

**“Everything has its Limits!”
The Berlin Wall and the Problem of Desire¹**
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By the East German authorities' account, the “Anti-Fascist Wall of Protection,” or Berlin Wall, was built to thwart hordes of anti-communist commandos poised to invade the socialist republic. If the Party acknowledged the constant stream of refugees from East to West at all, it was only to decry the efforts of paid agitators and “Menschenhändler” (people traders) luring or coercing skilled East German workers over the border. These paranoid scenarios, I will argue, represented more than just hard-line propaganda and political expediency; they arose from fundamental assumptions about the psyche and society. Through an exploration of East German cultural responses to the construction of the Wall, my paper outlines the ideological fantasies of the individual and social body that precipitated this drastic measure.

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“Alles hat seine Grenzen!”—“Everything has its limit (or border)!”—declares an East German propaganda leaflet launched westward over the Wall in the mid-1960s.² The front of the leaflet depicts a pair of Twiggy-esque legs in go-go boots and a miniskirt. Between the boots are the words: “Es gibt sie beim Minirock...”—“The miniskirt has one...,” that is, a limit or border. Ellipses lead the reader to the back of the pamphlet, where the sentence concludes “und selbstverständlich auch in der Politik” (‘and naturally politics does as well’), before outlining the GDR’s “reasonable” demands for diplomatic recognition and nuclear disarmament.



Image 1: “Everything has its limit (or border)! The miniskirt has one...”
 Image 2: “And naturally politics does as well.”

That the Berlin Wall marked a political border was indeed “selbstverständlich,” “self-evident.” The connection between the inner-German border and the miniskirt hemline, however, is less obvious. In the following analysis, we will find that this strange visual metaphor—the Wall as miniskirt—is neither a coincidence nor simply a lame attempt at barracks humor. Viewed in the context of 1960s East German public culture, it testifies to a recurrent link between the Berlin Wall and female sexuality. This link, in turn, points toward what might be called the “ideological fantasy” of the Berlin Wall: the ambitions and expectations projected onto it by East German cultural producers. In particular, my study focuses on the impossible phantasmatic task with which the Wall was freighted: to thwart that most agile of border-crossers, desire itself.

The Berlin Wall was everywhere and nowhere in GDR public culture from 1961 on. Though rarely depicted directly, it seemed implicated in every metaphor of obstruction or containment. Its sudden materialization resonated throughout East German culture and society, but almost inaudibly; an infrasonic wave. One intriguing echo may be detected in DEFA’s 1971 children’s movie *Dornröschen*

(Sleeping Beauty). In the film, as in the folk-tale, an aggrieved fairy casts a hex on Dornröschen's castle, causing all its residents to freeze in place for a hundred years. A hedge of thorns grows up around the castle, completely cutting it off from the outside world.

After the appearance, literally overnight, of barbed-wire thickets in the aftermath of "Operation Rose," this fairy-tale fantasy would have seemed all too plausible to East Berliners.³ And so in its visual representation of the enchanted briar hedge, DEFA's *Dornröschen* imitates life imitating art: the mise-en-scene of the sprouting thorns, with the castle wall looming behind coiling brambles, evokes the Wall's deadly topography of barbed-wire, mine-strewn "death strip" and concrete, while the shot of the castle's columns through the thicket seems to echo the iconic 1961 photograph of the Brandenburg gate framed by loops of razor wire.



Images 3 & 4: The hedge in Dornröschen (1971) and the Brandenburg Gate in August 1961. (Photo: akg-images / Gert Schütz. Used with permission.)

If, with Freud, we read this cinematic fairy tale as a ready-made "screen memory," a palimpsest of fantasy and recollection, then these visual parallels alert us to a deeper layer of significance within DEFA's deployment of this classic scenario of suspended time and slumbering affect.⁴

In DEFA's fairy tale, the Thirteenth Fairy, the conjurer of the briar hedge, describes the function of her creation: "No unworthy man shall pass through the

hedge!” Likewise, the narratives analyzed below assign the closed border a protective role; they share with *Dornröschen* the trope of female virtue besieged. With bathos verging on obscene, these stories justify the Wall’s construction by translating geopolitical hostility into scenarios of impending bodily harm—indeed, of latent or manifest sexual violence. Even as they try to portray the Wall as a magic barrier like the one that shields *Dornröschen*, sorting the worthy suitors from the bad, they eventually reveal a very different source of anxiety. In these tales of imminent danger, the most worrisome threat turns out to come from within: the Wall, we learn, is there to protect the imperiled heroine from her own desire.⁵ This interplay of manifest external and latent internal dangers plays out in microcosm the political and social dynamics that led to the construction of the Wall.

Schutzwall and Schandmauer: Constructions of the Wall

“Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten”

“No one has any intention of constructing a wall”

- Walter Ulbricht, 15 June 1961

The Berlin Wall was, in a sense, two walls. By the 1980s the Western side had become a riot of paint and protest, a Technicolor symbol of the Cold War, photographed incessantly and archived indelibly in the public memory. Whereas in the East, the Wall stood, to borrow from Hölderlin, “sprachlos und kalt” (silent and cold).⁶ Few photographs of the Eastern side are available, due to the party’s strict prohibition against images of the border fortifications.⁷



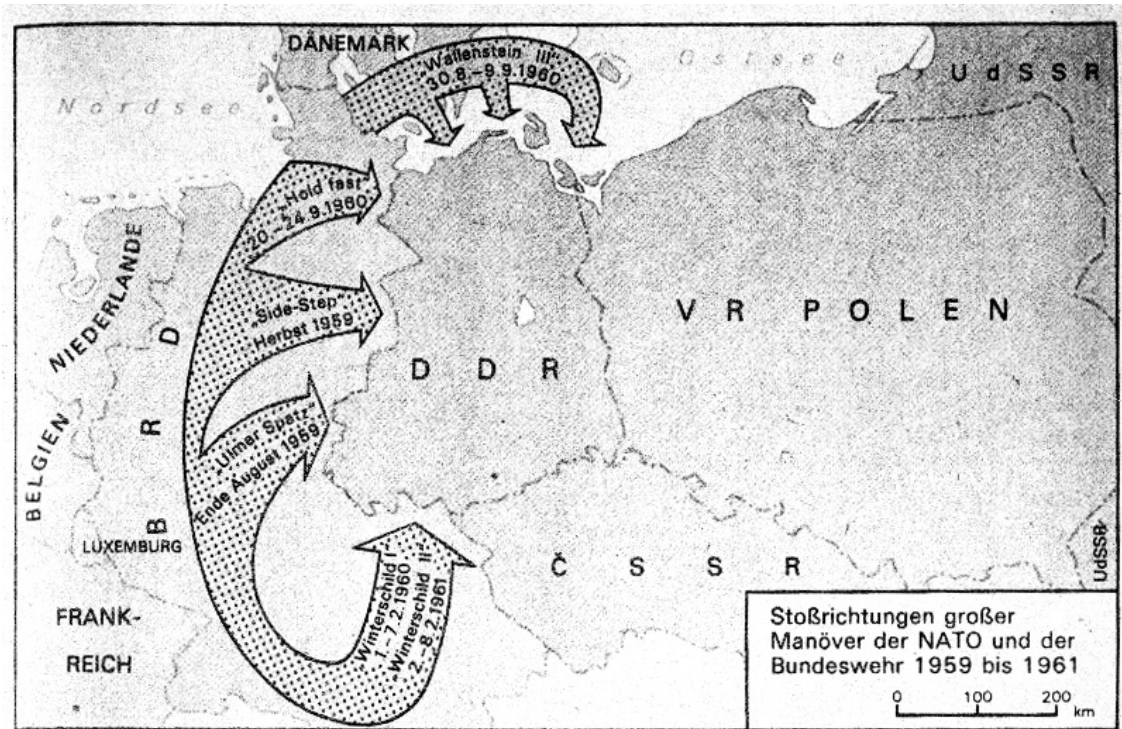
Image 5: The west face of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s. (Photograph by Takahisa Matsuura, <http://www.mauer.jp>. Used with permission)



