

«Das ist die Mauer, die quer durchgeht.  
Dahinter liegt die Stadt und das Glück.»  
DEFA Directors and their Criticism  
of the Berlin Wall

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This article examines the strategies used by directors of the East German film monopoly *Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA)* to voice their disapproval of the Berlin Wall.<sup>1</sup> My aim is to show how it was possible, despite universal censorship in East Germany, to create films that addressed the wall as an inhumane means to imprison the East German people. Although many DEFA films adhered to socialist law and reiterated the official doctrine of the «antifascist protection rampart» on the silver screen, an analysis of three DEFA films will demonstrate how the representation of human crisis was used as a means to criticize the wall.<sup>2</sup> The films *Das Kleid* (Konrad Petzold, 1961), *Der geteilte Himmel* (Konrad Wolf, 1964), and *Die Architekten* (Peter Kahane, 1990) address walls in a variety of functions and appearances as representations, symbols, and metaphors of the barrier between East and West Germany.

Interest in DEFA has certainly increased during the last decade, and many scholars have introduced a meaningful variety of topics regarding the history of East Germany's film company and its films. In addition to book-length works that deal exclusively with the cinema of East Germany, many articles have looked at DEFA's film genres, provided case studies of single DEFA films, and engaged in sociological or historical analyses of East German society and its films.<sup>3</sup> In order to expand the current discussion of DEFA, this article applies a sociocultural reading to the three DEFA films *Das Kleid*, *Der geteilte Himmel*, and *Die Architekten* with the goal of introducing the new subtopic of roles and functions of the Berlin Wall in East German film to the field of DEFA studies.

Surprisingly, this topic has yet to be discovered in English language scholarship on DEFA. In their study of Konrad Wolf's films, Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel interpret *Der geteilte Himmel* by looking at its «mode of narration,» speculating that official objections to the film were not due to it tackling the «hot topics of flight from the GDR [*Republikflucht*] or the

«protective barrier» that divided the German nation» (17). Although they refer to Erika Richter's article on DEFA films about the Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1965, Elsaesser and Wedel do not take into account the reference to the concrete barrier and its implications for life in East Germany in the film's title. Similarly, Seán Allan accounts for Peter Kahane's 1990 feature film *Die Architekten* as *primus inter pares* of the so-called *Wendefilme* of 1989/90. Allan compares this film with two other examples of the *Wendefilm*, Egon Günther's *Stein* (1991) and Jörg Foth's *Letztes aus der Da Da eR* (1990), to show the struggles of individuals in the waning days of East Germany. Yet, there seems to be an additional layer of meaning missing from his analysis, as Kahane's film combines the monotony of East Germany's architecture with the psychological state of his protagonists. Walls in concrete, psychological, or allegorical appearance are more than prevalent in *Die Architekten*, in their role as a focal point of human crisis.

Thus this article aims to encourage a closer look at the correlations between DEFA directors, their films, and the depiction of the Berlin Wall in their films. On a more global level, this study may help one to see beyond the surface of East German cultural products. Books, films, and other art forms about everyday life in the «other» Germany are often difficult to understand for outsiders and nonexperts of this culture. They require either insider knowledge of East German culture or an ability to read «between the lines» of a work of art and decode its meaning. As a result, these cultural products may be seen as unattractive, boring and alien to current audiences, whereas – with some guidance – they could offer alternative views and a more complete picture of German history and culture. This analysis of three DEFA films seeks to model the first steps of such a decoding process, which may eventually allow a nonexpert to see the «hidden agenda» of a DEFA filmmaker.

