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ARCHIVES FOR THE FUTURE:
THOMAS HEISE'S VISUAL ARCHEOLOGY

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Abstract | *Visual media played a crucial role on nearly all levels of everyday private and public life in the GDR. This essay intends to readjust the focus on GDR visual history by investigating its margins, including ephemeral and semi-official film archives beyond the "official" state-controlled production of images. It does not reexamine such ephemeral cinematic remnants as historical sources but rather as traces that have to be understood in context and appropriated, arranged, and re-read, assembling them as fragments of the past. The specific focus here is on the works of Thomas Heise, a filmmaker who—although prohibited from producing and publicly releasing films during the existence of the GDR—managed to create during that time various audio and visual artifacts as contributions to archives for the future.*

Résumé | *En la RDA les médias visuels ont joué un rôle crucial dans presque tous les domaines de la vie quotidienne, qu'elle soit privée ou publique. Cet essai a pour but de réajuster le focus sur l'histoire visuelle de la RDA en examinant ses marges, en incluant les archives éphémères et semi-officielles au-delà de la production "officielle" d'images. Cet essai ne réexamine pas ces vestiges cinématographiques éphémères en tant que sources historiques, mais comme des traces devant être comprises dans un certain contexte, approprié, arrangé et re-lu. Cette discussion sur les traces cinématographiques éphémères ainsi que les techniques d'assemblage de fragments du passé explore l'oeuvre de Thomas Heise, un réalisateur unique dans son genre qui – bien qu'il soit interdit de produire et de mettre en circulation publiquement des films sous le régime de la RDA – a créé pendant ce temps des artefacts audios et visuels comme contributions aux archives pour l'avenir.*

Title Image: Remnants of postponed futures from Material; still from Material. Dir. Thomas Heise, Germany 2009. DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Born in 1955, Thomas Heise belongs to what has been called the GDR's first generation, born and raised under socialism. His father, Wolfgang Heise, was a well-known professor of philosophy at the Humboldt University, a member of the GDR's intellectual "nobility" whom dissident poet Wolf Biermann praised as the only real philosopher in the GDR. After graduating from secondary school, Thomas completed a traineeship in a printing factory and, following the obligatorily military service, he began working as an assistant at the state-controlled DEFA film studios. From there he was delegated to study at the GDR's state film school in Babelsberg during the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, after the school's film production committee rejected one of his student films and severely criticized and then banned his follow-up projects, Heise left the school before finishing his studies and was prohibited from producing and publicly releasing any films. In the centralized and highly controlled GDR cultural sphere, this meant he had to seek alternative places to realize at this point his creative vision.

The possibility of working with dramatist and theater director Heiner Müller at the Berliner Ensemble theatre in East Berlin provided Heise with just such a space; he started working there in 1987, during the last phase of the GDR's existence. According to Heise, he received a Panasonic MV 5 VHS camera from a West German film producer who had planned to make a documentary about Müller (Heise, "Arbeit" 272), which enabled him to collect visual material during the GDR's last years. As Müller's assistant he began observing and recording scenes at the theatre and documented social and political changes in East German society. Combined with other remnants of various film projects, Heise later gathered this footage in his film *Material* (2009). "Something's always left over," he states in the opening sequence of this film, echoing Heiner Müller's dictum on "lonely texts waiting for history" (Müller 187). The voice over continues: "Remnants that don't work out. So images lie around waiting for a story." *Material* gathers these fragmented remnants of GDR history and develops strategies for making them readable in the present. In this sense, many of Heise's projects since the fall of the Berlin Wall have focused on the status of films as archives and on archived films. His interest in these films lies not in their capacity to reveal otherwise missing knowledge about East German society but rather as testimony to potential and unrealized futures in the GDR, at least in the case of his own work. His methods of archiving and his archived films present aspects of political and social life that were mostly invisible in official visual records, even in those East German films and documentaries that attempted to communicate hidden and coded messages about social reality. As a result, these unfinished or locked-away movies are archives for the future, a collection of rejected, banned, and lost fragments that had a delayed entry into the GDR's visual memory, after the country and its regime had disappeared.

