

Concrete Legacies of the GDR:

Elke Hauck's *Der Preis* (2011)

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Abstract

Elke Hauck's 2011 film Der Preis resonates with recent enquiries into the relationship between time and modernity, which have questioned whether "time is out of joint" (Aleida Assmann; Mark Fisher). Hauck, who has been associated with a second generation of 'Berlin School' filmmakers, directs an atmospheric film that produces the feelings of both the late 1980s GDR and the post-unification present. Der Preis takes perhaps East Germany's most 'concrete' legacies, its Plattenbauten – the product of the state's flagship housing program – as the foundation of its non-linear narrative, telling a story of homecoming, and of re-encountering ghosts. The architecture is a site of memory, its terrains conjure the spectral ever-presence of the GDR, evoking Jacques Derrida's hauntology. Through temporally and spatially conscious analysis of both image and sound, I argue that the sensations of 'not yet' and 'no longer' are found in the unfulfilled future promises of not only the socialist past, but also the post-unification present.

Keywords:

GDR Memory – Berlin School – Hauntology – Spatiality – Post-Unification Cinema – Embodied Film – East German Architecture

Introduction

At the centre of Elke Hauck's 2011 film, *Der Preis* (The Prize), stands the *Plattenbau* – the prefabricated-slab apartment blocks that have come to be the distinctive 'look' of East German architecture. Large, looming, and homogenous, these estates remain one of that former nation's most 'concrete' legacies. *Der Preis*'s non-linear narrative is set in their shadows; they house its story of homecoming, and of re-encountering ghosts across multiple temporalities, from the late 1980s GDR to the post-unification present. In this article, I examine the valuable insights *Der Preis* offers into time – as experienced in post-unification Germany and in late-modern capitalism more generally. The film has many spectral qualities. But, as I will argue, there is more at play here than the straightforward notion of the past haunting the present.

Key to this study is the question: in film, how are time and place experienced by the embodied spectator? My analysis focuses on the sensorial, affective qualities of *Der Preis*'s cultural memory. This study is broken into two parts. To begin, I outline the film's twin notions of 'temporality' and 'spatiality', investigating *Der Preis*'s aesthetic context through its connections with affective filmmaking of the 'Berlin School' and its influences from DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*) films. Secondly, I develop the enquiry into temporality and emotion through closer examination of the spaces of the *Plattenbau*, framed by an analysis of the film's sensorial, atmospheric and affective qualities, referring here to the notion of 'hauntology'. The specific temporal and spatial echoes in the *Plattenbau* are encapsulated by this concept, first introduced by Jacques Derrida, which replaces the priority of 'being' (in ontology) with the tension of presence and absence inherent in spectrality and ghostly figures. I find the same tension in *Der Preis*'s intertwining of time and

space, in particular through its use of sound, giving voice to melancholies from multiple temporalities. Memories of lost futures, regrets and failures stretch from the GDR past to the post-*Wende* present.

Time-and-Space between the Berlin School and DEFA

Der Preis follows its protagonist, an architect called Alexander ‘Alex’ Beck (Florian Panzer), across two timelines. In the present, his prize-winning designs to renovate a block of *Plattenbauten* send him grudgingly from his West German life back to the provincial, East German town of his childhood – to redevelop the very apartments where he and his classmates grew up. With construction stalled, however, he encounters people and places he has not seen since he left years ago. In the second narrative strand, we are taken back to the late 1980s of the GDR, via Alex’s memories; here the subjective flashback is used to frame this memory film.

Evident in the film’s temporal structure and in its ‘architectural’ setting are the twin dimensions of time and space, with which *Der Preis* plays. These preoccupations characterise ‘Berlin School’ films; Hauck, the director, has been associated with this collection of films and filmmakers (Wagner 5; Abel, “Film Establishment Attacks” 605). Berlin School films have notably been suffused with eerie, temporally uncertain, ghostly depictions. Christian Petzold’s *Gespenster Trilogy* (2000–2007) exemplifies these qualities. In Petzold’s *Barbara* (2012), set in the GDR, the spectral theme reappears – “the ghost [Petzold] archaeologically exhumes might be the GDR itself” (J. Fisher 139). Both *Barbara* and *Der Preis* might furthermore be considered as sharing ghostly characteristics with a wave of literature, dealing with the legacies of the GDR, that has been noted for expressing a sense of “spectrality” (Leeder 103–04; See also Smale). Reading *Der Preis* within

the context of the Berlin School may help to understand its place as part of a wider collection of cultural works that are figuring out questions of late-modern life through similar aesthetic means. It is important, however, to bear in mind that “the Berlin School has always been a critics’ designation, not an artists’ declaration” (Roy 11), when viewing separate productions as a part of a whole.

