

SPRING TAKES TIME: SYMBOL AND SIGNAL

“... and what if the directives are wrong?!”

By Detlef Kannapin

Der Frühling braucht Zeit (*Spring Takes Time*) starts with close-ups of serious faces. Inge Solter (Doris Abesser), the daughter of Heinz Solter (Eberhard Mellies) and his wife (Elfriede Née), overhears snippets of her parents' conversation in the evening, who discuss cut-backs, economizing and troubles. For the time being, the reason for this remains unknown, but one soon learns that Solter was laid off by his company. To make matters worse, the criminal investigation department shows up and arrests him. Solter unfurls the complex web of his transgressions, now being told in flash-backs, before the state's prosecutor (Erik S. Klein).

At the behest of his superiors and against his own better judgment, Solter approves the construction of a gas pipeline despite possible gas leaks. His decision is motivated by the pressure to meet quotas. The inevitable happens—an accident occurs in winter, which results in not only a big financial loss, but also gravely injures Solter's colleague, Wiesen (Rolf Hoppe). The chief operation officer, Eberhard Faber (Günther Simon), attempts now to cut the administrative losses and, at the same time, to present Solter as the only one responsible when, in fact, everyone in the plant management knows that Solter initiated the premature activation of the gas pipe only because he was ordered to. Still, Faber presents his version insularly and alleges that Solter acted negligently, although he himself as the director of the plant gives absolute priority to achieving quotas (and to his own career), rather than occupational safety and collective spirit. Due only to the tenacity of the state's prosecutor to learn the truth, the company's work and management methods come under scrutiny alongside the case in question. Faber has to realize that Solter will be acquitted. The charges are being dropped.

At first glance, the rather sluggish subject is ostensibly a variation of the well-known practice in the GDR of contending with production problems; behind it, however, hides a conflict that was of tremendous importance for the sociopolitical development of the GDR during the 1960s. It deals no more and no less with the questions how and in which way and by whom socialist society should be led competently and prudently during the onset phase of the scientific and technical revolution. Along with the problems of leadership, the movie also deals with the contradictions between social and individual interests and, subsequently, the ethical development of social coexistence. There is a discussion between Faber and Solter before the accident in which the operating directives are twice criticized. What happens if the directives are wrong? Faber presses his point that the administration cannot be wrong. Solter retorts that practice can run counter to the directives and that one has to reassess scientifically and rationally whether the directives live up to reality. During a later conversation with his wife (Karla Runkehl), Faber admits that he and Solter could become an invincible working team, if Solter were not so stubborn. These dialogs clearly demonstrate the basic social conflict. How can society be organized after laying the foundations of socialism so that it functions as a unit and is balanced in terms of planning, satisfying needs, and consideration of modern complexities? In contrast to the interpretations of functionless art that see their only *raison d'être* in aesthetic contemplation, *Spring Takes Time* is, on the contrary, a film with an outstanding role; it wants to contribute to the discussion about the possible future progression of socialist (self) consciousness.

This approach, as seen in the movie, eventually presented by Günter Stahnke, however, was not desired by the administrators of the SED Party, and this casts a light on the condition of the political culture, which hardened again in 1965. *Spring Takes Time* premiered on November 25, 1965. However, the film was shown in theaters until it was officially banned on December 22, 1965 in the wake of the 11th Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED. Obviously, the immediate withdrawal of all circulating prints did not happen nationwide since one cinema in Potsdam advertised a screening of the film at the end of January 1966.¹ It is therefore correct, as is common in academic texts about this topic, to associate Stahnke's movie with the verdict of the 11th Plenum, especially since the director's DEFA career was terminated and he

¹ Screenings of the film at the Melodie-Lichtspiele cinema in Potsdam from January 21-24, 1966 were advertised in the section Cinema Program of the *Berliner Zeitung* dated January 21, 1966.

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never got another chance to make a socially challenging movie.² The revival of the movie took place at cinema International in Berlin on January 18, 1990 and again one month later at the Berlin Film Festival. It was followed by sporadic showings in cinemas.³ Since then, the movie has been part of retrospectives, especially whenever such retrospectives recall the history of restrictions of the 11th Plenum. The surviving copies, however, have a length of 76 minutes (2085 meters), a minor difference from the original version (78 minutes, 2145 meters)⁴ that had been submitted for acceptance to the Central Administration for Film at the Ministry of Culture (HV Film). Cuts of various scenes were then ordered by Günter Witt, the deputy secretary for culture and head of HV Film.⁵ One needs to consider three analytical layers of interpretation: the sociopolitical background, the film's place in the director's filmography, and the film-aesthetic, especially the cinematically and historically relevant context.

