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The Collapse of Ideologies in Peter Kahane’s *The Architects*

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**Introduction**

This chapter analyzes the East German film *Die Architekten/The Architects* (Peter Kahane, 1990) in relation to the collapse of socialist ideology, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the opening of borders between East and West Germany.1 Produced by the public-owned film studio in East Germany, Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft, better known as DEFA, and filmed while the border between East and West Germany was steadily eroding, *The Architects* represents a unique cultural product precisely situated within the dramatic geopolitical shifts occurring at the end of the Cold War. This chapter seeks to uncover how the complex and sometimes contradictory power dynamics within a collapsing state ideology affected the production of the film, and, in turn, how these dynamics also became the subject of the film itself.

The central plot of the film focuses on the planning of a cultural centre in a large housing estate on the outskirts of East Berlin by a team of idealistic architects. At the beginning of the planning process the architects’ are full of visionary proposals for a more fulfilled and sustainable lifestyle in the usually dreary and grey mass housing estates in the suburbs of East Berlin. Yet as the planning process unravels, more and more ideas are cut back or changed in accordance with demands from
various government officials. When the final plans of the cultural centre have finally been accepted, they bear little resemblance with the initial drafts brought forward by the team of architects who have, one after the other, abandoned the project with disdain.

The chapter pays particular attention to the way the film is funded by DEFA, the funding body for films in East Germany, which has tended to align itself with the ideological agenda of the Socialist Unity Party, the SED.² The director of The Architects Peter Kahane thus had to carefully navigate the explicit and less explicit rules superimposed on DEFA by the Party. Yet as research has shown, throughout its history DEFA also defied the restrictions of the government by producing, at times, films that can be read as a critique against an overbearing and rigid socialist system (see for example Berghahn 2005). The chapter situates The Architects into a historical and theoretical context of DEFA films that represented an often-camouflaged form of critique against the regime of the German Democratic Republic GDR. Through the use of metaphors and allegories, this chapter argues that The Architects lays bare the suppression of individuality and creativity, the dominance of state institutions, and the culture of surveillance in the GDR.

The filming for The Architects began in October 1989, just as the border between East and West Germany began to dissipate. The chapter establishes that far from merely depicting a collapse of ideological and geographic borders, The Architects in itself was a constituent of this collapse in its own right. In other words, I argue
that the film is in itself a force in the dismantling of a dominant ideology. Lastly, considering that *The Architects* was granted full financial support from DEFA in 1988, the film is not only critical towards the socialist state, this chapter demonstrates that the support of the film itself signifies the collapse of an ideology even in cultural institutions considered loyal to the regime.

**A critique of party politics**

The film follows Daniel Brenner (played by Kurt Naumann), an architect nearing his forties who realizes that in the unyielding system of East German bureaucracy he is unable to fulfil his professional goals. Despite completing his studies with top marks, Daniel’s talent is wasted in designing mind-numbing projects such as bus stations or electric power substations. Then, one day Daniel’s former professor and mentor presents his aspiring yet also disillusioned student with a big opportunity: Daniel is to design a cultural centre in a large housing estate in Berlin-Marzahn on the outskirts of East Berlin. Fully aware of the overbearing bureaucracy and the political difficulties that such a project entails, Daniel accepts the offer only under one condition: that he can pick his own team of architects.

The first task of contacting his former colleagues and classmates already represents a major hurdle in Daniel’s project. Like him, many have become disillusioned and cynical about working as architects. Some have completely withdrawn from society, some have given up their practice all together, some have even gone ‘over
there’ (*nach drüben*). In the context of East German social history, it should be noted that going ‘over there’ or ‘across’ specifically refers to emigrating to West Germany – the ideological and political ‘Other’ of East Germany throughout the Cold War period. This brief reference to emigration to West Germany at the beginning of *The Architects* thus establishes an important dichotomy: while the film continuously comments on a lack of freedom and creative choice by the architects, emigration to the West is presented as an alternative for disillusioned individuals despite not precisely knowing what lies behind the Wall.³

Figure 1: Daniel and his team of architects on the future site of the cultural centre

In the film Daniel eventually succeeds in gathering a team of six architects willing to help him in designing the cultural centre. They are confronted with the monumental task of their assignment when they first visit the future site of the cultural centre in the midst of vast grey housing blocks. A shot in which the
architects’ backs are turned towards the camera as they look upon the estate highlights the juxtaposition between the dullness of the existing society and the possibilities offered by the cultural centre. The fact that the architects work in a team further helps to establish a central theme in the film: while the disillusioned individual might seek to emigrate or escape to the West, the architects stay put in order to embark on a project that shall aide the wider community as a whole. In other words, rather than pursuing a project for individual gain, or even more extreme, pursuing the desire for freedom by leaving the GDR, the architects are in the pursuit of a project for the greater good of their community. Here, The Architects apparently embraces socialist themes such as one of the mantras of the governing party, the SED, which proclaimed: ‘The force of the masses resides within their amalgamation around the Party.’¹⁴ (Vorstheher 1997: 90) The film introduces the complex party politics of the GDR near the beginning, when Daniel is asked by a representative of the SED if he wants to become a ‘comrade’ (Genosse). Unlike the romanticized representation of the community as articulated by the SED however, Daniel flatly turns down the offer in front of the visibly annoyed Party official with a decisive ‘I do not wish to do so’.
Figure 2: A stone-faced representative of the SED hears that Daniel does not wish to become a member of the Party.

