Riefenstahl and the director of *Jud Süß*, faced investigations and legal proceedings, with results that were argued about for decades.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the arrival of sound in German film and name two films from 1930 or 1931 that show it, with a reason each is remembered.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain three ways the government took control of the film industry after 1933, and say why it is wrong to think all Nazi-era film was propaganda.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain what happened to the people of the industry who left Germany, and say why the Lang and Goebbels story is better treated as an anecdote than a fact.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Sound:** arrived at the end of the 1920s; largely replaced silent film by the early 1930s
- **The Blue Angel (1930):** Sternberg, Dietrich
- **M (1931):** Lang, Peter Lorre; inventive use of sound

- **1933:** Goebbels in charge; the Reich Film Chamber; Jewish and opposition film workers excluded
- **Output:** some propaganda, much entertainment
- **Exiles:** Lang, Wilder, Lorre, Pommer, Dietrich and many others
- **1945:** Allied control; restrictions on some films
- **Check:** dates of the Film Chamber, UFA's nationalisation and the status of banned films

Next chapter: Rubble, Heimat & Krimi: West Germany 1945–1960s, which follows West German cinema after the war.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Rubble, Heimat & Krimi: West Germany 1945–1960s

After 1945 German cities were in ruins, the film industry was under Allied control and the audience wanted, understandably, to forget. This chapter follows West German cinema through its first two decades: the short wave of "rubble films" that looked at the damage directly, the comforting village films and costume dramas of the 1950s, the war films that asked awkward questions, the cheerful thrillers and westerns of the early 1960s, and the young film-makers who declared in 1962 that the old cinema was dead. East Germany has its own chapter (Chapter 5). Titles and dates are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Starting Again, 1945–1948

The Allied powers licensed new film companies and decided who could work. Cinemas reopened quickly, and the audience queued for any film that was available, including a large number of imported ones. The first German films after the war were made in the ruins, sometimes literally.

The Rubble Films

The *Trümmerfilm* ("rubble film") is the name given to the first postwar German films, set among the ruins and dealing with returning soldiers, homelessness, guilt and the question of what to do with former Nazis. They were few and not widely popular.

Film	Why remembered
<i>The Murderers Are Among Us</i> (1946), Wolfgang Staudte	Usually named as the first German film made after the war; a returning soldier recognises his former commanding officer as a war criminal. It was made in the Soviet-occupied part of Berlin, which links it to Chapter 5
<i>Somewhere in Berlin</i> (1946), Gerhard Lamprecht	Children playing in the ruins and a father returning from the war
<i>Germany, Year Zero</i> (1948), Roberto Rossellini	An Italian film shot in Berlin; often compared with the German rubble films, though it was not German

Check the details

Which film counts as "first" depends on the definition used, and several are claimed. The dates and the productions are from general knowledge and should be confirmed in a film reference.

The 1950s: Escape and Recovery

By the early 1950s the economy was recovering, and so was the cinema. Cinema attendance rose during the decade and then fell as television spread, a pattern seen in many countries (check the peak). The films that dominated were mostly cheerful.

The Heimatfilm

The *Heimatfilm* ("homeland film") was the characteristic genre of the decade. Set in the Alps, the Black Forest or the heath, with folk costumes, village festivals, simple romances and beautiful landscapes, it offered a view of a Germany untouched by war. Examples often named include *The Black Forest Girl* (1950) and *Green Is the Heath* (1951) (check the dates). Critics later saw these films as escapism that avoided the recent past, while their defenders point out that audiences simply liked them, and that the genre offered an idea of belonging at a time when many people had lost their homes. Both views have some truth.

Other Popular Films

- **The Sissi films.** A trilogy about the young Empress Elisabeth of Austria, from 1955 to 1957, starring Romy Schneider. It was an Austrian production, but it was hugely popular in West Germany and is a perennial on German television (check). It shows how the German-language market crossed borders.
- **Scandal and stars.** *The Sinner* (1951), with Hildegard Knef, caused a public row over a brief nude scene and attracted protests from churches. Stars of the decade included Heinz Rühmann and Maria Schell.
- **Dubbing.** West Germany dubbed foreign films on a very large scale, and a distinctive dubbing industry grew up, which is a feature of German film culture to this day.

War Films and Difficult Questions

The 1950s also produced war films, many of which presented ordinary soldiers as victims and left out the regime's crimes. A few were more critical. *The Bridge* (1959), directed by Bernhard Wicki, about teenage boys sent to defend a bridge in the last days of the war, is often named as a serious anti-war film. The question of responsibility was not absent, but it was usually side-stepped, a point taken up in Chapter 10.

Continuity and protest

Many people who had worked in the industry before 1945 returned to work after it, including some of the directors of Nazi-era films. Protests and calls for boycotts followed some of their new films. A resulting legal case about the right to call for a boycott became a landmark in German law on freedom of expression (check the details).

The Early 1960s: Krimi and Winnetou

At the beginning of the 1960s two series became very popular and were later remembered with great affection.

- **The Edgar Wallace films.** From 1959, German producers made a long series of thrillers based loosely on stories by the British crime writer Edgar Wallace. They were set in a foggy, theatrical London but filmed mostly in Germany, with a regular cast of actors and a mixture of menace and comedy. They are known by the German word *Krimi* (crime story). In Germany the Wallace films are better remembered than the author, a curiosity in the same spirit as *Dinner for One* (Chapter 1).
- **The Karl May films.** From 1962, adaptations of adventure novels about the American West, written by a German author who never visited it, featured the Apache chief Winnetou and his friend Old Shatterhand. They were filmed in the landscapes of what was then Yugoslavia, and starred the French actor Pierre Brice as Winnetou. These films were enormously popular (check).