Image 6: The eastern side of the Wall, photographed from the west. (Photograph by Takahisa Matsuura, <http://www.mauer.jp>. Used with permission)

The official accounts of its construction were as dissimilar as its outward appearance. On the Eastern side the closing of the border was always cast—officially, at least—as an unfortunate but unavoidable act of self-defense. As late as 1989, an East German 10th Grade history textbook devotes four pages to the increasing militarization of West Germany in the late fifties, the West Germans' efforts to undermine the East German economy through sabotage and agitation, and NATO's plans to invade the GDR in the Fall of 1961 (a map is included,

depicting the military maneuvers leading up to the planned attack (Dieckmann 103)).



Welche Erkenntnisse entnehmen Sie dieser Karte?

Image 7: Map from an East German history textbook illustrating the “lines of attack in the major maneuvers of NATO and the West German Army 1959 to 1961.” The caption reads: “What insights do you take away from this map?”

In a West German textbook from the same period, also intended for the 10th grade, the grounds for sealing the GDR's border are stated much more simply: “In order to stop the stream of refugees over the sector border, Khrushchev gave the GDR permission in the summer of 1961 to stop up ‘the person-trap in West Berlin’” (Brack 194-195). A graph shows the number of refugees leaving the GDR between 1949 and 1961.

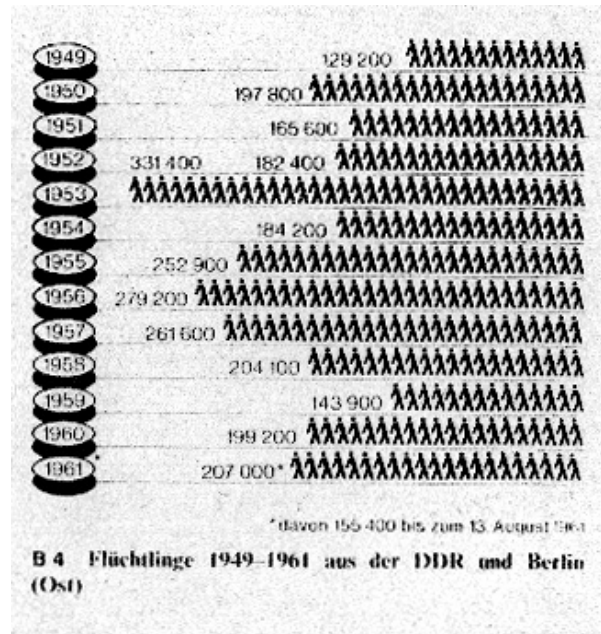


Image 8: Chart from a West German history textbook. The caption reads: “Refugees from the GDR and East Berlin 1949–1961”

These two history lessons trace the lines of divergence between Eastern and Western accounts of the Wall’s origin, a difference that can be cast in terms of dynamic orientation. As its official title in the East suggests, the “Antifaschistische Schutzwall” (anti-fascist wall of protection) was supposed to stand against a threat from *outside*; whether by NATO tanks or West German provocateurs, the GDR characterized itself as a nation under siege, taking appropriate measures to fend off its attackers. Here, the dynamics are centripetal: *centrum* (“center”) and *petere* (“seek” or “attack”). Problems originate on the outside and force their way in. In the West, on the other hand, it seemed indisputable that the “Schandmauer” (wall of shame) was designed not to keep enemies *out*, but to keep the dissatisfied citizens of the GDR *in*. The West German accounts suggest a centrifugal dynamic: *centrum* “center” and *fugere* “to flee”, whereby pressures within the system (political oppression, economic dissatisfaction) push the East Germans *out*. A *Spiegel* cover story from August, 2001, for instance, takes for granted that the Wall’s intended purpose was to quarantine the fleeing East Germans: “Never before had a government simply locked up its people to subject it to a social-political experiment” (Wiegrefe 66).

Or as C.R. MacNamara (James Cagney) fulminates in Billy Wilder's 1961 film *One Two Three*: "Russia is to get out of, not to get into!"

For an illustration of the GDR's fear of invasion and infiltration, consider East Germany's answer to James Bond, the 1963 espionage caper *For Eyes Only: Streng geheim* (For Eyes Only: Top Secret). In one scene, the American and West German forces outline their master plan: sleeper cells within "Mitteldeutschland" (East Germany) will be activated to "create dissatisfaction" among the East German populace. Meanwhile, "diversionary groups will create the conditions of a civil war," thereby justifying NATO's all-out military attack.

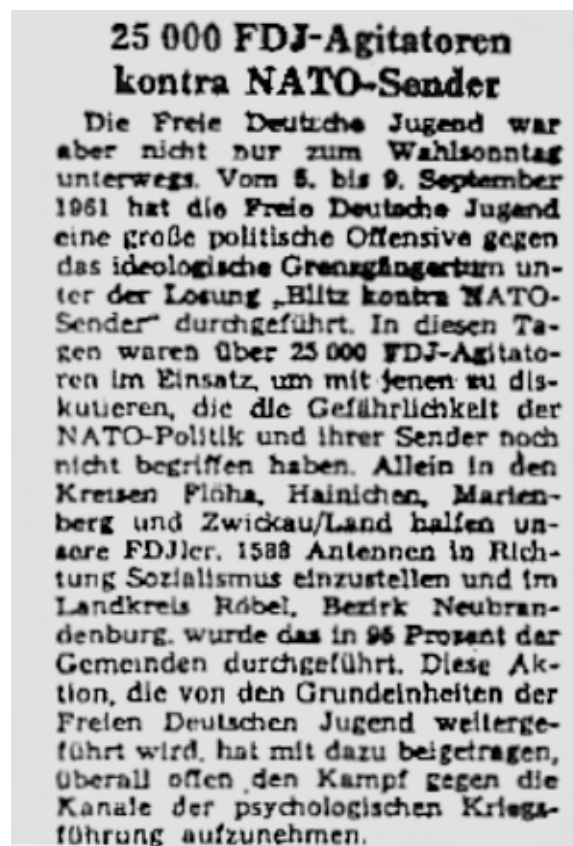


Image 9: The Americans plan their attack on East Germany in For Eyes Only. In the film, it will fall to East German special-agent Hansen (Alfred Müller) to smuggle evidence of this plot over the border to the East, where its publication will inspire worldwide outrage and thwart the Western warmongers.

