A Decade between Resistance and Adaptation

The Leipzig University Film Club (1956-1966)[i]

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Introduction

As on 9 October 1956 at 8:00 P.M. a group of students of the Karl Marx University screened the film *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*, Hanns Heinz Ewers and Stellan Rye, Germany, 1913) in the Pavilion of the *Nationale Front* in Leipzig, they were setting the foundation stone for one of the most peculiar and lasting cultural organisms of the GDR. Following some weeks of hasty preparations, this first screening marked the birth of the *Leipziger Universitätsfilmklub*, an institution that, after overcoming name changes, structural modifications and all kinds of shortages for more than thirty five years, would even outlive the SED-State until its disappearance in 1992. As one of the most important film clubs in the east-German country, the LUF was a good example of quite an unorthodox formation: a democratic organization which developed its activities within the boundaries of the distribution and exhibition practices implemented by the Soviet Union and assumed by the GDR during the 1950s.

Based on archives documenting the work of the film club, secondary literature, interviews with one of its main representatives, the director of the film club during the early 1960s and later film journalist Fred Gehler, but also the reports of the state youth mass organization FDJ (*Freie Deutsche Jugend,* Free German Youth) preserved in the University Archive Leipzig (UAL), I would like to concentrate in this article on the film club's first decade of existence, a period characterized by the sovietisation of the distribution and exhibition practices, the de-Stalinisation from the late 1950s onwards and the growing cultural openness between the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 and the 11th Plenum of the SED in December 1965. The analysis will end in 1966 with the film club establishing itself independently from the University and FDJ and receiving the new denomination: *Leipziger Filmklub.*

Whether the implications of the cultural policies enhanced by the SED-State are central to understand the emergence of film clubs, their position as an institution tolerated by the state (but also in constant conflict with its representatives) and their development towards a stable organization on national level, I would also like to point out some characteristics of the history of the LUF which connects the evolution of this institution and of many of its east-German peers to a

broader trans-European understanding of film culture. The discourses of a *cinephilian* culture described by French Film Historian Antoine de Baecque as a new way "of watching films, talking about them and spreading these discourses" (2003: 11) which appeared in France during the post-World War II period, dispersed during the 1950s across the French borders and influenced the national film cultures of the UK, Italy, Spain or the Federal German Republic. They also accompanied the emergence of the different European New Waves provoking a renaissance of the film club movement and the institutionalization of a film culture (through the founding of film museums, national film archives, film departments at universities) which had been till then condemned to a shadowy existence. Though the necessary cultural transfer behind this evolution was seriously obstructed by the SED, some developments did also take place in the east-German state: the LUF provides a very good example to analyze some of these aspects, an example in which the official cultural policies were confronted with the activities of a group of enthusiasts trying to outlive its passion for the moving images.

In an introductory part of this essay I will briefly lay out the evolution of the film club movement between the early 1920s and the 1950s, a trans-European process, as I understand it, which is important to comprehend the emergence, activities and self-conception of the LUF in an adequate context. The early examples of film-club-like events in the GDR will be described in a second part, connecting their formation with the cultural policies of the east-German state. The activities of the LUF from 1956 till 1966 will therefore occupy the main part of this article: its founding in 1956, the evolution until 1960 and its institutional renaissance and programmatic changes after 1962. The protocol of a heated discussion after the presentation of the Czech film *Snadný život* (Miloš Makovec, 1957) at the film club in November 1958 will serve to amplify my analysis of the everyday undertakings and ideological debates in the institution.

Watching Films and Talking about Them: The Film Clubs

The names may change but their function remains: film societies, film clubs or *ciné-clubs* were born as associations promoting film culture through the screening of works (usually too abstruse films not belonging to the distribution mainstream) and their public discussion, sometimes producing in the process an editorial output in form of brochures or magazines. Their story can be traced back to the 1920s and it is usually linked to avant-garde circles and alternative cinema circuits (cf. Hagener 2007: 119). In 1920 the Italian film theoretician Ricciotto Canudo started in Paris the Circle of Friends of the Seventh Art (*Club des amis du septieme art*), which is today considered to be the first film club in history. Louis Delluc's *Ciné-club*, founded in the same city just two years later, gave to these seminal groups their definitive name. Parallel to the emergence of these first French examples, the British film culture started to get organized around the film societies (from 1925 onwards)

which, compared to the artistic interests of their French counterparts, presented a more educational profile through the active promotion of the local films against the American productions and also of foreign films otherwise banned from the British screens for political reasons (especially German and Soviet films). In comparison to their French or Spanish counterparts, which had developed a culture of discussion around the film projection, the British film societies relied more on the introductory speech and projection, being the discussions with active participation of the audiences rare (cf. Dickinson 1969: 89).

Although many of these institutions in different European countries like England, Belgium or the Netherlands were being supported by left-wing groups, it was in Germany where the early experiences with organized film reception were at most characterized by a high level of politicization. The Workers International Relief, an organization ancillary to the Communist International, was screening since the early 1920s to proletarian circles. The film associations *Volksfilmverbände* and the production and distribution company Prometheus, both of them near to the Communist Party, were also part of this increasingly important left-wing film culture, which disappeared as the Nazis came to power in 1933.

Following a period of general decay during the World War II the film clubs registered a great expansion in the post-War era, especially in France. This was also the period when the first international film club association, the *Fédération Internationale des Ciné-Clubs* (F.I.C.C.), was founded – on 16 September 1947 in Cannes. Brought into life originally by French and British film-club members, it showed in its leadership an aim to internationalization but also towards left wing positions: its first directors were the communist French film historian Georges Sadoul and the also communist Italian film theorist and scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini. This organization was intended to be a forum to promote the cultural exchange of film art, especially through the cooperation with film archives and other cultural organizations. Its founding can also be seen as a protest reaction against the proliferation of American commercial films in Europe in the years after the World War II (cf. Becker and Petzold 2001: 83).