Generally, censorship, restrictions and requests for significant changes to their films by state censors made the work of DEFA directors difficult. Regardless of the time period in which a film was produced, official party politics in East Germany demanded the strict regulation of art to ensure the proper endorsement and undivided support of socialism. At times, severe restrictions discouraged any kind of autonomous creativity in favor of a state-sanctioned East German filmmaking. Films were supposed to promote the political ideals of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (*SED*), the ruling party, and DEFA directors were forced to adhere to the guidelines of official cultural policy, to constantly verify the political compatibility of film and politics, and to make decisions regarding the message of their films.<sup>4</sup>

However, many directors were not willing to forfeit their artistic freedom completely, despite strict control mechanisms. They looked for ways to voice

critical positions in their films, to make political statements, or to comment on living conditions in East Germany. One of the hottest topics was the Berlin Wall, a subject matter that could be approached only with utmost care if one did not want to risk one's further career as a filmmaker. Yet how could a director make films that conformed to official doctrine and yet comment critically on the Wall? There are at least three possible approaches to answering this question: first, the historical situation at the time of the film release proves to be illuminating; second, a translation of the film's metaphors can reveal the director's intended message; and third, decoding the dialogues and events within the film can reveal whether a director followed a «hidden agenda.»

By and large, DEFA directors were unable to voice criticism openly in their films if they wanted to avoid a direct confrontation with party officials. Instead, they chose alternative approaches to veil their criticism by establishing other central elements to distract censors from their original intention, as for example using human crisis in the case of the three films dealing with the Berlin Wall. Here, literary critic Paul de Man's theory about the correlation of crisis and criticism proves useful as a theoretical framework for an analysis of the link between crisis in DEFA films and a director's criticism of the Berlin Wall. De Man suggests in the first chapter of his work *Blindness and Insight* that crisis and criticism may be redundant terms. While crisis is usually considered to be a difficult situation, or even the turning point of a dangerous development, it also contains positive effects and is neither positive nor negative *per se*. A crisis, for example, might foster a stronger bond between the subjects involved in it, and may act as a launch pad for extraordinary efforts. In fact, de Man emphasizes that crises are an important part of criticism, since «in periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent on avoiding crisis at all cost [...] there can be no criticism» (8). Thus DEFA directors depicting crisis in their films were in fact challenging East Germany's political, social, and economic system as an unorganized group united by the common motive to improve life in their home country. Even more, they would not even need to have been aware of their intentions for two reasons: first, since criticism in de Man's view is recognized as a preconceived notion in which the critic is judged by «a certain degree of conformity to an original intent called artistic» (8), the lack of such standards for DEFA films, coupled with official guidelines and film censorship, forced directors to test the official boundaries anew each time they finished another film. Second, the critic may even have employed subconscious knowledge to construct a crisis as a critical reflection of reality. Nevertheless, de Man believes that «genuine criticism seems to flow from crisis, even as critics remain unaware of the source of their insights» (10). In other words, the depiction of the Berlin Wall in a film alongside human

crisis could therefore evoke a comparative reading of this crisis and criticism of the Wall, regardless of a director's intentionality.

Konrad Petzold's film *Das Kleid* is perhaps the most striking example of a DEFA director's unintentional account of the construction of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent consequences for East Germans. Petzold finished his film on August 15, 1961, exactly two days after East German border troops had begun cordoning off the demarcation line between the Soviet-occupied sector and the three Western sectors of Berlin. Within a few hours, barbed wire, followed by the preliminary construction of a brick wall, indicated that East Germany's government had made the decision to close its borders to West Germany permanently. Overnight, Petzold's modern fairytale for adults, relating the events in a medieval city contained by a large wall, turned from a cynical comment about the relationship of East and West Germany into a dire political reality. While it is obvious that Petzold could not have anticipated his film becoming the center of political debate due to an eponymous wall's symbolic centrality in the film, he nevertheless risked confrontation with the censors by deploying a variety of provocations throughout the film.

*Das Kleid* opens with a panoramic shot of a rural environment: fields, trees and wide open spaces. The opening shots are disrupted by a mocking comment, «Das ist die Mauer, die quer durchgeht. Dahinter liegt die Stadt und das Glück.» Despite the heavy fortifications around the city, the film's protagonists, the weavers Hans and Kumpan, manage to trick their way into a city rumored to be a haven of wealth and carefree living. They are captured, thrown in jail, and are to be executed unless they create new garments for the emperor to wear at a festive parade. In order to save their heads, Hans and Kumpan pretend to make clothes out of a fabric visible only to intelligent observers. During the parade, both weavers take advantage of the tumult and escape when the emperor presents himself stark naked to a laughing crowd that derides the risible gullibility and narrow-mindedness of their ruler. The film closes with a shot reminiscent of the opening scene: Hans and Kumpan leave the city and its wall behind them, walking into the wide open spaces, visibly embracing their new-found freedom with relaxed postures and smiling faces.

