

2010

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Shen, Qinna 2010. DEFA Märchenfilme as Brechtian Parables: Gerhard Klein's Die Geschichte vom armen Hassan and Konrad Petzold's Das Kleid. *The Brecht Yearbook* 35: Brecht, Marxism, and Ethics. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 112-31.

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DEFA Märchenfilme as Brechtian Parables: Gerhard Klein's *Die Geschichte vom armen Hassan* and Konrad Petzold's *Das Kleid*

As an iconic theorist and practitioner of revolutionary theater, Bertolt Brecht's influence on film is uncontested and far-reaching. Yet the discussion of 'Brechtian cinema' is often focused on European New Wave and feminist filmmaking, marginalizing DEFA pictures. This is despite DEFA (die Deutsche Film-Aktien-gesellschaft) being the state-owned film company in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), where Brecht had lived and worked after returning from exile. Brecht's relationship with DEFA has always been portrayed as brief (partly due to his untimely death in 1956) and rather strained. Although he shared the studio's idea that media should be didactic and entertaining, Brecht cringed at DEFA's ideological dogmatism as he did from Hollywood's commercialism. His loyal yet critical attitude towards Marxism accounts for his reservation concerning the East German Stalinist regime and thus his fraught relationship with DEFA. DEFA made a few attempts to film Brecht's plays; however, all failed.¹ Rolf Rohmer, a former theater professor in Leipzig, attests to Brecht's influence on all theaters in the GDR and on the artistic practice of many producers, actors and musicians who "interiorized" Brecht's drama technique (Rohmer 60). After all, Brecht was East Germany's most famous artist during its early years; many made pilgrimages from the West to see his productions. Some key DEFA actors were in the Berliner Ensemble and "trained in gestic acting" (Silberman, "Brecht and Film," 213). Individuals and dramaturgy thus suggest the immediate and mediated impact Brecht made on DEFA films.²

¹ The most cited example was the filming of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. See e.g. Wolfgang Gersch's *Film bei Brecht*; Ralf Schenk's "Von den Lastern der Welt;" the chapter "Brecht's Reception East and West" in Roswitha Mueller's *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media*; Erwin Geschonneck's *Meine unruhigen Jahre*, 174-5.

² Barton Byg also points out that Brecht's collaborators Slatan Dudov and Hanns Eisler remained influential in the GDR. Dudov was the mentor of young filmmakers, including Gerhard Klein, who directed *The Story of Poor Hassan* discussed in this essay (Byg 222).

This essay will focus on selected DEFA *Märchenfilme* to demonstrate the impact Brecht has made on the studio. At a first glance, fairy-tale films seem inappropriate for a Brechtian analysis due to the obvious contradiction between their presumably fantastic nature and Brecht's insistence on realism. Contrary to popular belief, the unexplainable and miraculous are not necessary elements in fairy tales; indeed, a number of DEFA adaptations of folk or literary tales do not contain any magic.³ This essay focuses on two such films where magic is absent and that most exemplify Brechtian aesthetics, politics and ethics: Gerhard Klein's *Die Geschichte vom armen Hassan* (*The Story of Poor Hassan*, 1958) and Konrad Petzold's *Das Kleid* (*The Dress*, 1961/ premiered in 1991). Made shortly after Brecht's death, both films can be considered Brechtian parables. Fairy tales (including folk and literary tales), parables and fables are overlapping genres.⁴ The parable is of great importance to Brecht's concept of the epic theater:

Brecht's stories were more often parables (*Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*) or worked as historically distant parallels to contemporary issues and events (*Galileo*, *Mother Courage*, *The Days of the Commune*.) In later years Brecht came in fact to prefer the term 'parable' for his work. It offered, Ernst Schumacher reports, 'simplicity and easy assimilation'; it was 'indirect', 'cunning' and 'concrete in abstraction'. (Brooker 214)

Indeed, Brecht himself uses the parable form in *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *The Good Person of Szechwan* to illustrate his Marxist and antifascist politics and ethics; thus, fairy-tale thinking is not alien to Brecht's work. Resembling

³ Including *Der Teufel vom Mühlenberg* (Herbert Ballmann, 1955), *Die Geschichte vom armen Hassan* (Gerhard Klein, 1958), *Der junge Engländer* (Gottfried Kolditz, 1958), *Das hölzerne Kälbchen* (Bernhard Thieme, 1961), *Das Kleid* (Konrad Petzold, 1961/ premiered in 1991), *König Drosselbart* (Walter Beck, 1965), *Wie heiratet man einen König* (Rainer Simon, 1969).

⁴ The Marxist critic Jack Zipes points out the similarities and differences between pre-capitalist folktales and the nineteenth-century literary fairy tales: "The folk tale is part of a pre-capitalist people's oral tradition which expresses their wishes to attain better living conditions through a depiction of their struggles and contradictions. The term fairy tale is of aristocratic and bourgeois coinage and indicates the advent of a new literary form which appropriates elements of folklore to address and criticize the aspirations and needs of an emerging middle class audience" (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 32).

the characteristics of epic theater, parable storytelling is emblematic, anti-illusionist and anti-naturalistic. Since the parable conveys a message in a mediated, yet intelligible way, the parabolic form suits Brecht's epic dramaturgy, or in other words, narrative theater.⁵ Commenting on the Copenhagen production of his *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, Brecht writes on the "peculiarities of the parable form": "This play, the parable type of non-aristotelian drama, demanded a considerable sacrifice of effects of illusion on the part of actors and stage set" (Brecht, "Notes to *Die Rundköpfe und Die Spitzköpfe*," 100).

