



Storytelling for Film

Excerpts from an interview with scriptwriter Thomas Knauf

I think *The Architects* was a film about the Wende, which was also acknowledged by an international audience. On several levels and in parallel storylines, the film reveals the demise of a state as well as the demise of many people. What do you remember about the creation of the film?

Yes, it's a long story, which took about five years to develop. But to make a long story short: Since I moved to Berlin in 1970, I had this big group of friends here in Prenzlauer Berg. We were the same age and I found them interesting. Most of them had studied architecture in Weimar and had graduated about the same year. It was a group of about 20 people, but only a handful was still working as architects. The others had already thrown in the towel. [...] They all had crazy social and aesthetic ideas of modernizing those typical GDR prefabricated slab blocks and building modern and interesting cities. But by the beginning of the 1980s, most of them had already given up. One committed suicide, a few left for the West and only one was still an architect, the quietest and most talented of them, Michael Kny, who was working at one of the few East Berlin construction offices that had survived. [...]

In 1987, I sat down and wrote the story about architects, who one by one all go down the drain. The idea wasn't to write about architects, but rather to write the autobiography of my own generation, like István Szábo in his film *Apa (Father)*, 1966). [...] Problems first arose when the script contract was signed, and a director came along, Peter Kahane, who didn't like how the downfall of ten people was depicted in such a sarcastic and undramatic way. He wanted to attach the story to a building project and have their failure told around that. At first, I didn't like it but then I figured he was right. The story would be much stronger when told over a shorter period and not in episodes as Brigitte Reimann had done in her novel *Franziska Linkerhand*. In my opinion, the atmospheric details in her novel overshadow the focus on real problems in construction. I wasn't too keen about the DEFA's film adaptation of her novel *Unser kurzes Leben (Our Short Life)*, dir. Lothar Warneke. So I wanted to contrast our film with a stronger story and followed the director's suggestions. After three months of nonstop arguing with the director, a script emerged that was intense and offered unexpected turns. But that was only the beginning of the problems.

The film *The Architects* presents sequences and images that thematize hopelessness. But what was the reason for this hopelessness? Maybe one should better describe this hopelessness as a situation with no future. *Our Short Life* still showed an effort to change things. There was still a kind of faith in chance, but that's no longer the case in your film. Is *The Architects* a conclusion?

For sure! You have to consider that it emerged at a time that was two years before the GDR collapsed. That's when I began to conclude in earnest. Actually, I felt that this was already the final stage. Although all enthusiasm was gone, I had a desire to draw my conclusions regardless of imminent consequences. When the new DEFA Studio head said: "I can't take responsibility for this material, absolutely not, it contradicts my political beliefs," the director and I determined that our professional future would be at stake. [...]

Peter Kahane thought that in the course of Perestroika, even the DEFA had to make films that came to terms with the Stalinist past. GDR politics didn't matter to me anymore. I didn't have anything left for ideological trench warfare between reformers and blockheads. I just participated because I was suddenly becoming a successful writer. Everyone who writes screenplays wants them to make it into a movie theater. [...] I didn't care about the fate of the state. I just wanted—in cinematic form—to somehow get rid of this whole dilemma of my generation. And then we told the studio head: "If we can't make this film,

we're ending our careers here and now." And we would have done it.

I'd like to address an aspect of this film's narrative: Daniel Brenner is almost a tragic figure in the film. He is "one of those GDR citizens," who believes till the end in certain opportunities that society could offer and is torn between being active and passive, a state of joy or despair. He shows most distinctly the ambiguity that was perhaps the essence of "socialism." How does the film portray such an internal and external damage?

Well, Daniel Brenner's character doesn't portray the group of civil rights activists who tried to steal the limelight or such opposition members who hid in the Church's shadow and didn't lift a finger for the country. Daniel Brenner stands for those people who ruined their physical, spiritual and moral health for this country, who were committed and wanted to change things—they are whom I wanted to portray. Particularly one person because he was one of my friends, who is, of course, not the same person as in the film, but he is still similar to Daniel Brenner, who stands for an entire generation of people who wanted to change the country even to the point of self-sacrifice, which is the Prussian quality of committing to do something even when the purpose of it is questionable. [...] The film doesn't actually rail against this typical German characteristic—the tragic aspect is at the forefront rather than the ironic distance so that the film pays homage to these people. What we couldn't know, of course, was how quickly they landed on history's garbage heap. Today, nobody cares about them anymore or honors them. Nobody thinks about those people who believed in the country's future, navigated daily life, made personal mistakes, and ended up committing suicide, turned into alcoholics, or were forced into unemployment.