Timing could not have been worse for Konrad Petzold. His film was flagged immediately for the prominent use of a concrete wall and became the subject of twelve meetings with East Germany's censors to discuss further edits. Petzold's decision to create a film full of ambiguities and double entendres, such as the use of a cartoon cloud resembling Soviet leader Khrushchev, or a guard with Stalin's features, resulted in the eventual banning of the film until its release in 1990. The censors were especially critical of the way Petzold employed a city wall at a time when East Germany required the support

of the arts to justify the erection of the barrier to West Germany. While Petzold probably would have been asked to edit some questionable scenes before 1961, the entire production became too problematic after the construction of the actual wall. DEFA's former general director, Jochen Mückenberger, realized that

it was absolutely impossible to show this film – not because it didn't meet artistic demands or because the screenwriter, director, or cameraman had failed, but because it didn't at all go in line with the heated-up political situation after the building of the Wall [...] About 40% of this film takes place before, on or behind a wall [...] of which neither the screenwriter nor the director had had the faintest idea when the shooting started.<sup>5</sup>

Konrad Petzold's filmic critique of the strained relationship between East and West Germany reflected the status quo of 1961 by using a wall to establish a playful crisis. The events of August 13, however, redefined his project as no longer possible within the changed political situation. Before the border to the West was permanently closed, it could be crossed rather easily.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly, the signs marking the GDR border were replaced by a physical structure of brick walls, concrete blocks, strings of barbed wire and armed border guards. Building the wall sent a signal for separation to the West; East Germany was no longer willing to accept the strong influence of Western money and the temptation of higher standards of living that had lured many East Germans permanently into West Berlin and the Federal Republic.<sup>7</sup> A permanent barrier was the only way to prevent the masses from leaving East Germany.

Konrad Petzold and his screenwriter, Egon Günther, used the same premise of an impenetrable wall to shield an entire society. The tall rampart in their film separates the outside world from the city and ensures the economic integrity of the society inside. It protects the wealth of the emperor and its citizens from outside merchants, who are only allowed in by invitation and after thorough searches. Guards poke the haystacks on carriages with their spears, the city gates remain closed and well secured, and the high walls are protected by patrolling soldiers. Similar to the wall of Petzold's time, the city wall also prevents the escape of citizens and ensures their loyalty to the despotic emperor. While appearing happy to the outside world, the population is not at all what one of the soldiers tells turned-away visitors: «Ein Haufen reicher Leute, Wohlhabende, Arbeiter, aber alles ruhige und zuverlässige Menschen. Kein Groll im Herzen, zufrieden, und gesund.» Instead, many strive to escape the city, which is only wealthy on the surface, but are stopped by the city's fortifications and the border guards.

When filming for *Das Kleid* began, there were no signs of the real wall, which would be constructed only a few months later. Yet it is uncanny to see

how the building in Petzold's film is an auspice of the real edifice about to be erected. Aside from the film's wall, designed to maintain homogeneity in matters of wealth, foreign cultural influence, population size and structure, and subdued inhabitants, other events in the film may urge a viewer to date the release of this film after 1961. The film's wall and its influence on the city's domestic politics is almost too real to be only a product of Petzold's imagination, who intended to launch a critical public discussion about the political direction of East Germany in the early 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

Even departure from the city is restricted, as Hans and Kumpan experience when they realize the true nature of the city and plan their escape. A guard foils their breakout and, while returning them to prison, comments, «Sie möchten weg, ist ja klar. Sie sind der Versuchung erlegen. [...] Einerseits verstehe ich ja gut, dass einer flüchten möchte. [...] Das ganze Gefliehe fällt bei mir unter die verständlichen menschlichen Schwächen.»

