PORTRAYALS OF SOCIALISM AND CAPITALISM IN EAST GERMAN FILM:
THE FILMS OF DEUTSCHE FILM-AKTIENGESELLSCHAFT (DEFA) 1946-1966

by

Lauren Shutt
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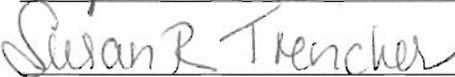
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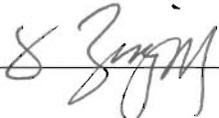
_____ Dean, College of Humanities
                                                          and Social Sciences

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Portrayals of Socialism and Capitalism in East German Film: The films of Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), 1946-1966

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

Lauren Shutt
Bachelor of Arts
University of Alaska Anchorage, 2009

Director: Andrew Bickford, Associate Professor
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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ABSTRACT

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Lauren Shutt, MA

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Thesis Director: Dr. Andrew Bickford

The study of national identity formation in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) vis-à-vis the binary oppositions extant in contemporary socialist and capitalist political systems has been almost entirely unexplored in anthropology. Despite welcome augmentations in topical research, the problem today becomes increasingly one of memory and official history; and in turn, the utilization of traditional anthropological research methods becomes less useful, even obsolete. In order to overcome this challenge, films of the formative period between 1946 and 1966 have been selected from the archives of the Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), the East German state film production company, which reflect the development of East Germany's sociopolitical ideals, and the construction of the socialist Self against the menace of the capitalist Other. Through cinema, DEFA filmmakers engaged simultaneously in artistic expression and cultural production. The analysis presented here employs a combination of interpretive techniques borrowed from visual anthropology, and previously existing research to

answer the question of how these films represented this encounter, as well as their

personal creative and individual viewpoints that informed the film.

INTRODUCTION

In his attempt to define the essence of British cinema, Edward Buscombe (2003) has posited that any national cinema tradition is presented with the choice of either emulating Hollywood, or contradicting it (141). Hollywood, Buscombe says, has become "a kind of phantasm synonymous with the cinema" (141). Therefore, film in any national tradition must respond to the expectations of audiences already acclimated to its non-national forms (Silberman 1996:299). The films produced by the state-owned East German film company DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) between 1946 and 1966 exemplify this rule.

In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the screen simultaneously substituted as a mediated encounter with the West (especially after the physical cordoning of the Wall), and as a creative projection of the state's socialist aspirations. Filmmakers were self-consciously positioned as arbiters in what Monika Maron (1991) has referred to as "the battle of the utopias" (41), and the evolving dialectic between their productions and the impositions of self- and external censorship speak specifically to manifest tensions between actually existing socialism and its utopian imagination. Writers and producers deliberately chose to position their films as socialist productions in opposition to the capitalist sybaritism of Hollywood (Poiger 2000:31-70). But within this position were wide variances that fluctuated with the political ebbs and flows charactering the history

of East Germany – positions which were received with equal variances of approval (or disapproval) by the state, as will be demonstrated in the analyses that follow.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary research objective undertaken in this thesis is to explore how DEFA films both mirrored and manipulated popular encounters between the socialist East and capitalist West, and to further discuss how these encounters amplified or contradicted the interior vision of the socialist "self". Borrowing from Erchak's (1998) exposition of selfhood, we can understand the self as a product of the socialization process, defined as a series of compromises between the needs of the maturing individual, and the needs of the larger society (34). In East Germany, the primary political need of the state was to establish its legitimacy opposite West Germany, that is, the legitimation of the socialist system opposite capitalism (see Park 2001:505; Howard 1995:55). It follows that the East German identity of the "socialist self" was articulated by the same opposition, and that further, the moments or processes produced in their articulation were "politically crucial", as emphasized by Bhabha (1994:1). In the filmic representations of this identity formation, the position of the filmmaker is paramount, illuminating the suspension of the individual in alternating dimensions of autonomy or dependence, and reflecting a confluence of state positions, personal sentiments, and foreign value judgments. These junctions were not static over time, but changed in tandem with the GDR's fluid relationship to the West (see Discussion in Chapter 5). By focusing on DEFA's output within the specific time period between 1946 and 1966, this research suggests, the

turbulence of the state's foundational years, plus the consequences of this agitation for individual versus state constructions of the socialist person, can be explored.

Contribution of the Research

The use value of film in anthropology, both as a means of communicating culture (i.e., the ethnographic film) and as cultural artifact (the study of films itself), is well established (see El Guindi 2004); including the use of features films, which were incorporated relatively recently as the site of ethnographic inquiry (see Chapter 2.3). However, expressly anthropological examinations of GDR films are lacking, even though they have been the subject of extensive research within the fields of film and cultural studies (Chapter 2.1). This indicates a gap in our understanding of the GDR, as reflected in its most vibrant, yet simultaneously most conflicted, creative industry. The research presented in this thesis aspires to complete a portion that gap.

Scope of the Research

The research is limited temporally, spatially, and in its perspective. The GDR existed as a state entity between 1945 and 1989, creating an inherent circumscription. However, an additional limitation has been added via the consideration of films produced no later than 1966. Following the devastating conclusion of the SED Central Committee's Eleventh Plenum in 1965, filmmakers increasingly retreated into inward-looking projects, vice formerly ambitious undertakings that had attempted to address social issues of national importance (Engler 1991:311; Fulbrook 2004:48, 59) (see Chapter 4.3.5). This signaled a fundamental shift in the character of DEFA productions,

after which filmmaking in the GDR became something other than what it had been previously.

The geographic limitations of this research must also be accounted for, since as Verdery (1991) points out, contemporary socialist economies presented innumerable variations, even between those characterized by strong, centralized economies such as the GDR (420). Thus, the conditions of East Germany would only imperfectly reflect those of other Soviet bloc states during the same period, making the application of these research findings to a generic model of the socialist state inappropriate.

Finally, there is the defining limitation of perspective. The nature of film censorship in the GDR means that the viewpoint offered by the films themselves has been heavily negotiated. Although attempts have been made to correct for this via historical contextualization and the inclusion of written and oral records from those involved in their productions, these corrections are themselves compromised by the problem of memory as discussed in Chapter 2.1.2.

BACKGROUND

The Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) was the state-owned East German film studio from 1946 until Reunification in 1990, finally disbanded in 1992 (Allan 1999:1-2). During its lifetime, DEFA produced over 750 films, which until the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, were screened internationally (Allan 1999:1), and, until the 1950s, were generally viewed favorably in comparison with those productions offered by the West (Jacobsen 2004:172). The GDR film industry experienced three distinct trends during the period under consideration: First, the

emergence of the "Trümmerfilme" ("rubble films") between 1946 and 1949; second, conformity to the aesthetics of socialist realism between 1949 and 1956; and third, the "Gegenwartsfilme" ("present films") produced between 1956 and 1966 (Poss and Warnecke 2006:1). These three phases are briefly discussed below.

The nascent years of East German cinema, from 1945 to 1949, were marked by Soviet rhetoric of an anti-fascist democratic renewal (Nothnagle 1999:93-142), and the empowering mandate that filmmakers and artists would reconstruct the film industry in the anointed service of "Aufbau" (reconstruction) (Prager 2008:89). Out of the ashes of the war emerged the aptly named Trümmerfilme, which chartered the narrative in which innocent workers, oppressed by the yoke of Nazism, were freed by the liberation of the "glorious Red Army" to rebuild and reclaim the mantle of the German cultural tradition (Fulbrook 2005:29). The role film played in the establishment of the GDR's foundational myths was essential to the nation's survival (Thompson 2009:282-3), and held a powerful message for postwar survivors, who struggled daily with malnutrition, disease, and exposure as late as 1948 (Fehrenbach 1995:1). During this period, socialist identity was equated with outwardly-directed labor, and a willingness to literally work past the legacy of fascism through the project of nation-building (see discussion of *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, Chapter 4.1.2).

From 1949-1956, the GDR experienced a profound crystallization of Stalinist cultural policy (Curtis 1992). This was manifested in the film industry primarily through the sanctification of socialist realism, not-so-subtly suggested by escalating pressure on the GDR to conform to the Soviet model (Berghahn 2005:19). This same pressure also

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served as the catalyst for severe structural changes: the Soviet Military Administration (SMAD) was given considerable control over the acceptance or disproval of proposed film projects, and DEFA was transformed into a Soviet Stock company (Feinstein 2002:28). As Boyer (2005) notes, the socialist realist aesthetic was intended to emphasize that "Kultur" (culture) was created by, and belonged to, the "Volk" (the people) (119). To this end, all artwork, including film, was directed to address the world in a realistic, readily comprehensible way (Brockman 2010:220). The strictures placed on filmmakers were asphyxiating: Boyer has described how any and all artifacts of cultural expression were "continuously, obsessively scrutinized by party functionaries for evidence of 'progressive' or 'reactionary' tendencies on the part of the producer, who would be either lauded or criticized accordingly". (Boyer 2005:119) Continuing in the tradition of the rubble films, the "ideal socialist citizen" was portrayed as hard-working and self-denying, rejecting the fascism of the former Germany and its perceived continuation in the contemporary West (Borneman 1995:51) (see Chapter 4.1.1).

Relief came, perhaps counter-intuitively, with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, halting the steady emigration of GDR citizens to West Germany (Kramer 1999:132). This physical barrier took economic and political pressure off the government, which in turn relaxed governmental pressure on artists. Thus, ironically, the Wall was welcomed as a liberation (Feinstein 2002:122; Liehm and Liehm 1997:266). The successive development of the "Gegenswartfilme" ("present films") (Feinstein 2005:6; Brockmann 2010:222; Bergahn 2005:26; Brady 1999:82) heralded a generic rejection of the romantic socialist vision presented by the preceding aesthetic, and instead

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moved to portray the GDR system with exceptional honesty (Brockman 2010:225). By 1965, issues like the economy, careerism, and deviant social behaviors were a significant topic in nearly two thirds of the year's film output (Kannapin 2005:193). But importantly, according to Berghahn (2004), the intent of these portrayals was not systemic opposition, but a critical exploration with the view to ameliorate the very problems that they critiqued (117). While the protagonists of these films often questioned or tested the structures of socialism, the ideal of the system is never rejected, and is usually portrayed favorably in comparison to the alternative offered by the FRG (see Chapter 4.3).

Tragically, however, before the debilitating aftershocks of Stalinism could be totally invalidated, the "thaw" that encouraged the Gegenwartsfilme was brought to an abrupt end with Brezhnev's takeover of the Soviet Union in October 1964 (Berghahn 2004:119). Under Brezhnev, the GDR was opened up to immense political backlash (119), but a number of productions in the Gegenwartsfilm tradition were already underway, and filmmakers "were aware that they were working against the clock, anticipating that the shifted political agenda would soon have repercussions for the cultural sphere" (Berghahn 2004:119). Twelve films were banned during the Eleventh Plenum of the SED Central Committee in 1965 (Allan 1995:13), and ultimately, filmmakers found it difficult to recover from this rejection. Disillusioned, pragmatism began to overwhelm creative inclinations, and the edge that had formerly characterized the East German film industry was blunted by "the search for material well-being and personal freedom" (Fulbrook 2005:48). By the 1970s, DEFA films were viewed as hopelessly old-fashioned and propagandist (Allan 1999:1).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research under consideration is simultaneously situated within the anthropology of East Germany, and the theoretical framework of visual anthropology. The following chapter first reviews extant contemporary ethnographic research concerning the GDR, anthropological interrogations of identity formation following German Reunification, and the challenges posed by the latter in the problem of memory reconstruction. It next considers the anthropology of film and its producers, and the theoretical implications of such for the present examination of GDR feature film production.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF EAST GERMANY

The majority of anthropological literature concerning the GDR has been produced following Reunification or late in the life of the state, making direct comparisons to contemporary East Germany difficult. There has been some work on identity formation, however, that can be viewed as indicative. Of further interest are examinations of the complications inherent in memory reconstruction, especially reconstructions that follows severe ideological disruption (i.e., that which took place following Reunification). Both topics speak to the choice of period films as an ethnographic device, rather than more direct methods of data collection, i.e. interviews or participant observation, which would be challenging to accomplish at the present time.

Pre-Reunification Literature

There is a limited body of anthropological research concerning East Germany that originated prior to German Reunification in 1991. It should be noted that the Soviet Union did maintain an active study of the history and nature of human society approximating that of its Western counterparts, as expressed by anthropology, following World War II (Krader 1959:158). This was generally divided into the three categories of physical anthropology, archaeology, and ethnography (158). However, ethnographic research was a minority field compared to the other two areas, and Krader lists only five ethnographic studies completed in the GDR during this period (157). The majority of Soviet studies were focused on European Russia, Siberia, and the Far East (158).

Germany also maintained an independent ethnographic field, or "Völkerkunde"; however this does not prove particularly useful in an examination of Germany itself. By definition, Völkerkunde was limited to the study of peoples without script, or "schriftlose Völker" (Jell-Bahlsen 1985:313). The field predated World War II, and tended to focus on the folklore and lifeways of peasants, but again, these studies refrained from turning the mirror back on Germany (313). Notably, Völkerkunde studies were considered to be a significant contributing factor in the Nazi rise to power, which may explain the postwar reluctance to re-engage the field, as institutions tainted by Nazism were scrupulously stigmatized in the immediate postwar years (313). Western anthropology likewise offers minimal insight into contemporary East German society, considering the inaccessibility of the region to outside academics (Halpern and Kideckel 1983:278). This limited availability of contemporaneous information makes a complete understanding of the

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nation's formative years difficult from traditional anthropological research methods alone.

We do know that under Honecker, East Germany encouraged the construction of a socialist identity specific to the GDR, one characterized by creativity, intelligence, industry, "collective spirit", and a strong commitment to the goals of socialism (Curtis 1992). Curtis writes that "the concept of a socialist personality embrace[d] many of the character traits and values traditionally admired by Germans. Thus authorities [were] able to tap traditional respect for authority, discipline, hard work, and efficiency as part of the development of a socialist personality." East German historians were urged to broaden the definition of the "progressive past" and reexamine periods that were formerly considered reactionary (e.g., the Prussian era formerly denounced for its militarism). Such seemingly antithetical figures as Martin Luther were recreated and embraced by the state (Curtis 1992). Functionaries even encouraged the development of a divergent standard of spoken German to further demarcate East and West (Curtis 1992).