The Oberhausen Manifesto (1962)

In February 1962, at the short-film festival in Oberhausen, a group of young film-makers published a statement declaring that the old German cinema was finished. Its best-known phrase is usually translated as "Daddy's cinema is dead". Twenty-six people are generally

reported to have signed, including Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz, both of whom appear again in later chapters (check the number). They called for a new kind of film, independent of the old commercial system and with new financial and training support.

The statement did not change cinema overnight, but it started a series of changes: public funding for young directors, film schools and a shift to a more personal style. The result, within a decade, was the movement covered in Chapter 6.

A generation gap on screen

The Manifesto is also a story about generations. The signatories had grown up during or just after the war, and they objected to a cinema they associated with their parents' generation and its silences about the past.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what a rubble film is, name one example and say why it was not widely popular.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe the Heimatfilm and give one criticism and one defence of it.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain what the Oberhausen Manifesto said, who signed it and what it led to, and say why it can be read as a generation gap.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Rubble films:** 1946 to 1948; ruins, returning soldiers, guilt; e.g. *The Murderers Are Among Us*
- **Heimatfilm:** 1950s village and landscape romances; escapism or belonging
- **The Bridge (1959):** Bernhard Wicki; a serious anti-war film
- **Sissi trilogy:** Austrian production, 1955 to 1957; Romy Schneider
- **Edgar Wallace series:** from 1959; Krimi thrillers filmed in Germany
- **Karl May films:** from 1962; Winnetou; filmed in Yugoslavia
- **Oberhausen Manifesto:** February 1962; "Daddy's cinema is dead"
- **Check:** exact dates, the first-film claim and the number of signatories

Next chapter: DEFA & the East German Screen, which turns to the other German state.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · DEFA & the East German Screen

While West Germany was watching Heimat films and Edgar Wallace thrillers (Chapter 4), East Germany had a very different film industry: a single state-owned studio, DEFA, working at Babelsberg, answerable to the ruling party and expected to serve the aims of the state. It nevertheless produced films that are still watched, a few that were banned for years, and a stock of children's and fairy-tale films that Germans of both East and West watch every winter. This chapter looks at how DEFA worked, what it made and what became of it after 1990. Titles and dates are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

A State Studio

DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*) was founded in 1946 in the Soviet-occupied part of Germany, at the old Babelsberg studios near Potsdam (Chapter 2), and after the East German state was founded in 1949 it became its state film studio. Its first film was *The Murderers Are Among Us* (1946), discussed in Chapter 4. The state paid for production, owned the studio, chose the subjects and controlled distribution.

- **Aims.** Films were expected to support socialist values, to teach and to entertain. The ideal was a cinema of the people, as opposed to what the authorities described as the commercial and escapist films of the West.
- **Control.** Scripts were approved by the studio and by state and party officials, and finished films could be changed or withheld.
- **Output.** DEFA is generally credited with several hundred feature films over its history (a figure around 700 is often quoted; check), as well as documentaries, newsreels, animation and children's films.

Within the Rules

Working inside the system did not mean that every film was propaganda. Many directors tried to make serious films about East German life, the Nazi past or ordinary people's problems, within limits that shifted over time. Some of the best-known are below.

Film	Director	Why remembered
<i>Stars</i> (1959)	Konrad Wolf	A German soldier and a Jewish woman in occupied Bulgaria; an early DEFA film to be recognised abroad (check)
<i>I Was Nineteen</i> (1968)	Konrad Wolf	A young German in Soviet uniform in 1945, drawn from the director's own life
<i>Jacob the Liar</i> (1974)	Frank Beyer	A story of hope in a ghetto; reported to be the only East German film nominated for an Oscar for foreign-language film (check)
<i>The Legend of Paul and Paula</i> (1973)	Heiner Carow	A very popular love story set in East Berlin

1965: The "Rabbit Films"

In December 1965 a leading meeting of the ruling party launched an attack on cultural life, and DEFA was hit hard. About a dozen films that had been completed or were being made were banned or held back (check the number). The group is often called the *Kaninchenfilme* ("rabbit films") after one of them, *The Rabbit Is Me* (1965), directed by Kurt Maetzig, which was not shown until 1990. Another, *Trace of Stones* (1966), by Frank Beyer, was pulled from cinemas after only a few days, and also reached audiences much later.

The ban was a punishment for films that the authorities thought were too critical or pessimistic about life in the East. It damaged careers and cost the studio some of its most talented people. It is a good example of the limits on what film could say.

A cautious thaw

After the leadership changed in the early 1970s, conditions eased for a time, and films like *The Legend of Paul and Paula* found a large audience with a more personal, less ideological story. The easing was real, and it was limited. The line could still be crossed, and directors learned where it was.

Children's and Fairy-Tale Films

DEFA's children's and fairy-tale films have had the longest afterlife. The studio made a series of lavish adaptations of folk and literary tales, which were shown on East German screens and are still shown on German television every year at Christmas. The best known international example is *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (1973), a co-production with Czechoslovakia, which is shown regularly in Germany and in other European countries in winter (check). Many Germans who grew up in the West know these films too, since they were later shown on all-German television.