The architects’ deep felt suspicion towards Party officials comes to a climax when a more experienced member of staff is ordered from the head office to oversee the group’s activities. Immediately, Daniel’s colleagues suspect that he is from the notorious STASI, the secret police of the GDR. Later in the film, one of the architects actually attacks this individual in the office and accuses him of sabotage in light of the continued failures of the project. Apart from this literal representation of suspicions towards the regime, the Party critical subtext in *The Architects* can also be observed in the way the group of architects interact with each other. As the leader of the project, Daniel assumes the role of a passive chairman, sitting back while his team continuously disagree with each other and argue over the plans. In other words, rather than recreating the top-down power structure of the Party, the
architects recreate a constantly shifting form of democratic exchange that inevitably leads to friction and argumentation. By doing so, the architects effectively create a democratic microcosm within the rigid structure of authoritarian Stalinism in the GDR.

The architects’ self-proclaimed goal is to create a vibrant and innovative space that stands in contrast to the dreary and depressing looking mass housing estates commonly found on the outskirts of East German cities. The architects proposed ambitious plans for the cultural centre, which should include a bowling alley, a cinema – thus cleverly referring to the ontological space in which The Architects would ultimately be seen in – and a Vietnamese restaurant.\(^5\) In short, the proposed plans for the cultural centre subtly imply the architects’ own hopes and desires for cultural diversity. Just as Daniel feared however, the team of architects consistently encounter restrictions and resistance from their superiors and high-ranking Party apparatchiks. Fully aware of the ensuing failure of the project, the architects become increasingly frustrated and voice their concerns to Daniel who is negotiating for understanding and leniency with his superiors. Under the heavy weight of state regulation and interference, Daniel’s relationship with his friends, colleagues and his own family begins to suffer and deteriorates.
The central plot of *The Architects* thus establishes a powerful set of binary oppositions that continuously work against each other: the idealistic architects versus their conservative superiors, the plans for a vibrant cultural centre versus the grey mass housing estates, the individual desire for cultural diversity versus the reality of living in the GDR. A poignant scene also establishes this confrontation on a visual level: separated by a large conference table, the architects sit across their superiors who heavily criticize their idealistic and ‘utopian’ plans. The architects have to endure a very public shellacking, as one idea after another is ripped apart. An important detail in the scene, a portrait of the General Secretary of the SED Erich Honecker above the top end of the table, signifies that the watchful eye of the Party is ever present (see figure 4). Importantly, in the shot Honecker’s image is
situated one the side of the table at which members of the Party are sitting, while his eyes are directed towards the architects on the other side of the table. In as much Honecker’s gaze signifies the relentless culture of surveillance and control in the GDR, the fact that it is a black and white drawing, and not a colour photograph for instance, equally functions as an allegory for an increasingly outdated mode of a political system.

**Architectural utopia as counter-hegemony**

Reflecting a significant political shift in GDR long before the first pieces of the Wall were hammered out, *The Architects* is full with references to a people’s desire for ideological renewal and political change. This is particularly well exemplified in a scene in which Daniel confronts the supervising architect, the same person who was earlier suspected to work for the STASI, about drastic changes to the initial plan. The man replies: ‘I have ten years more experience than you. This project is unviable for now.’ Daniel angrily replies: ‘Nobody asked for your opinion.’ The man returns: ‘I do my part where *one* needs me.’ Daniel presses the man: ‘Who is *one*?’ To which the man replies: ‘Management, my party.’ Daniel, now infuriated by the man’s arrogance, throws the new sketches down and angrily shouts: ‘We’ll see if your party backs such stupidity.’
Figure 4: Daniel confronts a senior architect and member of the SED.

Later in the film, when Daniel has to justify his plans to yet another superior, he says the following: ‘You want facts? Let’s tell it like it is. The standard facilities you prefer were designed ten years ago. But in the meantime, something has changed didn’t it?’ Here, these references to a new type of architecture which surpasses the old paradigm of constructing with standardized designs functions as a symbol for political change. The architects’ desire to build a vibrant cultural centre not only refers to an architectural renewal, but also, it refers to a desire to overcome outdated modes of thinking.

In the history of DEFA, there are a number of films that appear to represent a subtle critique of the political system through the means of metaphors. The film historian Wolfgang Gersch points out that between 1971 and 1973 films that initially
received backing from DEFA were later regarded as too critical of the GDR. As Gersch points out, this apparent relaxation of ideological restrictions on DEFA productions occurred after the resignation of General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party and Honecker’s predecessor Walter Ulbricht in 1971: ‘For a moment, freedom [freiraum] appeared to have surfaced. It lasted for three movies and then fell apart once these movies came out in 1973.’ (Gersch 2006: 140-141) Referred to by Gersch as Aufbruchsfilme, or literally, films of departure, these include Die Legende von Paul und Paula/The Legend of Paul and Paula (Heiner Carow, 1973) and Die Schlüssel/The Keys (Egon Günther, 1972). In the latter film, keys given to young lovers by a Polish couple who lent them their flat in Krakow, signified to the citizens of the GDR a society that since the erection of the Wall in 1961 they were metaphorically locked out of. Gersch analyzes the key as a metaphor in relation to the representation of Poland as following:

The declaration of love to the neighbouring country [Poland], with its spontaneity, dignity and fantasy, was the unspoken search of an opposite of the GDR whose rigid and militant formalism defrauded life itself. The hope of the film, which evoked the desire for freedom and free travel, laid outside, and as such, Poland did not simply signify Poland, but it signified the rest of the world (146-147).