The concrete wall is also represented as a death trap in a later scene, when one of the ministers attempts suicide by climbing the fortification and preparing to jump to the other side, choosing serious injury or death over a life within the narrow confines of the city. Its society is strictly regulated in a manner eerily similar to East Germany, and the slightest deviation from official norms results in a severe reprimand, either by K-9 special units «for persecutions of any kind,» leaving the kind of persecution and punishment to the imagination of the viewer, or by the military, which ensures public attendance and proper enthusiasm during the emperor's parade through the city streets. While the K-9 units foreshadow the dog-patrolled areas that were part of the Berlin Wall's fortifications, the military procedures evoke the official East German military parades that celebrated official anniversaries. Another official institution in the city is a group of well-dressed men who are introduced as snipers to eliminate any potential threat, rounded out by a group called «Police.» The police, a carbon copy of the East German secret police *Stasi*, answer anonymous tips from the people, arresting critical thinkers and outspoken citizens.

At the end of the film, when the citizens erupt in laughter after watching the emperor parade naked through the city, Petzold anticipates East German cultural politics after the Biermann affair of the late 1970s. Following outspoken public criticism, songwriter Wolf Biermann was exiled from East Germany in 1976, a fate shared by other artists who supported Biermann in his stand against official politics. Petzold's film shows citizens who are to be «sent away for good» as a result of their laughter during the parade. In response to the emperor's inquiry about how many had derided him, a minister estimates a number of approximately «Achtzig Prozent der Bevölkerung [...]

Die restlichen zwanzig Prozent sind aber Kinder von unter zwei Jahren, [...] dazu kommen zwei Blinde, die besoffen vor einer Kneipe saßen.»

*Das Kleid* reflects on the crises of its protagonists and the population affected by living their lives confined by a wall. The film's vision of an oppressed society translates real life into the realm of the walled city, and the ironic reduction of this experience with socialism in East Germany to simple dichotomies of rich and poor, illusion and reality, oppressor and oppressed, and concepts of security and restriction of basic human rights in the film. The wall, in this instance a physical barrier of separation, serves as a permanent visual marker of oppression in the film, inviting the viewers to look behind the façade, question certain concepts of authority, and exert their right to civil insubordination to rectify injustice. It is perhaps not only the wall as part of the film's mise-en-scene, but its allegorical association with human crisis in *Das Kleid*, that constitute Petzold's criticism. Essentially, the film's coincidence with the events of August 13 rendered it too critical in the judgment of the censors.

This was not the case with our second example. In 1964, three years after the Berlin Wall had been completed, Konrad Wolf's film *Der geteilte Himmel* was released, quickly becoming a hot discussion topic in East and West Germany.<sup>9</sup> The film is a faithful adaptation of Christa Wolf's novel of the same title, and she wrote the screenplay as well. The story centers on the relationship between the chemical engineer Manfred Herrfurth and the secretary Rita Seidl from the beginning of their affair in August 1959 until August 1961, when Rita suffers a mental breakdown, is admitted to the hospital, and recapitulates the events leading to her hospital stay. Her admission in mid-August 1961 coincides with the building of the Berlin Wall; when she is released after three months in October 1961, East Germany celebrates its 12th anniversary as an independent state, and its first anniversary as a state protected behind the «antifascist protection rampart,» the official East German euphemism for the Berlin Wall.

*Der geteilte Himmel* examines two figures who, despite their mutual love for each other, do not share the same ideological views. The protagonists, Manfred and Rita, are set up as antagonists that represent the opposing political ideals of East and West Germany, respectively. Manfred, a successful chemical engineer, is disappointed by the limits of his research in East Germany. He feels unable to reach his potential due to the lack of support by his superiors, and he believes that his contribution to his field is curbed deliberately for political reasons. Manfred travels frequently to West Germany and decides, one week before the Berlin Wall is built, not to return to East Germany, but to work in what he believes to be a more productive environment