The Problem of Memory

Although it might seem reasonable to assume that the preceding lack could be overcome by the wealth of current anthropological inquiry, the fallibility of memory and the gradual accretion of official history present considerable challenges to any potential attempt. The conflict between state and popular memory is explored by Epstein (1999) in her analysis of memoirs written by East Germany's "Old Communists" (181). According to the author, conflicting accounts of the GDR's state formation were generated by the need for an exalted, unified historical narrative, and the desire of individual Communist

leaders to re-inform the historical record (and possibly their own reputations) (182). The same conflict has been examined by Gallinat (2009) in her ethnographic reconstruction of the East German socialist past. In 2007, Gallinat conducted a series of interviews with former GDR citizens, finding their statements about life under socialism to be highly conflicted (183). The most contested histories addressed personal and morally ambiguous topics: "What can and can't be said about the past 'dictatorship'; who is allowed to remember what; who were informants during that period, and what, if anything, does that mean?" (184).

The subjectivity of memory is further demonstrated in the emergence of the "Ostalgie" phenomenon, or nostalgia for things associated with East Germany (Berdahl 1999a:192). Berdahl traces Ostalgie to the mid-1990s, when East German brands such as Trabi cars and Spee laundry detergent began to reappear on the market (197). This renewed interest, she notes, stemmed from a reinvigorated assertion of Ossi identity following Reunification (197). But as Thompson (2009) poignantly observes, this reassertion did not germinate from reminiscences of an identity lost, but wistfulness for one that never was:

> Ostalgie is uncanny, unknown, and essentially unknowable, because it both is and isn't, was and wasn't the GDR. This is because the GDR itself, as both concept and reality, was not what it claimed to be, indeed was not even, one might argue, what it was… [W]hat appears to be a retrospectively imagined community is actually a retrospective imagining of a proleptically imagined community… Ostaligie is therefore not simply a sense of a lack of something missing which one once had, but the lack of a lack, the sense of missing something which one never had but looked forward to. [284]

It is, in other words, an "other world lived retroactively" (Bhabha 1994:139). In the context of exile, Bhabha writes, this other world becomes a space of gathering for

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émigrés and exiles living on the "edge of foreign cultures" (139). Godeanu-Kenworthy in his discussion of the film *Goodbye Lenin* (2011) eloquently argues that Ostalgie is actually less a form of nostalgia and more an exercise in the production of an alternative history: it has become "a signifier without a signified… open to invention and to remembering according to the compensatory needs of the present, thus paving the way to the simulacrum" (168). Thus, Ostalgie not only epitomizes the fluidity and mutability of memory, it itself presents challenges to the determination of conditions under actually existing socialism via traditional ethnographic research methods.

Post-Reunification Literature

Since the Reunification of Germany, the former GDR has become a site of intense interest for inquiries into national identity formation. But conflict between existing research, representing specific personal views, and recent outside entrants means that such inquiries remain controversial (Buchowski 2004:1). Buchowski argues that the patterns and hierarchies of knowledge inherent this dualism of internal/external epistemologies means that researchers can often derive only limited information from material, as its apprehension frequently devolves into discerning the promotion of individual viewpoints. He describes this difficulty as follows:

> There is a degree of colonial mindset in this predicament. At least three grounds can be specified for this argument. First, local intellectual traditions are dismissed and are not included in the picture. … Second, and related to the first, indigenous anthropologists often acquire the status of the objects of study, regular informants, while their scholarly work does not matter at all. Third, and most importantly, in some accounts, the post socialist period is perceived as a chaotic transitional period, lacking in moral structures. [7]

As he pointedly asks the reader: "Think seriously about whether you have ever heard about any anthropological theory coming from CEE [Central East Europe]?" (6) Coupled with the demonstrated problems of memory, this epistemological fog means that post-socialist literature must be carefully considered. However despite these limitations, there has been a considerable amount of literature focusing on the formation and reinforcement of East German national identity that proves enlightening. Schneider (2002) for example has examined when he terms "the problem of the German self-identity", which, as the author notes, initially became associated with Germans after the Third Reich. This self-identity was relentlessly negative: "The 'typical German' was always seen as conservative, intolerant, and a perfect hanger-on in authoritative and hierarchical structures, summarized by the German word *spießig*." (Schneider 2002:14) A good complement, in other words, to fascism. Other aspects of German self-identification focused on terms of origin and descent, emphasizing that it is was not enough to simply be born in Germany, but one must also have German ancestry to be considered truly German (14). Conversely, the German identification of the Other (those who were not German) was also based primarily on the principle of origin and descent, rather than the criteria of birthplace or residence (14).

This was a clear national basis for identifying who did and did not qualify as "German" prior to the War. But this was challenged by the conclusion of World War II, which brought with it ideological disruption, refugees (particularly populations displaced from lands granted to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union), and national bifurcation into two distinct Germanys (Borneman 1992:46). Borneman's research,

conducted in East and West Berlin between 1986 and 1989 (7), provides a glimpse of

national identity reconstruction through the eyes of East Germans born between 1915 and

1935 (the generation that would have been involved in the production of films released

between 1949 and 1966). He explains that East Germans distinguished themselves from

West Germans through the generalization of fascism as a widespread cultural problem,

not specifically a German problem (51). Furthermore, "the GDR insisted that the Russian

occupation in 1945 marked an absolute break with this period, and that the post-1949

state (because it was socialist) eliminated the preconditions for fascism, which still lived

on in capitalist West Germany" (51). This distancing from, and later explicit opposition

to, West German identity set the stage for the development of a unique East German

identity. The notion of kinship and belonging espoused in the GDR, based on socialism

rather than origin and the descent rules discussed above, meant that all socialists (or at

least, those from socialist countries) qualified for identification as an East German (52).

Thus, the notion of belonging and solidarity was transformed from a descent-based

understanding, to one based on political affiliation, representing a significant break from

the formation of national identity prior to the War, as discussed by Schneider (2002).

Daphne Berdahl (1997) has written a poignant exposition of postwar identity

reconstruction framed by her experiences in the East German border village of Kella,

during the years of its assimilation into the GDR. Kella was not only situated within the

"Sperrgebiet" (a restricted zone extending a width of 5 kilometers along the boundary),

but also within the even more restricted "Schutzstreifen", the high-security zone

extending 500 meters along the border (2). The author's stated research goals were to

explore the intersection of the individual lives of Kella's citizens with the state's broader "extralocal economic, political, and social processes"; an exploration enhanced by the status of Kella as a borderland and its inhabitants as residents of such, perpetually caught in a condition of liminality, "a place betwixt and between cultures" (3). Important for our purposes is Berdahl's examination of the use of consumption as a defining characteristic of the Other, and by extension the position of the Self; especially its use in justifying the disparaging labels of "Nazis" and "fascists" applied to those living West of the border. This portrayal was often juxtaposed with the familial/communal orientation (or some conflation of the two) in East German society, with the moral high ground implicitly granted to the latter (97).

Mary Fulbrook's (2005) discussion of East German society more broadly is equally revealing. Fulbrook's research could be characterized as an attempt to counter what was at the time of publication the dominant narrative of life under socialism as aberrant, and collectively chafed under by its citizens. Instead, Fulbrook argues, tt was possible to live behind the wall and have "ein ganz normales Leben", a perfectly normal life, as once asserted to her by a tour guide (viii). Although East German socialism did ultimately collapse, Fulbrook contends that it did so not because of the dictatorial scheming often cited in Western discourse, but instead because of decades of "legacies of good intentions" (17). The belief in the ideals of a decent life articulated by the state cannot simply be dismissed as propaganda, she writes: "These aspirations were not just about maintaining the trust and confidence of duped citizens, but were rooted in a real

desire to better the lot of ordinary people – however compromised this desire was in practice." (49)

Boyer's (2005) writing of the creation and negotiation of "Germanness" is particularly relevant to the research question under consideration, especially his focus on media systems and the title dialectic between "spirit" and "society". Because of the importance the SED placed on Kultur, the Party (as the Nazis had before them) viewed their mediation as a critical defense against cultural "overformalization", and as an affective mechanism in unifying the people (103). Both parties, Boyer writes, had "envisioned themselves as mediums of the collective Kultural [sic] awareness and power of the Volk and as proxies of the collective will of the people" (103). However, even if one sees these mediations as well-intentioned, the regulations instituted by the SED are characterized by Boyer as even more invasive than those instituted by the Nazis before them (119). Nothing was allowed to happen that was not predetermined; spontaneity was deliberately stamped out (as illustrated by the ban of spontaneous DEFA film hits [see Chapter 4.3]) (137). One former editor-in-chief described as "a crazy sense of wishful thinking. It's voluntarism, no? It's like saying, 'I want something to be true,' and then when I see it the next day in the newspaper, I can say to myself 'See, the newspaper says it's true too!' Wunderbar!" (137) This intervention in the GDR's culture industry speaks to the limitation of perspective discussed in Chapter 1.1.2, and the state interference that characterized so much DEFA's film output.

Because of the profound political polarizations of the Cold War encouraged by both Germanys, the process of Reunification after 1990 was often slow and difficult.

Beyond the reinvigoration of East German identity illustrated by the emergence of Ostalige, Howard (1995) argues that citizens of the former GDR constructed a new East German "ethnicity" (56), noting that East Germans are "self-perpetuating and territorially bounded; they have powerful emotional ties to a common past, common values, common struggles; they are represented politically and are opposed to a common 'other'" (56). This speaks to what is commonly referred to as "the Wall in the Mind" – an abiding mental division that, twenty years later, still makes East Germans feel like second-class citizens (Spiegel 2008). Howard highlights Jürgen Kocka's observation that "an awareness of [the East/West] split seems to grow" rather than diminish. "This places the emphasis on mental distance," he observes (58). Building on Joseph Rothschild's exploration of ethnicity, he follows by asserting that it makes sense for dramatic identity transformations to occur following such a period of discontinuity as Reunification, and that former East Germans are now "stressing, ideologizing, reifying, modifying, and re-creating an identity based on a system and state that they had earlier opposed and rejected" (59).

Bickford has also examined the reconstruction of East German identity following Reunification within the specific context of the Nationale Volksarmee (the National People's Army), or NVA, which was disbanded in 1990 (2011:7). Seen as "'bad Germans' who served an 'illegal' regime and lost the Cold War" (1995:263), Bickford writes that former NVA soldiers suffered a profound loss of symbolic prestige, which became not simply a subtraction of identity, but simultaneously its excess (283). Namely, in an effort to offset their loss, the NVA increasingly indulged the West German

caricature of themselves. "The more they try to keep their identity or address the 'absence' of their identity," Bickford writes, "the more their identity outruns and defines them, further marginalizing them." (283) This has implications for former East German populations more broadly, who, as Howard notes, continue to feel not a decrease in differentiation, as one would expect, but its opposite. One East German writer described the experience by saying that Reunification resulted in a "total loss of one's own biography" (2011:110), as Osties were forced to confront West German prejudice that claimed the East German experience offered nothing of value to larger German culture (107):

> For those who have worked in the GDR, identity will not be created by a blanket condemnation of the work and achievements of more than forty years. The GDR belongs to my identity. I cannot be understood without the hopes and disappointments, the achievements and failures, the expectations and the disillusionment of this country. [110]

Interestingly, one former NVA officer engaged by Bickford during the course of his research drew an explicit comparison between the experience of East Germans following Reunification, and Jews during World War II, citing "ten years of abuse and belittlement at the hands of the government" (2009:279). The author explains this via Alison Landsberg's discussion of "prosthetic memories," or "imagined experiences of past traumas… which [the Germans] themselves never directly experienced, but which shape their experiences of trauma in the present" (280). More than a prosthetic memory, however, the declaration of the above informant arguably demonstrates a persisting externalization of National Socialism, which will be more fully explored in the Discussion that follows. This narrative of victimization echoes that of the immediate

postwar years, explored by Linke (1999) as a process of inverse projection (157-8).

Former GDR citizens felt themselves victims of what Bickford (2009) identifies as

"victor's justice," (263) exacted not just bureaucratically or judicially, but in the

condemnation implicit in the equation of German identity with West Germany alone. As

one former NVA colonel explained:

> The West Germans think they won the Cold War. Maybe they did. They think
> they're the victors, and can write history as they like. By focusing on everything
> that was wrong with the GDR, by saying it was a dictatorship, and that the NVA
> was a "party army" that supported a dictatorship, the West Germans can easily
> shift all the blame to us, and draw attention away from all the problems they've
> caused with unification… Unification hasn't gone well, but it is easier to simply
> blame us for the past, and blame us for the present. [263]

DEFINING SOCIALISM

A final concern regarding the problem of East Germany is one of definition. For

our purposes, Katherine Verdery's (1991) conceptualization of actually existing socialism

is preferred. The state in Verdery's model is relatively weak, for three reasons which she

enumerates (426-7): First, the socialist states monopolized power, reducing their ability

to complete projects due to the elimination of separate agencies that would have

otherwise facilitated the work process. Second, the state is dependent on production units,

who, acting in their own interests, could not be relied upon to provide accurate

information, further weakening the state's power to act. Third (and most important for

our purposes), the socialist state did not necessarily have legitimacy in the eyes of its

people, significantly weakening its ability to enforce legislation. Though it had coercive

measures at its disposal, ultimately it needed to gain legitimacy through cultural

acceptance (428). Trends in DEFA film productions can be directly linked to this

weakness, since the socialist state, as Verdery notes, often exhibited the unauthorized production of cultural materials in a parallel stream to authorized, state-sponsored intellectual production, likened to the intellectual expression of the second economy (428).

FILM AS ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

Anthropology has had a brief and liminal relationship with film as the site of ethnographic research (see El Guindi 2004). Given this equivocation, one concern of the literature review is to establish the use value of film as ethnographic data, and the precedent for such within previous anthropological studies.

Visual Anthropology

Visual anthropology has been defined by MacDougall (1997) as "an anthropology of visible cultural forms" (283), or more explicitly by Morphy and Banks (1997) as "the exploration of the visual in the process of cultural and social reproduction" (17). Film became accepted as an ethnographic tool in the early the 20th century; the camera was understood as an extension of the eye of the anthropologist, arguably the latter's primary observational tool and lens through which he/she interprets meaning (Gardner 1957:345). As Gardner explains, "Cinematic recordings of human life are unchanging documents providing detailed and focused information on the behavioral characteristics of man." (345) Of course, Gardner is speaking here of the production of ethnographic film rather than the analysis of feature films, as this research proposes; but the recognition that film arrests details of behavior and by extension culture, and fixes them in time, is highly valuable for this research.

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Although historically fixated on ethnographic film, visual anthropology has

recently shifted focus to examine popular media as the *subject* of anthropological

research rather than its output (El Guindi 2004:10; Gayles and Bird 2005:284-5). As

Powdermaker (1950) observes, "All art, whether popular, folk or fine, is conditioned by

its particular history and system of production. This is true for Pueblo Indian pottery,

Renaissance painting, modern literature and jazz as well as for movies. These are a

popular art concerned with telling a story." (3) The analysis of recorded and visual media

(television shows, photographs and art, books, etc.) as sources of cultural representations

has yielded rich ethnographic data (El Guindi, 2004, p. 10). As the site of synthesis for

popular and state projections (via censorship) of the socialist project in East Germany, the

feature film record of DEFA is well-suited for the same.