DEFA films such as The Keys thus established the significance of metaphors which later films such as The Architects equally make use of. My point is that in both
cases, the metaphor is applied as a narrative technique in order to express a
government critical subtext. Here, the metaphor fulfils the function as a language of
the politically repressed.

With its depressing representation of the workplace and mass housing estates, *The
Architects* also evokes comparisons with the DEFA film *Das Fahrrad/The Bicycle*
(Evelyn Schmidt, 1981). Gersch describes *The Bicycle* as part a series of films
coming out in the early 1980s that represented filmmakers’ total lack of hope for
the GDR. Gersch writes that: ‘In a country of small-minded people something akin
to a second dictatorship emerged: a dictatorship of parochialism (*Beschränktheit*). It
is a horrific product of a system that made people feel locked in, patronized,
assimilated and scared.’ (178) In Gersch’s observations, the German word for
parochialism, *Beschränktheit*, which literally translated refers to a state of being
enclosed by a barrier (*Schranke*), implies that the cultural and intellectual
disintegration of the citizens of the GDR is closely associated with the inability to
travel freely and, literally, cross the *barrier* to other cultures and countries. In *The
Architects* the association between feeling physically but also intellectually locked
in consistently emerges when Daniel’s wife Wanda (played by Rita Feldmeier)
complains about ‘dumbing down’ in the small housing estate flat that they share
with their young daughter. Daniel’s plan for a vibrant cultural centre is not only
motivated by his professional ambition, but also, it is motivated by his desire to
improve his family’s life.
Wanda’s frustration with her environment, the lack of cultural stimulation, the lack of space and the lack of intellectual exchange, is an important aspect of the movie. Wanda’s disillusionment vis-à-vis Daniel’s tentative enthusiasm for the project is neatly represented in a scene in which they both look at each other’s reflection in their bathroom mirror. The mirror – not a single sheet of glass but separated into three parts – signifies that Daniel and Wanda fail to see each other as they are, but rather, that they are beginning to see each other only as fragmented reflections.

With Wanda’s increasing frustration and the architects’ attempting to counteract cultural claustrophobia, the writer of the screenplay for *The Architect* Thomas Knauf sought to capture the difficulties incurred by his generation – a generation that was born before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. Despite growing up under the insular ideology of the GDR, Knauf’s generation was aware of the possibilities
of a united Germany and deeply frustrated about the direction of their country as he points out: ‘Two years before the end of the GDR, I seriously began to reflect on my life. For me this was already the endgame.’ (Poss 2006: 462) The architects’ frustration with their superiors and with party officials is therefore representative for a far wider reaching frustration felt by a generation.

Here, it is important to note that the architects’ continuous frustration with their superiors is not only a narrative device for the cinema, but it also reflects the real conditions faced by an architect practicing in the GDR. The architectural historian Frank Betker argued that in the GDR city planning and architecture was, in contrast to engineering, politically devalued to such an extent that, as a profession, it was unrecognisable (Betker 2005: 28). In his book on East German architecture, Betker argues that architects worked under considerable pressure from the Party to build structures favourable to the socialist ideology:

Any impression of individuality in mass housing developments had to be avoided. It did not matter then that some architects would watch extremely carefully at any savings they could make and build more resourcefully. The use of equally shaped, recyclable ‘type projects’ made of standardized elements, which were also an intrinsic part of industrial scale buildings, was downright sacrosanct (339-340).
The type of building referred to here by Betker is commonly known as *Plattenbau* - a German word combining the words ‘plates’ and ‘building’, or a building made of large, prefabricated concrete slabs. In many ways the format of the *Plattenbau* represents the architect’s nightmare as every building needs to be designed from rigid, pre-produced concrete walls with specific unchangeable dimensions. The consequence of building with such a methodology is that in the GDR mass housing estates looked generic, homogenous and unrecognizably the same.

![Figure 6: Mass housing estates in The Architects.](image)

While the mass housing estates represent an outdated and oppressive form of Stalinist socialism, the architects’ aspirations for the cultural centre represents the desire of a generation for urban renewal and cultural diversity. Yet this desire is not solely manifested in building a cultural centre in the midst of a dysfunctional
housing estate, but rather, the cultural centre acts as symbol for hope and a new beginning. This hope is best represented in a scene in which the architects celebrate the early success of their project. Asked by a group of alternative looking teenagers what they are celebrating, one of the architects replies: ‘The beginning of a new GDR architecture.’ In other words, the cultural centre symbolized a new beginning, not only for the housing estate, but for the whole of GDR architecture, and by extension, for the whole country.

With Daniel and his team of architects continuously fighting against their oppressive superiors and those associated to the Party, the provocative plans for the cultural centre function as a counter-hegemonic discourse within the film. The political theorist Chantal Mouffe summarizes the dynamic between hegemony and counter-hegemony as following:

The articulatory practices through which a certain order is established and the meaning of social institutions is fixed are ‘hegemonic practices’. Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony (Mouffe 2005: 18).