We can identify certain ‘Berlin School’ aesthetics and atmosphere in *Der Preis*’s slow realism, in its ‘foregrounding’ of the background mise-en-scène, the objectivity of the remarkably still, observant camera’s long gaze with a tendency to stare, and in the amplification of the sounds of everyday life. Marco Abel has observed that “many, though not all, Berlin School films are dominated by long takes, long shots, clinically precise framing, a certain deliberateness of pacing, sparse usage of extra-diegetic music” (*Counter-Cinema* 15). *Der Preis* is a film that is in many ways *about* time – specifically, the feeling of time within the context of Germany’s division and re-unification. The ‘action’ in *Der Preis* proceeds slowly, with unhurried, episodic shots that are suffused with a sparse, poetic use of dialogue, and with a plot that relies less on ‘action-reaction’ to drive it forward. Instead, the film meanders in a way which cinematically approximates the feeling, if not the actual temporality, of the slower pace of ‘reality’ out in the world beyond the film.

We encounter the film’s atmospherics of lateness and spectrality from the outset, through its stretching of cinematic time. The film begins without any image; the first sounds are of a GDR punk song playing over a black screen. Hauck uses non-diegetic music only sparingly in *Der Preis*. Here, the music precedes the first visual shot; We see the architect, Alex, waiting in his car at a crossroads for a train to pass. He is journeying from his home in Frankfurt am Main to his birthplace in the former East. The film, therefore, begins at a borderland of both time and place. Alex’s demeanour makes clear, even before he later declares, „ich schieb’ das Ding dem Bauleiter in den Arsch und hau’ wieder ab,“ that this visit is not one he would make by choice. The adult Alex’s reluctance is starkly portrayed, as he sits in his car, staring, after the train

has passed and the boom gates have risen. This scene establishes the subdued, melancholic tone that pervades the film, expressed through a grey colour palette typical of post-Wende eastern depictions, sparse dialogue, a sense of dissatisfaction amongst the locals, and Alex's body language as he deals with personal demons. These elements combine to suggest an inevitable tragedy set in the GDR past. Indeed, we eventually discover that, following a sequence of events that involves Alex's own actions, his best friend, Micha, commits suicide – unable or unwilling to contend with the joint pressures of society and his authoritarian father.

Time, itself, is an experience in *Der Preis*, tethered to the spectator via the film's affective spatiality. In terms of time, the Berlin School filmmakers' collective political approach is "profoundly affected by a sense of *belatedness*, of having missed or arrived too late for a time when politics in its more traditional, left-radical sense still seemed possible" (Abel, *Counter-Cinema* 10). The temporal sense of lateness is pertinent to *Der Preis*; it recalls *Nachträglichkeit* – "a retroactive effect directed towards the past" and an "aftereffect or affect projected into a future" (Gook 38). This particular sense (and sensation) belonging to the current historical moment, of present and future suffused with repetitive intrusions of the past, is interrogated further in the second part of this study.

In terms of space, Berlin School films often invite the spectator to play the role of "*flaneur*" together with the characters, "phlegmatically," in typically unrecognisable spaces, or interstitial environments such as borderlands and transitory locales (Abel, *Counter-Cinema* 16). The *Plattenbauten* of Hauck's *Der Preis*, so distinctive of the former East, might be symbolically recognisable, but their uniformity creates a generalised and non-specific affective quality, and they furthermore act as interstices between borderlands – East/West, division/re-unification. The film uses the *Plattenbau* as a cornerstone of its narrative; these buildings are the spatial environment which house past, present and future. The GDR-past, the post-unification present, and

the haunted landscapes of lost ideals, failed utopias and undelivered promises are all found in their shadows. The *Plattenbauten* produce an environment that *builds* the film's terrains of memory. These buildings are like stationary time-machines, seemingly always there. Meanwhile, the film beams us from the present to the past and back again, conjuring the spectral ever-presence of the GDR.

Temporality and spatiality are intertwined through the film's narrative structure: The past timeline, situated in East Germany, is remembered from the post-unification present. Past and present are tied together by *place* – and through the narrative trope of the *Heimkehrer*.¹ This homecoming role is embodied by Alex, the film's central protagonist. The locus of a provincial town in the former East is the fulcrum upon which the film's musings on change, stasis, time, nostalgia and regret are balanced. The GDR, encountered through the familiar cinematic technique of the flashback, is (re)created on the screen by filming in abandoned, or otherwise available, Soviet-era architecture. The present-day sequences are set in the same location, the *Plattenbauten* standing still in the face of the buffeting from the “winds of change”² that have swirled through Germany's history of division and re-unification. The sights and sounds of cinema are manipulated to achieve a mediation of a memory of East Germany that carries a melancholic emotional and affective valence; the spectator experiences not only the past, but how it feels to remember that past, today. In addition, through the trick of the flashback, the emotional immediacy of the past is brought to the forefront, short-circuiting temporality. This allows the film to bypass naturally occurring emotional, temporal and spatial distance from the past.

