

THE EASTGERMAN FUTURISTS

An Essayfilm by Leon Meschede

4K Video, 24:47 min

2024





The Eastgerman Futurists Installation, Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle (2024)

Synopsis: *THE EASTGERMAN FUTURISTS*

Excerpt | To watch the full film please contact meschedeleon@gmail.com for a screener link.

The Eastgerman Futurists is an essay film exploring the post-reunification generation's search for identity and future perspectives in East Germany. The film blends speculative fiction with documentary interviews to expose generational differences and cultural biases.

Based on Anna Segher Sci-Fi Short Story *Sagen vom Unirdischen* (Legends of the Unearthly, 1970), a Sandman figure from the future travels to the present, exploring sites of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR. 1949–1990). Along the way, she encounters memories, artifacts, and voices of post-reunification children, opening a dialogue between past, present, and future.

Today, Eastgerman nostalgia is increasingly politicized by right wing identity politics. This film and my ongoing work challenges such distortions through a speculative aesthetic, offering new ways to rethink East Germany's past and future—without conflating it with decolonial contexts.



The Eastgerman Futurists Stills: The Sandman uses a time machine and encounters children of the Wende and post-reunification generations, highlighting the generational gap in post-reunification memory.

Interviewfilm: *THE EASTGERMAN FUTURISTS*



The Eastgerman Futurists Stills: Archival, Documentary and Ficional Material is mixed into a story about facts and personal memories, representing the way the postreunification generation accesses the time of the GDR which they personally never lived in.

The Eastgerman Futurists was developed through a research-based process combining oral history, archival investigation, and fiction writing. The film weaves together interviews with members of the post-reunification and reunification generation, location-based imagery of former GDR sites, like the eerie watch tower by Ulrich Müther [3] on the cover, and fictional voiceover drawn from Anna Seghers’ 1970 sci-fi story Legends of the Unearthly [4]. These elements were combined using essay film techniques that emphasize contradictions and complexity over linear narrative.

Visually, the film employs slow, observational camerawork, softened digital motion graphics, and a muted, dreamy color palette that echoes 70s science fiction cinema. These choices are meant to evoke a sense of suspended time—neither past nor present. Archival overlays, fictional inserts, and the recurring Sandman figure blur the lines between documentary and imagined memory. The sound design uses ambient field recordings, subtle drones, and layered voices to create an immersive, dreamlike space.

In recent years, East German identity has become increasingly politicized, particularly by right-wing actors who instrumentalize nostalgia for nationalist narratives. By merging research and fiction through these techniques, the film performs a poetic entry point into a very politized topic, which people have strong opinions on, offering a speculative counter-aesthetic—one that reclaims and reimagines East German memory without flattening it into victimhood or romanticization.

Rather than framing the GDR through Cold War binaries of East vs. West, the film situates East German identity as a complex in-between space. Drawing on Doreen Mende’s reflections on Cold War historiography [5], the project asks: what does it mean to articulate an East German identity independently of both capitalist and authoritarian paradigms? This question is especially urgent for the post-reunification generation—who inherited a label (“East German”) that continues to shape their social, economic and cultural experience, despite never having lived under the GDR. I have experienced this myself, growing up in a reunified Germany where subtle yet persistent distinctions still defined who was considered “East” or “West.” A growing body of sociological studies [6] supports this, showing that the East–West divide continues to influence generational identity formation well into the present.



The Eastgerman Futurists installation with the takeaway infographic, Art Foundation of Saxony-Anhalt (2025)

OSTSEE

Die Ostsee war und ist von Caspar David Friedrich über den Ferienort der Nationalsozialisten Prora ein deutscher Sehnsuchtsort. In der DDR wurde sie als Teil der Innerdeutschen Grenze für viele Flüchtlinge ein Tor in die Freiheit. Heute lässt sich unter der Wasseroberfläche in Form von explodierten Gaspipelines und U-Booten das realpolitische Machtgleichgewicht des Kalten Krieges erahnen.

VERHEXTE REFORMER

Der Ökonom Friedrich Behrens (1909-1980) wollte in den 1960er Jahren die DDR-Wirtschaft von innen reformieren: Mehr Selbstverwaltung, weniger Zentralismus. Aber Moskau duldet keine Experimente. 1971 wurde Walter Ulbricht gestürzt, Erich Honecker übernahm - die Reformen verschwanden mit ihm. Die Kuratorin Doreen Mende nennt Ostdeutschland eine „verhexte Zeit“ - in Anlehnung an Mark Fishers Hauntologie (die Lehre vom Verhexten). Figuren wie Behrens kehren als Geister zurück: schwer einzuordnen, zwischen Dissidenz und Propaganda. Doch eines ist sicher - sie alle haben einen Pakt mit dem Teufel geschlossen.

