

# **SUPERMAN-The Movie Review**

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# **The Comics Journal**

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# Comics in the German Democratic Republic

by Paul Thiel

Translated by Dwight R. Decker

Comic art in the German Democratic Republic owes its initial existence to a defensive reaction, but it has since developed beyond that and today it is an independent and beloved portion of the children's and youth press.

Our comics include one comic book, which appears monthly under the name *Mosaik* and costs 60 Pfennigs (approximately 30¢), and a smaller publication called *Atze* (Berlin slang for 'brother'), which is also monthly and sells for 20 Pfennigs (approximately 10¢). Whereas *Mosaik* is a true comic book, resembling

the Western product in many details of form and content, *Atze* can only be compared to *Jet Cadet* and similar newspaper publications given out in American Sunday Schools. Picture stories appear in the GDR in other publications intended for children and teenagers, and in recent years increasingly in more adult periodicals as well. All comics or comic-like stories for the children's and youth press are produced by Verlag Junge Welt (Young World Publishers), the publishing arm of the Central Council of the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, or FDJ.)

After the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany (West) and the German Democratic Republic (East) in 1949, West Germany was for many long years the only German state in which comics were published, and most of these comics were of American origin. As comics from West Germany began to come into East Germany over the then still open border, the Central Council of the FDJ decided to publish its own magazine in order to counteract the influence of the West German ones. This magazine, the future *Mosaik*, was to be similar in format and execution to the comics from West Germany, but it had different objectives. The editors were assigned the task of imparting Socialist ideas and influencing the young readers in the spirit of Socialist humanism by means of artistically presented graphics and through humor, adventure, and excitement.

With a few exceptions that will be discussed later, no empirical or scholarly study of the comics medium has been made in East Germany. Not only have comics from the East so far escaped serious study here, but so have our own products and similar publications from the other Socialist countries, even though comics and comic-like publications exist in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Rumania, the Soviet Union, and even Hanoi and elsewhere. Only recently has the situation begun to change. For example, an East German teacher submitted a doctoral thesis in 1975 that dealt with *Mosaik* and included hard data useful for other researchers.

The lack of studies of this medium can principally be attributed to the fact that comics from the West are still lumped together in the public mind as worthless trash, and even our own product seems to be thought of as unworthy of any attention. Oddly enough,

the first evaluation of *Mosaik* appeared, not in our own country, but in the West German fanzine *Science Fiction Times* (#129, November-December 1972). In an article by Gert Eversberg, several issues of *Mosaik* that had specifically science-fictional themes were compared with series from West Germany and the USA, and the humanistic content of the East German comics was highly praised.

On the other hand, East German comics as well as the picture-stories from other Socialist countries are simply unknown in the West, or at best, there is only a dim awareness of them. One American fan once went so far as to call East Germany a 'comic desert.' A special issue of the French *Magazine Littéraire* devoted to comics (# 95, December 1974) was able to say very little about comics in the East, and even then printed statements that were utterly wrong. Exceptions would be comics from the People's Republic of China, which were analyzed in detail by Jean Chesneau and Umberto Eco in their book *I Fumetti di Mao* (Bari, 1971; German translation: Hamburg, 1972), and the catalogue of the West Berlin Academy of Art's exhibition of "Comic Strips" (December, 1969 — January, 1970), in which *Mosaik* and the ROSTA windows (a form of political propaganda illustrated by pictures arranged in a sequence, painted or pasted on the windows of empty shops in Russia during the 1920s) were mentioned. Even the very useful *International Comics Bibliography* by Wolfgang Kempke shows gaps when it comes to the Socialist countries.

This will serve as a brief sketch of the situation. Now I would like to cover in detail the history, development, and content of East German comic art.

The first issue of *Mosaik* appeared at the end of 1955. In the beginning it was quarterly, published with a print run of 320,000 copies of 32 pages in four-color offset. With #8, it became a monthly with 24 pages per issue and continued in this format for 20 years and 216 more issues. All 223 issues were drawn by a team of artists under the guidance of Hannes Hegen (the pen-name for Johannes Hegenbarth). Then Hegen left and a new *Mosaik* was developed, the first issue of which appeared in January, 1976. It had the same name and was written and drawn by the same team (although without Hannes Hegen) and was scheduled for a print run of 650,000 copies per month.\* In between the last Hegen issue, 223, in June, and the first new-style issue in January, reprints of old stories were published in issues 224-229.

