THE COMPETING AESTHETICS OF SOCIALIST REALISM AND NEOREALISM IN FOUR DEFA FILMS OF THE 1950's: PORTRAYALS OF SOCIALISM IN THE GDR

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It is my hope that this project is not the end but the beginning of further research in the field of East German film.
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Introduction

After the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1949, the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) sought to promote socialism through art, literature, and film. In March of 1951, the Central Committee of the SED declared socialist realism the official state literature of the GDR. The socialist realist aesthetic used positive heroes as role models to ideologically reshape and elevate the working people in the spirit of socialism. These positive heroes were hard working, politically involved, and looked optimistically towards a future of socialism. Film was a vehicle that enabled the SED to promote the socialist realist aesthetic to the citizens of the GDR.

During the 1950’s, three major political events affected the practices of the socialist realist aesthetic in the GDR. The death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in March of 1953 contributed to the liberalization of rules governing artistic production. Many credited Stalin with initiating the socialist realist movement; others, however, gave credit to Russian novelist Maxim Gorky for this accomplishment. In June of the same year, the Workers’ Uprising urged the SED to allow greater artistic freedom for GDR artists. The Uprising, which took the SED by surprise, was a response by GDR workers from a variety of industries to high production quotas. Following the Uprising, GDR artists called for more artistic autonomy. As a concession to artists, the SED created the Ministry of Culture, an institution that granted artists some degree of self-regulation by allowing participation in various official panels. However, it is questionable whether the Ministry did in fact improve the level of freedom for GDR artists. Also contributing to a more liberalized artistic
climate was the denunciation of Stalin by Khruschev at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956.

The relaxation of the socialist realist doctrine in the GDR affected the film industry as well as other areas of the creative arts. This era of artistic liberalization allowed East German filmmakers the opportunity to temporarily abandon socialist realism and instead experiment with the competing aesthetic of neorealism. While socialist realist films typically utilized set plot patterns and stereotypical characters who were optimistic about their future in the GDR, neorealist films often included non-linear plots as well as non-professional actors. Furthermore, the characters of neorealist films were not as politically motivated as those found in socialist realist films. Neorealist films frequently included scenes that were filmed outside instead of inside a studio. The use of realistic footage enabled the viewer to see a more "realistic" depiction of life.

The film company of East Germany was known as DEFA, or Deutsche Film AG. The Soviets established DEFA immediately after the war to promote communist ideology in the occupied sector. In 1947, the Soviets transferred control of DEFA to the Germans where it always remained under the close scrutiny of the SED. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, the political climate of the GDR had a direct affect on the reflected aesthetics of DEFA films.

The purpose of this project is to examine the competing aesthetics of socialist realism and neorealism in DEFA film. In my research, I will explore four films produced by DEFA in the 1950's. Two of the films, both produced in 1952, could be said to reflect the socialist realist aesthetic. Political involvement is the key to
happiness for the heroes of these works. These films incorporate very predictable plot lines. The other two films, made in 1956 and 1957, could be considered examples of neorealism. Factors other than politics motivate the characters of the neorealist films to either remain or move to the GDR from the West. The films will be discussed in pairs with the first set consisting of the 1952 films and the second pair the 1956 and 1957 films. Using textual analysis, I will show that despite the enormous differences in style, both sets share common elements that result in the hero choosing life in the GDR over life in the West. These elements include politics, economics, the presence of a positive role model in the East, and romance. Additionally, I will demonstrate that the neorealist films incorporated virtues found in the socialist realist films: hard working positive heroes, nurturing role models, as well as optimism and hope for the future. As a result, films that reflected neorealism were not anti-socialist but instead served as a critique by the directors of the socialist realist aesthetic. The directors maintained that socialist realist films failed to show the GDR in a realistic light and lacked artistic innovation. Additionally, I will examine how gender affects the actions of the characters.

I plan to analyze The Story of a Young Couple (Kurt Maetzig, 1952), Destinies of Women (Slatan Dudow, 1952), A Berlin Romance (Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase, 1956) and Berlin Schönhauser Corner (Klein and Kohlhaase, 1957). All four films take place in Berlin and the East-West conflict is a central theme in each film. The protagonists are young people who question the world in which they live. In the first pair, the main characters are mostly in their early twenties, while those of the second pair are in their teens. Furthermore, these films
are examples of *Gegenwartsfilme*, which are "films set in the present - which supported the struggle to build up a socialist society." Unlike the rubble films of the immediate post-war era, which focused on Germany's National Socialist past, the *Gegenwartsfilme* took place in the present and looked towards the future.

In order to situate historically the aesthetic debate between socialist realism and neorealism, I begin with a review of the works of some noted GDR historians and cultural critics. In order to understand neorealism, it is important to place neorealism in relationship to the formalist debates that occurred in the late 1940's and early 1950's in the GDR. The practice of formalism was widespread throughout the era of National Socialism. Eager to shed the remnants of the Nazi past, the SED became suspicious of any literary or artistic works that contained formalist tendencies. In the newly created GDR, formalism was considered decadent, bourgeois, and fascist. An example of formalist art is a painting by artists Arno Mohr and Horst Strempel that depicted a scene from an East Berlin subway station. The work, which incorporated colorful paint blobs, was considered primitive and said to contain reactionary elements according to the SED. Instead, Ulbricht preferred moonscapes that depicted progress towards the space program or paintings that showed people working on a farm collective. Such works were often displayed in public places such as train stations in order to instill the socialist work ethic on the masses. Though the formalist debate affected mainly literature and art, it did not directly influence DEFA. What did have an impact on DEFA was neorealism, which was considered, like abstract art, to be artistically innovative by critics but
politically suspect by the SED. The Berlin films produced by Klein and Kohlhaase were judged to be examples of neorealism.

I will begin my discussion of formalism by examining *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, a work by Wolfgang Emmerich, a professor of modern German literary history. Emmerich points to March of 1951 as the start of the debate in the GDR against formalism in art and literature. According to Emmerich, the SED defined formalism as the “decay and destruction of art itself”10. The SED asserted that formalists did not look at the content or the idea of the work; they only considered its form. Formalist art and literature did not promote economic progress nor did they utilize positive role models. The SED roundly criticized several world-renowned authors of modern literature such as James Joyce and Franz Kafka because they did not advance the ideals of socialist realism in their works. In addition, the SED was suspicious of German authors who showed formalist tendencies. The SED prematurely ended a production by playwright Ernst Barlach because his characters conveyed pessimism, an attribute considered to be anti-socialist.11

According to Emmerich, there are essentially three important characteristics of socialist realist art and literature. He wrote that “the true and historically concrete artistic representation must be united with the task to ideologically reshape and elevate the working people in the spirit of socialism.”12 In a socialist society, art and literature were to influence people, encouraging them to make positive contributions to the economy. Economic productivity should be of the greatest importance in a socialist realist work. Additionally, a politically correct socialist work should contain a positive hero with whom the reader can identify.
Furthermore, a socialist realist work needed to reflect the classic cultural heritage of Germany, something that formalism did not achieve. Emmerich states that without a tie to Germany’s cultural past, the result would compromise the national culture, destroy the national consciousness, promote cosmopolitanism, and directly support the politics of American imperialism. A strong historical foundation was an important aspect of socialist realism.

Like Emmerich, Manfred Jäger discusses the debate between socialist realism and formalism in his work entitled Kultur und Politik in der DDR: Ein historischer Abriss. Jäger’s work describes the effect of politics on art and literature in the GDR. He begins his analysis of the debate with a discussion regarding the creation of the First Five Year Plan by the SED in 1950. According to the Plan, the SED organized cultural tasks and expected an increase in working production. The creation of clubs and culture houses such as public libraries provided the said structure for spreading socialist ideology. In 1951, a speech given by SED secretary Walter Ulbricht began the struggle against formalism and decadence. According to Ulbricht, “The darkest color painting that is an expression of capitalist decay is a harsh contradiction in the new life of the German Democratic Republic.”

The role of culture in the 1950’s was to contribute to the building of socialism in the GDR. As a result, Ulbricht took great interest in the type of music, art and literature that existed in East Germany, using Soviet art as a prime example of acceptable art. Ulbricht was not the only SED member to wage a fight against formalism. In 1951, GDR Minister President Grotewohl declared that the political criticism of art was primary and artistic criticism was secondary. The function of art and
literature was to serve politics. Jäger states that GDR artists often refer to the early 1950's as a time when the development of art was hindered by the prevailing politics that the SED enforced. For example, the 1951 DEFA film *The Axe from Wandsbek* was criticized by the SED because it contained a negative hero who did not support antifascism. According to the SED, the cessation of modernist art would pave the way for the building of socialism.  

Jäger lists three important criteria that are essential to the definition of socialist realism. The first point is that the work must have a historical foundation. The SED was adamant that a work of literature reflect the literary heritage of Germany which dates from the nineteenth century and includes classicism as well as poetic Realism. According to Walter Ulbricht, authors that positively reflected the classic literary tradition of Germany included poet Heinrich Heine, author Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, and poet Friedrich von Schiller. Ulbricht maintained a foundation in German literature was necessary before one could comprehend the teachings of Marx or Engels. Secondly, in order for the work to be considered an example of socialist realism, it must contain an optimistic view of the future. Lastly, the inclusion of a positive hero is essential. Works that did not adhere to these guidelines were abandoned by the SED.

The cinematic representation of formalism is neorealism, which are both considered a part of the modernist tradition. Modernist films were popular among European audiences in the earlier part of the decade and experienced a revival after the war. In addition, they were unique in that they were more innovative and experimental in comparison to more traditional films. The word “neo” in
neorealism suggests that a “new” realism is reflected in this aesthetic. Like formalism, neorealism utilizes realistic film language that was considered foreign and suspicious by the SED. Furthermore, neorealism claims to show the world as it is rather than presenting the world in an overly optimistic fashion. Unlike socialist realism, neorealism did not require a historical basis; that is, such films could be about contemporary life. Examples of neorealism are most widely found in Italian cinema. When Klein and Kohlhaase created the Berlin films, they emulated the styles of Italian neorealist directors such as Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio de Sica. In order to present some of the theories of neorealism, I will discuss the text *Film History: An Introduction* by Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell.

The neorealist film style is considered an example of postwar modernism. According to Thompson and Bordwell, a stylistic feature of postwar modernism in film is the attempt by filmmakers to create movies in a manner that was more true to life than the classical filmmakers had done. Many Italian neo-realist films are shot in the street rather than in a studio. Furthermore, modernist filmmakers sought to record not only objective but also subjective reality. Subjective reality is described as those psychological forces that make an individual act in a certain way. Unlike the classical filmmakers, modernist filmmakers tried to record what was transpiring in a character’s mind. An example of subjective reality is a flashback construction where a character is recalling a particular event based on his perception of the incident. An additional stylistic feature of postwar modernism is the use of authorial commentary which is “the sense that an intelligence outside the film’s world is pointing out something about the events we see.”

Thompson and Bordwell give an
example from the French film *Le Plaisir* (Max Ophüls, 1952). In a scene that is set in a church, the camera pans from cherubic statues to prostitutes sitting in the pews, implying that the women are blessed because they are in the church attending a girl's confirmation.

In postwar Italy, neorealist films were not always well received by Italian officials. The portrayal of a poverty-stricken country outraged Italian politicians who wanted to show the world that they were in the process of rebuilding a democratic and prosperous nation. In particular, the leftists regarded the neorealist films as pessimistic and lacking explicit political commitment. Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) depicts the harshness of post-war Italian life. Ricci, the main character, is a worker whose livelihood is dependent upon his bicycle. When it is stolen, Ricci is forced to take someone else's bicycle in order to survive. Neorealist films also received a similar reception by SED officials in East Germany who were not impressed by their negative portrayal of GDR life as well as their lack of political influence.

According to Thompson and Bordwell, the neorealist film was influential due to its political attitudes, world view, and form. Plot developments often depict chance encounters in life rather than relying on a motivated chain of events. In addition, plot lines are often flattened in neorealist films, including climaxes. The camera often dwells on mundane events such as the opening of a can of pop. According to Thompson and Bordwell, "Neorealism sought to embrace ordinary life in all its varying moods." Neorealism not only presented the positive elements of life but it also showed the negative side.
Italian neorealism influenced the cinematic traditions in other countries, such as the GDR. Following the death of Stalin and the Workers' Uprising of 1953, the resulting cultural thaw enabled GDR filmmakers to experiment with the neorealist style. In his work entitled *DEFA, Künstler und SED-Kulturpolitik*, author Thomas Heimann who writes about the effects of GDR cultural politics on DEFA, discusses the formalist debates as well as the effects of neorealism on DEFA film.