¹ I intend this term in a separate sense from the post-World War II meaning.

² I borrow this phrase from German band Scorpions' anthemic tribute to the end of the Cold War.

The concept of ‘place’ is certainly important to Hauck’s film, which has an architect as its central protagonist, and which examines the East German *Plattenbau* as a key *Erinnerungsort*.³ The film expresses cultural memories of the GDR in the subjective mode of its fictional personal narrative; we inhabit the *Plattenbau* of the late 1980s through Alex’s point-of-view via ‘his’ flashbacks, and we re-encounter these spaces through his *Heimkehrer* role. The film’s focus is demonstrably concerned with memory (thought of as different from history), as the film directs its attention to the GDR past via Alex’s subjective flashbacks. Maureen Turim has written that the “Hollywood film finds it almost impossible to tell the story of an historical occurrence or to describe a period of history without focusing on how a small group of individuals is affected by that time in history” (103). The ‘Berlin School’ *Der Preis* utilises Alex and his individual memory in a similar narrative fashion; the issue at hand is how the past is approached from the coordinates of a post-unification landscape.

The film’s stretching of time is complemented by a sense of ‘doubling’; the repeated jumping back into, and then returning from, the past, achieved through flashbacks, highlights a paradoxical stagnation of life within the liminality of the post-Wall present *and* in the GDR past. In the present tense, this is a contradiction of memory and history: An entire country virtually disappeared, along with its political ideology, economic structures and social organisation. This is remembered as one of the most dramatic, singular turning-points in recent world-history; yet, in both material reality and in the people’s memories, much of the GDR remains. The stalling of the renovations to *Der Preis*’s *Plattenbauten* reflects the frustrations and ambivalence faced by those living in these spaces today. There is, moreover, a double resonance in the evocation of this contemporary feeling with the temporality (shown in flashback) of the ’80s GDR, an era

³ Following Pierre Nora’s concept of the *lieu de mémoire*, a place where a group’s memory crystallises.

typically understood as stagnated – a theme that is notably shared by the DEFA film *Die Architekten* (Peter Kahane, 1990). Hauck's film should therefore be considered not only in terms of its Berlin School qualities, but in light of influences in GDR filmmaking.

The *Plattenbauten* in *Der Preis* not only embody the film's spatiotemporal attention to both continuity and change across the period of the *Wende*, and of the subsequent post-unification era, but they also have specific resonances with East Germany's cinematic legacies. Hauck's film, which uses the construction site as a device for exploring the 'construction' of post-*Wende* lived-environments, has resonances with DEFA films such as *Spur der Steine* (Frank Beyer, 1966) and *Unser Kurzes Leben* (Lothar Warneke, 1981); in these films, the construction site appears as both material reality and metaphor for the building of the socialist state. In *Der Preis*, a post-Wall audience is transported to a construction site, set up around buildings like those in Heiner Carow and Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1973); Alex's struggle to finish his prize-winning renovations mirrors the imperfect, and incomplete processes of re-unification. Here we can identify a doubling with Carow and Plenzdorf's film; in *Paul und Paula*, the buildings now referred to as *Plattenbauten*, were shown to be still under construction, suggesting the unfulfilled promises of the Party, and the yet-to-be finished project of socialism more generally (Pugh 193). Hauck's film might be thought of as an extension of these concerns, shot instead from a post-*Wende* context – with a temporal advantage over the socialist ideals and realities of the former East, while at the same time being embedded in apparent failures of the present.

In *Der Preis*, the characteristics of these DEFA films merge sensibly and sensorially with the Berlin School's preoccupation with, as Abel puts it, "the here and now of unified Germany" (*Counter-Cinema* 31). Indeed, Knut Elstermann reports that Hauck specifically drew on DEFA films as inspiration for her directing of *Der Preis*: "As [Hauck] has told me herself, she consciously drew on *Die Architekten* by Peter Kahane

for her story. In fact her film could almost be a sequel” (57). Kahane’s film provides an example of this filmic GDR memory, referenced and reflected in the interior and exterior spaces of *Der Preis*. In *Die Architekten*, a group of hopeful designers plan out an alternative to the urban monotony which the *Neubau* projects had produced throughout the GDR (their hope proves ultimately to be in vain). “Cookie-cutter buildings made of the same concrete facades stood facing vast empty, treeless squares,” as Mary-Elizabeth O’Brien describes it (114). Amid this desolate picture, the architects of the film optimistically envision a wholly-new built environment, which would revitalise the East, stem the flow of migration to the West, and promote a more comfortable, liveable sense of place. In Kahane’s film, the visionary protagonists eventually come up against the (metaphorical) brick-wall of GDR bureaucracy, a plot that is reminiscent of the problems faced by the socialist workers in *Spur der Steine*. In Alex’s brick-wall moment in *Der Preis*, he runs into the bulk of the ‘Stasi-Fettsack’ – this man being a relic (Alex surmises) of the old regime. He owns the corporation in charge of the buildings that Alex’s firm has won the right to renovate, and is holding the process back owing to the company’s concerns that the renovations will prove more costly than desirable.