Anthropology of Film Producers and Consumers

The anthropology of film, though not a common site of inquiry in recent years,

can be traced to the 1950 ethnography of Hollywood filmmakers performed by Hortense

Powdermaker (1950). Powdermaker viewed filmmakers as culture producers, and was

one of the first anthropologists not only to focus on the production of film, but the

meaning of the exchange between the culture producer and consumer, an idea revisited

(somewhat cynically) by Horkheimer and Adorno (1969), among others, in later works

on the culture industry[1]. One of the major strands of film studies, according to Mahon's

(2000) analysis of the literature, is the study of the cultural agenda of the producer, and

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[1] Horkheimer and Adorno presented culture as a kind of standardized commodity used
for manipulative purposes, one so completely subject to the law of exchange that it is no
longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed that it can no longer be used" (Horkheimer
and Adorno 1969:131).

their intention toward social or political change (474). This is part of the culture producer's two-fold purpose: the first being artistic expression, and second, the goal of promotion, mediation, or even instigation of change (475). Stirrings toward change, Mahon notes, often begin outside of the dominant industry rather than inside it; however, outside filmmakers (or other culture producers) will often find themselves, upon the creation of a desired change, to be suddenly consumed by the industry they sought to reform (478). Mahon explains that it is this type of cultural politics with which anthropology is concerned, as well as features such as aesthetics and authenticity, and their relation to the films' production process (478). But while film can, as Mahon notes, portray culture to an extent, Ginsburg (1994) reminds us that film is also inherently an interpretation of culture on the part of the filmmaker, and it may be modified, simplified, or changed entirely in order to meet the needs of the culture producer (5). This is true of both ethnographic films, which are intended to explicitly portray culture, and feature films, which have a specific producer with a specific view of the cultural representations being made (6; see also Turner's 1992 discussion of indigenous media appropriations).

Of equal importance to the study of a film's producer is the study of its consumer, and, more broadly, the effect of the film medium on society itself. As Spitulnik's (1996) study of radio broadcast in Zambia and its resulting social discourse shows, the influence of mass media continues outside of its direct influence, resulting in ripples of social discourse within the broader society (161). This is not exclusive to a discourse of the motifs promoted by the broadcast, but also to the vocabulary and structure of the language employed to discuss them (161). Thus, the dissemination of media affects a

reflexive change in its own communication. In a separate work, Spitulnik (1993) writes

that the challenge is not strictly to analyze media, but to account for it as a "total social

fact of modern life" (293), including not only the direct evidence of its influence, but an

understanding of the power structures behind it, and how these are established and

maintained within a particular culture (295). In other words, an anthropological

exploration of film must be able to encompass the intentions of its producers, the use of

the product as cultural artifact, and the power structures that maintain its overall use

value.

Film and Identity Construction

The identification of the "self" in opposition to that which it is not has been well-

explored. The self is, in other words, defined by its relation to the Other, to its

"constitutive outside" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:127-34). Hall (1996) asserts that

identities are in fact more the product of marking difference and exclusion than they are

of any perceived unity (4). The unity, he argues, is a "constructed form of closure", and

every identity "has at its 'margin', an excess, something more" (5). This takes on a new

significance when examined in the context of Germany's political division, wherein the

margin can be understood as the physically constructed border, or Wall: an artificial and

in many ways arbitrary closure against that which lies just beyond it.

Thompson (2009) has explored the artificiality of a unified identity as it can be

specifically applied to the East German state. Borrowing from Anderson (2006), he

describes the GDR as an "imagined community," with national identity acting as the

"invisible hand" that regulated it (281). "A nation," he writes, "is the organization of

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disparity into a fragile multiversal unity held together by a set of relatively stable myths

and narratives… which have been created not out of a reality but out of a need to create a

reality out of unreality." (281) Bhabha (1994) speaks of the same need for a unified

identity springing from an "imagined community of the nation-people":

> [The nation] fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns
> that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymology of the word
> suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the "middle
> passage"… across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the
> imagined community of the nation-people. [139]

In addition to its horizontal aspect, Hall also recognizes the temporal dimension

of identity. He regards identities as "sutures" (see Hall 1995), between what he describes

as the processes that "hail us into a place as the social subjects of a particular discourse",

and the processes that produce subjectivities, "[constructing] us as subjects which can be

'spoken'" (Hall 1996:5-6). Because of the attachment of these discourses to the state,

identity definitions are inherently temporary, "chained" to political fluctuations (6).

Bhabha also emphasizes the temporality of identity in its inscription by political entities,

writing that the ambivalence of the national narrative, "as an apparatus of symbolic

power… produces a continual slippage of [identity] categories" (140). Subjects, in other

words, are obliged to affect identities knowing that they will never be adequate --

"identical" -- as Hall interjects, to the processes invested in them (Hall 1996:6).

Bickford (2011) has explained the particular suitability of anthropology to

exploring the role of the state in East German identity formations, describing it as "a

window into… the practices and techniques of power that state agents utilize in the

consolidation of power and legitimacy" (21). Borrowing from Corrigan and Sayer,

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Bickford describes how states define acceptable social activity in its manifold images and forms via such mundane processes as the visits of school inspectors. "Indeed," Corrigan and Sayer assert, "in this sense 'the State' never stops talking." (22) The state's constant instruction in the GDR, specifically its pervasive Marxist-Leninist ideology, defined even the possibility of identities, while "simultaneously appearing as 'natural' and value-free. Accordingly, they help create 'commonsense' notions of what men and women are to be, and help create notions of 'possible' ways of being and acting in society" (58-9). But the state opinion on the possibility of identities was by no means monolithic. Bickford asserts that the various bureaucratic units that comprised the East German state were often in conflict with each other over policy implementation (22). This aggravates the temporal dimension of identity, since as Hall (1996) notes, attaching identity to the political encourages the instability of the former by the latter's inherent mutability (6).

Bhabha (1994) describes the "process" of identity as "the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity", confirming the fluidity of self-identification and the slippages in definition that accompany temporal and spatial changes (1). Considering the turbulence of the GDR's foundational years in both categories, we can surmise that the East German identity of the "socialist self" went through continual transformation during the period under consideration, with correlating transformations reflected in the frame narratives of contemporary film productions.

SUMMARY

The preceding literature review has addressed the anthropology of East Germany prior to and following Reunification, specifically addressing East German identity

construction, in addition to the anthropology of film (and its producers and consumers) within which this project is situated. The former informs the context within which the DEFA films under consideration will be examined: although contemporaneous studies are limited, post-Soviet research into the formation of GDR national identity will prove valuable. The latter interrogated the use of film as the site of ethnographic research, focusing on the position of film within the anthropological lexicon, and the contexts that are best suited to its exploitation. This material will be used to inform the following exploration of DEFA films as mediators in the process of national identity construction, as it was located in opposition to capitalism.

METHODOLOGY

The present research is based on a close ethnographic and historical analysis of seven DEFA feature films, relying on systemic portrayals and explorations of identity present within said films to interpret the establishment of the cultural opposition between the socialist self and capitalist Other. These interrogations are situated in the tradition of visual anthropology, but are derived more specifically from the anthropology of media. The following chapter will discuss the methods employed in the research process under consideration, and the practical implications of its theoretical framework.

INTERROGATING THE FEATURE FILM

According to Sarah Pink (2005), the anthropology of media can be regarded as the anthropological study of media practices, providing a fine-grained method of analysis to reveal underlying cultural differences or structures. Jay Ruby (2005) writes that, "An anthropology of visual communication is premised upon the assumption that viewing the visible and pictorial worlds as social processes, in which objects and acts are produced with the intention of communicating something to someone, provides a perspective lacking in other theories." (165) The use of the feature film as the basis for anthropological study, in other words, will focus on the revelation of meaning in the production of acts illustrated onscreen.

As previously discussed, the primary source of ethnographic information in this research is a series of feature films produced by DEFA between 1946 and 1966. According to Weakland (1995), feature films represent a significant repository of information regarding the culture of their production; more than that, they are "surprisingly close to traditional anthropological interests and methods" (45). However, the examination of these cinematic texts within anthropology is rare, and could be candidly characterized as an under-developed area of study (Gayles and Bird 2005:284). Because the representations made within films are often variable and contested, and can represent actual or potential facts, audience interpretations of such yield inconsistent results (Weakland 1995:47). To avoid this, previous study has focused primarily on categorization, or comparisons between representation and reality (48). However, as Chalfen and Pack have argued (1999), in the same way that we do not look to myths or folktales for a mirror account of a culture, we should not look for an exact replication of reality in the feature film (104). Instead of asking whether a movie is literally "true" we should be asking whether it "rings true" to its audience (Gayles and Bird 2005:285).

David Gauntlett's (2008) study of identity using Legos as a form of "serious play" confirms that individuals tend to employ story frames as an architecture for interpreting their own lives (259-280). As he explains, "[a]ll possible ways of living life are played out in the stories that are told in a culture, and we learn from stories of greed, lust, hate, love, kindness and heroism, and develop our own narrative of self in relation to these templates… Such narratives give people the chance to think about what constitutes a

'good life' or desirable identity" (120). It follows that film, as a visualized story, fulfills the same cultural function.

An interesting approach has been taken by Elizabeth Traube (1992) who, "[o]n the assumption that mass cultural forms annex and disguise popular concerns… abstracted a pattern from a set of commercially successful films [e.g., *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *Rambo*]… and tried to define the social conditions with which the pattern might resonate" (1990:375). Similarly, Drummond (1996) in his analysis of Hollywood blockbusters suggests that their success is grounded in their mythical quality; their ability (along with other myth genres) to "confront and attempt to solve elemental dilemmas of human existence" (1984:2). Although grounded in the semiotics of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthe, Drummond's theoretical framework rejects the primacy of language endorsed by the former, instead arguing with James Fernandez (1986) that culture can be conceptualized as a semiospace: what Fernandez defines as "a quality space of 'n' dimensions or continua" (13). As Peterson (2003) explains, the semiospace can be likened to the Aboriginal concept of dreamtime (109), with movie theaters as its temples (Drummond 1996:20):

> Dreamtime, the time and space outside of time and space, where myths happen. Films, like other myths, are not texts to be interpreted according to codes; rather they are movements across vectors within semiospace to be experienced and made part of our lives… When we view a movie, regardless of the preposterousness of the plots, we become travelers in the topography of semiospace. This experience allows us to sort through the central dilemmas of our lives (the most central of which is "who/what are we?") by experiencing various virtual worlds in which the cultural categories central to our lives are twisted into powerful new (and old) configurations. [Peterson 2003:109-110]

In the application of his model, Drummond's analyses are organized around specific two-dimensional axes of semiospace (e.g., us/them, life/death), unpacking the configuration of symbols along them (110). The analyses present here will focus primarily on the axis of us/them: the latter's proxies of consumerism, capitalism, and anti-fascism, and the former's of asceticism (in the service of the morally-mandated Aufbau), socialism, and anti-fascism (all identified with the binary opposition of East/West).

RESEARCH PROCESS

The research process was constituted by the three respective stages of film selection, film viewing, and film analysis, briefly described below.

Film Selection

Films were selected based on three primary criteria: first, the availability and accessibility of the film. Hundreds of films are available through the DEFA Film Library (an archival service managed by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst), online sources such as YouTube or Oregon State University's media management system, and rental services such as Netflix. However the logistics entailed in utilizing the former made it preferable to use online and rental services for our purposes. The second criterion was the clear designation (or classification) of the film within one of the three period genres discussed in Chapter 1.2: the Trümmerfilme or rubble films, films conforming to the aesthetics of socialist realism, and the Gegenwartsfilme, with the aim of delineating the time period under consideration and by extension the social and political issues that would provide external context. The third criterion was the availability of supplementary

materials (e.g., oral histories, film criticism, previous study) that could be utilized to
provide insight. An enumeration of films analyzed in this research is offered in Table 1.

Table 1 Films selected for analysis

Film	Director	Year
Die Mörder sind unter uns (The Murderers Are Among Us)	Wolfgang Staudte	1946
Ernst Thälmann – Sohn seiner Klasse (Ernst Thälmann, Son of his Class)	Kurt Maetzig	1954
Ernst Thälmann – Führer seiner Klasse (Ernst Thälmann, Leader of his Class)	Kurt Maetzig	1956
Der geteilte Himmel (Divided Heaven)	Kurt Wolf	1963
Berlin um die Ecke (Berlin Around the Corner)	Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase	1965
Das Kaninchen bin ich (I Am the Rabbit)	Kurt Maetzig	1965
Spur der Steine (Traces of Stones)	Frank Bayer	1966

Film Viewing and Analysis

The primary approach to data collection was film viewing and analysis, which
involved multiple film viewings, note taking, and subsequent evaluative comparisons.
This process is consistent with previous approaches to anthropological film analysis
(Weakland 1995:55). The films under consideration were viewed in German with English
subtitles, with the exception of Kurt Maetzig's *Ernst Thälmann* epics and *Berlin um die
Ecke*, for which subtitled films are not available. Political attitudes and affiliations,
possible regime interference in the form of content negotiation or censorship, and
conflicts between the two were of particular interest, as were overt or obfuscated

portrayals of socialist and capitalist systems and identities. Significant symbols and motifs were examined for potential interpretation within these contexts. Viewings were repeated until the saturation point, when no further data was derived. The number of viewings required for content assimilation varied, but generally vacillated between two and three per film.

Films were next individually analyzed in terms of how they presented the socialist self, the capitalist Other, the relationship as well as any commonalities between the two, and how this could be apprehended in terms of actually existing socialism and contemporaneous political events. This indicated a series of historical examinations of the social and political milieu in which the films were produced. The final goal of the analysis was an understanding of the respective films as situated in the research question.

Presentation

The resultant film analyses are presented periodically, following the sequence of the generic triad discussed in Chapter 1.2. Each section includes a brief historical overview of the film's social and political context, followed by a discussion of one or more films viewed as representative of the period.

RESEARCH ISSUES

This construction of the research process is not without its issues. Primarily, the analytical process must by necessity be selective; with over 750 films produced over the lifespan of the GDR, it would be impossible for this project to encompass DEFA's output in its entirety. Furthermore, the established use of feature films in ethnographic research is characterized by an inherent selectivity, reflecting the volume of films available in the

address of any given research question (Weakland 1995:46). It is also worth reiterating

the difficulties presented by the lack of contemporaneous ethnographic research, and the

problem of memory presented by more recent inquiries that might bridge this deficiency.