The truth is that only the truly active is to be morally blamed! He who does nothing can't be implicated. And those who get involved in making the world a better place, in changing things, are in the end always held responsible for it. That also applies also to Daniel Brenner, who certainly isn't blind, avaricious, unscrupulous, or corrupt—actually, he is what the Russians call "a good *Mensch*." Regardless, he does things contrary to his common sense and becomes partly responsible for the failures of others because he intervenes. In the end, he kneels and vomits in front of the stage at the awards ceremony. This is such a dramatic image, but later it is offset by Händel's music. This scene is only bearable because it is not a cynical image; rather it shows the desperation of those people, who at the end of the GDR, were at their own end too.

The musical motifs often suggest a threat caused by the city's architecture as well as personal relationships.

I didn't have much to do with that. The director's son composed the music, and they discussed it among themselves without my involvement. I would have preferred a composer like Georges Delerue and his soundtrack for Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*). By the way, this is one of my favorite films. But as a rookie, Tamás Kahane did a great job because his music expresses the architects' deep sadness even in certain jubilant moments. I really like the solo accordion with its French soul as well as the sentimental German folk songs. For example, it's the music that sets the tone in the scene where Daniel Brenner tries to draw his daughter's attention at the Brandenburg Gate.

The music allows us to look right into the protagonist's soul, who seems about to cry, but outwardly he remains stalwart. I would consider myself a callous viewer, even of my own films, but there are some musical moments in *The Architects* where I have to swallow hard because the GDR's past haunts me just like Brecht wrote: "When the wound doesn't hurt anymore, the scar does."

[...]

You mentioned that precisely this generation often couldn't adapt to the new circumstances [after the fall of the Wall].

That doesn't really apply to the film though because the script was finished before the GDR ended. The problem with *The Architects* was that the film could only be made after the disintegration of power structures became apparent at the beginning of 1989; otherwise, it would have never been produced in the way it was. [...] Shooting was delayed several months for technical reasons, which led to the awkward situation that this film was supposed to be about the GDR, but in real life the Wall was already down

[...] It was rather absurd! Before anyone knew the Wall would fall, we were faced with the grotesque situation that the scene at the Brandenburg Gate had to be pushed way back in the production schedule because it became clear that we wouldn't get permission to shoot it. Filming the Wall was taboo, even for "Aktuelle Kamera" (a GDR TV news program). So we weren't sure how to film his scene, but then the Wall fell on November 9, 1989. We were very lucky that we could film the scene four days before they opened the Brandenburg Gate [to the public]. The situation was completely absurd.

When the film hit the theaters in May 1990, some critics insinuated that we very cleverly made a film critical of the GDR as it was coming to an end, that we had slipped things into the story that were already post-GDR. But it isn't true. Everything that is in the film was in the script. There's one single scene that was filmed after the fact, where Brenner is sitting in a pub with a young female architect and she says, "There aren't many of us today... but someday we'll start marching the streets." And he says, "Nobody here will dare to march or picket. They're either cowards or fat or content." [...] One can only talk about the past as it appears in the present because one must first understand the circumstances to analyze them. Besides, the events portrayed in the film had already happened ten years earlier.

That was the problem when anyone said that this is the first post-Wall film. In reality, it was one of the last DEFA films. We couldn't have predicted at all that this film would turn into the country's final outcome. There's a scene in the film, a drive along the Wall through East Berlin's new housing district, and then there's this lovely children's song: "Our homeland... these are not only our cities and villages, but our homeland is also all the trees in the forest..." The film sequence isn't only a bitter commentary on the songs sung in honor of the GDR, which were sometimes quite lyrical. But it also shows an avant-garde of sorts—a typical GDR inclination for ugliness in new housing districts, particularly the Wall, the largest structure in the GDR, an ugliness that's unrivaled. Its use, too, was one of the great atrocities, but evidence of GDR architecture, nonetheless. [...]

Wolfgang Trampe is an (East) German author of poems, novels and essays as well as an editor and publisher. He has worked at the Aufbau publishing house in Berlin and edited numerous poetry collections. In the 1970s and the early 1980s, he was the co-editor of the series *Neue Lyrik – Neue Namen* (*New Poems – New Names*) that gave unknown, young East German poets a voice. Trampe also wrote the scenario for the DEFA feature film *Dein unbekannter Bruder* (*Your Unknown Brother*, 1981, dir. Ulrich Weiss). In 2003-04, Trampe talked to DEFA scriptwriters, including Thomas Knauf, Wolfgang Kohlhaase, Ulrich Plenzdorf and Gabriele Kotte and published the interviews in *Erzählen für den Film: Gespräche mit Autoren der DEFA* (2004) as part of DEFA Foundation's book series.

This is a slightly revised translation of the English text that was published on ICESTORM Entertainment's 2004 DVD release of The Architects.

Citation:

ICESTORM Entertainment GmbH, translator. "Storytelling for Film." *The Architects (Die Architekten)*. Berlin: ICESTORM Entertainment GmbH, 2004. DVD. "Interview mit Thomas Knauf." *Erzählen für den Film: Gespräche mit Autoren*. By Wolfgang Trampe, DEFA-Stiftung, 2004. Excerpts 202-211.