According to Heimann, a need for a democratic art such as socialist realism became apparent in 1948 with the impending creation of two German states. The formalist debates, which were already in existence, resurfaced in the wake of the formation of East and West Germany. Still under Soviet occupation, the cultural offices of the SMAD began a cultural war against Western influences. Marxism became the dominant theoretical paradigm for philosophy, science, and literature. At the First Party Conference of the SED in January of 1949, the SED declared that the culture of the GDR people should not contain Western or bourgeois influences. The SED dictated a cultural politics that would contribute to the building of an anti-fascist and democratic Germany.

While the SED sought a seamless integration of Eastern politics with literature, art, and film, such an integration turned out to be problematic. In the early 1950's, disagreements arose between SED party functionaries and party artists regarding what was to be depicted in their works. In addition, conflict in regard to what was proper art existed between the party and the majority of the GDR population. In order to provide an example of Heimann's point, I turn to the comments of Seán Allan, a Lecturer in German. In his article entitled "DEFA: An
Historical Overview,” Allan comments that only thirty films were released by DEFA between 1950 and 1954 due to the fact that many had been rejected by the SED because they did not fit the ideological guidelines. Furthermore, the socialist realist themes were not popular with GDR audiences. People did not want to spend an evening at the cinema observing the same problems on the screen that they experienced on a daily basis in the workplace. Heimann states that the politicization of DEFA film led to a reduction in film production which had reached a point of stagnation in 1949. Because the SED was using art as a political tool, some artists and intellectuals left the GDR in protest and settled in the West.

When the cultural thaw transpired in the GDR in the mid 1950’s, East German filmmakers departed from the socialist realist aesthetic. These new aesthetic experimentations in film, such as neorealism, were popular with GDR film critics. The Berlin films of Klein and Kohlhaase were known for their human approach and for depicting the realities of GDR life. For example, Berlin Schönhauser Corner shows how Angela is forced to leave her apartment several times a week while her widowed mother entertains a male visitor. Klein and Kohlhaase allow the viewer to experience disfunctionality within an East German family. The Berlin films also reflected elements of Western culture such as boogie-woogie music and Western clothing styles. The fact that Klein and Kohlhaase could include these Western symbols in their filmmaking is evidence of the more liberalized artistic environment of the mid-1950’s. Heimann adds that the Berlin films represented the creative achievements of DEFA artists who had been hindered in the past by socialist realism.
There were two ways in which the early 1950’s DEFA films varied in aesthetics and dramaturgy from the Berlin films of the mid-1950’s. First of all, the early films depicted young protagonists who were indoctrinated into socialism at the end of the national socialist era and the early years of the GDR. The characters who consistently displayed didactic intentions throughout the films and were active and optimistic contributors to socialism were women. By the mid-1950’s, the notion of an overly optimistic hero who zealously contributes both economically and politically to the socialist cause was discarded. While the female characters of the later films serve as an impetus for the males to come to East Berlin, they are not actively involved in GDR politics. The second way in which the films differed was in the thematization of the reality of a divided Berlin. In the socialist realist films of the early 1950’s, the East and West were defined in terms of two distinct political parties. The East represented socialism and the West capitalism. Although this politicization was carried over to some extent in the Berlin films, the authors wanted an explanation of the motivation of the youths rather than a moral assignment of guilt, as the socialist realist films of the early 1950’s had made.32

Though all of the authors and directors of the Berlin films were either members or candidates of the SED, there were critics who interpreted the Berlin films as anti-GDR. Hans Modrow, head of the GDR’s Free German Youth organization (FDJ), criticized the Berlin films because they showed a lot of the negativity of life in East Germany. The films also disappointed the SED who claimed that the films failed to depict teens who were more involved with the FDJ and did not represent the youth organization in a more positive way. What the SED
wanted to see were more politically involved protagonists in order to influence GDR youth. Furthermore, the lack of political representation gave the SED a reason to criticize the otherwise popular film. In a scene from Berlin Schönhauser Corner, the main character Dieter refers to the FDJ as “useless.” Another point of criticism for the SED was the fact that the actress who played Angela was a West German.

In his article entitled “Rebels With a Cause: The Development of the ‘Berlin-Filme’ by Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase,” Horst Claus, a Reader of German at the University of the West of England, discusses in greater detail the films A Berlin Romance and Berlin Schönhauser Corner. Claus begins his article with a comparison between socialist realism and critical realism. Socialist realism “regards film as a propaganda tool, demands set patterns of plot, stereotypical characters, and rejects experiments in aesthetic form.” However, “Critical realism is an aesthetic which identifies controversial issues, opens them up for critical debate, and allows formal experiments which enhance and deepen the understanding of reality.” Claus cites critical realism as an example of neorealism. According to Claus, Klein and Kohlhaase were committed socialists who wanted to promote their socialist ideals through film. The way in which they conformed to the directives of the SED and socialism was through their experimentation with neorealist film.

Neorealist films appeared in the GDR when the political situation allowed for a more liberal climate for artists. In 1955, debates about the aesthetics of socialist realism and neorealism were not intense. The Berliner Zeitung newspaper even called Klein and Kohlhaase’s film A Berlin Romance “a true reflection of the country’s reality.” However, this view changed as time progressed. At the
Eleventh Plenum in December of 1965, Erich Honecker commented “that neorealism is the appropriate means of revealing the deficiencies of capitalist society, but that it was quite inadequate for a critical analysis of socialism.”36 While the Berlin films did reflect problems of the West such as crime, unemployment and greed, they were criticized by many for failing to depict characters with strong socialist work ethics who were politically active.

Various government officials criticized Klein and Kohlhaase’s film Berlin Schönhauser Corner for its neorealist aesthetic. Alexander Abusch, the GDR Deputy Ministry of Culture, regarded all Berlin films and especially Berlin Schönhauser Corner as “examples of the negative influences of Italian neorealism on the development of the progressive Gegenwartsfilme.” Claus claims that Abusch favored socialist realism over the neorealist aesthetic in film.37 Despite the criticism, Klein and Kohlhaase remained firm to their commitment to socialism. With the next Berlin film entitled Berlin Around the Corner,

Kohlhaase agreed to pay more attention to the main protagonist’s social position and environment, and to emphasize the positive aspects of society; but he also insisted on the need to point out the contradictions and difficulties as long as these did not confuse the spectator.38

At the 1961 Writers’ Conference, Kohlhaase called socialist realism “a crude, sociological approach to the representation of human beings.”39 Though he was a committed socialist, Kohlhaase did not approve of the stereotypical characters and set plot patterns found within the socialist realist aesthetic. The intentions of Klein and Kohlhaase were to promote their ideas about socialism through film without
succumbing to the demands of ideologues who only viewed film as a means to advance political doctrines.\textsuperscript{40}

The purpose of my research is to challenge the opinion that neorealist films of the mid 1950’s denounced socialism. Instead, I will demonstrate that despite their disparities in style, the two types of films shared common motivators that convinced the protagonists to choose life in the GDR. As previously mentioned, the motivators include politics, economics, a positive role model, and romance. While the motivators serve to persuade the characters that the West is inferior, there are also certain factors shared by all four films that demonstrate to the viewer that the goals of Klein and Kohlhaase were not to contradict the practice of socialism in the GDR. Rather, the two directors were committed socialists who, as artists, were simply responding to the creative liberalization that resulted from the political events that affected the GDR in the 1950’s. The political events that influenced Klein and Kohlhaase to reflect socialism in the more artistic aesthetic of neorealism were the death of Stalin, the Workers’ Uprising, and Khurschev’s denunciation of Stalin. The first two events introduced the era of creative liberalization while the latter served to prolong, though briefly, the autonomy of DEFA artists. This research will show that the four films are unified by the inclusion of hard working protagonists who are influenced by nurturing role models and who are able to look to their futures in the GDR with hope and optimism.
1 Ingo R. Stoehr, *German Literature of the Twentieth Century: From Aestheticism to Postmodernism*, vol. 10 (New York: Camden House, 2001) 257.
6 Claus, 95.
7 Jäger, 32.
8 Ibid., 30-31.
11 Ibid., 80.
13 Ibid., 81.
14 Jäger, 30.
16 Ibid., 32.
17 Ibid., 32-33.
18 Stoehr, 256.
19 Jäger, 16.
20 Ibid., 42.
23 Thompson and Bordwell, 412-413.
24 Ibid., 417.
25 Ibid., 416.
26 Ibid., 419-420.
27 Heimann, 93.
29 Heimann, 137.
30 Ibid., 283-284.
31 Ibid., 286.
32 Ibid., 287.
33 Claus, 95.
34 Ibid., 94.
35 Ibid., 103.
36 Ibid., 103.
37 Ibid., 110.
38 Ibid., 110.
39 Ibid., 110.
40 Ibid., 94.

...
Chapter 1: *The Story of a Young Couple*

In the opening scene of the 1952 film *The Story of a Young Couple*, a woman makes her way in heavy snow through the rubble of war torn Berlin. This introductory glimpse of Berlin includes bombed buildings and piles of debris. Though the film is a prime example of a *Gegenwartsfilm*, one cannot help but notice that this scene literally displays elements of the ruins of post-war GDR. Such films, known as rubble films, used the destroyed Germany as background and metaphor for destruction of Germany’s National Socialist past.\(^1\) The scene introduces the viewer to Agnes Sailer, a woman who is torn between her loyalty to the GDR and her love for her husband Jochen, who lives in West Berlin.

Both Agnes and Jochen are aspiring actors. Agnes is from Dresden in East Germany and Jochen is from West Germany. At the beginning of their relationship, they are very supportive of each other’s careers. Eventually, however, the characters begin to disagree about politics, especially its role in art. Agnes’ view of art and politics as one complete unit was consistent with the philosophy of the SED in the early 1950’s. As mentioned in the introduction, under the socialist realist doctrine the function of art and literature was to serve politics.\(^2\) A resolution to the Politburo at the Third Party Day conference of the SED in 1950 stated that literature should play an important role in the fight against Western decadence and art. Unable to come to terms with their political and moral differences, Agnes leaves Jochen and goes to East Berlin where she is able to find acting roles that are morally agreeable and politically compatible to her. Eventually, Jochen becomes disillusioned with the West and decides to join Agnes in East Berlin. Jochen follows Agnes because of his
love for her as well as his disenchantment with the political and economic situation in West Berlin.

Politics cause Agnes to choose a life in the GDR rather than in the West. The viewer’s first hint of Agnes’ political beliefs is a scene where Agnes is rehearsing for a part in Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*, which was one of the most popular plays in Berlin during the 1946-1947 season because of its call for tolerance and love at the beginning of the Cold War. Burmeister, the director and advocate of socialist politics, discusses with Agnes the role of art in politics. Agnes states that art should get one’s mind off war. Burmeister, however, tells Agnes: “Art shouldn’t lead us astray. Art is a flaming torch on the foggy road to the future.” Burmeister’s opinion of art as a cultural political tool is consistent with that of the SED.

Agnes’ strong political views become apparent shortly after her marriage when she and Jochen participate in a radio performance of East German author Anna Seghers’ *The Seventh Cross*. Seghers, who was Jewish, is best remembered for her works about the persecution of Jews during Nazi Germany. *The Seventh Cross*, which was written in 1942, is a collection of interviews conducted with concentration camp refugees. Naturally, the work was forbidden by the Gestapo. In the newly found GDR, however, Segher’s writings became instrumental to the cultural and political development of the new nation. As a supporter of the GDR, Agnes is deeply influenced by Segher’s works. She therefore becomes enraged when prior to the airing of the performance, the West German radio announcer states that the piece was written as an anti-communist rather than an anti-Nazi work. In
response, Agnes turns off the radio. Burmeister agrees with Agnes that the incident is deplorable.

Agnes also reveals her opinions about politics when Jochen wears a Nazi uniform while playing the lead in Carl Zuckmayer’s *The Devil’s General*, a military film that was popular in West Germany but condemned in the East. After the performance, she expresses disdain for the uniform as well as the play. The uniform is a symbol of the National Socialist past, which was considered by the East to be an evil of the West. Jochen, however, remarks that it is a sign of a good actor if he can play a role that he dislikes. Herr Plisch, a theater owner in West Berlin who symbolizes Western decadence and greed, is quite impressed by how well Jochen plays the part of a military character. Agnes does not react favorably to the performance nor is she convinced of Jochen’s aversion to the role. Given the employment situation in post-war Berlin, Jochen is fortunate to have been offered the part.