These speak to the limited perspective that the films present and the challenge of its

correction, as discussed in Chapter 1.1.2.

SUMMARY

The preceding methodology has explicated the research process utilized in the

production of the following film analyses, specifically the method of film selection, the

kind of analysis used, and the theoretical framework that informs the latter. Research

issues have also been highlighted, including the selectivity of films, and the limited

perspective that they offer.

DISCUSSION

The following chapter presents an analysis of the continuing construction of the socialist self in the GDR, as represented in the development of three successive film genres that emerged between 1946 and 1966: the "Trümmerfilme", or "rubble films," (1945-1949), films conforming to the socialist realist aesthetic (1950-1959), and the Geganwartsfilme (present films) (1960-1965). Periodic content analyses are prefaced by historical discussions of the social and political context in which the films were conceived and later released, and how these influenced the viewpoint of the producers, and by extension, the films themselves.

<u>THE RUBBLE FILMS</u>

> When I came in 1945, so much had been dammed up, there were so many plans, so many good intentions that we just had this feeling: now it's starting, now it's really about to happen. And for that reason the period after 1945 wasn't primarily a time of worries, of fears, of problems, and of poverty for me, although it was all of that… It was a time of poverty, but even more than that it was a time of discoveries, of the beginning, so to speak, of a land of unlimited possibilities.
>
> Kurt Maetzig [Mückenberger 1994:14]

From 1945 to 1949, Soviet rhetoric of an antifascist-democratic cultural renewal enchanted filmmakers and artists with unprecedented freedom from economic censorship (Brockmann 2010:216), and the empowering mandate that they would reconstruct the film industry in the anointed service of Aufbau (rebuilding) (Prager 2008:78-9). The

vacuous cinema of West Germany, bloated with American imports, was rejected in favor of the antifascist narrative of the East (Berghahn 2005:14; Poiger 2000:1-30; Feinstein 2001:54; Fehrenbach 1995:64). Despite popular disillusionment, film would, in later years, prove the only area of cultural endeavor in which the East that did not continue suffer the loss of its artists and craftsmen to the glitter of the West (Liehm and Liehm 1977:260).

The vision and depth of commitment displayed by the DEFA's incipient filmmakers is especially vivid when contrasted with the bleak reality of postwar Germany, where malnutrition, disease, and exposure remained grave threats to survival through 1948 (Fehrenbach 1995:1). It was during this time of utter devastation, known as "die Stunde Null" ("the Zero Hour"), that the German entertainment industry was outlawed. Law 191, passed by the Allies on November 24th, 1944, prohibited, among other things:

> the activities or operation of theaters, cinemas, opera houses, film studios, film laboratories, film exchanges, fairs, circuses, carnival houses and other places of theatrical or musical entertainment and the production or presentation of motion pictures, plays, concerts, operas, and performances using actors or musicians. [Pleyer 1965:196]

Thus, the industry was dismantled in its entirety, literally reset to zero. Because of its position as the nucleus of the Third Reich's propaganda arm, its disassembly was a top priority for the Allies (Berghahn 2004:11-12). The Soviet Military Administration (SMAD), which administered the Soviet Zone, had the good fortune of geography to confiscate the former Universum Film AG (Ufa) administration buildings on Krausenstraße, in addition to the studios at Johannisthal, Althoff, and Neubabelsberg, the

oldest large-scale film studio in the world (Pleyer 1975:267). The annexation of the industrial town of Wolfen, which produced AGFA film stock, plus the appropriation of Ufa property, left the SMAD in control of 75% of the German film production capacity (Heimann 1994:39-40; Kreimeier 1989:57-8).

The Soviets had been relying on the propaganda power of film for nearly 30 years: as von Geldern (2011) explains, socialism was considered by its proponents to be a cutting edge political system, and the Bolsheviks liked to underscore this image by associating themselves with modern technologies (airplanes, motor cars, radios, "even fantastic schemes for rocket ships"). Though many of the former seemed excessive in a nation where people struggled with the basics of food and shelter (as postwar Germany later did), the cinema, von Geldern writes, "could be used with practical effort to improve people's lives" (von Geldern 2011). As Lenin famously declared, "Cinema is the most important of all the arts for us." Thus, film was quickly identified by the SMAD as the primary medium and catalyst for the re-education of the German people (Brockmann 2010:216; Allan 1999:3; Gemünden 2008:110; Liehm and Liehm 1977:1; Berghahn 2005:12-20).

Feinstein has observed of the relationship between the SMAD and the East German population that "in no single realm was the potential affinity between the Soviet occupiers and the defeated Germans greater than in their shared reverence of art" (Feinstein 2002:22). This characterization was based on the emancipatory function attributed to art and film by the SMAD:

> As guardians and propagators of Germany's classical heritage, artists were assigned a special role in emancipating their compatriots just awakening from

fascism's trance. Artists provided a link between their ailing land and its better
self, between national parochialism and universal progress. Like teachers, artists
were supposed to educate the German people and instill in them a love for the
noblest of values. [23]

Days after Germany's surrender, Soviet-sponsored concerts were held in Berlin, and

within two months, dubbed Soviet classics were screened in theaters (22). The first

German cinemas reopened their doors on April 28th, 1945, and Law 191 was amended the

following month, reflecting the rapidity of changing sympathies in the SBZ (Allan

1999:2; Shandley 2001:11).

DEFA was granted a production license on May 13th, 1946 (Allan 1999:3). At the

festive ceremony that marked the event, Soviet cultural officer Colonel Tulpanov

admonished the gathering that:

DEFA faces a number of important tasks. Of these, the most crucial is the struggle
to restore democracy in Germany and remove all traces of fascist and militaristic
ideology from the minds of every German, the struggle to reeducate the German
people – especially the young – to a true understanding of genuine democracy and
humanism, and in so doing, to promote a sense of respect for other people and
other nations. [3]

DEFA enjoyed an exceptional atmosphere of political tolerance during its nascent years,

encouraged by the unity of artists and politicians in promoting the GDR's foundational

anti-fascist narrative (Mückenberger 1999:60). "This was important," writes

Mückenberger, since it created a "special climate in which artists could develop their

ideas without fear of censorship and in which they could feel confident that they were

wanted and needed" (60). Studies of DEFA's early years confirm that the work

conditions and atmosphere inside the SBZ were certainly as open as those in the Western

sectors; perhaps, Shandley (2001) posits, even more liberated than in some of the Allied

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countries themselves (17-18.) However, this unprecedented tolerance may have been inspired by the baser motives of political maneuvering. Feinstein (2002) observes that Germany's division was not a foregone conclusion at Zero Hour, and by "appealing to Germany's own cultural traditions, the Soviets may have sought to make their policies attractive to as broad a constituency as possible" (24). The Communist party might soon have to compete in national elections, and the SED needed to, at the least, create an empathetic image that the voting population could relate to (24).

From June 6–9, 1947, Babelsberg hosted its first Film Autoren-Kongreß (filmmakers' conference), with an open invitation to filmmakers from all zones (Allan 1999:5). The goal of the conference was to formulate a series of policies that would encourage inter-zonal collaboration between filmmakers, acting on the assumption of an eventual unified German state (5). In his address, DEFA production director Alfred Lindemann proclaimed his hope that "this congress will provide the momentum for a broad exchange of views on how to build a secure basis for the revival of German cinema, an exchange of views which need not be hampered by the zonal divisions within Germany" (5).

Die Mörder sind unter uns

Die Mörder sind unter uns (1946) – the most critically acclaimed of the rubble film genre – was not only the first postwar East German feature, but also the first postwar German feature film (Brockmann 2010:200). Initially conceived under the working title *Der Mann den ich töten werde* (*The Man I Will Kill*) (200), Staudte first pitched his idea to the American Military Administration, but his proposal was rejected with the rebuff

that no German would produce a feature film for the next twenty years (Feherenbach 2005:59). As previously demonstrated, the Soviets did not share this sentiment, and granted Staudte a film license (59). In keeping with the ubiquity of the Aufbau narrative, the primary mechanism through which the film sought to demarcate the capitalist West from the socialist East (identities that at the time of its production were still undergoing differentiation) was through the apotheosis of altruistic and outwardly directed labor (see Prager 2008).

Set a year earlier in the immediate aftermath of Germany's defeat, the protagonist of *Die Mörder* is Hans Mertens, a former surgeon and War veteran who returns home to the to wreckage that was once Berlin. His own residence presumably destroyed, Mertens settles into an empty apartment. The owner is former artist Susanne Wallner, who has been interned in a concentration camp. When Susanne returns, she is surprised to find the apartment occupied, but allows Mertens to stay. The two share an uneasy peace as Susanne attempts to rebuild her life and Mertens stubbornly drinks his away, plagued by graphic memories of his wartime experiences. In particular, the horrific destruction of a Polish village ordered by his former captain, Ferdinand Brückner. Mertens recognizes Brückner one day in the city, hawking pots converted from military helmets. The encounter induces Mertens to fantasize about avenging the deaths of Brückner's victims.

While *Die Mörder* was conceived prior to the formal definition of the socialist state in East Germany, an embryonic socialist identity is still discernable within its narrative. As discussed by Prager (2008), labor is portrayed as the redemptive pursuit of the German people, their remedy for moving past the traumatic legacy of the recent past

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and allowing its associated shame to fade, along with the rubble and other architectural consequences of the War that would be remedied by the same. This labor is personified by Susanne, who in the absence of other work and consumed by the need to forget her experiences, begins to restore her apartment. When she reunites with an old friend, Herr Mondschein, she laments to him that, "It is so hard, so hard to forget." Herr Mondschein in return gently admonishes that "It is easy, Susanne, when you have a goal." Susanne acknowledges this, admitting that "Arbeit", work, is what will impel her to begin living once again. As Prager observes, "the first films produced by DEFA in the period immediately following the war marketed the project of rebuilding Germany directly to the German people… Sponsored by the state and overseen by the Soviet occupation, DEFA films were meant to encourage the rebuilding of a nation that was in transition" (78).

Tellingly, however, Mertens is not pleased by Susanne's efforts, and demands that she relegate her relentless housekeeping to her room only. "If I feel it is necessary to restore civil order, I shall do it myself," he explains gruffly. Unlike Susanne, Mertens is still bitterly reliving the trauma of his service, and is unwilling, or perhaps unable, to let go of the chaos and violence he has internalized. The link is made more explicit after Susanne finds a letter Captain Brückner entrusted to Mertens when he expected to die, addressed to Brückner's wife. When Susanne asks Mertens why the letter was never delivered, Mertens becomes enraged at her for "prying". "I thought maybe you forgot," she protests. But Mertens has done anything but. "Maybe I forgot? I've forgotten nothing. I didn't want to. I just can't help it." Mertens refuses to, literally, work past his haunting

experiences, inhibiting his integration into the new society (see Prager's 2008 analysis of labor). In contrast, Susanne has effectively been able to externalize fascism (as the viewing audience is expected to do) through her labor – underscored, of course, by her victimization as a concentration camp survivor. This is aligned with what Vamık Volkan (1988) describes as an externalization of the "bad self". A normal feature of childhood development, the targets of this process usually solidify during adolescence. However, in situations of cross-cultural conflict, the process is again mobilized by the need to "Otherize" an enemy, who becomes the new target of the bad self's projection. Volkan argues that this delineation of Otherness via emphasis on dissimilarity, a process Freud (1917) famously refers to as "the narcissism of minor differences" (272), is imperative to maintaining a conceptualization of the enemy that is psychologically "useful" (Volkan 1998:xxiii-xxvv). Arguably, it is the precise mechanism engaged by the rubble films such as *Die Mörder* in their attempt to comprehend the fascist past.

Notably, the film also portrays a distinct gender differentiation in the formation of the new socialist identity. In one especially revealing scene, Susanne sits in the left of the frame (symbolically female), brightly lit by the lamp above her canvas, working on her chalk drawing. She is cheery when Mertens walks through the door, but Mertens deflates her mood with his palpable bitterness, standing to the right (symbolically male), shadowed and haunted by not only by his past, but more importantly, by his refusal to work and thereby forget it. "You never think about work?" Susanne asks him. "Sometimes I do consider it," Mertens responds flatly. "And that satisfies you?" Susanne probes. "Yes, it satisfies me." The scene then cuts to the dramatic collapse of a building

into rubble. This clearly positions Susanne as creative, while Mertens is associated with destruction. The dichotomy of woman as creator and man as destroyer is consistent with Ortner's (1972) discussion of gender dichotomies, and the positioning of women as closer to nature (as means of creation), while men, the bringers of culture, are associated with war and destruction (18-19).

Labor is of course not sufficient to delineate between the identities of the East and West. The distinction between socialist, outwardly-directed work and capitalist, self-directed work is made explicit in the person of Captain Brückner, Mertens' former commander and now antagonist, who has also been hard at work since the war. The former captain owns a factory that converts discarded helmets into saucepans, literally recycling the War. His apartment has been completely restored (through paid labor, not his own), and he beams to about the real glass panes in his windows. "No cardboard for us!" he boasts. Brückner's work is fundamentally different from that of Susanne's: Brückner has been capitalizing on the war *itself*. This stands in stark contrast to Susanne's constructive and regenerative work. Within this dualism, it becomes clear that Brückner represents the capitalist Other – self-directed and profit-oriented – while the tirelessly optimistic Susanne portrays the emerging self-denying, service-oriented socialist identity.

Mertens' failure to resist unjust orders – and the memories of the consequences that continue to haunt him – arguably represents East German complicity in National Socialism. But instead of assigning blame, Staudte portrays Mertens as contrite and sympathetic; his potential for redemption clearly emphasized by his discomfort in

Brückner's presence and the intensifying enmity between them. In one poignant scene, Brückner jokes to a silently fuming Mertens: "Mertens, don't look so sad. We want to have fun! Every era has its chances, you just have to find them. Helmets from saucepans, saucepans from helmets. It's the same game. You must manage, that's all." This exchange occurs as the pair walks past a line of Berliners passing pails of rubble between them, persisting in the hard labor of rebuilding the city. Brückner's light-heartedness in the face of such manifest poverty and hardship parallels the contemporary resentment of many Germans toward the frivolity of American cultural imports (Poiger 2000:129). His unaffected treatment of war and peace as one and the same ("helmets from saucepans, saucepans from helmets"), namely, as a game to be managed, further emphasizes his disregard for the suffering of his fellow Germans, which he underscores with the declaration that "We want to have fun!" Thus, although Mertens remains conflicted about the value of work, the audience is clearly intended to feel the same visceral response to the vulgarity of Brückner's unapologetic levity.

