

Kurt Maetzig's *Das Kanninchen bin ich*: Lessons from a "Modern Dictatorship" in East Germany?

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Why analyze a 40-year-old film from East Germany that was never widely seen by either the East or West German public until 1990 and was once described as a relic "of a vanished land or perhaps one that never was?"¹ The debate over Kurt Maetzig's *Das Kanninchen bin ich* (The Rabbit is Me) illustrates the complicated nature of dissent and the limits of control in totalitarian regimes.² Authors Jürgen Kocka, Konrad Jarausch and Monika Kaiser have argued that after the Berlin Wall was built, East Germany began to move away from totalitarianism toward a more modern dictatorship.³ The debate over Maetzig's film helps us weigh the totalitarian model, which focuses on repression from the top down, against the model of a modern dictatorship, which emphasizes the negotiation that takes place between individuals and the state concerning dissent in a dictatorship. While Kocka, Jarausch and Kaiser all agree that the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was "thoroughly ruled" from above, they explore how social change nevertheless took place.

While it may seem odd to talk about a modern dictatorship and Ulbricht in the same breath, the case has been made that after 1961, Ulbricht shifted from a Stalinist posture to become an advocate of economic and cultural reform. He made this shift not because he experienced a change in personality, but out of national interest.⁴ Ulbricht thought that the only way the GDR could prevail in the struggle against the Federal Republic of Germany was through reform. Maetzig's film was a product of this reform,

but was ultimately banned at the end of 1965 because the more dogmatic members of the GDR Politburo triumphed over Ulbricht's experiments.

As a political scientist, the politics of the production of Maetzig's film and its rejection by the 11th Plenum of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED, the Communist Party of the GDR) in December 1965 make the film an irresistible topic. The film is also noteworthy because it illustrates East German vulnerability to West German influence during times of Soviet leadership change. The themes in Maetzig's film were similar to those of films being made at the time in West Germany.⁵ This paper will explore the individual and domestic conflict, as well as international pressure, associated with the film's release.⁶ It will also consider the motivation for Maetzig's oppositional behavior.

The charged international political atmosphere around the film, exploited by East and West Germans alike, deserves exploration because the film's main theme—generational conflict and reform—symbolized tension not only within the East German political leadership (i.e., between those interested in the reform of socialism and those opposed to it), but reflected similar tensions in West Germany. After the construction of the Wall, East German leaders did not feel they had total authority in the country. They appeared caught between SED Politburo struggles, the expectations of their citizens, West German criticism, and Soviet insecurity due to leadership change.

Maetzig's role as director also merits more attention because he was loyal to the Communist Party, which he joined in 1944. It was possible for him to make the film because of his track record, "integrity and proven party loyalty."⁷ (*The Rabbit is Me* was based on an already banned Manfred Bieler novel, which made its production all the

more provocative.⁸⁾ The film, together with Frank Vogel's film about the generation gap, *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* (*Don't Think that I'm Crying*), were the only two films ever featured at a plenum of the SED—the eleventh plenum in 1965.

The dynamics of the Cold War meant that East Germans were fearful of 1) the future of *Kulturpolitik* in the Soviet Union after Khrushchev's removal put his cultural "thaw" into jeopardy and 2) West German attempts to highlight the failure of East German policies. While General Secretary Ulbricht was among those interested in reform prior to the SED plenum, his reasons for reform were different from those of the filmmakers. And he was forced to abandon reform and adopt the dogmatic position of the SED Politburo majority after his economic, social and cultural policies came under simultaneous attack.

The debate over the Maetzig film gives us a chance to understand the gray nature of dissent and the political negotiation that occurred in and between communist countries.⁹ Stefan Soldovieri has described film censorship in East Germany as "not simply something inflicted upon films from above, but a complex and contentious process of negotiation with historically shifting parameters."¹⁰ Corey Ross has argued that Soviet policy (and as a result, East German policy) was one of "improvisations and contradictions."¹¹ This article will, to borrow his words, "disentangle and draw new connections between contending narratives"¹² about the roles of Maetzig and Ulbricht in the making of *The Rabbit is Me* by relying on sources from a variety of disciplines: film/cultural studies, economics, history and political science. The analysis will focus on the approval of the film, its retraction, and the 11th SED Plenum as an example of complex negotiation in a communist regime.

The Role of Maetzig

Coming from an older generation (he was born in 1911), Maetzig had been a founder of DEFA (*Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft*, the East German state-owned film company from 1946 to 1992) and was rector of the East German film school. By 1965, he had directed 14 films and received the National Prize five times. While certain East German politicians, cultural administrators and artists wanted to explore and experiment during the 1960s, Maetzig explicitly tried not to go “too far” in the creative film movement. In fact, he argued in several interviews that he did not view himself as a dissident, describing himself simply as a critical artist who wanted to make a productive contribution.¹³ He continued to defend both his film and his career vis-à-vis censorship into his eighties.

Once the Wall eliminated any option of an easy exit from the GDR, artists such as Maetzig had little choice but to use their voice to show *mismutige Loyalität* (disaffected loyalty).¹⁴ Maetzig joined with young film administrators in supporting partial criticism of their society precisely because he believed the audience would also see things his way. Joshua Feinstein describes Maetzig’s film as showing “the will of the little people caught between the cracks without voice.”¹⁵ The fact that Maetzig and other directors believed in the possibility of critical non-conformity suggests that East Germany was not entirely a totalitarian society, at least not from 1964 to 1965.

As the oldest of the “forbidden” film directors (54), Maetzig may have recognized a potentially fleeting “window of opportunity” for reform.¹⁶ While 11 other films were banned within nine months of *The Rabbit is Me*, the fact that all 12 are called the “Rabbit Films” suggests the importance of Maetzig’s role. As fellow artist Brigitte Reimann

reported: “He wanted to fight to the last breath. He had placed all his hopes on the film.”¹⁷ In retrospect, Soldovieri suggests that “[p]erhaps it was the sense that his own work was not free of overwrought politics that led Maetzig to embrace the atmosphere of reform and a subject venturing into such sensitive terrain.”¹⁸ Although some authors view Maetzig as a critical dissident, this author prefers the more modest term “partial critic” or “critical non-conformist,” which emphasizes dissent as a slow, inconclusive process.¹⁹

Das Kanninchen bin ich

The aesthetics of the film alone make it noteworthy and could still make it popular today. Shot in the cinematographic style of neo-realism,²⁰ it echoes the Berlin films of Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase, as well as the *Gegenwartsfilme* (East films about contemporary society) of the fifties and sixties, while using innovative techniques such as flashbacks and off-screen narration.²¹

The film takes place in East Berlin from 1961-1962, shortly before and after the building of the Wall. It deals with generational conflict, feminism, *Berliner Schnautze* (a “big-city” attitude), and idealism. The narrative is a “coming-of-age” story about a nineteen-year-old East Berlin woman, Maria Morzeck. Not exactly a heroine, as she is too flawed a figure, Maria represents the downtrodden. She lives in poor circumstances and her only family is an aunt and a troublesome brother, Dieter, who receives a three year prison sentence for political slander. The film depicts her difficult striving for personal autonomy in romantic as well as family and societal relationships. She is shown full of self-assurance, candor and confidence, in contrast to Communist Party members, who are often depicted in a negative light.²² While it is hard to justify the GDR

Politburo's description of the film as pornographic, Maria is a very strong woman with a clear sexual identity.

In most critical scenes, imagery is as important as the dialogue. In the film's opening minute, for example, Maetzig uses imagery to criticize the workplace and the behavior of men (who are all shown drinking, hanging out, and focused on flirting). We not only see Maria's workplace, a bar, but also Maria's working-class apartment, which contrasts with the judge's weekend cottage. Maetzig obliquely criticizes inequities within the communist system as well as the success of economic renewal. When Maria says "I am the Rabbit," it becomes clear that rabbit means innocence and, possibly, an attempt at experimentation—a *Versuchskanninchen* (an experimental rabbit, which could be translated in English as a guinea pig). This could connote her own need to experiment with society or the state's need to experiment with her life.

As the film opens, Maria is working as a waitress at a seedy bar near *Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse*, making the film's neo-realism immediately apparent. As the film progresses, she begins a relationship with the married judge who passed the harsh sentence on her brother, a relationship headed for trouble. When the judge and Maria spend time in a village, they witness how a local conflict resolution committee considers mitigating circumstances and gives a light sentence to a man who got drunk and insulted the East German National Peoples' Army.²³ Maria naturally becomes alarmed by the contrast between the local sentence imposed by citizens and her brother's severe verdict imposed in the name of the state and the Communist Party. Although the judge later changes her brother's verdict, Maria realizes he did not do so for her, but to gain political favor in the liberalizing GDR system. Here one could argue that Maetzig is criticizing the

opportunism of Ulbricht's liberalization. By the end of the story, Maria breaks off her relationship with the judge, because she sees how hypocritical he is. Her brother is freed, but when he comes home he beats her for having had a relationship with the judge.

Toward the end of the film, the judge's wife points a gun at Maria and threatens to shoot. Maria tells her, "We stand there like the rabbit and snake." One could view the image of the snake as connoting evil or privileged members of the Communist Party, whose lifestyle differs dramatically from that of the "innocents" of society, young women such as Maria.²⁴ As the film closes, Maria enrolls as a university student after initially being rejected because of her brother's crime. In this sense, one could argue that it is an uplifting film.²⁵

However, the final image of the film is of Maria as a strong woman pulling a cart, but still getting catcalls, which reminds the audience of the failure of communist society to accept the independence and equality of women. In a desperate attempt to make the film more inspirational, the censors insisted that Maria emphatically say at the end of the film, "I am a citizen of the GDR." Because of the complex moral and social issues addressed in the film, the statement appeared ludicrous and had the opposite effect of that intended by the censors.²⁶

By making a film primarily about a woman's private life, Maetzig may have recognized that he would have more ideological latitude to criticize the GDR's version of socialism, "its official arrogance and blindness."²⁷ In fact, the main male figures were so depressing that it was necessary to hire a more sympathetic actor, Alfred Müller, for the role of the judge to gain the censors' initial approval. Even the main character's brother,

Dieter, is dislikeable as he beats his sister. Maria, in contrast, is clearly the character with whom the audience identifies.

Prelude to the 11th SED Plenum: 1961–1964

The construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 led to the East German cultural reform that made Maetzig's film possible. As the director described the situation, "After the erection of the Wall, the situation in the country stabilized and became calmer. We thought the time had come to tackle problems in our country more critically and more outspokenly."²⁸ Wischnewski, DEFA's chief dramaturge, recalled, "My memories of the years from 1961–1965 are characterized by a sense of energy, self-consciousness, and a willingness to take risks."²⁹

There had been signs of liberalization in filmmaking even prior to the construction of the Berlin Wall. According to Joshua Feinstein,

As early as 1957, the studio director had obtained the right to approve scripts for production independently. DEFA had also had success with nuts-and-bolts issues such as annual production planning. The state still set basic annual goals, but the studio was generally free to develop individual projects as it saw fit.³⁰

When the first Bitterfeld conference (an East German literary conference focusing on workers) was held in 1959, it officially introduced the theme of reform to artists of all types (writers, filmmakers, etc). As a result of this decentralization and an urge for more creativity, seven working groups were formed at DEFA; Maetzig became head of the group *Roterkreis*.³¹ Without this structure, the sustained debate in support of his film would have been impossible. While these groups' primary purpose was to guarantee a better quality of production, they gradually gathered strength vis-à-vis upper-level managers at *Hauptverwaltung Film* (hereafter the Film Office), as well as in the SED.

In July 1961, the East German secret police (STASI) sent a report to the Politburo that outlined how SED cultural policy had failed to capture the population's imagination. It singled out movies as an area where the quality of production had to improve, as television was seriously competing with film for the attention of the masses.³² After the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in October 1961, a renewed effort at de-Stalinization began in the GDR. The SED Politburo soon held a meeting that focused solely on making DEFA more popular and more accountable.

At the same time, Ulbricht, who had been the “quintessential Stalinist leader in the 1950s,” took on a new political role.³³ After the Wall was built, he was alleged to have said, “Now we must rethink everything.”³⁴ He subsequently introduced parallel reforms in the economic and cultural arenas, which inadvertently increased the demand for grassroots democracy in the country.³⁵ Ulbricht's most personal policy reform, the NES (New Economic System for Planning and Management),³⁶ was officially announced at the 6th SED Plenum in January 1963. However, he had begun working on the reform in 1962, when he set up working groups to help reform the economy. It was an administrative realignment from above meant to streamline and rationalize the economy. Ulbricht wanted East Germany to be more competitive with West Germany, which meant that the GDR would have to be more open to western trade and support for the initiative to succeed.

The years 1962–1963 were opportune for the GDR to exploit the political weaknesses of West Germany, giving Ulbricht more room for maneuver. The Spiegel Affair, for example, broke in October 1962. One year later, the only chancellor West Germany had known, Konrad Adenauer, resigned and was replaced by his finance

minister, Ludwig Erhard, who was generally considered a lesser political figure.

Ulbricht's openness to reform subsequently increased because the FRG might become a more willing partner for him.

As Ulbricht focused on economic reform and other reforms as the means to win the Cold War, he courted the support of a younger generation open to experimentation. In film, these reformers included Günter Witt and Jochen Mückenberger, who were both in their early forties and had climbed the political ladder together.³⁷ Witt became the Deputy Minister for Culture in 1960 and Director of the Film Office in 1964. Mückenberger, who was considered undogmatic, replaced Wildening as the head of DEFA film studio in 1962.³⁸ Another young reformer, Hans Bentzien, who had studied in the Soviet Union, became Minister of Culture in 1961.

According to Maetzig, Khrushchev was also very supportive of cultural reform in the GDR. When Maetzig spoke to the Soviet leader during the June 1963 celebration of Ulbricht's 70th Birthday in East Germany, Khrushchev said to him, "Move out of the old paths which our films have followed. You should do something new, something bold. You will get unbelievable criticism, but you must withstand this."³⁹ In a recent interview, Maetzig added that Ulbricht joined the conversation and said "Oh, but we have praised you (Maetzig) so often." Khrushchev responded, "You (Maetzig) are already having to defend yourself!"⁴⁰ With this permissive environment, Witt felt comfortable enough in 1963 to bring in capitalist films for viewing by film artists, although general viewing of these films remained controversial.

In September 1963, an East German youth conference adopted a new policy that advocated more trust and understanding between adults and youth. As Deputy Minister of

Culture Witt described the atmosphere in 1964, “[T]here was a sense of great change (*Aufbruchstimmung*), a turn to themes of life in this country, a search for truth through the discussion of uncomfortable questions.”⁴¹ Witt gave a speech in March 1964 in which he emphasized the importance of dealing with real problems, not hiding from them.⁴² And Kurt Turba, head of the official Youth Commission, founded a youth radio station, DT 1964, that openly criticized East German leaders for avoiding reform.⁴³ Erich Apel, deputy member of the Politburo and chair of the State Planning Commission from 1963 to 1965, went even further, reporting that East Germans were planning on reaching world standards, not necessarily Soviet standards.⁴⁴

Soon afterwards, the second Bitterfeld conference, held in April 1964, emphasized that artists should be more involved in decision making. The 10th SED Plenum in April 1964 expressed support for artistic experimentation and pointed out the need to profit from and be competitive with other international cultural “products.”⁴⁵ On October 7 1964, the 15th anniversary of the GDR, an amnesty decree was proclaimed. It built on earlier jurisprudence decrees beginning in January 1961, which called for less bureaucracy in the justice system. The 1965 decree freed almost all political prisoners in East Germany (9,000 East Germans and 1,000 West Germans). Moreover, it stipulated that local and workplace committees could regulate minor judicial matters. This decree, which was viewed as a sign of further de-centralization and democratization, specifically prompted Maetzig to make his film, although he later said he overestimated the decree’s meaning.⁴⁶ The *Rabbit is me* focused on the intent of the original jurisprudence decree of 1961.

When Leonid Brezhnev took over from Khrushchev as leader of the Soviet Union in the middle of October 1964, East German reform was at risk. While there was no immediate reversal of Soviet economic or cultural policy, there was a great deal of uncertainty. Brezhnev held an October 1964 summit with Ulbricht, where he complained that East Germany was too caught up in its own economic affairs and neglected Soviet trade priorities⁴⁷—a reminder that any East German reform effort needed to keep Soviet needs in mind. That same month, moreover, the West German journal *der Spiegel* reported that old East German communists had told their western contacts that Ulbricht was working with “opportunistic young people” and was thus threatening to “betray the old ideas of the KPD.”⁴⁸

With these developments in the background, Witt approved “*Das Kanninchen bin ich*” for production in November 1964. With some recommended changes, the film was approved as part of DEFA’s thematic plan. In December, Culture Minister Bentzien, who apparently realized the potential political difficulties the film could cause, emphasized that the screenplay differed from the book so as to avoid major objections.⁴⁹ While there was some criticism of the project, the film appeared to already have strong support among film administrators and certain SED officials at the end of 1964. Those who supported the film evidently did not expect the strong political backlash that would follow in November and December 1965.

A New Debate on Cultural Policy

Maetzig’s film sparked a back-and-forth movement between cultural reform and cultural repression in the GDR during the entire year 1965–1966. At the time, many East German filmmakers did whatever it took to get a film released so that their artistic

interpretations could gain the support of the public. As director Wolfgang Kohlhaase noted,

We didn't feel we had to accept every criticism, particularly when a film was going down well with the public. And we had allies—some of whom were politicians who loved art and had no wish to subject it to crude demands.⁵⁰

In the increasingly polarized political atmosphere that followed Khrushchev's fall from power in the USSR, Witt had second thoughts about the Maetzig project as early as January 1965. In his role as director of the Film Office, he wrote a letter suggesting that the positive characters were not sufficiently developed and there was too much eros in the film. At a meeting held in late January with the Justice Ministry, however, neither Maetzig nor Justice Minister Hilde Benjamin appeared—they both sent lower-level representatives—suggesting that disagreements over the film could not have been considered too important at that time.⁵¹ Soldovieri believes it is possible that Justice Minister Benjamin, who was a personal acquaintance of Maetzig, “may have played a mediating role in the discussion surrounding the film project.”⁵²

In response to Witt's criticisms, the *Roterkreis* working group at DEFA simply stated in February that the script had already been approved, so no changes were needed. This may have been a bluff, as the head of the film studio (Mückenberger) ordered a halt to production in February. Certain changes were then made in March—the character of the judge became less careerist and Maria was given additional lines that suggested she was more sympathetic to socialism. The Section for State and Legal Affairs of the SED Central Committee (CC) remained critical of the project, as documented in a letter sent to the Culture Section in May of that year.⁵³

Why, however, was the Film Office tolerant of so little cooperation? As Soldovieri suggests:

Adapting to modest efforts to decentralize the film industry, the Film Office was forced into a mediating role between the party and the studio as it strove to prove that it was capable of successfully handling a difficult project. This helps to explain why film administrators did not halt work on the film even after the changes made in the script version of 2 March 1965 had been widely criticized as insufficient by the [CC] Culture Section, the Ministry of Justice, and the Section for State and Legal Affairs.⁵⁴

Probably in response to the CC complaint in May, Witt wrote a letter suggesting that the October Amnesty Decree did not cover political provocation, which was the topic of Maetzig's film. He then tried to get Mückenberger to co-sign the letter in order to share responsibility for ordering script changes, but decided not to send it when Mückenberger refused to sign.⁵⁵ The summer was a period of stalemate at the studio. A memo from the Justice Minister at the end of June suggested that there was still plenty of room for negotiation, noting that "Benjamin had agreed to personally talk to Maetzig on behalf of the CC should problems with the script continue."⁵⁶

The GDR Politburo remained quite active with "vacation" politics during the summer of 1965. Honecker, for example, received a report on criminal youth problems in June, but waited to disseminate it until a July 7th meeting of the Politburo when General Secretary Ulbricht was on vacation. The ploy enabled Honecker, Chairman of the CC Secretariat, to exaggerate the report's meaning.⁵⁷ Despite his vacation, Ulbricht was forced to call a Politburo meeting because the July 1965 projections for the long-range economic plan were so bad.⁵⁸ Honecker was simultaneously fighting Ulbricht's economic and cultural reforms in the Secretariat via "special" CC working groups because several individual CC sections were supportive of Maetzig's film. (Honecker

learned this tactic from Ulbricht, who had used his own “special working groups” to enact his reforms.)

Several crucial events then took place in West Germany that made Ulbricht’s position on reform less tenable. The setbacks may have been exaggerated, because he was in the USSR at the time. On September 15, fans at a Rolling Stones concert in West Berlin tore the stage apart after the concert. This episode was followed by youth demonstrations in East Berlin, which were subsequently sensationalized by dogmatic members of the Politburo. The West German election of a conservative coalition, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP), a few days later delivered further bad news for Ulbricht. Because the Social Democratic Party (SPD) made only a small gain, Ulbricht had no reform partner, as he would later find in Willy Brandt. One can imagine that GDR Politburo members’ comments were not supportive of reform in Ulbricht’s absence.

In this context, Kurt Hager, the Politburo member responsible for ideology, put together a special working group on ideology, which met five times over a two-month period, beginning on September 11.⁵⁹ At the end of September, DEFA head Mückenberger asked for permission to release “*Das Kanninchen bin ich*.” Around this time, Ulbricht reportedly told Witt that he encouraged a patient attitude toward artists and was not interested in “administrative means” of controlling cultural affairs.⁶⁰

By October, ostensibly “supportive” CC working groups were reviewing and undermining Ulbricht’s economic and ideological reforms, including youth and cultural policy. (Attacks on his policies occurred in groups controlled by his Politburo rivals Honecker, Hager, and Mittag).⁶¹ At a meeting of the CC Secretariat on October 11, Youth

Commission head Kurt Turba was given 24 hours notice to appear at a meeting on youth policy, to which 23 guests were invited. The invitation of guests suggests that the meeting, a five-hour discussion of “rowdy” youth behavior, was planned well in advance.⁶² At a Politburo meeting the following day, State Planning Commission Chairman Apel, one of the leaders of economic reform, was asked to produce a rough draft of the 1966 economic plan, as well as an outline of problems foreseen in the 1966–1970 five-year plan. A week later, two economic working groups that reported to Mittag were created.

While ideology and youth policy were placed under a watchful eye in October 1965, this was not yet the case for film. Surprisingly, Witt supported Maetzig’s film at a meeting of the CC Cultural Section in late October, after several shots had been removed from the film and one line of dialogue had been changed. The film was then subsequently approved, pending further alterations. By October 30, however, riots against a ban on beat music in the GDR gave the dogmatic wing in the Politburo more fodder in their struggle against Ulbricht’s cultural reforms.⁶³ When Witt was invited to a Politburo meeting in early November, he was strongly criticized for his reformist approach.⁶⁴ After Ulbricht’s encouragement a little over a month earlier, Witt was shocked. At the same meeting, Honecker introduced the new theme of the 11th SED Plenum: culture. Ulbricht left the room during his presentation.⁶⁵

Two opposing political currents appeared to progress at the same time. On November 12, a meeting of the *Roterkreis* working group at DEFA called the film a model for future productions. That same day, however, the Politburo received objections to the film from the CC Culture Section.⁶⁶ An ensuing Politburo meeting addressed the

films of both Maetzig and Vogel. Although the ideological working group chair Hager rejected the films on the basis of “foreign and enemy influence” (i.e., West German influence), Ulbricht continued to defend them, suggesting they served as a counter-example to Chancellor Erhard’s policies in West Germany, which focused almost solely on economic achievement. On November 19, the ideological working group pointedly discussed problems with the films.⁶⁷ As late as November 23, however, Mückenberger indicated that while he expected some films to be banned, he anticipated that Maetzig’s film would be released.⁶⁸ That same day, however, a Politburo meeting that reviewed ideological issues in culture cited Maetzig by name as someone who deserved financial punishment for violating SED cultural policy.⁶⁹

The decisive moments in the debate over the film appear to have occurred on November 24 and 25. On the 24th, a meeting of the CC Secretariat asked Mückenberger to review all DEFA productions for 1965 and 1966. The meeting also decided that no guests would attend the 11th Plenum—it was to remain primarily an internal matter. (This decision on guests was later reversed.) A meeting of artists with the Council of Ministers was held the next day to discuss three main topics: problems of music and youth, the novel *Rummelplatz*, and, finally, the limits of cultural policy. Forty-five writers and 25 cultural administrators attended the gathering,⁷⁰ which would have been the first serious inkling for artists that something was terribly amiss. The meeting’s agenda, moreover, mirrored that of the upcoming plenum.⁷¹

The fear of West Germany became explicit at the Council of Ministers meeting. Ulbricht adopted Hager’s line and argued that new tendencies could lead to an inner weakening of the GDR, thus making it unsympathetic to West German workers and

citizens. This argument was the chief reason why Maetzig's film was not released. However, Ulbricht also said that a critique of the mistakes and weaknesses of the GDR should be dealt with and not hidden from the West. He also argued against "administrative measures," the same language he had used several months earlier in his supportive conversation with Witt. Privately, Ulbricht mentioned to Wolfgang Berger, an economist who was his close personal assistant, that this was the wrong theme at the wrong time—the plenum should focus more on the economy.⁷²

Two days later, November 27, approval for Maetzig's film was officially retracted. Mückenberger informed his staff of the decision on November 29.⁷³ These events coincided with an "unofficial" visit of Brezhnev to the GDR from November 27 to 29, giving support to the dogmatists on the Politburo and solidifying the theme of the 11th SED Plenum: re-centralization.⁷⁴ On November 30, after a ten-hour discussion, the Politburo approved the second stage of the NES economic reform in name only, a solution that had been introduced at the CC Secretariat meeting on November 26.⁷⁵ While Brezhnev's visit was not the sole reason for the death of Maetzig's film, it certainly added to the pressure against all of Ulbricht's reforms.⁷⁶ After his visit, moreover, the Politburo appeared to reach unanimity in its decisions.⁷⁷

After being severely criticized for his economic reform policies at a Politburo meeting, Apel committed suicide on December 3.⁷⁸ His suicide represented a serious defeat for Ulbricht's reforms and gave West Germany an opening to speculate on both economic failure in East Germany and the *real* nature of Apel's death (a Soviet assassin). In the aftermath of his suicide, Witt officially notified Mückenberger that the film would

be blocked. Simultaneously, a spate of critical letters (sponsored by the SED) on cultural policy appeared as letters to the editor in the newspaper *Neues Deutschland*.

The 11th SED Plenum

The 11th SED Plenum opened on December 14th with a unique event: a private viewing of Maetzig's film. (Vogel's film was shown the following day.) Neither director was present⁷⁹ and later plenum publications never mentioned the two films. Newspaper coverage removed two further elements: that Party officials heckled the artists and that certain artistic contributions strayed too far from the dominant Party line. The Soviets did not publish a single report from the plenum.⁸⁰

The plenum was still intended to be an internal message to GDR artists, probably because the public might have had more sympathy for them than the Communist Party. In Ulbricht's opening speech, he emphasized that no actions had been taken against DEFA.⁸¹ Even Party ideologue Paul Fröhlich, who was aligned with Hager, emphasized the commonalities between the SED and the artists of the GDR: "We have trust in our artists, we are just concerned about counterrevolutionary tendencies."⁸²

Ulbricht's reformist tone changed, however, as the plenum progressed. Perhaps he was affected by the cumulative weight of the negative comments of others, or perhaps he simply saw that he had temporarily lost the reform argument. In his final speech, he argued that DEFA had demanded absolute freedom for filmmakers to do whatever they wanted, noting that the campaign against dogmatism had gone too far and there had been no unified party leadership.⁸³

In later years, Hager said that while he agreed with the content of the plenum, he did not agree with the tone.⁸⁴ At the meeting, however, he tied all the themes together

when he argued that the skepticism encouraged by Maetzig's film would lower workers' morale and allow the standard of living to sink. According to this criticism, the film was responsible for the GDR's economic problems!

After being informed that Robert Havemann, a well-known East German academic dissident, had written an article critical of the Communist Party, which would appear in a West German paper soon after the plenum, Ulbricht called an emergency Politburo meeting to conduct damage control. A disciplinary meeting with DEFA was organized for December 22—five days after the plenum and three days before Christmas. Meanwhile, Maetzig had a four-and-one-half hour chat with Hager, who argued that the director had been too focused on 1956 (i.e., de-Stalinization) and not enough on 1945 (i.e., fascism). More importantly, Hager argued that Maetzig was building too much of a bridge to West German intellectuals so that both East and West Germans would protest their governments.⁸⁵

Maetzig followed up on this encounter by writing Ulbricht a letter of self-criticism, which was published in *Neues Deutschland* January 5, 1966. Ulbricht's conciliatory response appeared on January 23. Director Egon Günther said Maetzig read him both Maetzig's letter and Ulbricht's response: "In the moment I heard Ulbricht's answer, it was clear to me that he [Maetzig] was no longer afraid."⁸⁶ Ulbricht clearly still had respect for Maetzig because he wished the director good luck. And although Ulbricht wrote of mistakes and a lack of clarity, he no longer accused the film of exhibiting "enemy influence." Maetzig responded by writing a personal letter to Ulbricht in early February that was subsequently forwarded to the CC.

Although neither Ulbricht nor Maetzig wanted an irreparable break, Ulbricht's ultimate priority was maintaining control over cultural policy. The GDR leader's message to his new Culture Minister Klaus Gysi, appointed in January 1966, is thus very revealing. While Ulbricht believed he had found a successful path for resolving the situation with artists and intellectuals, he was not certain it would hold:

We just had the big debate with our artists and intellectuals at the XIth Plenum. We told them very clearly what the situation is. And now you have to take over the shop and you need to be careful that the debate is behind us and make sure that you quiet the shop down a little bit.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Why would the Stalinist SED leader Ulbricht become a reformer, especially in the unlikely arena of filmmaking, then retreat from that reform? Knowing that the GDR had to be competitive with West Germany, Ulbricht clearly envisioned artistic reform as a counterpart to his economic reform. While he certainly was not a visionary, the film debate suggests that he was more than an opportunist in his reform efforts. Ulbricht probably sensed that the more conservative Politburo members, such as Honecker, might organize against him (as they ultimately did in 1970–1971), and he wanted to open the first volley. By wishing Maetzig good luck in his January 1966 letter, he was in a sense wishing himself the same.

Many politicians in East Germany were not as ready for change as Maetzig and other East German artists initially believed, although politicians such as Hager later allegedly regretted their actions. By banning 12 films, the more orthodox members of the SED satisfied Soviet officials (who were unhappy with both East German economic performance and the budding democracy in their own country), while distracting the East

German people from the GDR's poor economic and social performance vis-à-vis West Germany.⁸⁸ Ulbricht was complicit in this effort because in the wake of Apel's suicide, he was seeking to escape responsibility for economic failure. This does not mean, however, that he completely gave up on reform, as his unclear response to Frank Beyer's critical film *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*) suggests.⁸⁹

How should we view Maetzig's actions? Did he act courageously in making and defending this film, thus giving voice to voiceless people? What about his self-criticism? While film historian Berghahn excuses him for his letter of self-criticism, suggesting that he protected other filmmakers, Maetzig did not have to make changes to his movie or write a letter of self-criticism. Wolfgang Kohlhaase, for example, took neither step. Maetzig's argument that he had two choices—to stay or to leave (i.e., loyalty or exile)—is logically flawed. Some artists went to West Germany on extended visas with the option to return to East Germany. He could have stayed in East Germany without writing the letter, but he probably would have been denied work (as was the case of Juergen Böttcher) or restricted in his filmmaking (as happened to Frank Beyer).⁹⁰

Maetzig's artistic achievement meant as much or more to him than being a reformer. Due to his important stature and the film's aesthetic quality, he hoped that his film would still have a chance to be shown within the confines of East Germany.⁹¹ His bet paid off, but it took twenty-five years longer than he estimated. This explanation helps us better understand why Maetzig was still motivated to expand on the narrative of *Das Kanninchen* in his 1977 interviews with Günther Agde and to praise the SED and its 7th Party Congress of 1967.⁹²

Maetzig himself suggested the model of a “modernizing dictatorship” after the fall of the wall. At the premiere of *The Rabbit is Me* (Berlin Film Festival, 1990), he argued that other critical films, such as Beyer’s *Spur der Steine*, only had a chance of being released if he criticized his own. As an older, loyal Party member, Maetzig undoubtedly believed that he was protecting others when he agreed to criticize his own film. The six-month debate over Beyer’s film suggests that Maetzig’s view was warranted at the time. Yet even Konrad Wolf, who defended *Spur der Steine* initially, ultimately felt obliged to publish his own self-criticism several months later. Maetzig later clarified that he thought punishment for others would have been more severe if he had not published his letter of self-criticism, noting that no one was arrested, prosecuted, or imprisoned due to his film. He had also hoped his letter would help Ulbricht build a bridge to the artists.⁹³

In reviewing the conflict over Maetzig’s film, does a totalitarian or modern dictatorship model best characterize the GDR regime at the time? The conservative members of the SED Politburo prevailed at the 11th Plenum, but the length of the negotiations over the film, which went into 1966, calls into question a totalitarian model of complete order imposed from above. On the individual level, while Honecker’s response was closer to the usual political position of a totalitarian ruler (the need to gain total control in what appeared to be a chaotic atmosphere), Ulbricht and Maetzig both saw a fleeting “window of opportunity” for reform. On the state level, however, when West German developments threatened East Germany at vulnerable moments (especially when such moments coincided with Soviet leadership change), East German propensity

for reform decreased. At such times, the totalitarian model appears more applicable to the regime.

In the end, Maetzig's tortured defense of his actions suggests that the subtle methods of control used by modern dictatorships may be equally soul-destroying as the direct control of totalitarian dictatorships. While Maetzig initially said he regretted only some parts of his letter, his more recent responses appear to be more honest. In a 1993 interview with Joshua Feinstein, for example, he said he "knelt in shit,"⁹⁴ and in a 1999 interview, he called his self-criticism "a disgraceful act of moral self-pollution" because he had turned on his own ideas.⁹⁵ However, while Maetzig, Mückenberger, Witt, and Bentzien all failed in 1965, the cultural reforms they initiated may have encouraged others to pursue reformist goals in future decades.⁹⁶ Whether one agrees with this thesis or not, such attempts to promote a more critical cultural atmosphere in totalitarian regimes, even if they are small and contradictory, merit more attention.

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¹ Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2002), 4.

² Totalitarianism, according to Carl J. Friedrich, is identified by six characteristics: a dominant ideology, a ruling party, secret police terror, control of the media, a weapons monopoly and a planned economy. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Boston, MA: Harvard, 1965) as discussed in Konrad H. Jarausch, “Care and Coercion: The GDR as a Welfare Dictatorship,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 53.

³ The term “modern dictatorship” is a variation on modernization theory, which described East Germany as one among other modern industrial societies. Advocates of modern dictatorship argue that modernization theory overlooked too many key differences between democracy and dictatorship. While Konrad Jarausch has called the GDR a “welfare dictatorship,” Detlef Pollack has called it a “semi-modern mixed society.”

For more on this debate over terminology, see the following chapters in *Dictatorship as Experience*: Jürgen Kocka, “The GDR: A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship,” 17–26; Detlef Pollack, “Modernization and Modernization Blockages in GDR Society,” 27–46; and Monika Kaiser, “Reforming Socialism? The Changing of the Guard from Ulbricht to Honecker in the 1960s,” 325–340.

Others, including Fritz Stern, find these terms ill-advised and responded by calling these regimes “smiling dictatorships.” See Fritz Stern, *Five Germanies I Have Known* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 356.

⁴ The German political scientist Eckhard Jesse has argued the opposite: that totalitarianism characterized Ulbricht’s entire rule, but not that of Honecker. In his attempt to define regimes with totalitarian and authoritarian elements, Jesse developed the concept of “autalitarian.” See Jesse, “*War die DDR totalitär?*” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, no. 40 (1994): 23.

⁵ As Katie Trumpener argues, Maetzig’s film “shares both key visual motifs and central political concerns with an exactly contemporaneous West German film, Alexander Kluge’s *Goodbye to Yesterday*” (*Abschied von Gestern*, 1966).” See “*La guerre est finie*: New Waves, Historical Contingency and the GDR Rabbit Films” in *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Michael Geyer (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 2001), 125. Trumpener also suggests that DEFA films were stronger than West German films.

Stefan Soldovieri views Maetzig's film as DEFA's "rejoinder to a film like *The Girl and the Prosecutor* (*Das Mädchen und der Staatsanwalt*, Jürgen Goslar 1961), in which a young woman, played by Elke Sommer, is pursued by a public prosecutor who preaches high morals while at the same time carrying on an illicit affair," or to "*Roses for the Prosecutor* (*Rosen für den Staatsanwalt*, 1959), made by DEFA renegade Wolfgang Staudte, who stopped working for DEFA in the mid-1950s." See Soldovieri, "Reel Existing Justice: *The Rabbit Is Me* and the Discourse on Legal Reform" in *Managing the Movies: Censorship, Modernization and the GDR Film Crisis of 1965–1966* (forthcoming, 2007), 110. This gives new meaning to Ulbricht's infamous quote from the 11th SED plenum: "Do we have to copy all the dirt that comes out of West Germany? Who does this help?"

⁶ For more on these three levels of analysis, see Kenneth Waltz, *Man, State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁷ Soldovieri, "Reel Existing Justice," 143, footnote 21.

⁸ Feinstein suggests that among the people associated with the film, only Bieler could be described as a dissident. Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 152.

⁹ Unlike the death of Stalin in 1953, the period 1964 to 1965 in the GDR was not a crisis period, so the likelihood of dissent was smaller. Ross, *East German Dictatorship*, 119. For more on the 1953 crisis and the negotiations of another artist, Bertolt Brecht, see both Meredith Heiser-Duron, "Brecht's Political and Cultural Dilemma in the Summer of 1953" in *COMMUNICATIONS from the International Brecht Society*, vol. 30, nos. 1&2 (June 2001) and Mark W. Clark, *Beyond Catastrophe: German Intellectuals and Cultural Renewal After WWII, 1945-1955* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

¹⁰ Stefan Soldovieri, "Censorship and the Law: The Case of *Das Kanninchen Bin Ich*" in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, ed. Sean Allan and John Sanford (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 158.

¹¹ Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold Press, 2002), 161 and 202.

¹² Ibid, 202.

¹³ See Günther Agde, ed., *Filmarbeit: Gespräche, Reden, Schriften* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1987), 162. Maetzig's critical stance was already noticeable in his earlier films, such as *Schlösser und Katen* (*Castles and Cottages*, 1957), which casts aspersions on collectivization and the events leading up to 1953. See Sean Allan, "Ruptures and Continuities: DEFA, History and the Rise and Fall of the GDR" in *Moving Images of East Germany: Past and Future of DEFA Film*, ed. Barton Byg and Betheny Moore (Washington, DC: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 2002), 47. One should note, however, that Maetzig also made "Party faithful" films, such as that on Ernst Thälmann.

¹⁴ Ross, *East German Dictatorship*, 123. To better understand these concepts, see Albert O. Hirschman, *Voice, Exit and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹⁵ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 163.

¹⁶ The directors of the 11 other forbidden films included Gerhard Klein (born in 1920), Juergen Böttcher (born in 1931), Frank Beyer (born in 1932), and Frank Vogel (born in 1929). There were also two novice directors: Egon Günther (born in 1927) and Hermann Zshoche (born in 1934). See Trumpener, “*La guerre est finie*,” 136. Novelist Manfred Bieler was also born in 1934, so he was only 21 at the time of the production.