Meanwhile Heise has become a renowned documentary filmmaker who has produced nineteen films in the past twenty-five years. Footage for five of them had been shot in the GDR but was never publicly screened. In addition to *Material*, which contains some of the footage that Heise shot between 1987 and 1991, these films include: *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* (*So Why Make a Film about These People?*), made in 1980 but publicly shown only after 1990; *Das Haus 1984* (*The House 1984*) and *Volkspolizei 1985* (*The People's Police Force 1985*), both released in 2001; and *Der Ausländer* (*The Foreigner*, 1987) about Heiner Müller, which was finished in 2004. The first film that contained footage from the 1980s was *Vaterland* (*Fatherland*, 2002), and already Heise's first full-length documentary made after 1989/90, *Eisenzeit* (*Iron Time*, 1991), was based on a previously unfinished project from 1981 (Dell and Rothöhler 13). These cinematic works function as archives for the future that introduced a specific form of visual archeology from the margins of East German society. After the Babelsberg film school administration rejected *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* Heise stored and preserved his footage in mostly hidden spaces or semi-official archives, among them the archive of the Babelsberg school itself and the GDR's State Film Archive.[1]

What is an "archive for the future"? The notion is informed by Jacques Derrida's proposition to consider not the archive's function to preserve the past but its prospective function:

> [T]he question of the archive is not [...] a question of the past. It is not a question of a concept dealing with

the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility of tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. (37)

The footage that Heise collected for the selected films I discuss here constituted archival material in precisely this sense: for an unknown and unspecific future, for frictions and transitions "to come." Edited from this footage and screened after years of delay, these films respond to Derrida's unrealized futures. As such, they resemble what Siegfried Kracauer in his final, unfinished book on history defined as "lost causes" and "unrealized possibilities" that constitute traces to be unraveled only in retrospect (199). Several of Heise's films provide a model for this concept of the archives for the future and suggest the need to reevaluate these remnants and leftovers of East German visual culture as "lost causes" that simultaneously reveal a vanished East German reality and potential but unrealized futures.

Images Waiting for a Story

Heise's insistence in the opening statement of *Material* that the "images lie around waiting for a story" ascribes a certain agency to the archival images appropriated in the film. Not merely resting passively in archives, this material is also actively "waiting for a story." Horst Bredekamp calls this independent activity of images a *Bildakt* or image action. Re-

ferring to paintings and visual arts more generally, he claims that the interdependency of image and recipient includes an active role on the part of the image in which it can adopt the position of enunciator (59). In this sense, images not only passively reflect the past but also exercise a "formative power of form" that, like social actors or institutions, has the ability to shape history (Paul).[2] *Material* contradicts the dominant perception of the *Wende* (the transition to German unification in 1989–90) as a narrative of progress, seeking a different mode that would create a different perspective on the same events. And indeed, Heise's footage participates in the (re)shaping of history in just the sense of active images. Heise apparently assembles the footage from the years before and after 1989/90 in a contingent and unsystematic order: images of ruined houses in Halle give way to squatted streets in East Berlin; from Heiner Müller's work in the theatre the film shifts to the mass rallies at Alexanderplatz in November 1989; statements from prisoners and prison guards are followed by images of left-leaning activists interrupting the premiere of Heise's documentary film about East German skinheads, *Stau—Jetzt geht's los* (*Jammed—Let's Get Going*, 1992). This loose order provides no coherent chronology of the events, yet its fragmentary form challenges the viewer with demands to deal with the footage actively.