The denouement of the film only reinforces the moral appeal of altruistic labor. Eventually Mertens is called upon to use his surgical skills to save the life of a suffocating girl, the catalyst which reinvigorates his surgical career and impels him to begin his own work in the service of rebuilding Germany. The sequence which illustrates this transformation cuts often between Mertens' labor assisting the girl and her widowed mother, and Brückner, whose has retired to enjoy the company of friendlier women at a local bar. The juxtaposition of Mertens bidding the girl and her mother goodbye with

Brückner agreeing to rendezvous with the women backstage heightens the valorization of outward-oriented work, compared with the profit-orientation of capitalism.

However despite his revelation, or perhaps strengthened by it, Mertens persists in his determination to kill Brückner. He is dramatically, if predictably, dissuaded by Susanne, who convinces him to let the courts punish Brückner instead. The two begin a new life together, and the film ends with a frame showing Brückner behind bars, pleading with the audience to bring all the "murderers among us" to justice. The ending of the film clearly demonstrates an association of capitalism with the Nazi past and its associated atrocities, while outwardly directed work is valorized as the means to move on from it.

But there is an uncomfortable contradiction in the film's opposition of the two. As soothing as this narrative may have been for the image problem of German audiences, it belies the fact that Mertens was a Nazi, and party to the same atrocities as Brückner. Arguably, this is exactly what made it so appealing. *Die Mörder* offered Germans the opportunity to see themselves as not only salvageable, but in a way, heroic. Shandley (2004) observes that this was a widespread criticism of the rubble film genre: the institutions, traditions, and assumptions that contributed to the devastation in which contemporary Germans now found themselves were, at best, mentioned in passing, and at worst flagrantly lied about (4). As Prager (2008) explains:

> the Nazi years unsurprisingly appear as though they were imposed upon the victimized population of Germany. The treatment of recent history as an era of foreign occupation was consistent with what ultimately became the standard East German narrative of that time: Crises in capitalism produced the Second World War and these had now been abolished. The enemy was no longer among the Germans, and there was, therefore, no need to reexamine recent events. The films do not take up the challenge of pointing an accusatory finger at their German

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audiences, but rather assert that someone other than them did an awful thing to their homes and land. [80]

Furthermore, the evils committed under Nazism were often conflated with the Germans' own postwar sufferings, and hardships such as engaging the black market were portrayed as equally distressing as the presence of war criminals. Refugees from Silesia and returning German soldiers even occupied the same symbolic position as death camp survivors in some instances (4). Referring to work done by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, Linke (1999) suggests that Germans managed the trauma of the Holocaust by a process of inverse projection, in which an external threat was imagined or exaggerated to increase the individual sense of victimization (157-8). Indeed, the East German filmmaker Georg Klaren lamented that he received a ridiculous number of self-pitying coming-home stories and scripts about postwar marital problems. (Shandley 2004:23-4) By emphasizing the individual in this tradition, Staudte allowed audiences to feel themselves victims of a fascist collective that they had little or no power to affect, forgetting that they were the foundation of the collective. Laboring in the service of socialist reconstruction was simultaneously held out as both the penance and salvation of Germany. "Through the sheer amount of labor needed to rebuild", Sebald (1999) writes, the society created "a new, faceless reality, pointing the population exclusively towards the future and enjoining on it silence about the past" (37). This is especially evident in the (decidedly Aryan-looking) character of Suzanne, inexplicably liberated from a concentration camp without any explanation from her internment, save for melodramatic window-gazing and deliberate silences. As the embodiment of the emerging socialist self, Suzanne symbolizes the inexplicable victimization of Germany in the popular imagination.

Die Mörder was a success in Germany and Europe, with film critic Walter

Lenning going so far as to advise that, "A good German is recognizable in how or

whether or not he is affected by this film" (Sebald 1999:33). Tellingly, it was compared

favorably to the contemporary film selection offered in the West: in contrast to DEFA's

first triumph out of the gate, the first West German release was an unimaginative

romantic comedy written during the Third Reich (Jacobsen et al. 2004:583). Helmut

Weiss's *Sag' die Wahrheit* (1946) was immediately condemned upon its release by the

Catholic Film Service as a moral and artistic "false start", and underscored the

superficiality with which the West was perceived to the approach project of postwar

reconstruction (583). French film critic Chris Marker explained the differing filmic

approaches to the devastation of the War by describing how the East, "sometimes too

sweepingly, [tries] to identify political causes and exact responsibilities, while production

in the west accuses fate, the Kaiser, Wotan, Mephisto, Adam, and the good lord himself"

(Brockmann 2010:195).

The rubble films ultimately failed to maintain currency as a medium of

reinforcing socialist identity in part due to the rapidity of social and political change in

postwar East Germany. Given their turnaround time, topical films were already dated by

the time they arrived in theaters (Shandley 2004:23-4). As early as 1947, audiences were

already growing tired of the films' pontifical overtones and increasingly irrelevant

subject matter. They were, in Shandley's (2001) assessment, "problem films about

problems that the German public either no longer wished to solve or claimed to have

already solved" (Shandley 2001:8). This demonstrates an inversion of the problem of

construction of social discourse around films as explored by Spitulnik (1997): rather than being driven by media, the discourse sped past it.

SOCIALIST REALISM

> As if Ernst Thälmann could ever die.
> Thälmann died yet did not die.
> For that which he, while he lived, taught,
> That for which he, without rest, propagandized,
> Lives as an admonition in millions of hearts,
> Lives as knowledge in millions of brains.
>
> "Legacy" by Max Zimmering (Recommended for Thälmann ceremonies in the 1950s) (Northangle 1991:121)

The SED had stated in 1946 that Germany could follow its "own path to socialism", if it chose (Brockmann 2010:190). But a swift reversal came in 1948, when the organization declared itself a "party of the new sort", proclaiming that Germany would follow the "shining example" of the Soviet Union (190). Tensions between East and West intensified during the late forties; the cooperation present at the Film Autoren-Kongreß dissipated, and the beginnings of the Cold War pushed the SED to strengthen its allegiance to Moscow (Berghahn 2005:19). In October, the Party proclaimed that "feature films should be imbued with the progressive and optimistic spirit of the human being of the new sort, they should, indirectly, serve political and economic enlightenment and thereby the goals of the two-year plan" (Brockmann 2010:190). Allan marks this as the end of the "antifascist-democratic" period of East German cultural policy (Allan 1999:6). A series of personnel purges ensued as the Stalinization of the Party began to crystallize (Feinstein 2002:29).

SED and Soviet leaders viewed the GDR as a "marvelous opportunity to realize at last the *Kulturstaat* long denied the Volk by industrial capitalism" (Boyer 2005:117). As Prager (2008) later observed, the atrocities of National Socialism were encoded as "the most radical and deformed variant [of capitalism], proving Lenin's general rule that all capitalism tended toward monopolism and thence institutionalized barbarism" (117). The objectives of what Boyer euphemistically coins the SED's cultural "mediation" were twofold: First, it attempted to unify and transcend the heterogeneity of bourgeois mass cultural representations. Second, it hoped to ultimately replace the former with an "integrated, monopolized, and monsemous public culture consonant with the harmonious collectivity associated with the Volk and its Kultur" (128). The implementation of these goals centered on institutionalization of the party line, similar to the National Socialist Führerprinzip, would tightly control and negate bourgeois mass media and thus "stimulate the development of Volk consciousness among the masses" (129). However, unlike Goebbel's application of the Führerprinzip, the intimacy of the general secretaries' involvement in everyday media production was fanatical (130). Artifacts of cultural expression were "continuously, obsessively scrutinized by party functionaries for evidence of 'progressive' or 'reactionary' tendencies on the part of the producer, who would be either lauded or criticized accordingly" (119).

On November 3rd, 1947, the SMAD decided that the Soviets would hold a majority interest in DEFA (55%), while the SED would hold the minority interest at 45% (Feinstein 2002:28). Seven days later, a contract was agreed upon between whereby the Party was guaranteed the right to influence film production, with a select SED

committee, the Filmkommission or DEFA-Kommission approving outlines of the

company's plans, rough cuts, and completed films (28). DEFA became a Soviet Stock

company the next day (Allan 1999:4). However, as Feinstein (2002) notes, "Whether

these organizational changes themselves represented an intensification of political control

or merely its normalization is difficult to assess" (28).

The goal of these changes was principally to ensure that GDR cinema would

reflect the SED's foundational narratives about the genesis of the German socialist state,

and second, to illustrate the (shifting) priorities of the party's cultural agenda (Bathrick

1995:16). To this end, proposed film projects were judged by the standards of "socialist

realism", which prescribed that all artwork, including film, should address the world in a

realistic, readily comprehensible way (Brockmann 2010:220). Sinyavsky has defined

socialist realism more specifically as:

> the basic method of Soviet [art and art criticism]. It demands of the artist the
> truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary
> development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic
> representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation
> and education of workers in the spirit of socialism. [Tertz 1960:148]

Socialist realism was originally conceptualized by Zhadnov, Stalin's "cultural

commissar" in 1934 (Berghahn 2004:35). Berghahn qualifies this preemptive

circumscription by writing that "its original rationale had been driven by a genuinely

democratic and emancipatory desire, namely to create art for the masses and thus make

high culture accessible to the broad middlebrow public" (35). Under these parameters,

extreme fantasy and modernism were frowned upon, condemned as formalist and

therefore an expression of bourgeois culture (Brockmann 2010:220). Objects were to be

realistically depicted – for example, substituting a box to represent a chair in theater

productions was forbidden (Frankel 1972:124). All artistic representations were

encouraged to present an optimistic view of the world, i.e., "one that was moving forward

in a positive way toward a just and prosperous society" (Brockman 2010:220). This

usually included the depiction of a positive "worker hero", with whom the audience was

expected to identify with and endeavor to imitate (seen in embryonic form as the

character of Susanne in *Die Mörder*) (220). Excessively cynical or negative protagonists

were discouraged (220), and favored idioms emphasized the energy and activity of the

Volk and the "emancipatory Wissenschaft" of the party (Boyer 2005:117). Official

rhetoric declared that to the West, the capitalist system had produced a "Volk-hostile

imperialistic mass culture" that was over-formalized and alienated from the spirit of

human action (Poerschke and Grannrich 1983:231) This would not be allowed to happen

in the East.

Such rigid regulation may strike observers as oppressive, but the Party saw it

differently. Walter Ulbricht later famously declared that, "We have much more extensive

freedoms [than in the West]; We only have no freedom for madmen." (Aber wir haben

viel weitergehende Freiheiten; wir haben nur keine Freiheit für Verrückte.) (Ulbricht

1965) Artists were, after all, the engineers of souls, as Stalin described them, and bore a

heavy responsibility toward society (Stalin 1932). To this end, art became subservient to

politics, and artists were, as Günter Netzeband (1990) has asserted, "whipping boys" for

political events beyond their control (44).

The Ernst Thälmann Epics

Kurt Maetzig's sequential epic films, *Ernst Thälmann: Sohn seiner Klasse* (*Ernst Thälmann: Son of His Class*, 1954) and *Ernst Thälmann: Führer seiner Klasse* (*Ernst Thälmann: Leader of His Class*, 1956) are paradigmatic of the socialist realist films praised and encouraged by the Party. The initiative for the films under consideration was "handed down from above" (Anders et al. 2010:8), the only productions that Maetzig ever "made on demand" (Brady 1999:84). The films follow (loosely) the life of KPD leader Ernst Thälmann, beginning with his celebrated involvement in the German Revolution in 1918, and ending with his execution at Buchenwald on Hitler's orders in 1944. The idealized Thälmann exemplifies the "positive worker-hero" the Party required (Brockman 2010:220), and its relentless magnification of his actions emphasizes the hard line drawn between Cold War identity constructions of socialists to the East, and capitalists and fascists to the West.

Ernst Thälmann – Sohn seiner Klasse opens on the Western Front during the last days of the World War I, where Thälmann is serving in the Army. A fellow soldier delivers the news of the Kiel mutiny (the inciting incident of the German Revolution [Broué 2006:140][2]) to Thälmann's bunker. The message is met with elation by Thälmann, who convinces his best friend Janesen and several others to desert so they can take part in the uprising at home. He leads his own mutiny against his commanding officers, Zinker and Quadde, and the group is able to escape, but not before flying a red

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[2] The Kiel Mutiny (October 28th, 1918) was led by the crews of ships anchored in Wilhelmshaven, when sailors were ordered to go on maneuver after the government had agreed to peace talks. It was widely believed that the General Staff were preparing to make a symbolic "last stand", even though such a strategem was doomed to fail (see Broué 2006:139-142).

flag in place of Germany's, proclaiming to his listeners that "Jetzt lebe die Revolution!" ("Now live the Revolution!") Thus from its incipient act, the film lionizes Thälmann as a revolutionary leader.

Upon their return to Hamburg, Thälmann and his comrades find to their dismay that Karl Liebknecht and his wife Rosa Luxemburg, the revered leaders of the German Communist Party, have been murdered. The film depicts Thälmann's former officer Zinker as the assassin, but the actual identities remain unknown (256). Thälmann zealously addresses the workers gathered in the shipyard, promising that the sacrifices of Karl and Rosa will not be in vain. Ostensibly, this speech was the catalyst for Thälmann's political career. We see Thälmann throw himself into self-education, proceeding to shut himself in his study, poring over works such as Lenin's *Staat und Revolution*, from which he reads aloud (the excerpt is actually Lenin quoting Engels, but this is not explicated in the film).

His studies are eventually interrupted by Jansen, who informs him that the city is facing an attack by a Freikorps unit led by none other than Zinker[3]. Zinker's march on Hamburg was depicted as a part of the infamous "Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch", incited by the disbandment of Germany's Freikorps units and extradition of "war criminals" (Broué 2006:349).[4] To halt the Freikorps, the Cabinet issued a proclamation to Germany's

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[3] The Freikorps (literally "free corps") were volunteer paramilitary units. After World War I, the term was used to refer to organizations formed by defeated soldiers returning home from the front. The Freikorps were active during the Weimar era in suppressing Communist uprisings, and later became the vanguard of National Socialism (see Waite 1969).

[4] Under the Versailles Treaty, Germany was ordered to reduce its troop strength from over 350 to 100 thousand men. This, coupled with Allied demands for the extradition of

workers to defeat the Putsch by a general strike. This received massive support,

especially from the KPD, which issued the following statement urging workers to avoid

violence:

> For the general strike! Down with the military dictatorship! All power to the
> workers' councils!... In the councils, the Communists will fight for the
> dictatorship of the proletariat, for the republic of councils! Working people! Do
> not take to the streets! Meet in your workplaces every day! Do not let the White
> Guards provoke you! [356]

In the film, Thälmann is portrayed as instrumental in mobilizing the Hamburg workers to

this end, believing that the strike is a means to achieve the "neues Deutschland" he

envisions. The strike was a success, and the Putsch disintegrated.