Once again, Agnes’ political beliefs are obvious when she is offered a role in Sartre’s *The Dirty Hands*. Agnes calls the role “cold, heartless, and shameless” and refuses to play the role even though Jochen has purchased an expensive stereo on credit in anticipation of her acceptance of the part. Plisch tells Agnes that she should not let her friends influence her and that she is backing the wrong horse, the GDR. Contrary to Agnes’ view, Plisch believes that art and morality are different. Under the doctrine of socialist realism, however, art had a task to ideologically reshape people in the building of socialism. Plisch, who represents the materialism of the West with his new expensive car and his fondness for caviar, expresses the opposing
view of socialism. Agnes, however, remains true to her political convictions and
goes to East Berlin in search of a role that is politically acceptable to her.

In East Berlin, Agnes plays the lead role in the film *The First Years*, a film
held in high regard in the GDR. After the premier, Jochen displays disgust at the
film. He calls it unbearable and says that she did not listen to his advice regarding
how the role should be played. She instead chose to follow the directives of her
socialist colleagues as well as interject her own positive views about the GDR into
her work. Jochen therefore claims that Agnes does not respect him as an actor. A
friend comments that they were not spared an overdose of propaganda, and Jochen
agrees with the remark. Hurt and humiliated by Jochen’s actions and unwilling to
concede to his Western politics, Agnes leaves him to take a short acting assignment
in the town of Halle in East Germany.

Agnes finds, however, that acceptance in East Germany is not easy. When
she applies for membership in an East German actors’ league, she is rejected. Her
marriage to a Westerner is a factor as well as Jochen’s anti-socialist comments at her
film premier. Though she has been a staunch supporter of GDR politics in the eyes
of her acquaintances in the West, the East is not fully convinced of her political
convictions. When the league rejects her, Agnes looks down at her feet in despair.
She is losing her husband due to their differing political beliefs and yet she cannot
gain acceptance among her peers in the East due to her associations in the West.

In order to prove to her Eastern peers that she is one of them, Agnes
attends the trial of director Veit Harlan of *Jew Suess* fame, renamed Hartmann in the
film. During the war, the Nazi party commissioned Harlan to produce *Jew Suess*, an
anti-Semitic film that prompted the deportation of thousands of Jews to concentration camps. After the war, Harlan was tried for war crimes but was acquitted of all charges. In *The Story of a Young Couple*, Agnes expresses shock that Hartmann is found not guilty. Like Harlan, Hartmann states that as a top director during the war, the Propaganda Ministry of the Third Reich forced him to accept unsavory tasks such as the making of *Jew Seuss*. Acquaintances of Jochen are present at the trial to support Hartmann. Agnes comments to Jochen that the acquaintances who once supported peace were now supporting war. The GDR saw Germany’s National Socialist past as a problem of the West, not of both German states. Therefore, those who supported Hartmann were advocates for West and for war.

Agnes’ strong socialist convictions are further demonstrated when Jochen announces that he is reciting freedom poems for a choir of schoolgirls from Dresden who escaped into West Berlin. According to the information that Agnes has from the East, Westerners lured the choir to West Berlin and told them lies about Easterners. As a result, the girls no longer know what to believe. Jochen finds Agnes’ information outrageous. He says that her radicalism is losing him friends. In response to that comment, Agnes storms out of their apartment to officiate at a grand performance to commemorate the building of the Stalinallee, a major street in East Berlin. Agnes’ political convictions are finally rewarded at the Stalinallee festivities, where she is presented a lease to an apartment for her hard work and dedication. In the end, Agnes gains acceptance by her Eastern peers.
The presence of a role model also influences Agnes to assume a life in the East. Agnes first becomes acquainted with Father Dulz while she is helping to clear debris or Trümmer from the streets of Berlin shortly after her arrival in the city. Weakened by hunger, Agnes pauses to catch her breath. Father Dulz offers Agnes a piece of bread. He remarks that the bread is plain, nothing fancy. The bread can be thought of as a metaphor for the German Democratic Republic. Though it is simple, it satisfies Agnes' basic need for nourishment. Father Dulz insists that Agnes call him colleague, implying that they are equals though she is roughly the same age as his daughter, Brigitte. Father Dulz’s words of wisdom resonate throughout the film. When Agnes complains to Brigitte about the fact that her East German ration card is not worth its full value because she lives in the West, Brigitte suggests that Agnes and Jochen move to the East. Brigitte tells Agnes that she knows of a vacant apartment in the East and arranges to meet Agnes and Jochen the next day so they can take a look at it. After they arrive at the apartment, they find that it is a war-torn building not yet renovated. Jochen sarcastically comments that the West is building. Brigitte’s reply is “The bigger the house, the greedier the foundation,” which is a quote from her father. Her comment suggests that in a socialist system, everyone’s house is the same size and everyone is treated equally. In the capitalist West, however, a disparity between classes exists. Brigitte’s remark can also refer to fascism which socialists linked to the West. A characteristic of fascism is military expansion, that is, the desire for something bigger and better, resulting in greed. Decadence, which is implied by a large house, is also a fascistic quality. An additional example of Father Dulz’s influence is his words of comfort at the
Stalinallee premiere. During the festivities, Agnes bursts into tears and tells Father Dulz and Brigitte that a divorce from Jochen is inevitable. Though she still loves Jochen, she cannot accept his Western principles. Yet, despite her loyalty to East Germany, she cannot gain acceptance there as demonstrated from her rejection by the actors’ league. After her work on the Stalinallee festival, Father Dulz tells Agnes, “We can tell that you are one of us.” He comments, “When the load is too heavy, it is shared,” meaning that everyone helps each other in a socialist society. Father Dulz and Brigitte offer Agnes a place to stay in the East and welcome her with open arms. In addition, Father Dulz is the individual who presents Agnes with her lease for an apartment on the Stalinallee.

Although Jochen is skeptical of the East, he eventually becomes disillusioned by the West and decides to follow Agnes to the GDR. A major influence for him is politics. When the theater where he often performs is closed due to the poor economy, Plisch sends him to audition for the Americans. The set is made to resemble Alexanderplatz, also known as “the darkest East” according to one of the crew members. In the scene, East German hooligans attack a carload of people. The hooligans’ teeth are painted black to resemble missing teeth, as though this were a common phenomenon in the GDR. A crew member comments that the scene represents “East zone reality.” Knowing this not to be true, Jochen leaves the set in disgust. He complains to Plisch who then offers him a part in a military film. Plisch claims that war films sell but theater is no longer profitable. Angry that Plisch cares more about what sells than about art, Jochen storms out of his office. Plisch views art as a means to achieve economic prosperity. Jochen, on the other hand,
gradually undergoes a metamorphosis in regard to his opinions about art's role in the universe. Though he once saw art as a way in which to earn a living, Jochen slowly realizes that real art properly reflects politics and society. What he witnessed at the audition was not an adequate representation of art. On his way to the divorce hearing, Jochen comes upon a scene of West Germans protesting remilitarization. Police break up the crowd of protesters and arrest them. Jochen picks up a flag lying on the ground that belonged to one of the protesters. The flag has a dove on it, a symbol of peace. Jochen presents the flag to Agnes at the courthouse. The final scene of *The Story of a Young Couple* is of Jochen and Agnes walking arm in arm away from the courthouse to their future in the East.

Unfavorable economic conditions provide Jochen with little incentive to remain in the West. The few roles that are available prove to be of very poor quality as Jochen discovers when he auditions for the Americans. When Plisch closes his theater, a comment is made that there are over three thousand unemployed actors in the West. The Western economy also influences Agnes to look for work in the East, though her reasons for doing so are based more on politics rather than economics. Her comment to Brigitte about the decreasing value of her ration card is evidence of the economic decline in the West. In response to the poor economic conditions in the West, director Kurt Maetzig cleverly incorporates a montage sequence in the film that depicts the ever-diminishing East-West exchange rate.

Romance is also a major factor that influences Jochen to pursue a life in the East. Agnes serves as a catalyst that draws Jochen to a life of socialism. Without his romance with Agnes, Jochen likely would have remained in the West and not
considered life in the East. With the presence of a female figure, however, life in East Berlin becomes an option for him. If he is to continue his relationship with Agnes, political compatibility between both characters is necessary. Because this film is centered around a romance, presumably the audience consisted primarily of women. The significance of Agnes’ role as a reason for Jochen leaving the West is that her character served as a source of inspiration for other women, who by gender are typically characterized as more nurturing. Agnes is able to have a career and support herself in the East as well as influence her husband to join her.

While examining the role of romance as an influencing factor for Jochen to choose a life in the East, it is interesting to note the role that gender plays in the element of romance. It is the female, Agnes, who is the protagonist as the committed socialist. Jochen, the male, must be convinced that socialism is the right answer. Agnes is not submissive to her husband in that she does not follow his politics. On the contrary, Agnes is an emancipated woman who, though reluctantly, makes a moral choice which involves life in the East and therefore must face losing her husband because of her decision. Thomas Heimann comments that Agnes’...

...emancipation does not appear as a social but rather an ideological problem, based in the conflict between East and West. In addition, in a blunt ideotypical way, the striking tension between propagandistic fiction and social reality will be obvious in The Story of a Young Couple.5

When she chooses socialism over Jochen, Agnes becomes emancipated. She gains acceptance by the East as well as a lease to her own apartment. As in a fairy tale, Jochen returns to her and they presumably live a happy life together in the East.
There are many elements that make *The Story of a Young Couple* a prime example of a socialist realist work. The socialist realist doctrine called for people to unite together in the name of socialism to build the future. During one of their arguments, Agnes comments to Jochen, “I thought we were a partnership, a friendship.” Agnes was disappointed that Jochen was not a team player, a very important element in socialism. According to Ingo Stoehr, one of the elements of socialist realism is that “typlifications were to be generalized from individual cases, keeping with the belief that class consciousness, not individual subjectivity and irrationality--the obsolete concepts of tragedy and fate-mattered.” It is the class as a whole and not the individual that matters in a socialist society.

Under the doctrine of socialist realism, art was intertwined with politics in order to promote the building of a socialist society. According to Manfred Jäger, “It could not be more clearly formulated, that art and literature had to serve prevailing ordered politics.” In *The Story of a Young Couple*, Agnes believes that there is a relationship between art and politics. Due to her political convictions she cannot accept the role in *The Dirty Hands*. She finds it necessary to go to the East to pursue roles that are morally acceptable to her. The director Burmeister also goes to the East to pursue employment. At a rehearsal of *The Russian Question* by Simonov, Burmeister tells an actor that he cannot play a part in which he does not believe. Simonov, who wrote about human themes such as love, pain, and separation, is noted for his works that served the Soviet war effort during World War II. According to Plisch, however, art and morality are different. Plisch has no hesitation closing his theater and pursuing military films because they are more lucrative for him. For
Plisch, art does not necessarily have to be politically correct but it must be profitable in order for him to engage in it.

As I said in my introduction, a function of socialist realist art was to celebrate work. In *The Story of a Young Couple*, Maetzig provides several examples promoting a strong work ethic. Scenes of the Stalinallee show workers eagerly building apartments. In addition, the wise Father Dulz is a mason by trade. At the Stalinallee festivities, the spectators, who are ordinary working citizens, are dressed in their overalls and smocks rather than fancy clothes.

Socialist realist literature contained a positive hero who had minor defects that were overcome in the course of the story. In *The Story of a Young Couple*, Agnes is the positive hero who is not fully accepted by the GDR because of her ties to the West. Throughout the film she struggles to gain acceptance by accepting politically correct socialist roles and attending the Hartmann trial as a supporter of the East. She finally overcomes her deficiency, that is, her connections to the West and is granted a lease for an apartment on the Stalinallee.

Furthermore, the film expresses optimism towards the future, which is another important element of socialist realism. An example of optimism is the way in which Maetzig depicts the GDR. It is portrayed as a country experiencing post-war economic progress as demonstrated by the building of the Stalinallee. In addition, Agnes is able to remain optimistic about a life in the East despite her weakening relationship with Jochen. Even after she is denied acceptance in the actors' league, Agnes agrees to work on the Stalinallee project because she believes in the GDR. In fact, Agnes is so convinced of a brighter future in the East that she,
in spite of her love for Jochen, is willing to sacrifice her marriage for a life in the GDR. The film ends on an optimistic note, however, when Jochen gives up life in the West and decides to join Agnes in the GDR.

The few humorous scenes that Maetzig incorporates into *The Story of a Young Couple* are noteworthy. In a scene where Plisch is offered caviar, he states, “The Russians are nice but if you scratch one, a Bolshevik usually comes out,” meaning a communist. Another example is when Jochen and Agnes return after looking at the apartment in the East with Brigitte. Jochen jokingly says, “traveling is educational,” referring to the war torn apartment building and what Jochen thinks is slow progress towards post-war rebuilding in the GDR. These sarcastic comments are utilized to demonstrate the West’s false perception of the East.