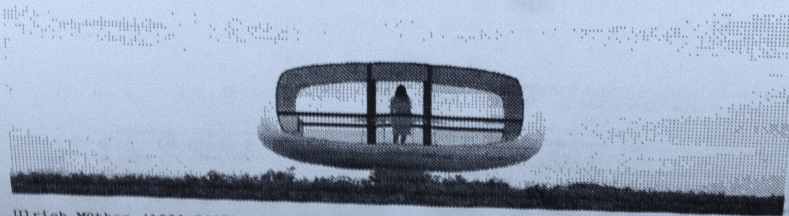
OSTALGIE

Ostalgie ist die Sehnsucht nach dem DDR-Alltag: Plattenbauten, Sandmännchen, Simson Schwalbe. Erinnerungen an eine „verlorene“ Lebensweise. Doch öffentlich gilt Ostalgie oft als Verklärung der Diktatur. Die Nachwendekinder stehen vor der Frage: Wie erinnern - und was daraus machen?

SANDMANN

Der Sandmann ist eine in der europäischen Mythologie angesiedelte Sagengestalt. Er besucht während des Abends die Kinder, streut Schlaf bewirkenden Sand in ihre Augen und lässt den Traum entstehen. Den Schlafsand reibt man sich am Morgen aus den Augenwinkeln. Die auf dieser Grundlage in Deutschland geschaffenen Serienfiguren des Ost-Sandmännchens bzw. West-Sandmännchens erlangten internationale mediale Popularität und wurde zu einem geisterhaften Symbol der ostdeutschen Kultur.

HYPARSCHALEN



Ulrich Müther (1934-2007) baute futuristische Betonkuppeln für die DDR. 1981: Der Bünzer Rettungsturm - ein Raumschiff aus Beton. Seine Hyparschalen stehen in Libyen, Jordanien, Kuba. Auch in Wolfsburg (1983) - gebaut, noch bevor die Mauer fiel. DDR-Architektur als Vision einer Zukunft, die nie kam. Boris Groys schreibt: „Die Zeit des Kommunismus war stets die Zukunft.“ Die Rückkehr in die Gegenwart ist ernüchternd.

SAGEN VOM UNIRDISCHEN

„Sagen vom Unirdischen“ (1973) von Anna Seghers - eine sozialistische Science-Fiction-Erzählung. Eine Reise aus der Reformationszeit begegnet einem Raumfahrer aus der Zukunft. Vergangenheit und Fortschritt verschränken sich, die Geschichte beginnt von vorn. Eine Zeitschleife - oder eine Erkenntnis?

STASI-UNTERLAGENARCHIV

1950-1989: Die Staatssicherheit (Stasi) überwachte Millionen Bürgerinnen. 111 Kilometer Akten dokumentieren das Leben in der DDR. Nach 1991 wurden die Archive geöffnet. Heute suchen Menschen hier nach ihrer eigenen Geschichte. Das massive Gewicht dieses zehnpaltigen Gedächtnisses der Stasi lässt die Vergangenheit nur langsam sinken.

Additional Screenings: *THE EASTGERMAN FUTURISTS*

As part of the exhibition, the film can be paired with screenings of two rare DEFA-Futurum short films from the 1970s (*Werkstatt Zukunft I & II*), which explore speculative futures from within the GDR. This combination creates a layered dialogue between archival utopias and contemporary reinterpretation.



Screening of *Werkstatt Zukunft II* (1971) by Joachim Hellwig in Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design, Halle (2024)



Installationview at Art Foundation Saxony-Anhalt, Halle (2024)

The Eastgerman Futurists was exhibited at:

- Art Foundation of Saxony-Anhalt (2025)
- Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design (2024).

The film won the jury award of the art prize by Saalesparkasse Art Foundation (2025) and was covered in press by Mitteldeutsche Zeitung (2025) and highlighted by Kreativwirtschaft Sachsen-Anhalt (2025).

Tech Rider: *THE EASTGERMAN FUTURISTS*

Fact Sheet:

- Length: 25 minutes
- Country: Germany 2024
- Format: 4K DCP, ProRes, h264 mp4, 30 fps, Stereo, Color
- Language: german with english or german subtitles
- Loopable: Yes

Supplied by the artist:

- 1 brightsign media player with videofile and a hdmi cable
- Edition of 200 prints of the infographic specifically for the exhibition
- License to screen “Werkstatt Zukunft I” and “Werkstatt Zukunft II” provided by Deutsche Kinemathek

Covered by exhibitor:

- 4K projector, alternatively a Full-HD projector
- A projection Screen
- 2 speakers

[0] Futurisms

The title *The Eastgerman Futurists* references artistic movements like Afrofuturism and Yugofuturism, which use speculative futures to reclaim marginalized histories and imagine alternative realities. In this context, “futurism” serves as a critical tool to reflect on the eastgerman identity—not as nostalgia, but as projection.

[1] Daniel Kubiak on East German Identity

A sociologist whose work examines how East/West divides continue to shape generational identity and perception in contemporary Germany, particularly among those born after reunification.

[2] defa-futurum

Defa-futurum was a film studio dedicated to developing a distinct East German science fiction cinema. Its artistic aim was to combine documentary-style observation of future developments in the GDR with their fictional dramatization in so-called “Zukunftsfilme” (future films). Within the landscape of Eastern Bloc film production, the project was unique and is now difficult to categorize—hovering somewhere between propaganda and resistance. As such, it offers a new lens through which to view the cultural imagination of the GDR.