The denouement of the film is the Hamburg uprising of 1923, initiated by the

Hamburg KPD. Thälmann himself wrote that uprising was "driven by the plight of

inflation, driven by the unprecedented suffering of the toiling masses, carried by the spirit

of Bolshevism the best, most revolutionary part of the Hamburg workers picked up their

rifles and took up the struggle against the capitalist oppressors" (Thälmann 1925:69).

Indeed, hyperinflation is specifically pointed to as the inciting cause, portrayed by the

long line of workers outside a Bäckerei who watch in dismay as prices are hiked yet

again via the chalkboard outside (one elderly lady nearly faints). The Thälmann of the

film is again as prominent in organizing the resistance; however, Broué (2006) writes that

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war criminials was met with fierce resistance by military officials, who were particularly
sensitive to the dangers posed by such provisions. After orders were issued for its
disbandment, the Erhardt Freikorps brigade led by General Walther von Lüttwitz
marched on Berlin (March 13th, 1920). Lüttwitz succeeded in driving out the government
and attempted to construct his own (Broué 2006:349-356).

Thälmann "apparently played no decisive role in [the Uprising]" (812)[5], and the origins

of the uprising remain controversial (810). Whatever its cause, the movement ultimately

failed, due to (in the film) the failure of the KPD to send weapons it had promised to the

rebels; the message delivered through a delegate explains that violence is no longer the

Party's policy. Nevertheless, in keeping with the optimism demanded by the socialist

realism, Thälmann re-emerges at the end of the film, galvanizing a crowd of gathered

workers (again) with the promise that their fight will go on.

      As alluded to above, the film is replete with historical inaccuracies. For example,

the failure of the Hamburg Uprising is attributed to unreliable political factions; but in

reality, as Lemmons (2007) writes, the shipment of promised weapons was forcibly

halted by the Army (101). (It's also worth noting the operation was militarily futile

anyway, characterized as a "blunder" that was over in 24 hours [Broué 2006:812]).

Speaking of the film's historical infidelity in an interview in l999, Kurt Maetzig

described the production "a film which you can no longer watch today. It is terrible.

When I saw it once again I had red ears and was ashamed (Brady 1999:84). Although he

initially received the project proposal as an honor, Maetzig quickly found that the film he

had in mind diverged dramatically from the Party's vision. "They had young people in

mind who during the fascist period had not heard anything about Thälmann," Maetzig

recalls, "except the worst possible things – that he was a criminal and so on. And they

wanted to build a kind of monument for these young people. Accordingly they put this

sympathetic and simple man Thälmann on a pedestal and corrected the scenario all the

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[5] Though the assertion should be carefully considered, Goebbels (1935) writes that during
the uprising Thälmann "laid stone drunk in his own vomit" (Goebbels 1935:236).

time." (Brady 1999:84) This mediation of the narrative by the Party is painfully obvious from the outset; as Sepp Schwab, the general director of DEFA, pointed out, revolutionary soldiers' groups could only be found on the home front in 1918, and were nonexistent on the Western Front, as the film depicts (Lemmons 2007:98). Schwab went so far as to conclude that the entire first 19 scenes or the original cut "were so full of historical fictions that they should be completely scrapped, and the action should open with the twentieth scene, which shows daily life in the Hamburg shipyards"; presumably a safe topic, or at least one with little room for negotiation (98).

In addition, despite the meticulous research that Maetzig completed in order to ensure the accuracy of the project (103), another significant criticism leveled at the film was its depiction of a "'cardboard hero,' devoid of any personality" (102). Indeed, the actions of the hero on screen are terrifically predictable, and his brow is, for all intents and purposes, permanently fixed in a deep furrow, with few facial muscles to lend to expressive variety. But the very things that made it "shameful" for its director made the film golden for the SED. As previously discussed, socialist realism indicated a very specific template for its cultural productions. Frey writes contemporaneously that in the GDR, "Purely human, individual psychological conflicts and emotions, which are of no official interest, [have to be] smuggled in through the backdoor – the writer must present [the hero] in a positive, heroic and victorious light." (Frey 1953:275) One reviewer remarked of the film, without irony, "Thälmann really had no personal life, it was the life of the German working class." (Lemmons 2007:102)

Indeed, by the 1950s, Thälmann had attained the status of demigod in the German

Democratic Republic. Northnagle (1999) describes how

> [c]hildren cultivated Thälmann's memory with the arcane rituals and incantations
> surrounding their pennants and blue neckerchiefs ("whoever dirtied his
> neckerchief had, so to speak, symbolically dirtied the idea of the liberation of
> humanity, and had to be reprimanded accordingly," as one former Pioneer
> recalls), "the Pioneer salute," the ceremonial kissing of the red flag, the
> decoration of red-draped, altar-like Thälmann "tradition corners" in their club
> houses, relentless indoctrination at school, in the vacation camps, and in their
> "friendships," visits to memorials and talks with border guards and (Communist)
> resistance fighters. [119]

By the early 1960s, the same children were exhorted to "be worthy of Thälmann's death",

a development Northnagle describes as "ominous" (120). Thälmann's apotheosis was

completed with the suggestion that he hadn't really died: "The SED was relentless on this

point," (120). Indeed, in *Führer seiner Klass* Thälmann's death is not actually illustrated:

"Thälmann marches on," writes Lemmons (2007), "red flag in the background, into the

glorious socialist future." (103) Michael Tschesno-Hell, the coauthor of the script,

excused these liberties by maintaining that "[t]here are great truths and minor truths. In

art it is absolutely legitimate to permit the great truths to have precedence. And the great

artistic truth is always in agreement with reality" (102). The films were hailed as radiant

achievements by the SED, and all Pioneer and FDJ members were required to attend full-

length screenings of both, along the following lecture and discussion (Northnagle

1999:120).

The opposition between socialism and fascism/capitalism is heavy-handed and

hard to miss. For example, the demands for Karl and Rosa's deaths come at the behest of

an American capitalist named McFuller, whose collaboration with the Army suggests not

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only greed, but cooperation with Hitler, according to Anders et al. (2010:21). The dirty work is gladly carried out by Zinker, Thälmann's former officer, later depicted as a fascist. The workers are continually pitted against an emerging Nazi military: when the Freikorps rolls into town as part of the Kapp Putsch, swastikas have already been crudely painted on their helmets; and if that weren't obvious enough, the German flag is accompanied by a fluttering skull and crossbones.

Military officials are shown frequenting an expensive Western-style club, making the link between profiteering capitalism and fascism more explicit. Inside, a man sings a disorienting German rendition of "Yes! We Have No Bananas" – a song that adds to the club's nonsensical, frivolous, and alienating comportment. The scene is shown to be contemporaneous with the worker's strike that begins the Hamburg Uprising; as the striking masses make their way past the establishment, the staff increasingly tries to seal out the noise. But when the patrons inevitably hear the sound of marching, they become absurdly panicked, trampling each other at the mention of the word "Genossen". The wealthy patrons are garish and flighty caricatures – one woman is even show stuffing her jewelry down her shirt as she makes her escape from the imagined threat.

Conversely, a history of friendship between Germany and the Soviet Union is made equally explicit. In the midst of a meeting of the USPD Congress, Thälmann interrupts the proceedings to announce the "frohe nachricht" that a Soviet steamship, not-at-all-sententiously-named *Karl Liebknecht*, has arrived with wheat for the unemployed workers. Although the policeman who meets the ship (Thälmann's former officer, Quadde) attempts to dissuade the captain from unloading, the captain pointedly reminds

him the policeman of his guest status while onboard. Thälmann is grateful, telling the Captain that, "Dies ist mein erstes Mal auf sozialistichen Boden. Wir danken Ihnen, genosse ihn, genossen Kapitän." ("This is my first time on socialist ground. We thank you, Comrade Captain.") The Captain responds graciously: "Das Russischen proletariat ist immer bereit den Deutschen Volk zu helfen." (The Russian proletariat are always ready to help the German people.") In this way, the liberating role of the Soviet Union is back-projected, lending legitimacy to the current occupation.

In a later work, Volkan (1997) has described how groups that have been victimized or somehow humiliated by another group choose to fixate on "chosen glories" and "chosen traumas" as a way of reinforcing cohesive internal identity. This is profoundly congruent with the cohesion encouraged by the imposition of socialist realism. Though much of Thälmann's s heroism is fabricated, it is ostentatiously displayed nonetheless as a "chosen glory", encouraging the population to unite in nationalist pride behind Thälmann' s legacy, against the Other. Alternatively, in reliving chosen traumas, Volkan asserts that their remembrance becomes a vehicle for simultaneously recovering control over the event, and fueling the visceral revulsion needed to unite a population in the service of a cause (xxxii). Notably, the glorified or traumatic events often become greater than their historical truths, as the central role they take in the group's identity become increasingly significant (xxvi). In their decidedly un-nuanced opposition of socialism with the macabre fascist-capitalist hybrid West of the border, the *Ernst Thälmann* epics reflect the political polarization of the Cold War environment in which they were conceived.

As Frey observed at the time, "under the banner of socialist realism the depiction of 'objective reality' means the literary presentation of a reality that is solely constituted by a set of social conditions" (Frey 1953:275). In the project of socialist identity construction, in other words, the examination of the social conditions themselves were paramount. But the maladroit mediation of film circumscribed by the socialist realist aesthetic speaks more to the identity imposed by the state than that internalized by the individual; with the freedom of the 1960s the latter was able to be explored more fully, as will be demonstrated.

THE GEGENWARTSFILME AND CENSORSHIP

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 ushered in a period of exceptional liberalization, once the immediate need to differentiate East from West became a geographic rather than cultural battle (Berdahl 1999:148-9; Brockmann 2010:225; Feinstein 2002:153; Liehm and Liehm 1977:266; Kramer 1999:132-33). According to official rhetoric, the border was sealed as a protective shield against western imperialists (Berdahl 1999:148). One woman recalled how, in keeping with the official narrative of the GDR's inception, she was instructed in school that the Wall was "built between the workers, who had all been in concentration camps, who wanted their freedom, the little people, and the big ones on the other side… capitalists, Nazis" (149).

Filmmakers for the most part have remarked on the relief they felt at the Wall's completion. Maetzig recalled how "[a]fter the erection of the Wall, the situation in the country stabilized and became calmer. We thought the time had come to tackle the problems in our country more critically and more outspokenly" (Brockmann 2010:225).

Similarly, Frank Beyer remembered that, "I had the feeling after the Wall's construction, now we are no longer in the front trench. Now we can talk with each other in another fashion. We can deal with each other in a critical fashion. We can talk about things that were forbidden before." (Feinstein 2002:153) The Wall halted the steady emigration of GDR citizens to the West, taking economic and political pressure off the government and, consequently, relaxing governmental pressure on artists (122; Liehm and Liehm 1977:266). It was a reassuring symbol that they would now "finally enjoy a protected discursive space in which critical works of art would no longer be lambasted for playing into the hands of the West" (Kramer 1999:132-33).

Although difficult for many on the outside to envisage, GDR citizens reflecting on the world behind the Wall have asserted that it was perfectly possible to lead "ein ganz normales Leben" (a perfectly normal life) (Fulbrook 2005:16-17). During this period, the government became increasingly optimistic about the potential for growth (32). Although poor working and working conditions persisted, the 1950s and 1960s, in a continuance of the optimism of the postwar years, were a time of "a sense of building up something new… of being part of a collective spirit, making a contribution to a better life in the future" (59). But as the older generation continued to construct the provisions of the future-oriented Aufbau, younger generations coming into maturity increasingly compared the affluence of the West with their own relative austerity: "not merely taking for granted but actively critiquing the modest achievements of the repressive if paternalistic state" (32-33). In response to this discontent, the state reluctantly sanctioned a sharp increase in the production of consumer durables in the 1960s (42-43). More and more families

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acquired radios and television sets; by 1971, between 90 and 100 percent of young people

had access to one or both, and 93% regularly tuned in to Western media broadcasts (70).

Indeed, as early as the mid-1950s, commentators were wringing their hands over youthful

imitations of the dress and behavior depicted in Western films; a trend linked in the

popular imagination to excessive consumption and feminization, and by extension, the

corruption of normalized gender roles (Poiger 1995:95). This was, arguably, a

reclamation of Eigensinn as Gallinat (2005) describes it, a resistance to the normalization

of a crystallizing socialist identity (294).

The film industry was also moving to approach a critique of the conditions under

actually existing socialism, taking full advantage of the political alleviation that followed

the construction of the Wall. Kurt Maetzig and others seized upon the unprecedented

artistic autonomy of the early sixties as an opportunity to experiment. As Maetzig

remarked, the new liberties available to filmmakers suggested the idea of enhancing "the

critical aspect of our films" (Brockman 2010:227). Berghahn (2005) clarifies that, "in a

repressed society a greater degree of openness and criticism promised to have nearly as

much popular appeal as sheer escapist entertainment" (142). The results were the

Gegenwartsfilme ("present" films) (Brockmann 2010:222; Feinstein 2002:6; Bergahn

2005:26; Brady 1999:82-3), which examined contemporary socialist society with

extraordinary honesty, placing DEFA on the cutting edge of cultural modernization

(Engler 1991:23). By 1965, nearly two thirds of the year's annual film output examined

such formerly taboo phenomena as careerism, economic problems, and deviant social

behavior in an effort to contribute to larger reform discussions (Kannapin 2005:193). It is

important to emphasize that such films were not made in a spirit of opposition, but rather "with the conviction that the time had come to render life under real existing socialism, in a more realistic and somewhat more critical way than had hitherto been acceptable", as the filmmakers themselves later attested (Berghahn 2004:117). Tragically however, the Party soon shifted gears, and nearly an entire year's worth of productions were banned during the 11th Plenum of the SED's Central Committee (Chapter 4.3.5); including the films discussed below.

Spur der Steine

One of the more well-known *Gegenwartsfilme* was Frank Beyer's 1966 production *Spur der Steine*, based on the novel of the same name by Erik Neutsch. The novel was in many epitomized the workplace fiction encouraged by the SED, and the film version was expected to ride the wave of its success (Byg 1990:11). Set against the construction of a chemical plant, the protagonist is the foreman of a construction crew, Johannes (Hannes) Balla, who is gifted but crude – his dress and mannerisms are in fact a nod to the epidemic *Halbstarkenproblem* (literally "half-strong problem").[6] While his crew outperforms all others in their work, Balla is not above strong-arming or stealing to acquire sparse building supplies. A Party secretary, Werner Horrath, is assigned to supervise Balla at the same time a female engineer, Kati Klee, joins the project. Although Balla is immediately attracted to Kati, she begins an affair with Horrath, who, it is later revealed, has a wife and child at home, away from the site. When Horrath waffles

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[6] The Halbstarkenproblem was a youth subculture in 1950s East and West Germany, largely blamed on American media imports, which manifested in American fashion and aggressive, sexually provocative behavior (see Poiger 2000:80-105).

between his wife and Kati, Kati turns her attention to Balla, but the two become good friends instead of lovers. Kati soon discovers she is pregnant with Horrath's child, and is eventually forced to disclose her pregnancy to the local clinic (and subsequently Horrath). However, she manages to protect Horrath by concealing the identity of the father. This prompts a Party investigation into Kati's immoral behavior (the film's frame story), which untangles the web of Balla's rebellion and Horrath's slide from condemnation to complicity.