Historians of the GDR have coined the concept of *Eigensinn* or obstinacy to characterize a widespread but subdued form of agency practiced in East German society that complicates its image of an oppressive, totalitarian society. According to Andrew Port, *Eigensinn* has "become one of the most popular concepts used to describe a wide range of behavior in East Germany, all of which suggests that the so-called mass-

es were not just passive victims, that they held 'agency'" (5). Thomas Lindenberger specifically sees in *Eigensinn* an expression of a "sense-of-oneself" (32), a sensibility for individual agency based on "perceptions and interpretations of reality, conceiving of them as a factor of creativity in their own right" (51). Moreover, Alf Lüdtke, one of those historians who popularized the concept, relates *Eigensinn* to the medium of GDR photography and the constructive dimension of producing and perceiving images. In this context, he explicitly refers to examples from the margins of established and officially accepted image production, including images made by semi-professional and even amateur photographers (232).

Semi-official and semi-professional images such as those appropriated in *Material* constitute a specific visual element shaped by incompleteness and fragmentation. As documentary footage, it serves both as a source in the historians' sense—i.e., a container of historical information that needs to be evaluated and critically interpreted—and as a trace in the Kracauerian sense mentioned above. The term trace itself, however, introduces ambivalent meanings. First, much like a footprint, a trace indicates an indexical remnant of past events. As a referent it connects different temporalities, but as a signifier, not by preserving the event itself. Second, a trace is often a detail that, much like a clue, can suggest a larger context. This dimension correlates with Kracauer's notion of "lost causes." A trace is a vestige, a part of a whole that exists only as a mosaic of fragments and voids. Hence, the concept of traces also corresponds to the practice of archeology as a technique of excavating past remains.

In his recent study on visual culture and memory Steve Anderson refers to archeology in a manner that can also illuminate Heise's projects: "the process of understanding how the past is transformed into memory may be best described as an archeology in which the goal is not simply to uncover something that has been buried but also to discover how and why its meanings have changed and additional layers have been built up on it" (51). Films too can actively participate in this archeological undertaking through their specific visual techniques for exploring photographic material and cinematic documents. Simon Rothöhler, for example, identifies the independent agency of Heise's visual remnants as the "Eigenrechtlichkeit des Materials," an intrinsic right incorporated in the footage (97). He argues that documentary films pursue historiographical ambitions, not only by retelling stories from the past but also by actively writing history (10). Citing Kracauer's analogy between film and history, Rothöhler claims that film's inherent ability both to bear witness and to provide multiple perspectives on the past contributes to the understanding of past events (21). Thus, the collection of details and the focus on seemingly irrelevant aspects (23) resemble Kracauer's idea of "lost causes," which are constitutive for a visual archeology of GDR society.

When Heise presented his film compilation Material at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival, his visual archeology had reached full fruition. Comprised exclusively of footage he had shot privately in the 1980s and during the Wende and its immediate aftermath, the film develops a set of specific cinematic techniques to investigate visual traces of the GDR with the goal of contributing to the writing of East German history. These include recognizable Brechtian strategies such as the use of camera angles that differ from iconic television images, the integration of intertitles to comment and reflect on the screened footage, and voiceover commentary to explain the film's archeological approach—all aiming to "thematize the very historical apparatus and draw our attention to a set of unresolved historical contradictions" (Koutsourakis 252–53). In a significant sequence, for example, Heise appropriates footage of a protest rally from November 4, 1989 at Berlin's Alexanderplatz. [Clip 1] We approach the speakers, some recognizable as leading figures of the regime, from an odd angle unlike official media representations. The image is peripherally located at the margins of the historical

Clip 1: Sequence depicting the protest rally on November 4, 1989, from Material (2009). Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

moment, embedded within the protesting crowd but not absorbed by it. This distanciation becomes obvious in the second part of the sequence when the camera—acting as what Dell and Rothöhler term a "micro-historical countershot" (12)—pans the protestors as they sing the communist anthem "The International." Knowing neither the story these images would tell nor the history they could document, the footage captured a particular or even paradoxical measure of time. Because it clearly differs from the now-familiar television images of the Wende, it enables a different view on the over-mediated events. Simultaneously it preserves the potentiality of a future course of history that was never realized. When the camera turns away from the speaking politicians and focuses on the ordinary participants who start chanting "The International," it points to the moment of an unrealized future through a precise interplay of images, voices, and intertitles that highlights the lines of the anthem and resonates as a response to the future from the past.[3]