Red Westerns

In the 1960s DEFA made its own response to the Karl May films of the West (Chapter 4): adventure films about Native Americans, sometimes called "Red Westerns" or "Easterns". They presented Native Americans as the oppressed side in a struggle against colonisation, in line with the state's ideas, and starred the Yugoslav actor Gojko Mitić, who became a star in the East. The first, *The Sons of Great Bear* (1966), was a hit (check). They are a clear case of the two German states making their own versions of the same popular genre.

Science Fiction and Other Genres

DEFA also made science fiction, such as *The Silent Star* (1960), an adaptation of a novel by the Polish writer Stanisław Lem, made in cooperation with Poland and other East European partners. The studio also co-produced films with partners in the Eastern bloc, which widened its audience and its resources.

After 1990

When the two German states united in 1990, the East German state studio ended. The agency set up to privatise state-owned businesses took over DEFA's assets, and the studio at Babelsberg was sold to a French company in the early 1990s (check). It operates today as a commercial studio, hosting international productions. The film rights were eventually placed in a foundation, the DEFA Foundation, which looks after the archive and supports the restoration and release of the films. In the United States, the DEFA Film Library at a university has long distributed the films with English subtitles (check).

Ostalgie and its limits

"Ostalgie" (nostalgia for the East) affects how these films are viewed. Some audiences return to them with real affection, and others find the affection uncomfortable, given what the state also did. A fair view keeps both in mind: the films are often well made, and the system that produced them was also a system of censorship. Chapter 9 returns to the subject.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe how DEFA was run and controlled, and give one example of a film made within those limits that is still remembered.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain what the "rabbit films" were, what happened to them and why they matter for understanding the limits of East German film.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Compare DEFA's Red Westerns with the West German Karl May films, and explain what DEFA became after 1990.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **DEFA:** founded 1946; Babelsberg; the state studio of East Germany
- **First film:** *The Murderers Are Among Us* (1946)
- **Control:** state funding, script approval, party oversight

- **Notable films:** *Stars, I Was Nineteen, Jacob the Liar, The Legend of Paul and Paula*
- **1965:** the "rabbit films" banned; *Trace of Stones* withdrawn
- **Children's films:** still shown at Christmas; *Three Wishes for Cinderella*
- **Red Westerns:** DEFA's reply to Karl May; Gojko Mitić
- **After 1990:** studio privatised; rights held by a foundation
- **Check:** film counts, dates and the Oscar nomination claim

Next chapter: New German Cinema, which follows the generation that came out of the Oberhausen Manifesto.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · New German Cinema

In the years after the Oberhausen Manifesto (Chapter 4), a group of young West German directors made films that no one had seen from Germany before: personal, political, often strange, and made on small budgets. Within about fifteen years they had won major prizes in Cannes and Venice and an Oscar, and German cinema was again a name to conjure with. This chapter looks at how the movement was funded, at six of its best-known figures and at what was distinctive about their films. The dates and titles are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

How It Was Paid For

The movement was only possible because of new money and new rules.

- **Public funding.** From the mid-1960s a new body gave grants to young directors, and a federal film law in the later 1960s set up a film subsidy system (check the dates).
- **Television.** In the mid-1970s the public broadcasters agreed to help pay for films, in return for the right to show them on television (check the date). That arrangement meant many of the films were as much television co-productions as cinema releases.
- **Schools and small crews.** The new directors often worked in small groups, used the same actors and technicians from film to film and kept their costs low.

An unusual arrangement

The New German Cinema was a creation of public money and public television as much as of individual genius. The directors were independent in style and dependent on the state for funding, which gave them freedom to make unconventional films and also made them vulnerable to changes in policy.

A Movement or a Moment?

The label "New German Cinema" covers directors who were quite different from one another, with no common manifesto beyond the Oberhausen statement. The label is a convenience, applied by critics and by the directors' supporters abroad. What they shared were a rejection of

the earlier commercial cinema, an interest in the German past and present, and a personal, author-driven approach to film-making sometimes called *Autorenfilm*. They were also influenced by the French New Wave, Italian film and, in Fassbinder's case, American melodrama.

Six Names

Director	Well-known films	Why remembered
Alexander Kluge	<i>Yesterday Girl</i> (1966)	A signatory of the Oberhausen Manifesto; an essayistic, fragmentary style; an early prize-winner
Volker Schlöndorff	<i>Young Törless</i> (1966), <i>The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum</i> (1975), <i>The Tin Drum</i> (1979)	Literary adaptations; <i>The Tin Drum</i> shared the top prize at Cannes and won an Oscar for foreign-language film (check)
Margarethe von Trotta	<i>The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum</i> (co-directed), <i>Marianne and Juliane</i> (1981)	The leading woman director of the movement; films about sisters and political violence
Werner Herzog	<i>Aguirre, the Wrath of God</i> (1972), <i>Fitzcarraldo</i> (1982)	Obsessive heroes in extreme settings; long collaboration with the actor Klaus Kinski; famously difficult shoots
Wim Wenders	<i>Kings of the Road</i> (1976), <i>Paris, Texas</i> (1984), <i>Wings of Desire</i> (1987)	Road movies and Berlin; a love of American culture seen through German eyes
Rainer Werner Fassbinder	<i>Ali: Fear Eats the Soul</i> (1974), <i>The Marriage of Maria Braun</i> (1979)	Extremely prolific; melodramas about love and power in West German society

Check the details

The list is a selection, and the years and prizes are from general knowledge. Wenders and Herzog continued to make films long after the period the label covers, and some of their best-known work falls later than the movement is usually dated. Confirm each title, year and award in a reference before quoting it.