Following this schema, in The Architects the large structures of the mass housing estate represent the hegemony of the state, the Party and the so-called ‘planned
economy’ (Planwirtschaft) of the GDR. In contrast to that, the innovative and visionary ideas for the cultural centre brought forward by the architects represent an attempt to deconstruct the existing order, even to create a space that might challenge the master narrative of the Party. In the film this is expressed in a brief discussion about footpaths on the estate: the architects agree that rather than superimposing a rigid matrix of paths onto the existing structure of the estate, the new plans for the cultural centre should take into consideration the natural flow of people. In other words, similar to the counter-hegemonic space proposed by the architects, the natural footpath represents the universal desire to choose one’s own direction in life whether this is geographically, ideologically or politically. It is to this extent that Peter Kahane’s film is deeply political and steeped in symbolism.

**DEFA’s internal power struggle**

The witty and slightly opaque political symbolism in *The Architects* can be explained by analyzing the films production history. In line with the ideological agenda of the Socialist Unity Party, DEFA films were to represent antifascist, socialist and communist ideals as well as love for the GDR (Brummel 2010: 39). In other words, it was the artist’s obligation to rear socialist citizens. Filmmakers who veered off from the SED ideology of social realism, either risked the withdrawal of funding, censorship, or they risked their films being banned all together. At a historically important junction for East German cinema, the Eleventh Plenum of the SED’s Central Committee in December 1965 launched ‘a scathing attack on artists,
singling out the DEFA feature film studio for especially harsh criticism’ (Feinstein 2002: 151). In the following months, the SED banned twelve pictures that were deemed unfavourable to the regime.

Despite this apparently rigid system of power that seeped from the SED through to DEFA, the history of East German cinema also underwent phases in which films that were subtly critically of the regime received financial backing and subsequently made it to the movie theatres. As pointed out above, one such period occurred between 1971 and 1973, while the early 1980s similarly saw a number of films that painted a bleak and depressing picture of the GDR. *The Architects* thus fits into a history of films, such as *The Legend of Paul and Paula*, *The Keys*, or more recently *The Bicycle*, which subtly critique the living conditions in the GDR.

Emerging out a discourse of films that critically engage with the social conditions of growing up under a repressive and isolated political system, Peter Kahane belonged to a group of filmmakers and writers who wanted a ‘departure from any form of taboo-making’ at DEFA. In 1988, Kahane co-authored a manifesto with other aspiring yet increasingly disillusioned filmmakers and writers who argued:

Uniformity and the average characterise the majority of our films. It is our responsibility, through a sharpening of perception to engage in the process of treating reality, where the result is not predetermined. What counts is to rediscover the pleasure of a provocative viewpoint (Schenk 2006).
Reiterating the frustration of filmmakers of his generation, in August 1988 Kahane gave an interview in which he attacked DEFA for failing to support filmmakers of his generation as he points out: ‘We were treated as the new generation, as little apprentices. In truth we were not really wanted.’ (Schenk 2006) Proposing an exposé of *The Architects* to DEFA in 1986 was, as Kahane says, a ‘last attempt in which I wanted to free myself from everything which I had experienced.’ Herrmann Zschoche (born 1934), who was initially short-listed as potential director for *The Architects*, recognized the conflicts of a younger generation and turned down the project.6

At the time, the General Secretary of DEFA was Hans Dieter Mäde (born 1930) – a man considered loyal to the SED regime and who held his position for 13 years. Reflecting a larger movement towards ‘Openness’ (*Glasnost*) and ‘Restructuring’ (*Perestroika*) emerging from the Communist Party under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, the SED’s control over DEFA began to unravel. As a sign of how rapidly Mäde was losing control over DEFA, *The Architects* was finally granted full funding in 1988. In an interview, Peter Kahane reflects on his experience with DEFA:

We had the screenplay accepted right before Christmas 1988. And of course I hoped we could start shooting real soon. It was remarkable that we had imposed our will. There were many arguments against
DEFA producing it. But the balance of power had already started to shift. They [DEFA] were under pressure. Our project had a lot of support (Kahane 2006).

As of early 1989, since even films with a government critical subtext such as The Architects received DEFA’s support, Mäde’s position became untenable. The ideological power struggle within DEFA is neatly reflected in the fact that despite the film receiving official support, at the same time, the actual production of it was consistently stalled and delayed. Even before filming for The Architects could begin, in June 1989 Kahane gave an interview in the premier film journal of the GDR in which he argued for the complete abolishment of cinematic censorship under DEFA. Kahane said: ‘The gulf between the daily experiences of our potential viewers and the experiences represented in our films is enormous.’ (Oehmig 2008: 23) In his interview, and what can only be considered as another affront to the aging DEFA leadership, Kahane emphasized that his industry is suffering from a generational conflict which suffocates any new developments and ideas (23).