France, birth land of the *cinephilia*, had also become the most significant European stronghold of the film club movement. In the mid-1950s there were already 180 institutions of this kind with around sixty thousand members (cf. Ramos Arenas 2011: 47). In other west-European nations, though not so strongly represented, the film club movement had as well made an essential contribution to the local film culture. In Eastern Europe, the Polish and Czech film audiences also caught up with these developments organizing themselves in independent associations during these years (1956 in Poland) or in the next decade (1964 in Czechoslovakia).

Film Clubs in the GDR

Although some early attempts to promote film cultural initiatives in the new east-German state can be traced back to the late 1940s (for instance the *Film-Club Berlin,* founded in the British sector of the German capital), the first wave of film clubs foundation emerged around 1956 as consequence, among other aspects, of the previous film cultural activities already taking place in well-established organizations and institutions, like the Society for German-Soviet Friendship (*Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft,* GDSF), the FDJ or in the 1956 newly created east-German army (*Nationale Volksarmee*). In this regard, the *Kulturbund*, a cultural mass organization in which still during its early years different political tendencies were represented, was playing also a pivotal role not only organizing cultural activities but also doing that sometimes *parallel* to the official line. (see Becker and Petzold 2001: 32)

The foundation of the State Film Archive (*Staatliches Filmarchiv*, SFA) in 1955 was extremely relevant to the work of all these institutions. It was established a center to collect and scientifically study film historical documents and films, but also functioned de facto as a non-commercial institution for the film distribution, providing the early film clubs with the necessary yet scarce film copies. Contrary to the official distribution company PROGRESS, the SFA could supply films not belonging to the mainstream, like old German productions from the 1920s or Soviet films from the 1920s and 1930s for extremely low prices.

Another important column of the film cultural work in this period was the movement *Filmaktiv,* officially promoted by the state authorities between 1951 and 1960, that can be seen, on a broader context, as part of a process of transformation of the east-German political and social structures along the soviet lines that had already shaped the production and distribution ramifications of the east-German film industry since the late 1940s. The approx. 3000 members of this movement were originally recruited by the state distribution company PROGRESS and commissioned, after an obliged training, to guide the reception of films according to the official ideological line. After the founding of the SFA in 1955, this institution took control over the *Filmaktiv* providing thereby a centralistic hierarchy. Although its distance to more "independent" activities of the film clubs is obvious, some of the characteristics of the film club work, especially its self-understanding as connection point between producers and audiences, were already present at the *Filmaktiv* (see Becker and Petzold 2001: 46–62).

Up to this point the authorities in the SED state had seen the tradition of independent but also organized film audiences with distrust: the film clubs were, in contrast to the *Filmaktiv* initiative, not easily manageable; the result of a movement "from below" only basing on the previous work of film enthusiasts. Their organization was, therefore, rapidly nested in the official structures provided by the SED and other state organizations: independent federations, as in other socialist countries like Poland were not allowed in the GDR. The supporting organizations (Universities, FDJ, the Society for German-Soviet Friendship or the *Kulturbund*) delivered however not only

representation in the organs of political power or financial support, but also ideological control, as I will explain in the case of the LUF. At the local level, the film clubs were also forced to work with institutions like theaters or cinemas as providers of the facilities to screen the films.

Apart from the problems of their institutional affiliation, the film clubs also proposed some other difficulties to the official culture political line: in their most basic definition they were an institution trying to bring the "artistic valuable" film to the masses, addressing by these means a shortage in the film cultural education often not accepted by the official instances. At the same time, their interest for art film caused them a lot of frictions with the state instances: film clubs were seen in this logic as elitist institutions, organizing private screenings and unwilling to engage with the "proletarian" esthetics of the new state (such as socialist realism) while having a preference for traditional, "bourgeois" cultural forms. Just a few months before the founding of the LUF, Eberhard Richter, at the time press aide at the Ministry of Culture, published an article in *Forum* (2/1956), the official print medium of the FDJ, in which he summarized the official SED line on the existence of film clubs:

> We consider that a film club, as an independent organization, is not necessary. The task of the film clubs in the western countries is to make the artistic valuable films accessible to the audiences. In the German Democratic Republic there are not barriers preventing the screening of artistic valuable films.[ii]

Why did it came though, in spite of these impediments, to that already mentioned wave of film club foundations during the second half of the 1950s, in which the LUF can be included? The developments abroad, specially the founding of the Polish Film Club Organization in 1956, were indeed seen as encouraging examples of an active film cultural work "from bellow" (see UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 71). At a culture political level, and following the discussion of the Central Committee of the SED (from 21 to 27 October 1955), the FDJ had already uttered criticism against the bureaucratic structures of the party and its distance from the real problems and necessities of the youth. It also campaigned for the building of interest groups and associations, which should reestablish strong boundaries to the basis (see Mählert and Stephan 1996: 110). Some months later, at the 12th Conference of the Central Committee of the FDJ in February 1956, the organization opted for an increasing cooperation with cultural and sport groups in order to secure its proximity to the masses. The founding of six film clubs during the next months, among them the LUF in October, can therefore be interpreted as part of these efforts of the state authorities to promote a closer relationship to the youth in general and students in particular.

The cultural openness during 1956 following the self-critical positions after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February and the protests in Hungary and

Poland had also their consequences during the following months at the Karl Marx University (see Heydemann 2010: 517ff.). The initial openness gave way during the last months of 1956 and early 1957 to a repression wave against intellectuals (cf. the so called Harich's Platform around the SED functionaries Wolfgang Harich, Bernhard Steinberger and Manfred Hertwig, who claimed for a different, "German way" to Socialism or the campaigns against the Philosopher Ernst Bloch and the Germanist Hans Mayer at the University) and put an end to any traces of a cultural thaw in the GDR and with it to that first wave of film club founding. The 30th conference of the Central Committee of the SED between 30 January and 1 February 1957 made these dispositions official.

