

Luci Cook: The Geography of Solidarity: Tracing Vietnam–Berlin Trajectories in Heynowski & Scheumann’s Vietnamzyklus

This paper interrogates mobility and transcultural collaboration in Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann’s „Vietnamzyklus“ (DEFA, 1976–1979) by exploring how these works emerged from multidirectional processes involving Vietnamese interlocutors—ranging from government officials and interpreters to camera operators and interview subjects. I move beyond oversimplified readings of these films as simply GDR propaganda to consider instances of transcultural collaboration that might inform a more nuanced understanding of authorship, agency, and representation within the context of GDR-Vietnam relations.

For the 1979 Berlin screening of „Vietnam 4: Die Eiserne Festung“, the celebrated DEFA documentarians invited several Vietnamese interviewees to East Berlin. Their transcontinental journey, their reception by GDR audiences, and their reflections on seeing their experiences refracted through the GDR’s cinematic lens were documented in the follow-up film „Die fernen Freunde nah“ (1979). The recorded movements of filmmakers and subjects, and the contribution of Vietnamese professionals behind the camera—most notably Nguyen Luong Duc in „Vietnam 2: Die erste Reise danach“ (1977)—demonstrate how the mobility of people, images, and stories can both reinforce and unsettle prevailing norms of socialist representation.

In what ways do these encounters support, complicate, or reframe our understandings of socialist documentary practice and its effects, particularly within the GDR-Vietnam relationship? How do these films serve as sites for negotiating meaning between institutional imperatives and lived transnational experience? By tracing encounters in front of and behind the camera—from the Mekong Delta to Berlin—I aim to open new perspectives on how solidarity was imagined and negotiated, and on the complexities of transcultural collaboration in late 1970s DEFA filmmaking.

Biography: Luci Cook is a PhD candidate in Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan. Their dissertation analyzes German depictions of Vietnam in political film and literature (1963-1983). They are a current fellow of the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies.