CONSTRUCTIVE STYLIZATION

By Annette Dorgerloh

When the DEFA motion picture *Der Frühling braucht Zeit* (*Spring Takes Time*) premiered in the Berlin cinema Colosseum on November 25, 1965, the press initially reacted with favorable reviews (Fig. 1). The movie that is set in the context of socialist production was "stylistically confident," and the sparingly fashioned interior decorations called "attention to the intellectual disputes."[1] The artistic production group Babelsberg and especially the director, Günter Stahnke, probably took note of the positive reception with relief; after all, three years earlier, in 1962, two of Stahnke's film productions for GDR television had been strongly criticized and their broadcasting banned.[2] This new feature film, a commissioned work of the DEFA Studio for Feature Films, became for Stahnke a sort of litmus test. The elation was short-lived, however, because soon the release was stopped and the movie banned in the course of the political *Kahlschlag* (lit. clearcutting) by the 11th Plenum of the SED's Central Committee. The notorious plenum that was disastrous for the further cultural policies of the GDR met in Berlin from December 15-18, 1965.[3] In particular, newer works of literature, art and twelve movies of the DEFA annual productions in 1965 and 1966 fell victim to it. Subsequently, the director Günter Stahnke was summarily dismissed and was unable to find work for two years.[4]

Fig. 1—*Spring Takes Time*. Cover of the playbill 119/1965, published by the distribution company of the film PROGRESS Film-Verleih. © DEFA-Stiftung. Archive of the author.

The formalism-debate in the GDR, the 11th Plenum and *Spring Takes Time*

The rejection of the film *Spring Takes Time* is based not only on the sophisticated manner in which the film tells its story, but rather on its special visual aesthetic. It focuses on a consistently modern minimalism that reminded critics of Italian directors such as Antonioni or Fellini. The minimalism style that gained acceptance in art, architecture and design during the 1960s oriented itself towards simple and functional forms. Its characteristic feature is an extreme aesthetic reduction of the artistic elements, which should be understood primarily as a reaction to the cluttered styles of the past decades. These tendencies that started to quickly gain acceptance in the architecture of industrialized construction, could also be

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[1] Albrecht, Hartmut. *Nationalzeitung*, November 27, 1965. As Cited in: Habel, F.B. *Das grosse Lexikon der DEFA-Spielfilme*. Berlin: Schwarzkopf&Schwarzkopf, 2001. 187.

[2] The TV short *Fetzers Flucht* (*Fetzer's Escape*, 1962) and the 37-minute TV movie *Monolog für einen Taxifahrer* (*Monolog for a Taxi Driver*, 1962) were developed in collaboration with the screenwriter Günter Kunert. *Fetzer's Escape* had its first broadcast on GDR television on December 20, 1962, but was banned after the TV premiere. The special visual language of these movies had been criticized as being „formalistic" and „decadent." *Monolog for a Taxi Driver* would have its first broadcast only after the Berlin Wall came down, on April 26, 1990.

[3] *Neues Deutschland* from December 19, 1965 earmarked the dates December 15-18, 1965 as the official date of the 11th Plenum. It is well known that on the previous day, December 14, 1965, the movie *The Rabbit Is Me* was shown. Cf.: Günter Agde (ed.): *Kahlschlag. Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965. Studien und Dokumente*. Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 2000. (2nd extended edition)

[4] Stahnke started to work as director at the Metropol Theater in 1968, followed soon afterwards by various assignments for television, especially for light-hearted entertainment. He was awarded the Chaplin Prize for the best comedy at the 1969 Television Festival in Montreux for his TV film *Telegenerell* (*Television in General*). Stahnke has made over one hundred entertainment films; he is one of the most successful directors of the GDR and remained active as theater director after the fall of the Wall in 1989.

found in the furniture industry. For example, we see in the film that the Solter family apartment is furnished with pieces of furniture that was industrially produced in the Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau (German Workshops Hellerau)[5] in Dresden. Such sets, modular furniture and stackable assembly units were not only appreciated and sought out by young East Germans. The GDR was one of the biggest furniture exporters in the world. It is paradoxical that the GDR championed a less modern line in the field of the visual arts, including in literature and film. The formalism debate smoldering since the 1950s shows that the functionaries mistrusted all modern forms and abstraction attempts in the arts on principle; they insinuated that this kind of overemphasis on form was—in their opinion—an unacceptable neglect of the content. Therefore, this kind of formalistic art could only be interpreted as a manifestation of the capitalist system, and hence, as a betrayal of the goals of socialism. This verdict of subjectivism pertained especially to the abstract fine arts, but also to experimental forms in literature, theater and film. Any form of aestheticization was perceived as alienation and brusquely rejected as being unsuitable for and harmful to the working class.

The 11th Plenum attempted to firmly squelch this kind of art. Kurt Hager, one of the protagonists of the plenum and one of the chief ideologues until the end of the GDR, remarked in his plenum talk, "Art is always a weapon in the class struggle," and in regard to Günter Stahnke's film, "The discussion about the alienation theory must take place thoroughly. The concept of alienation between the individual and society in socialism, based on an imitation of Kafka, which is the basic situation in such films like *Spring Takes Time* or *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit Is Me*), is not only linked to the lack of understanding of the historic role und development of the GDR. If artistic figures act alien towards socialist society, if a downright coldness prevails in the relationship between the individual and the socialist state and its institutions, if a hostile contrast of the individual to the leaders, functionaries, parents, teachers etc. is being constructed, then the respective authors have a 'fraught relationship with our state' as some comrades aptly remarked."[6] What the movie offers as a solution, namely a process-driven differentiation, an understanding of the positions and their later correction by means of a justified rehabilitation, can only be rejected resolutely by a person like Hager. The dictum "Art is always a weapon in the class struggle" holds for him; there can only be black and white, and not the nuances and shades which this film offers in a very intelligent way.

The set-designer Georg Kranz

Georg Kranz (born 1934), one of the most important GDR set designers, was responsible for the scenography of *Spring Takes Time*. After his studies at the Hochschule für bildende und angewandte Kunst (Academy of Visual and Applied Arts) in Berlin, he began in the DEFA Studio for Feature Films in 1953, and since 1965 has been a freelance set designer. The short film *Keine Leute* (*No People*, dir. Karl-Heinz Carpentier, 1963), part of the DEFA satire series *Das Stacheltier* (*The Porcupine*), was his first work.[7] Kranz's second feature film, *Spring Takes Time*, also deals with the tense relationship between personal advantage and commitment to the common good. Afterwards, Kranz worked with diverse genres and created set designs for crime stories (*Leichensache Zernick, Murderer Case Zernick*, 1972), screen adaptations (*Unterm Birnbaum, Under the Pear Tree*, 1973), children's films (*Wer reißt denn gleich vorm Teufel aus?, The Devils Three Golden Hairs*, 1977) and films with contemporary themes, including Siegfried Kühn's *Zeit der Störche* (*Time of the Storks*, 1970) and *Die Beunruhigung* (*Apprehension,* 1981), Lothar Warnecke´s film about a single psychologist who finds out that she might possibly have to undergo a breast cancer operation. Kranz designed comedies like *Asta, mein Engelchen* (*Asta, My Little Angel*, 1980), Roland Oehmes's declaration of love to the great Babelsberg film history, and he worked together with Dieter Adam on the advanced GDR-period movie, *Trotz alledem!* (*Despite Everything*, dir. Günter Reisch, 1971), about the workers' leader Karl Liebknecht, one of the great heroes of GDR-historical narrative.

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[5] The Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau was founded as a private company in 1898. In 1951, it was converted into a state-owned company known for their assembly furniture program using a grid system and their connection to the Bauhaus in Dessau. Today, the company is specialized in interior design.

[6] Hager, Kurt. „Die Kunst ist immer Waffe im Klassenkampf." *Neues Deutschland*. December 21, 1965.

[7] The short tells the consequences of the private withdrawal of an automechanic, who prefers finishing his own garage rather than going to work and therefore takes a sick leave. As a result, the car of the only local physician cannot be repaired. When the protagonist suffers an accident, the doctor cannot rush to his aid.

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Since 1962, Georg Kranz has designed sets for over one hundred motion pictures and TV movies and repeatedly received national awards for his work. Kranz developed for each new film project specific and distinctly self-contained solutions that were always in tune with the current art and design trends. None of his later films, however, presents such a distinct minimalism in its composition like *Spring Takes Time*. Together with Günter Stahnke and the cinematographer Hans-Jürgen Sasse, he succeeded here in creating highly effective film spaces. The space compositions, created almost like a stage set, have an expressive effect due to the use of light, and they appear reduced and austere; they are based on the ideal of a serially and geometrically influenced modernity that has its roots in the Bauhaus-style of the 1920s and 1930s. The principle of geometrical sequence is used again and again, both in the composition of outdoor and indoor spaces (Fig. 2). The black and white of the film material is employed here as its own distinct design medium. The concentration on clearly structured rooms with only a few, yet characteristic, pieces of furniture as a stylistic device is sustained throughout the film. The result is an incredibly dense, almost chamber-play-like film that is capable of telling its crime story in a visually impressive and poignant way. Surprisingly, films like this one or like *Jahrgang 45* (*Born in '45*, dir. Jürgen Böttcher, 1966/90), *The Rabbit Is Me* (dir. Kurt Maetzig, 1965), *Wenn du groß bist, lieber Adam* (*When You're Older, Dear Adam*; dir. Egon Günter, 1966/90) or *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* (*Just Don't Think, I'll Cry,* dir. Frank Vogel, 1965) remain effective even today. The banning of this and other DEFA motion-picture experiments after the 11th Plenum demonstrates that GDR officials mistrusted their dedicated artists as much as they mistrusted international modernity that had been adapted constructively by DEFA filmmakers during the 1960s. In the process, functionaries failed to recognize the artistic power and the aesthetic potential of the applied artistic means, because, according to the intentions of their creators who wanted to address acute problems, the films should contribute to showing life in the GDR and how to improve it.

Fig. 2—Nightly way home. Film still © DEFA-Stiftung, Kurt Schütt. Filmmuseum Potsdam.

The aesthetics of the scenography of the film

Spring Takes Time differentiates very clearly between the protagonists and the spaces assigned to them; every piece of furniture has been picked out with utmost care. The characters act mostly in front of white walls; besides the few pieces of furniture, the interplay between light and shadows is an important design feature. This effect is even more important in the outdoor spaces because the light seems to shape facades and walls. One can say that strictly modern forms and rooms are matched with the appealing characters who are most notably the engineer Solter and his wife, his daughter Inge, and also Luise Faber, the wife of the plant manager; while the problematic, state-servile characters like the plant manager Faber or state attorney Burger are characterized by historicizing furniture and accessories. The pretentious furniture—especially the desk—stands for the representative power of the state that discredits itself on the visual level by resorting to past styles and designs.

Faber's single-family house is confronted with Solter's austere and strictly modernly furnished apartment. Its style expressing power and prominence shows a mixture of modern and traditional forms—so typical for Faber. The old-fash-

ioned desk dominating the living room makes this clear (Fig. 3). Faber is the boss even at home, a position that is challenged by his wife during a nighttime argument. During their quarrel he sits on his pompous desk speaking patronizingly while she is filmed in front of a bookshelf; thus, both of them are assigned to their own characterizing environment. During his speeches in the company, Faber is always framed by various GDR flags, while Solter sits during his report in front of a sober, modern partition. In a dramatic scene, Solter throws his worst opponent out of his office, which is the most consistently modern designed room in the entire film (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3—Director Faber's living room. Film still © DEFA-Stiftung, Kurt Schütt.