Despite capturing the essence of socialist realism within the guise of a romance, the film itself was an absolute failure, says Thomas Heimann. According to Heimann, director Kurt Maetzig claimed that the lack of creativity and the dictatorial and bureaucratic leadership of the DEFA studio was the cause of the failure of the film.10 Maetzig was noted for producing films that were in agreement with SED cultural politics.11 Especially noted as a departure from reality and truth were the scenes depicting the building of the Stalinallee. Ironically, the Workers’ Uprising that took place the following year broke out on the Stalinallee. The film, however, depicts the street as a place of unity between the workers and the GDR government. At the Stalinallee festivities, the workers praise Stalin for his leadership.
Though *The Story of a Young Couple* is a prime example of a socialist realist film, film historian Christiane Mückenberger claims that it marked a low point in 1950s DEFA films. In regard to GDR film, Mückenberger asks, “At what point did artistic quality in East German cinema lose out to political expediency?” The film is not cinematically creative yet it does fit the doctrine of socialist realism as set forth by the SED. The next chapter will present the 1952 film *Destinies of Women* which is also an example of a socialist realist work. Though it was slightly more creative than *The Story of a Young Couple*, the SED criticized *Destinies of Women* because it portrayed women who were weak enough to become romantically involved with a shady male character from the West. The political events that followed these two films are what enabled DEF A artists to experiment with more creative cinematic methods in the mid 1950's.
Endnotes

2 Jäger, 32.
4 Emmerich, 80.
6 Stoehr, 256.
8 Emmerich, 78.
9 Stoehr, 256.
10 Heimann, 127.
Chapter 2: Destinies of Women

The opening scene of the 1952 film Destinies of Women by Slatan Dudow shows the start of a new day. The camera focuses on a man walking along the street carrying a briefcase, presumably on his way to work. The scene is so bright from the reflection of the sunshine that it is difficult to decipher whether the scene was filmed in color or black and white. Subsequent shots show women awaking to the sounds of their alarm clocks. The camera finally focuses on Barbara, a GDR law student who is about to start her day. These beginning scenes depict the dawning of a new socialist era in the GDR, and the women rising out of their beds are symbolic of their role in the building of the new German state.

Destinies of Women is the story of four young women from East and West Berlin who are united through their association with Conny, a shady seducer from the West. His trademark line is “You only live once,” and he often intersperses some English phrases such as “bye bye” and “excuse me,” symbolic of his affinity with the evil West. Among the four women, three actually fall for his advances. Barbara is a law student from the East who is attracted to Conny but he eventually loses interest and ends the relationship. Anni is a seamstress from West Berlin who becomes pregnant with Conny’s child. Renate, from East Berlin, is quite taken by Conny after he pursues her at a carnival. Her desire to win Conny is so great that she kills her brother in the process of stealing money from her mother in order to buy a dress that she feels will impress him. Ursula is an orphan from East Berlin who lives with her grandparents. Conny tries to impress her when she asks for his signature on a petition against war and rearmament. Unlike the other women, Ursula does not fall
for Conny’s act. Despite their connections with Conny, and even as a result of them, the female characters either remain in the East or choose a life in the East over the West. I will now discuss the factors that motivate each of the female characters to choose the GDR.

Hertha, though a minor character, is dedicated to the socialist cause and a staunch supporter of the GDR. She served time in a concentration camp due to her communist beliefs and lost her husband during the war. Though she does not have direct contact with all of the women, her influence is felt by all of the protagonists. Hertha can be considered the embodiment of the socialist party. She has no children of her own but cares for an orphan child named Christel. When Christel’s mother suddenly reappears to claim her, Hertha selflessly returns the child. As an advocate for the rights of women and children in the GDR, she frequently gives speeches in workplaces promoting the advantages of life within the East German social system.

Barbara is a very bright law student who becomes one of the first women judges in the GDR. Her character serves as an example that there are career opportunities for smart, educated women in the GDR. Ironically, she is able to attain this achievement directly out of law school which seems a little suspicious and overly optimistic. Barbara was in a concentration camp during the Second World War where she was a role model for the other inmates of the camp. She is a good student but has a lapse of judgement when she falls for Conny and begins to skip classes. When Conny ends the relationship, Barbara is deep in despair and is nearly killed when she steps in front of a car. Barbara’s life is saved both literally and
metaphorically when Conny exits her life. As a judge, Barbara learns that Conny is facing his third paternity case in East Berlin. When asked by a colleague who is to blame, Barbara answers that Conny is the guilty party, not the girl. The first case that Barbara tries as a judge involves Renate, who has been charged with the death of her brother. As Barbara opens the file to review the case, she discovers that Conny is associated with Renate. Barbara removes herself from the case because she feels that it is impossible for her to remain impartial towards Conny.

Barbara remains a supporter of the GDR throughout the film. A factor that strengthens her convictions towards a future in East Germany is Hertha. Hertha met Barbara at a concentration camp where both were interned during the war, and Hertha later becomes a mother figure for Barbara. She urges Barbara to stop seeing Conny, calling him a failed lawyer. When Barbara is in the hospital recovering from her near fatal injuries, Hertha brings Barbara her books and insists that she study her communist political theory in order for her to be adequately prepared for her career. Hertha serves as a positive role model for Barbara and is influential in her development as an individual with strong socialist beliefs.

An additional motivating factor for Barbara is politics. As a judge, Barbara is very committed to justice, which she is able to find through socialism. Barbara takes an interest in Renate’s case because she was a victim of Conny. Barbara realizes that she too could have been in Renate’s shoes. She visits Renate in prison and offers her an opportunity to better herself while serving her sentence. Barbara also makes arrangements so that Renate can participate in a work release program at a local steel works. She tells Renate that the new socialist Germany is not
like Germany in former times. In the GDR, the justice system offers opportunities to its citizens. Barbara says, “We’re building a new life and want everyone to be happy. It’s up to you whether you’ll be a part of it,” meaning that in order to benefit from a life of socialism, everyone must contribute. When Barbara presides over her first case, she comments in her closing arguments that the days are past when a few people lived at the expense of others. In the new socialist system, it is necessary that people work together for the happiness of everyone.

In the end Barbara does find romance, but it is with someone who is politically compatible. She eventually marries a fellow judge with whom she went to law school. A humorous element of this otherwise very predictable socialist realist film is the character of Barbara’s husband. Although he remains nameless throughout the film, practically every sentence that he utters contains the word “but,” or “aber” in German. In the final scenes of the film, Barbara and her husband are pictured standing on their balcony observing the World Youth Festival parade. They show their loyalty and commitment to communism by hanging the Soviet flag off of their balcony.

The character Anni is not as lucky as Barbara in that she actually falls prey to Conny’s advances and becomes pregnant with his child. Throughout the film, Anni struggles as a single mother but benefits from the GDR social system when she moves from West to East Berlin. She comes from poor working class parents in West Berlin; her father is a drunk who is unemployed and her mother supports the family on her meager wages. Though her family situation can be considered dysfunctional, Anni is the only character that has both a mother and father who are
living. Anni aspires to be a dressmaker but her parents cannot afford the training. She meets Conny when she is fitting Betty, one of Conny’s love interests, with a custom made dress she has created. Conny pursues Anni and they meet for a date. When her boss in the West discovers that she is pregnant, she tells Anni to look for another job.

The stable economy in the GDR as well as the benefits provided by their social system motivate Anni to remain in East Berlin. When Anni is fired from her job, her boss remarks, “Thank God we’re not in the East where the workers are boss.” After visiting one potential employer in West Berlin, Anni remarks that the employers do not even care about the children. In the East, however, she is able to find a position in a factory as a seamstress as well as childcare in the factory kindergarten. With her job comes increased responsibility. After the factory receives some new light blue fabric, Anni shows initiative and demonstrates commitment to her job by offering to handle the trial run of a new dress pattern. Her efforts are rewarded as she is given the responsibility of leading the project. The opportunities that are available to women in the GDR allow someone like Anni with little education to gain responsibility and learn new job skills. In turn, Anni becomes a contributing member of the East German economy.

Hertha serves as a role model as well as a mother figure to Anni, which also motivates her to remain in East Berlin. Anni’s own family was not supportive of her decision to leave West Berlin. Anni is impressed by Hertha’s words when she speaks to her and her fellow co-workers about women’s rights in the GDR. Hertha talks about the laws established by the GDR to protect women and families and she
urges people to fight in order to prevent future wars. Anni proudly introduces her young son to Hertha, who embraces him in a big hug. Neither woman realizes that each has a connection to Conny. When Anni shows Hertha the dress created from the blue fabric, Anni says, “I wish I could see the girl who’ll wear it one day.” Ironically, one of those girls will be Renate.

Renate comes from East Berlin. She works in a factory and lives with her widowed mother and younger half brother. Renate is not interested in politics and skips an assembly on women’s rights at her factory in order to deliver a birthday present to Conny, with whom she has become quite smitten. When she gives him the present which is a picture of herself, she is shocked to see that his apartment is full of pictures of other women. However, Renate is not deterred in her efforts to impress him. After Conny comments on her dark blue plaid dress, Renate is embarrassed and tells him that it is old. Conny then suggests that a light blue dress would look nice on her. “You only live once!” says Conny. A few days later when Renate calls Conny, he tells her that he is simply too busy to see her, and she is heartbroken.

Renate’s friends then see Conny with Isa, a woman from West Berlin who is very elegantly dressed. As they describe Isa to Renate, her friends rave about the woman’s beautiful dress. Later, Renate goes to West Berlin where she spots a lovely light blue dress in a shop window. When she inquires about the price, the sales clerks suggest that she look at something less expensive. She pleads with her single working mother for the money which is stashed away in a jar, but her mother refuses. Renate asks her friend for a loan but her friend is unable to help her. Desperate to win Conny back, Renate takes the money from the jar while her mother is at work.
Renate’s brother sees her and threatens to tell their mother. Angry, Renate smothers the boy with a pillow. She then proceeds to purchase the dress. Wearing the garment, Renate passes Conny on the street with Isa. Conny, however, simply tips his hat to her and keeps on walking. After she returns home, Renate learns that her actions killed her brother. At her trial, one of the judges comments that Renate was “dazzled by the false glitter of a doomed social system,” meaning the West. The trial proceedings reveal that Renate’s father was killed during the war. Her mother had to work and therefore Renate was forced to be on her own much of the time. She also had a relationship which resulted in the birth of her half-brother, whom the court revealed was loved by the mother above all. The East German court states that the war plus the circumstances in which Renate was raised were detrimental to her development. Her crazy lust for life led to her downfall and she no longer knew right from wrong. In addition, the court maintains that she did not intend to kill her brother as she did not realize he was dead until after she returned home. The judges therefore rule that Renate should receive a lighter sentence. She is sent to prison for two and a half years.

Barbara, who becomes a role model for Renate, strengthens her beliefs in socialism. Barbara takes an interest in Renate and allows her to plan for her future while she is being rehabilitated in prison. By working at the steel works, Renate learns job skills that she can use once she is released to contribute to the GDR economy. Barbara also agrees to talk to Renate’s mother, who has not visited her since her incarceration. Shortly thereafter, Renate’s mother does pay her a visit, bringing her a sweater so she will keep warm. Barbara, who represents the GDR
legal establishment, empowers Renate so that she can make a new beginning for herself.

Romance also motivates Renate towards a life in the East. While at the steel works, Renate meets Helmut, a fellow worker. Helmut cannot understand why Renate will not go out on a date with him until he sees her board the truck that takes her to and from the prison every day. When Renate is released wearing the same dark blue dress that she first wore when she visited Conny at his apartment, Helmut waits for her and drives her from the prison grounds. They go to a department store where he offers to buy her a dress. When he shows her a nice light blue dress, Renate is shocked because it is nearly identical to the one she bought with the stolen money. Incidentally, it is also the dress that Anni designed! Renate hesitates and says that it costs too much, but after Helmut insists, she accepts the dress. Renate turns out to be the girl that Annie wishes she could have seen in the dress. Ironically, both girls fell prey to Conny’s advances but were able to build better lives for themselves and prove their self worth by becoming contributing members of GDR society. Renate’s romance during her incarceration provides her with a sense of hope for a better future and inspires her to be a model prisoner so she can end her term and return to society.

The one character that is pursued by Conny but does not fall for him is Ursula. Ursula is slightly younger than the other women in the film. She is fourteen years old and in an orphanage when Hertha first encounters her. Ursula lost both parents in the war and lived with her grandparents until they could no longer get along with each other. When asked by Hertha about the problem, Ursula complains
that her grandparents will not allow her to go to the FDJ meetings or trips. Ursula displays strong socialist tendencies at her young age. Hertha takes her under her wing and offers to talk to the grandparents for her if Ursula agrees to obey them in the future. Again, Hertha serves as a positive role model.