In 1957, Alexander Abusch, member of the Central Committee of the SED, had proclaimed at the cultural conference that a fundamental goal of the state was to drench the whole era of entertainment and enjoyment with the socialist spirit (cf. Von Richthofen 2009: 154). Following this idea, at the 5th Party Congress (from 10 to 16 July 1958), the SED introduced the idea of a "Socialist Cultural Revolution" as one of the main objectives of state politics. The work at the film clubs was again in the spotlight and their founding reactivated: often in form of an "*ensemble*", a typical denomination for the emerging cultural groups before the 5th and between the 5th and the 6th Party Congress, a good dozen of film clubs appeared during the next three years. The direct way in which the political discussions influenced the work of the cultural institutions in general but also the everyday life activities of the film clubs is clearly shown in a 15 pages long document prepared by PROGRESS distribution company shortly after the 5th Party Congress and sent to different film organizations: it included a list of film suggestions which should help illustrate the "10 Commandments for the New Socialist Man", as proclaimed by Walter Ulbricht during the Congress (UAL, FDJ, 245, pp. 7–21).

The *Leipziger Universitätsfilmklub*

Although the founding of the film club can be seen primarily as a result of the collision of the spontaneous initiative of a group of students interested in cinema with favorable culture political circumstances, its existence could only be possible within the boundaries of already existing structures, in this case under the patronage of the FDJ and the *Hochschulgruppe* (university group) of the *Kulturbund.* While it was expected that the FDJ should handle the "problems of the students" and the *Kulturbund* would provide the culture political assistance (see UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 96), the FDJ controlled in fact the ideological line, received in its central in Berlin reports of the activities of the club and paid also the bills for the films or the lecturers who were intermittently invited to comment a particular exhibition or explain a broader film historical or film political subject. From December 1957 onwards, and parallel to an official change of name from *Filmklub* to a "Working Team (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*) Film at the Student Club of the Karl Marx University", the club was

exclusively subordinated to the FDJ.

Which were the purposes of the film club? According to the *concept paper* (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 96) from April 1957, these included the screening of films and their public discussion. In this document, its members explained as well their approach to the interpretation of the film work as an "ideological appraisal of the content and of its social implications" and an "engagement with the artistic-esthetic problems and means of expression in film, whereby the unity of both factors must be emphasized" a set of goals in line with the guiding premises of socialist realism. Regarding the great social pressure to conform existing in the east-German universities during this period, it is not surprising that the members of the film club (students all of them) acted so in line with the official ideological precepts on film reception. Reflecting on the first two years and a half of activities in a report of winter 1959, the film club administration commented that during the first months a great part of the members of the audiences were however attending the screenings "only interested in film historical and film aesthetic questions." Yet, as the club started to "discuss ideological questions, many of the original spectators just jumped off", remarked the directors not without certain pride (see UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 140).

The work of the film club was also integrated in the Leipzig local cultural-policies: since a conference of the *Filmaktiv* in 1953, the city had tried to promote the discussion on the progressive-film and the political indoctrination of the audiences. Therefore, parallel to the emergence of the LUF in October 1956, *Filmvolkshochschule* (founded 1958) offered in the facilities of the *Filmeck* movie theater documentary film cycles (see Höpel 2011: 191).

The club was originally structured around a small group of seven students, which constituted the organ of government and managed the everyday-business including the selection of the films, the organization of the screenings and the lectures, the contact of the lecturers or the administration of the finances, etc. The members of the direction of the LUF, like in other film clubs in the GDR, were autodidacts who worked without remuneration. The facilities were provided by the University, but also other state organizations like the *Nationale Front* or the Sport Institute of the University (DhfK).

The screenings were originally set up as private events for a maximum of 230 members, a number which was rapidly achieved. Among these students, most of them were members of the Institute for Journalism and also German Philology, but there were also a significant representation of the Graphic Arts Institute and of the Section of Performing Arts. The films were initially screened exclusively to the members of the club; its directors hoped by these means to be allowed to show films otherwise banned to normal audiences (see UAL, FDJ, 254, p. 106), a request which could not be fulfilled though. The private character of the screenings was also modified, presumably following the official guidelines, in October 1957: from this point onwards, the film club was accessible for everyone interested in cinema.

While the activities of the film club were controlled by the FDJ, its direction had to work also with the University on a regular basis. Although not taking part in the common decisions concerning the election of the films screened in the club, a four man scientific committee composed by members of the University was set up on order to provide the work of the film club with the necessary "professional guidance". The interferences were though sometimes beyond these professional questions: Dr. Erhard John, member of this committee and of the Department for Aesthetics at the Institute for Philosophy of the Karl Marx University used his privileged position in January 1957 to provide to fifteen of his students access to the club, which at that point had achieved its limits and did not admit any new members (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 80).

The films were screened in sessions on average twice a month (sometimes more than one film in each of these sessions) and they came mainly essentially from the State Film Archive in Berlin for a price of DM 30 per picture. This cooperation with the SFA determined also the titles shown, belonging to the tradition officially embraced by the SED, which included:

- German films of the 1920s like *Das Kabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1920), *Berlin – Symphonie einer Großstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, Walter Ruttman, 1927), Friedrich Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (*The Last Laugh*, 1924) and *Faust* (1926) or Fritz Lang's *Die Frau im Mond* (*Rocket to the Moon*, 1929). As a kind of under-category among the German films were also the works of the so called Proletarian Cinema like *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (*Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness*, Phil Jutzi, Germany, 1929) or *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* (*Kuhle Wampe*, Slatan Dudow, Germany, 1932) which had been produced by the Socialist and Communist Parties (SPD and KPD) during the late 1920s and 1930s.

- A series of international films, whose directors enjoyed ideological appeal in the socialist country such as Charles Chaplin (*The Great Dictator*, 1940) or Joris Ivens (*De Brug*, 1928, or *Misère au Borinage*, 1933, to whom the LUF organized cycle taking place in October and November 1957). The defense of Charles Chaplin as anti-capitalist artist could already be observed during this period in the *Deutsche Filmkunst*, the most important film magazine in the GDR.