When the last new story in the old series had appeared and the readers saw #224, the first reprint, the editors were deluged with a flood of protesting mail. The irritated and rather unprepared readers expressed themselves in over 600 letters. An analysis of those letters shows that *Mosaik* was being read by not only children and adolescents, but also by adults from all levels and

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*\*With the exception of the chief artist, Hannes Hegen, the artists for Mosaik have remained anonymous for 20 years. That was changed with the publication of the first issue of the new Mosaik. In the indicia the following artists were named: J. Arfert, I. Behm, H. Boche, E. Reitzl, L. Rietzl, H. Sott, U. Stephan, I. Wittig, G. Zimmermann. Text: L. Dräger. Editor-In-Chief: A. Altenburger.*

professions. Since the editorial staff had neglected to inform the readership about the change-over in *Mosaik*, the readers were concerned about the fate of the magazine and wrote in. Some were even worried that the publication would be suspended altogether.

The following will serve as an example. The writer is a 25-year-old electrical engineer living in Dessau.

"After faithfully following your magazine *Mosaik* for 18 years, I can only say that I disapprove of your current attitude. I read #223 again with mixed feelings, for there is nothing on the last page even hinting as to what was to happen with the content. Today I saw a new issue, #224, on the stands. When I first looked at it, I thought it was a joke!

"I have been collecting your magazine since 1957. Only much later did I begin having the issues bound. By that time, the older issues had unfortunately been read to pieces (which shows how often and how enthusiastically they were read and reread), and so could not be used for binding. It has now cost me a great deal of effort (not to mention money) to get this or that issue in good condition. But it was fun, for it had become a genuine hobby, as well as educational, as various issues included quite a bit of factual information presented in a humorous way. In the meantime I've grown up and acquired a degree in electrical engineering, but your magazine hasn't lost any of its value for me. It is interesting, entertaining, and educational, and I think that someday my children will thank me for having assembled and preserved a collection of such a fascinating magazine."

A reader from Berlin even sent a photograph of himself to the editors: the picture showed him as a baby with a copy of *Mosaik* in his hands, demonstrating his lifelong attachment to the magazine.

In 1966, the presentday Editor-in-Chief of *Mosaik* and *Atze*, Wolfgang Altenburger, then a student in the School of Journalism at Karl Marx University in Leipzig, wrote his thesis under the title: *The Special Tasks Of The Illustrated Magazine In The Children's Press Of The German Democratic Republic: A Study Of The Principles Of The Unified Educational System And The Sixth Conference Of Journalists*. This work, as yet unpublished, must be considered as the first treatment of East Germany's own product. Among other things, Altenburger identifies this as the goal of his work: "to investigate the possibilities of the picture story from the viewpoint of educating our children to be better citizens..." and comes to this conclusion: "It is wrong to stereotype the picture story as solely a means to neutralize children in regard to ideology. The determinant of the positive or negative effect of a comic magazine is its ideological content and the manner in which it is presented. It is also decisive who happens to be publishing such a magazine: the Socialist children's organization of the German Democratic Republic working for the party of the working class, or the millionaire Disney in the interests of American and West German imperialists. The content of our picture magazines consists of presenting to the children a realistic, objective picture of various social experiences and developments in the past, present, and future."

This was the program followed by the *Mosaik* staff.

Issues 1-89 featured fictionalized accounts of the great inventions and facts about the history of the world and of mankind. For example, the magazine popularized in a light and amusing manner the story of the steam engine from the ancient inventor Heron to James Watt. The fictional heroes of *Mosaik*, who will be treated in more detail below, used a science-fictional framing device for a series of stories in which different planets were visited, each world reflecting a different stage of Earth's development. This cycle was ended in issue 89.

Issues 90-151 comprised another cycle, this one featuring the character of "Ritter Runkel." Ritter means 'knight' in German, and *Runkel* is slang for 'turnip,' so the German reader, upon seeing the story was about a knight named 'Sir Turnip,' could only conclude he was in for a good time. Nor was he disappointed; the entire story as well as the main character had a *Don Quixote* touch. The adventures were set at the beginning of the 14th Century, when knighthood was already in a state of decline.

Issues 152-211 were played in the United States during the Civil War and issues 212-223 were set in the East about the time of Sultan Mahmud II. Issues 224-229 were reprints from the Runkel series.

The new run of *Mosaik*, beginning in January, 1976 with a new #1, is intended, according to hints in the East German press, to tell tales of merry-makers of all times and peoples, which at least in principle ought to allow for endless story possibilities. A new character,



Harlequin — called "The King of the Merry-makers" — is introduced and he is shown saying: "I'm a poor farmboy from the Bergano area in Lombardy. Since I couldn't find any work at home, I went to the City, where I had to become the servant of rich men. I soon noticed that I had the gift of being able to see right through them. The rich men feared my talent, for I used it to make them appear ridiculous to all the people!"

Given the wider perspective of the new *Mosaik*, it is to be expected that the merry pranksters of other people will be presented, such as Till Eulenspiegel, Chodscha Nasreddin, Hans Wurst, Ludas Matyi, etc.