Focusing specifically on the peripheral visual angles, Rothöhler links this formal perspective to Kracauer's thoughts about micro-history. While macro-history refers to a broad and universal concept that suggests a process of filtering and harmonizing divergent, fragmented, and ephemeral perspectives, a micro-historical approach respects the material's inherent needs and demands (Rothöhler 97). Furthermore, the objects of history, here the footage itself, participate actively in the writing of history. The images gain historiographical agency. Indeed, Heise states: "The material provides the form. It's like digging something up or turning it over. There is this strange idea that came to me all of a sudden and has never gone away: a story, considered longitudi-

nally, is actually a tangled mass" ("Thoughts" 228). Heise's film proposes new audiovisual constellations, which reveal hidden relations and at the same time refuse the common perspective of the always far-too-close or far-too-distant television images that define our visual memory of the Autumn 1989 events.

This formal strategy gives rise to a paradoxical temporality, which Kracauer describes as "historical relativity": "Because of the antinomy of its core, time not only conforms to the conventional image of a flow but must also be imagined as being not such a flow" (*History* 199). This antinomian temporality is best expressed, according to Kracauer, in a spatial image: the "cataract of times" that is characterized by "'pockets' and voids […] vaguely reminiscent of interference phenomena" (199). Films such as *Material*, which explore ephemeral "lost causes" through visual archeology, can be elucidated by the metaphor "cataract of times." The montage of archival images as a tangled mass of visual remnants constitutes a cinematic cataract, which on the one hand establishes a visual flow *through* time and on the other encapsulates specific moments in time. Furthermore, Material's temporality creates "'pockets' and voids" in which "unrealized possibilities" can surface. As thematic clusters, which dwell on specific, often even random and contingent situations, these pockets and voids interfere with the image flow. This disruption produces what Kracauer describes as "a Utopia of the in-between—a terra incognita in the hollows between the lands we know" (*History* 217). In such a cinematic constellation, the images themselves can incorporate *Eigensinn* as a form of agency, waiting, as Heise emphasizes, for a story and then providing the form for this story. Both Heise's films and the visual remnants they appropriate possess the agency of Eigensinn. In this context, it is no coincidence that the idea of active images as it was famously introduced by W.J.T Mitchell in his book *What do Pictures Want* is derived from Marx's concept of fetishism, which Mitchell defines as "the subjectivity of objects, the personhood of things" (30). It should be noted that Heise's archeological approach also adopts basic ideas of Marxist thought but then inverts them; his work transforms the Marxist concept of fetishism into an agency of images that undermines the ideological position of East German media in the same manner as his archives for the future invert the future-oriented pathos formulae of state officials (Sabrow).

Memories of Missed Opportunities

This inversion of the future-oriented but empty pathos of the GDR's ideology resonates strongly in the 1991 film *Eisenzeit*, Heise's first attempt to collect and preserve material for the future. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall he had visited the city of Eisenhüttenstadt, located close to the German-Polish border. Established in 1950 as Stalinstadt, the industrial city anchored by a new steel foundry was laid out as a socialist model town (the name was quietly changed in 1961). Yet when he visited once again in 1990–91, the city had started to decline, in tandem with the state that projected its ideology of scientifically planned progress at this site. *Eisenzeit* was not just intended as a portrait of a declining East German industrial area. Already in 1993, Marc Silberman had recognized in the film a "structural fragmentation of the film images and the textual commentary, a kind of aesthetic correlative for the memory of illusions and missed opportunities" (28). Indeed, *Eisenzeit* incorporates the memory of potential futures and departs from the lost causes of an unfinished film. A decade earlier, as a student at the Babelsberg film school, Heise had already envisioned a film project about young people in Eisenhüttenstadt. In this 1981 film with the working title *Anka und…* (*Anka and…*), Heise set out to portray the first generation of children born in what was called the "First Socialist City of the GDR." Perhaps fittingly, the film about an abandoned youth generation, lost in a shattering storm of alleged progress that felt like permanent stagnancy, was never made. Heise later described the end of the project. When the team arrived at Eisenhüttenstadt, a production student from the film school told him that the municipal authorities had withdrawn permission to shoot in the city: "We didn't manage to do any shooting, […] I could only make some audio recordings with Tilo Paulukat, one of the four heroes in the film" (Heise, "Thoughts" 224). Despite earlier support on the part of his teachers, the film project was ultimately cancelled by the school in cooperation with the municipal administration. The only traces left are a letter from the film school's head of production to the city council of Eisenhüttenstadt, preserved in production files of the school, and the songs performed by the projected film's protagonists, which Heise had taped and stored in his private archive.[4]