Of course, this ideological wish-fulfillment fantasy never happened. The West never intended to invade the East (at least not in such a cinematic manner). In historical hindsight, the Party's tale of imminent invasion seems a thin cover story for an otherwise unjustifiable action.

And yet, I will argue that the East German rationale for the "protection measures" on August 13, 1961 was not simply a political expediency designed to hide the shortcomings of the East German social and economic system, but rather may be read as symptomatic of one of the central flaws of the GDR ideological infrastructure. The problem lay in the inability of East German

ideology to address the problem of desire. It is here that we see the truth of the party's paranoid rhetoric of invasion: the citizens of the GDR—and especially the youth—were in fact besieged, to echo Slavoj Žižek, by a plague of fantasies from the West. Every broadcast of the RIAS (Radio in the American Sector), every Hollywood movie shown at a border-cinema packed with young East Germans, and later every West German television program beamed toward the East, reminded East Germans of the glamorous world to the West. Against this fantasy—especially the promise of instant gratification through consumer culture—the Wall was totally ineffectual. Efforts to “protect” the GDR's citizens from Western media were tokenistic at best, along the lines of the FDJ's “Action Blitz against NATO Transmitters” in September 1961, in which thousands of youth re-directed television antennas away from the West.⁸



*Image 10: An article from the September 20, 1961 edition of the FDJ organ *Junge Welt* boasts: “In [Saxony] alone, our FDJlers helped to point 1588 antennas toward Socialism...” (that is, away from Western transmitters).*

At least on the media front, the West was winning the Cold War. In this light, the building of the Wall signaled not a resistance to invasion by Western fantasies, but rather a total capitulation. To the degree that the Wall acknowledged the need to set boundaries between socialist and capitalist consumption, it also endorsed the commodity as the appropriate object of desire.

When one surveys the depictions of this East-West tug-of-war in GDR mass media, a striking pattern emerges. In a great number of East German cultural products from this period, a scenario of romantic choice—in short, a love triangle—both motivates and verifies a political decision in favor of the socialist order.⁹ This standard plot line presents a female protagonist with a choice between two suitors. One seems to represent the allure of the West: flashy, rebellious, exciting and dangerous. The other, whose loyalty is to the East, is stable, kind and a bit boring. Given the prescriptive tendencies of GDR culture, it should be no surprise that the terms of the competition inevitably favor the eastern suitor. More unexpected, though, are the lengths to which these plots must go to ensure the eventual success of the suitable romantic partner. Even with the ideological deck stacked against him, the Western rebel exerts an undeniable pull on the heroine's romantic imagination. Eventually, the narrative itself is forced to intervene, dramatizing the party's direst warnings about the dangers of receptivity to Western influence.

This romantic choice template—and the political ramifications it entails—would not in itself be particularly remarkable; GDR public culture had a tendency to narrativize and personalize political economy.¹⁰ As much as the high priests of socialist realism insisted on the subordination of the “kleine Glück” to the “große Glück”—“little happiness” or personal fulfillment to “big happiness” or social harmony—, the former still demanded pride of place in film and fiction.



Image 11: Program for the 1953 DEFA film “The Little and the Big Happiness.” (Progress Filmillustrierte. 1953, Nr 49)

Thus, while East German ideology addressed the needs and wants of the individual through political means, East German culture pursued political ends by means of individual stories. In these narratives the conclusion of the individual’s story—for instance, the correct romantic choice—is tantamount to a political resolution. And yet, however meritorious its end-effect, such focus on personal fulfillment always risked accusations of selfish individualism—a trait associated with Western Capitalism. The solution to this quandary, and what makes this example illuminating, was a key modification to East German political ideology in the course of the 1950s and 60s: directed to the proper end, the pursuit of individual fulfillment—“das kleine Glück”—was imagined as standing in direct relationship to the social good. This transitive relation is at the core of the phenomenon that I will call the socialist commodity fetish: the GDR’s counter-intuitive—and ultimately counter-productive—cultivation of consumer desires.

Right Triangles: Romantic Choice as Political Avowal

One of the clearest illustrations of the forced choice between East and West in GDR mass culture occurs in Frank Vogel's 1962 film *...Und deine Liebe auch* (And Your Love Too). Eva, the protagonist, is torn between two brothers, Klaus and Ulli.



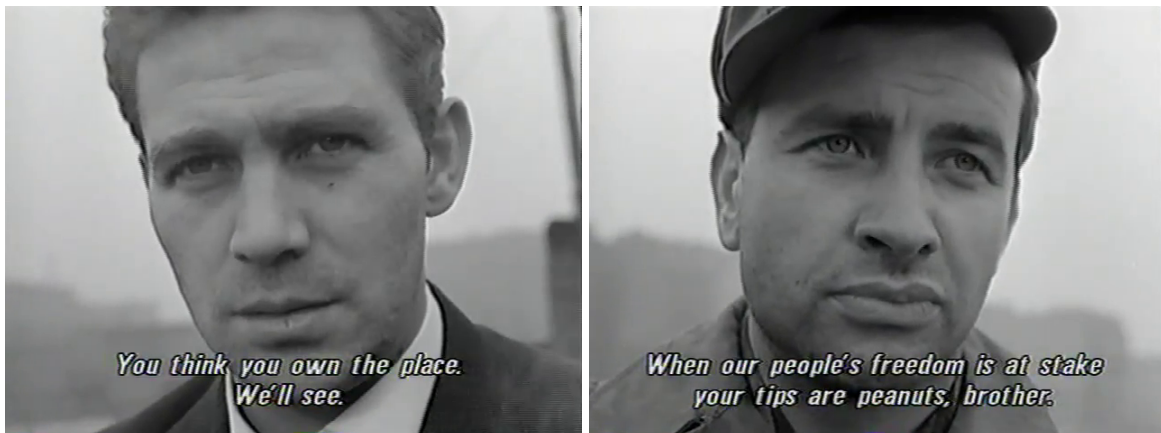
Image 12: Will Eva choose the charming, dangerous rebel Klaus or the kind and stable Ulli?

Ulli is a Party-loyal factory militiaman tasked with closing off the border on August 13, 1961. Klaus would prefer to be in the West. Near the beginning of the film, the brothers confront each other at the border. They turn their backs to the camera and move a step away, explicitly excluding Eva and the other militiaman from the conversation.



Images 13 & 14: Ulli and Klaus step away for a private conversation while Eva looks on.