The folk nature of fairy tales allows us to relate them to Brecht's work. Expressions found in the wishes of the common people and the anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist tendencies in folktales show that these tales and Brecht's parable plays share similar political ambitions, addressing the needs and aspirations of the lower class. As the primary theoretician of the Marxist approach to folktales, Jack Zipes highlights the politics disguised in fairy tales that belie the tales as innocent children's stories.

The initial ontological situations in the tales generally deal with exploitation, hunger and injustice familiar to the lower class in pre-capitalist societies. And the magic of the tales can be equated to the wish-fulfillment and utopian projections of the people, i.e., of the folk, who preserved and cultivated these tales. (Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell* 8)

In typical fairy tales, wish-fulfillment materializes only in "magic reality." However, Brecht's work urges wish-fulfillment in "social reality," to borrow Dorothee Ostmeier's term.⁶ Many fairy tales originated from the folk and were initially transmitted in oral form. They were later co-opted by bourgeois collectors and editors who had similar social aspirations, as in the case of the

⁵ Reinhold Grimm suggests that "epic" is more or less synonymous with the adjective "narrative," not "heroic" (40).

⁶ "In the traditional Cinderella tales, magic agents initiate the reader into social liberation and act as mediators between two realities: the corrupt social reality and the redeeming magic reality" (Ostmeier 114).

Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen.⁷ Because a proto-Marxist critique of the bourgeoisie and capitalism was already embedded in folktales, Brecht stands in the tradition of the populist art of folktales. Fairy tales lend themselves to a Marxist reading, just as Brecht's plays are consciously composed with Marxist leanings.

Many folktales revolve around the social ascent of a member of the lower class into the upper class structure without any radical changes to society as a whole. Partly due to bourgeois editors' intervention, "The endings of almost all folk tales are not solely emancipatory, but actually depict the limits of social mobility and the confines of the imagination" (Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell* 33). Not surprisingly, DEFA adaptations of folk and literary tales extend the improvement of an individual's fate to that of the entire lower class, a shift in accord with Brecht's politics and ethics. The major difference between the fairy tale ideology and Brecht's agenda lies in the fact that fairy tales lack "the social interventionist" activism that Brecht so outspokenly espouses (Silberman, "A Postmodernized Brecht," 1). Because of middle-class control of the folktales' official versions, the tales' functions are limited to entertainment and education, without explicitly formulating a coherent socio-political critique. To Brecht, however, art is charged with a political mission: "By accentuating contradictions between everyday appearance and what is historically realizable, Brecht hoped to galvanize his audience into action outside the theater" (Lunn 15).

Brecht's relationship with DEFA was complicated. In the GDR, Georg Lukács' advocacy of classical humanism, socialist realism, and his censure of Romanticism and modernism dominated official cultural politics. Brecht was criticized by Lukács for being "formalistic":

⁷ See Zipes' article "Dreams of a Better Bourgeois Life: the Psychosocial Origins of the Grimms' Tales" and his book *Hans Christian Andersen: The Misunderstood Storyteller*.

As early as 1932, in one of his rare direct comments on the dramatist, Lukács had attacked Brecht's plays, in particular the didactic *Lehrstücke* of the period, arguing that Brechtian method prevented the development of a true socialist realism because it lacked the treatment of representative, yet individualized, characters in psychological conflict. Instead Brecht's characters represented merely abstract functions in the class struggle, speaking in disembodied arguments and agitational dialogues. Lukács regarded the "estrangement" effect as a merely formalistic device artificially imposed on the material. This critique was similar to Lukács' general assault upon the modernist avant-garde. (Lunn 14)

Although Brecht opposed Lukács' judgment of him (Lunn 14-5), Lukács' deprecation of Brecht's aesthetics as such predestined the latter's vacillating reception in the GDR, a reception Marc Silberman succinctly summarizes:

Brecht's return to East Berlin in 1948 and the establishment of the Berlin Ensemble were celebrated by the East German government as a major public relations coup, since he represented a strong ideological line of continuity with left intellectuals of the Weimar Republic; nonetheless, in the course of the fifties until he died in 1956, Brecht's politics and aesthetics were treated by the government's cultural functionaries with great suspicion because his "formalism" did not fit the dogmatic image of Socialist Realism. After his death, however, the work at the Berlin Ensemble quickly became acceptable as a model of political theatre motivated by critical, interventionary thinking (Brecht's *eingreifendes Denken*) when applied to the fascist past and to western capitalism but not to the domestic socialist development. (Silberman, "A Postmodernized Brecht?" 4)

DEFA's reception of Brecht was not entirely inhibited by Lukács' negative appraisal of the playwright. While DEFA typically adhered, especially in the early years, to socialist realist strictures, it occasionally deviated from them, as is evident in many fairy-tale films, especially those containing magic. The artistic, scientific and mechanical nature of filmmaking made Brecht's view that art is "a technical skill, engaged in experimentations" attractive and practical for DEFA (Lunn 30). The formal, technological, and often Brechtian way of production was deemed essential to the success of a film project, despite their tinges of formalism. In general, Lukács was followed by GDR cultural functionaries, whereas Brecht appealed to artists.