Sociopolitical background

It has often been noted that only the closing of the border to West Berlin on August 13, 1961 allowed for the liberal climate in the GDR during the first half of the 1960s. Indeed, a considerable number of voices opined that the main source of interference with socialist construction had been eliminated with the border closures; now one would be able to systematically build the socialist society. Interestingly the building of the Wall—a visible measure—coincided with a less visible process, which nevertheless started to shape the class structure of the socialist society in an enduring manner.

After the structures for the bases of socialism were finalized (socialization of main industries, collectivization of agriculture, centralization of administration), a third social class developed parallel to the two main social classes (workers and farmers), which, due to its higher education, was prepared to occupy state leadership positions. This class was the intelligentsia, especially its technical branch (engineers, university graduates in the sciences, computer scientists). The decision in the SED to implement the New Economic System of Planning and Management of the National Economy, the Youth Communiqué, and also the Judiciary Decree of 1963-1964 was by no means merely a reactive measure meant to offer the general public some compensation for their confinement after August 13, 1961.⁶ Almost all the public justifications for the strategic reorientation of the GDR—also prominently espoused by Walter Ulbricht—stated that the scientific and technical revolution made high demands on organizations and state management, which needed to be tackled by all social classes by means of rationalization, cooperation, and teamwork.⁷ Parallel to this, the SED promoted relevant scientific projects to establish and specify controlling mechanisms based on cybernetics, accounting models, data processing, and automation.⁸ Promoting specialists during this phase was crucial to the introduction of efficient accounting. The deliberate preference given to the technical intelligentsia went hand in hand with their increased political influence.

The main conflict of *Spring Takes Time* symbolizes in an aesthetically concentrated form exactly this sociopolitical contradiction by means of Solter's and Faber's contrary views. On the one hand, the dialectics of the socialist perspective consist precisely in establishing a synthesis between society's demand for the principle of equality and the achievement principle of its educated members.⁹ On the other hand, the increasing authority of the technocratic intelli-

² Cf. the still indispensable standard reference by Günter Agde (editor) concerning the sphere of the 11th Plenum and its general placement in motion picture history. *Kahlschlag. Das 11. Plenum ZK der SED 1965. Studien und Dokumente*. Berlin: Aufbau 1991 (2. extended edition. 2000); Erika Richter. "Zwischen Mauerbau und Kahlschlag 1961 bis 1965." *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg. DEFA-Spielfilme 1946 – 1992*. Ralf Schenk (ed.). Berlin: Henschel 1994. 158 – 211; especially 194 -198.

³ Cf. Henning Wrage. *Die Zeit der Kunst. Literatur, Film und Fernsehen in der DDR der 1960er Jahre. Eine Kulturgeschichte in Beispielen*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008. 308.

⁴ Editor's Note: The information about the length of the film varies in the 1960s documents and publications. State Film Archive's *Filmbibliographischer Jahresbericht*: 96 min / 2602 meters. The HV Film document (dated August 19, 1965) of the approval of the film dated August 17, 1965 lists 2145 meters; later changed by hand into 2085 meters.

⁵ The edited material was destroyed. Cf. Günter Stahnke: „Verbotener Frühling. Notate für ein entstehendes Buch.“ *Informationsblatt Nr. 19: Der Frühling braucht Zeit*. 20. Internationales Forum des Jungen Films Berlin 1990: Download unter www.arsenal-berlin.de/berlinale-forum/archiv/katalogblätter/category/die-verbotsfilme-der-ddr.htm (Accessed: August 3, 2015).

⁶ Concerning the background of these sociopolitical measures cf. Jörg Rössler. *Geschichte der DDR*. Cologne: Papzrossa 2012. 49-67. Concerning the Youth Communiqué and its consequences cf. the (rather deprecating) interpretation by Marc-Dietrich Ohse: *Jugend nach dem Mauerbau. Anpassung, Protest und Eigensinn (DDR 1961 – 1974)*. Berlin: Christoph Links, 2003. 64 – 82. Concerning the Judiciary Decree, see the discussion between the years 1961 to 1964 in the theoretical magazine of the GDR-Jurisprudence, *Staat und Recht*.