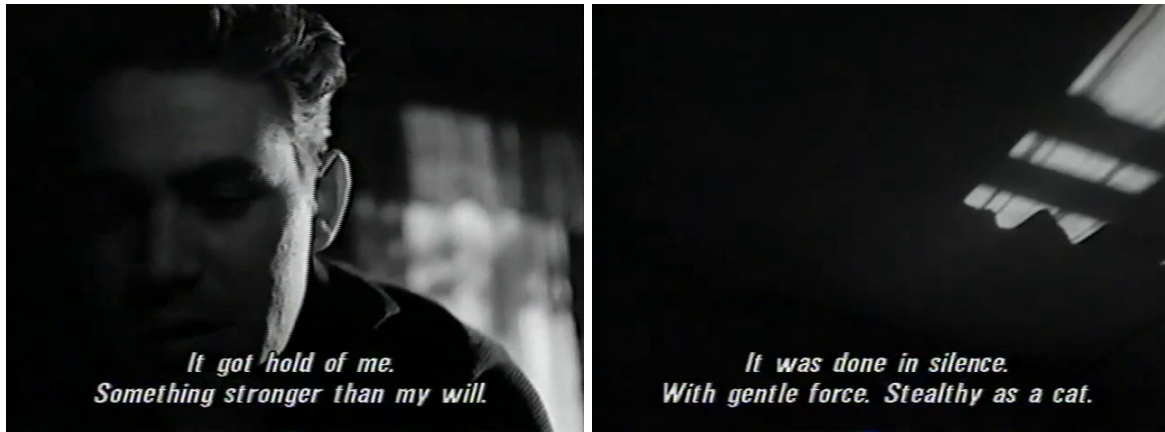
The audience, however, is privy not only to the spoken dialogue, but also to the brothers' thoughts in voice-over.¹¹ Because the conversation is filmed as a sequence of close-up shot/reverse-shots, the source of the internal voices is never in question. In this off-camera dialogue, the brothers ventriloquize a national conversation with clear ideological stakes: Klaus doesn't want to give up his job in the West and the buying power it affords, while Ulli sees the Wall's construction as necessary to ensure world peace.



Images 15 & 16: The voice-over reveals Klaus and Ulli's thoughts during their conversation.

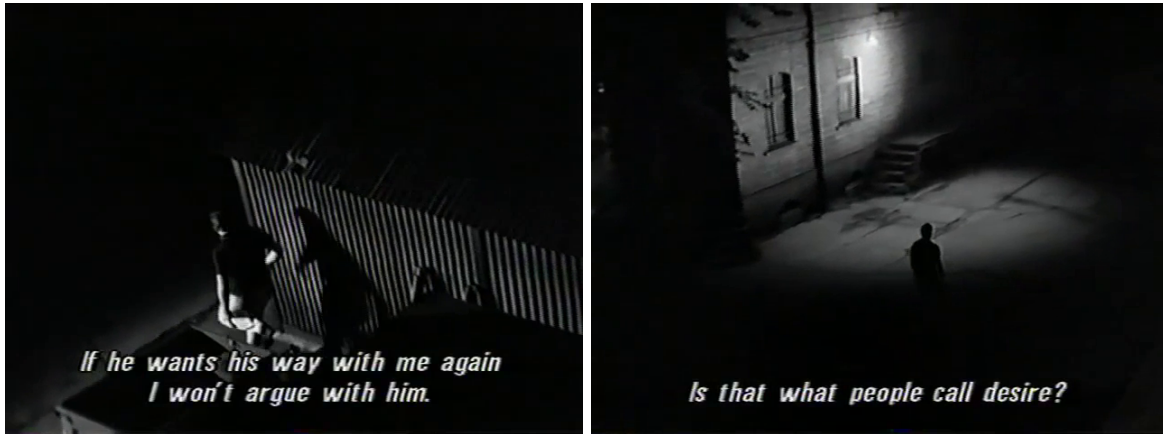
Though excluded from this silent conversation, Eva contends with her own internal struggle. Significantly, this internal debate is couched not in terms of

politics or economics, but rather desire: her attraction to a man whose attachments to the capitalist West render him politically suspect and potentially dangerous. We see this interplay of menace and magnetism when Klaus pays her an unannounced, but not entirely unwelcome visit.



Images 17 & 18: Klaus pays a late-night visit to Eva. She finds herself “quite defenseless” against his advances.

The visual cues of this scene—dark, high-contrast images, *noir*-ish light effects, low-angle close-ups—underscore the threat presented by Klaus’s “sanfter Gewalt,” “soft violence.” Yet the voice-over instructs us to read this encounter not as (or not just as) a scenario of invasion and assault, but rather of mixed signals and conflicting emotions. In the face of Klaus’s aggressive advances Eva discovers “something within [her] that [is] stronger than [herself].” “Is this what people call desire? (Liebesgefühl)” she asks.



Images 19 & 20: Klaus leaves through the window and disappears into the night. Eva's voice-over reveals her conflicted emotions.

Eva's confusion, I would argue, is not just explained by personal uncertainty (or bad writing), but rather evinces a structural problem, a gap in the film's libidinal economy. Eva's conflicted "Liebesgefühl" matches a pattern found in a number of contemporaneous cultural products. The problem, as we will see, is a lack of discursive machinery available to sort out the intertwined forces of danger and desire. Instead, a third term will have to be called in: the repressive power of the State and its representatives.

This dynamic is evident as well in Brigitte Reimann's important 1961 youth novel, *Ankunft im Alltag* (Arrival in the Everyday). Reimann's novel describes the experiences of Recha, Nikolaus, and Curt, three students spending a year at the *Schwarze Pumpe* brown-coal refinery in Hoyerswerda before going to college. In the love-triangle that develops, we see the same contrasting types as in *...Und deine Liebe auch*: Nikolaus is the quintessential worker-hero of the Socialist Realist mode, while Curt is the textbook image of a *Halbstarker*, a westernized rebel à la Marlon Brando or James Dean.

Just like in the film *...Und deine Liebe auch*, Recha finds out how dangerous her attraction to the rebel Curt could be when he visits her one night. Before Curt's arrival, the novel's free indirect discourse dips temporarily into the perspective of Recha's roommate, Lisa, as she reads one of the sentimental West German romance novels that circulate among the young women at the

Schwarze Pumpe. Lisa is moved by the potboiler's melodramatic suspense, though she knows that "after seventy pages of love, sorrow and renunciation everything will come out all right and wedding bells will ring for the poor but pretty nurse" (131).



Image 21: The cover of a pulp "doctor novel" like the one Lisa reads in *Ankunft im Alltag*.

Lisa is interrupted in her reading when Curt rings the doorbell (an echo, perhaps, of the potboiler's wedding bells). That Curt's visit coincides with this gratuitous rendition of the romance novel's formulaic plot underscores his association with westernized romantic clichés: he would be the well-heeled surgeon to Recha's poor but pretty nurse.

We see the other side of romance-novel melodrama, however, when Curt forces his advances on Recha, foreshadowing a more perilous attack later in the novel.

Silently and wildly he fell over her and held down her hands and covered her eyes and her mouth and her throat with kisses. She bit his lips but he felt no pain. He whispered as though out of his mind; "...you damned cat..., I'll get you..., go on, scratch, it won't do you

any good..., I kill myself for you and you..." She suddenly stopped defending herself and kissed him, benumbed and trembling. (136)¹²

Only a few pages after satirizing the kitschy language of the romance novel, Reimann falls into equally ludicrous prose here. Though perhaps inadvertent, this juxtaposition serves as a warning to the consumer of the potboiler's fantasy; its sensuous pleasure, we learn, has a violent core. When Curt attacks Recha he reveals that his magnetic charisma is backed by force. Yet, as was the case with Klaus in *...Und deine Liebe auch*, Curt's coercive violence seems to have a certain appeal: "benumbed and trembling," Recha succumbs (temporarily) to his desire.