While Mäde was still in office, a replacement was found in the reformer Gerd Golde. In late summer 1989, Mäde finally announced his resignation ‘due to health reasons’ (a commonly used code in the GDR for a dismissal resulting from an internal political revolt). In response to a new generation of filmmakers such as Kahane, even the GDR’s very own Secretary of Culture Hans-Joachim Hoffmann felt it was necessary to distance himself from the previous DEFA leadership in a
speech he gave at the inaugural festivity for the new DEFA leadership on 8 September 1989. Rather than customarily addressing the obligations of the artist to produce works in the name of the Party, the socialist cause, or the people of the GDR, Hoffmann said:

We live in a time of many changes. More than ever, film will have to help people in their lives. Help in the search of happiness and fulfilment (Poss 2006: 347).

The new General Secretary of DEFA Gerd Golde meanwhile emphasized in his inaugural speech that the new management wishes to promote better communication, exchanges of thought and dialogue (347). As Ingrid Poss points out, the dialogue that DEFA sought to promote however, was already expanding at a fast pace, on the streets, throughout the whole country: ‘When 6500 people met at the Monday Demonstrations on 25 September 1989, that was only the beginning and the end of the GDR could not be stopped.’(347) Staying true to his reconciling words, the new General Secretary of DEFA Gerd Golde finally sanctioned the production of films, which were previously stalled for political reasons (Brummel 2010: 87). Filming for The Architects, precisely one of those films, which was, despite being initially approved by DEFA, consistently stalled, could finally begin on 2 October 1989.
There are several important parallels between the main character in *The Architects* Daniel and the filmmaker Peter Kahane. Like his protagonist, Kahane (born 1949) was nearing his forties when the film was initially proposed to DEFA. Like Daniel, Kahane had to grapple with the strictures of a restrictive bureaucracy governing his profession. Like Daniel’s proposal for a cultural centre, Kahane’s movie had to fit into government policy and an ideological agenda. In short, Daniel’s frustration with the apparatuses of his profession represents Kahane’s very own frustration working as film director in the GDR.

In the film, this ideological conflict is subtly referred to in an ongoing discussion amongst the architects about the importance of a movie theatre in the cultural centre. After the various cutbacks to the architects’ plans however, the movie theatre is eventually combined with an assembly hall suitable for party congresses. As they are being told by those in power, Daniel and his team have to ‘compromise’. In *The Architects*, this compromise signifies the very restrictions under which filmmakers such as Peter Kahane had to operate. The constant meddling with the architects’ plans by more superior architects or members of the Party thus functions as a powerful metaphor for filmmakers fighting for artistic freedom in the GDR. Like the architects represented in the film, filmmakers had to grapple with the ideological restrictions superimposed by the Politbüro. *The Architects* is therefore a deeply self-referential movie which uses the architects’ struggle to equally represent the struggles of aspiring filmmakers working under a repressive system of control.  


The vanishing of the border

At times, the division between fiction and reality in *The Architects* appears rather blurred. Filmed in a quasi-documentary style, with very little artificial lighting and a bleak range of colours, the film can easily be read as a representation of reality rather than a representation of fictional characters and events. The format of the film also appears to lend itself to the family drama that is slowly unfolding as Daniel is more and more consumed by his failing project. Importantly, the collapse of Daniel’s family is foreshadowed by a public sculpture proposed for the cultural centre with the title ‘Family in Stress’. Like all the other innovative ideas for the cultural centre, the management demands that the sculpture should be changed because ‘a depiction of stress is no field for dedicated socialist artists.’ Rather than displaying a ‘Family in Stress’, they suggest ‘Family in Socialism’ to reflect a more hopeful and idealistic theme. The film thus comments on the gulf between a romanticized version of socialism and the harsh reality of living in an oppressive state.

The tension between two conflicting perspectives - a ‘Family in Stress’ and ‘Family in Socialism’ - is best encapsulated in an argument between Daniel and his wife Wanda. Wanda has met a Swiss man and she has made the decision to leave the GDR as she cannot cope with living there any longer. In an emotionally charged scene, Wanda tells Daniel: ‘There’s more to life than our humdrum existence. The endless repetition day after day. Our love died of monotony and you didn’t even
notice.’ Commenting on the chronic shortages of basic goods in the GDR, Wanda continues: ‘There is nothing that positively surprises me anymore. For years its always the same groceries in the store, the only surprise lies in the fact that except for a shortage of milk, onions have suddenly become scarce.’

In trying to convince Wanda to stay so that he can continue to see their daughter, Daniel says: ‘You should know that I see similar problems. Yet I am trying to do something about them. Only through action can you change things.’ Wanda meanwhile is completely disillusioned and cannot imagine a better life in the GDR. Daniel tries to convince Wanda by saying: ‘But things are changing. Everywhere. Hope for change only exists if you are actively engaged.’ Wanda meanwhile replies: ‘Hope. I simply have no time to hope for something new.’ With that statement it becomes clear that Wanda has made her decision that she will leave the country with their young daughter. In effect, Daniel’s doomed project has lead to the complete breakdown of his family. Later in the film, faced with the unavoidable consequences of putting the plans of the cultural centre before his family, Daniel’s wife eventually emigrates to Switzerland with their daughter. In an emotionally loaded scene, Daniel hugs his daughter for what he believes will be the last time. In the background a sign reads ‘Ausreise’, or ‘Emigration’, further emphasizing the dramatic split of the family this scene captures.
Figure 7: Daniel says goodbye to his daughter at a border crossing.

