

DEFA without borders: Mobility and Space

Paper Abstract / Émilie Duranceau-Lapointe

Under Section I. Mobility and space in film

Title: *Western Heroes in a Betonwelt: Berlin-Marzahn in 1980s DEFA Films*

Berlin-Marzahn was the GDR's largest housing project, with 35,000 apartments built for 100,000 residents by 1985. Offering modern amenities such as heating and hot water, as well as schools, kindergartens, restaurants, and cultural facilities, Marzahn embodied the state's promise of socialist modernity and attracted residents from across social groups, from construction workers to university professors. By the 1980s, the GDR's housing policies had become more than social infrastructure: they were central to the state's self-legitimation and served as proof of socialism's progress and prosperity. This paper examines how Marzahn was represented in DEFA film productions as both a projection of the state's socialist ideals of work, community, and everyday life, and a contested site where competing visions of modernity, individuality, and the GDR's future collided.

Focusing on two feature films—*Insel der Schwäne* (1982, banned in 1983) and *Der Hut des Brigadiers* (1985)—alongside documentaries such as *Manchmal möchte ich fliegen* (1981) and *Berlin – Bauplatz der Jugend* (1982), this paper traces how the “*Plattenbausiedlung*” was cinematically used to question not only the lived realities of GDR housing policies but also the role and space of citizens in shaping and negotiating their environment. These films employ *Western* archetypes—the silent hero and the new sheriff in town. These figures, guided by a sense of justice (“*Gerechtigkeitssinn*”), struggle against monotony and conformity while seeking to shape and embellish their “concrete world.” The “*Betonwelt*” of Marzahn thus emerges as a blank canvas for debating notions of technology, progress, nature, and “*Heimat*.” Moreover, it becomes a symbolic space where individuality, creativity, and civic participation were negotiated. By comparing both forbidden and celebrated films set in Berlin-Marzahn, this paper reveals how cultural productions in the 1980s simultaneously reinforced and challenged GDR housing policy, raising broader questions about the meanings of “*Volksherrschaft*” and socialist modernity.

Biographical Information

Émilie Duranceau-Lapointe, currently affiliated with the ZfA—TU Berlin, completed her PhD in History at the University of Michigan (09.2025) on German-Jewish history in Nazi Berlin. Her future habilitation project will analyze housing policies in the GDR, focusing on Berlin-Marzahn.