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Wende Flicks Collection. 2009. Boxed set of 11 DVDs from DEFA.

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"But it is *my* prison": Forgotten Voices from East Germany's Last Days

To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst co-organized a traveling film series, *Wende Flicks: Last Films from East Germany,* that is now available as an impressive DVD set ($245.95 individual, $700.00 educational). Showcasing eight feature films and three feature-length documentaries produced and released between 1988 and 1994, the *Wende* Flicks Collection offers unique insight into the last days of East German society. Included in the collection are: *Die Architekten (*1990); *Herzsprung* (1992); *Jana und Jan* (1992); *Das Land Hinter dem Regenbogen* (1991); *Letztes aus der Da-Da-eR* (1990); *Miraculi* (1991); *Stilles Land* (1992); *Die Verfehlung* (1992); *Leipzig im Herbst* (1989); *Östliche Landschaft* (1991); *Die Mauer* (1989/1990); and *flustern & SCHREIEN* (1988). For viewers who may not be familiar with East German film and culture, the discs also provide useful bonus content, including essays and interviews provided as downloadable PDFs, as well a handful of short films.[1]

Compared to the critical attention that has been dedicated to *Neuer Deutscher Film*, East Germany's cinematic legacy has been comparatively dismissed, its dominant socialist-realist style sometimes perceived as aesthetically provincial next to the bolder experiments of West German *auteur*s. As part of the sizeable and ever-growing library of East German titles released by the DEFA Film Library, however, the *Wende* Flicks Collection will no doubt help to rectify such perceptions.[2] This is not to say that all of the films are equally successful, but rather, where there are failures, those failures are bound to the failing institutions and turbulent contexts to which they are responding. Taken together these films provide a remarkable epilogue to both East Germany and the centralized, state-run DEFA film studios, which included separate divisions for *Spielfilme* (feature films), *populärwissenschaftliche Filme* (educational and industrial films), *Trickfilme* (animated films), and *Dokumentarfilme* (documentary films).

Much like the young protagonist of *Stilles Land*, who attempts to make a provincial theater production of *Waiting for Godot* speak to the events of 1989, these films reveal a profound desire to make their stories "zeitgemäß." But being of the moment is both a blessing and a curse. Distracted by the heady events of the day, audiences unfortunately had little attention left to give to these films. The filmmakers, too, struggled to remain relevant at a moment when history seemed simultaneously to be bearing down upon them and to have already passed them by. Their ambivalent relation to the urgency of the moment is further compounded by the fact that most of these directors were middle-aged before DEFA allowed them to direct their first feature. For many of them, the crises brought on by the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) doubled as a mid-life crisis, particularly for the directors born in 1949, the same year as the ailing state itself.[3] Although they were given greater artistic and critical license during the *Wende* period, their voices seemed to fall on deaf ears. The long-awaited permission for more open criticism came too late to be as urgent or subversive as their filmmakers wanted them to be. The more these films try to address the present, the more they seem haunted by the very history into which they have been thrown. Yet it is precisely this anxious sense of belatedness that lends many of them their force.

Given the intrinsic historical significance of the period, the DEFA Library's decision to include three documentaries in the collection–addressing the protests in Leipzig, rock-n-roll counterculture, and the fall of the Berlin Wall–was a wise one and highlights one of the strengths of the DEFA-Studio system, whose documentary division provided a level of support unequaled in the West. Though all three films document the events and experiences of the *Wende*, they are also stylistically di-

verse and at times share more with the other feature films than with each other. Nowhere is this stylistic diversity better reflected than in the stark contrast between Jürgen Böttcher's distant and meditative documentary, *Die Mauer*, and Andreas Voigt and Gerd Kroske's engaged, *cinema verité*-style exploration of the various people and conflicts that shaped the events unfolding in Leipzig in October and November 1989. Dieter Schumann, in contrast, avoids the more explicitly political events of the *Wende* period, but *flüstern und SCHREIEN* nevertheless underscores the subversiveness of rock even as it offers a jaunty, offbeat journey through East Germany's countercultural music scene.

Intercutting footage from ride-alongs with popular bands like Feeling B., Silly, André + die Firma, Chicorée, Sandow, and This Pop Generation, Schumann's documentary is refreshingly unpretentious in its portrayal of the struggling bands and their fan base. There is something both warming and sad about the bands' respective attempts to preserve the countercultural force of their music against the glossier and more lucrative temptations of overproduced pop. Interviews with groupies and moshers reveal a likeable community of rebellious outsiders frustrated with social discrimination and the pressures of conformity. Schumann's attention to the subversive power of rock also provides an interesting counterpoint to the more explicitly political protest culture shown in *Leipzig im Herbst.*[4] Released in 1988 and drawing over a million viewers, the film clearly spoke to audiences looking for more honest representations of life in the GDR.

More "flustern" (whispering) than "schreien" (shouting), Böttcher's meditative documentary, *Die Mauer,* quietly explores the Wall's significance as a screen upon which history and ideology have played themselves out. The film is at times uncomfortably, if also deliberately slow, its images sparse and depopulated; the soundtrack communicates less the jubilant rumblings of the masses than an almost surreal sense of quiet calm. The camera frequently offers us long takes of curious passersby who want to take part in history by chipping away at the Wall, but who are then surprised at the material difficulty of actually breaking off a souvenir. Onlookers are caught out in their desire to touch–and in some cases, commodify–the history taking place all around them. Footage of two young boys haggling with tourists over shards of the Wall offers a simultaneously candid and bleak glimpse of the end of an era. Intermittently projecting images from Germany's past and present onto the Berlin Wall, Böttcher underscores the iconographic and spectral dimensions of history in the making. After preparing us with footage from the *Kaiserreich*, Nazi period, and then the U.S./Soviet occupation, Böttcher brings us into the present with footage of events that we saw take place earlier in the documentary. Although the chronological sequencing of previous projections should prepare us for this unsettling interchangeability of past and present, it nevertheless comes as something of a shock. Böttcher seems to be forcing us to acknowledge our own phantasmatic encounters with the historicity of history. Directing our gaze away from the obvious, Böttcher captures instead the fleeting, seemingly minor experiences of a major world event. As with the materiality of the Wall itself, the monumental is chipped away to reveal otherwise discarded, yet haunting fragments of experience.

In sharp contrast to the contemplative distance Böttcher cultivates, Kroske and Voigt's *Leipzig im Herbst* returns us squarely to the fray of history, its title echoing the Left's politically charged response to the (RAF) Red Army Faction-related events of 1977, *Deutschland im Herbst* (1978). Filmed between October 15 and November 7, 1989, *Leipzig im Herbst* documents the tense Monday protests in Leipzig that played such an important part in the eventual fall of the Wall. The protests began several weeks before, but Voigt, Kroske, and cameraman Sebastian Richter provide rare footage of the demonstrations that is interwoven with interviews with key players on both sides. Interviews with senior police officials and young crowd-control recruits reveal significant gaps not just between those in power and the frustrated masses, but also between authorities and those who felt pressured to carry out commands they believed to be unjust. Reminiscent of Jean Rouche and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), the filmmakers join protestors on the street and ask simple questions like, "Why are you here?" and "What do you want?" The candid answers are particularly notable given the filmmakers were wandering the streets with a 35mm DEFA camera. Although the filmmakers were anxious that their institutional status might provoke anger, the protesters welcomed them and saw their presence as a promising sign of future press freedoms. Also included on the disc is Eduard Schreiber's documentary short, *Östliche Landschaft* (1991), which meditates on the collapse of the DDR through the image of a dumpsite whose mountains of rubble recall the *Trümmerfilme* (rubble films) of the *Nachkriegszeit* (postwar period). Through Schreiber's lens, material fragments of a lost society reveal a wasteland of bankrupt values and beliefs, the symbolic refuse of a broken system.

A similar iconography of waste informs the visual texture of Jörg Foth's by turns comedic, disturbing, and moving modernist musical (of sorts), *Letztes aus der Da-*

Da-eR. Based on the popular underground clown performances of Steffen Mensching and Hans-Eckardt Wenzel, the errant protagonists, Meh and Weh, carry a lifeless baby doll with them as they trek through the bleak landscapes of a collapsing country. The play of words (Da-da/GDR) in the film's title is in turn echoed by the white-faced, bespectacled clowns, who'd both be at home in a painting by George Grosz. Wandering by day from a prison that doubles as their home, Meh and Weh nevertheless return at night. Though tended to by a perversely maternal figure played by Rainer Werner Fassbinder-favorite Irm Hermann, their prison remains a prison no matter how domesticated or voluntary. Speaking to the sense of loss many East Germans felt after unification, Foth has explained that it is not just a question of it being *a* prison, but also *my* prison. The film does not so much ask why Meh and Weh return every night as it expresses the difficulty of leaving the familiar behind, let alone embracing an uncertain future.

Alluding to opera, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Miguel de Cervantes, as well as Hans Albers and Erich Hönecker, Wenzel and Mensching's satirical vignettes are enjoyable in and of themselves, but their richly intertextual songs and dialogue remind us of the fraught cultural past from which Meh and Weh cannot seem to extricate themselves. Early in the film we see Meh and Weh literally honoring each other to death before brainless party functionaries, the sharp pins of meaningless medals turned into deadly instruments. Though applauded by the lifeless bureaucrats watching their performance, the two clowns are subsequently thrown into a dump truck and discarded into a vast heap of trash, a pointed commentary on the treatment of artists in the GDR.[5] A founding member of the DEFA working group Gruppe Da-Da-eR, Foth was one of the most outspoken advocates of change among the *Nachwuchs* generation.[6] The empty applause given to Meh and Weh by hypocritical bureaucrats recalls the resent many filmmakers had come to have for declarations of support from above that never materialized. As if stillborn, the inanimate doll Meh and Weh carry with them echoes the sense of aborted creativity that frustrated so many DEFA filmmakers of the *Nachwuchs* generation.

As if anticipating the pile of rubbish captured in Schreiber and Foth's films, Peter Kahane's *Die Architekten* follows an idealistic, middle-aged architect in the final days of the GDR. Similar in situation to the "younger" generation of DEFA filmmakers represented in the collection, Kahane's protagonist, Daniel Brenner, is ecstatic when his superiors finally give him some level control over his own building project. Determined to pursue his idealistic plans despite ongoing struggles with the bureaucracy, Brenner's life begins to deteriorate at the very moment when he feels himself to be coming alive. Similar to many of these filmmakers, Daniel's first tastes of freedom aren't enough to compensate for the loss of youth and the belatedness of change. Although the story could have been translated to a number of different jobs, Kahane's focus on disappointed architects is particularly suited to the lament of a dying social structure and disappearing way of life.

Similarly bleak but with a delightful impishness is Helke Misselwitz's *Herzsprung*, which begins and ends in heartbreak, as the title suggests. *Herzsprung* follows the challenges facing a young mother, Johanna (Claudia Geisler), living in the provincial town of *Herzsprung* shortly after reunification. After her abusive, skinhead husband shoots a barn-full of cattle and then commits suicide, the jobless Johanna finds comfort in the arms of a mysterious black wanderer. Despite ongoing reminders of the Holocaust–we learn, for example, that Johanna's Polish-born father had been persecuted by the Nazis–the economically disenfranchised locals turn increasingly to the thuggish comforts of xenophobia and racism.[7] When a lynch mob-style attack later goes awry, Johanna manages to escape from a burning diner (ironically called Onkel Toms Hütte), but is inadvertently killed by her husband's incompetent skinhead friend. Misselwitz deftly combines allegorical fable, trenchant political criticism, and feminist critique without losing the lightness of touch that ultimately gives greater gravity to her film.[8] Reminiscent of the haunting cry of spiritual bankruptcy that concludes Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Theorema*, Misselwitz ends her film with a sustained, disembodied scream that voices the frustration and rage that Geisler's subtle performance keeps brewing just beneath the surface. As with so many of these films, the belatedness of the scream reiterates the more general sense that the time is indeed out of joint.

Returning to the figure of the outsider, Helmut Dziuba's *Jana und Jan* examines life in a juvenile detention center where the authorities are as corrupt and compromised as those running the country. The generation gap felt by the *Nachwuchs* filmmakers is echoed here in the teenagers' disillusionment with the older generation. When the rebellious Jan arrives at the detention center where Jana lives, he encounters figures of authority who are as cruel and small-minded as the youth who seem to really run the place. Jana initially sleeps with Jan on a bet, but they eventually fall in love, their mutual sympathy only to be tested again when Jana becomes pregnant. Despite Jan's subsequent violence against her, the

two eventually run away from the school only to wander through a barren landscape in which Jana nearly dies in childbirth. Although the titular characters form the emotional centerpiece of the film, it is often the supporting characters who draw one's interest, particularly in its portrayal of the erotically charged conflicts among the young women. Strongly echoing Dorothea Weick's *Mädchen in Uniform,* one subplot features a young girl whose love for another leads to her suicide. As the child of its age, the symbolism of Jana and Jan's seemingly stillborn child is a little heavy-handed, but doesn't ruin the emotional authenticity of its characters. As with so many of these films, the difficult end of an era seems to trump the birth of a new one.

Stilles Land and *Die Verfehlung* are the most widely accessible of the *Wende* Flicks films and were also directed respectively by the youngest (Andreas Dresen) and oldest (Heiner Carow) filmmakers in the collection. Best known as the director of 1973's superhit *Paul und Paula*, Carow reunites with *Paul und Paula* star Angelica Domröse in *Die Verfehlung*, the story of a doomed romance between an "Ossi" and "Wessi." Set in the early 1980s, the film opens with Jacob, a sailor from Hamburg, gazing uninvitedly at the joyful Elisabeth (Domröse) as she cavorts nakedly in an outdoor bath with her grandchildren. When they later meet at the mayoral office where Elisabeth cleans, the passion quickly becomes mutual, but is no match for petty provincialism and self-interested politics. When Elisabeth refuses his advances, the paranoid mayor conspires with the secret police to exact his revenge on Elisabeth, who will later use his gun to exact her own revenge.

More interesting than Jacob and Elisabeth's romance, though, is the discrepancy that arises between mundane village life and the paranoid rhetoric of the state. This incongruity becomes painfully visible when the mayor confesses his love to a gas mask-clad Elisabeth during the nighttime invasion drill that he has himself precipitated. The intrusion of history into Elisabeth's life is most real, though, when her rebellious younger son is tortured into muteness by the Stasi, the very organization in which his ambitious brother is trying to climb the ranks. If the final shots of the film, so to speak, do not carry the full weight of tragedy, it is not because Carow's narrative or characterization are weak, but rather because the broken political system lacks the legitimacy it needs to make its demands on the individual seem unavoidable. Similar to the provincial setting of *Die Verfehlung*, Dresen's *Stilles Land* places itself at a deliberate remove from the stage of history, as it were. A play on words, both title and film explore the contradiction between the turbulent events rocking the *Land*-as-state and the quiet life of the *Land*-as-countryside. The narrative follows a young director who has been newly assigned to a provincial theater in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Despite the unsophisticated tastes of the local residents, the increasingly disillusioned director chooses *Waiting for Godot* as his first play. As news of the demonstrations in Leipzig and Berlin begins to trickle down to the cast and crew, they all struggle with the challenges of keeping the play both relevant and "zeitgemäß." Like Fassbinder's *Warnung vor einer heilige Nutte*, the film shows us the souring relations and conflicting egos of an isolated group of artists, but without Fassbinder's recourse to Brechtian melodrama. Though idiosyncratic, the cast remains sympathetic, particularly when they decide to join the demos in Berlin but are held up by the chronically broken engine of the theater's touring bus. Dresen wisely opts for a wryness that keeps the film from being too heavy-handed, a real risk considering the film's self-reflexive use of Samuel Beckett's play. One of the best moments in the film comes when the director has decided to place a broken-down car on the stage but must decide whether the car is to be East or West German. Like their stalled tour bus, the car on stage speaks to a sense of history that is not just delayed for them, but fundamentally displaced, always happening somewhere else. Their geographic remove from the epicenters of protest seems to be felt by them as an impossible and frustrating remove from history itself, a future for which they wait even as they feel it to have already passed them by.

By way of contrast, the final two films in the collection, Ulrich Weiß's *Miraculi* and Herwig Kipping's *Land Hinter dem Regen Bogen*, are the least accessible, perhaps because they are the least interested in transcending the cultural codes and politics of the GDR. Aside from Foth's nouveau Dadaist musical (of sorts), Weiß and Kipping also diverge the most widely from DEFA's predominant socialist-realist style. For the same reason, though, these idiosyncratic films are deserving of more attention than they will probably get, particularly Weiß's *Miraculi.* As its name implies, *Miraculi* ends with a "miracle" based on a real-life geographical disturbance that resulted in a lake disappearing overnight. But that miracle merely frames the central story of a young man, Sebastian, whose paltry theft of some cigarettes leads to an existential crisis both for himself and the state, which like the lake, dries up and disappears overnight. As part of his criminal rehabilitation, Sebastian must go undercover to catch passengers trying to ride the S-Bahn without paying, a punishment that is made doubly difficult by his rebellious friends, who try to take advantage of his new position,

and his family, who views him as a cowardly informant. At first paralyzed by the conflicting demands made upon him by his friends, family, and the state, a now bearded and robed Sebastian soon begins looking as well as acting the part of the disciple, a modern-day saint of the state. Sebastian begins to internalize the paternalistic ideology of the state so rigorously that he unwittingly begins to embody its irrationality and strategic mystifications.

Episodic in nature, the film also becomes increasingly surreal as it progresses towards the miraculous disappearance of the lake at the end of the film. I say "progresses," but in many senses the film is rather an unwinding, an increasingly unsettling revelation of emptiness as the socialist revolution reveals itself to be a mere hallucination in the petit-bourgeois annals of history. During the final lake sequence, a rather disjointed coda to the rest of the film, Sebastian visits an elegant lake party where he is surrounded by the trappings of bourgeois wealth. An attractive man who has troubled his conscience aboard the S-Bahn now enlists a tango-dancing seductress to complete his temptation of Sebastian. When the miraculous event finally happens, the dried-up waterbed lays visually bare the cynical underbelly of ideological enchantment. Yet there is a profound ambivalence throughout the film between a disappointed faith in socialism, on the one hand, and on the other, characterizations of the DDR's collapse as being historically or ideologically inevitable. The film's resistance to simplified historic narratives of the *Wende* can also be felt through its refusal to conform to the unities of classical film.[9]

Last in the set is Kipping's *Land Hinter dem Regenbogen*, which bears superficial similarities to Weiß's film, but doesn't possess the same dialectical sophistication. Set in the critical year of 1953, the story unfolds in the imaginary village of Stalina, where two uncanny children lead the viewer through an absurdist transformation of life under communism. Whereas Foth's Dadaist-surrealist venture seems to me to hit its mark, Kipping's clunky symbolism and cast of grotesques finally fail, appropriately and perhaps deliberately so, to produce a sustainable vantage point from which to either mourn or critique the failures of East Germany. Whereas Weiß ultimately maintains a kind of humanist if despairing vision, Kipping's caricatural figures never ask or hope to be human in any recognizable sense. They are instead like so many sticks of dynamite knocking crudely through the despotism and ideological bologna of communism in its most cynical embodiments.

Notes

[1]. Short films by the *Wende* Flicks directors include Jörg Foth's *Tuba wa duo* (1989); Eduard Schreiber's *Östliche Landschaft* (1991); and six by Andreas Dresen: *Consequences–Peter 25 Years Old* (1987); *What Every Man Must Do* (1988); *The Rats Sleep at Night* (1988); *Far from Klein Wanzleben* (1989); *Train in the Distance* (1989); and *Shortcut to Istanbul* (1990).

[2]. Licensed through Icestorm International and Progress Film Verleih, the DEFA Film Library controls the educational distribution of DEFA films in the United States; many of them have also been made available for U.S. commercial distribution through First Run Features.