The essay will focus on two DEFA fairy-tale films that are consciously Brechtian. *The Story of Poor Hassan* is directed by the famed director Gerhard Klein in the form of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* or didactic plays.⁸ Based on an Ugrian tale, *The Story of Poor Hassan* reinforces the core of Marxist ethics: the exploitation of the working class and the need for class consciousness and rebellion. Adapted from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," in which the ruler becomes a laughingstock when the naked truth of his incompetence is revealed, Konrad Petzold's *The Dress* is a political satire of Stalinism. After the erection of the Berlin Wall, this film was increasingly suspected to be a parody of the East German state as an isolated dictatorship. (The kingdom in the film lies behind a thick and solid wall). *The Dress* not only echoes Brecht's anti-Stalinist criticism encoded in *Buckow Elegies* by quoting from the poem "Die Lösung" ("The Solution"), it also follows the precepts of Brecht's epic theater. The uses of songs, intertitles, masks and stilts are conspicuous Brechtian features in the film.

Despite Brecht's tortured relationship with DEFA, these two fairy-tale films show how the studio is indebted both aesthetically and politically to the legacy of the playwright. Modeled on Brechtian parables, these films make historically or geographically distant parables into analogies featuring contemporary issues found in the GDR (cf. Brooker 214). Their minimalist, indicative and realist *mise en scène* is comparable to how Brecht stages a play: "There is nothing decorative and nothing magical in it" (Dort 240). Many of the actors and actresses in these films came from the Berliner Ensemble, including Ekkehard Schall, who plays Hassan, and Erwin Geschonneck, who plays the merchant Machmud in *The Story of Poor Hassan*,⁹ as well as Wolf

⁸ See *77 Märchenfilme: Ein Filmführer für Jung und Alt* (p. 41), *Zwischen Marx und Muck: DEFA-Filme für Kinder* (p. 111), or *Das Grosse Lexikon der DEFA-Spielfilme* (p. 204).

⁹ Against Brecht's wishes, Geschonneck left the Berliner Ensemble for DEFA. See Geschonneck's *Meine unruhigen Jahre*, esp. 181-86.

Kaiser and Eva-Maria Hagen, who respectively are the emperor and kitchen maid in *The Dress*.¹⁰ These films are overlooked exemplars that demonstrate how DEFA pictures apply Brecht's theory on media, experiment with the audio and visual, and illustrate a Brechtian ethics that is Marxist yet anti-Stalinist.¹¹

The Story of Poor Hassan

Set in a parched Middle Eastern region, *The Story of Poor Hassan* revolves around the coolie Hassan's oppression and final rebellion against his suppressors, who are represented by the rich merchant Machmud and the pallid and sickly magistrate Kadi. When Hassan accidentally kills Machmud's dog during an attempt to defend himself, the corrupt judge sentences him to be the watchdog for Machmud. Following a montage sequence of serene images taken in Machmud's yard, which is accompanied by the slave Fatima's beautiful song,¹² the camera abruptly takes the spectator's focus along an iron chain to Hassan and shows him shackled to a leash. Instead of being outraged at his animalization, Hassan says "Hier ist es schön." The sharp contrast between Hassan's abject existence and the serene images and sounds found in Machmud's yard and Fatima's song constitutes a moment of Brechtian *Gestus* and *Verfremdung*.¹³

¹⁰ Others also have extensive theatrical background. e.g. Horst Drinda, who plays Hans; Günther Simon, who plays the butcher; and Gerd E. Schäfer, who plays the foreign minister in *The Dress*.

¹¹ See references to, among others, Wolfgang Gersch, John Willett, Marc Silberman, and Roswitha Mueller.

¹² The use of songs is another characteristic of Brechtian plays. Songs appear twice in the film: the first time for Fatima to express her homesickness; then at the very end when Fatima (off scene) and Hassan sing a song about the joy and reward that come with rising up and casting away the fetters that bind them: "Freudenvoll / Wer furchtlos sich erhoben / Tausendfach wird der die Tage loben."

¹³ Brechtian *Gestus*, (translated as gist, gesture or attitude) is demonstrated in performance or in gestic acting, which evokes alienation effects. "[Epic actors] would therefore demonstrate the social gest implicit in an action or event in such a way that its contradictory emotions and motives were situated or 'historicised'." *Gestus* has social content attached to it and "allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances" (Brooker 219-221). To see how Brechtian *Verfremdung* and *Gestus* are created, see Steinweg, especially 36-40.

After failing to bark like a good watchdog to prevent the theft of Machmud's horse, Hassan is also forced to perform all of the duties of the stolen horse. Believing that his fate is Allah's will, Hassan puts up with all the humiliation dealt him by the upper class. His resignation is symptomatic of the lack of consciousness among the lower class. 'Hassan the horse' eventually rebels against his unjust punishments at the end of the film. When the two wealthy men sacrilegiously negotiate the price of Fatima during prayer time, Hassan loudly protests against their actions and literally casts aside his yoke, a device he must wear around his neck to draw water from underground. Shortly afterwards, when Hassan is hitched to a carriage and forced to pull Machmud and Kadi through the desert, he revolts against his unreasonable punishment for the last time. After Machmud whips Hassan until the latter faints, Hassan secretly frees himself upon regaining consciousness. He runs the horse wagon into a boulder lying ahead of them, breaking up the wagon and unseating its passengers. He orders them to bark, as Machmud had once ordered him, and then leaves them in the desert to die.