Ursula is motivated to a life in the GDR because of her political involvement. At the light bulb factory where she is employed, Ursula is faced with choosing to stay with her work brigade with whom she is particularly close or to go to the university, all expenses paid, of course. She has difficulty deciding and feels tremendous loyalty to her brigade and to her work in helping to build the GDR. When Ursula does encounter Conny, she asks him for a signature on a petition against war and the use of bombs. Conny attempts to charm her but she is not seduced, even when Conny uses his famous “you only live once” phrase. Ursula is perhaps the strongest willed female character in that Conny’s advances never tempt her.

What makes Destinies of Women a good example of a socialist realist film is its portrayal of the evil West and the good East. Conny is the epitome of the evil West. He is decadent, materialistic, and lazy. Scenes from his apartment frequently show him lounging around in a bathrobe with an ascot. When he dates a woman, he is concerned with what they are wearing. He has a dress made for Betty and he tells Renate that a light blue dress would suit her. After he becomes involved with Isa, her butler comments, “They’ll [Conny and Isa] both dance ‘til they die and leave their debts behind.” Conny and Isa then go to a jazz club. The SED considered jazz music too American in the wake of the Cold War. At the club, the camera focuses
on a picture of an ape smoking a cigar which derogatorily draws attention to the African American roots of jazz music. Historian Uta Poiger suggests that such portraits carried connotations of the problems of African American civil rights in the United States, and hinted that not everyone was equal in the West as opposed to those living in the East. In addition, a link to fascism can be made in that the picture represents racism, which is a characteristic of a fascist system. The club itself represents fascism in that it displays Western decadence. As Conny and Isa dance, their reflections appear in the mirrored ceiling as though they are the only ones who matter in society, which is contrary to the practices of socialism.

Furthermore, when Conny learns that Anni is pregnant, he does not care for the welfare of her or the child. He is only concerned that his lifestyle remain unaltered. He refuses to pay for an abortion, which was illegal in West Germany, claiming that he could be charged with abetment. His statement is actually phony since he is involved in the black market, which is an illegal activity. The fact that Conny has three paternity suits against him could be considered immoral by some. Like abstract art of the formalist era, Conny’s intentions are superficial and lacking content. When he encounters Ursula who asks him to sign a petition against war and rearmament, Conny cannot understand why she is more interested in politics and the petition than in him. He does not work for the good of others nor does he strive to build a strong socialist environment per the dictates of socialist realism. Rather, Conny only works for himself.

Destinies of Women is an effective example of a socialist realist film for many reasons. As I previously mentioned, a socialist realist work must elevate the
people in the spirit of socialism. Anni’s character shows how a poor, single mother from the West can come to the East and become self-sufficient, gain increased responsibility in the workplace, and contribute to the economy. Barbara is able to emerge from a concentration camp and obtain an education that enables her to become one of the first female judges in the GDR. These characters are inspirational in that they become successes due to the opportunities offered by the socialist system.

In my introduction I also discussed that a socialist realist work must be optimistic towards the future. The final scene of the film shows the World Youth Festival which is taking place in East Berlin. The camera zeroes in on a picture of Stalin in an East Berlin square. Also within view of the camera is Ursula, who is marching in an FDJ parade as well as Anni’s son, who is also wearing an FDJ uniform. Barbara and her husband are watching the festivities and Renate and Helmut are following the parade in their car. All of the characters appear satisfied with their destinies in the GDR, and according to the film, happiness is only attainable in the East. The West is plagued with unemployment, a social system that is not favorable to single women and their children as well as people who are only concerned about their own welfare, such as Conny.

Despite its strong socialist realist message in an era where such was dictated by the SED, Destinies of Women did receive criticism. Members of the German Democratic Women’s Alliance (DFD) were appalled that Dudow used women who were so gullible and vulnerable and would fall for a character such as Conny. The DFD maintained that the female characters in the film were not
adequate representations of typical East German women. In fact they were not
typical enough for the critics, for if they were too typical, they would not be as
interesting. According to East German actress Steffie Spira and DEFA dramaturgist
Martha Führmann, the fact that the film did not reflect typical destinies in typical
situations meant that it was missing a critical component of socialist realism. An
example of what was typical to Spira and Führmann was a woman who was left to
run the family farm because her husband never returned from the war. Additional
criticism centered around the fact that the positive heroes were female rather than
male. Dudow actually used female heroines on purpose because male heroes were
often associated with war, military, and hate. In the post-war era, if a man was
strong, then he was most likely militaristic and therefore did not make a positive role
model in the GDR. Incidentally, when Dudow first began to film Destinies of
Women, the character of Hertha was simply a background figure. After a debate
with the DEFA Commission, Hertha was given a more prominent role in the film.
The first version of the film also included more discourse among the male judges
regarding the inclusion of a woman judge. In the final version, the judges’
arguments were reduced to a minimum. Dudow was, however, able to use the
vulnerability of the women characters and in turn mold them through their
experiences with Conny into stronger women characters who were politically
motivated as well as economic contributors within the socialist system. The roles
of the women as well as the successful romances of Barbara and Renate served as a
source of inspiration to women who presumably were the primary target audience of
this film, which fits the genre of a “woman’s film.” Ironically, when the film did
premiere, the actor who played Conny was besieged by female fans screaming, “Conny, Conny, when are you coming again?” Despite the fact that his character was representative of Western capitalism and greed, Conny’s character still managed to hold some allure to female East German fans.9

The style of Destinies of Women is quite a departure from other DEFA films of the early 1950’s. The film uses color which enables the viewer to see, for example, how well a light blue dress compliments Renate. Dudow also employs a montage affect in the final scenes as Renate and Helmut drive down the streets of East Berlin during the World Youth Festival. Flags from the participating socialist countries that hang in the streets are super-imposed on Renate and Helmut’s faces, suggesting that they, too, are welcome to join in celebration with the rest of the socialist world. The singing of a communist hymn is also incorporated in the background of several scenes. One line of the hymn is “a sapling grows from a tree,” meaning that East Germany grows from mother Russia. Walter Ulbricht was in favor of communist hymns that supported the building of socialism.

Though Destinies of Women did fit the characteristics of a socialist realist work, it did have its shortcomings in how it depicted women from the East. At a 1952 film conference, East German Politburo member Hermann Axen claimed, “We don’t want to see any more films like The Fate of Women (Destinies of Women.) Instead, we should be preparing to create a worthy memorial to a hero such as Clara Zetkin.”10 Zetkin, who lived from 1857 to 1933, was a leader of the communist party of Germany. According to Axen, he would prefer to see films about communist heroes and heroines rather than atypical women who were so gullible and
vulnerable. Despite Axen’s remarks, the political events of the following year introduced a period of creative liberalization that enabled DEFA artists to experiment with the neorealist style. The next chapters will explore the effects of neorealism on the film culture of the GDR during the 1950’s.
Endnotes

1 Heimann, 129.
3 Heimann, 128.
4 Feinstein, The Triumph of the Ordinary, 32.
6 Ibid., 74.
7 Ibid., 76.
10 Mückenberger, 52.
Chapter 3: *A Berlin Romance*

The opening scene of the 1956 film *A Berlin Romance* by Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase shows a busy street in Berlin. People quickly walk along the sidewalk and the sound of carhorns honk in the background. This scene is a sharp contrast to the opening shots of Berlin as shown in *The Story of a Young Couple* and *Destinies of Women* because it is not staged. Rather, it is as if someone stood in the middle of a Berlin street with a camera and captured reality. According to the neorealist style, the camera is depicting the world as it is rather than how it should be.

*A Berlin Romance* is the story of Uschi, a pretty seventeen-year-old department store clerk and aspiring fashion model from East Berlin and Hans, a West Berliner who works odd jobs. Uschi and Hans become acquainted through Lord, who is a friend of Hans. Though the relationship between Uschi and Hans gets off to a rough start, the two become attracted to one another. When Hans offers to pay for modeling school in the West Berlin and shows her an apartment which he says belongs to him, Uschi decides to leave her stable but dull life in the East for the glamour of the West. However, her dreams are shattered when she learns that the modeling school is prohibitive in cost and that Hans does not have a place to call his own. Disenchanted, she returns to the East. Following the approval of her parents, Uschi invites Hans to her home. The film ends with the two characters walking hand in hand down an East Berlin street towards the horizon.¹

Though initially not satisfied with life in the East, Uschi does eventually choose to remain there rather than resettle in the West. Throughout the course of the
film, she finds that the West is not all that it is claimed to be. Her parents, who serve as role models, are a major determinant in her decision to remain in the East.

Despite the fact that both parents provide a stable, working class home in the East, her mother is the more dominant authoritative figure in the household. When Uschi models for a fashion show, her photo appears on the cover of an East Berlin newspaper. After her brush with fame, Uschi begins to complain bitterly that her family is not treating her as an adult. Her behavior towards her parents, however, indicates that she still has some growing up to do. She frequently goes to West Berlin despite the disapproval of her parents. On one of her trips to West Berlin, a girlfriend whom she happens to meet by chance invites her to see the film *Temptation*. Uschi responds that she has already seen it, an indication of her many trips to the city. When her parents discover a radio in her room that Hans has lent to her, they ground her for a week and announce their displeasure about her excursions to the West. In a later scene, Uschi spends the night with Hans and lies to her mother about her whereabouts. Instead, Uschi says that she was at a girlfriend’s house. When Uschi announces that she is leaving home to pursue modeling in the West, Uschi’s mother slaps her. The next scene shows Uschi at the train station with her packed bags. Despite her parent’s disapproval, Uschi is determined to do what she desires. After she returns to the East, her mother attempts to keep Uschi grounded by reminding her of her roots in the East. She discourages Uschi from pursuing modeling in the West, telling her not to lose her head. The mother says, “You’ve got to know where you belong,” meaning that her home is in the East and not the West. She then explains to Uschi that she was also pursued by young men.
when she was young and pretty, like Uschi. By trying to relate to Uschi, the mother demonstrates a human side of herself. The mother also shows an element of compassion by the fact that she bothers to inquire about Hans. When Uschi asks if she could invite Hans to their home, the mother responds that she will speak with Uschi's father about the request. Uschi's mother not only tries to instill that the East is where Uschi belongs but also acts as an agent and empowers Uschi to extend an invitation to Hans. In turn, the decision to allow Uschi to invite her friend from the West is made by her father.

Economics also serves as a motivating factor for Uschi to choose life in the East over the West. She tells Hans that life in the West is more interesting, has more opportunities and is more modern, like in the ads. The East, according to Uschi, is all work. When Uschi decides to leave the East, she shows up at the apartment that she thought belonged to Hans, only to find another couple living there. They give her Hans' actual address, where she sits and waits for him. Startled to see her, Hans admits that he cannot afford the modeling school and that the apartment actually did not belong to him. Uschi had thought of the West as a glamorous place where she could achieve her dream of modeling.

The most influential element for Hans that motivates him to leave the West is his romance with Uschi. Unlike the romances found in the first set of films, the romance between Uschi and Hans is not based on political compatibility. Rather, the two characters simply enjoy each other’s company without any political commitments. The friend who lends Hans his apartment makes a comment about Uschi’s prettiness. The friend says that although he and his girlfriend live together,
he does not think that she is actually the one for him. Hans is somewhat taken aback by these words as though he never has had such thoughts about Uschi. While his friend from the West is more concerned with appearance, Hans’ attraction to Uschi is more than cosmetic. Consequently, the romance also serves as a source of optimism about the future for both characters. Uschi is united with her supportive family and gains a boyfriend while Hans is able to divorce himself from his dysfunctional home life and look optimistically towards an otherwise bleak future.

The poor economic situation in the West also influences Hans to accept Uschi’s invitation to go to the East. Hans makes his living washing cars at a garage. When business is down, Hans must go from place to place asking for work. He does manage to find a position with a demolition company. However, the boss is a symbol of Western decadence and greed in that he is more concerned with profits rather than safety. When Hans injures his arm on the job, the police inspector tells the workers, “By accepting these conditions, you share the blame.” The workers respond that the job was the only job that they could find. Furthermore, Hans cannot afford to live on his own and his family’s financial situation in the West is dismal. After his mother finds a repayment book for the radio he purchased from Lord, she questions how he can afford such a luxury when she is unable to pick up a pair of shoes due to the expense. In addition, Hans is forced to give up his hobby of boxing because it is too costly.