Unlike the protagonists of *Die Mörder* or the Ernst Thälmann epics, the film's three main characters depict an anomalous ambivalence toward socialism; Balla in particular represents its kind of antithesis – rule-breaking and self-directed. When the newly-arrived Horrath asks him whether he is willing to play by the rules in acquiring building materials, Balla responds audaciously: "I play by my rules. Otherwise I'll go where they leave me alone." ("Ich spiele nach meinen Regeln. Sonst ich gehe wo sie mich in Ruhe lassen.") When Horrath asks him to clarify, Balla elaborates, tongue-in-cheek: "Somewhere where socialism is a bad joke." ("Irgendwo, wo der Sozialismus einem fauler Scherz ist.") But the positive message portrayed through Balla, as Berghahn explains, is that "socialism can win Balla's energy and creativity for the new society" (Berghahn 2004:117). Indeed, as the film continues, Balla slowly warms up to Horrath, representative of the system. When Kati inquires if Balla likes Horrath, he replies that "If he was a worker, yes. He wants to change the world." It is Horrath's methods that Balla objects to – his politicizing vice physical work – rather than his intentions. He echoes this sentiment during a speech on the site's conversion to a three-shift labor system. "Lenin

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was a wise guy. He criticized all those pencil-pushers who are afraid to make decisions, accept responsibility," Balla smirks. This highlights the inversion that has taken place within the GDR's political structure: namely, the nation's bureaucratic mechanisms have become so insular that that a worker such as Balla has a better understanding of socialism's founders than do the country's leaders.

However, the film is about more than just Balla. Kati and Werner typify the disillusionment of young Party members with socialist ideals. Kati studied architecture and was the daughter of a Party functionary, but chooses to work as an engineer. This baffles her new supervisor at the site, who chalks it up to the "the idealism of Party youth". That idealism is shattered during the subsequent course of events, as Horrath is forced to conclude that the Party bureaucracy is grossly inefficient (while Balla's methods aren't so bad) and Kati faces an interrogation into her own "hypocrisy" and disloyalty to Party virtue. Horrath narrates his personal disenchantment to Balla one night: "I became a member of the Party in 1950. I had very little experience of life. The younger you are the more you think you know. What's good, what's bad. How a communist ought to be… We saw things very simply, too simply. If something needed fixing we fixed it by resolution." Balla jokingly asks him when he became so clever. Horrath replies stoicly, "Since I became a victim… Resolutions can't help me at all." This narrative of victimization by the government parallels the externalization of the previous state as illustrated by the rubble film genre. Socialism has become separate from the citizenry it intended to strengthen, and is now an entity unrecognizable within even its own narrative. Speaking in defense of disgraced Party member Trutman, Kati for her part

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asserts that "What sounded like truth today were more often excuses. How is a person to know the truth if he has lived for many years with petty lies and excuses? Today he just wanted to be honest. Honesty deserves a second chance." Arguably, this is doublespeak for Kati's frustration with the pretended purity of the Party, and refusal to engage with actually existing socialism.

In *Spur der Steine*, the problems of the past have been inverted: Balla now listens in awe as a coworker, Franz, describes how "in the old days" they never ran out of material; instead there was "a shortage of work, money problems." These are foreign to Balla and his crew. The availability of work is taken for granted. In *Spur der Steine* the problems of the past of been inverted: Balla now listens in awe as a coworker, Franz, describes how "in the old days" they never ran out of material; instead there was "a shortage of work, money problems." These are foreign to Balla and his crew. The availability of work is taken for granted. Thus, the vision of the socialist self as described by the previous genres has been transformed to reflect the insulation of the system, Socialist identity is now being defined opposite the state, instead of intimately linked with its construction, as it had been up to this point.

The optimism and utopian aspirations that constituted *Die Mörder* and Maetzig's Thälmann epics have dissipated in Beyer's production. However the problem with socialism, Beyer instructs us, is not the ideal that motivated Susanne and Thälmann in Staudte and Maetzig's films respectively; it is the perversion of those ideals by the Party. The bureaucracy that Horrath, Balla, and Kati come to equally detest is responsible socialism "spinning its wheels" in the muck of social and economic ills. In that sense,

there is a ray of hope for Beyer that the GDR might reform itself into a nation truer to the

ideals of Marx and Lenin – or at least, Lenin as Balla envisioned him.

Das Kaninchen bin ich

Perhaps the most famous of the Gegenwartsfilme is Kurt Maetzig's 1965

production *Das Kaninchen bin ich*, the namesake of the twelve so-called "Rabbit films"

banned during the Eleventh Plenum of the SED's Central Committee. The protagonist of

the film is 19-year-old Maria, whose brother Dieter is sentenced to three years in jail for

sedition. Her brother's rebellion casts a significant pall on her own life: although she

made good grades in school with the goal of advancing her education in Slavic Studies,

her university applications are denied and she ends up taking a job as a waitress. Her life

becomes considerably complicated when she begins an affair with the judge who

sentenced her brother, Paul Deister.

Similar to the protagonists of Beyer's production, Maria's feelings about the

government appear ambiguous. When she requests a day off from school to visit her

brother in jail, the headmaster asks her whether or not she condemns his deed. "I don't

know what he did," Maria responds evasively. The headmaster begins to berate her.

"Where's your faith in our courts? It was in the newspaper. College entrance requires

aptitude plus attitude. So do national scholarships. Don't be surprised if…" here he

catches himself. "Your brother has his whole life ahead of him… So do you." Maria asks

if there is any connection. The headmaster pauses, then answers that there is none.

Suspicion, Maria narrates as she leaves. *Where do great comrades get great suspicions?*

Is he Mr. Socialism? The distinction here is important. Maria does not see her

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headmaster's suspicion as endemic to socialism, but simply as a symptom of the bureaucracy that is its excrescence. Similar to the Balla, Kati, and Horrath, Maria makes a clear delineation between the potential of socialism and its practice in the GDR. This both demonstrates the fading legitimacy of the government (identified by Verdery [1991] as a defining weakness of the socialist state) and the rejection of fixed reflexivity between self-identity and national identity.

Maria describes Dieter as "a fast mover. Too fast for these times." He is never explicitly described as a capitalist or any similar descriptor, and tellingly, his crime is similarly concealed, only vaguely discussed as "subversion". The audience never even learns whether or not Dieter actually committed the crime. Maria and her Aunt Hete are barred from attending Dieter's trial after a motion is made for the public to be ejected — "to serve state security". ("The public" consisting solely of Maria and Hete, even though there are twenty other spectators in the courtroom.) Maria states several times during the course of the film that she does not know what her brother did: once in response to her headmaster, and again to her brother himself during a jail visit. In the latter instance, Dieter's response is cut off by the guard, with the dry retort, "Three years for stealing apples?" We are given another chance at the truth when Maria asks Paul toward the end of the film what Dieter did. "What do you mean by [did]?" Paul responds. "What he actually did," Maria responds. "I'd have to get his file… Details escape me at the moment but it was repugnant." The audience never receives a clear answer. This reflects what had become an ubiquitious and frustrating concealment of information within the GDR (Hutchings 1987:206); one which will prove of significant symbolic value.

Maria is relentless in her interrogation of the law and its institutions. In a particularly defining scene, Maria confronts Paul about the difference between her brother's sentencing, and that of a similar case which she witnessed. Paul responds with frustrating economy that "they" (the justice system) abide by the law. "The law of 1960 or the law of 1970?" Maria snorts. Paul tells her to "look closely." Unfazed, Maria presses him to explain to her what law and order is. Paul begins to, but is interrupted by a coworker in need of his office. Their conversation is interrupted a total of three times as they are forced to change locations; an inconvenience underscoring the bureaucratic complications of the system within which Maria's critique is taking place.

However, at the same time as the legitimacy of the state is called into question by Maria, its defensability is reinforced through the invocation of the omnipresent Western Other. Paul reminds Maria during the conversation that, "Our world changed… Two years ago the border was open. The other side hastened to exploit every weakness, gap and hesitation. To harass us, provoke us and stir up unrest. Every nag and faultfinder, not to mention 'enemy' was a western bridgehead. They're the same. We're stronger." Maria pushes Paul to say whether her brother's sentence was correct. "Absolutely," Paul replies. "And was it just?" "Naturally. Why are you harping on it? Is it my fault we can be more lenient now? A lot has changed… The circumstances. The border sealed. A sound economy." "Right. If you mean life is more normal," Maria says flippantly. Paul is unfazed. "You see? That's what I mean." For Paul, and for the government he represents, the ganz normales Leben (completely normal life) is a carefully constructed goal – constructed and therefore artificial; an irony underscored by its fabrication behind a

concrete Wall. The value of normality is foreshadowed by one of Maria's early conversations with Paul. Maria asks what reason he has to be interested in her, "a waitress, average looks. And you a big shot." Paul answers simply that she is normal. "Is not being nuts special?" Maria asks. "It sure is." "Do you only deal with nuts?" The scene cuts before we can see Paul's response. For Paul, and the government he represents, the legitimacy of East German identity is dependent on the ability to live a "normal life".

It is instructive here to take a closer look at the symbolism implicit in the film's title confrontation, namely, the rabbit versus the snake. Although the film's English title is *The Rabbit is Me*, Maria refers to herself as the "Kaninchen", the little rabbit or bunny rabbit, immediately associating herself with innocence and naïveté. When she points herself out at the beginning of the movie as the Kaninchen, Maria is not only preparing us for what she judges to be her artless role in the plot arc that follows, but also ostensibly justifying her credulity to herself. In the tradition of *Die Mörder*, Feinstein (2002) observes that "[y]oung female protagonists in East German film and fiction retained a traditional resonance as emblems of their society's moral purity and righteousness" (159).

Tellingly, however, rabbits have a subversively complex tradition in Germanic mythology, and the Greco-Roman tradition more broadly (see Boyle 1973). They are often a symbol of eros and fecundity, depicted as the companion of Aphrodite or Luxuria (Boyle 1973:323). "In fact," Boyle writes, "the hare as an erotic symbol and the hare-hunt as a metaphor for sexual pursuit are amply attested in both classical and medieval literature, the latter of course drawing on the former:

> For the Ancient World we may refer to the passage in Ovid's Metamorphoses in which Daphne fleeing before Apollo is likened to a hare being pursued by a

"Gallic hound"; and for the Middle Ages to Chaucer's Monk, whose fondness for hares has recently been shown to admit of a double interpretation. [324]

In a not unrelated departure, rabbits are also seen as the harbinger of fires (325). Witnesses in England have described how rabbits will remain in heath fires until their deaths, sometimes leaping directly into the flames (325). Thus the myth tradition of the rabbit underscores the paradox of Maria's entanglement with Paul (and by symbolic extension, her ambivalence towards socialism) and willingness to leap knowingly into the burning destruction that her relationship could cause her. Maria, the comparison suggests, is not simply overcome by Paul or the situation in which she finds herself; she actively contributes to its construction.

The title confrontation takes place between Maria (the rabbit) and Paul's wife, Gabriele (the snake). After an uncomfortable round of target practice, Maria is stopped dead in her tracks when Gabriele levels an air rifle at her head. One's immediate interpretation this face-off might be that the snake, Gabriele, is going to strike Maria (in other words, the system might be poised to strike or consume her). Large sometimes eat rabbits; and this interpretation seems supported by the fact that Paul's wife is pointing an air rifle at her head. But an alternate view may yield richer comparisons. In 1939, Karl Barth wrote the following about Germany's acceptance of National Socialism:

> Whether the essence of National Socialism consisted in its "totalitarianism" or…
> in its "nihilism," or again in its barbarism, or anti-Semitism… it was a spell which
> notoriously revealed its power to overwhelm our souls, to persuade us to believe
> in its lies and to join in its evildoings. It could and would take us captive with
> "strong mail of craft and power". We were hypnotized by it as a rabbit by a giant
> snake. [43]

Here Barth attributes to Germany, if not precisely the victimization discussed previously,

then certainly an inexplicable passivity when confronted with the Nazi Party's rise to

power. He characterizes this relationship as a type of trance, explicitly comparing

National Socialism to a snake, which hypnotized Germany, the rabbit. Although snakes

do not actually hypnotize their prey, rabbits and other small animals will often "freeze"

when they sense a snake's approach. Because snakes detect motion, this essentially

makes the rabbit invisible, or at least indistinguishable from an inanimate background.

Tellingly, when we return to the scene under consideration in *Das Kaninchen*, Maria

literally freezes when confronted with Gabriele's air rifle, as does the scene itself, in what

Feinstein (2002) has described as "an eccentric high camera angle" (162). However, in

Maria's narration, her frozen words explicitly proxy for her frozen movement: "If I say a

word, she'll shoot." Maetzig here emphasizes the power and subversive danger of speech,

and the immobilizations of its popular exercise (Bathrick 1995:1-26).

Lest one is tempted to criticize Barth's analogy as an aberrance, we can also

consult the writings of Joseph Goebbels (1941):

> On 14 September 1930… The Fuehrer won his first great electoral victory. The
> NSDAP won 107 seats in the German Reichstag. The democratic republic faced
> two choices: to recognize the Fuehrer or to destroy him. The first would have
> been reasonable and logical, the second difficult but not impossible. The republic
> did neither. They watched things happen like the rabbit viewed the snake, giving
> themselves up to their fate. ["Sie ließ die Dinge an sich herankommen, schaute
> wie das Kaninchen auf die Schlange, ergab sich fatalistich in ihr Schicksal".]
> [296]

The parallels in these comparisons are striking. Taking them into consideration, we can

understand Maria as a stand-in for Germany, and Paul's wife as not simply a proxy for

socialism, but a warning against the insular bureaucracy and centralization of authority

that also characterized fascism. In one subtle maneuver, Maetzig has arguably turned the GDR's anti-fascist narrative on its head.