Fassbinder

Rainer Werner Fassbinder is the figure most often placed at the centre of the movement. He directed around forty features, plus television work, between 1969 and 1982, often working with the same group of actors, and he also wrote, acted and edited. He died in 1982, aged 37 (check). His films are mainly stories of unequal relationships, from small-scale love stories to portraits of the economic recovery, and he was greatly influenced by the Hollywood melodramas of Douglas Sirk. His television epic *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is discussed in Chapter 8.

Herzog and Wenders

Werner Herzog made films about people driven by obsession, often in remote places, and filmed in difficult conditions. Wim Wenders, by contrast, made quiet, wandering films about people in motion, in West Germany and the United States, and was strongly influenced by American music and cinema. Both found international audiences more easily than at home, and both became better known abroad than most of the earlier directors.

Politics and the "German Autumn"

Many of the films dealt with the pressures of West German society in the 1970s, a time of political violence by left-wing militants and a sharp reaction by the state. The autumn of 1977 is remembered as a peak of that crisis, and in 1978 a group of directors, including Kluge, Fassbinder, Schlöndorff and others, contributed to an omnibus film about it, *Germany in Autumn* (check). It is an example of film-makers responding directly to events.

Women in the Movement

Women directors were more visible in this period than in earlier German film. Von Trotta was the best known, and others such as Helma Sanders-Brahms and Helke Sander are also usually named (check). Their films often looked at women's lives, the family and the consequences of the war, and were part of wider changes in German society.

How It Ended

The movement is usually said to have faded around the early 1980s. Fassbinder's death in 1982 is often treated as a symbolic end, but the causes were wider: funding priorities changed, some directors moved abroad or to other work, and the audience for such films never grew large at home. Even so, the directors' reputation abroad was lasting, and several of them remained active for decades.

Famous abroad, mixed at home

New German Cinema won more admiration among critics and festival audiences abroad than it did among ordinary German cinema-goers, who often preferred Hollywood films and comedies. That gap between reputation and popularity is typical of art cinema everywhere.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain how New German Cinema was funded, and why it is fair to say that it depended on public money and television.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose two directors from the table. For each give two films, one thing that marks their style and one reason they are remembered.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why "New German Cinema" is called a convenient label and not a single movement, and say how the period is usually said to have ended.

[→ Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Funding:** public grants and subsidies from the mid-1960s; television co-production from the mid-1970s
- **Kluge:** *Yesterday Girl* (1966)
- **Schlöndorff:** *The Tin Drum* (1979); Oscar for foreign-language film
- **Von Trotta:** *Marianne and Juliane* (1981)
- **Herzog:** *Aguirre* (1972), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982)
- **Wenders:** *Kings of the Road* (1976), *Paris, Texas* (1984)
- **Fassbinder:** about forty features, 1969 to 1982; died 1982
- **Label:** a convenience, not a single movement
- **Check:** dates of funding laws, awards and the end date

Next chapter: Television: ARD, ZDF & Tatort, which turns from the cinema to the small screen.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Television: ARD, ZDF & Tatort

German television began under the shadow of what radio had been used for in the Nazi years, and was deliberately built so that no government could control it again. The result is a system of regional public broadcasters, two national channels, a licence fee and a handful of programmes that most Germans have watched for decades. This chapter explains how that system was designed, how East German television differed, and how the best-loved programmes fit in, from the crime series Tatort to the New Year's Eve sketch from Chapter 1. Dates and facts are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Built Against Central Control

After 1945 the occupying powers set up broadcasting in their zones, and the British zone in particular drew on the model of the BBC, with an independent public corporation (check). When West Germany was founded in 1949 its constitution gave the regions, the *Länder*, responsibility for broadcasting, and the lesson of the Nazi years was that it should not be run by the national government. The system that followed has three main features.

- **Regional broadcasters.** Public broadcasters were set up for different regions, each with its own board that includes representatives of society and not only of government.
- **A joint network.** In 1950 the regional broadcasters joined to form **ARD**, which shares a national first channel while each broadcaster also produces regional programmes.
- **A licence fee.** Public broadcasting is funded mainly by a household charge and not by taxes, to keep it at arm's length from government.

The second channel

In 1960 the federal government tried to set up a national television company of its own. The Constitutional Court ruled against it in 1961, on the ground that broadcasting belonged to the regions (check the details). The result was ZDF, a second national channel founded by the *Länder* together, which began broadcasting in 1963. The court case is one of the most important decisions in German media law.

East German Television

East Germany took a different path. Its television service, the *Deutscher Fernsehfunk*, was a state broadcaster controlled by the ruling party, with its own news programme, entertainment and children's shows. It also ran programmes designed to answer Western television, one of which, *The Black Channel*, was a regular commentary attacking Western broadcasts (check). The audience could often watch Western stations too, since signals crossed the border, and in most of the East it was simple to tune in to the West. The exception was a region around Dresden where the signal was weak, sometimes nicknamed the "valley of the clueless" (check).

One programme crossed the border in a different way. The children's bedtime puppet *Sandmännchen* (the Little Sandman) was shown in both German states from the late 1950s, with different versions (check). It is a surviving example of shared German television culture.

Tatort

The programme most closely tied to German television is the crime series **Tatort** ("crime scene"). Its first episode was shown in November 1970 (check), and it has run ever since on Sunday evenings, with a new episode most weeks. Its special feature is that it is made by many of the regional broadcasters, so each team of detectives is based in a different city, with its own style: some are serious, some comic. Austria and Switzerland contribute teams too.