For information on Maetzig and other directors and artists, see a German-language website dedicated to his work <http://www.kurt-maetzig.de/indexm.html> (accessed 09/2006); the German-language DEFA website <http://www.defa-stiftung.de/> (accessed 09/2006), which provides a general history of many East German films, as well as a year-by-year history of DEFA; and the University of Massachusetts website dedicated to DEFA <http://www.umass.edu/defa/moma.shtml> (accessed 09/2006), which provides a general history of many East German films and directors. As for the politicians of the day, Honecker was born in 1912 and at 53, was one year younger than Maetzig, whereas Ulbricht was born in 1893 and was 72 at the time of the debate.

¹⁷ Elke Scherstjanoi, “Von der Sowjetunion lernen. . .” in Günther Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag. Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED. Studien und Dokumente* (Berlin: Aufbau Tashenbuch Verlag, 2000), 30.

¹⁸ Soldovieri, “Reel Existing Justice,” 109.

¹⁹ According to Trumpener, Maetzig argued for radical reform of state socialism and attempted to update—even westernize—socialist realism. Trumpener, “*La guerre est finie*,” 127. Feinstein, on the other hand, suggests that Maetzig was hopelessly utopian. See *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 192. See also Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, 112–23, for a discussion of dissidence in the GDR.

²⁰ See Wolfgang Kohlhaase, “DEFA: A Personal View” in Allan and Sanford, *DEFA*, 117–130. Kohlhaase describes the style of neo-realism as “there is a political context, but these films show hair style, skirt lengths and the girls people thought were beautiful in any given year” (117). He explains the centrality of neo-realism in GDR filmmaking as follows: “When we began to make these films, inspired by neo-realism, we were convinced that this was the only way in which to portray the truth. Filming in the streets, close-ups, raw material, professional actors working with amateurs” (125).

²¹ It also features a contemporary leading star, Angela Waller, who was then a complete unknown. Maetzig held thirty auditions for the role. See Christiane Mückenberger’s interview with Maetzig in *Prädikat: Besonders Schädlich* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1990), 320. Waller worked with the Brecht theater group after the film’s repression in 1965. See University of Massachusetts DVD release of *The Rabbit is Me*, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2006, for more on the career of Waller and other actors in the film.

²² Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 175.

²³ *Ibid.*, 164–5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁵ As Karen Kramer points out, this ending differs from most East German films, where the heroine gets her man. Karen Ruoff Kramer, “Imag(in)ing the GDR: Gender in Projected Memory” in *After the GDR: New Perspectives on the Old GDR and the Young Laender*, ed. Laurence McFalls and Lothar Probst, *German Monitor*, no. 54 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 159–60.

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- ²⁶ Karen Ruoff Kramer, "Representations of Work in the Forbidden DEFA Films of 1965" in Allan and Sandford, *DEFA*, 141.
- ²⁷ Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The cinema of East Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 180. Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 159.
- ²⁸ Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 143.
- ²⁹ Sean Allan, "DEFA: An Historical Overview" in Allan and Sandford, *DEFA*, 12.
- ³⁰ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 155.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 66-7. These groups were suggested as early as 1953 and introduced into DEFA in 1959. They were modelled on similar projects in Poland and Czechoslovakia. It is interesting to note that Maetzig made a suggestion for decentralization in 1956, but backed off it when it proved unpopular with the authorities.
- ³² Dagmar Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime: Die Filmpolitik der SED im Spiegel* (Berlin: Christoph Link Verlag, 2002), 114.
- ³³ Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and Their Century*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 179-80.
- ³⁴ See Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership, 1946-73: Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1999), 160. American historian Catherine Epstein, British historian Peter Grieder and the German political scientist Monika Kaiser are in agreement with this view of Ulbricht. See especially Kaiser, "Reforming," in Jarausch, *Dicatorship as Experience*, 330-1, and Monika Kaiser, *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997).
- ³⁵ See also Peter Christian Ludz, *Parteielite im Wandel. Funktionsaufbau, Sozialstruktur und Ideologie der SED-Führung. Eine empirisch-systematische Untersuchung* (Cologne, Germany: 1970).
- ³⁶ The NES was an East German innovation, but looked similar to the Soviet economic innovations of Lieberman in 1962. Peter Grieder has argued that the NES was not inspired by Soviet reform, but one could argue that Soviet reform was a necessary if not sufficient condition. Grieder, *The East German Leadership, 1946-73: Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1999), 121. See also James A. McAdams, *Germany Divided: From the Wall to Reunification* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 46.
- ³⁷ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 167. In the area of economics, the young leaders were Erich Apel and Herbert Wolf, who became candidate members of the Politburo in 1961 and 1962, respectively. In the area of culture, there was Kurt Turba, who Ulbricht appointed head of the Youth Commission (which reported to the Politburo), in July 1963. As Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, points out, the potential for reform was generally not great at the highest levels. In the Politburo, for example, 11 of 14 members were veteran Communists who had joined the Communist Party prior to 1933 and over half of the Central Committee consisted of "old Communists" (106).
- ³⁸ Egon Günther described Mückenberger as "courageous and able to maintain his ground." See *Das Jahrbuch der DEFA Stiftung*, ed. Ralf Schenk and Erika Richter (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2000), 73. It should be noted that Mückenberger's brother served in the Politburo. See also Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime*, 116.