As the director Peter Kahane reflects, the scene was shot in the beginning of October 1989 while more and more East Germans were leaving for the West. The crew received permission to shoot the scene at the Friedrichstrasse border crossing, yet were given strict guidance on what could and could not be filmed. Importantly, the scene was not allowed to include any people who are actually in the process of emigrating. As a result, the crew had to intermittently stop the steady flow of people leaving for the West, and then get their own actors to replicate what is already happening in reality. As Kahane remembers, filming the scene in the fictional format of cinema seemed ‘absurd’ because what the film was trying to capture was in effect already taking place (Kahane 2006).

It is important to briefly situate *The Architects* in a historical context. Unable to contain the widespread dissent amongst its people, the tightly controlled borders of
the GDR began to crumble in the summer of 1989. In August 1989, Hungary opened its border to Austria for East German refugees desperate to leave the Eastern bloc. The images of East Germans storming through a half-opened border gate and dodging sharp barbwire have in the meantime been imprinted into the Germany psyche. Beginning in September 1989, the ‘Monday Demonstrations’ in the city of Leipzig attracted more and more people ardent to make their voices heard. Under the motto ‘We are the people’ (‘Wir sind das Volk’), these demonstrations grew from a few hundred to 300,000 participants by late October 1989 (see for example Glaeser 2000). Overshadowing these acts of political dissent was the 40th anniversary of the GDR on 7 October 1989. Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in East Berlin for what was supposed to be joyous celebrations of a fully functioning socialist state. Instead, the celebrations marked what can only be regarded as a political farce in which the dissent and even deep-felt hate against the SED could not be hidden any longer. In a desperate effort to save the regime from its impending end, the Politbüro ousted the General Secretary of the SED Erich Honecker who ruled the GDR for nearly two decades. Much like the ideological power struggle taking place at DEFA earlier that year, Honecker was forced to resign on 18 October 1989.

As a result of the tumultuous changes amongst the top brass of the SED, the distribution of power at the very heart of the government was descending into chaos. The reshuffling of important government officials caused a major vacuum of power that would prove terminal for the GDR. This became most apparent at the
famous press conference hosted by the newly assigned government spokesperson Günter Schabowski on 9 November. Shortly before the press conference, Schabowski was given a short note which articulated several changes with regard to travel permissions for East German citizens. These changes were to take effect the following day so that border guards could prepare for the growing number of people leaving the country. Schabowski however was not fully informed about when the changes were to take effect, and when asked to confirm when exactly the new rules would be implemented, Schabowski replied with hesitation: ‘As far as I know … effective immediately, unhesitatingly.’ [‘Das tritt nach meiner Kenntnis - ... ist das sofort, unverzüglich.’ (Timmer 2000: 283)]

Because of Schabowski’s unusual choice of words, in later years the awkward phrasing ‘immediately, unhesitatingly’ (sportunverzüglich) would become a commonly understood reference to that very press conference. It represents the chaos of those days – a chaos that is still veiled in the bureaucratic yet also confusing language of the regime. Within minutes, Schabowski’s statement was broadcast via the major TV networks and news agencies. The first parts of the Berlin Wall were to be hammered away that very night.

On the set of The Architects meanwhile, these rapidly unfolding events led to rather comical circumstances. Kahane recalls an incident on the evening of the Schabowski press conference when an American news network approached his lighting crew:
They asked us what we would do now that we are free. Then we looked at each other in disbelief. … We thought the Americans had lost their marbles. (Kahane 2006)

As Kahane recalls, the existence of the Wall, that ultimate signifier of a divided Germany, was simply unquestionable, and anyone who doubted it was declared insane: ‘Nothing was as certain as death and the Wall.’ It was only later that night that Kahane and his crew found out that indeed, the border was not only open, it was also quickly vanishing.

At this moment in time, the uncanny slippage between reality and fiction in The Architects is also reflected in Kahane’s fear (even though it was unfounded) that his film crew would emigrate to the West, much like Daniel’s wife and daughter emigrated to the West in the film. The rapid erosion of many parts of the Berlin Wall in the coming days and weeks led to another unforeseeable problem on the set of The Architects: a key scene which included the Wall was yet to be filmed. The filmmakers thus had to search for a part of the Wall that was still intact and unmarked by the joyous celebrations in order to replicate the structure’s status as signifier for division, while in reality, it was quickly becoming a signifier for unity. In the film, the scene unfolds as following: Daniel receives a phone call from his daughter who is on a class trip in West Berlin. She asks him what clothes he is wearing and they arrange to ‘see each other’ an hour later at, what sounds like, a
well-known meeting spot. Instead of meeting face to face however, Daniel ventures to an observatory deck next to the Brandenburg Gate and looks towards an adjacent platform on the other side of the border in the West. Standing next to several others who try to identify friends and family members in the distance, Daniel’s gaze traverses the notorious strip of death (Todesstreifen) between East and West Germany in order to find his daughter. He opens his jacket to show the blue sweater he is wearing to help his daughter to identify him. Tragically, they fail to see each other.