The film parable serves Marxist state ideology by critiquing inhumane capitalism. Social divisions between the wealthy and the poor are emblematically depicted, with Hassan's indigent hut standing next to Machmud's lavishly opulent residence. The class division is exacerbated by Machmud's monopoly of the water supply in the dry region. However, by making Hassan's character the physically stronger of the two, this film suggests that the working class has the power to topple capitalistic rule. The film is reminiscent of Brecht's early didactic play—*Die Ausnahme und die Regel* (*The Exception and the Rule*, 1930), which also has three central characters: a rich merchant, a coolie and a judge. In the plot, the merchant and the coolie cross the Mongolian desert in great haste to conclude an oil deal. The merchant shoots the coolie, mistaking the latter's good intention of giving him the water bottle for an attack. Later, the judge

acquits the merchant on the ground that he had every reason to believe that the mistreated coolie wanted revenge and that the merchant's self-defense was reasonable. Employing a number of distancing devices such as songs, Brecht alerts his audience to the irony of the coolie's fate, the collusion among the upper classes, and the helplessness of the lower class. The play compels the audience to think about what the title "The Exception and the Rule" means: The coolie only wanted to help his master, but his humanity was the exception to the rule—the exploited never harbor good intentions towards their exploiters.

Der Richter *singt*:

Die Regel ist: Auge um Auge!
Der Narr wartet auf die Ausnahme.
Daß ihm sein Feind zu trinken gibt
Das erwartet der Vernünftige nicht.

.....

Der Führer *singt*:

In dem System, das sie gemacht haben
Ist Menschlichkeit eine Ausnahme.
Wer sich also menschlich erzeigt
Der trägt den Schaden davon.

The ending of Klein's parable film resembles, yet reverses, Brecht's play: Hassan kill his master and thus the film has a more positivist conclusion than Brecht's play. This makes Klein's plot resemble that of the typical fairy tale, since a happy ending is formulaic and even obligatory in fairy tales. The ending of *The Story of Poor Hassan*, listed as a children's film, satisfies this expectation of the young audience, whereas Brecht's ending would frustrate it.

In the film, the lower class also reclaims the fruit of its labor. After Hassan chases away the guards at Machmud's gate, he leaves the door wide open. This suggests that wealth or property, symbolized here by water, is now accessible to the common people. In *The Exception and the Rule*, Brecht provocatively implies that violence wielded by capitalism can only be countered by violence from the exploited, i.e., proletarian revolution. The film, in contrast, acts

on that suggestion explicitly, as when the exploited resort to violence at the film's finale. Such ideological indoctrination seemed anachronous since the GDR had already established a socialist regime. Many DEFA films, however, tended to revisit the economic and socio-political problems that necessitated class struggle in the first place; the GDR often reiterated the reasons for socialist revolution to justify its legitimacy. In accordance with scientific atheism, the film also implicitly criticizes how religion is utilized by the upper class to deceive the poor. Hassan's initial acquiescence can thus be traced back to his Islamic faith. Refusing to help Fatima flee, he says: "Ich darf nicht, dieser Platz ist von Allah bestimmt." The film ultimately empowers the working class to take matters into its own hands, instead of entrusting fate to some divine authority and its dubious worldly agents.

Hassan initially takes his subordinate status for granted; however, once he acquires class consciousness, his rebellion is anticipated by viewers siding with the exploited. Along with Hassan's transformation, the Brechtian parable hopes for similar realization on the part of the audience. This enlightenment follows Brecht's intention for the didactic play or epic theater in general.¹⁴ Brecht's *Lehrstücke* revolutionize the theater not only via the activist belief that political theater can induce changes in the real world by "laying bare, or exposing, the contradictions inherent in human society and history," but also through its form (Grimm 42). The play uses a number of techniques to engage the audience and make the staging a didactic experience instead of a purely aesthetic or 'culinary' one.

Evoking the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, *The Story of Poor Hassan* opens with a camera rolling towards the main actor Ekkehard Schall. He turns to face the camera and

¹⁴ For a discussion about the similarities and differences between the didactic plays and the epic theater, see Mueller's chapter on "The *Lehrstück*: Learning for a New Society."

introduces himself, his parrot,¹⁵ and the other characters of the film by leafing through a huge book. The refreshing and sobering preamble clearly employs Brecht's dramatic theory and practice: "The preparations made so as to give point to the parable had themselves to be visible. The playing had to enable and encourage the audience to draw abstract conclusions" (Brecht, "Notes to *Die Rundköpfe und Die Spitzköpfe*," 100). Schall appears in multiple roles (the narrator, the leading actor, and the singer at the finale) that enable the actor to distance himself from his character. (Schall was one of the most prominent actors involved with Brecht's works. He was a member of the Berlin Ensemble from 1952 till 1995, and married to Brecht's daughter, Barbara Brecht-Schall.)¹⁶

The film illustrates the dynamics and conflicts between social classes by using 'typical' characters with common Muslim names, intentionally repressing the inner emotions of each character: "To [Brecht], the story—the interaction of the characters with other characters or their struggle with blind societal and historical forces—is much more relevant than any subtle probing into the depths of an individual psyche" (Grimm 39). Likewise, Brecht favors "ready made types" for social representation (Lellis 10). The anti-naturalistic, non-psychological acting keeps the spectator at arm's length. While Hassan is resigned to his fate, his degradation to animalistic existence provokes anger from the audience because of the cruelty of the merchant and his accomplice. The divergent reactions of character and the viewer to the same event exemplify Brechtian estrangement, because "the actor would stimulate the audience to feel emotions that were not the same as those 'felt' by the character" (Eddershaw 279). Here too, the viewer does

¹⁵ The parrot comes closest to resembling a magical helper; it functions as 'a comrade' with higher consciousness. The choice of a parrot, an animal that has the capacity for imitating human expressions, is interesting, because the humanization of the bird is contrasted with Hassan's animalization.

¹⁶ See, e.g. Stephan Suschke's "Geniales Kind im Mörderhaus," written on the occasion of Ekkehard Schall's seventieth birthday.

not identify with the character, whose submissiveness urges the viewer to realize the oppression of the lower class and the necessity for revolution.