[3]. Excluding Dziuba (born in 1933), Carow (born in 1929), and Böttcher (born in 1931), these filmmakers all belong to the so-called *Nachwuchs* generation of up-and-coming filmmakers, the youngest of whom, Dresen, was born in 1963. If the Nazis and World War II constituted the definitive crisis of the older generation, those of the younger generation of DEFA filmmakers, born in the *Nachkriegszeit*, were defined by the ideological fluctuations and Cold War battles of the 1960s. As Kahane (born in 1949) has described it, "Prägende Geschehnisse für mich: der 13. August 1961, die Ereignisse in der CSSR 1968 und der Vietnamkrieg, aber auch eine Persönlichkeit wie Che Guevara und die kulturpolitische Debatte von 1965. Dazu gehören ebenso die Beatles … die neue Wohlstand in unserem Land usw. Die Nähe von großen Hoffnungen und Enttäuschungen." In Ingrid Poss and Peter Warnecke, eds., *Spur der Filme: Zeitzeugen über die DEFA* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2006), 438. But what Kahane says next is perhaps even more telling of the generational sense shared by these filmmakers: "Aber darüber hat noch keiner der jungen Regisseure einen Film gedreht" (p. 438). There were at least two reasons for this: on the one hand, they were not permitted to make films until they had themselves become, by and large, middle-aged; and on the other, the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) had maintained a tight control over both content and film aesthetics.

[4]. Sometimes called the "Rock Resolution" due to the number of rock venues at which it was read, a number of cultural figures signed a resolution dated Sept. 18, 1989 (after Schumann's film had been completed) that defended East German society against both autocratic party control and calls to dissolve the socialist state altogether. "Our country," the resolution proclaims, "must finally learn to work with minorities that have different opinions. … We want to live in this country, and it makes us sick to have to watch, as if with tied hands, as attempts at democratization, attempts to analyze society

are criminalized and ignored." From a translation by Delene White, DEFA Film Library at UMass Amherst.

[5]. By film's end, Meh and Weh will come full circle; whereas they had begun by gratuitously honoring one other, they now accuse each other of having failed the revolution. After relocating their prison/home to an old graveyard, very fitting for two ghosts trapped in the past, Meh and Weh shout accusations at one another before a wall of German flags promising unification on the building opposite. Speaking to an invisible authority in the air, their words grow increasingly shrill until they are finally reduced to the meaningless babble of barking dogs.

[6]. Although dissuaded from openly criticizing DEFA's disregard for younger points of view in the early 80s, Foth unleashed a scathing critique of the system during a 1988 meeting of the Verband der Film- und Fernseschaffenden. Foth condemned the fact that "Der Arbeitsbeginn der um das Jahr 1949 geborenen Regisseure hat im krassen Gegensatz zu früheren Impulsen in der DEFA-Geschichte zu keiner produktiven Auseinanderseztung auf der Leinwand und im Publikum geführt. Unsere Welle war keine." In Poss and Warnecke, eds., *Spur der Filme,* 442.

[7]. Played subtly by *Berlin, Alexanderplatz*-star Günter Lamprecht, Johanna's father seems to be stained by the racist logic of the very Nazis who once persecuted him. Although he at first embraces the stranger, Misselwitz complicates this partnership of outsiders with a shot of the sleeping father holding a nineteenth-century book of racist ethnography.

[8]. The film's dialectical subtlety is evident even in the title sequence, which opens to a shot of an almost heavenly profusion of fluttering feathers accompanied by the angelic offscreen singing of Elsa, played by Eva-Marie Hagen, mother of the popular singer Nina Hagen. As the camera pans right, we gradually realize that the previously unidentifiable feathers belong to the butcher's shop where Johanna is busily plucking feathers with Elsa and their colleagues. When Johanna is summoned by the boss who will fire her, her bare bloodstained feet come into view and alert us to a sharp disconnect between desire/fantasy and reality.

[9]. In an interview included on the DVD, for example, Weiß comments on the *Wende*: "Germans and revolution–that's a contradiction in and of itself. I wasn't euphoric for a single second. For example, the concept that Leipzig was a city of heroes was entirely strange to me. I saw the problems that would arise. For me, the experience of the jubilant petit bourgeois was an experience of defeat."

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