in the West. Rita, a 20-year-old secretary and Manfred's girlfriend, is a strong supporter of socialism. She views herself as a crucial element in the construction of East Germany who needs to sacrifice some of her own individual desires to build and develop socialist society. Despite this ideological incompatibility, or perhaps because of it, Manfred and Rita fall in love and become a couple that works hard to create a functioning relationship largely unaffected by their political views. The couple's relationship serves as an allegory for the political developments and the progressing alienation of East and West Germany as a result of the Cold War. At first, the mutual ideological coexistence seems to succeed; both Manfred and Rita make the necessary concessions to maintain their relationship against rising political tensions. Over the course of two years, from August 1959 to August 1961, Rita and Manfred manage to stay together, until Manfred decides to leave East Germany to pursue his career in the West. Rita follows him, but is unable to adapt to the different political mentality and cannot overcome the feeling of loss. When the division of East and West Berlin is complete, Rita is faced with the difficult decision to either choose love and live in an antagonistic society, or select happiness and leave Manfred without a chance to ever return to him. When she returns to East Germany and realizes the enormity of her decision, she suffers a mental breakdown, from which she slowly recovers, later reintegrating slowly into socialist society. Both a psychological and a metaphorical barrier stop her from reversing her decision as the concrete wall prevents East and West Germany to reunite at this point in history.

By setting the plot in the time before the wall was built, Wolf shifts the focus away from a physical reality and towards the psychological interaction of the two protagonists. During the entire development of their love story, however, the title *Der geteilte Himmel* foreshadows the destiny of the couple and points at separation and breakup in their future.<sup>10</sup> The concept of division or impediment by walls is in itself not unusual as the remnants of fortifications around many European cities attest; nevertheless, «[d]er Rückgriff einer modernen Staatsgewalt auf das Mittel der Mauer, mit dem sie ihr Staatsvolk am Verlassen des Staatsterritoriums hindern will, stellt einen absurden, gleichwohl aber bitteren und blutigen Anachronismus dar.»<sup>11</sup> Wolf, on the other hand, uses the metaphor of the divided sky to expand the picture of separation into the realm of something that seems to be indivisible. His choice of this metaphor immediately raises the question if such a division is possible at all, and, if so, how it would be accomplished. By posing this challenge to the viewer, along with the introduction of Manfred and Rita, the title demands the association of the two protagonists and their failed relationship as a divided sky. As the plot thickens and the audience learns about the couple's ideologi-

cal and personal struggles, the metaphorical puzzle is solved: the psychological wall that separates the two lovers is more significant (and impenetrable) than the actual physical barrier. At least at the beginning of the story, the psychological wall is a signifier of the dialectic between Manfred and Rita's love and their ideological reality. The erection of the real Berlin Wall concludes what the abstract, psychological wall initiated: true, irreversible separation.

Rita's and Manfred's crisis is more than a symbol of divided Germany; it is Wolf's critical comment on the political situation in East Germany that led to the mass exodus of the late 1950s. Second, the psychological wall establishes human crisis as a timeless construct independent from historical events such as the construction of the wall. At the same time, the intended message of *Der geteilte Himmel* remains ambivalent, justifying the dividing structure as the appropriate reaction of a young nation. The film supports the wall as a necessary means to respond to the disturbances of domestic politics. Wolf seems to claim that, without these disruptions, it will be easier to build socialism.

However, despite the supportive message for the Berlin Wall conveyed in the film, some irregularities remain. The fact that Wolf contrasts his protagonists as lovers and political antagonists, convinced individualist and progressive socialist, West-embracing rebel and West-despising visionary, appears too banal. Repeated allusions to the division of East and West Germany, which culminate towards the end of the film with Rita and Manfred's separation, correspond to the construction of the wall, warranting another reading. Rita's nervous breakdown, a consequence of her irreversible decision, is implicitly compared with the eventual outcome: instead of creating an attractive socialist society that safeguards freedom, the wall perverts the concept by forcing socialism onto society without allowing this freedom at all.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to *Das Kleid* and *Der geteilte Himmel*, in which walls play a central role in the progression of the plot, Peter Kahane's film *Die Architekten* is concerned with crisis from within East German society. The wall as physical structure is featured only indirectly during most of the film, and yet, the further the plot progresses, the more the audience understands that Kahane's story tells more about the Berlin Wall than the eye is able to see. *Die Architekten* reminds the viewer of daily life in the East at a time and place where life was at its worst: in an East German *Trabantenstadt* of the late 1980s. Kahane replaces the concrete wall, a familiar sight after 25 years, with the environment of gray highrises seemingly in the middle of nowhere on the fringes of Berlin. As a result of this rearrangement, the few scenes of the film actually featuring the Berlin Wall seem to define the 1961 construction as a precursor to everyday life in a dystopian society of monolithic steel and concrete architecture.