The fact that the parable takes place in a Middle Eastern town with German actors playing Arabs in exotic attire furthers the Brechtian alienation effect. By using German-speaking Muslims, the film conveniently achieves the desired Brechtian distinction between actor and character: “At no moment must [the actor] go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played” (Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” 193). After Wolfgang Staudte’s fairy-tale film *Die Geschichte vom kleinen Muck* (*The Story of Little Mook*, 1953), *The Story of Poor Hassan* was the second film to be set in the Middle East. This dislocation creates a distance between the story and its German audience, who would be less likely to see the celluloid world as their own. Likewise, expecting a certain suspension of disbelief, the *DEFA-Indianerfilme* cast the famous Yugoslavian actor Gojko Mitic as Native American and Germans in make-up as extras.

The subtle and sparse yet suggestive cinematography of *The Story of Poor Hassan* led commentators to doubt the film’s overall appeal to younger audiences.¹⁷ Most of the negative or skeptical reviews focused on the direct transposition of Brechtian dramaturgy onto a film targeted for children. This criticism indicates that the cerebral process the Brechtian style demanded from the audience would be too challenging for the young viewers.¹⁸ According to one review, it is unconvincing that Hassan can send the armed guards into flight by simply

¹⁷ “... doch ist eher zu befürchten, daß sie in ihrer kargen Dramaturgie nur langatmig wirkt und in der sehr einfachen Studioausstattung mitnichten die Magie der Leinwand beschwört” (*Zwischen Marx und Muck*, 111).

¹⁸ For example, a reviewer observed that the young audience hardly apprehended the parabolic message: “Eine solche Parabel aber dürfte sich Kindern kaum erschließen, und die offizielle Uraufführung in Anwesenheit zahlreicher Kinder zeigte auch, daß diese sich ausschließlich an das äußere Geschehen hielten.” (Christoph Funke, *Der Morgen*, Berlin, 26.11.1958. In *Zwischen Marx und Muck*, 112)

shouting “Geht weg!”¹⁹ In defense of the film, here one can compare Hassan’s seemingly ‘supernatural power’ to the decay of the ruling class: According to Marxism, after the ruling class is overthrown, it is not long before the infrastructure of that power system begins to crumble and its minions to scatter in all directions.

The Dress

While *The Story of Poor Hassan* illustrates Brecht’s anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist position, Konrad Petzold’s banned comedy *The Dress* aligns with Brecht’s anti-Stalinist sentiment. In Andersen’s tale, the narcissistic emperor is tricked into believing that the magnificent new clothes created by two “swindlers” are invisible to those who are inept or incompetent. These clothes function not only as beautiful apparel for the self-absorbed emperor, but help him identify and dispose of those unfit for the positions they hold. In actuality, these “swindlers” do not work with magic, but with logic. They have come up with a perfect lie. It is ridiculous to expect clothes to function as a convenient litmus test or detective device. Yet, except for the one child, everyone in Andersen’s tale pretends to see the emperor’s new clothes because they assume that others can also see the material and thus do not wish to appear foolish in front of their peers. The two cunning “swindlers” are able to pull off their trick by taking advantage of the weaknesses of the emperor and of human beings in general. “The Emperor’s New Clothes” pokes fun at insecurity, social hypocrisy and the resultant dishonesty. It reveals how people refuse to be different for fear of public shame or disapproval, which explains the resulting social conformity and blind acceptance of group behavior. Children are often associated with innocence, honesty and boldness. They can break the spell because they can speak their

¹⁹ Uscha Geisler, *Forum*, Berlin, 11.12.1958 (*Zwischen Marx und Muck*, 112).

minds without fear of shame or stigmatization.²⁰ Although the emperor is the major focus of the satire, society at large is not spared by Andersen's caustic criticism.

The fact that no one, except a small child, discovers the ruse serves as a poignant portrayal of dictatorship, where no opposition exists to point out the absurd notions of the ruling party. Whereas such a subversive idea is only implied in Andersen, the film develops the original plot's potential as a political satire. The ministers have the possibility of exposing the emperor's fallacies; however, they are too scared to tell the truth for fear of the unpredictable repercussions. Since the emperor seems determined to eliminate the supposedly unsuitable people from his retinue, the nobility feels compelled to lie for its own security. Consequently, no one within the emperor's inner circle puts a stop to the folly surrounding the clothes. In the end, the tale exposes the emperor, both literally and metaphorically, for his ignorance of and refusal to accept the truth. The film prefigures the lack of honest solidarity and collaboration within a totalitarian government, which is ultimately self-destructive and unsustainable. The ridicule of the ruling power, already contained in the original tale, spelled doom for Petzold's film. Upon closer examination, it is not surprising that the film was deemed as "objektiv parteifeindlich" and as showing "konterrevolutionäre Züge."²¹

In the film, two weavers, Hans and Kumpan, come to a kingdom surrounded by a well-guarded and seemingly impenetrable wall. The sentry tells them that "Das ist die Mauer, die quer durchgeht. Dahinter liegt die Stadt und das Glück." Censors took this line to be pure provocation.²² The image of affluence and happiness that the patrol guard ascribes to the city mocks the reality of poverty, popular unrest, mass exodus, and the ensuing necessity to build the

²⁰ In the film, there is also a child who has no qualms about blurting out the blatantly obvious truth; however, the role of the child is marginal.

²¹ Ralf Schenk, "Feuer im Bierbauch," *Berliner Zeitung*.

²² Ralf Schenk, "Das Kleid," *Kinder- und Jugendfilmkorrespondenz* 78/2'99.