The neorealist style that *A Berlin Romance* is said to reflect is a departure from the so-called socialist realist films. Klein and Kohlhaase incorporate several street scenes into the film, similar to what was described in the opening scenes. One
scene shows Uschi and Hans strolling along a river bank. As they converse, the wind blows the trees as well as their hair. The outdoors shot is in contrast to a scene in *Destinies of Women* when Anni tells Conny that she is pregnant. The two characters sit on a park bench surrounded by artificial fall foliage. The latter scene is clearly more staged, obviously filmed inside a studio. Furthermore, because the film is in black and white, the directors incorporate shadows in some of the scenes. For example, when Hans steps up to the counter at a West Berlin cinema to purchase refreshments, there are shadows behind the salesclerk that are similar to a lattice work pattern. It is almost as if the clerk is imprisoned behind the counter, selling refreshments to those about to watch a tempting Western film. Klein and Kohlhaase also utilize an additional stylistic technique commonly found in neorealist film, according to Thompson and Bordwell, which is the camera’s focus on a still object. Immediately following the scene when Uschi spends the night with Hans, the camera focuses for several seconds on water coming out of a drain spout, perhaps signifying a right of passage for both characters.

Unlike a socialist realist film that is optimistic about life in the GDR, *A Berlin Romance* shows some negative aspects of the East, especially in the eyes of a GDR teenager in the 1950’s. Uschi admits that the East is not as interesting, full of opportunity or modern as the West. She and her friends frequently cross the border into West Berlin to see the movies, indicating that the cinematic offerings in the East are not as attractive. In contrast, the characters of the first set of films discussed in this project do not admit that there are any negativities with living in the East. One cannot ignore, however, that in *Destinies of Women*, Renate does find a more
suitable dress in the West with which to impress Conny, though it is above her price range.

One interesting aspect of *A Berlin Romance*, which differs from the so-called socialist realist works, is the use of political references. Unlike the other two films, the story line in this film is not as motivated by politics. In *The Story of a Young Couple* and *Destinies of Women*, for example, the East-West conflict is more in terms of politics. Agnes and Jochen become estranged due to Agnes’ strong socialist beliefs. In addition, her politicism is demonstrated by her comments after the West German radio announcer denounces Anna Segher’s work and by her protests against Hartmann’s acquittal of war crimes. Likewise, all four women in *Destinies of Women* become convinced of the powers of socialism. Conny, on the other hand, is oblivious to politics as evident when Ursula asks him to sign a petition protesting war. In contrast, the East-West conflict in *A Berlin Romance* is defined in terms of culture. When Uschi crosses the border, she is exposed to the evils of the West. The name of the film that she sees with Lord and Hans is *Temptation*, a title that has sinful connotations. Klein and Kohlhaase include a short clip of the film. In the short time frame of the clip, there is evidence of infidelity and murder. One of the characters is named “Mike,” suggesting that *Temptation* takes place in the West. In contrast, the film in which Agnes stars in *The Story of a Young Couple* is political, condoning the practices of the SED. Even the American film for which Jochen auditioned was political in nature. It demonstrated the West’s negative perception of East Germans. The more liberalized artistic environment created after the political events of 1953 enabled filmmakers like Klein and Kohlhaase to experiment with
elements, such as the film clip, which reflect Western culture. The fact that the clip portrays a rather violent scene suggests the directors’ commitment to socialism. Had they been pro-West, Klein and Kohlhaase may have chosen a less sinister clip. An additional example of the East-West cultural conflict that is portrayed in *A Berlin Romance* is the inclusion of a billboard in West Berlin for a product called “Flirt.” The ad includes a very provocative picture of a nude woman. In addition, the character of Lord, who is involved with smuggling goods between the two Berlins, is representative of the evils of the West. After Lord meets Uschi, he asks her out on a date. When they are deciding on the location, Uschi asks if they will meet in the West. Lord’s reply is “Where else?” His comment implies that he cannot imagine going to the East, even to pursue a pretty girl like Uschi. On his date with Uschi, Lord tells her that she could make in the West as a model, again suggesting that in order to become important and noticed, the West is the place to be. There are, however, two additional specific references to politics. When Hans looks at a billboard in the West that is advertising jobs, the narrator comments, “We all know it’s [the West] the land of opportunity, but reality isn’t nearly as rosy as the papers suggest.” The narrator suggests that economic prospects are better in the East. At the end of the film, the voice of the narrator is again heard when Uschi and Hans are walking down the street towards their future. He says that the couple will find their place in the GDR where there is work, struggle, and love.

Furthermore, one cannot help but notice that the style of dress as well as the taste in music and movies of the GDR teenagers in *A Berlin Romance* is influenced by Western culture. In the mid 1950’s in both East and West Germany,
the term *Halbstarke* was the name given to young males who dressed much like James Dean or Marlon Brando, wearing jeans, T-shirts, short jackets, and hair greased back into ducktail plumes.² Like the characters from the Western movies, the German often rioted, which became a source of angst among both East and West German officials. The riots frequently occurred after concerts or movie showings or spontaneously in city squares. According to the East German government, the *Halbstarke* were absorbed in the consumer culture and therefore politically astray. The reaction by GDR authorities was to deny that the problem of the *Halbstarke* existed or to use the English word “rowdies” to describe them, suggesting that they were an American phenomenon and not something that originated in the GDR.³ The East Germans also used American popular culture as a weapon against West Germany in the midst of the Cold War. In an East German manual on how an East German soldier was to think and behave, it accused the West German government of influencing West German adolescents with Western cultural icons such as the boogie-woogie and rock and roll music to act aggressively against the socialist lands. The East German government maintained that American cultural consumption influenced female sexual expressiveness, hyperaggression in males, and fascist behavior. Therefore, it was not considered respectable.⁴ In addition, a 1957 East Berlin report on rock and roll, officials indicated that the music influenced female sexual impropriety, male aggressiveness and deviance.⁵ In *A Berlin Romance*, the male characters of Lord and Hans dress similar to the *Halbstarke*. Uschi is also very stylishly dressed with her short hair, tight sweaters, and long, flowing skirts. The appearances of the young adults in this film are in sharp contrast to those of pre-1953
who wear more loosely fitted and less trendy clothing. Again, the creative liberalization brought on by the death of Stalin, the Workers’ Uprising and denunciation of Stalin allowed the directors to experiment with more artistic methods. In this case, the characters demonstrate their approval of Western culture through their clothing and hairstyles.

Though Uschi’s appearance is dictated by Western fashions, she as the female serves as the impetus for Hans to go to the East. Her role is similar to that of Agnes in The Story of a Young Couple. While the male characters embark on a longer and more complicated journey to recognize that their futures are in the East, the women are able to come to this realization more quickly than the men. As we have seen with the other films discussed thus far, the presumed target audience of A Berlin Romance is women. Uschi’s character is influential to other East German women in that while she is not able to achieve her dream of becoming a model in the West, she is able to find romance, which she is able to bring back to the East with her. On the other hand, some male characters like Conny of Destinies of Women, Plisch from The Story of a Young Couple and A Berlin Romance’s Lord represent capitalism. That is, they are decadent, self-serving, and self-centered individuals who are incapable of being rehabilitated as productive GDR citizens by any of the women with whom they come into contact. These male figures will do virtually anything, even if it is illegal, to make a profit and they only care about themselves.

Though the film is noted for its neorealist style, it does share elements with the first set of films that encourage socialism. Throughout the film, Uschi does not think of her prospects in the GDR as optimistic. She would prefer to pursue
modeling in the West where life appears more glamorous and exciting but changes her mind when she realizes the reality of life in West Germany. Hans cannot find steady employment and the modeling school that would boost her career is financially out of reach. She realizes that she has a home in the East where she is accepted with unconditional love by her parents. As Uschi and Hans stroll down the street together in the final scene, the narrator comments that the couple “will find their place with each other in this life of ours, where there’s work, struggle, and love.” Unlike the so-called socialist realist films that depict optimism more in terms of progress towards the future, optimism is apparent in this film though it is defined as acceptance of life in the GDR as well as hope for the future. Furthermore, the character of Hans is hardworking, although work is not the emphasis of this film. When his job as a car washer ends, he goes from place to place looking for employment. He accepts a job with a demolition crew despite its unsafe conditions. An additional element that this film shares with the so-called socialist realist films is the presence of a positive hero. Though they are not as politically motivated as Father Dulz or Hertha, both of Uschi’s parents could be considered positive role models. Uschi’s mother, however, is the more prominent character of the two. Despite the fact that Uschi disobeys her parents and leaves for the West, her mother still asks Uschi to give her a kiss upon her return to the East. The mother loves Uschi and accepts her back into the family, and her father gives the approval to invite Hans into their home. Hans, however, lacks a positive hero in the West. A Berlin Romance suggests that Uschi’s family is a metaphor for the GDR state. They
enable Hans an opportunity to work hard and contribute to the building of a socialist future.

Though *A Berlin Romance* does favor socialism, the SED still remained critical of the film due to its negative portrayal of the East. For example, Uschi’s comments about how boring and without opportunity her life is in the East drew criticism from GDR officials who claimed that Klein and Kohlhaase should have made more of a distinction between East and West, demonstrating more of the positives of GDR life. Anton Ackermann, a member of the DEFA Commission, was critical of the film and declared that youths want to experience adventure and the film showed that West Berlin was the place where those adventures could be realized. Furthermore, the fact that Lord and Hans are *Halbstarke* also raised eyebrows among East German critics. One East German reviewer stated that he did not consider it a problem that the two boys were *Halbstarke* because they are only dangerous in groups. The reviewer maintained that when each boy was considered individually, they were both “understanding, diligent, boyish, and funny.” In another review, an East German program brochure for the film examined the effects of Western consumer culture and capitalism on the two individuals. It concluded that Lord, who was the most Americanized of the two, led a life of crime while Hans was poverty stricken. The brochure notes that Uschi chooses Hans “not for his appearance,” suggesting that she is no longer blinded by the glamour of the West but is looking for a meaningful relationship.

In contrast, the reception by GDR viewers was very favorable, largely because many could identify with the characters. One East Berlin teenage girl
declared that the film showed young Berliners as they really were. The popularity of the film, however, was a threat to the SED who were quick to point out its shortcomings. After all, how was a film that depicted negative aspects of the East expected to influence people to look at the future with optimism?

One particular element of the film that is contradictory is Uschi’s response to Hans’ behavior. Hans is not truthful to Uschi in regard to his ability to finance modeling school and the apartment. He finally realizes the gravity of his situation when his mother angrily throws a second notice demanding payment for the radio he purchased from Lord. However, despite her shattered dreams, Uschi still invites him to her home in the East. Most girlfriends would not be as accommodating in similar circumstances! Hans breaches the fundamental principles of most relationships which are honesty and trust. The film portrays Hans as down on his luck and his actions are not considered untruthful. It suggests that the West German state is to blame for his disillusionment of his financial situation. In other words, Klein and Kohlhaase show that Hans’ actions are not his fault but that of the Western environment in which he lives.

The following chapter will discuss another film by Klein and Kohlhaase entitled Berlin Schönhauser Corner. My goal is to further demonstrate that the so-called neorealist films produced by DEFA were an artistic reaction to the political events that transpired in the GDR earlier in the decade rather than an attempt by the artists to defiantly stray from the socialist principles set forth by the SED.
Endnotes

1 Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 60.
2 Poiger, 81.
3 Ibid., 85.
4 Ibid., 184.
5 Ibid., 199.
6 Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 60.
7 Schenk, 130.
8 Poiger, 93.
9 Claus, 103.
Chapter 4: Berlin Schönhauser Corner

Like *A Berlin Romance*, the opening scene of Klein and Kohlhaase’s *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* shows a crowded street corner in Berlin. As the camera slowly pans the corner, a streetcar cuts across the picture. After it has cleared, people cross the tracks en route to their destinations. A man pulls a cart of goods. Also within the camera’s glimpse is a sign for the newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, informing the viewer that the location is the GDR. The grainy black and white footage as well as the incorporation of the street scene using non-professionals rather than actors are indicative of the neorealist style. An additional neorealist element is the extremely long take of the camera. As it pans the scene, it captures details from all sides of the corner, allowing stationary objects to glide in and out of the picture. 1

*Berlin Schönhauser Corner* is the story of four GDR teenagers who frequently hang out at the corner of Schönhauser Street in East Berlin. Dieter, who lost both parents in the war, lives with his older brother, a police officer. The events of the story are retold from Dieter’s perspective to a detective after he flees from a refugee camp in the West. Angela, a seamstress, is Dieter’s girlfriend whose father was also a casualty of the war. Her mother often sends Angela out on the streets while she entertains her boss who happens to be a married man. Kohle is regularly beaten by his alcoholic stepfather and often escapes his horrible home life by frequenting the cinemas in West Berlin. Another character named Karl-Heinz is illegally involved with black market traders from the West. In order to prove his loyalty to the traders, he commits a murder. Dieter and Kohle then confront him because he owes the latter a West mark. Threatened, Karl-Heinz pulls his gun.
Kohle throws a rock at Karl-Heinz and the gun discharges. Thinking they have killed him, Dieter and Kohle flee to the West where they are detained at the refugee camp. In an attempt to not be separated from Dieter, Kohle tries to fake an illness by drinking a mixture of coffee and tobacco. The drink proves to be fatal and Kohle dies. Dieter escapes the camp and returns to Angela, who is expecting his child, and they begin their lives together.

