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Brecht's Film Heritage Preserved by the Akademie der Künste and the Deutsche Kinemathek

The Akademie der Künste has begun safeguarding and digitalizing the cinematic holdings in Bertolt Brecht's archive. In cooperation with the Deutsche Kinemathek and supported by the LOTTO-Stiftung Berlin and the Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien (Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media), this film inventory – a unique compilation, but one that is also acutely endangered at present – will be preserved over the next two years and subsequently made available to the public.

The Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv, a culturally and historically significant collection at the Akademie der Künste, includes 44 film-related titles on approximately 70,000 metres of film. This collection can be largely traced back to Brecht's estate, and was supplemented with further works after his death by Helene Weigel. The films were made between the late 1920s and the 1970s. Among them is rare, one-of-a-kind, and in part still unpublished footage providing testaments to Brecht's oeuvre. The film materials have been stored at the Deutsche Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen since 2008, where the cinematographic and archival infrastructure for the proper cataloguing and storage of the collection is readily at hand.

The inventory contains a wealth of differing cinematic genres: private films, theatre productions from the 1930s to the 1950s, which were recorded as frame-by-frame playback, film recordings of Brecht's works, test shots, documentaries, which Brecht used in his productions, rare documentation of theatre performances, as well as portraits and reports about Brecht and Weigel. The collection is enhanced by documentation of theatre productions and private film documents from the estates of Ruth Berlau and Theo Lingen, which are also part of the archives at the Akademie der Künste.

The films – to a large extent (original) negatives, early copies and reverse originals – exist in analog formats: 8 mm, 16 mm and 35 mm. The critical condition of the film material requires immediate professional processing, as the cinematic documents might otherwise be irretrievably lost. The problems are twofold. First, the collection is threatened by a process that has already begun: chemical decomposition of the historically-used cellulose nitrate and cellulose acetate film bases. Second, the film material has been exposed to notable physical damage, such as drying out, perforations and liquid damage, running scratches, as well as dirt and other contaminants. The irreversible process of chemical decomposition can only be counteracted through a planned preservation of the inventory by copying it onto a permanently stable polyester base material.

Following the safeguarding of the analog material, the film collection is going to be digitalized and made accessible to the general public. In the future, screening of digitized films will be possible at electronic reading stations in the archives at the Akademie der Künste. To make online research possible, the metadata on the cinematic works will be linked to the Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek (German Digital Library, DDB) as well as to the academy's own archival database. The completion of this project will make available new possibilities for comprehensive study and research on the cinematic heritage of Bertolt Brecht.

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