Berlin Wall in East Germany.²³ By stowing away under a cart, the weavers slip through the security check at the city gate. With the help of a kitchen maid named Katrin (alluding to Brecht's *Mother Courage*), they are smuggled into the palace. On seeing the 'intruders', the emperor, paranoid about his safety, embarrasses himself by cowardly hiding away from the supposed "Attentäter, Spione, Agenten, Totschläger."²⁴ Suggesting a paralyzed judicial system, the crippled minister of justice comes forward in a wheelchair to pronounce the death sentence for the weavers. However, upon learning that the condemned are weavers, the emperor orders them to instead make an amazing outfit that will make everyone fall on their knees. The emperor is so obsessed with new clothes that he has appointed a *Bekleidungsministerin*, or Clothing Minister, to his cabinet and refused to see his people for a long time due to a 'lack' of presentable clothes. The two weavers rack their brains, taking on this challenge from an emperor who has just thrown out all the clothes that the *Bekleidungsministerin* had designed for him. We could hardly believe that Andersen's emperor, who simply wants to add the 'invisible' clothes to his collection, would empty his closet. In contrast, the emperor in this film scorns his previous outfits and expects this new design to replace them all. The amount of ambition that the emperor invests in his new clothes is a significant change the film makes from the original tale. In Andersen's version, it is simply his pomposity and pretention that causes him to fall into the weavers' trap. The film, however, makes it clear that it is the emperor's greed for power that has blinded him. His excessive expectations for the new clothes provoke an extreme reaction from

²³ The guard patrolling the border describes the city as being occupied by "der große Terrorist, erstens und überhaupt, und ein Haufen reiche Leute, wohlhabende Arbeiter, und alles ruhige und zuverlässige Menschen, keine Gräueltaten im Herzen, zufrieden und gesund, der Soldat, und nicht zu vergessen, die Polizei. Kurzum, das Leben ist zum Vergnügen." (*Das Kleid*)

²⁴ The scene calls to mind both the official interpretation of the June 1953 Uprising as the work of fascist *agents provocateurs* and the highly embarrassing reaction of Walter Ulbricht and other top leaders by seeking refuge in the Soviet military headquarters during the night of 17-18 June (Dennis 65-72).

the weavers. They come up with an ingenious plan to claim that the robe they are making is invisible to those who are stupid or otherwise unqualified.

Andersen's tale can be analyzed from a Marxian perspective because the two lowly commoners are able to outsmart the emperor and the entire ruling class. However, the fact that Andersen uses "swindlers" as a label for the two weavers, who set out to reap monetary benefits through deceit and trickery, shows his ambiguous image of the poor. In comparison, Petzold's film offers a clearer analysis of class issues. The Brechtian aesthetic that the cinematic version explicitly employs further assists in bringing Marxist concerns to the fore. The two weavers in the film are portrayed as unquestionably positive characters. They come to the kingdom having not eaten for three days, demonstrating the eternal suffering of the lower classes. The Brechtian theme song—"Das Lied von den Neigungen des Menschen"—voices the commoners' simple desire for a better life, ending with an accusatory question that refers to Brecht's poem "Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters": "Befragt nach Süchten, dann gestehe ich leicht. Die Sucht zu fragen, und so frage ich glatt: Warum der Rauch steigt und den Himmel bleicht; wer Schuld an meines Lebens, wer Schuld an meines Lebens Anteil hat [sic]?" Arriving in the city, they search for a roof over their head with no luck. Reminiscent of the Brechtian epic theater, after the poor families ignore them a sentence appears bold-faced on the screen: "Die Ärmeren der Stadt zeigten sich verhärtet." While Hans and Kumpan sleep on the market place under a table, an animated scene is inserted where a female cat flirts with a tom cat at night, representing the emperor and his *Bekleidungsministerin* in both sound and image. Hans and Kumpan's honest desire to work for the emperor nearly costs them their lives. One of the many revolutionary Brechtian intertitles appears on screen, foreshadowing the danger awaiting the weavers: "Wer kämpft um das Stück Brot, das ihm vorenthalten wird, rechne mit grausamen Gegnern und fast

hoffnungslosen Lagen.” Thus, the weavers must use their creativity and cunning to find a way to save themselves from the tyrannical and murderous emperor. Anticipating the day of the parade, another Brechtian intertitle projected onto the screen summarizes the revolutionary potential of the proletariat: “An diesem gewöhnlichen Tage erschüttern zwei Habenichtse die Plattform eines Staates. Es ist bekannt, wie weit so etwas mit der Zeit gehen kann.” Twice in the film, two picture frames appear side by side, showing parallel events at the same time. The cinematic version thus fragments itself by inserting projection titles, cartoon episodes, and experimental visuals, which reflect Brecht’s emphasis on “interruption, discontinuity” (Mueller 78; Brady 304) to pull the audience out of a “passive consumer” state of mind (Schoeps 71; Silberman 202). In addition, the theatrical acting style and minimalist settings are characteristic of Brecht’s epic theater. The masked soldiers walking on stilts represent the ostentatiously imposing (East German) military. The masks, for example, are reminiscent of the 1954 production of Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, where “the rigid expressions of the masks of Brecht’s ironshirts showed the rigidity of people who have become unquestioning instruments of the powerful” (Kleber 6).