Figure 8: Daniel tries to see his daughter on the other side of the border.
The scene at the Wall is deeply symbolically for the open wounds of a divided Germany. A people, with the same culture, language, and history, forcefully separated by a concrete and heavily protected structure that tore apart friends, families and, like in Daniel’s case, parents and their children. It is here, that *The Architects* turns from a movie about a generation’s disillusionment with the political system to a movie about the utter tragedy of a brutally separated Germany. In that sense, *The Architects* appears to be at the very forefront of a massive political change that was taking place on the ground at the time. The constant slippage between reality and fiction, between documentary and narrative cinema is the very symptom of producing a film that not only seeks to be capture an ongoing debate on political change, but also, that seeks to be part of that very debate. In addition to being produced at the very moment when the border between East and West Germany was rapidly eroding, the very format of the film, its subversive
political message and witty symbolism also appears to erode the border between narrative cinema and documentary.

**A footnote to History?**

At the end of the film, the architectural plans for the cultural centre has undergone so many changes that by the time construction begins, the plans bear little resemblance with the initial draft. Rather than creating an aesthetic contrast to the Soviet-style housing estates it is surrounded by, the cultural centre itself becomes an architectural failure. The allegorical decline of the project comes to a climax when at a ceremony for the construction of the cultural centre, Daniel realizes that he has been abandoned by his colleagues, friends and his own family. The bleakness of Daniel’s psychological disposition is exemplified by the grey mass housing estates to the background of the shot. The dominance of the red stage decoration and the flag of the GDR signify Daniel’s sacrifice for the Party, the socialist cause and his country. It is at this moment that Daniel is confronted with the realization that he had to pay a bitter prize for a project that was not worth its sacrifices.
The deeply pessimistic vision explored in *The Architects* is best exemplified in an earlier montage of environmental shots underpinned by the high-pitched music from a children’s choir singing the socialist anthem *Unsere Heimat* (Our Homeland): ‘Our Homeland is not only the cities and villages; Our Homeland is also all the trees in the forest, Our Homeland is the grass in the meadow …’ The lyrics evoke the patriotic concept of *Heimat* by alluding to the beauty and diversity of the natural world. In complete contradiction to the lyrics of the song however, rather than representing nature, the camera joins Daniel on a bleak car journey from the centre of East Berlin to the mass housing estates on the edge of the city. Importantly, just as the volume of the children’s voices increases, the first short of the montage is a tracking shot filmed from the car driving in parallel to the Wall. The oblique looking Wall, the deserted streets, even the heavy dust that appears to cling onto the surfaces of buildings creates a shocking contrast to the children’s
joyful voices. The lyrics combined with the tracking shots documenting Daniel’s viewpoint conjure a meaning all together different: rather than showing a homeland with trees and forests, it shows a homeland with decaying buildings, polluting cars and smoky chimneys. Importantly, the montage ends with a shot of a T-junction in the mass housing estate suggesting that this is, literally, the end of the road for Daniel. In other words, the housing estate is cinematically represented as a geographical, cultural and political dead end.
Commercially *The Architects* was a flop. The screenwriter Thomas Knauf recalls that when the film first came to the cinemas in May 1990, critics accused the filmmakers for cleverly producing a government critical film when the end of the GDR was already sealed (Poss 2006: 464). Partially as a result of a poor critical
reception, *The Architects* only had a very short run in the cinemas and quickly faded into the archives. The gloomy and hyperrealist perspective on pre-unification GDR, particularly towards the final scenes of the film, simply did not fit into the greater narrative of a people celebrating their newfound freedom. The literary historian Stephen Brockmann has argued that ‘by the time the film was released in the spring of 1990, the political community to which the film had addressed itself hardly even existed any more.’ (Brockmann 2010: 231) Instead, Brockmann writes, *The Architects* ‘became a historical footnote.’ (231) Film historian Seán Allan similarly argues in reference to several East German films, including *The Architects*, produced towards the collapse of the regime: ‘Needless to say, by the time the majority of these films were released, they were overshadowed by events on the political stage.’ (Allan 2003: 18) Allan concludes that ‘events were happening so fast that the cinema – in common with perhaps all the arts in the GDR – was simply unable to keep pace.’ (18)

Brockmann and Allan appear to agree that the film itself is considered to be a reflection of a social condition, which was changing so rapidly that by the time the film was completed, the social conditions themselves have changed. In other words, the film is too late in capturing a process that is, or already has, occurred. While in the fictional narrative Daniel becomes increasingly pessimistic, in reality, a wave of optimism and political activism swept over the country. This complex mismatch between fiction and a representation of real social conditions is discernable in a brief conversation between Daniel and the last member of his team about to
abandon him. Clearly referring to the growing number of people joining the ‘Monday Demonstrations’ at the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig in October 1989, Daniel’s colleague says: ‘Today we are only a few, and we still need the protection of the Church. But there are many people who have no fear any longer. And one day, we will take to the streets.’ Daniel is drunk and angrily retorts: ‘What’s wrong with you? Don’t you get it? No one will take to the streets here.’

Figure 12: Daniel angrily proclaims that no one will take to the streets.

Even though The Architects appears to respond to the swiftly changing political climate, with Leipzig as the epicentre for growing dissent, Daniel’s premonition that no one will take to the streets has been proven incorrect by history. While on one hand the film appears to adapt to and reflect the social conditions of the GDR, on the other the filmmakers consciously appear to use the fictional format of narrative cinema to represent Daniel’s downward spiral into depression. The
Architects therefore does both: it engages with reality while at the same time, conscious of the cinematic medium, it produces meanings autonomous of, even contradictory to, reality.