⁷ Cf. the corresponding speeches by Ulbricht concerning the introduction of "Das Neue Ökonomische System der Planung und Leitung der Volkswirtschaft," of the "Jugendgesetz," the intellectual creativity, and rationalization between 1963 and 1966. In: Walter Ulbricht: *Probleme der sozialistischen Leitungstätigkeit*. Berlin: Dietz, 1968. 205 243, 363–379, and 423–438.

⁸ Cf. especially Georg Klaus. *Kybernetik und Gesellschaft*. Berlin: Deutsche Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1966.

⁹ Cf. the general conclusion in Felix Bartels's. *Leistung und Demokratie. Genie und Gesellschaft im Werk von Peter Hacks*. Mainz: Thiele, 2010. 91–96.

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gentsia proves to be so extensive that they obtain class status as well as push for political representation for their special interests.¹⁰ The art of reasonable governance lies in creating and maintaining a sociopolitical parity in the form of a stable equilibrium, i.e. bringing the contradiction of equality and achievement into a well-balanced ratio, as well as acknowledging at the same time the increased role of the technical intelligentsia and integrating it selectively into the state leadership. Taking into consideration the respective interests and balancing them sensibly requires effective state control that is significantly borne by the party authorities. This should work less and less on the basis of command and instruction rituals and more on negotiation and procedure. Ulbricht had understood this, his successor after 1971, Erich Honecker, less so.

The dispute between Solter and Faber concerning the correct work procedure is also a synonym for the struggle for the correct way of life in socialism. The more complex the social stages of development became, the less simple chains of command and hierarchic appeals sufficed. The transition from the phase of the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” in the GDR (until 1960) to the phase of the “socialist lifestyle based on the education of awareness” (since 1960) took place with great contradictions and was accompanied by considerable setbacks. Against this background, the 11th Plenum appears as the most visible expression of an irrational and misunderstood exercise in control.

The film in contexts of the director’s bio- and filmography

Günter Stahnke (born 1928) came to his profession as movie director via circuitous routes. Although he was part of the same generation that the DEFA Studio and TV recruited from the first graduating classes of the film academy with a directing major, he had not studied directing but rather acting and education. Stahnke first worked as an actor and film journalist. He acquired the practical skills of a director autodidactically, whereby he attracted attention due to his fascinating perception, his courage to improvise, and the vision for well-conceived cinematic results. Right after his collaboration on the shorter children’s film *Peter und das Einmaleins mit der Sieben* (*Peter and the Seven Times Table*, 1962), television entrusted him with the film adaptation of the radio version of the opera *Fetzers Flucht* (*Fetzer’s Flight*) by Günter Kunert and the music of Kurt Schwaen. According to his own statement, this assignment happened by chance because no one in television counted on the material not being screenable. As a test, however, Stahnke shot the key scene with the mortal fight between Harry Fetzer (Ekkehard Schall) and the guard (Fred Düren) on a moving open freight car so realistically that the broadcasters were excited and gave the go-ahead for production.¹¹ Actually, *Fetzer’s Flight*, a story of the main hero’s (Fetzer’s) “double” flight, first to the west and then, due to his sense of responsibility, back to the east, was broadcast on December 13, 1962 and rerun the next day. The initially euphoric press reviews about the successful experiment—which, through its aesthetic realization, was an absolute novelty at that time—soon disappeared and were replaced by campaign-like scathing reviews. The follow-up project that was designed and implemented simultaneously by Stahnke and Kunert, *Monolog für einen Taxifahrer* (*Monolog for a Taxi Driver*), subsequently had no chance to be broadcast, although the air date of December 23, 1962, the week of the 10th anniversary of the *Deutscher Fernsehfunk* (German Broadcasting), had been announced already.¹² The negative interventions were clearly due to direct interference by the Party leadership (Walter Ulbricht and Horst Sindermann). Watching both movies retrospectively, one gets the strange impression that real support for socialism in the arts reached its limit exactly whenever the artists turned out to be too idiosyncratic.¹³

In 1963, a fruitful collaboration between Stahnke, Kunert, and Schwaen was once again successful with the children’s film opera *Vom König Midas* (*About King Midas*), a medium length color film that deals—both in- and outside the staging of the fairy tale by Pioneers (members of the state youth organization) in a small town—with moral questions about greed, egoism, and arrogance. When afterwards, however, Hans Rodenberg, the then head of HV Film at the Ministry of Culture of the GDR, got hold of the script of the Mark Twain adaptation, *A Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, by Stahnke and Kunert, he ordered that any collaboration between the two should be stopped immediately and that the film studio

¹⁰ Cf. György Konrád, Iván Szelényi. *Die Intelligenz auf dem Weg zur Klassenmacht* (1974). Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1978. 273.