Film critic Stephen Holden's *New York Times* review of *Die Architekten* contains a telling description of the new city under construction. His portrayal of the city suburb could serve equally well as a depiction of the divider of East and West Berlin: «These views of block after block of anonymous rectangular buildings evoke a joyless environment in which the imagination is systematically stifled and where people live in a state of chronic, low-grade depression.»<sup>13</sup> The suburb is the final result of young architect Daniel Naumann's first large project after the implementation of many changes. Naumann, in his late thirties, has only designed two bus stop shelters and other minor structures, but is hired to design and build a cultural center for a new suburb. He begins with enthusiasm to assemble a design team, and creates an ambitious layout mixing nature with art: green rooftops, a movie theater, open plazas to stroll through in the evening, an ice cream store for the children and a Vietnamese restaurant for their parents are only some of their ideas Daniel envisions for the future. However, his progressive plans meet the resistance of the East German ruling party's planning commission. After multiple changes requested by party officials, Daniel is forced to accept failure. Instead of using radical new ideas to craft a habitable space, the finished suburb resembles previous East German housing projects, with the monument «Family in Socialism» at its center.

Yet Daniel loses more than his mistaken faith in a progressive East German society that wants to adapt to modern times. His wife, Wanda, and his daughter recognize the futility of his endeavors early on. When they see how Daniel alienates himself from his family to dedicate his zeal to the architectural project, Wanda decides that she wants out. Kahane anticipates the events of the autumn of 1989, as he shows how Wanda leaves not only Daniel, but also the dreariness of East Germany. She becomes a symbolic figure, representing the many discontented East Germans who resignedly voiced their dissatisfaction by leaving the German Democratic Republic.

Unlike his predecessors, who had to struggle with the censor's editing cuts, Peter Kahane was challenged by the pace of historical events. What began as a radically critical film project questioning the state of East German politics and society in the late 1980s ended as a historical obituary, assessing a society's final years. *Die Architekten* opened in theaters almost unnoticed as Germany was preparing for unification, while only one year before this critical film would have sold out East German movie theaters. It challenges power constellations within the structure of East German society in a manner that would have been unthinkable when Konrad Wolf filmed *Der geteilte Himmel*. The film *Die Architekten* contains a multitude of references to East German architectural history and political ideology, ranging from a bird's-eye shot of East Berlin's representative Karl-Marx-Allee, the restoration of

Potsdam's Schloss Lindstedt, and the suggestion of Daniel's friend, Max, to build structures that «would make the GDR's modern Palace of the Republic look like a miserable shack.»<sup>14</sup>

One striking feature in Kahane's film is that the Berlin Wall is not the origin of the crisis between Daniel and Wanda. The best-known East German architectural structure is set up as a symbol for human crisis and a directional pointer for ways out of it; the crisis itself, however, is caused by the setting of the new buildings Daniel works on. Instead of improving living conditions, the new suburb looks oppressive and threatening. The *Plattenbauten*, high rises assembled from gray concrete elements similar to the ones used in 1961 to erect the border fortifications, are the manifestation of a nightmare: horizontal and vertical walls are combined to form a threatening structure that seems to act as a visual replacement for the Berlin Wall.