Fig. 4—Solter's office. Film still © DEFA-Stiftung, Kurt Schütt. Filmmuseum Potsdam.

In the same way, however a bit less so, a modern, transparently lit office is assigned to Luise Faber (Fig. 5). When the young student Inge Solter enters this office, she passes an elaborately carved door that is not unlike the one of the state attorney's that her father had to go through. When faced with this power symbol, Inge is initially reserved and declares that she wants to quit her studies because her father has been imprisoned and she is afraid of collective punishment. Luise Faber, however, is receptive, intelligent, and open-minded, and her space confirms this impression; the elegant woman with the cigarette and her corner desk in the modern room flooded with light matches this image with her actions by standing up for her father, Solter, and discourages Inge from her intentions to quit her studies. Inge's friend Jensen, on the other hand, becomes a big disappointment for Inge, because he seeks to benefit from Solter's sacking. His apartment that Inge tries to jazz up with a daring bottle pyramid (Fig. 6) demonstrates with its indecisive style between old and new that its inhabitant is indecisive; and, indeed, he opposes Solter in the crucial work meeting out of fear for his own career.

Fig. 5—Luise Faber's office. Film still © DEFA-Stiftung, Kurt Schütt. Filmmuseum Potsdam.

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Fig. 6—Jensen's apartment. Film still © DEFA-Stiftung, Kurt Schütt. Filmmuseum Potsdam.

Fig. 7—Dr. Karl's apartment. Film still © DEFA-Stiftung, Kurt Schütt. Filmmuseum Potsdam.

Another private interior design is introduced in the film with the apartment of the old engineer Dr. Karl, a sensitive lover of art and cacti (Fig. 7). Dr. Karl, who also failed personally and whose health suffered due to this failure, now encourages his younger colleague Solter to consistently follow his own path. Dr. Karl's apartment appears to be old-fashioned yet sedate. It is furnished with the old, heavy furniture, but also the light rocking chair, which reminds one of the 1930s—it is the space of the engineer of a past era. Characteristically, the party secretary—like in all DEFA films, the obligatory good, old comrade, acted, as so often, by Hans Hardt-Hardtloff—has no room of his own. He becomes active only in working contexts.

The assignment of designated styles to the protagonist's private spaces in *Spring Takes Time* is reminiscent of Fritz Lang's film *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933), a film that was not allowed to be shown in Nazi Germany. This film is also about a good engineer, Thomas Kent, who at the core is a good guy, but has incurred guilt due to external circumstances. In the course of the thrilling plot, he succeeds in escaping the snares of the mysterious Dr. Mabuse with the help of Lilli, a young woman who loves him. The engineer's apartment is also the only completely modernly furnished space in this film. It is as positively connoted as the Solter family's living and work spaces. They are set off against the rooms of the entirely power-oriented functionaries with their neo-baroque furniture, just like the furniture of Fritz Lang´s characters, who turn out to be villains.

Beyond utopia

If one looks back upon the 1960s with today's sensitivities, we can recognize that the GDR's rejection of modernity was accompanied by a loss of utopia. Timid GDR cultural policies repressed and banned the artistic avant-garde of DEFA in 1965/1966. By rejecting the positions critical of society that became conspicuous in *Spring Takes Time* and other film

projects, their constructive substance was rebuffed and dispelled at the same time. Subsequently, the hope for a speedy creation of a new, fairer social order disappeared together with the forms of modernity. Many DEFA films of the 1970s and 1980s signify this with various retraction scenarios by taking into account individually oriented alternatives and ways. They no longer had the rigor and strength of modern minimalism that Günter Stahnke and Georg Kranz deployed so convincingly in *Spring Takes Time*. Looking back, these aesthetic positions prove to be stunningly forceful and strong.

Translated by Sigrit Schütz.

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