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## **Digitizing amateur films from the German Democratic Republic**

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FILMCOLORS – AN  
INTERDISCIPLINARY  
APPROACH  
([HTTPS://FILMCOLORS.ORG](https://filmcolors.org))



By Josephine Diecke, M.A., Research Project SNSF Film Colors. Technologies, Cultures, Institutions, University of Zurich, and Dennis Basaldella, M.A, Hamburg University / Filmmuseum Potsdam

The *Film Colors* projects of the University of Zurich and the Filmmuseum Potsdam joined forces, in order to digitize six selected color films from the Filmmuseum's holdings (<http://www.filmmuseum-potsdam.de/Erforschung-historischer-Farbfilmverfahren.html>). The cooperation between the SNSF project *Film Colors. Technologies, Cultures, Institutions* (<https://www.film.uzh.ch/de/research/projects/verbund/filmfarben.html>) located at the University of Zurich (Switzerland) and the Filmmuseum Potsdam (Germany) (<http://www.filmmuseum-potsdam.de/>), was established by Josephine Diecke (<https://www.film.uzh.ch/de/team/drittmittel/diecke.html>) and Dennis Basaldella (<http://www.dennisbasaldella.de/>) with the aim to present an innovative collaboration that brings together specialized knowledge in the realms of film production and film technology with a particular focus on typically marginalized topics, such as amateur filmmaking and film stock manufacturing in selected historical contexts.

Both dissertation projects are relying on film and non-film sources from the archival holdings of the Filmmuseum and were selected according to their common research interest in alternative approaches to the film and media histories of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). How can both approaches enrich the debates about the preservation, digitization and circulation of marginal objects? Some of the results are going to be presented in the framework of the upcoming CSF Summer

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### Research on Independent Film Production in the GDR

Dennis Basaldella's research interest focuses on the neglected, marginal film production modes in the former GDR. This includes the amateur studios (Basaldella 2016) and – as he discusses in his PhD project – production modes as the *private freie Filmhersteller*, freelance film professionals working during one or more projects for one or several employers, producing contract works within their own production company and production infrastructure. Research on GDR film history has mainly focused on the so-called 'big players' such as Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), responsible for the film production and the Deutscher Fernsehfunk (DFF), the national television broadcaster, suggesting that those two protagonists were solely in charge of film and television production in the country. The topics of the films produced by freelancers and amateurs made them often uninteresting for current scientific research. Still, reality shows another picture, as the example of the amateurs shows.

Even though they were controlled by the state, amateur films have been a central part of cultural life in the GDR from the beginning. As the studios were part of the factories and the companies in the socialist state, the films documented working life, other related topics such as safety at work or political subjects, but also the amateurs themselves during the shooting. By doing so, the films became unique documents of everyday life. For example, the films of the studio of the Wohnungsbaukombinat Berlin – the biggest housing society in the country – document the construction works of various socialist buildings in East Berlin such as the Fernsehturm at the Alexanderplatz or the big housing complexes in Marzahn. However, the proximity to their institutions and factories made it possible that amateurs could not only work with semi-professional 16mm film stocks, but also with professional film equipment.

### Research on Development and Diffusion of Chromogenic Color Films

The SNSF project *Film Colors. Technologies, Cultures, Institutions* seeks to position historical color film technologies in their cultural and sociopolitical contexts. Color film processes based on chromogenic development dominated the second half of the 20th century, while their further development and dissemination was characterized by international and transnational exchanges. In the framework of her PhD project, Josephine investigates successful as well as less popular players who have shaped the production of chromogenic color film stocks and the materials' subsequent professional and amateur uses during the so-called 'Cold War', e.g. in the production context of DEFA (<https://filmcolors.org/2018/05/04/defa>).

Agfa and its East German successor ORWO were one of the biggest raw film manufacturers, whose extensive role for the global distribution of color films is mostly minimized in historiographical overviews. Its headquarter in Wolfen was built in 1909 and continued film stock production almost immediately after World War II for the Socialist nations. From 1945 until 1964, the newly constructed film production plant in Leverkusen (West Germany) and the old one in Wolfen (East Germany) coexisted under the same name "Agfa". In 1964, Wolfen sold all the rights for the Agfa brand to Leverkusen and changed the company's name to ORWO, which is an acronym for 'ORiginal WOlfen'. Throughout their existence, their products constantly fell behind the international standards, set by the US-American Eastman Kodak. The biggest challenge for the film manufacturer was to keep up with the customers' demands and needs for a stable supply of qualitatively reasonable film materials.