Towards the end of the film, however, Kahane employs the German border in two key scenes of the film as a symbol of human crisis. The first time the actual structure is used to signal a permanent break is when Wanda and their daughter leave Daniel and East Germany to begin a new life in the West. Daniel is shown in front of the Friedrichstraße sign at the S-Bahn station, embracing his daughter, before she disappears into the building carrying her suitcase. This scene is more than a depiction of the separation of a family. Although the wall is not visible, it is implied that Daniel will not be able to see his daughter on a regular basis, since the Friedrichstraße station used to be the border crossing to West Berlin. Entering the S-Bahn at this point stands for the permanent, irreversible departure from East Germany, which is confirmed in the following panoramic shot when we see the S-Bahn leave the station towards West Berlin.

Kahane's condemnation of the physical wall along with its redefinition as a psychological barrier becomes apparent in the final sequence of the film. The plot culminates at the Brandenburg Gate when Daniel tries in vain to catch a glimpse of his daughter through the border fortifications. Cordoned off from access to it on both East and West German sides, the Brandenburg Gate is no longer a gateway but a mocking symbol of German division that only appears open, although it is a monument with the purpose of segregation. In the few instances of its appearance on screen, the physical structure of the Berlin Wall in Kahane's film becomes the «visual evidence» of hope in the West and agony in the East.<sup>15</sup> Daniel's failures, the loss of his utopist vision and his values all come together in this showdown at the wall to illustrate the magnitude of human crisis.

Criticism was not taken lightly in East Germany as heavy censorship of DEFA films proved again and again. Yet, as my discussion of these films has

suggested, it was possible to make critical films despite the repercussions. To avoid direct confrontation with the regime, directors used metaphors in their films that alluded to obvious problems in society without pointing them out directly. However, while it was necessary to use indirect means of criticism, since DEFA was controlled by East German party politics, understanding the nuances of a film and decoding its intended message nowadays requires taking into account historical events, social tendencies, and the personal experiences of the people involved in the making of a film. The examples of links between human crisis and the Berlin Wall is but one paradigm of criticism in DEFA film; other possibilities might be to look at the construction of gender roles, views of West Germany, or the use of dialogue as a means of criticism.

DEFA's films go well beyond mere propagandistic works; in fact, many show surprisingly open criticism of East Germany's problems if one looks beyond the surface of these films. DEFA films are demanding and require the audience's use of imagination to draw its own conclusions as well as its dedication to think critically beyond what the eye sees on the screen, and stamina to sit through films that – much like an *Entwicklungsroman* – focus on the psychology and inner development of their protagonists instead of an action-filled plot. The depth and meticulous structure of all three films is a reflection of the overall canon of DEFA productions. It was precisely this structure that helped DEFA directors construct critical films and get them past the censors. Many directors used the interaction of protagonists at the center of their films and employed human crisis as a disguise for their criticism. Regardless of the amount or depth, it is important to note that East German films contain criticism, and DEFA directors presented critical comments to their audiences.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper presented at the 2007 Kentucky Foreign Language Conference. I would like to thank the audience for their comments and questions. My thanks also go to Lee Holt for his valuable feedback during various stages of the manuscript revision.
- <sup>2</sup> Films reiterating the need for the Berlin Wall in the years following the building of the Wall include, for example, *For Eyes Only – Streng geheim* (János Veiczi, 1961), ... *und deine Liebe auch* (Frank Vogel, 1962), *Der Kinnhaken* (Heinz Thiel, 1962), and *Die Glatzkopfbande* (Richard Groschopp, 1963).
- <sup>3</sup> The first and to date most diverse publication is Seán Allan's and John Stanford's edited collection *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*. Other book-length studies exclusively about DEFA films are Joshua Feinstein's *The Triumph of the Ordinary* and Daniela Berghahn's *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany*.