Having pushed Curt away, Recha rearranges her hair in the mirror. "I'm not as thin as a starving cat anymore," she says. "With time... I'm getting more curves, don't you think?" (137).¹³ It is telling that, in this appeal for affirmation of her desirability, Recha refers to herself as a "cat," falling into the language Curt used during his attack ("you damned cat"). Naming herself with Curt's epithet, Recha reveals an important aspect of what she later calls Curt's irresistibility (139). Even, or perhaps especially, at his most menacing, Curt does something that the considerate, self-sufficient Nikolaus cannot do: through his fervent—indeed violent—passion for her, he interpellates Recha into the economy of desire. The phlegmatic Nikolaus, on the other hand, is striving toward what Recha calls a "fixed point"—his work and his convictions—and doesn't seem to need her very much. "He's a block of ice," she thinks at one point (170).

In this sense, we may read Recha's relationship with Curt, like Eva's ambivalence about Klaus, in line with what Mary Ann Doane, in her study of the woman's film of the 1940s, calls a "desire to desire." Doane claims that, vis-à-vis the question of female desire, "the representations of the cinema and the representations provided by psychoanalysis of female subjectivity coincide. For each system specifies that the woman's relation to desire is difficult if not impossible" (9).

In the East German cultural context, the concept of a “desire to desire” takes on an added significance. For in the psychological discourse of the GDR, it was not just the woman who had a problematic relation to desire. The dominant psychological model in the GDR, adopted from Soviet psychologists such as Sergei Rubinstein, did not recognize desire at all—desire, that is, as defined by psychoanalytic theory as a lack, a space of unconscious agency that incessantly demands satisfaction yet cannot be appeased by specific objects. Instead, the Soviet model understood human activity as rational and goal-oriented. Desire, according to this model, is always determinate and therefore can always be satisfied.

Here we see in microcosm the tension between what I have termed centripetal and centrifugal understandings of motivation and action. Rubinstein characterizes human activity in centripetal terms, positing a subject motivated entirely by external stimuli. For Rubinstein there is no “unconscious” in the Freudian sense, no mysterious engine of often irrational activity, but rather that which is conscious and that which is “not-yet-conscious” to the subject (40-41).

According to this model, lack is not constitutive, but pathological. The “cure” for desire is conscious activity toward a known goal. Nikolaus, following the “fixed point” of his work and his art, seems immune to the kind of inner turmoil that plagues Curt, who considers endless discontent “his personal tragedy.” This “personal tragedy” is actually that of consumption in general: the commodities thought to offer satisfaction inevitably disappoint at the moment of acquisition, and the consumer must look ahead to his or her next purchase. Through an endless series of material acquisitions, the consumer attempts to alleviate the centrifugal pressure of his or her ever-present sense of lack.

In contrast to the consumerist economy of the West, the productionist economy of the GDR functioned according to a dynamic in which the overabundance was on the side of the *producers*, rather than the consumers. One clear illustration of this is the case of material shortfall, a phenomenon depicted in nearly every East German film or novel of production. Shortfalls occurred when a given workforce exceeded the materials needed to complete

their work. In the GDR's economy, the labor force was over-abundant, but material was lacking. Even more than the supply of work-material, however, the East German consumer market suffered from a critical scarcity. The East German consumer was left "desiring to desire," hoping for something to want.

Socialism and Its Discontents

The party had become aware of the dangers of frustrated desire—especially consumer desire—when workers' disgruntlement escalated into a full-blown general strike on June 17th, 1953.



Image 22: Demonstrators march on June 17, 1953.

Image 23: Employees of the East German HO department store "surrender" to the demonstrators.

http://www.fes.de/archiv/adsd_neu/inhalt/downloads/17_juni.htm#

Scrambling to placate a citizenry not only seething with the resentment that sent them into the streets in the first place, but now also traumatized by the violent suppression of the demonstrations by Soviet tanks and troops, the SED availed itself of a time-tested strategy. As Thomas Heimann puts it in his history of early East German Cinema: "the state reacted pragmatically, in accordance with the motto 'Bread and Circuses'" (223–44). The "circuses" were a new cultural policy centered on light entertainment and genre films. The "bread" would be supplied

by the New Course, the name given to the economic and social reforms introduced in the second half of 1953. Essentially the New Course marked the emergence of an East German consumer culture: from now on, commodities and consumption would play an increasingly significant role in the GDR's ideological self-understanding. As Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht said in 1959: “[we will] prove the superiority of socialism ... not with any old durable goods, with trash, with surplus product, but instead with commodities which possess a high use-value, which are beautiful and tasteful, which the working person can buy and use with pleasure” (Kaminsky 50).

Ulbricht's words here betray the logic of what we might call a socialist commodity fetish—a reversal of the dynamic identified by Marx as operating within capitalist ideology. For Marx, the “commodity fetish” is a misrecognition whereby the “definite social relation between men themselves... assumes... the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Capital 165). According to Ulbricht's rhetoric, on the other hand, commodities would not *obscure*, but rather *reveal* the social relations that produced them—and in so doing, would attest to the triumph of socialist production. The “ideological fantasy” at work in the GDR commodity fetish, then, does not uncouple the commodity from the social network that produced it, but rather erroneously believes consumer goods to be ideologically *inseparable* from this network—it would draw a straight line between the socialist factory and the socialist consumer.



Image 24: The Western vs. the Eastern commodity fetish.

The danger inherent in this policy—of pegging socialism’s success and the Party’s legitimacy to the availability of consumer goods in the GDR—was twofold. First, the scarcity of consumer goods had to be overcome. Second, and more troubling for the ideological logic of the GDR, a distinction between good and bad commodities had to be created and maintained. The first and more practical problem arose from the East German manufacturing sector’s inability to produce enough of these goods to back up the Party’s promises, let alone outpace the West. The exclusive emphasis during the postwar reconstruction period on heavy industry had led to a critical shortage even of basic consumer goods, and luxury items were out of the question. In this way, consumer desires were deliberately cultivated by the policies and rhetoric of the SED, even though the actual object of this desire was noticeably absent from East German homes and stores. The SED attempted to offset this jarring discrepancy through an institutionalized *promesse de bonheur*, whereby present hardships were mortgaged against the promise of future prosperity. In 1962, the New Course was extended and amplified into the New Economic System, a wide-ranging set of initiatives designed to make good on the promises of the 1950s reforms. The New Economic System, like the New Course, relied on the promise of future

enjoyment to compensate present inconvenience. The problem, then, was how to convince East German consumers that GDR commodities would not only materialize one day, but that they would be worth the wait.