As in *Die Architekten*, Hauck’s film draws our attention to everyday GDR-experience, and to the present-day milieu of the former East, in order to search for explanations of why things were – and are. The most vital and critical point of *Die Architekten* for Reinhild Steingröver is its portrayal of “the defiant struggles for the last generation which nevertheless was doomed from the start” (208). *Der Preis* appears to steer *Die Architekten*’s critique of the GDR into the eastern post-*Wende* experience. For instance, this forlornness is starkly felt in a series of uncomfortable encounters with Alex’s old classmate, Udo, who is living in his parent’s old apartment in one of the buildings planned for renovation. We see Udo right at the end of the film packing all his belongings into a van. His prediction, voiced earlier to Alex, has materialised: the renovations, together with his not having paid any rent for months, have resulted in his eviction. His last words

are a half-hearted repeat of his request that Alex let him know if he hears of any work available as part of the renovations. The level of compromise necessitated by the realities of life under socialism does not necessarily feel like it has lessened for many of *Der Preis*'s characters, in a society that, too, has its dual share of change and stagnation.

Der Preis's connections to both the Berlin School and DEFA films extends to its use of sound. "Berlin School filmmakers," Roger F. Cook writes, "give more autonomy to sound," rather than "following the mainstream practice that relegates audio to a supporting role" (28). 'Ambient sound' is important in *Der Preis*: the attention paid to recording the acoustics of Alex's past and present contributes to the stylistic realism of the film. Hauck explains that she sought to make „die Atmosphäre eher durch Geräusche lebendig und erlebbar“ (qtd. in "Der Preis"). In commentary available on the DVD release, Hauck remarks on one serendipitous moment in the film's shooting. The scene in question is the young Alex's supposed betrayal of his friend. At a board meeting of party representatives at his school, Alex is asked, as *Vorsitzender der FDJ* (Head of the Free German Youth), to comment on Micha's suitability for the *Sportschule*. Alex, in anger at Micha's recent treatment of him, refuses to support his friend. In this sequence, Hauck describes how she was struck, when listening to the recording, that the voices of two women in that scene sounded just like those from an old DEFA film. Her remark coalesces with the film's palimpsestic quality: it awakens ghosts from the GDR by disturbing the sounds of abandoned *Plattenbauten* in the processes of production. Voices from DEFA films echo in *Der Preis*'s intertextual references to East Germany's film history. In the filmmaking process, this consequence literally resonates with Hauck's own memories (and anyone's who has seen these DEFA films) – evoking the past as 'echoes' through the audio track.

The *Plattenbau* as Haunted House

Memories of the GDR, as all memories, are embedded in spatial contexts. These spaces stretch from the post-socialist circumstances of the present to historical sites that house the traces of shared and private memories. The theory and practice of architecture produce built-environments: the physical, material world we inhabit. Architecture forms and shapes our memories within shared, social and cultural frames. Cinema and architecture have been closely linked, both as visual regimes of experience and in studies of the non-optical affects they engender; people respond to the enveloping nature of film and architecture in similar ways. Giuliana Bruno has written persuasively on the connections between these disciplines. She concurs with the filmmaker René Clair's statement that, "the art that is closest to cinema is architecture" (qtd. 27), inasmuch as "both enterprises are practices of space." Bruno goes on to argue that cinema "defines itself as an architectural practice," the landscape of city views interacts with filmic representations, and "to this extent, the streetscape is as much a filmic 'construction' as it is an architectural one" (27).

The GDR's *Plattenbauten* and the environment they produced are 'sites' with meaning, drawn in part from the political economy and ideology behind their construction; it emerges through people's activities within them via the affects aroused within these social realms. The buildings were intended to embody the future capacities of the GDR, as Adelheid von Saldern recalls: „Die Großsiedlungen in Plattenbauweise verkörperten für ihre Protagonisten in Staat und Partei die Zukunftsfähigkeit der DDR“ (301). Plans to build vast estates of *Plattenbau* housing, such as the Marzahn district in Berlin, were certainly future-oriented. This new urban space "reflected the modernist concepts popularized by Le Corbusier, the CIAM, and like-minded planners and architects [...] it was truly a socialist, and modern, space" (Rubin 2).