- <sup>4</sup> The most severe restrictions took place in 1965 after the Eleventh Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee, when the entire film production of 1965 was banned. Stefan Soldovieri provides a good account of the politics of censorship in his essay «Censorship and the Law. The Case of ›Das Kaninchen bin ich (I am the Rabbit).»
- <sup>5</sup> Qt. from the web site accompanying the DEFA permanent exhibit at the Filmmuseum Potsdam <<http://www.filmmuseum-potsdam.de/en/446-1484.htm>>.
- <sup>6</sup> A West German film visualizing these border crossings is, for example, Helmut Käutner's *Himmel ohne Sterne* (1955). It tells the love story of a West German border patrol officer and an East German woman who illegally leaves the GDR to reunite with her son in the West.
- <sup>7</sup> East Germany's government was forced to react in some way to the ever increasing numbers leaving for West Germany. According to West Germany's *Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen*, more than 2.6 million East Germans had left since 1949.
- <sup>8</sup> Petzold chose the banning of his film over a radical editing into a harmless fairytale suggested to him. See also <[www.mdr.de/DL/3457396.pdf](http://www.mdr.de/DL/3457396.pdf)>.
- <sup>9</sup> See Klaus Finke, «Entscheidung für die ›Heimat des Neuen›. Das Beispiel ›Der geteilte Himmel›».
- <sup>10</sup> The film's English title is translated as either *The Divided Heaven* or *The Divided Sky*. The translation of *Himmel* as ›heaven› invites religious interpretations, which has been the case with the reception of Christa Wolf's novel. To my knowledge, film scholars have so far abstained from these readings and focused on more secular approaches, although the multilayered meaning of the German word *Himmel* certainly leaves these options open.
- <sup>11</sup> Finke 27.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Walter Ulbricht's closing remarks at the 1965 Eleventh Plenary Meeting of the SED's Central Committee: «Ist jetzt allen Genossen klar, frage ich, daß es nicht um Literatur geht und auch nicht um höhere Philosophie, sondern um einen politischen Kampf zwischen zwei Systemen. [...] Also worum geht es? Um die Gewährung von Freiheiten in der DDR, die in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft des Westens üblich sind. – Aber wir haben viel weitergehende Freiheiten; wir haben nur keine Freiheit für Verrückte, sonst haben wir absolute Freiheiten überall» (Qt. in Günter Agde, *Kahlschlag* 350).
- <sup>13</sup> Qt. from <<http://movies.nytimes.com>> from 27 Oct. 1993.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Ralph Stern's observations of the correlation between architecture and ideology in his essay *The Architects – Socialist Family in Stress*. <<http://www.umass.edu/defa/films/architects.shtml>>.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Klaus Finke, «Utopie und Heimat. Peter Kahanes Film ›Die Architekten›»

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## How Do We Tell Stories of What We Could Never Imagine?

First East-West Encounters in German Feature Films from the Early 1990s by Andreas Dresen, Andreas Kleinert and Peter Kahane

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It is hard to believe at the time of this writing in December 2007 that the fall of the Berlin Wall lies nearly two decades back. If you teach at the college level as I do, you must remind yourself that today's undergraduates do not remember the amazement, the excitement, and the optimism of this historic event. For most of them it is the kind of history one reads about in books. They are too young to remember it. A recent *Spiegel* issue dedicated its title story to the «*Generation Wende*,» because the first baby born after the fall of the Wall turned 18 years old in October of 2007.<sup>1</sup> The complexity of the unification and the process of coming to terms with the GDR have left their mark on film history, with a response that is still emerging. The search for «the definitive» *Wendefilm* and *Wenderoman* has continued in vain. Among the various cinematic treatments, several German productions that reckon with the end of the GDR from an East German perspective have received substantial acclaim even beyond the German market, among them *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003) and the 2007 Best Foreign Film Oscar winner *Das Leben der Anderen*. German film expert Ralf Schenk suggests in an essay for *Filmportal.de* that it is more likely that a number of different films will present parts of a unification story, which taken together contribute to the rendering of a more complete picture over time.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis that follows treats three films from the early end of the spectrum of filmic reactions to the end of the GDR: Andreas Dresen's *Stilles Land*, Peter Kahane's *Cosimas Lexikon*, and Andreas Kleinert's *Verlorene Landschaft*. All three present elements of a uniquely East German experience of the early 1990s and contribute to the process of coming to terms with German unification. My analysis of these films in the context of their creation indicates that they present images of resistance, of (self-) estrangement, and of reorientation. All three films discussed in this paper were shown in cinemas in 1992. They are treated here in chronological order of the phases of East