A critical motivating factor that influences Dieter to return to the GDR is his romance with Angela. His feelings for Angela are demonstrated when he invites her on a date along with Karl-Heinz and another female friend. Karl-Heinz wants Dieter to assist him in stealing the girls’ East German identity cards which can be sold in the West for a profit. At first, Dieter is willing to go along with the plan, but later that evening, he changes his mind and refuses to participate in the scheme. After the friend discovers the missing passports, she blames Dieter who is taken to the police station but is later released by the detective and told to go home. Dieter does not steal the passports because he cares for Angela and does not want to do harm to her or her friend. After he flees to the West and is at the refugee camp, Kohle asks him if he has been thinking of Angela. In his response, Dieter does not deny his thoughts of her. When Kohle dies, Dieter realizes that he is alone in the West with no support, and he returns to Angela. As with the other films discussed in this project, the role of the female gives the male an impetus to return to the GDR to build a future. The romance between Angela and Dieter is important because she serves as a source of hope for him. Without her, Dieter would have nowhere to turn after Kohle’s death.
Though Angela is his main reason for going back to East Berlin, another motive is the lack of a role model in the West. In the East, the fatherly police detective attempts to help the youths and acts as a metaphor for the socialist state. An example of the detective’s interest in the youths is when all four individuals are brought into the police station because of a broken street light. Karl-Heinz offers Kohle a West Mark if he is able to break the light by throwing a stone at it. Kohle does so and passers-by call the police. The detective then takes the group to the police station where he attempts to talk to the teens. He promises Kohle, who cannot get a job but aspires to be a mechanic or pilot, that he will try to find an apprenticeship for him. The detective acts more as a father than as an authoritative figure and tries to motivate the teens to do something useful with their lives. Rather than severely punishing the teens, he gives them a stern lecture. The detective again demonstrates his fatherly tendencies when Dieter is arrested following the missing identity cards. Instead of forcing Dieter to spend time in jail, the detective allows him to go home. He tells Dieter that he believes in him and that Dieter should believe in himself. Later in the film when Dieter returns from the West, he first tells the detective about Kohle’s death. The officer takes down the information and then instructs Dieter to go to Angela and make a fresh start. By doing so, the officer does not blame Dieter for the death but enables him to begin anew in the GDR. Dieter’s brother, on the other hand, is often a source of resentment to him due to the fact that the brother must act as a parental figure since both of their parents are dead. As Dieter and his friends are taken to the police station after the rock is thrown at the light, his brother, who is present in his police uniform, comments, “Any more of this
and I’ll beat the pants off you at home.” His brother does allow Angela to stay at his home after her mother expels her from their apartment because she is pregnant. Despite his authoritative position as a police officer, he shows concern for Angela’s condition.

Politics plays a minor role in swaying Dieter to return to the East. Before he flees to the West, Dieter is resistant to GDR politics. When the FDJ asks him to join their organization, his response is that he has no time. In another scene, Dieter’s brother chastises him for getting into trouble with his friends. Dieter’s reply is, “At the corner, I’m a rowdy. If I boogie, I’m a Yank. If I’m not neat, my ideas are false. What bull.” Dieter admits that he is a Halbstarke who is influenced by Western music, dance, and clothing. His brother replies, “We’re creating socialism.” In other words, Dieter’s actions are contrary to what the GDR is attempting to achieve, which is a socialist environment. Instead, he is attracted to Western culture. Once Dieter arrives at the refugee camp, he uses politics as his reason for fleeing the East in order to cover up the possibility that he and Kohle committed a murder. When asked why he fled the East, Dieter says that he was coerced to join the people’s national army. The interviewer asks if it was his brother who pressured him to become a member, since he is a police officer. Dieter is then questioned as to whether he has any contact with the Russians, who are the main Cold War enemy of the West. After Dieter tells Kohle that he wants to return to the East, another refugee overhears his comments. The authorities then become suspicious and ask Dieter if he was sent to the West. He is barred from leaving the camp and must beat a guard in order to flee to the East following Kohle’s death. Prior to leaving the East, Dieter is uninterested
and purposely uninvolved in GDR politics. While in the West, however, Dieter inadvertently becomes politically suspect. When Dieter gives his statement to the detective, his response is “Where you won’t find us, you’ll find our enemies.” In other words, the West is the enemy. By using the collective word “us”, the detective includes Dieter in his statement and thereby accepts him back into GDR society.

The so-called neorealist style of Berlin Schönehauser Corner was not popular with the SED, who claimed that the aesthetic was decadent and did not inspire people towards the socialist movement. However, its realistic depiction of everyday life won favor with the majority of East German audiences who could easily relate to the trials and tribulations experienced by the four teens. This film can be considered a reflection of the neorealist style due to its incorporation of several scenes shot in the streets of Berlin rather than in studios. For example, the film demonstrates subjective reality, which is a characteristic of neorealist film. The events of the story are from Dieter’s perspective as he is relating the details to the detective. In addition, four scenes in the film utilize a mirror to capture the reflection of the characters which can be considered an example of authorial commentary. When Angela is getting ready to go on her date with Dieter, she looks into the mirror to apply her makeup. Later that night, a mirror in the dancehall reflects Angela and Dieter dancing together. At the moment when Kohle is about to commit manslaughter, a mirror captures his reflection, and likewise Angela’s mother sees her own image in a mirror when she is about to end the relationship with her lover. The mirror is symbolic of important moments in the lives of the characters, allowing them to take a deeper look at themselves. Furthermore, the climax of the film,
which is when Dieter returns to Angela, is flattened. Rather than embracing each other, Dieter simply gazes up at her while she waves to him from her window.

Another characteristic of neorealist films is the camera’s focus on mundane objects. At the train station when Dieter and Kohle reach the West, the camera focuses on a poster that reads “Serve Ye One Another—Relief Work of the Evangelical Church.” The poster, which advertises organized religion in the West, is a contradiction to the greedy and decadent Western attitudes that the SED continually emphasized.

The framing techniques utilized by Klein and Kohlhaase are also noteworthy. The scene immediately following the opening shots of Schönhauser corner shows Dieter running down the street to the detective’s office, where he announces that Kohle is dead. As the detective begins to type, Dieter tells him about his four acquaintances, thereby setting the scene for the film. The first person Dieter describes is Angela. As Dieter recalls events, the scene shifts to him entering a courtyard in front of Angela’s apartment, thereby coming into her life. The scene following Dieter’s escape from the West German camp is again the detective who continues to type Dieter’s statement. After he is through typing, the detective tells Dieter to go home, that Angela will be glad to see him. The film then shows Dieter back in Angela’s courtyard, gazing up at her apartment. Dieter leaves the courtyard after seeing Angela in the window, realizing that she is now a part of his life. The fact that Dieter first goes to the detective upon his return to the East is an important factor, for it shows that he trusts the detective, who is also an authority figure, with such startling information. Another critical point is that the detective invites him to “go home,” which indicates that Dieter does have a place in the world, which is in
the East. That Angela is the first person described by Dieter signifies her importance to him. The framing techniques utilized by Klein and Kohlhaase are significant because they represent non-linear causality, which is a characteristic of neorealism. Framing allows Dieter to start at the end of the story, flash back to where the events chronologically begin, and then return to the end in order to complete the story. This technique allows the viewer to understand, from Dieter’s perspective, how the events actually transpired. In the socialist realist style, a narrator may have taken the place of Dieter, retelling the events as they should have occurred according to socialist doctrine.

True to the neorealist tradition, the film gives a realistic portrayal of life in the GDR. Because of this, the SED was extremely critical of the film. One point of contention was the manner in which the East German regime was depicted. The only real authoritative figure who represents the state is the police detective who is unable to maintain order among the teens. However, in one instance when he is addressing the youths and in another scene when he is lecturing Dieter, his shadow looms over the characters, presumably to emphasize his authority. In addition, the FDJ is unable to exert its influence to sway Dieter to join them. Furthermore, Karl-Heinz’s father, who is skeptical of East Germany, says “The West is psychologically better. This system [the East] will fail.” The character of Karl-Heinz and his criminal tendencies is symbolic of Western greed and decadence. His parents, who are only staying in the East because of two properties inherited by his mother, own bank accounts in the West. One West German critic noted that the film should be shown in the West because the film portrayed the SED in a negative light.⁴
In addition, the film demonstrates that the Halbstarke problem is not just a Western import but that it also exists in East Germany. Unlike Lord and Hans from A Berlin Romance who are Halbstarken from West Berlin, the four teens from Berlin Schönhauser Corner are all from the GDR. The three males from Schönhauser wear their hair in ducktail plumes and dress in t-shirts and jeans. Angela styles her hair in a fashionable ponytail and hangs out with the boys. In one scene, the camera shows several teens gathered at Schönhauser corner, wearing their Western fashions. Upbeat music plays in the background, and one boy dances in a fast paced manner. To most people, it would appear that the teens are simply enjoying themselves. The SED, however, regarded the scene as a threat. Young adults, who represented the future of the GDR, were being corrupted by decadent and capitalist Western influences such as clothing, music, and dance. Likewise, viewers were also threatened by the images. This scene is a definite contrast to the Stalinallee street scene of The Story of a Young Couple. GDR citizens, wearing more conservative clothing, perform a more traditional dance to an East German political hymn. The comparison of the two events demonstrates the creative liberalization that followed the political events of 1953 as well as the denunciation of Stalin in 1956. As a result of increased artistic freedom, the street scene from the post-1953 film reflects the influence of Western culture on GDR society. Additional evidence of the dominance of Western culture is Angela’s comments about the type of boys that she likes. She responds that she prefers “doctors and boxers and those that look like Marlon Brando.” One must also not forget Kohle’s hobby of frequenting West Berlin cinemas, which is indicative of the effects of the West’s influence on GDR culture.
When the detective asks him how many movies he has seen in West Berlin, Kohle responds that the number is over one hundred. Sadly, Kohle obtains the lethal recipe for the coffee and tobacco combination from a movie. He dies in the West, where he would go to enjoy films and escape his dismal homelife. The movies viewed by Kohle are in marked contrast to Agnes’ film from *The Story of a Young Couple*. While Kohle views films that promote Western culture, the film starring Agnes is more political in nature, reflecting the socialist realist practices of pre-1953. Many GDR officials as well as other East German citizens felt that Western culture contributed to the delinquency of GDR youth and discouraged them from becoming productive members of society.

The SED also criticized the film because it depicted East German youth who were unemployed and unmotivated. When the youth are questioned by the detective after the rock throwing incident, we learn that Kohle is unable to find a job and Karl-Heinz quit school. Dieter does work but when he is questioned about his interests, he states that little interests him except motorcycles and soccer.

Another negativity that *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* portrays is the dysfunctional home life of Kohle, Angela, and Dieter. Kohle’s alcoholic stepfather regularly beats him and Angela’s mother forces her out of their apartment several nights a week. When Angela sees that her mother is preparing ham for her boss who is coming to visit, Angela asks why none of it is for her. Her mother responds that she forgot to get any for her and that Angela is just being difficult. However, despite her erratic home life, Angela is obedient. Rather than taking advantage of the situation and returning later in the night, she returns to her apartment shortly after
midnight. Dieter, on the other hand, lacks both parents. The only character that actually has an intact family is Karl-Heinz, but he and his family are disloyal to the GDR.