Mass construction of prefabricated apartment blocks was not unique to the Eastern bloc. But, as Mary Fullbrook explains, "[w]hat was distinctive about the GDR, in contrast to most contemporary Western societies, was the sheer extent to which the state took responsibility for housing" (51). Following Erich

Honecker's takeover of Party leadership in 1971, a policy focus – The Housing Construction Program (*Wohnungsbauprogramm*) – explicitly sought to improve living standards, partly as a means to cast aspersions on the failures of Walter Ulbricht's previous administration (Pugh 288). Consequently, this meant that when the state eventually proved unable to provide housing to satisfy everyone, largely due to economic reasons, East Germans' dissatisfaction was directed towards the Honecker-led SED regime. In contrast, in the West, housing issues might be the fault of any number of agents, landlords, banks or the housing market itself. In cultural memory within the former East, the political dimension of the *Plattenbau* lingers; once exciting visions of a socialist future, which would provide all citizens with the fundamental domestic essentials, are now obscured by the same ideological ties with the failed, socialist state.

In post-unification eastern Germany, these spaces no longer carry the weight of possible, utopic futures. Instead, the *Plattenbauten* house memories of futures that are no longer possible. As von Saldern argues, „nach der Wende mutierte der Plattenbau dann endgültig zum Negativsymbol par excellence“ (308). Standing as monuments to 20th century socialism, whether used, abandoned, or in liminal states of renovation or demolition – they literally and figuratively overshadow post-socialist realities in the present. More than this, the hegemonic Western (capitalist) triumphalist attitudes that shape how they are viewed from the present foreclose how futures were once imagined in the past.

From the temporal perspective of today, the historical events that led to November 1989 and its aftermath in Germany appear to be predetermined, leaving little flexibility for contestation. “Common sense,” as Ben Gook argues, “dictates that this is how things stand today.” However, as he goes on to observe, “if we move in reverse from [now] to 1989, we can notice the belated hardening into ‘fate’ of what was earlier an open moment – a moment at which contingency was visible” (23). And so, proceeding backwards through the years towards 1989, we can see how the range of potential futures grows at each point. Given

prevalent negative appraisals of the *Plattenbau*, it may be difficult to conceive of the existence of a nostalgia for GDR housing. However, as Peter Thompson has pointed out, “the nostalgia inherent in the term *Ostalgie* is actually a longing for a future that went missing in the past rather than for a past that never had a Socialist or Communist future” (252). Gook’s temporally ‘backwards’ approach to history allows us to imagine how the revolutionary meaning of the Wende has narrowed over time. This upsets teleological obfuscations that accompany the dominant cultural memory of the GDR, which can only imagine the inevitability of the failure of the socialist state.

These themes play out in *Der Preis*’s evocation of Ulrich Müther’s *Rettungsstation*. The young Alex, demonstrating an early interest in architecture, was fascinated by the GDR architect’s extraordinary building. Müther’s lifeguard hut, resting on a solitary post, rises futuristically over of its coastal surroundings. Today, its curved structure and glass exterior no longer serve its function as an observational platform for lifeguards. This out-of-the-ordinary building from 1968, looming over the sand like a UFO on the *Ostsee*, is now a relic from a futurism that is not often remembered in GDR architecture. Thematically, its filmic image pulls the national and personal together; its cultural importance as an unusual, distinctive example of East German architecture joins with its meaning for Alex within the film’s narrative, where it houses both his dreams and failures.

The building’s architectural futurism seems forlorn when understood in the context of Alex’s melancholic and nostalgic reflections. He is reminded of his youthful enthusiasm for what such spaces promised the GDR, in contrast with the everyday life within and surrounded by *Plattenbauten*. This landmark traces the emotional trajectory of Alex’s life from a hopeful and optimistic youth, embedded within the structural ideology of the GDR, to an outwardly successful, yet melancholic and somewhat unsatisfied adult. The extraordinary *Rettungsstation*, distinctive in comparison with the homogeneity of the *Plattenbau*, is, for Alex,

an architectural *Erinnerungsort*. This building is not a place he visited during the time of the GDR, it is rather a place that embodies his earlier ideas and dreams.

In his remembered GDR, the monotony of the *Plattenbauten* is highlighted in contrast with the extraordinariness of the motif of Ulrich Müther's lifeguard-hut. Returning home as an adult, Alex tracks down Nicole, a central figure from his past – Micha's sister and Alex's adolescent crush. Alex asks Nicole if she will accompany him on a day trip to finally visit this site. She agrees – and Alex and Nicole's belated trip to this old-GDR outpost, standing resolutely alien and futuristic against its natural sea-side backdrop, speaks of melancholic absences: Micha's death, Nicole and Alex's abandoned friendship, and the GDR's 'absent presence' in memory. Nicole and Alex's *Ausflug* is a haunted, melancholic trip, a delayed visit to the youthful dream that never came to pass, Micha's death having ruptured their plans. Micha's absence from Alex and Nicole's eventual visit highlights the misalignment of desires and reality. The *Rettungsstation* is a motif of Alex's past dreams and his search for identity and self within the socialist paradigm.