- And, of course, soviet films like *Oktyabr': Desyat' dney kotorye potryasli mir* (*October: Ten Days That Shook the World*, Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1928), *Aleksandr Nevskiy* (*Alexander Nevski*, Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1938), *Putyovka v zhizn* (Nikolai Ekk and N. Batalov, 1931) or *Dezertir* (*Deserter*, Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1933).

Trying to reaffirm the political aspect of these practices of film screening, some of these films were presented in cycles like a "Sergei Eisenstein" series of films, the "Masterpieces of Soviet Cinema",

which included film screenings and conferences, or "The Image of the German Worker in Film", all of them celebrated in 1957 and 1958.

The most noticeable absence on this list of screened films is the contemporary east-German film production (DEFA). Some exceptions were Georg C. Klaren's *Karriere in Paris* (1950) or *Der Richter von Zalamea* (Martin Hellberg, 1956) which was shown in the LUF only two years after its premiere in Berlin. In this aspect, the film club acted like many other institutions of this kind in west-Europe, stressing the distance between art-house cinema production (in this particular case, in form of the "artistic valuable progressive cinema") and the "official" films provided by the state tradition of quality. On the one hand, this mode of action can be explained according to the original goals of the club as formulated in its *concept paper*. On the other hand, as the contemporary films were also exhibited in regular movie theaters, a film club would represent an undesirable competitor to the traditional, commercial, exploitation practices, making their exhibition at the film club unwelcome.

The range of films available to the clubs was strictly limited and that meant that many of the titles were repeatedly screened. The selection of the films and the elaboration of a coherent program represented constantly a problem for the LUF. Already after the first year of work the club informed the central office of the FDJ (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 108) that its activities were being complicated by the impossibility of receiving the right films from the archives (SFA) or planning their lending in advance. The material shortage did not only influence the pictures showed but also the activities that accompanied the screenings like the printing of brochures or the organization of discussions on the films with the attendance of film scholars or film directors from the German Academy of Cinema Art in Babelsberg.

The Student Film in 1958: Untruthful, Negative and Atypical

In order to illustrate the discussions lead in the film club, I would like now to analyze the debate celebrated on 28 November 1958 after the screening of the Czech film *Snadný život* from Miloš Makovec (1957), which was registered in a discussion protocol by the members of the film club.

The film tells the story of a group of students in a Czech university during the 1950s and was expected by the members of the film club to be a faithful portrait of the contemporary youth in a communist country. The picture had already been running in some normal GDR cinemas since the previous summer before being picked up by the LUF because of its thematic, which was expected to address some experiences they could relate to. The screening of the film should also provide a basis to discuss, on a broader scale, the possibility of a student film in the GDR, which, inexistent up to this point, could illustrate the reality of the east-German universities.

After having lamented during the previous months a shrinking audiences (UAL, FDJ, 245, p.

166), and identifying the cause of this problem with a lack of activities at the film club apart from the screening of the films, the members of the film club prepared for *Snadný život* an special event: the film director Heinz Thiel and two other members of the *Dramaturgie*-section at the DEFA-studio, Dieter Scharfenberg and Wolfgang Pieper, were invited to take part at the subsequent discussion organized after the screening.

The protocol of the discussion shows however no trace of alternatives to the official line dictated by the party, neither from the members of the DEFA-studio, nor from the students. The film was lambasted by all the present members whose opinion was registered in the protocols: "The film is untruthful. It is not only negative, but also atypical" exclaimed the participants. A medical student noted furiously right at the beginning of the discussion "we don't want to see such a film again!", what is shown in the film "could not happen not even in a capitalist country, not to speak in a socialist one" (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 206).

As already noted, the members of the DEFA studio supported this line of argument and offered also self-criticism as filmmakers: they explained, after being asked about the inexistence of realist depictions of the world of the students, that there were not scripts available treating this problematic. Scharfenberg considered though, the absence of this kind of texts was not a problem of craftsmanship, but a political one: "The reason why there are not good scripts is that most of the authors lack of the right ideology", he said (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 208).

To support their opinions, the participants drew on to the contemporary official discourses, for example, Walter Ulbricht's at the 5th Party Congress (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 210), in which he had proclaimed that the first goal of the socialist national culture was to bring the people and culture together (see Höpel 2011: 143). The consequences for the inner politics of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the subsequent waves of liberalization and revolts in Hungary in different east-European countries were also continuously addressed during the discussion. Thiel condemned for instance the film in the following way: "The pernicious message is in alignment with a false interpretation of the 20th Congress, as one intended to deviate from the formula. One ends up at dull revisionism." (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 207) Handel, a member of the film club also present in the discussion, interpreted the film in broader (and in his view more alarming) culture political terms: the film encourages tendencies to "soften" (*aufweichen*) the socialist countries, which had been already observed behind the Polish and Hungarian revolutions of 1956. Therefore, the film was bad not only because of its intrinsic qualities but because of its critical examination of the principles of the socialist realism: "the film should recount the serious scientific, social and practical work of the students" was noted in the resolution after the discussion (UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 55) and, by doing so, it should also show a positive view on these students.

Building on this resolution, the film club prepared also a letter of protest to the DEFA: on 16 December, the director of the film club at that time, Blumenthal, wrote to the export department of

the film studios demanding an explanation about the exhibition of such a "harmful work" (cf. UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 190). The campaign against the film culminated with an article titled "Not Real Student Problems" and published in *Forum* (2/1959), the fortnightly journal of the central council of the FDJ in Berlin, attacking the DEFA for its responsibility for a film "which could have been produced in any capitalist land."

While the discussion on this film and its consequences were prolific documented in the archives, it is impossible to determine, due to the lack of more material of this kind, if such a virulent reaction was an usual "natural" response to films which certainly put into question some of the principles of socialist realism, or if this event was to some extent "staged" in order to achieve a greater political resonance for the activities of the club (for example, with the aid of the letters rapidly sent at the DEFA and *Forum*).