Now I got a reason

Now I got a reason

Now I got a reason and I'm still waiting

Now I got a reason

Now I got a reason to be waiting

The Berlin wall

- The Sex Pistols, "Holidays in the Sun"¹⁴

The vain hope that an entire population might be persuaded to defer its grievances and desires lies at the heart of the ideological fantasy that became concrete reality in the Berlin Wall. We might call it the *Dornröschen* fantasy: "what if a wall appeared and everyone just went to sleep for a while?" Christa Wolf's 1963 novel *Der geteilte Himmel* (Divided Heaven), among the more subtle and thoughtful apologias for the Berlin Wall, provides an intriguing instantiation of this fantasy. In one key scene the protagonist's lover, Manfred, learns at a cocktail party that his innovative new textile manufacturing process has been turned down, apparently for political reasons. Outraged and demoralized by this rejection, Manfred proposes a toast "to our lost illusions." Realizing where this resignation might lead, the protagonist, Rita, makes her own silent wish: "may time stand still now" (116).

Absent the magical intervention of the Thirteenth Fairy, however, time rushes on, and Manfred eventually emigrates to the West. If he had waited a while longer, though, Manfred's decision would have been moot; just a few months after his departure, the border to the West is closed. The significance of this fact is not lost on his friend and colleague Martin, who later writes to Rita: "[The party] is interested in our machine. Couldn't Manfred have held on eight

more months? That's what gives me the most trouble when I think about him: If he had remained here, even by force: today he'd *have* to try to cope. Today he couldn't just run away..." (134). The implications of Martin's words are hard to overlook: if the GDR's citizens—especially the precious intelligentsia—lack the patience to wait for the coming society, then this patience will have to be supplied.

Heinz Thiel's 1962 DEFA film *Der Kinnhaken* (The Uppercut) is also motivated by the notion that if disgruntled East Germans could just be held back a bit longer, they would see the superiority of socialism over capitalism. The film opens with a radio report breaking the news of the border closure. Carolin (Dietlinde Greiff) panics and heads to the newly built Wall in an effort to find a way into the West. As she explains to Georg (Manfred Krug), the kind-hearted factory-militia soldier who stops her at the border, she has a good job in West Berlin and needs to get across. He temporizes, offering to smuggle her over at a later date. When she visits him at home to discuss the plan, he reveals that he has no intention of taking her across. "You can come visit me," Georg tells Carolin, "tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, more and more, like in a film, until you gradually get used to me."

What's curious about his suggestion here is that this is precisely *not* how love works in a film, at least not in the traditional Hollywood romance. Cinematic lovers don't "gradually get used to each other," they fall in love at first sight, or they clash comically for a few reels and then realize they love each other. Georg's invitation to Carolin, to keep coming back until she learns to like him, parallels the film's implicit (and rather cynical) message to the citizens of the newly isolated GDR: "since you can't leave, you might as well learn to like it here." In line with this effort *The Uppercut* is a veritable advertisement for the products and attractions of East Germany. Just after this conversation between George and Carolin, for instance, the film cuts to footage of the bright lights of East Berlin's nightlife and the neon signs of stores reading "His" and "Hers." The film seems to be saying: we have this now, just think of what we'll have in the future.

The GDR of Thiel's film is a consumer paradise, even if, as the characters point out in a number of scenes, a few of the products aren't quite up to Western standards yet. In one exchange Georg jokes about the poor quality of GDR whisky, in another about the unavailability of seamless nylons in the East. Yet just as Georg's patience will eventually pay off in Carolin returning his love, the frustrated East German consumer is assured that, as the banner above Georg's workplace proclaims: "as we work today, so shall we live tomorrow," "wie wir heute arbeiten, werden wir morgen leben."



Image 25: A romantic kiss fades into an equally romantic promise in Der Kinnhaken. The sign above Georg's workplace reads: "As We Work Today, So Shall We Live Tomorrow!"

The Good, the Bad, and the Stasi: Policing the Love Triangle

To return to the second danger that accompanied the GDR's embrace of consumer culture and the commodity fetish, we must ask: how does one tell the difference between capitalist and socialist consumerism? This conundrum had vexed party functionaries and cultural producers alike since the introduction of the New Course in the early 1950s. Consider these juxtaposed photographs in the May 1954 issue of the East German entertainment magazine *Das Magazin*.



Images 26 & 27: “True Love” vs. “Wares of Love”

The first looks outward from a bookshop at a young couple window-shopping arm-in-arm. Both are gazing intently at a book entitled “Verliebte Welt,” “World in Love.” The caption reads “wahre Liebe,” “True Love.” On the facing page is a photograph of another couple, from the waist down. He is wearing a wrinkled sportscoat and pointed shoes, she a tight sweater, a short, floral-print skirt and stockings. On a billboard behind them we can see most of the words “St. Pauli,” the red-light district of Hamburg. The caption reads “Liebesware,” “Wares of Love.”

At first, the intended moral of the story seems fairly clear. Against the Cold-War backdrop of the early 1950s, the “Wares of Love” seems to point to the decadent West, where love is for sale, literally and figuratively. In consuming the latest fashion trends, in buying the products that are supposed to make them more desirable, these young West Germans are in fact selling themselves.

The East, we may infer, is the land of “True Love,” where young lovers are brought together by culture and ideas, rather than fashion. The pair in the bookstore, however, are not *not* consuming: their romantic moment is created and defined by commodities, in this case books. In fact, the books are not even

products of the socialist bloc: one title, faintly visible, identifies a translation of British author David Severn's 1946 children's novel Forest Holiday, while "Verliebte Welt" is a picture book by the popular French cartoonist Raymond Peynet. Both "true love" and "love-for-sale," it seems, may involve the act of consumption—and even of Western products. The GDR is not drawing attention to the means of production to justify the consumption of commodities. Instead, the determining difference seems to lie in the intention behind the consumption. The difference, in other words, is one of individual psychology (the motivation of the consumer), rather than political economy (the conditions of production).

Perhaps this need to distinguish between Eastern and Western forms of consumption explains the third figure in the "Wahre Liebe" photograph, a man wearing a trenchcoat, hat and glasses, standing behind the couple and watching them. Such supervision, and even intervention, appears in all the cultural products we've looked at so far.

We see this demand for qualitative discernment—and state intervention—in ...*Und deine Liebe auch* when Eva goes to visit Klaus, who is in prison for trying to escape to the West. As Klaus assures Eva that he will reform his life, his voice fades out and another fades in. This voice-over belongs neither to Eva nor to Klaus, but rather seems to originate from the guard who sits between them (in fact it belongs to Ulli, who is absent from the scene). The off-voice summarizes and comments on Klaus's words, reporting that he claims to have "drawn the line" ("er hat einen Schlußstrich gemacht")—which, the voice reminds us, is easier said than done.



Image 28: Eva visits a repentant Klaus in prison. The voice-over summarizes and comments on his statements.

The disembodied voice is then echoed by Eva. “Irgendwo muss eine Grenze sein,” she says. “You have to draw a line somewhere.” Literally, “there must be a border somewhere.”



Image 29: Eva exhorts Klaus to turn his life around.

Eva’s relationship with Klaus is thus doubly mediated: first by his brother, a border guard, who keeps Klaus from abandoning her and escaping to the West, and then by the prison (embodied in this guard), who keeps her from getting too close: “A line has to be drawn somewhere.” Until individuals know what’s good for them, their desires must be held in check by the power of the state.