The melancholy of the failed utopias of both *Plattenbau* and the *Rettungsstation* is of a particular sort: *Der Preis*'s specific temporality evokes a feeling that relates to both melancholia and nostalgia – hauntology – a “puncture” coined by Derrida. Playing on the almost identical pronunciation in the original French, Derrida's term seeks to subvert traditional notions of ‘ontology’ by replacing the importance of ‘being’ and ‘presence’ with the figure of the ghost, who occupies spaces in-between. According to Martin Hägglund, “what is important about the spectre is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*” (82). In *Der Preis*, the directional temporalities of “*no longer*” and “*not yet*” are found in the unfulfilled future promise of the socialist past and the post-unification present, both of which are embodied in the structure of the *Plattenbau*.

The twin modalities of the “no longer” and the “not yet” thus designate distinct absences in time, both of which are ‘present’ (present as absences, like ghosts) in *Der Preis*. These are affective experiences in both narrative timelines, which are leveraged by the turning point now remembered as the ‘end of communism’, symbolised by the fall of the Wall, and the ‘end times’ evoked, for example, in Francis Fukuyama’s famous (or infamous) phrase, the “end of history.” In this (post)historical moment, social or cultural dreams of *anything else* have become ghostly visions: alternative futures that are forever trapped in the past, only to emerge into the present as absence, whiffs of nostalgia, melancholic songs, and the return of retro fashions and material culture. In this context, Alex, together with the *Plattenbau* inhabitants and their memories, bound up within the concrete walls of their housing, might be thought of as the subjects of his renovation’s ‘exorcism’. Derrida argues that capitalist societies “can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back” (123). We bear witness to this spirit via the reluctance of the inhabitants of the *Plattenbauten* in *Der Preis* to move, in order to make way for the revitalising rebuild that would turn their outdated blocks into a re-energised, spacious and well-lit upgrade.

Der Preis’s general atmospherics are suffused with belatedness, spectrality and temporal disjuncture – a ‘time out of joint’.⁴ The film’s sense of stagnation, of looking ‘over the shoulder’, is projected into Alex’s flashback memories of the former-GDR. It is also woven into the narrative of the present through the lack

⁴ This sensation is echoed in recent work that focuses on time. For instance, Aleida Assmann’s *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?* explores the idea that the current epoch is in a crisis of temporal disjuncture.

of action on the building site. Fisher describes this post-modern sense, or sensation, as a “feeling of belatedness, of living after the gold rush” (8). His phrase resonates with *Der Preis*’s ‘Berlin School’ atmosphere and pace, and with a sense of the near impossibility of anything actually *happening*. At one stage in the film, there is a pointed moment that appears to carry a subtext of meta-commentary on this aspect of its own temporality. Alex, upon arriving at the building site, asks the foreman, „Bin ich zu spät?“ – to which the laconic reply, „Hier? ... Nee“ seems to suggest a general belatedness, or an endlessly drab present, more than a specific answer to his question.

The disappearance of future-oriented movement afflicts the characters of *Der Preis* in complex, often ambivalent ways. They have experienced dual let-downs, both from socialism and re-unification, which promised futures that never arrived. Recent interest in the notion of hauntology, influenced by cultural theorist Mark Fisher, who has written widely about negative affects of late-capitalism in popular culture, iterates feelings of longing for a future that never arrived, a sensation that profoundly afflicts post-modernity and late-capitalism. “What has vanished,” Fisher writes, “is a tendency, a virtual trajectory” (22). For instance, in *Der Preis*, the *Rettungsstation* is a place suffused with hauntological affect. This building now houses the ghost of its architectural ideal. It once sought to alleviate the boredom of the *Plattenbau*, a purpose that the young Alex remembers eloquently describing (to the pleasure of his teacher) during a class presentation, shown in flashback. Alex and Nicole’s daytrip is an encounter with the spirits of their younger selves, yearning for a brighter, more interesting future. This is now encapsulated in Mütter’s futuristic pod, trapped in Alex’s backwards looking gaze.

The expression that Fisher borrows from Franco ‘Bifo’ Bernardi to describe the post-modern waning of the expectations of a temporality beyond the present and the past is the “slow cancellation of the future” (qtd. 13). Alex’s designs seek to modernise the relics of GDR urban planning by transforming, for

the better, what he remembers as the „absolute Reduktion“ in the GDR’s *Plattenbauten*: „Essen, schlafen, Dach über dem Kopf.“ Alex, for one, expresses no Ostalgie in his retrospective evaluation of the *Plattenbau*, which he remembers providing only the barest minimum in terms of everyday comfort: „Es bricht den Geist, so eine Typologie.“ From the late 20th century and increasingly as we progress through the 21st century, the sensational forward-moving trajectories that were the modernist promises of the 1950s and 1960s are becoming ‘no longer’ expected.