Feinstein remarks that the unequal relationship between Paul and Maria is representative of the skewed power distribution within the GDR, and takes not of the dualism symbolized by the snake (evil) and rabbit (innocence) (162). However, more can be derived from this dichotomy. Associations of the snake with evil in the Western tradition originate with the biblical Eden, whereby Eve is tempted with fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 3:1-7). It follows that the snake also represents knowledge, specifically forbidden knowledge, withheld from the female protagonist both in the biblical creation story, and in Maria's experience. In another striking congruence, it is Gabriele, identified as the snake in the latter, who illuminates the inner mechanisms of the government, both through her verbal admonishments, and in her embodiment of its cynicism. She explains to Maria that Paul is one of the best jurists in the country, and that he's had a slew of cases similar to the one involving Maria's brother. "They are related to current… charges," she says. "[Paul] feels up against a freight train. He can't go back, can't go ahead. It's not his fault. He's maneuvered himself into loggerheads with his peers. They think he's hard-hearted, dogmatic. He's nothing of the kind. Paul could not survive if they ousted him." Gabriele gives Maria the insight that Paul could not provide her, and she rejects it. When Gabriele tells Maria she is willing to tolerate their affair if Maria will stop "blowing up the appeal in favor of [her] brother," Maria becomes enraged and screams at her to get out. It is her calculating

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character, mirrored by the jaded political framework within which she operates, that sends Maria over the edge. Her eyes have, in a sense, "been opened" by this encounter.

Maria describes her transformation afterwards by declaring that she is "not taking it lying down. I'm back on my feet. You can't pull the wool over my eyes. I'm no dumb bunny any longer. I'm a wise old rabbit." ("Na, ich bleib nicht liegen. Ich steh' wieder auf. Ich lass mir nicht das Fell über die Ohren ziehen. Ich bin nicht mehr das Kaninchen. Ich bin alte Hase.") It is interesting to note here the crucial difference between the way Maria identifies herself in the beginning of the film and at its close: rabbits ("Kaninchen") are born blind and hairless, completely vulnerable. Hares ("Hasen") on the other hand, are born with vision and fur, able to live on their own only an hour after their birth. At the beginning of the film, Maria is many respects blind to the faults of her government, and even its modus operandi. By the end of her story, she has not simply had her eyes opened, as Eve did, but the shift in analogous species would suggest a rebirth. Maria for her part has transformed herself into a different type of socialist, but one that, tellingly persists in defining herself in opposition to the West..

In the end, Dieter's crime is alluded to. After he is released from jail, Dieter asks his sister to walk with him along the Kurfürstendamm, which was West Berlin's leading commercial street during the Wirtschaftswunder. This suggests that Dieter had attempted, or was planning to attempt *Republikflucht* (fleeing East Germany). Maria, ultimately expressing her fidelity to her country, rejects her brother's suggestion, , telling Dieter that they can see more new buildings on their side of the Wall. When Dieter later discovers Maria's tryst with Paul, he assaults her, demanding that Maria tell him whether she still

has feelings for Paul. Maria affirms that she does, repeating "immer noch" each time Dieter hits her, unflinching.

The scene recalls Maria's first week with Paul, when Paul playfully threw snowballs at a window she was cleaning. *It can't be true*, Maria narrates. *It's not real. Who is he? Paul? Or Dieter. Bombard me. I love you. I can't help it, Dieter. I love him*. She repeats the word "him" with increasing emphasis after each snowball. It should be noted here that Maria once dared Paul to hit her, but he refused. Paul might be flawed, but Dieter has shown his true colors. If Paul can be seen as representational of not only the justice system, but the government more broadly, then we can interpret the film's resolution as Maria's rejection of anti-socialist criticisms and a more informed acceptance of the government, or at least its position as a better, albeit flawed alternative to that presented by the West (advocated and represented by Dieter). Later we see Maria covering the bruises left by her brother with makeup. "They can't keep you down," Aunt Hete remarks as she walks past. *That's what you'd want*, Maria narrates in a voiceover., going on to describe herself as the "alte Hase", the "wise old rabbit". Whether she is speaking to Paul or Dieter is impossible to discern, creating an equivalence between them in terms of their faults and more importantly, the flawed systems they represent. The film ends with Maria moving out of the house she shares with Hete and Dieter and beginning University, defiantly pulling her possessions through the street in a potato wagon. It might not be glamorous, but she has preserved her independence and personal integrity, as perhaps, Maetzig seems to suggest, the GDR could do the same in returning the foundational principles of socialism.

Other Gegenwartsfilme

The Gegenwartsfilm genre had a number of films that promoted similarly ambivalent ideals. For example, *Der getielte Himmel* (*The Divided Heaven*) (1963) portrays the Republikflucht of a young couple, Manfred and Rita. Manfred and Rita flee to the West after Manfred becomes disillusioned with socialism. But Rita is uncomfortable in West Berlin, and returns home just prior to the building of the Wall while Manfred remains. Facing permanent separation from Manfred, Rita attempts suicide in despair and slips into a coma. The story is told in retrospect, after she awakens in the hospital. By illustrating the inhumanity of the Wall, the film clearly sets itself against the normative discourse promoted by the state that the separation from the West would cultivate the ability to live "ein ganzes normales Leben" (completely normal life)." Separated lovers driven to suicide do not meet this definition. Finke (1998) writes of the title metaphor that it:

> [p]oints to the future, it refers to the problem to be solved by the SED regime: the creation of an order of Self and World that could provide the individual with meaning in the vast arbitrariness of life, in short, the creation of a symbolic order… The film itself is an application of an effective symbolic order, with its metaphorical title it formulated what is important for a modern government: more important than the presence of a physical wall is a symbolic wall, a wall in the head, the distinction between right/wrong, good/evil, friend/enemy, etc. [Finke, 26-7]

Another exemplary Gegenwartsfilm is *Berlin um die Ecke* (*Berlin Around the Corner*) (1965), the fourth installment of the so-called "Berlin Films" from Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase (also including *Berliner Romanze* [*Berliner Romance*] [1956], *Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser* [*Berlin - Schönhauser Corner*] [1957], and *Alarm im*

um die Zirkus [*Alarm in the Circus*] [1953] [Claus 1999:94]). *Berlin um die Ecke* centers

on the lives of young people in the Berlin of the 1960s. Most of the controversy

surrounding the film concerned the generational conflict it portrayed, a sensitive topic

because it "belied the official view that old and young agreed upon all fundamental issues

in life and shared the common goals of socialism". (Berghahn, 126)

The film's main challenge to the established socialist self-identity is its assertion

of generational conflict, a sensitive topic because it "belied the official view that old and

young agreed upon all fundamental issues in life and shared the common goals of

socialism" (Berghahn 2004:128). But, it also problematizes the centrality of labor to the

socialist self-identity and creates a conflict at its core. The essence of this film is

Eigensinn and Scott's (1990) hidden transcript, focusing on a factory youth brigade that

stirs up increasing agitation. Olaf, the leader of the youth brigade, resents the factory's

wages and working conditions, especially the preferential treatment of the older workers.

Angered by one such worker shouting that the youth brigade should be thrown in jail for

writing "we are slaves" in graffiti on a factory wall, Olaf assaults the older man on the

way home from work. However, the fascist past returns to haunt Olaf and the viewer

when Olaf, feeling guilty about his action, goes to apologize. The old man tells him that,

"The last time they hit me like that, it was at roll call. He was just as young as you –

April 24th, 1945." A terse reference to his time in a concentration camp.). ("Das letzte

Mal haben sie mich auf dem Appellplatz geschlagen. Einer, der so jung war wie du. 24.

April '45".) This identifies the old man as an anti-fascist resistance fighter, one who

never forgets his mission to prepare the youth to be socialist leaders (Berghahn

2004:126). However, as Byg (1990) points out, "this is the GDR's typical alibi: because of its origins in resistance to the Nazis, it is immune to criticism" (15). Olaf's reply, that he is not as happy as the newspapers say, is a direct reference to the weakness of the censorship of the East German state and the failure to actually enact conditions that could promote the realization of the ideal socialist self.

The *Kahlschlag* and the 11th Plenum

Tragically, before the debilitating aftershocks of Stalinism could be invalidated in the GDR, the "thaw" that encouraged open films like *Spur der Steine* was brought to an abrupt end with Brezhnev's takeover of the Soviet Union in October 1964. (Berghahn 2004:119). Under Brezhnev, the GDR experienced immense political backlash, even though many screenplays and scripts were well under way and filmmakers "were aware that they were working against the clock, anticipating that the shifted political agenda would soon have repercussions for the cultural sphere" (199). Kurt Maetzig was himself a leading member of the Communist Party, and his film was initially met with Party support (Brady 1999:85). The same was true of the other filmmakers whose productions were eventually banned (Günter 1990). For this reason, the censorship of their productions was invariably met with surprise and a feeling of betrayal.

In December 1965, the Central Committee of the SED met for its 11th Plenary Session, and branded as false the new cultural developments in film, literature and theatre, ultimately abandoning the initiative for reform (Brockmann 2010:227). The Committee banned or withdrew nearly the entire annual production of DEFA's feature film studio. The event came to be known as *Kahlschlag*, or "ground clearing" (228;

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Berghahn 2005:141). Several industry leaders were also suspended (141). Although the

films supported topical reforms that had initially been promoted by the Party, by 1965 the

films' liberal narratives were at odds with the Party's notion of what Honecker described

as a "clean state with unshakeable moral standards" ("ein sauberer Staat mit

unverrückbaren Maßstäben") (Honecker 1965). Honecker went on to assert that:

> in these artworks there are tendencies to proclaim that contradictions are absolute, to disregard the dialectic of development, there are constructed situations of conflict that have been forced into a preconceived framework. The truth of social development was not grasped. The creative character of human labor is negated. The collective and the leaders of the Party are often perceived by the individual as cold and foreign powers. Our reality is… only seen as a difficult temporary state of affairs, full of sacrifices, on the way to an illusionary future. [Brockman 2010:228]

Berghahn (2005) has suggested that the backlash exemplified by the 11th Plenum

was actually a strategy to divert attention from its original purpose, namely, an address of

the economic situation (172). The attack on the GDR's cultural production could be

explained by the "Stellvertreter Funktion" (replacement function) that art performed,

especially literature and film, as the target of punitive political measures vice the

economy (172). However, this rejection caused many filmmakers to lose faith in the

system. Speaking of his banned film *Wenn du groß bist, lieber Adam*, Egon Günter

expressed that "[t]he making of this film was driven by a critical solidarity with socialism

and we were astounded that society did not want it" (Günter 1990). Ulrich Plenzdorf

recalls how "[a]t first we were pretty much caught off guard. We hadn't been prepared

for something like this. Actually, we'd all been full of hope" (Brockman 2010:228).

Filmmakers reacted by shifting from expressions of utopian visions toward what Engler

(1991) has characterized as a retreat into individualism, away from narratives that had broad political or collective import (Brockman 2010:228).

Fulbrook (2005) similarly describes how "the willingness to work regardless of reward, to step in when needed for emergencies or overtime, the sense of 'owenership' of the enterprise and their elated cultural and social facilities were, according to some participants' memories, displaced in the course of the 1960s and '70s by a retreat into individualistic concerns, with the growing focus on home, family and private gain" (59). In the end, it was the "individual search for material well-being and personal freedom" that won over the utopian dreams borne out of the Second World War (48). As utopian aspirations faded into pragmatism, and pragmatism faded into coping mechanisms for, and finally concealment of, the "ever more evident inadequacies of daily life", the state could do nothing but desperately cling to power (32-3). This clearly represented the end of both the artistic freedom that filmmakers had briefly enjoyed, as well as the freedom that they were given to shape the political and social identity of socialism in East Germany.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion has explored the ongoing process of socialist identity

construction that took place in the German Democratic Republic between 1946 and 1966.

Situating the analyses within the traditions of visual and media anthropology, the

underlying cultural constructions of "self" and "other" were examined as expressed

through the medium of film productions. As anticipated by the analyses of the films

under consideration, this period was one of one of rapidly changing social norms,

political controls, and consequent identity transformations. One constant in this process,

however, was a continued definition in opposition to the West, and the reinforcement of

the East/West binary as a fundamental cultural dualism.

Erchak (1998) has stressed that the identity of the "self" is formed in culture, and

that further, the socialization process is analogous to an "intergenerational genetic

transmission", wherein the personality features are passed to the next generation through

cultural agents, or proxies (35), a category demonstrated by Powdermaker (1950) to

include filmmakers. However these agents are themselves influenced by specific social

and state discourse, and, as Hall (1995) notes, must be understood within "specific

historical and institutional sites" (4). In East Germany, these sites were constantly in flux,

as demonstrated by the country's rapid succession of political "freezes" and "thaws",

speaking to the inherent temporality of identity as discussed by Bhabha (1994:1).

The citizens of the former GDR in many respects inhabited an "imagined community" as discussed by Thompson (2009), cemented by its foundational narratives of antifascism and moral superiority (Fulbrook 2005:29). Bhabha writes that the voids left by these imaginings were filled with the language of metaphor, and that metaphoric movement requires a kind of "doubleness", a "temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes", admonishing that we need another way to look at identity and nation that will "inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute [them]." Judith Butler (1993) has perhaps best captured the ephemeral nature of identity by categorizing it in the same imaginary as the nation Thompson and Bhabha describe. They are "phantasmic efforts," she writes:

> of alignment, loyalty, and ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations, they unsettle the I; they are the sedimentation of the "we" in the constitution of any I, the structuring present of alterity in the very formulation of the I. Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted, and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way. [105]

Understanding the temporality of identity and the profound influence of the state on its transformations has continuing implications for East/West German relations today. As Bickford (2011) and Howard (1995) have demonstrated, acute divisions persist in the form of a "wall in the mind" (Spiegel 2008), one which has been reinvigorated by the denial of the East German experience and the consequent reassertion of East German identity. Continually defined by its opposition to capitalism, the assimilation of the East German "self" into the identity of the Other remains reluctant and fragmentary. The DEFA films under consideration here, in addition to their shifting definitions of the

contemporary East German "self" and "Other", today offer a fuller apprehension of the

depth of the dissonance which prohibits a fuller integration of the former Germanys.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Lauren Shutt graduated from the University of Alaska, Anchorage in 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Political Science. While at GMU, Lauren was employed as a graduate research assistant by the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study, acting in the capacity of team anthropologist on a JIEDDO-contracted agent-based modeling initiative to limit the use of improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan. She also worked as a research assistant for the University's Special Collections & Archives, translating and processing a recently acquired collection of East German posters. She co-presented a discussion of the posters at the Conference of Cold War Cultures at the University of Texas, Austin in 2010, and co-authored a paper on the collection in the Cambridge journal *Theatre Survey*. Since 2011 she has been employed as the Cultural Enrichment Specialist for Title VII Indian Education with the Anchorage School District in Anchorage, Alaska. She received her Master of Arts in Anthropology from George Mason University in 2011.