In *Ankunft im Alltag*, Recha learns the importance of that border only after Curt lures her into the woods and attempts to rape her. As Julia Hell points out in

her excellent reading of the novel in *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, this scene contains “an intricate, complex entanglement of desires and prohibitions” (126). In Hell’s reading, Recha’s desire renders Curt’s assault a transgression both of political and psychic taboos: “Recha’s relationship to Curt is highly ambivalent. He represents what is most forbidden—both the fascist father/past *and* the proto-fascist West/present—and Recha’s physical attraction is as strong as her moral revulsion” (Hell 126). When Nikolaus comes to her aid, then, he rescues her as much from herself—from her own forbidden desire—as from Curt. Following the pair into the woods, Nikolaus pulls Curt away from Recha and pummels him; a “relapse to the stone-age,” as he says later (212).

Finally, in *Der Kinnhaken* it turns out that Carolin’s lucrative job in the West was nothing short of prostitution. Having learned of Carolin’s unseemly past, Georg’s friend Hübner (Horst Bastian) puts it bluntly: “She did it for money. That’s a fact.” Fortunately, the patient and forgiving Georg, who originally stopped her from crossing into the West, decides to give Carolin another chance, and after he delivers the uppercut of the film’s title to her pimp’s chin, he and Carolin become a happy couple. Read allegorically, the message of the story to the East German consumer might be summarized as follows: “the closed border is there to protect you from yourself, to stop you from prostituting yourself for Western goods. Though you may have sold your love in the past, we’ll afford you a second chance at respectability. And if you wait patiently, we’ll soon have the very products here for which you were selling yourself there.”

The love triangles in *...Und deine Liebe auch*, *Ankunft im Alltag* and *Der Kinnhaken* are all about marking boundaries. It is no coincidence, then, that all three appeared in the year following the construction of the Berlin Wall. Just as the “Anti-Fascist Wall of Protection” had to be built to protect East Germans from Western exploitation and aggression, these plots suggest, a clear distinction has to be drawn between socialist consumption and capitalist prostitution. In our examples, it seems the only thing keeping the former from becoming the latter is the state’s intervention. In each, a sudden eruption of violence protects the vulnerable, desirous East German subject from her own desire.

Epilogue: Coming Out

In a particularly unprophetic moment, East German Party Secretary Erich Honecker assigned the Berlin Wall a lifespan well suited to the *Domröschen* analogy I sketched at the outset: “The Wall will remain for 50 and 100 years” he proclaimed, “if the conditions that necessitated it have not been removed.”¹⁵ A few months later, the Wall fell. But had the conditions been removed? Amidst ever-greater rapprochement between East and West in the wake of *Wandel durch Annäherung* on one side and *glasnost/perestroika* on the other, the prospect of invasion—what I have been calling the centripetal threat—seemed relatively distant.¹⁶ But what of the centrifugal threat: the accretion of discontent, indignation, desire—especially frustrated consumer desire—within East German society?

The films and novels we have looked at from the time of the Wall’s construction still subscribed to the belief that with proper boundaries, such internal pressures could be corralled and controlled. A line could be drawn between good and bad passionate attachments. Translated into romantic plots, the solution became even more straightforward: the unworthy inamorato would inevitably show his hand, causing the heroine—with help from the State—to withdraw her wayward desire and choose the more suitable suitor. This, I claimed, had a direct socioeconomic analogue in the assumption that consumers’ desires could be steered ideologically toward the proper object-choice: the socialist commodity. By the logic of what I have been calling the socialist commodity fetish, East German consumer goods would bear witness to the superior political economy that produced them; the act of consumption would win over East German citizens to the socialist cause.

As it turned out, the stumbling block in this plan was not the creation of the fetish—socialist consumers were more than willing to buy and enjoy products labeled “made in GDR”—but rather the production of commodities. There were precious few East German consumer goods to enjoy. In his book *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945–1989*, Jeffrey Kopstein points out how

the yearly increases in personal savings throughout the 1980s indicate “pent-up demand” in the East German economy. Thus, he argues, one can view the events of autumn 1989 “largely [as the] political actions of dissatisfied consumers, not . . . of dissatisfied producers” (192–93). If, as I have claimed, the Wall went up to buy time for the GDR to develop a consumer economy, its collapse signaled the failure of this effort.

Pragmatically, the party’s policies fostered the desiring-economy of consumerism, even as the objects of consumer desire were nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, East German ideological doctrine continued to refute the notion of desire as insatiable lack. Functionaries and psychologists alike saw human activity as rational, motivated by concrete goals and satisfied by discrete accomplishments.

This contradiction made itself felt in the public culture of the 1980s, and perhaps most clearly in romantic narratives. Where we might expect to find a pattern homologous to that of the Wall narratives of the 1960s, in which the choice of romantic partner (the “kleine Glück”) mirrors the decisions appropriate to society’s “große Glück,” the 1980s saw a more radical development. In a great many narratives from the GDR’s last decade, meaningful romantic choice has disappeared entirely; it is foreclosed at the outset.

One of the starkest illustrations of this dynamic can be found in Konrad Wolf’s 1980 film *Solo Sunny*. As the title suggests, Sunny, the film’s young protagonist, has not succeeded in her attempts to find love and companionship. She is also incapable of holding down a day job, the kind of work that was supposed to ensure social integration and alleviate discontent. Instead, Sunny wants to be a rock and roll singer. According to a logic that may now seem all too familiar, Sunny is exposed to the dangers of this lifestyle when one of her band-mates sexually assaults her. Unlike the heroines of the 1960s Wall narratives, however, Sunny is able to fight off her attacker without outside help: “if you hit me,” she screams, beating him with a shoe, “you’d better kill me.” Sunny is tough, headstrong and self-reliant—so much so, as it turns out, that the greatest threat to her wellbeing is herself. At the film’s dramatic climax, Sunny swallows all

the sleeping pills in her friend's medicine cabinet. The emergency room procedure that follows is filmed with documentary realism and distressing proximity. There is no soundtrack, just the sounds of splashing water and the doctors' conversation. "What does she do for a living?" one of them asks, sliding a tube down Sunny's throat. "She's a pop singer," the other says dismissively.

After the danger has passed, a visiting friend asks about the suicide attempt. "Everything just happened all at once," Sunny says, then changes the subject: "You know, their favorite word here is 'Partner.' They just don't get it. Finding someone is like winning the lottery. And I never get the ones I want... There must be something wrong with me."



Image 30: ER doctors pump Sunny's stomach in Solo Sunny (1980).



Image 31: The same procedure in Coming Out (1989).

Heiner Carow's 1989 film *Coming Out* begins with a remarkably similar scene of medical intervention. As the film opens, we follow an ambulance

through the streets of Berlin against a backdrop of New Year's fireworks. In the hospital, a jerky handheld camera ushers the gurney into the emergency room. Now we see the patient, a young man, as doctors insert a tube into his esophagus—"This part will be unpleasant," they say—and pump out the contents of his stomach. In the next scene, a nurse visits the patient at his temporary bed in the hallway. A neon light flickers overhead. "Why did you do that?" She asks gently. "Don't you want to tell me?" We see his face in close-up, glistening with tears and sweat. "Because... I'm gay," he says. "I'm a homosexual." "Matthias, don't cry," the nurse says, stroking his hair. "Don't cry about that."