- **A shared ritual.** Many viewers watch it as a habit, and some hold Sunday-evening viewing parties and online discussions.
- **A showcase for regions.** The settings are real German cities and regions, which gives the series a map-like quality.
- **Comedy and drama.** The most popular teams include a pair of investigators in Münster whose episodes are comic (check).

Derrick and Other Favourites

The crime series *Derrick*, which ran on ZDF from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, followed a calm, formal police inspector in Munich and was sold to many countries, becoming especially popular in some of them (check). Other long-running shows include *Tagesschau*, the evening

news programme broadcast since the early 1950s, which gave the national channel a regular fixed point, and *Die Sendung mit der Maus*, a children's educational programme from 1971.

Dinner for One

The sketch from Chapter 1 needs its explanation. *Dinner for One* is a short English-language comic sketch about an elderly lady's birthday dinner and her butler, who has to play all the absent guests and gets drunker with each course. It was written in English, performed by the British comedian Freddie Frinton and recorded in Germany in 1963 for a northern German broadcaster (check). Over the following years it became a New Year's Eve tradition, with the line "the same procedure as every year" known to nearly everyone. It is often described as one of the most repeated programmes in the world, though that claim should be treated with care. In Britain it is almost unknown, which makes it an unusual example of a cultural export.

Saturday-Night Shows

For several decades Saturday evening was reserved for large entertainment shows. One of the best known, *Wetten, dass..?*, ran on ZDF from the early 1980s to the mid-2010s, mixing bets about unusual feats with celebrity guests (check). The Eurovision Song Contest was an important part of the same tradition: the German member of the European Broadcasting Union is ARD, whose regional broadcaster for the north organises Germany's entry (check). See The Eurovision Song Contest 2 for the origins of the network.

Spiel ohne Grenzen

The international game show known in France as *Jeux sans frontières* and in Britain as *It's a Knockout* was broadcast in West Germany as *Spiel ohne Grenzen*, and West Germany is generally reported to have been among the first participating countries (check). It is covered in *Jeux Sans Frontières (It's a Knockout): Europe's Game Show 3*, and the German angle fits the shared-network picture in this chapter.

Commercial Television

For about thirty years the only channels were public ones. In the mid-1980s the first commercial channels began, helped by cable and satellite, and they brought game shows, soaps and imported series. The result is called the "dual system", in which public and commercial channels exist side by side, with ARD and ZDF still carrying the main news and the major events. After reunification the East German broadcasting was folded into this system.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why German public broadcasting is organised by region and funded by a licence fee, and say how ZDF came about.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe Tatort and explain why it reflects the regional structure of German broadcasting.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Compare East and West German television in three points, and explain why Dinner for One is an unusual cultural export.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Principle:** regional, independent public broadcasting, funded by a licence fee
- **ARD:** joint network of regional broadcasters, formed in 1950
- **ZDF:** second national channel, from 1963, after a Constitutional Court ruling in 1961

- **East Germany:** state broadcaster; Western channels widely watched
- **Tatort:** crime series from 1970; teams in different cities
- **Derrick:** ZDF crime series from the mid-1970s; widely exported
- **Dinner for One:** a British sketch, a German New Year's Eve ritual
- **Commercial channels:** from the mid-1980s; the dual system
- **Check:** dates, the Dresden region and the Dinner for One details

Next chapter: The Epics: Heimat, Das Boot & Berlin Alexanderplatz, which looks at the large works made for television and cinema.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Epics: Heimat, Das Boot & Berlin Alexanderplatz

Some of the most admired German screen works are not films in the usual sense. They run for many hours, were made for television, and treat German history on a scale a cinema release cannot. This chapter looks at three of them: Fassbinder's television version of Berlin Alexanderplatz, Edgar Reitz's Heimat, and Wolfgang Petersen's Das Boot, which exists as a film and as a series. It also looks at the American series that prompted Reitz to write, and at a later drama that caused a row. Dates and titles are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Why Television?

The public broadcasters (Chapter 7) had two things that cinema often lacked: a stable income from the licence fee, and long time slots that did not have to be filled with the most commercial programmes. They also co-financed films (Chapter 6). A director with an ambitious project, like Fassbinder or Reitz, could therefore turn to television for the money and the room. These works are sometimes described as ancestors of the long, serious series now made for streaming services, though the comparison should be handled with care.

Berlin Alexanderplatz (1980)

Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Chapter 6) made *Berlin Alexanderplatz* for television, based on a novel of 1929 by Alfred Döblin. It follows Franz Biberkopf, a man released from prison who tries to live an honest life in Berlin in the late 1920s and is gradually broken by the people around him. The series runs for around fourteen hours in thirteen parts and an epilogue (check the length), and was shown on West German television in 1980, with the leading role played by Günter Lamprecht. It is generally regarded as one of Fassbinder's major works, and it is the longest and most ambitious piece of his career. Its tone is dark, its style is stylised, and its length is part of the effect.

Heimat (1984)

Edgar Reitz, a signatory of the Oberhausen Manifesto (Chapter 4), wrote and directed *Heimat*, an eleven-part series of about fifteen hours that was shown on the ARD network in 1984 (check). It follows families in a fictional village in a rural region of western Germany from 1919 to 1982, through the Weimar Republic, the Nazi years, the war, the postwar recovery and the arrival of modern life. The central character is Maria, who ages through the series.

- **Everyday life as history.** The series is built around ordinary life: weddings, work, emigration, a first radio. The great events of the century enter as things that happen to the village.
- **A reclaimed word.** *Heimat* means "home" or "homeland". The word had been damaged by its use under the Nazis and by the sentimental films of the 1950s (Chapter 4). The series asked what the word could mean again.
- **The sequels.** Reitz returned to the story in *Die zweite Heimat* (shown in 1992), set among young people in Munich in the 1960s, and in later instalments in the 2000s, and made a prequel about the 19th century in the 2010s (check).