¹¹ Cf. Christoph Hochhäusler: Günter Stahnke. „Revolver live!“ *Revolver*, Nr. 31, 2014. 105–133, here 111; Günter Stahnke in a discussion with the author on the occasion of the revival of *Fetzer’s Flight* in the Peter Hacks Society in Berlin on February 24, 2015.

¹² The premiere of *Monolog für einen Taxifahrer*—in tandem with *Spring Takes Time*—took place on January 26, 1990 at the Academy of Arts in East Berlin; its first broadcast on GDR TV took place on April 26, 1990.

¹³ Cf. a comprehensive analysis of *Fetzer’s Flight* and *Monolog für einen Taxifahrer* in Wrage, *Zeit der Kunst*, 300–342.

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should authorize no further joint projects.¹⁴ With what we know today about the mechanisms of repressive crackdowns, it becomes clear why Stahnke afterwards tried in vain to assume another film direction. Nevertheless, as we know today, he would get one last chance to prove his artistic abilities in film with *Spring Takes Time*.¹⁵

If one looks at Günter Stahnke's career development in the medial cosmos of the GDR during the obviously short time span between 1962 and 1965, one has to state firstly that there was hardly any other young director who was so productive in such a limited time frame (three completed medium-length feature films, one film he co-directed, and one full-length feature film).¹⁶ Secondly, Stahnke was open to experiments and found unerringly appropriate visual solutions for text and music passages at hand. Thirdly, he already acted like an expert when it came to the rules of the two disparate image formats of cinema and television. He succeeded in the rather unusual field of the TV or film opera by giving innovative and modern answers to questions about the representation of issues, which still seem modern even fifty years after their creation. The same is true for the textual subjects. Even if German-German escape stories like *Fetzer's Flight* have been historically resolved, unresolved are the problems of common responsibility, social estrangement, false ideals, and advocacy for the idea of a humane society. At the same time, a movie like *Monolog for a Taxi Driver* (lead Fred Düren with interior monolog spoken by Armin Mueller-Stahl) about the psychological turmoil of the individual in socialist society has become thematically no more obsolete than the debate about adequate forms of work and life for the benefit of all members of society, even if the socialist framework and the corresponding context for discussion have disappeared, as seen in *Spring Takes Time*. In other words, Günter Stahnke's movies "express, after all, an explicit plea for collaboratively responsible actions, a commitment for socialist society. If one concedes this, it becomes clear a second time that the GDR nomenclature frequently pursued just those who were most committed to the country's socialism."¹⁷

The withdrawal of *Spring Takes Time* resulted in Stahnke's instant dismissal without notice from the DEFA Studio for Feature Films. It is one of the tragic chapters of the GDR that afterwards he was employed exclusively in the production of light-hearted TV programs, musicals, comedies, and family series. Just like the character of the foreman, Meternagel, in Christa Wolf's novel *Der geteilte Himmel* (*The Divided Heaven*), he experienced the fate of a "regressive cadre development," a step down to the second row of filmmakers, although, due to his skills, he still could have made some significant contributions to GDR film history.

The context of film aesthetics and film history

After the contract award process for *Spring Takes Time*, Stahnke made clear that he didn't even consider filming simply the "naturalistic facts of the case" or illustrating a table of formulae about the struggle for production indicators. On the contrary, he aimed from the beginning at a "profile of the active characters" by foregoing the naturalistic particularization.¹⁸ This claim becomes obvious in almost all shots. Already, the exposition traces the difficulties of the Solter family with extremely illuminated and expressive special framing constellations and with the alternation of close-ups and medium long shots (camera by Hans-Jürgen Sasse). The scenes with Solter before the state prosecutor and the confrontation with Faber show the prosecutor and Faber filling the screen and radiating power, while Solter stands initially "shrunken" in the middle of the space. As the action progresses, the camera perspectives on the protagonists change. The more the prosecutor wants to get to the truth, and the more Faber gets wound up in his sense of authority and Solter knows that the validation of the arguments are on his side, the more the visual negotiation of the conflict takes place at "eye level."