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- ³⁹ Agde, *Filmarbeit*, 163.
- ⁴⁰ *Zeitzeugengespräche* (1999), on the DVD release of *The Rabbit is Me*, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2006.
- ⁴¹ Witt, "Inquisition," in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 340.
- ⁴² Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime*, 119.
- ⁴³ Kaiser, "Reforming," in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, 333.
- ⁴⁴ Greider, *East German Leadership*, 162.
- ⁴⁵ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 127–8.
- ⁴⁶ Agde, *Filmarbeit*, 165.
- ⁴⁷ Jeffrey Kopstein, *Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945–89* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 51.
- ⁴⁸ Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, 182.
- ⁴⁹ One suspects that Communist Party officials were more upset with Bieler's play from 1965, *Zaza* (*Zentralamt zur Aufbewahrung alter Genossen*). Rejected by the Maxim Gorki Theater, the play nevertheless received official communist attention because of its subject, a dead communist who appears before a commission consisting of Marx, Hegel, Lenin and Luxemburg. In the end, the commission does not reach a verdict, leaving the task to the audience. See Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 188.
- ⁵⁰ Kohlhaase, "Personal," in Allan and Sandford, *DEFA*, 120.
- ⁵¹ Soldovieri, "Reel Existing Justice," 129–30.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 145, footnote 35.
- ⁵³ The letter was from Todd Riemann, an official in the CC Section for State and Legal Affairs. *Ibid.*, 132.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.
- ⁵⁵ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 166.
- ⁵⁶ Soldovieri, "Reel Existing Justice," 145, footnote 35.
- ⁵⁷ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 170.
- ⁵⁸ Kopstein, *Economic Decline*, 57.
- ⁵⁹ Günter Agde, "Zur Anatomie eines Tests. Das Gespräch Walter Ulbrichts mit Schriftstellern und Künstlern am 25 November 1965 im Staatsrat der DDR" in *Kahlschlag*, ed. Agde, 135.
- ⁶⁰ The term "administrative means" suggested Communist Party control from the top. Witt, "Inquisition," in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 341.
- ⁶¹ Mittag was a reformer who switched to the Honecker-Hager camp. Hager alleges that Honecker and Horst Sindermann were the two figures behind these attacks. GDR Oral History Project (Kurt Hager, July 11, 1991, 17–18); see footnote 6 above. Maetzig later concurred with the assessment that Hager acted under pressure. *Zeitzeugengespräche*, 1999.
- ⁶² Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 172.
- ⁶³ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 167–71.
- ⁶⁴ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 168.
- ⁶⁵ Witt, "Inquisition," in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 342.
- ⁶⁶ Agde, "Gespräch," in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 139.
- ⁶⁷ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 182–91.

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- ⁶⁸ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 168.
- ⁶⁹ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 192.
- ⁷⁰ Agde, “Gespräch,” in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 138–41.
- ⁷¹ Kaiser is of the view that Ulbricht hoped to give artists a chance to respond to ideological criticism prior to the SED plenum, although others disagree with this analysis. Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 121. Scherstjanoi argues that others may have been lobbying for this option, but not Ulbricht. See Scherstjanoi, “Sowjetunion” in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 37–65. Günter Witt appears to agree more with Kaiser’s analysis.
- ⁷² Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 196.
- ⁷³ Schittly, *Regie*, 138, and Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 168.
- ⁷⁴ Schittly, *Regie*, 128.
- ⁷⁵ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 120.
- ⁷⁶ Maetzig later argued that the Soviet visit killed the reforms, just as Gorbachev’s glasnost re-opened the possibility for cultural reform. *Zeitzeugengespräche*, 1999.
- ⁷⁷ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 206.
- ⁷⁸ Apel fell out of favor in the Politburo in the summer and fall of 1965; it was rumored he would be fired from his job as head of the State Planning Commission. See Kopstein, *Economic Decline*, 59.
- ⁷⁹ In his 1999 interview, Maetzig mentioned that Konrad Wolf had warned him about the attack on his film while the plenum was taking place. Previously, the director had maintained that he learned about the attacks from the newspaper. *Zeitzeugengespräche*, 1999.
- ⁸⁰ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 229.
- ⁸¹ “Die Lesemappe” in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 224.
- ⁸² Agde, “Gespräch,” in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 150.
- ⁸³ Kaiser, *Machtwechsel*, 217.
- ⁸⁴ Hager reported that Honecker thought Hager was going to commit suicide because he became upset and left the plenum suddenly. Speaking in early 1993, he said he regretted that neither he nor other critics understood that the films and books under discussion took a critical tone not because of the artists, but because of “real social problems” in East Germany. GDR Oral History Project, Kurt Hager, July 11, 1991, 17–18.
- ⁸⁵ Martin Brady, “Discussion with Kurt Maetzig,” in Allan and Sanford, *DEFA*, 89.
- ⁸⁶ Maetzig later said that he and Hager came to a kind of compromise. Maetzig understood that if he published a self-criticism, the directors of the other 11 films would avoid harsher criticism from the SED leadership. *Zeitzeugengespräche*, 1999. See also Günther’s comments in Shenk and Richter, eds., *Jahrbuch*, 59.
- ⁸⁷ GDR Oral History Project, Klaus Gysi, December 28, 1991, 36.
- ⁸⁸ Banning these films promoted a kind of anti-intellectualism that was prevalent not only in East Germany, but could also be felt in the West Germany of Adenauer and Erhard. See Wolfgang Engler, “Strafgericht über die Moderne—das 11. Plenum im historischen Rückblick,” in Agde, *Kahlschlag*, 34.
- ⁸⁹ If we look at the fate of Frank Beyer’s film, *Spur der Steine* (Trace of Stones, made in 1966 and released in 1989), we can see that even though the dogmatists on the Politburo had won the battle over Maetzig’s film, a unified ideological line did not exist in 1966.

Beyer agreed to make his film shorter in December 1965 to avoid the problems encountered by Maetzig. Beyer also had a discussion with Hager while the film was being advertised in March 1966. Although it began showing in late June, the film was banned after one week. Meanwhile, East and West Germany were negotiating a political speaker exchange, a reform that Ulbricht is believed to have supported and Honecker opposed. The speakers' series was cancelled the first day that Beyer's film was shown. See McAdams, *Germany Divided*, 53.

⁹⁰ Maetzig spoke with Bieler and concluded he had to decide either to leave GDR, as Bieler did, or stay. Bieler went to Czechoslovakia in 1968, then to West Germany. Beyer did not leave the GDR, but he was banned from making films for 10 years in the Berlin Potsdam area. He turned to television in Dresden, although he was allowed to make the film *Jakob der Lügner* in 1974. The film administrators in the affair were also punished. Witt ended up teaching physical education in Leipzig, Mückenberger became the Director of Castles and Gardens in Potsdam, and Bentzien was banished to television.

⁹¹ In his 1999 interview, Maetzig said it was either self-criticism "or the film would never be released." *Zeitzeugengespräche*, 1999. This would also explain why he followed the groundbreaking film with one on sport, *Das Mädchen auf dem Brett* (The Girl on the Board, 1967), which pleased sports fan Ulbricht. See Soldovieri, "Reel Existing Justice," 128. Some of the other banned films were later allowed to be seen, and even celebrated, in the late 1980s. Barton Byg, "What Might Have Been: DEFA Films of the Past," *Cineaste* 17, no. 4 (1990):10.

⁹² While Agde interviewed Maetzig in 1977, Agde's book (*Filmarbeit*) was not released until 1987, probably because of political reasons.

⁹³ See *Zeitzeugengespräche*, 1999.

⁹⁴ Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*, 182.

⁹⁵ See Maetzig's 1999 interview (*Zeitzeugengespräche*).

⁹⁶ The GDR Minister of Culture at the time, Hans Bentzien, would completely disagree with my view. In a 1993 interview (see footnote 1 above), he argued that the forbidden films were "the end of the possibility of political reform" in the GDR. He quoted Honecker's pronouncement from a 1966 New Year's Party as proof: "The intellectuals produce their trash and the People's Police are forced to step in."