Despite the negative aspects of the film as characterized by the SED, I will argue that the film does share elements that were condoned by the East German regime under the practice of socialist realism. For example, Dieter is shown as a hard working individual in contrast to his friends. When a bomb explodes at a construction site where he is working, Dieter acts as a hero and helps to save a fellow worker. GDR critics believed that more scenes emphasizing Dieter’s work needed to be included in the film and they questioned why Kohle’s character is not employed.\textsuperscript{7} Incidentally, Angela is also employed as a seamstress. The SED was also critical of the fact that the film did not move towards the future.\textsuperscript{8} Kohle dies and Karl-Heinz receives ten years for his role in the homicide. However, one cannot forget that Dieter returns to the East in order to build a future with Angela. Though Dieter’s character does not directly express optimism about the future, by returning to the East he does show acceptance of his life in the GDR.\textsuperscript{9} Additionally, the fact that Angela is expecting his child and the prospect that they will be a family suggests hope about the future. The inclusion of a positive hero such as the detective is an element that is shared by the socialist realist aesthetic. However, some East German critics believed that though the detective was kind, he was not inspiring.\textsuperscript{10} Rather than disciplining the youths for the rock-throwing incident, he merely gives them a stern lecture. Though the detective does not motivate Dieter to become a politically active socialist, he does as a policeman and representative of the GDR state.
encourage him to go to Angela and “make a fresh start, boy” in the German Democratic Republic. Dieter was under the opinion that the GDR did not allow one to start over, which is why he initially fled from the East. In the West, however, he found that his options were extremely limited.

Incidentally, *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* also emphasizes the role of West Germany in the arms race. When Karl-Heinz is in an underground train station in the West making a deal with one of his so-called business partners, an individual selling newspapers calls out the headline which is “Nuclear arms for West Germany, fifty-five billion arms.” The scene demonstrates West Germany’s weapon accumulation in the wake of the Cold War. An FDJ member who attempts to recruit Dieter makes an additional comment related to war. When Dieter refuses to join, the member asks if he is against war, and Dieter reminds him that the last war resulted in the death of his parents. The inclusion of the references to nuclear arms and war suggest that Klein and Kohlhaase wanted to demonstrate negativities of the West.

It is important to note that Dieter does not become lost in the evil and decadent West. Unlike Uschi of *A Berlin Romance* who goes to the West in search of glamour and fame, Dieter and Kohle leave the GDR merely to escape possible murder charges. Though Kohle does not really desire to return to his bleak home life in the East and even suggests that he, Dieter and Angela go to Canada, Dieter is unenthusiastic about the idea. In fact, Dieter expresses a desire to return to the East. Despite the fact that Dieter is attracted to Western cultural elements such as clothing, music and dance, he realizes that his home is in the East with Angela, his work, and his brother.
Klein and Kohlhaase's film *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* marked the beginning of the end of the creative liberalization that had introduced the neorealist aesthetic to DEFA film. Had it not been for the events that transpired at the Twentieth CPSU Congress in 1956, the directors could not have implemented the film project in the first place. It was not until well after the film's release that it began to cause controversy among SED officials.\(^\text{11}\) At the GDR Ministry of Culture's Second Film Conference in July of 1958, Deputy Minister of Culture Alexander Abusch attacked the Berlin films, in particular *Berlin Schönhauser Corner*, for its reflection of the neorealist aesthetic, which he perceived as negative. In his speech Abusch called for a return of the socialist realist aesthetic.\(^\text{12}\) As will be discussed in the conclusion, political events affecting the GDR in the mid to late 1950's resulted in the end of the neorealist aesthetic in East German cinema and a return to socialist realist aestheticism.
Endnotes

1 Feinstein, The Triumph of the Ordinary, 48.
2 Poiger, 128.
3 Feinstein, The Triumph of the Ordinary, 54.
4 Claus, 108.
5 Poiger, 124.
6 Feinstein, The Triumph of the Ordinary, 55.
7 Claus, 109.
8 Feinstein, The Triumph of the Ordinary, 69.
9 Ibid., 60.
10 Ibid., 73.
11 Ibid., 63.
12 Claus, 110.
Conclusion

In this project, I have compared the aesthetics of four DEFA films made during the 1950’s to show that despite their differences in style, the protagonists ultimately choose a life in the German Democratic Republic. *The Story of a Young Couple* and *Destinies of Women* are examples of the socialist realist aesthetic which was a part of cultural policy set forth by the SED. What binds these films together is that the protagonists are, or eventually become, politically motivated individuals who look to the future with optimism. These films depict the GDR as the ideal place to live, using politics as the driving force behind the East-West conflict. Furthermore, the style of these films is an indicator of the socialist realist aesthetic. For example, the majority of the scenes are filmed on a set stage rather than outside, and the plot lines as well as the actions of the characters are also very predictable. Catchy communist hymns are interspersed within the text to remind the viewer about the virtues of socialism. In contrast, the characters of *A Berlin Romance* and *Berlin Schönhauser Corner*, which represent the neorealist style, are not politically driven. These films seek to show life as it is instead of how it ought to be, displaying some of the negative aspects of life in the GDR. Western clothing, music, and dance deeply influence the teenage characters. In fact, culture rather than politics defines the East-West conflict. Instead of displaying outright optimism towards the future, the neorealist characters show acceptance of life in the GDR and hope for the future. Stylistic differences also prevail in the neorealist films. For example, many scenes are shot outdoors instead of inside and utilize non-professional actors. The grainy
black and white photography, unique camera angles and shots, flattened climaxes and framing techniques are all indicative of the neorealist style.

The purpose of this paper was twofold. My intent was to demonstrate that although both pairs of films reflect two different cinematic styles, the heroes of the films are motivated by similar elements to choose a life in the GDR: politics, economics, a positive role model, and romance. Though politics is clearly more of a motivator in the earlier films, it is a factor that motivates Dieter in *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* to return to the East. All four films also define to a certain extent the East-West conflict in terms of economics; the East is the land of opportunity while the West is plagued with unemployment. In addition, each film includes a positive role model that influences the characters to choose the GDR. In the socialist realist films, the character is more political than in the neorealist films. Finally, the role of romance and its relationship to gender cannot be overlooked.

Each film contains examples of men who try unsuccessfully to integrate themselves into the Western social system; Jochen becomes disenchanted and joins Agnes in the East; Conny is unable to "find himself" in the West and turns to the East, where he is incapable of joining East German society due to his lack of morals; Hans gives up on the West and accepts Uschi's invitation, and Dieter also returns to the East after he has lost all hope in the West. Also included in the films are examples of women who are more nurturing and create a sense of stability in the GDR for their male counterparts. Konrad Wolf, who was a prominent DEFA director, once commented that he chose women protagonists because they provided a means of plot resolution. They reflected a coming-to-consciousness as well as a catalyst for the insights of the
male character. Also, the women often invoked an image of woman as victim who overcomes her crisis by serving others in need.\textsuperscript{1} Wolf's comments can be applied to the films discussed in this project; Agnes serves as an impetus for Jochen to leave the West; though Barbara’s husband is already a contributing member of East German society, she provides a sense of home for him; and Uschi and Angela also influence their partners to choose the East. Romance stories typically appeal to female audiences, suggesting that the directors were attempting to influence GDR women to become active citizens as well as create a nurturing home environment. As I mentioned previously, men were often difficult to use as role models. If the audience perceived their characters as “strong,” they were frequently associated with militaristic tendencies, which were defined as fascist by the SED. It should not be overlooked, however, that the Marlon Brando-\textit{Halbstarke} characters of the Berlin films also held some appeal for younger male audiences.

Furthermore, I wanted to show that neorealism was merely a cinematic style and that it did not denounce the practices of socialism. The political events of the early to mid 1950’s introduced a more liberalized artistic climate in East Germany which enabled DEFA filmmakers such as Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase to explore the neorealist tradition popular in Italian cinema. Despite the differences in style between the first and second pairs of films, the latter films still incorporate elements found among the socialist realist films. That is, the heroes of the neorealist films are positive, hard- working characters. The films also display hope and optimism towards a future in the GDR, though somewhat muted, and the works contain role models who are positive figures. One must not overlook the fact that the
The neorealist films had to display some positive elements of life in the GDR in order to gain approval from the SED to be shown to the public. In fact, Klein and Kohlhaase had to change several elements in *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* before the East German authorities accepted the project. Nevertheless, they were committed socialists who wanted to experiment with a more artistic cinematic style. When Kohlhaase condemned socialist realism at the 1961 Writers' Conference, he commented: "The quality of a film cannot be determined solely with reference to questions of formal aesthetics: one has to look at the film's vision, thought, engagement and creativity as a unified whole." In other words, aesthetics cannot be the only determinant of a film's merit.

What precipitated the change in aesthetics from socialist realism to neorealism were three political events of the 1950's. The death of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in March of 1953, whom many credit for the start of the socialist realist movement, marked the beginning of artistic liberalization in the GDR. The Workers' Uprising that occurred in June of the same year influenced East German artists to call for more artistic freedom, which was granted by the SED. Finally, Khruschev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 led to greater autonomy for DEFA and gave filmmakers and writers the opportunity to develop and approve their own scripts, which enabled them to experiment with neorealism.

The neorealist films proved to be very popular with GDR audiences because they gave honest portrayals of GDR teens in the 1950's. Klein and Kohlhaase's characters are worldlier than their socialist realist counterparts. That is, they are knowledgeable about American film idols, clothing, music and dance. In
addition, they often venture to the West because it is admittingly more exciting than the East. The neorealist films also depict realistic characters that have flaws and imperfections but manage to persevere despite their inadequacies. In contrast, the characters in the socialist realist films are mechanical in nature and able to overcome any shortcomings in order to become good socialist citizens. East German audiences could relate more easily to the neorealist characters because they were more true to life.

The SED, however, did not condone neorealist films. Because the films displayed a more realistic portrayal of life, they also showed some negative aspects of the East. After all, the SED believed that film was to influence people to a life of socialism, not discourage it. Some negative elements contained in the films include unemployed and unmotivated youth, lack of consumer goods, and dysfunctional families. In addition, the SED was critical of how filmmakers portrayed the East German government. For example, they complained that the teens were not involved enough in the FDJ. Another point of contention was the depiction of the *Halbstarke* trend in the neorealist films. It was the belief of the SED that this trend contributed to delinquency and fostered unproductive behavior.

The contributions of neorealism are important. For artists, it allowed them the opportunity experiment with an aesthetic which they emulated while continuing to make statements as committed socialists. The neorealist films invite us to see the GDR as it really was, rather than how the SED wanted us to see it. They also allow us to see that the East Germans were ordinary people who enjoyed the same idols as we did and who had similar tastes in music, clothes, and dance. In other words, they
weren't individuals who, by the end of the film, were undoubtedly convinced of the wonders of communism. In addition, neorealism gives the figures in the films more common ground besides politics on which to build a relationship. Using *The Story of a Young Couple* as an example, Agnes and Brigitte are friends because they both have similar political beliefs. In *A Berlin Romance*, however, Uschi’s friend invites her to a movie because they both enjoy watching Western films. Neorealism worked for everyone except the SED who condemned it because it was not optimistic enough, did not emphasize economic progress and showed some negative aspects of life in the GDR.

Just as politics had disrupted the strict socialist realist practices of the GDR in the early 1950’s, it was also the cause for the abrupt end of the neorealist aesthetic in the late 1950’s. There were several political events that influenced the return to the socialist realist aesthetic in East Germany. With the declaration of military alliances by East and West Germany, the former’s sovereignty as a country became more recognizable by the Soviet Union. Likewise, the GDR’s relationship with the Soviets improved as they began to recognize the geographic advantage that the GDR provided in regard to Western relations. This in addition to Ulbricht’s good relationship to Khruschev following the Twentieth CPSU Congress of 1956 influenced the SED to reinitiate the ideological offensive of pre-1953, which meant a return to the socialist realist aesthetic.⁵ A return to socialist realism was further influenced by political unrest in Hungary and Poland in the mid 1950’s, which caused GDR authorities to question whether the same could happen in their country.⁶ At the SED’s Fifth Party Congress in 1958, Ulbricht stated that the GDR’s standard
of living would surpass that of West Germany’s by the end of 1961. Therefore, a fusion between art and life would be necessary in order for the GDR to achieve this goal.\(^7\) This event as well as Abusch’s remarks against neorealism at the 1958 Film Conference and the SED’s increased dissatisfaction with DEFA also solidified the return of the socialist realist aesthetic to GDR cultural politics, including film. The result, which can also be partially attributed to the increasing trend of television, was a decline in popularity of DEFA films in the late 1950’s.\(^8\)

What transpired in the next decade was the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. This event actually introduced an era of greater autonomy for artists who felt protected behind the Wall. As a result, artists enjoyed a greater sense of artistic freedom following the closing of the East-West border, but the mood did not last as several DEFA writers and filmmakers were condemned at the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee in 1965. The SED felt that the works did not adequately conform to their political directives and as a result, eleven films were banned. Once again, the artistic freedom of GDR filmmakers was restricted. However brief the period was, the era of the neorealist aesthetic allowed filmmakers the opportunity to promote the ideals of socialism through a more creative style and enabled us to see the realities of the GDR.
Endnotes

2 Claus, 108.
3 Ibid., 110.
5 Ibid., 64-65.
6 Allan, 10.
8 Allan, 10.
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Vita

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