Talking about the role of the FDJ during the early 1960s, film club director Fred Gehler pointed out the way members of this youth organization tried to guide the discussions against the work of the new club direction, accusing him of lacking political commitment, a situation that provoked important tensions between the new direction and the FDJ (Gehler, personal communication, November, 22, 2011). We can therefore assume that the representatives of the FDJ played also already in the late fifties – a period in which there was still no relevant discrepancies between the direction of the club and the youth organization –, not only a central role behind the political overzealousness observed in this discussion, but also in the way events like these were employed to work politically towards the party dispositions (even by criticizing thereby the activities of the DEFA).

1962: A Renaissance

In 1960 the LUF had for all practical purposes disappeared. "Manpower shortage" was the cause according to the official line. The real motive seems though to be, as explained by the SFA employee of the former Rudolf Freund, the competition that this institution represented for the monopole of the state distribution company PROGRESS (see Becker and Petzold 2001: 29).[iii] The film distribution at the SFA had already been suspended for this reason between 1960 and the beginning of 1962. In any case, the film club had reached a point in 1959 were it was not anymore functioning as active institution. The delays in payments to the SFA, which had been constant in the film club since its early days and had capitalized much of the post conducted by the institution during 1957 and 1958, had been increasing during the last months. Unanswered letters and invitations gathered during 1959 and 1960 in the archives until the first months of 1962, in which new activities, like screenings in cooperation with the House of Polish Culture in Leipzig, were newly being planned.

The reactivation of the film club was a reflex of culture political developments. Following the building of the Wall in August 1961, the First Secretary of the SED Walter Ulbricht had embarked on a policy of cultural liberalization. Cultural institutions were encouraged to offer activities which would secure the closeness of the youth to the party. The cultural education of the masses was also directly addressed two years later as a central goal during the 6th Party Congress of the SED.

For the film club, this new period after 1962 was also a phase of growing ideological frictions. In late 1962, the new FDJ-appointed direction had worked on a new *concept paper* for the institution (UAL, FDJ, 242, p. 154). The LUF became also a new name, *FDJ-Filmklub der Karl Marx Universität*. Beside the description of the usual goals and subjects, the *paper* also included among its objectives an analysis of the work of a series of "bourgeois filmmakers", a subject usually condemned by the cultural authorities. As noted on the margins of the paper by the members of the FDJ who controlled its edition, the document didn't either discuss directly the party principles on art and literature. The text was rejected and substituted some months later, in summer 1963, by a new one which presented the work of the film club as a direct execution of the dispositions discussed at the 17th Plenum of the SED (UAL, FDJ, 60, p. 5).

The new members of the film club direction, who have been addressed by the FDJ to take charge of a de facto not existing organization, marked though very soon in their practices clear distances to the official ideological line. On the one hand, the screenings showed an increasing interest for the films of the "New Cinemas" of other socialist countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary (Fantisek Vlácil's *Holubice* [*White Dove*, Czechoslovakia, 1960] and Roman Polanski's *Nóz w wodzie* [*Knife in the Water*, Poland, 1963] were already shown in Leipzig in 1962 and 1963. The first of these films had been even originally banned by the SED authorities), neglecting at the same time the some of the productions of the east-German DEFA. Through contacts with the House of the Czech Culture, but also moved by the personal interest of the film club member Hans-Burckhard Schnaß for the Czech film, the LUF was able to show till shortly before the Prague Spring in 1968 some new films coming from the young flourishing cinema of neighboring country like *Ostře sledované vlaky* (*Closely Watched Trains*, Jirí Menzel, Czechoslovakia, 1966). This openness could not include though the west-European productions: these came to the screens of the GDR in most of the cases with a delay of some years (for example, Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* [*The 400 Blows,* 1959] the first example of the French New Wave which could be seen in east-Germany, did not premiere until 1968).

The discussions that accompanied the reception of these films showed also the influence of other theoretical and ideological traditions, which represented a challenge to the socialist realist line still defended by the authorities. The FDJ headquarters in Leipzig discussed during a conference on 22 January 1963 how some of these, in their view, "dangerous" attitudes influenced the work of the

members of the film club. Regarding the work of its new director Fred Gehler, the FDJ noted:

> Political-ideologically, his work must be more effective for the purpose of the party. He lets himself being pushed from right and left and he is very inconsequent. He doesn't possess a clear political outline.[iv]

Gehler seems though not to be the only one whose attitude caused headaches to the FDJ:

> Some members of the film club are not free from arrogance towards the films of the DEFA and the socialist contemporary art. Especially the friends [Hans-Burkhard] Schnaß and Schkerl tend to an exaggerated adoration of the form and deny the content. Therein it is also clear the influence of Prof. Mayer (Institute for History of German Literature).[v]

The discussion on content or form, which has been behind most of the debates on art and literature in the GDR since the early 1950s, converged during this years with the challenges proposed by the film productions and developments in film theory and criticism in other European countries. Confronted with this "official" evaluation of his work by the FDJ during this period, Gehler remarked the influence exercised over him by the writings of contemporary leading European film journals like the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* or the west-German *Filmkritik*. His work for the east-German leading film magazine of the time, the *Deutsche Filmkunst* (cf. Agde 1999), from the summer 1961 till its suspension in December 1962, allowed him access to ideas and intellectual currents which were banned for most of the normal east-German cinema goers (Gehler, personal communication, January, 17, 2012). This connection with the *Deutsche Filmkunst* had also had a major influence in his selection as director of LUF in 1962: it was mainly because of his experience in film publications that Gehler, who was not any more a student at Leipzig Karl Marx University but an assistant at its Institute for Journalism, was offered his job at the film club. It also meant during the following years that the film club, in spite of its official submission to the FDJ, developed an own screening program increasingly in conflict with the SED ideological line.

The growing distance between film club and FDJ did also manifest itself physically, in the screening facilities. Since the early 1960s, many of the film clubs which had emerged during the 1950s usually attached to universities were now establishing formal relationships with cinemas. After some early months, in which the screenings had taken place at the film hall of the Grassi Museum, the club took up residence in a much bigger venue, the Casino Theater in the Leipzig city center, an institution without any formal connection to the state youth organization.