### Color Mania – Exhibiting

#### the Materiality of Color in Film and Photography

(<https://filmcolors.org/2019/01/24/color-mania/>)

#### Fourth International Conference Colour in Film, London

(<https://filmcolors.org/2018/12/21/cif2019/>)

#### Colorful Copyright Books by George Kleine at the Library of Congress

(<https://filmcolors.org/2018/11/13/copyright-books/>)

#### Tagging for Users

(<https://filmcolors.org/2018/10/01/tags/>)

#### Digitizing Amateur Films from the German Democratic Republic in Color

(<https://filmcolors.org/2018/08/13/potsdam/>)

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Besides the successful implementation of the first negative-positive process for color films, Agfa also provided the first reversal film stock seriously competing with Kodachrome (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/timeline-entry/1277/#/>). The small gauge Agfacolor (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/timeline-entry/1276/>) and its successors Orwocolor (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/timeline-entry/1315/>) reversal and Orwochrom (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/timeline-entry/1396/>) negative and positive film stocks, covered a great share of the consumer market that amateur as well as freelancing filmmakers were dependent on. The “State-socialist Mode of Production” (Szczepanik 2013) especially differed from other Western ones and was shaped by material shortages and centralized supplies. To keep in mind these aspects of film production and its interdependency with the accessible media technologies puts artistic and economic choices into equally respected perspectives.

The *Timeline of Historical Film Colors* (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/>) is a platform where a variety of film gauges are exhibited alongside each other. Highly successful inventions as well as forgotten failures are part of the history of modern (mass) societies, and with this also the age of proliferated (color) images. The goal is to foster a profound research into the traditionally marginalized areas of private and vernacular uses of the same technological principles that more popular products stem from. Since technology never evolved in a societal vacuum, the current research must be informed by discursive practices and processes of identity formation through technology, too.



### Cooperation: Digitizing Amateur and Independent Films in Color


In digitizing six more or less unknown films from the collection of the Filmmuseum, the two PhD projects joined forces to support a change of perspective towards the writing of (non-)canonical film history. The color films that have been digitized in this cooperation are mostly documents of daily life in the GDR. The earliest reel is a sort of ‘behind the scenes’ compilation of the DEFA movie *Maibowle* (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/galleries/berlin-nikolaiviertel-1986/>), shot in 1959 by the director Günter Reisch himself. The edge markings of the 8mm print indicate the original negative material as Agfacolor. All the other films were shot after 1964 and therefore show a variation of ORWO signatures. The unknown animated accident prevention movie *[Unfallschutz-Zeichentrickfilm]* (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/galleries/unfallschutz-zeichentrickfilm/>) from the ČSSR, showing the accidents that can occur due to unsafe work in the factory, is preserved as a 16mm Orwocolor positive in the Filmmuseum’s holdings. The footage *[Pfungsten 1981]* (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/galleries/pfungsten-1981-1981/>), showing an event organized by the GDR youth movement Free German Youth (FDJ) in Cottbus, as well as the uncut footage *[Berlin Nikolaiviertel]* (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/galleries/berlin-nikolaiviertel-1986/>) of the restoration process of the historic city center of Berlin, the Nikolaiviertel, were both recorded on Orwochrom UT 15 film stock, optimized for outdoor shootings, and in the case of *[Pfungsten 1981]* also on UK 17 film stock for the indoor scenes. The last two films in contrast were both shot on 16mm Orwochrom UK 3, a low contrast film stock for color television. Whereas *[Neue Turmspitze auf Oberkirche Cottbus]* (<http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/galleries/neue-turmspitze-auf-oberkirche-cottbus-1988/>) (GDR 1988) features rare footage of the restoration of the new spire of the Oberkirche in Cottbus, *Maschinen der Kohleveredelung* (GDR 1988, Horst Klein) was a contract work for the Schwarze Pumpe power station near Hoyerswerda (Saxony), shot as a professional film and focusing on the professions of the power plant. All films have been scanned at the University of Zurich in 5k by Martin Weiss, ERC Advanced Grant FilmColors (<http://www.research-projects.uzh.ch/p21207.htm>).


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