Why Reitz wrote it

Reitz has been reported as saying that he was spurred by the reaction to an American television series on the Holocaust, shown in West Germany in 1979 (check). That series drew a very large audience and a strong response, and Reitz felt that Germans needed to tell their own history of the period in their own way. The point is relevant to Chapter 10, and the details of what he said should be checked.

Das Boot

Das Boot ("The Boat") was directed by Wolfgang Petersen from a novel by Lothar-Günther Buchheim, who had been a war reporter on a German submarine. It follows the crew of a U-boat on a patrol in the Atlantic during the Second World War, and is known for its claustrophobic, realistic view of life in a cramped steel tube. Jürgen Prochnow played the captain.

Version	Notes
Cinema film (1981)	Around two and a half hours; very successful abroad and nominated for several Oscars (check which)

Version	Notes
Longer cut	A longer director's version was released later (check the length and year)
Television series (mid-1980s)	A multi-part version for television, with more of the material
New series (2018 onwards)	A sequel series in several languages, made by a different team (check)

The film is generally seen as an anti-war film, because it shows men trapped and ill-served by their commanders. Some critics have questioned whether any film that makes its soldiers sympathetic can avoid some sympathy for the cause. The film-makers are generally reported to have intended an anti-war film (check), and the question is still debated. It is a good example of how a German war film needs to be read against the history in Chapter 3.

A German film that was an international hit

Das Boot was a rare case of a German-language film that found a large audience abroad, and it helped its director move to Hollywood. It shows that the same story can work as a cinema film and as a television series, a pattern that has become much more common.

A Later Controversy: Generation War

The tradition continued. In 2013 a three-part ZDF drama, usually known in English as *Generation War*, followed five friends from the start of the war to its end. It was a success in Germany, and was also criticised, especially in Poland, for how it portrayed Poles and for what it was thought to leave out (check). It is a reminder that screen history of the period is still contested, and that its audiences include neighbouring countries.

What the Epics Share

- **Length.** They use time to build a world and to show change.
- **History through individuals.** The big events are seen through ordinary people.
- **Public funding.** All were made with public broadcasters or the public funding system.

- **A debate about the past.** Each touched on how Germans see their history, which is the subject of Chapter 10.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why German public television made it possible to produce very long dramas, and name two examples from the chapter.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe what Heimat is about, what the word means, and why Reitz is reported to have written it.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain in what ways Das Boot exists as a film and as a series, and give one argument for and one against calling it an anti-war film.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Berlin Alexanderplatz (1980):** Fassbinder; from Döblin's 1929 novel; about fourteen hours
- **Heimat (1984):** Edgar Reitz; a village from 1919 to 1982; eleven parts; sequels from 1992
- **What prompted Heimat:** the American series about the Holocaust shown in West Germany in 1979 (check)

- **Das Boot (1981):** Wolfgang Petersen; from Buchheim's novel; film and series
- **Generation War (2013):** ZDF; praised and criticised
- **Pattern:** long form, public money, history through ordinary lives
- **Check:** lengths, dates and Oscar nominations

Next chapter: Reunification, Contemporary Cinema & the Streaming Era, which follows German screens from 1990 to the present.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Reunification, Contemporary Cinema & the Streaming Era

After 1990 there was one Germany, one film industry and a new set of subjects: the end of the East, a country of immigrants, and a generation with no memory of the war. In the late 1990s and 2000s German films began to win audiences and prizes abroad again, and since the middle of the 2010s German-language series have found a global audience on streaming services. This chapter follows that stretch of time, with a selection of the best-known films and series. It is a selection, not a ranking, and the titles and dates are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked. The chapter ends with a cut-off date of 2026.

A Slow Start, Then a Revival

The 1990s began uncertainly. The East German studio had gone (Chapter 5), the New German Cinema generation was ageing (Chapter 6), and audiences preferred American films. Two things helped the revival: a funding system that supported new work, and a group of younger directors who made films aimed at wide audiences. Comedy proved a reliable success. A parody of the Karl May westerns of Chapter 4, *Der Schuh des Manitu* (2001), was one of the most successful German films at the box office (check).

Films That Travelled

Film	Director	Why remembered
<i>Run Lola Run</i> (1998)	Tom Tykwer	A woman has twenty minutes to find money; the story is played three times with different outcomes; fast, electronic music; an international hit
<i>Good Bye, Lenin!</i> (2003)	Wolfgang Becker	A son recreates East Germany in a flat to protect his mother, who has woken from a coma after the Wall has fallen
<i>Head-On</i> (2004)	Fatih Akin	A Turkish-German love story; won the top prize at the Berlin festival (check)

Film	Director	Why remembered
<i>The Lives of Others</i> (2006)	Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck	A Stasi officer who monitors a writer; won the Oscar for foreign-language film (check)
<i>Toni Erdmann</i> (2016)	Maren Ade	A father's pranks on his businesswoman daughter; a long comedy that was a critical success abroad
<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i> (2022)	Edward Berger	A German-language version of the First World War novel; won several Oscars (check)

Check the details

The table is a selection and not a ranking. Prizes and nominations, in particular, are from general knowledge and should be confirmed in a film reference or on the festival and academy websites.