Comment by Doreen Mende via *The Time Lag of Defa-Futurum*:
“Defa-futurum allowed the idea of film-as-theory to endorse the GDR as a sovereign state—promoting also an East German socialist internationalism—under the conditions of the global Cold War by the means of cinema.”

[3] *Cold War Binary Narrative*

As discussed by theorist Doreen Mende, Cold War-era thinking often enforced rigid East/West binaries. Mende argues for the need to decolonize socialist histories, including the GDR in order to understand the complexity of post-socialist identities and technopolitics beyond simplified oppositions.

Comment by Doreen Mende via *The Time Lag of Defa-Futurum*:

“Decolonizing socialism is necessary in order to break through the Cold War’s binary limits for understanding technopolitics, art, and social realities in the post-1989 world.”

[4] *Werkstatt Zukunft*

Two short films produced by defa futurum in the 1970s, combining documentary and fictional elements to explore visions of a socialist future. These films are rarely screened and are used in the project as speculative companions to *The Eastgerman Futurists*.

[5] *Legends of the Unearthly*

In Anna Seghers’ 1970 science fiction story *Legends of the Unearthly*, extraterrestrials land on Earth during the German Peasants’ Wars. They are disturbed by the violence of humanity but fascinated by its artistic expression. One space traveler falls in love with a woman accused of witchcraft, and together they fly through the sky on broomsticks and rocket shoes. As they discuss their worldviews, they eventually start a farm. The story is considered one of the few New Wave science fiction works from the GDR, exploring a new image of humanity by merging past and future.

[6] Sandmann

A folkloric figure reimaged in East German children’s television, here adapted as a speculative character who moves through timelines and memory. In the film, the Sandman becomes a narrative device for exploring ideological shifts and post-socialist subjectivity.

[7] Lifeguard watch tower by Ulrich Müther

A sculptural modernist structure from the GDR era, designed as part of a network of architectural interventions along the East German coastline—now reinterpreted as a spatial symbol of utopian and protective futures.



Leon Meschede (*1999, Halle) is a German video artist and essayist working at the intersection of history, technology, and social change. His films explore the legacy of East Germany’s post-socialist identity and ecological crises, using the essay film as a tool to examine speculative cultures of remembrance.

He studied at Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle and Seoul National University. During his studies, he received several grants, including the DAAD PROMOS scholarship and project funding from the Korean International Cooperation Agency. In 2025, he became a Fellow at the Professional Media Master Class at Werkleitz Gesellschaft e.V., and received the Jury Award at the Art Prize of Saalesparkasse Foundation for his graduation film.

His films have been exhibited and screened internationally, including at the Art Foundation Saxony-Anhalt (Halle), Galerie KUB (Leipzig), gr_und (Berlin), Lkham Gallery (Ulaanbaatar), and the Ecobuddy Institute (Seoul).

PRESS

Katja Pausch, *Art Prize awarded by the Saalesparkasse Foundation*, Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, Halle, Germany (2025)

Kreativwirtschaft Sachsen-Anhalt, *BURG graduates awarded the 2025 Art Prize of the Saalesparkasse Foundation*, Magdeburg, Germany (2025)

Nam Ye-jin, *Beyond conflicts, towards coexistence*, News Penguin, Seoul, South Korea (2024)

Radio Corax, *Interview: A crane as an „Object of Desire“*, Halle, Germany (2022)

Team: THE EASTGERMAN FUTURISTS

| | | | |
|---|----------------------|---|--|
| Direction, Writing, Camera Leon Meschede | | Production | |
| Script loosely based on <i>Sagen vom Unirdischen</i> (1970) by Anna Seghers | | Costume | Manuela Vieweger-Albrecht von MCA GmbH |
| Cast | | Light | Richard Rothfeld |
| Sandmann | Seoyeon Ha | Music Concept | Steffen Krutz |
| Marit | Marit Krätzer | Audio Mixing, Voice Design | Ines Wassermann |
| Fabian | Fabian Reetz | | |
| Valerie | Valerie Schönicke | | |
| Leon | Leon Meschede | | |
| Voice Actors | | Music | |
| Narrator | Thomas | <i>Das sentimentale Ufo</i> (1985) | |
| Sandmann | Levina Yejin Ahn | von Taymur Streng/Ornament & Verbrechen | |
| Alexander Pushkin | Mikhail I. Svistunov | <i>Auf der Elbe schwimmt ein Rosa Krokodil</i> (1974) | |
| Witches | Mechthild Bolik | von Synopsis (Zentralquartett) | |
| | Gudrun Mohr | <i>Holzland</i> (1974) | |
| | Gisela Ott | von Synopsis | |
| | Angelika Sommer | Graphic Design | Hyeonseo Jo |
| Annett Trebst | | | |
| | | Academic Advisors | Prof. Natalie Häusler |
| | | | Nadja Verena Marcin |

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THANK YOU

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