Sensations of ‘not yet’ and ‘no longer’ emerge in the following illustrative example of a spectral sequence in *Der Preis*. Running up against further obstacles to the renovations, Alex encounters three youths hanging about in the area around the *Plattenbau* in question. He asks if they are at all interested in the development plans, to which only one boy replies, with a uninterested and far from definitive: „mäßig...ein bisschen.“ These three figures are a ghostly mirror to the three young friends of the 1980s GDR, Alex, Nicole and Micha, who hung around in the same place, looking much the same back then as it does now. The girl in this present-day group even has a streak of fluoro dye in her hair, as Nicole used to wear. They appear in the film as if to remind us of the universal truism, ‘as much as things change, they remain the same’. In the context of preoccupations with a late-modernity defined by hyper-acceleration (what Paul Virilio terms ‘dromology’), these figures reflect a resistance against this increasing pace; they embody the belatedness inherent in the temporal clash between past events, past futures, and a lack of future in the present. This scene demonstrates, through its uncanny affect, how contemporary cultural experience remains afflicted by ever-returning spectres of the events, dreams and disillusionments of the 20th century.

This brief example in the film demonstrates *Der Preis*’s use of ghostly figures. Understated, quick – this scene’s impact is ambient and atmospheric, rather than obvious or forceful, consistent with the film’s general feeling. These revenants, who appear in the shadows of the *Plattenbau*, demonstrate a lack of interest

in the project that is an uncanny doubling of the film's depiction of youthful disengagement in the GDR. The doubling of the static temporality of the stalled building project with the equally frozen 1980's GDR reflects the persistence of cultural memories of East Germany in the post-unification present. In *Der Preis*, this feeling draws the spectator into the 'not yet' renovated apartments and the 'no longer' dreamings of utopia. In the DVD's commentary, Hauck recounts a moment during filming when two 'punks' suddenly jumped out of the window of an abandoned *Plattenbau* apartment in the background of the shoot; Hauck chose to keep them in the final cut. It is apt that these figures, real life 'ghosts' of the *Ostpunks* from the 1980s, interrupt the diegetic world of the film from the 'real' world outside. It seems appropriate that the *Plattenbau* spits out these characters from beyond the film. They and the buildings appear as extras with a life of their own, an ecosystem of memories and affect.

Bearing in mind that Fisher's re-energising of Derrida's hauntology has significantly accompanied his studies into music and sound, it seems appropriate to turn our perceptive attention to the aural dimension of *Der Preis*. In his study of 'haptic geographies,' Paul Rodaway reminds us of the contrasting perceptual modalities of sight and sound: "An auditory world unfolds like a tune, a visual world is presented already complete like a painting" (82). The enveloping characteristic of sound is a key element of *Der Preis*'s realism, wrapping the spectator into the film's world in a way that light's directionality does not. The scholar and architect, Juhani Pallasmaa, theorising sensorial qualities of spaces observes: "Sight isolates, whereas sound incorporates; vision is directional, whereas sound is omni-directional" (53).

Sound and film are tied together in the medium's particular form of spatiality. "The city remade in a film studio is a geography in its own right," Bruno explains. "[S]oundscapes define cities: they construct urban spaces and make them into specific places and sites of memory. As inhabitant-spectators of the haptic architectural journey, we are deeply affected by the sounds of the city" (306). Steen Eiler Rasmussen, in his

influential work, *Experiencing Architecture*, describes precisely how architecture can not only be “heard” – but how this can be experienced through film. He elaborates how, during the famous, final chase scene in Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949) through Vienna’s sewer tunnels, “the characteristic sounds which tunnels produce are clearly heard in the splashing of the water and the echoes of the men hunting the third man. Here, architecture is certainly heard. Your ear receives the impact of both the length and the cylindrical form of the tunnel” (225).

One particular moment in *Der Preis* bears both this architectural quality of sound and its hauntological character. In a flashback scene, Alex’s class visit a factory as part of their education into what constitutes a good, socialist worker. This sequence, Hauck explains in the film’s commentary, was filmed in an abandoned building in Gera, Thüringen. She describes how, through an aural trick of editing, the impression of an active factory was achieved in this empty, abandoned space, through the use of backgrounded sounds of machinery operating. We see the class wandering down the corridors of what is, in the external reality to the film, a relic of industry. The building becomes ‘undead’, a revenant of GDR memory, through a sonic trick; the breath of ‘life’ almost revives this abandoned piece of architecture, once a functioning, symbolic and literal centre of the working backbone of the socialist GDR, and the space resonates with the juxtaposition of unrealised futures in its post-unification malaise. We see none of the workers that the foreman describes to the children; within the past temporality of the GDR flashback, these role models, who are meant to programmatically inspire these children into becoming the socialist worker, are absent – ghostly. To return to Rasmussen’s phrasing, the “ear receives the impact,” in this instance, of the presence of memories that haunt the absences in the abandoned building.