The East on Screen

Many of the most successful films of the period looked back at the East. *Good Bye, Lenin!* is the best known, a comedy with a serious edge about nostalgia and about how much of the old life people missed (compare the Ostalgie box in Chapter 5). *The Lives of Others* takes a darker view. It is set in 1984 and follows a Stasi officer assigned to monitor a writer, and it was praised for its portrayal of the surveillance state, though historians have pointed out that the central change of heart is more a drama than a documented type of event (check). Between them the two films show the range of ways in which East German life was remembered after the Wall fell.

A Country of Immigrants

Millions of people with Turkish family backgrounds live in Germany, and from the 2000s their stories reached the main stream of German cinema. Fatih Akin, born in Hamburg to Turkish parents, is the best-known director, and his films such as *Head-On* (2004) and *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) deal with life between two cultures. This strand was largely absent from the earlier chapters, and its arrival is one of the real changes of the period.

The Berlin School

Alongside the popular hits, a group of directors working in a quiet, observational style, often called the Berlin School, attracted critical attention. Christian Petzold is probably the best known, with films such as *Barbara* (2012) and *Transit* (2018) (check). Their films are usually slow, restrained and set in the present or recent past, and are admired by critics more than by wide audiences. They are a reminder that the German tradition of serious art cinema has continued.

The Streaming Era

From the middle of the 2010s, German-language series became a global export through streaming services and a new kind of co-production between broadcasters and platforms.

- **Babylon Berlin (from 2017).** A crime drama set in Berlin in 1929 and the following years, based on a series of novels, made by a team that included Tom Tykwer. It was a co-production of a pay-television company and the public broadcaster ARD, and it was reported as the most expensive German-language series made at that time (check).
- **Dark (2017 to 2020).** A science-fiction mystery about time travel and families in a small German town, made for Netflix, which was an early German-language original for the service and found a worldwide audience (check).
- **Das Boot (from 2018).** The sequel series mentioned in Chapter 8.

The public broadcasters, meanwhile, have put much of their archive and new work online in their own libraries, and Chapter 7's picture of a few national channels has given way to a crowded market. *Babylon Berlin* in particular shows the new mix of public and private money.

Dubbed or subtitled?

Viewers abroad often have a choice between the original German and an English dub. Germany has a very large dubbing industry for foreign films (Chapter 4), and German series now face the same question in reverse. The choice affects how the performances are experienced, and the course recommends the original with subtitles where possible.

Where Things Stand

German film and television in the 2020s is a mixed picture: a steady stream of comedies for home audiences, a few films that reach international audiences, a lively but small art-cinema scene, and a television and streaming sector that exports its drama. The long conversation about the Nazi and East German pasts continues in many of these works, which is the subject of Chapter 10.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Name three German films from this chapter, with the director, and say which are connected to the East.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Compare *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *The Lives of Others* as ways of remembering East Germany. Say what each shows and what each leaves out.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Describe two ways streaming changed German television drama, and explain why *Babylon Berlin* shows a new mix of public and private money.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Run Lola Run (1998):** Tykwer; three versions of one story
- **Good Bye, Lenin! (2003):** Becker; nostalgia and the East
- **The Lives of Others (2006):** Henckel von Donnersmarck; Stasi surveillance

- **Fatih Akin:** Turkish-German cinema; *Head-On* (2004)
- **Berlin School:** quiet, observational art cinema; Christian Petzold
- **Streaming:** *Babylon Berlin* (from 2017), *Dark* (2017 to 2020)
- **Comedy:** the Karl May parody *Der Schuh des Manitu* (2001)
- **Check:** prizes, dates and production details

Next chapter: Capstone: Confronting the Past on Screen, which draws the course together.

German Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Confronting the Past on Screen

*This last chapter follows one thread through the whole course: how German film and television have dealt with the Nazi years and, later, with the East German state. German has a long word for the process, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, usually translated as "coming to terms with the past", and a shorter one, *Aufarbeitung*, "working through". The chapter draws on the earlier ones, asks how the approach changed over time and what it tells us, and ends with suggestions for further reading and viewing. As in the rest of the course, it separates what can be checked from reputation and memory, and the exercises ask you to do the same. Recent events end with the 2026 cut-off.*

Stages of Looking Back

Period	Approach on screen	Examples
1946–48	Direct, brief: ruins, guilt and returning soldiers	<i>The Murderers Are Among Us</i> (Chapter 4)
1950s	Mostly avoidance: escapism, and soldiers shown as victims; a few exceptions	Heimat films, war films, <i>The Bridge</i> (Chapter 4)
1960s–70s	Challenge from a younger generation, mostly about the parents' silence	Oberhausen, New German Cinema (Chapters 4 and 6)
1979–84	A turning point: an American series prompts a German one	The Holocaust series, then <i>Heimat</i> (Chapter 8)
After 1990	New subjects: the East, and the past as a source of drama and debate	<i>Good Bye, Lenin!</i> , <i>The Lives of Others</i> (Chapter 9)

Silence, Then Argument

The pattern across the first two decades is that the screen, like society, looked away. The rubble films did look at the problem (Chapter 4), but their audience was small. The 1950s preferred romance, villages and soldiers who were presented as ordinary victims. It was left to the

generation born in or just after the war to ask their parents' generation what it had done, and the film-makers of the Oberhausen Manifesto and of New German Cinema (Chapter 6) took up the question in their own ways, often through stories about families and political violence.