As case study, *The Architects* puts into question to what extent cinema can be regarded as a reflection of a social condition, a notion which was initially established by the Marxist critic Siegfried Kracauer. As pointed out by the film historian James Chapman, Kracauer argued ‘that the disturbing themes and violently dislocated imagery in films such as *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu* and *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* reflected the psychological trauma of the period following the First World War and revealed the unconscious disposition of the German people towards authoritarianism as the only answer to the social problems of the time, thus, he suggested, anticipating Nazism.’ (Chapman 2003: 27) In his classic book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Kracauer writes in this famous passage:

Irretrievably sunk into retrogression, the bulk of the German people could not help submitting to Hitler. Since Germany thus carried out what had been anticipated by her cinema from its very beginning, conspicuous screen characters now came true in life itself (Kracauer 1969: 272).
Kracauer sought to establish that the cinematic text helps to locate a psychological trauma that would come to a climax in the horrors of the Third Reich. Yet as James Chapman points out, Kracauer wrote about Weimar Republic cinema immediately after WWII thus giving him the benefit of hindsight and historical perspective (Chapman 2003: 27-30). Equally, the many American films there were popular in the Weimar Republic are not accounted for in Kracauer’s theory, which only focused on a narrow selection of movies that might have suited a particular argument. The historian of German cinema Anton Kaes concludes that ‘Kracauer’s trajectory from the fictional tyrant Caligari to the all-too-real Hitler is a bold and problematic construct, manifesting his strong belief in the social power of the cinema to influence perceptions and mould opinions.’ (Kaes 1992: xi). Similarly, as outspoken critic of Kracauer’s reflectionist model, Graeme Turner writes:

Film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and ‘re-presents’ its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of its culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium (Turner 1999: 152).

Following Turner’s argument, rather than regarding the film as capturing a history unfolding in front of the camera, what needs to be recognized is that cultural products are creating new meanings in their own right. This newly produced meaning, once consumed via the cinematic apparatus, thus functions as agent of
social and historical change. In the case of *The Architects*, by the time cinemagoers watched the movie, a critique of the GDR’s isolated and repressive political system became a forlorn conclusion. Yet my point is another. Rather than the film itself, I argue that the complex production history of the film must be regarded as agent of social change which ultimately resulted, at least partially due to a new generation of filmmakers such as Peter Kahane, in a change of regime at DEFA even before the first crowds gathered in Leipzig. In other words, not necessarily the film as such, but the production of the film is in itself an active force in the dismantling of an ideology.
Conclusion

With the benefit of historical hindsight, *The Architects* appears to capture a social process that was happening so rapidly that the film was consistently lagging behind. Yet, a more accurate analysis, one that pays attention to the use of metaphors and codes, one that pays attention to the ideological struggle with regard to the film’s funding, one that pays attention to the film’s subversive political message reveals that *The Architects* played an integral part in a social process that eventually lead to a change in leadership at DEFA and, ultimately, the collapse of the GDR. Any criticism that the film was belatedly trying to catch up with the ideological shifts in the latter stages of the GDR fails to recognize that the film itself is encapsulating a process of deep reflection and political debate that was repeated all over the country and culminated in the demise of the GDR.

*The Architects* is a profoundly self-referential film representing the conditions of filmmaking in an ideologically controlled and constantly surveyed environment. In that sense, not only did the internal power struggles at DEFA affect and delay the actual production of the film, these dynamics have actually become subject of the film itself as the architects’ plans are consistently turned down or changed. The state’s interference with the architects’ plans thus functions as a metaphor for a variety of larger social problems in the GDR: a lack of freedom, disillusionment about the future and the omnipresent power of the state via a culture of surveillance and regulation.
Uniquely situated at the precipice of political and ideological change, *The Architects* was first written, then proposed to DEFA, consistently delayed and then finally produced as the GDR was nearing its demise. Far from reflecting the dissolution of ideological and geographic borders between East and West Germany however, *The Architects* is in itself an active constituent of this dissolution in its own right. *The Architects* therefore does not simply coincide with the political shifts taking place in the GDR, nor does it belatedly capture a social process that was rapidly developing in the country, but rather, *The Architects* functions as a powerful symbol that even when faced with a strict system of censorship, surveillance and control, the outdated systems that the film put into question can be overcome.
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1 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this edited collection for their invaluable feedback.
2 For an in-depth analysis of the SED’s ideological agenda and DEFA film productions, please refer to Dagmar Schittly’s German language book Zwischen Regie and Regime: Die Filmpolitik der SED im Spiegel der DEFA-Produktionen.
3 Later in the film the assumed freedom in the West is continuously discussed by Daniel and his wife Wanda.
4 All translations from German to English except where otherwise noted are mine.
5 Vietnam not only represents a state which shares an ideological affinity with the GDR, but also, the proposed Vietnamese restaurant might function as an exotic and colourful space within the mass housing estate in which its inhabitants can embark on a culinary journey while travel and crossing borders to neighbouring nation-states itself is widely restricted.
6 In 1994, Zschoche directed the German TV movie Natalie – Endstation Babystrich/Natalie – Final stop child prostitution. The author worked as an extra on the film set.
7 Hoffmann, himself considered a reformer, fell out of favour with the SED and was subsequently spied on by the STASI.