What are we to make of these two overdoses and the identical scenarios of medical intervention they occasion? And what do they have to tell us about East German public culture in the decade they span? Matthias and Sunny are not alone in their morbid despair. In her book *Rifts in Time and in the Self*, Cheryl Dueck calls attention to the striking number of protagonists of East German novels in the 1980s who die through accident, sickness, suicide, or at the hands of others. In these novels, Dueck writes, "the main character either finds him/herself divided, unable to maintain a single subjecthood, or fails to find a place within the societal order and dies at its hands. This dissection of the subject necessarily implies its death, because, although the separate parts continue to live, the original entity has ceased to exist" (113). Dueck relates these narratives of doomed subjectivity to the notion of the death drive, as proposed by Freud and elaborated by Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. For Freud, the death drive attempts to remove a "persisting tension" in human experience, namely "the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demand*ed and that which is actually *achieved*" (Freud 1975, 51). This driving factor of human activity, the vital motor that the death drive tries to stop, is what Lacan called *desire*.

If Eros and Thanatos, as Freud claims, exist in constant mortal conflict, then Dueck's analysis would lead us to conclude that the latter was in the ascendancy in the GDR of the 1980s. The hospital scenes in *Solo Sunny* and *Coming Out* would support this reading as well. For what are Matthias and

Sunny's suicide attempts if not drastic, death-driven efforts to quell desire? In both cases the problem is not that they haven't found romantic fulfillment, but that they despair of the possibility of ever experiencing this fulfillment. Sunny is by nature (or by definition) "solo." Matthias despairs of finding lasting partnership in the fiercely heteronormative culture of East Germany. Exposed to the unappeasable hunger of the desire to desire, both characters seek relief in an overdose of sleeping pills (one might even hear echoes of the sleeping beauty motif). In this light, the state's intervention through the medical procedure of stomach-pumping would amount to a negation of a negation—an attempt to purge lack. Simply put, the state wants Sunny and Matthias to abandon their problematic desire and become productive—and reproductive—citizens.

Yet Matthias and Sunny survive their attempted suicides, and each finds a way to live within—or despite—East German society. Matthias comes out of the closet, finds a community of support amongst friends and family, and thrives in East Berlin's underground gay scene. Sunny remains solo—but emphatically, unrepentantly so. "I sleep with whomever I want," she tells her new band. "I call it like I see it, I'm the girl who was kicked out of the 'Tornadoes.' I'm Sunny." Thus, barred from the GDR's official culture—a norm coded, as we have seen, in terms of heterosexual romantic partnership—both Matthias and Sunny find fulfillment within the "kleine Glück" of their individual desires.

Likewise, as the official culture of the GDR waned under the sign of Thanatos, the GDR's unofficial, underground counter-public sphere—what Günter Gauss, among others, has called the "niche" society—gained power and momentum.¹⁷ Thus Sunny and Matthias, who seem at first to be cultural outliers, belong in this sense to the mainstream. In their tenacious pursuit of personal fulfillment, their refusal to compress their "kleine Glück" into the space allotted to it within the "große Glück," they embody the attitudes and strategies the GDR's citizens more generally. On November 9, 1989—coincidentally, the same night that *Coming Out* premiered in East German theaters—East Germany's unofficial society poured over and through the suddenly obsolete Berlin Wall.

¹ Parts of this argument have appeared in *Legal Tender, Love and Legitimacy in the East German Imagination* (Cornell University Press, 2010) and “Realism and Romance in the East German Cinema, 1952–1962,” *Film History* 18.1 (2006).

² After the closing of the inner-German border, aerial propaganda became one of the more outlandish phenomena of the media Cold War. While NATO dropped leaflets via propaganda balloon, East German artillery fired “propaganda rockets” full of pro-socialist pamphlets and magazines across the border in an attempt to encourage desertion among Western troops. More about aerial propaganda (including this leaflet) can be found in Arthur Fournier’s fascinating blog post at <http://rectoversoblog.com/2010/12/13/propaganda/>.

³ The official code-name for the border operation that would eventually lead to the building of the Berlin Wall was “Rose.” See Taylor and Rottman 29.

⁴ Freud discusses fairy tales as screen memories in “The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales.” *Writings on Art and Literature* 101–108.

⁵ In her essay “‘You Have to Draw a Line Somewhere’: Tropes of Division in DEFA Films from the Early 1960s,” Mariana Ivanova examines the way DEFA’s “Wall Films” “reinforce the official rhetoric in the GDR about the Wall’s protective function,” even as “they underscore the harmful effects of the physical wall upon personal relationships” (80).

⁶ Friedrich Hölderlin’s 1805 poem “Hälfte des Lebens” ends:

Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen.

The walls stand
Silent and cold, in the wind
The weathervanes rattle.

⁷ For more on photographic representations of the Berlin Wall see Demke and Drechsel.

⁸ For more on the “Blitz kontra NATO-Sender” see McDougall 141–143.

⁹ In “Projections of History: East German Film-Makers and the Berlin Wall,” Seán Allan points out the tendency of numerous DEFA films “to exploit the metaphor of the love triangle to capture the conflicts of German-German relations during the Cold War” (121). Ivanova also calls attention to the ubiquitous love triangles in the Wall Films (80).

¹⁰ See Urang 4.

¹¹ Seán Allan’s thoughtful discussion of *...Und deine Liebe auch* in “Projections of History” attributes the conspicuous voice-over to Frank Vogel’s interest in the work of Alain Resnais.

¹² The original German reads:

Er fiel stumm und wild über sie her und hielt ihre Hände fest und bedeckte ihre Augen und den Mund und ihren Hals mit Küssen. Sie biß ihm in die Lippe, aber es tat ihm nicht weh; er flüsterte wie von Sinnen: “. . .du verfluchte Katze . . ., ich krieg’ dich doch . . ., na los, kratz nur, nützt dir ja nichts . . ., ich bring’ mich um nach dir, und du . . .” Sie hörte plötzlich auf, sich zu wehren, und küßte ihn, betäubt und zitternd. (136)

¹³ The German reads: “‘Ich bleib’ nicht so mager wie ‘ne verhungerte Katze,’ sagte Recha. ‚Mit der Zeit . . . ich werde noch üppiger, glaubst du?’ (137).

¹⁴ Thanks to Jan Mieszkowski for reminding me of this song.

¹⁵ “Die Mauer wird in 50 und auch in 100 Jahren noch bestehen bleiben, wenn die dazu vorhandenen Gründe noch nicht beseitigt sind.” Erich Honecker in *Neues Deutschland*, 18 January, 1989. Aqi. Mählert 156.

¹⁶ *Wandel durch Annäherung* (Change through Approach/Rapprochement) was the name of West German chancellor Willy Brandt’s new *Ostpolitik* (Policy toward the East), instituted in the 1970s. The policy led to greater openness and communication between the FRG and the GDR. *Glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) refer to the reform policies introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s.

¹⁷ Gaus, the Federal Republic’s ambassador to the GDR between 1974 and 1981, coined the term *Nischengesellschaft* to refer to the unofficial social and economic arrangements that replaced East Germany’s dysfunctional public sphere. See Gaus 156 ff.

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