A Turning Point

In January 1979 an American television series on the Holocaust was shown on West German television, and the response was very large (check). It is often described as the moment when the subject entered the living rooms of ordinary families. Edgar Reitz is reported to have felt that Germans should tell the story of the period in their own way, and *Heimat* (1984) was his answer (Chapter 8). Whatever the exact chain of cause and effect, the later 1980s and 1990s brought a steady flow of documentaries, dramas and discussion programmes on public television.

An outside spark

It is notable that the most influential single programme was not German. A foreign series gave the debate a form and a broad audience that years of German cinema had not. That does not make the German work less important, but it shows that these changes depend on events, audiences and timing as well as artists.

Directly and by Indirection

- **Directly.** After 2000 a series of dramas dealt openly with the period. *Downfall* (2004), about the last days of Hitler, divided critics over whether showing him as a human being was wise or dangerous; *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (2005) told the story of a young woman in the resistance (check the titles and years). A later satire, *Look Who's Back* (2015), imagined Hitler returning to present-day Germany (check). The television drama *Generation War* (2013) provoked protests abroad (Chapter 8).
- **By indirection.** Many works were about the consequences of the past without showing it: families who did not speak, villages with unspoken histories, political violence in the 1970s, and the way the postwar economic recovery was built on silence.
- **By restriction.** Some propaganda films from the Nazi years remain restricted, shown only in special settings with an introduction (Chapter 3; check how this works now), a different way of handling the past that has its own supporters and critics.

The Second Past: the East

After 1990 the question had a second part. East German film and television had been controlled by the state (Chapters 5 and 7), films had been banned, and the secret police had watched everyone. Films released after the end of the state, such as banned films from 1965, and new films, such as *The Lives of Others* (Chapter 9), made the East a subject of its own. The danger on the other side was nostalgia, or "Ostalgie", which could make a dictatorship look like a quaint lifestyle. *Good Bye, Lenin!* plays with this danger knowingly, and it is why the film can be read as comedy and as comment.

Two pasts, two kinds of memory

The Nazi past was dominated by guilt and responsibility, and the East German past by questions of survival, complicity and loss. The same viewer may feel quite different things about the two. Comparing them is one of the most revealing exercises in the whole course.

What It Tells Us

About film and politics

Screens were used by the state for control in two German dictatorships and later became places where the state's past was questioned. The same medium served both.

About memory

A society does not remember all at once. It looked away, then asked, then argued, and the arguments continue. Films are part of how that happened, and not only a record of it.

About television

The public broadcasters, built to prevent a return of state control, have been among the main places where the past was discussed (Chapter 7).

About limits

No film can settle a question like this. The best of them raise it again for the next audience.

The course's question, answered carefully

Chapter 1 asked how German screen culture has dealt with its own history, and how much of it can be separated from politics. A careful answer is that it has dealt with it slowly, unevenly and under pressure, first by avoiding it, then by challenging it, and now by making it a normal subject for drama. As my own judgement, and not a finding, the strongest German work on the subject tends to come from people willing to be uncomfortable, and the weakest from those trying to settle the matter.

Record, Reputation and Memory

The same three categories from Chapter 1 apply to the whole course.

Kind	Examples from the course
Record	UFA formed in 1917; the Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962; ARD in 1950 and ZDF in 1963; the 1965 bans at DEFA; Fassbinder's death in 1982
Reputation	"The greatest silent film"; "the best of the Heimat films"; "the end of New German Cinema"; Kracauer's reading of the 1920s films
Memory	Which film you saw and when; who played whom; the feel of watching Tatort on Sunday evening or Dinner for One on New Year's Eve

What still needs checking

Many facts in this course came from general knowledge, and the text has said so as it went: founding and release dates, prizes and nominations, lengths of the long series, the Heimat and Holocaust-series connection, the details of the 1965 bans and the status of restricted films. Before using any of them elsewhere, check each against a film reference, a broadcaster archive or a reliable history.

What to Read and Watch Next

- **The films themselves.** Watch one from each stage in the table above and compare how they treat the past.

- **Archives and broadcasters.** The public broadcasters' online libraries and the DEFA Foundation's holdings are good starting points (Chapters 5 and 7).
- **Related courses.** The sibling course Japanese Film & Television 1 asks similar questions about another country's screens, and the other Culture courses on this site, such as Jeux Sans Frontières (It's a Knockout): Europe's Game Show, place German television in a wider European setting.
- **Histories and criticism.** Look for histories of German cinema and broadcasting, and for studies of memory and film, which put the works in context.
- **Your own memory.** If you watched any of these, write down what you recall and then test each point against a source.

A Closing Thought

German film and television may look like a collection of genres, from silent horror to Sunday-night crime. Underneath, the thread that holds them together is a country working out, in public and in front of a camera, what to do with its own history. That makes it a good subject for a course, and a good reason to keep watching.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Write a one-paragraph history of how German screens dealt with the Nazi past, naming at least one film or programme from each of Chapters 4, 6, 8 and 9.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Pick one claim from the course and classify it as record, reputation or memory. Explain what you would check to confirm it.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

In about 150 words, compare how German screens deal with the Nazi past and with the East German past, giving one similarity and one difference.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Key term:** *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, "coming to terms with the past"
- **Stages:** direct (1946 to 1948), avoidance (1950s), challenge (1960s and 1970s), turning point (1979 to 1984), normal subject (after 1990)
- **Turning point:** the American Holocaust series (1979), then *Heimat* (1984)
- **Direct dramas:** *Downfall*, *Sophie Scholl*, *Generation War*
- **The East:** banned films, the Stasi, Ostalgie
- **Habits:** separate record, reputation and memory; check before quoting

Course complete. Return to German Film & Television 1 for the scope and sources.