The discussion between Faber and Solter during the first meeting of the management committee is exemplary, when the camera zooms away from both protagonists, presenting their viewpoints coequally. Later on, the camera's focus on Faber becomes more and more distanced until in the last scene Faber (shot without exaggeration) leaves the meeting

¹⁴ Cf. Hochhäuser, Günter Stahnke. „Revolver live!“ 127.

¹⁵ The condition for that was an extensive "self-criticism" within the framework of an SED conference on culture on March 25-26, 1963, during which he had to distance himself from his earlier work. Cf. Günter Agde: "Zwischen Mahlsteinen. Der Regisseur Günter Stahnke und sein Film *Der Frühling braucht Zeit* (1965)." *Filmblatt Nr. 48, Spring 2012*, 33-45.

¹⁶ In addition there is the cooperation on the TV documentary about the assassination plot against Hitler on July 20, 1944, *Revolution am Telefon* (*Revolution on the Phone*, 1964), by Karl Gass. (Stahnke staged the feature film sequences) and he directed the two-part TV thriller *Doppelt oder nichts* (*Double or Nothing*, 1964).

¹⁷ Cf. Wrage. *Zeit der Kunst*. 342.

¹⁸ Cf. Richter. „Zwischen Mauerbau und Kahlschlag.“ 198.

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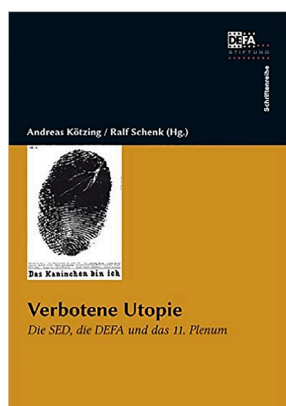
furiously, during which Solter has been found innocent. Such an aesthetic control of the plot continues in all subplots (e.g. in all sequences with Faber's wife) in which the highly stylized décor, the tailor-made proportion of the characters in relation to the scenery, and the high contrast black-and-white focus are memorable. By the standards at the time, certainly, but even from our present point of view, *Spring Takes Time* is a carefully directed and produced movie that places content-related depth with visual precision in a balanced relationship.

One can prove with international and national examples that *Spring Takes Time* was no isolated case in film history. Movies like *Obžalovaný* (*Defendant*, CSSR, 1964, dirs. Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos) or *Húsz óra* (*Twenty Hours*, Hungary, 1964, dir. Zóltan Fábri) worked with similar set pieces from industry and agriculture in order to promote the new socialist principles in their respective countries. Moreover, more of the later banned DEFA films like *Denk bloss nicht, ich heule* (*Just Don't Think I'll Cry*, 1965, dir. Frank Vogel), *Berlin um die Ecke* (*Berlin around the Corner*, 1966, dir. Gerhard Klein), and *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*, 1966, dir. Frank Beyer) pleaded for the improvement of the cooperation of modern work and lifestyles. In this regard and from the present point of view, the TV mini-series *Dr. Schlüter* (5 parts, 1965/66, dir. Achim Hübner), which was highly praised back then and, in the meantime, is often (wrongly) condemned, assumes a different dimension. In its fourth part, *Die Insel* (*The Island*), the confrontation between Schlüter (Otto Mellies), a respected scientist, and the not very likable Party Secretary Semkow (Horst Hiemer) dominates. The conflict pushes either towards a disaster or a settlement and is finally harmoniously resolved in terms of a rational style of government during a meeting with the secretary in charge (Martin Flürchinger). The secretary stresses that socialism would become poorer without people like Semkow and not more prosperous without people like Schlüter. Even after the 11th Plenum, the concept of the equilibrium of working class and intelligentsia is still present in several TV and cinema films such as *Anlauf* (*Start*, 1969, dir. Egon Günther), *Zeit zu leben* (*Time to Live*, 1969, dir. Horst Seemann), or *Netzwerk* (*Network*, 1970, dir. Ralf Kirsten).

All in all, *Spring Takes Time* is a symbol and a signal of its time because the movie struggles for new procedures and lifestyle principles for the developed socialist society, albeit via a discussion about work conditions. It is a signal because title and plot must also be understood allegorically—as a call for the fight against old, outdated structures whose reconstitution under the auspices of equality and justice need time. Since the potential signal effect was taken away from the movie for political reasons, a practical realization is still pending.

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