The continuing characters of the old *Mosaik* were named *Dig*, *Dag*, and *Digedag*. The scheme of three characters is an old one, perhaps most familiar to American readers in the form of Huey, Dewey, and Louie. The names *Dig*, *Dag*, and *Digedag* have no particular meaning in German and are untranslatable, although *Dick*, *Dock*, and *Dickerdock* might serve as an American approximation. They appear together, split up for a time, search for each other, and then reunite. They are shorter than the other, 'more real' characters in the stories, and complement each other in their attributes and abilities. (This aspect is more meaningfully developed in the three heroes of the new *Mosaik*, who are named *Abrax*, *Brabax*, and *Califax*. Together they are known as the *Abrafaxes*.) They are characterized as being kind and good, and helpers of the 'little guy.' Quite frequently they function as a collective *deus ex machina* and move the plot forward.

Diametrically opposed opinions are to be heard concerning the reception of the three merry heroes and the stories told around them. To judge from the readers' letters and oral statements, issues 1-189 would have to be considered the best. On the other hand, Editor-in-Chief Altenburger wrote in his thesis of 1966:

"With its stories of technology in ancient and modern times, *Mosaik* attempted to impart knowledge. With the adventures of its elfin heroes *Dig* and *Dag*, it attempted to tell children in a fairy tale-like fashion of the triumph of good over evil. These intentions were overshadowed by the necessity for being realistic in depicting the ruling classes. The stories' social background was not always based exactly on a Marxist historical interpretation. Excitement and merry adventures did not serve as a means to an interesting interpretation of historical processes and facts, but became ends in themselves. The magazine was popular, yes, but by 1963 it was fulfilling its educational mission in a very unsatisfactory manner."

After the Sixth Party Day of the Socialist Unity Party, the editors were instructed to reevaluate their standpoint and devise a new set of outlines for their publication. Thus the heroes of *Mosaik* were given new tasks, more in accordance with the new educational plan of the East German school system. It was decided that they "...fight always on the side of the people, and show personality traits that children will wish to emulate. The people are to be shown as more active and their history-making power

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is to be emphasized...", as was written by the future chief editor of *Mosaik* and Atze.

The stories' background subject-matter was more than ever before, arranged to complement the history lessons taught in the 5th and 6th grades. Even the depiction of Enemy and Friend, of Good and Evil, was given increased attention. For some stories and characters, subtle references to the present were included. Thus the chancellor of the Byzantine Court in #112 and the following issues was given the face of the former Chancellor of West Germany, Konrad Adenauer; and in #109 a corrupt Roman general was shown enlisting robbers and criminals as reinforcements for his mercenary army (a reference to the reuse of former high officers of the Nazi Wehrmacht in the Bundeswehr, the West German army).

However, the *Digedag* characters were active only in the past in all 233 of their issues. They never concerned themselves with the questions of modern history, such as the struggle of the working class or the proletarian

revolution. Their adventures were limited to past social formations and they changed nothing about the social conditions with which they were confronted. In the opinion of the editors, the *Digedags* were not suited for that role.

To make up for the lack, a test series of the *New Picture Magazine For Boys And Girls* was begun in 1964 and 1965 under the direction of the central leadership of the Pioneer Organization (the Scouts of East Germany). Each issue was primarily concerned with recent history, such as the Hamburg Uprising led by Ernest Thälmann (#1, under the title "The Storm Began At Five O'Clock"), and the resistance struggle of the Communist Party of Germany in the first years of Hitler fascism, and even the escape by a Soviet flyer captured by the Nazis as a prisoner of war. Each issue was complete in itself and had no continuing characters to connect it with other issues. Nor were the illustrations and text as closely connected as might be expected in comics stories; they were actually prose narratives with pictures.

The drawings were rather average, even poor at times. After five issues the series was suspended.

Then the magazine *Atze* was chosen to carry the contemporary and politically relevant stories. It had been appearing since 1955, at first with eight and currently with 16 pages per issue. It had been running simple, purely humor or adventure picture stories, but now it presents increasingly more political comics. The only strip that has been running since the first issue is that of the two mice *Fix und Fax*, who have dealt with all possible themes considered important in bringing up the new generation. (There have been over 220 *Fix und Fax* sequences, incidentally.) To make the magazine more interesting and to lend it more variety (and probably also to sell it), *Atze* prints puzzles and runs contests. (*Mosaik* has never had a readers' page.) Only recently have the comics in *Atze* attained any sort of quality, measured by East German standards. (For example, "The Red Men Of Wounded Knee" in the July, 1976 issue. Artist: Horst Klöpffel.)