The action (and the inaction) of *Der Preis*, in both timelines, takes place largely in and around the town’s *Plattenbauten*. One exception to this is Alex and Nicole’s visit to the *Rettungsstation*. Also important is

a particular section of woodland by the train tracks, where Micha used to run, and where the three young friends would often meet. We return here a number of times throughout the film. There is a natural magic in the forest environment, emphasised by the contrast with grittier realism in the built environment. We encounter this in Alex's flashbacks and also when he returns to the same spot as an adult at the very end of the film. *Der Preis*'s narrative ends here. Micha's life ended here. This narrative's ending is far more affectively mediated than the sequence which precedes it, in which we see that construction has finally begun on the *Plattenbau* redevelopment. The revelation of the nature of Micha's suicide overshadows any sense of closure in the post-unification narrative arc. It is the site of Micha's tragic suicide in 1988 that is meant to linger with the audience.

Where the ringing of awful screams of steel were heard, as the train that hits Micha fails to brake in time, there are now only the calls of birds and the distant hum of traffic. We leave Alex, as an adult, staring down the line, his only movement the rubbing of his fingers against each other in an expression of discomfort. The credits roll, and for a while the sounds of the forest linger. We hear the amplified crunch of leaves underfoot, the sound of a car's ignition, and we engage our senses to conjure the image of Alex's driving off, away from this place where he is haunted by too much memory and regret, and futures forever lost. As he departs, the once officially-forbidden punk-rock of the band L'Attentat, which opens the film, returns to bookend Alex's journey. The refrain – „Abfahrt, Abfahrt, das ist zu hart“ – while originally a composition expressing frustration and rebellion against the 'prison' of forced optimism in the GDR, echoes with Alex's personal battles with the ghosts of both future and past in his role as *Heimkehrer*.

The punk music in *Der Preis* recalls the spirit of hauntology observable in works that have looked back at the East German punk scene. The title of a series of exhibitions, and a subsequent DVD documentary, *Ostpunk: Too Much Future*, adapts the Western catchcry taken from the Sex Pistols' song to suit the distinct atmosphere of the East's punk scene.

Too much future, to them, meant no future at all ... In the flashy and flamboyant activities of the punk scene they found a home which the GDR no longer supplied them with. They escaped the country while still living in it, thus becoming free within limits (*Too Much Future*).

Where the feeling of 'No Future' bound the punk subculture together in the West, for Eastern punks, the issue was that of a future overloaded with the programmatic expectations of the regime: a future that Micha (who progresses in the film to increasingly stylising himself as a punk, wearing leather and chains) rejected in his suicide. The hauntological presence-and-absence of futures can be found in similar works, for example in the title of Tim Mohr's book, taken from a favourite *Ostpunk* graffiti slogan: *Stirb nicht im Warteraum der Zukunft*. The last verse of L'Attentat's song, played out over the film's credits, also encapsulates the sentiment of being trapped in the decaying failures of modernity:

Ich wohne dort wo die Panzer stehen.

Dort wo man sagt, das Leben ist schön.

Dort wo bald kein Vogel mehr singt,

Wo das Wasser nach Abfall stinkt.

Ich wohne in einem Friedensstaat

Abfahrt, Abfahrt, das ist zu hart.

Conclusion

Failures of the socialist state are embodied in the *Plattenbau* monoliths, which rise up like giant tombstones across eastern landscapes. *Der Preis*'s memories are not only of the socialist past, but of the teleology of socialism's utopic vision, popularly (and globally) discredited after the collapses in the revolutionary wave of 1989. Further to this, the promises tied to the capitalist, neoliberal rejuvenation following unification have failed to materialise for many in the former East. As poet Simon Armitage wrote, "the future was a beautiful place, once" (12).

Set in post-unification Germany, *Der Preis* is poised to comment on the end of socialism and late-capitalism, and our 'end of history' moment that seems to have found a kind of perpetual stasis since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In such a light, the film's *Plattenbauten* loom over a landscape that remains disquieted. The stalling of Alex's renovations to his childhood dwelling reflects the frustrations and ambivalence faced by those living the shadows of these spaces, both then, and now. *Der Preis*'s ghosts lurk in the evocation of the GDR's lost futures, which continue to haunt easterners in the Berlin Republic, as well as post-unification's unrealised „Blühende Landschaften.“ This phrase, uttered in 1990 by then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl, offered a picturesque economic promise for the recently former East. Now, it haunts the drab greys of the many neglected, deteriorating, or empty and abandoned *Plattenbauten*.

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