The scarcity of film copies, which had already determined the work of the film club during the 1950s, posed also a problem during this second period. The members of the club tried therefore

to have access to films provided through personal connections with foreign institutions such as the Polish and Czech Cultural Centers in Berlin. These unofficial networks were also central to understand the relationships with the International Leipzig Documentary and Short Film Week (see Becker and Petzold 2001: 144), the most important east-German film festival, which had been restarted in 1960 and allowed the members of the LUF access to international filmmakers, representatives of west-German film clubs,[vi] publications and, of course, films.

This relationship with the Film Week, with the Casino Theater, with the publications and above all, the new personal constellation, shows that, in spite the institutional continuity, the period around 1960 marked a wide gap in the history of the film club. Its evolution during the following years can only be understood regarding these parameters, which usually promoted screening and discussion practices against the official lines.

The evolution of the film club towards the contemporary film critical discourses already spreading in other European countries (cf. Hillier 1966, de Baecque 2003, Tubau 1983, Kessen 1996 or Ramos Arenas 2012) wasn't though accepted without resistance by all the members who attended the screenings. As already noted, Roman Polanski's *Nóz w wodzie* was shown in Leipzig in May 1963, two years before its official premiere in the east-German cinemas, and the response of some members of the audience shows the gap between the intentions of the film club direction and a mass of spectators still following the official party line on film aesthetics. The University Newspaper published on 13 June 1963 the reaction of one of these infuriated members of the public in form of an article titled "Who do you serve, film club?": LUF spectator Rolf Rothke used the screening of Roman Polanski's first feature-length film and of *Grausige Nächte* (Lulu Pick, Germany, 1921) on the same evening, the 31 May 1963, to attack the work developed by the film club on ideological grounds: "Did not the latest discussion on partisanship, popularity and artistic mastership penetrate in the brains of the friends at the film club?" he asked. Although Rothke admitted not having seen Polanski's film, he attacked both pictures, which, as he expressed, could have been "dug out by a decadent snob of a west-German existential-club." The article ends with an ironic remark addressed at the direction of the film club: "the comrades, Khrushchev, Lenin, Kurt Hager and Walter Ulbricht wouldn't be angry if you first study their discourses on the problems of art and literature." (UAL, FDJ, 60, p. 1)

The publication of this criticism on the film club caused rapidly a reaction from the FDJ: ideological overseers called the directing members of the film club Fred Gehler and Hans-Burckhard Schnaß for explanation. These published a response in which they defended on the one hand the decision of screening the films and the work of the film club. Yet in order to support their opinions, they did not defend the intrinsic qualities of the films, but reasoned entirely on official party lines, asserting that: "Our principal ideological goal was to work, with the means and methods which are specific for our effort, on the realization of our main culture political task." (UAL, FDJ,

The new direction of the LUF picked up also newly one of the battles central to the understanding of the east-German film clubs since their early days in the mid-1950s: the attempt to see the different clubs represented in an organization at national level. The founding of the Film Club Association (*AG Filmclubs*) in December 1963 was the culmination of this long and, till this point, fruitless struggle: already in autumn 1956 the members of the film club had been contacted by their colleagues from the Filmclub of the Martin-Luther-University in Halle in order to exchange some ideas and experiences. After explaining their intentions and the film cycles they had in mind, they uttered quite frankly their disagreement with the way the birth of film clubs was not being supported by the authorities, and explained their intentions to create a platform to express their demands (cf. UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 71) Some months later, in the summer of 1957, Stephan Heinig had already written on behalf of the LUF a report to the central headquarters of the FDJ demanding an organization which would unify the film east-German film clubs (see UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 110). New efforts to establish this institution can be found at a conference of the University Film Clubs of the GRD organized by the University section (*Hochschulgruppenleitung*) of the FDJ which took place in Berlin between the 22nd and 23rd of April 1960. As occurring during that already mentioned period of inactivity of the LUF in the early 1960s, its members couldn't attend the meeting. Nevertheless, these early attempts wouldn't crystalize until the creation of the *AG Filmclubs*.

After its refoundation in 1962, the LUF had already make significant, though informal, contacts with other film clubs, especially with the one at the Martin Luther University in Halle, which provided a basis for future association. During 1963 they even came to publish jointly two numbers of a film club magazine *Filmklubmitteilungen*. The project of a national organization wouldn't though have come to life without state intervention: it was indeed the SFA of the GDR who invited 120 representatives of the east-German film clubs and of the *Club der Filmschaffenden*, an organization created already in 1953 to promote the study of the progressive cinema, on the 6 and 7 December 1963 in Berlin and proclaimed the foundation of the Provisional Committee Film Clubs at the Club of the Filmmakers (*Provisorische Arbeitsgemeinschaft Filmclubs beim Club der Filmschaffenden*) (see Becker and Petzold 2001: 127). The film club association was subordinated to the *Club der Filmschaffenden*, which provided the budget for the reunions and for the publication of a magazine (*Film*, printed between 1963 and 1968 and closed down after ideological conflicts with the official party line), and took over the international representation of the east-German film culture. Fred Gehler, already known for his work at the LUF and his film publications, was elected president of the *AG Filmclubs*.

The foundation represented an important shift in the dynamics of the Film Clubs within the power structures of the SED-State. Firstly, it gave them an institutional representation. At the same

time, it was seen by some of the members as a chance to promote the exchange among the different film clubs, which up to this point it had been difficult to maintain, but also as an opportunity to improve their presence and power when dealing with the authorities. Secondly, this institutionalization also meant a more direct control form from the authorities: the *AG Filmclubs* became the battlefield of different conceptions of the activities of the film clubs. The tensions around the organization of two central workshops in 1966 and 1967 in the city of Meißen (a third, which should have taken place in 1968, was originally planned but never carried out on ideological grounds) or around the publishing of the magazine *Film* (also closed down in 1968), are the best examples of its agitated existence (cf. Becker and Petzold 2001: 148 and Gehler 1999).