The Dress made several changes to the original version. In Andersen’s tale, it is not until the end that the people show themselves to be capable of correcting their mistake by admitting, “He has nothing on!” The emperor proves himself just as arrogant and hopelessly stubborn: despite some inkling that the people could be right, he continues to strut through the city “even more proudly” in his ‘new clothes’. His two pitiful servants keep carrying the ‘invisible’ train to play out the charade. The film makes a stronger distinction between the emperor and his people, depicting them as less gullible than their ruler. Unlike “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in the cinematic version a rumor quickly spreads through the city that the weavers have woven nothing

at all.²⁵ The servants catch on to the plan and all participate in deceiving the emperor. The fact that they choose to take the side of Hans and Kumpan shows that the working class has a shared interest against the government. Both the foreign minister and the *Bekleidungsministerin* quickly realize that the so-called invisible fabric is a cruel joke; however, they decide to lie to the emperor as a form of revenge, since he did not trust them in the first place. When the emperor arrives to inspect the clothes personally, they all collude in deceiving the emperor. When the weavers tell the two businessmen, Fatty and Skinny (der Dicke and der Dünne), that the clothing is invisible to the stupid, Fatty immediately predicts that the emperor is going to head the parade naked. During the procession, Fatty laughs uncontrollably at the emperor's nudity. Skinny, his business rival, reports him to the secret police—alluding to the Stasi, who then arrests Fatty. Two plain-dressed secret policemen appear out of nowhere by special effect, indicating the omnipresence of the security organs. Some onlookers ignore the ceremony and play cards instead. When a secret policeman confiscates their cards, they take out a new set of cards and keep playing. This is the umpteenth time that the emperor has flaunted his clothes in such a display, and the people have grown weary of it. The parade climaxes when the two kitchen boys decide to imitate the emperor; they present themselves stripped naked in front of the crowd and tell the hapless emperor that they are dressed as splendidly in royal attire as the emperor himself. The crowd scatters in laughter and the procession ends abruptly. The camera scans over the items strewn on the road, then rests on the abandoned royal chariot. Ralf Schenk sees this deserted throne as foreshadowing the events in 1989, when only relics remain of the former government.²⁶ Indeed, in Petzold's GDR adaptation, the people have matured and become anti-authoritarian.

²⁵ "In der Stadt redet man herum, die zwei Weberburschen haben überhaupt keinen Stoff gewebt." (*Das Kleid*)

²⁶ Ralf Schenk, "Das Kleid," *Kinder- und Jugendfilmkorrespondenz* 78/2'99.

The alliance of the people in both secret and open defiance of the emperor augurs the eventual implosion of the East German state.

The film focuses its sarcasm on the emperor, twice referred to as “der große Terrorist.” He is entranced by the idea of having magical clothing that could assert his intelligence and competence, while putting others to shame. Self-assured that he is fit for his throne and his men are not, he bathes himself in the sadistic pleasure of seeing his ministers exposed: “Ich sehe schon Angst in den armseligen Gesichtern. Keiner von euch wird den Stoff sehen. Morgen wird es herausstellen, wer Versager ist.” He bursts the balloons, each representing a minister. When the next morning comes, he again gleefully torments his ministers: “Das ist ein ungewöhnlicher Tag. Verlasst ihr euch darauf. . . . In eurer Haut möchte ich nicht stecken.” In the end his mockery of the ministers backfires. The emperor is the one who suffers extreme humiliation and is even abandoned by his closest advisors. The clothes have achieved a result exactly opposite to what the despotic ruler had intended. Instead of bringing everyone to their knees, he has made everyone turn against him. At the end of the film, the emperor is irritated by the tight crown. The foreign minister suggests in a sarcastic tone: “Vielleicht bräuchten Sie eine Nummer größer?” The film’s anti-government stance is obvious here, for it is not the crown that does not fit the emperor — the emperor no longer befits the crown. As Katie Trumpener points out, the film “implicitly questioned of the legitimacy of authority and was shelved for thirty years” (*Divided Screen*). In this manner, Petzold’s film sharpens the satire of Andersen’s story and sends an implicit message that sadistic power leads to self-destruction. The film’s potentially constructive criticism fell on deaf ears, and, in retrospect, turned out to be prophetic.

The fact that the emperor in Andersen’s tale continues the parade after the childish revelation of his nudity suggests his inability to reform. In a more explicit manner, the emperor

in the film immediately seeks revenge and asks the foreign minister how many people have laughed, then orders eighty percent of the populace to be banished (“Die Bevölkerung wird ausgewiesen.”) The minister recommends that the emperor choose a different people, alluding to Brecht’s poem “Die Lösung” (“The Solution”) from his poetry cycle—*Buckower Elegien*: “Wäre es da / Nicht doch einfacher, die Regierung / Löste das Volk auf und / Wählte ein anderes?” Published posthumously, “The Solution” was not included in the initial publication of *Buckow Elegies*, indicating Brecht’s careful dealings with the GDR government. In this sarcastic poem written after the June 1953 Workers’ Uprising, Brecht counters the official call for people to work harder in order to regain the trust of the government with the ironic question: Wouldn’t it be easier for the government to dissolve its people and choose a different one? Playing on the name ‘Stalin,’ which means iron in Russian, “Eisen,” another poem from *Buckow Elegies*, criticizes the rigidity of Stalinist policies that the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) implemented: “Im Traum heute nacht / Sah ich einen großen Sturm. Ins Baugerüst griff er / Den Bauschragen riß er / Den Eisernen, abwärts. / Doch was da aus Holz war / bog sich und blieb.” Brecht is “a Marxist playwright” and also “a Marxist heretic” (Grimm 45). His critique of Stalinism follows his teacher Karl Korsch’s early critique of Leninism and then Stalinism. As a result, Korsch was expelled from the Communist movement in 1926 (Grimm 45; Kellner 283). The fact that the film quotes from “The Solution” suggests that its subversion was to some extent intended. The censors obviously reached a similar conclusion, as they banned the film for the duration of the GDR.