This representation on national level was seen by many of the film club members as a chance to build some contacts with other foreign film clubs and have privilege access to many of international films, which, as they hoped, could be shown within the restrictive circles of the clubs while still remaining banned for general audiences. This international integration had been a question already addressed by the first wave of the film clubs around 1956 and 1957. The members of the LUF had manifested already in April 1957 their intentions of establishing contact with other film clubs "in west-Germany and abroad" (see UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 96). The integration in international structures (the *Fédération Internationale des Ciné-Clubs,* F.I.C.C.)[vii] was therefore seen as part of the goals behind the formation of the *AG Filmclubs* (see Becker and Petzold 2001: 129 and 145), a first step to get access to the modern films of the European New Waves, which they had heard of or read on, but not watched. The contacts with this institution, which finally lead to the admission of GDR in 1965, were though established by the *Club der Filmschaffenden*, so that it never came to a fruitful and direct collaboration between the east-German film clubs and their foreign counterparts.

In spite of the autonomy enjoyed by the LUF during this period in the early 1960s, the structural dependence and control from the FDJ caused quite often open conflicts. After the screenings, now taking place on Thursday at 19:00 in the big theater house Casino, the film club moved to the Club House of the FDJ Kalinin at the University where, in a more familiar atmosphere, lectures and discussions took place. In these facilities, the debates were often controlled by affiliates of the FDJ sitting in the audience, putting into question the election of the films showed, criticizing its lack of ideological commitment, especially when these films could not be found in the "normal" theaters (Gehler, personal communication, November, 22, 2011).

Collateral damages of the attacks on its director Fred Gehler also influence the evolution of the film club during these years. In 1965 Gehler had been expelled from the University after the publication of an article in Mai 1965 in the political and cultural magazine *Sonntag* in which his film critical texts were severely reviewed and his political commitment seriously questioned. Gehler had been himself criticizing for some years many of the DEFA-productions in his journalistic work

for the *Deutsche Filmkunst* and for the political and cultural magazine *Sonntag* in a way which wasn't acceptable for the authorities. After his public denunciation in 1965, he was forced to leave his job as assistant at the Karl Marx University but also his position as president of the *AG Filmclubs* (see Gehler 2001)

The close form of cooperation of the film club with the AG was also gone with it. This lack of formal attachment of its main members to the University, where they were not any more students or scholars, the growing tensions in the work with the FDJ, but also the structural security provided by the longstanding cooperation with the Casino Theater induced the directory of the film club to change its name and affiliation at the city hall without previously informing the FDJ. In 1966 the *FDJ-Filmklub der Karl Marx Universität* became the *Leipziger Filmklub*. In order to avoid conflicts with official instances during the next years, many of the activities of the film club were presented as extraterritorial events of the Houses of the Polish and Czech Culture in cooperation with the Casino Theater (Gehler, personal communication, January, 17, 2012). Surprisingly enough, neither the FDJ nor the University seemed to take this movement into account. None of them demanded an explanation and the film club could continue to function for many years, until 1992, liberated from the direct control of these organizations.

Conclusions and Outlook

During the twenty years that followed the end of the World War II the film club movement experienced an extraordinary evolution in most Europeans countries. From 1956 onwards this trans-European development would also influence the east-German film culture, which up to this point had been following a model in which, as well as in the production and distribution, (cf. the articles of Kyrill Kunakhovich and Pavel Skopal in this volume) the reception practices had been officially guided according to party lines. The mere existence of film clubs proposed a challenge to this *status quo*.

The development of the LUF during the late 1950s sums up the experiences of a bigger group of sixteen film clubs, all emerging in a four-year period (see Becker and Petzold 2001: 396). It arose as a democratic organization "from below" proposing a serious alternative to the diverse ramifications of the process of sovietisation unfolded in the east-German society and cultural life since the late 1940s. The embracement of a Stalinist social and cultural model, adopted as a central part of state discourse at least since the second party conference in summer of 1952 was preceded in the field of film production by the foundation already in 1950 of a commission in charge of the political control of every film produced by the DEFA, an institution headed by Hermann Axen, who, to that time, was also director of the department for "*Agitation*" of the Central Committee of the SED.

Following this logic of growing political control in every social realm, the intents to exercise centralist guidance on the cinema field started also in this period to cover the area of film reception, primarily through the activities of the *Filmaktiv*. The rapid and forced integration of the film clubs within already existing mass organizations like the FDJ or the *Kulturbund* some years later can be seen, therefore, as a further example of this tendency. The early obstacles obstructing the national organization of the clubs or the problems regarding the distribution of films reflect the weight of two different conceptions of their work; the democratic approach of their founders on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, the Stalinist conception of the SED-culture-policy. These contradictory notions pushed the clubs often to an existence at the edge: they were officially accepted but not actively promoted. In the eyes of the authorities they oft represented an elitist, not enough controlled approach to the film reception.

But the example of the LUF also shows that the activities of the film clubs during their first period in the late 1950s were far from achieving the subversive effects on the official culture politics feared by the authorities. Its proceedings and discourses during the late 1960s offer no sign of ideological sedition. In a film cultural panorama dominated by material and intellectual scarcity, the works of these groups of students which constituted the LUF were oriented towards an extension of film cultural activities, not towards questioning them. If there was at the beginning of its existence the desire of proposing alternatives to the state lines regarding the politics and aesthetics of film reception, the integration in the FDJ soon marked homogenous conformity, as observed in the *concept paper* in April 1957 or in the protocol of the discussion of December 1958.

When in 1962 the FDJ contacted Fred Gehler and Hans-Burkhard Schnaß it was hoping to resuscitate the film club supported on a group of cinema enthusiasts who could offer expertise and contacts with other institutions, but also a loose attachment to the University. The new members embraced a program to open the film club up to contemporary cinema developments in other east-European countries, a more critical approach to the east-German production and a set of aesthetic views not compliant with the official line. The tensions emerging in this period between the film club and the FDJ culminated in 1966 with the change of names (giving up the "University") and the disengagement from FDJ.

Whether up to this point the structure of the film club remained essentially similar to its first incarnation in 1956, the personal changes were connecting it to other European developments. The foundation of the *AG Filmclubs* in 1963 increased the institutional presence of the film clubs and produced a magazine (*Film*) which allowed the dissemination of ideas, which were up till this point only discussed in small groups. This organization became also rapidly an ideological battle field on questions of film reception.

In this regard, the way the discourses of a modern cinema were received in east-Germany, the way they influenced the activities of the film club, points out not only interest aspects of the

cultural policies of this country but also of the ideas themselves. The discourses of this *modern cinephilia*, as disseminated throughout Europe from the early 1960s on, were characterized by a mixture of aesthetic modernism and left-wing politics (cf. Kessen 1996, Hillier 1986, Tubau 1983 or Ramos Arenas 2012). As these debates on the modern cinemas battled for a place in different European film cultures, they drew on intellectual traditions with subversive potential in each of the countries. The film publications provide a good example of this process, for example in the undeniable influence of the Spanish Communist Party on *Nuestro Cine* or of the Italian Communist Party on *Cinema Nuovo*, but also in France, in the magazine *Positif* or in the evolution of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* towards left-wing positions (which would culminate in the Maoist phase of the magazine around 1968). In west-Germany the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School as central force behind the *Filmkritik*. In the east-German case, the *modern cinephilia* drew not so much on the left-wing tradition, which would have situated in a position near to the official cultural policies, but on that aesthetic modernism, often branded down by the SED-authorities as formalism, which helped them to interpret and praise the new cinemas.

The conflicts taking place in the LUF during the early 1960s, after some of its members had established contact with the international debates and films accompanying (or actively constituting, in case of the films) the cinema New Waves, show firstly a clear evolution from a first phase of the film club movement, which had developed within the boundaries of the state cultural lines. They illustrate also the significance of an international cultural transfer of ideas on film criticism or theory functioning often over non official networks that can help to understand a complex film culture offering its own response to the birth of the modern cinemas.

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ⁱndnotes:

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ⁱⁱ „Wir sind der Meinung, daß ein studentischer Filmklub als selbstständige Organisation nicht notwendig ist. Die Aufgabe der Filmklubs in den westlichen Ländern ist es, dem Publikum künstlerisch wertvolle Filme zu erschließen. In der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik gibt es keine Hemmnisse gegen die Aufführung künstlerisch-wertvoller Filme."

ⁱⁱⁱ A letter written to the headquarters of PROGRESS in Berlin (17.10.58) illustrates the problems of the film club with the distribution company: "At this cycle ["The Image of the German Worker in Film"] we wanted also to screen the film *Kuhle Wampe* and we got in contact with the regional head office of PROGRESS. We received the answer with astonishment: We were informed that the film was only distributed to commercial theaters. We cannot understand such an ordinance which contradicts the principles of a socialist cultural policy. It is beyond our comprehension why such a significant film like *Kuhle Wampe*, can be exclusively shown when it also yields a certain financial profit and not when there is political-ideological reason behind its screening. Hence, we would like you to examine this disposition, so that the film would be put at our disposal. Your early response is appreciated."
("Innerhalb dieses Zyklus [„Die Gestalt des deutschen Arbeiters in Film"] wollten wir auch den Film *Kuhle Wampe* zeigen und wandten uns deshalb an die Bezirksdirektion Leipzig des Progreß Filmvertriebs. Die Antwort von dort rief jedoch unser Erstaunen hervor, denn es wurde uns mitgeteilt, daß dieser Film nur an gewerbliche Spielstellen verliehen wird. Wir können eine solche Anordnung, die doch den Prinzipien einer sozialistischen Kulturpolitik widerspricht, nicht verstehen. Es ist uns unbegreiflich, weshalb ein solchbedeutender Film wie *Kuhle Wampe* nur dann gezeigt werden darf, wenn ein bestimmter finanzieller Gewinn dabei herausspringt, und nicht dann wenn der politisch-ideologische Nutzen Grund der Aufführung ist, Wir bitten deshalb, diese Anordnung zu überprüfen, damit uns der genannte Film doch noch zur Verfügung steht. Wir hoffen auf eine baldige Antwort." UAL, FDJ, 245, p. 173)

^{iv} "Er muß politisch-ideologisch im Sinne der Politik der Partei wirksamer werden. Er läßt sich von links und rechts stoßen und ist zu inkonsequent. Er verfügt über keine klare politische Grundkonzeption." (UAL, FDJ, 242, p. 123)

[v] "Einige Mitglieder des Filmklubs sind nicht frei von Überheblichkeit gegenüber der DEFA-Filmen und der sozialistischen Gegenwartskunst. Besonders die Freunde Schnaß und Schkerl neigen zu einer übertriebenen Anbetung der Form und negieren den Inhalt. Darin kommt auch der Einfluß Prof. Mayers (Institut für deutsche Literaturgeschichte) zum Ausdruck" (UAL, FDJ, 242, p. 124) Prof. Hans Mayer was in the late 1950s and early 1960s an element of tension at the University because of his ideas on politics and aesthetics. An unorthodox Marxist, Meyer was also a celebrity within the intellectual circles. Especially after the publication of his ideas (and criticism) on the contemporary east-German literature on 2 December 1956: "Zur Gegenwartslage unserer Literatur" in *Sonntag* (11/1956), he was being persecuted by the east-German authorities. In 1963, after paying a visit to his editor in west-Germany, he did not return to the GDR. The film club did not establish though any kind of contact with Prof. Mayer.

[vi] Fred Gehler pointed out, in a conversation with the author, the contacts with five of six representatives of the film club *Film Studio* at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, which were in Leipzig during the autumn of 1964. This served not only to exchange experiences but also to get to know the publication of his west-German colleges: *Filmstudio*. Through these informal networks the members of the club could also receive an invitation to take part at the 1965 Congress of the west-German film clubs in Bad Eims. Rudolf Freund was sent there as representative of the east-German film clubs.

[vii] First intents to become part of the F.I.C.C. had already taken place in 1958. To a full membership of the east-German film clubs wouldn't come until 1965.