The brutal repression of the 1953 Workers’ Uprising by Soviet tanks and GDR police partially explains the indirect criticism expressed in this Brechtian film. Hans and Kumpan wish to honestly earn their bread by making clothes for the emperor. However, it is the emperor’s

ridiculous expectations that make the task impossible for the workers, much like the unrealistic and overly ambitious expectations that the East German government had of its workers. The June 1953 Uprising had multiple causes, including increased production quotas, lack of raw materials, shortage of food and other consumption goods, collectivization, increase in taxation, etc. The failure of the June Uprising resulted in the strengthening of the GDR's Stalinist regime and the consolidation of Ulbricht's autocracy. In spite of all the deficiencies and mass exodus of East Germans to West Germany, the Ulbricht government propagated the belief that East Germany could overtake the West German population's per capita consumption level within a few years (Dennis 86). The preposterousness of the emperor's expectations captures the absurdity of the GDR's economic plans. The lack of support for the emperor also mirrors Ulbricht's unpopular status with both the state and common citizens.

Most fairytale stories convey a certain moral. Morality in *The Story of Poor Hassan* and *The Dress* is inseparable from political and aesthetic considerations. Whereas *The Story of Poor Hassan* aligns with the Marxist endorsement of the lower class's struggle for social justice, *The Dress* critiques Stalinist power games that pretend to concretize Marxist ethics. The fate that the film met with is, in hindsight, not surprising due to GDR's persistent adherence to Stalinist politics. The shooting of *The Dress* started in June 1961. It was first screened by the censors three days after the construction of the Berlin Wall. The censors demanded that some scenes be cut. These scenes included the mustached guard (who was believed to resemble Stalin) and the animated sequences where a cloud puffs up its cheeks to blow wind (believed to mock the Soviet Party Secretary Khrushchev).²⁷ Whether or not Petzold intended the resemblance can only be hypothesized. In early 1963, all 135 cases of negatives were secretly sent to the State Film

²⁷ Ralf Schenk, "Das Kleid," *Kinder- und Jugendfilmkorrespondenz* 78/2'99.

Archives. The director could not complete the film until the summer of 1990. However, when it reached the screen thirty years after its making, it had already missed the right audience and political context.²⁸ The banning of the film remained Petzold's lifelong trauma.²⁹

This essay has selected two DEFA films that subscribe to Brecht's drama theories and practices and implement a range of Brechtian theatrical devices, such as a strong story line, social types, episodic structure, the use of a narrator, songs, emblematic props, tableaux, masks and gestic acting (Silberman 200; Brooker 215).³⁰ The parable, according to Brecht, is one way of showing "indignation at inhuman conditions" (Brecht, "The Popular and the Realistic," 110). He mentions his own *Threepenny Opera* as "a parable type plus ideology-busting" (Brecht, "On Experimental Theatre," 130). These DEFA films reflect Brecht's belief in the relevance of parables for elucidating Marxist ethical constructs, and exemplify the legacy of Brecht in DEFA pictures.

²⁸ Erika Richter, "Zwischen Mauerbau und Kahlschlag: 1961 bis 1965."

²⁹ It is no coincidence that he ended his career with another fairy-tale adaptation—*Die Geschichte von der Gänseprinzessin und ihrem treuen Pferd Falada* (*The Story of the Goose Princess and her Loyal Horse Falada*, 1989), adapted from the Grimms' "Die Gänsemagd" ("The Goose Girl"). Harmless on the surface, this last film allowed Petzold to address the theme of trust due to the false bride's theft of the real princess's love and trust and resulting punishment for said theft. At a time when the GDR government had lost the people's trust, the film's political overtone seems only thinly disguised.

³⁰ Gottfried Kolditz's *Der junge Engländer* (*The Young Englishman*, 1958), an adaptation of Wilhelm Hauff's literary tale "The Young Englishman or The Ape as Man," is a Brechtian satire on bourgeoisie, capitalism and religion. In the story, an old stranger comes to a small German town called Grünwiesel. Because of his insistent refusal to interact, the philistine townspeople treat him as an outcast. To get back at the provincial town, the old gentleman buys an orangutan from a circus and passes him off as his "English" nephew. The townspeople attribute every improper behavior of the young Englishman to his British upbringing, and even copy his moves and appearance. Similar to "The Emperor's New Clothes," the entire town is duped by a simple lie. Kolditz draws a parallel between the German townspeople's adoption of assumed British fashion and East Germans' widespread idolization of American popular culture, especially their 'aping' of rock 'n roll. Typical of the epic theater, the film has a narrator (Lothar Kusche) whose role is vital for the audience to follow the story, since the characters are never heard except for the dreadful singing of the three daughters. The music plays an essential role because of the film's pantomimic nature. The music in this film, as well as in *The Story of Poor Hassan*, is written by Hans-Dieter Hosalla, who composed a number of pieces for Brecht. For instance, he composed the Berliner Ensemble's 1960 production of *The Threepenny Opera* directed by Erich Engel, with Wolf Kaiser in the role of Mack. The silhouette technique, the skewed architecture and pantomimic acting suggest expressionist elements in the film. This, however, does not contradict Brechtian influence, since Brecht himself has appropriated from many sources, including expressionism, for his theory on theater. The film's criticism of greed, blind faith in authority, and social conformity accords with the ethics of Brecht's plays, which criticize false moralities and ideological doctrines.

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