Ten years later, after the GDR had ceased to exist, Heise returned to Eisenhüttenstadt and began working on a film that was to take up and continue the unfinished project. What had been planned originally as a portrayal of the city and its disenchanted youth—and implicitly a larger story about

the GDR—became a visual essay about the vanishing state, a fracturing society, and a generation lost between the renounced past and a precarious future. The first full-length film produced by Heise, *Eisenzeit* negotiates these complex temporalities. On the one hand it is a cinematic time capsule, preserving a particular moment of transition, and on the other it assembles traces and remnants that were collected in the past for an indeterminate future, a future after an as-yet-unimagined transformation or end of the GDR:

> Heise's collage narrates the past by breaking off and recommencing again and again, as if the memories of friendship, home, lost dreams, and an unrealized film were open wounds. As with many such documentaries, the use of historical footage (here from 1980) serves both as a contrast to and an explanation for change: the present is meaningful only when seen historically. (Silberman 28)

Eisenzeit proceeded from and secured its unfinished predecessor. According to Vrääth Öhner, it incorporates a cinematic search for the leftover traces of the proposed *Anka und…* protagonists. Experiences, memories, and material remnants had been stored away, preserved for later use, and in the revitalized 1991 film project embody Heise's search for traces of his own past and for remnants of an unfinished film (60–61). As Heise himself explained: "we used them [the audio recordings with Tilo Paulukat made in 1981] ten years after for the film *Eisenzeit* that I shot in 1991. At that time Tilo was already dead. He hang [sic] himself on a holiday week-end during his national [military] service. The only things remaining were the old recordings of his Neil

Young song interpretations" ("Thoughts" 224). Once again "lost causes," the tapes, and an unfinished film caught in a

Figure 1: Wall mural from the opening sequence of Eisenzeit (1991). Dir. Thomas Heise, VHS, Unidoc, 1993.

condition of waiting and postponed time initiate a cinematic dialogue between the present and the future.

Eisenzeit links this concept of postponed futures to the experience of time in the late GDR, serving as a blueprint for Heise's method of accumulating material and fluid experiences as "lost causes." These possible futures are not realized, thwarted, or rejected paths of life and dead ends; they do not emerge from the course of history understood as a story of progress and success or of making sense. They exist instead in an in-between space, which is in our case the elusive space of film that absorbs the ephemeral phenomena of the physical world to protect them from forgetting. *Eisenzeit* condenses these thoughts already in its opening sequence. First the camera pans a wall mural depicting figures in the mode of the "revolutionary romanticism" that typified 1950s socialist realism, celebrating a vision of the future that never came to pass: workers, engineers, teachers, youth, and young families enjoying the Labour Day holiday [Fig. 1]. The colorful mural conveys a dynamic but uniform striving toward the future. The traveling camera intensifies this energy, animating the idealized storyline of constant progress. However, the contrastive interplay of image and sound emphasizes the implicit notion of postponement. Heise attaches to the images of a failed socialist dream a song about the failed capitalist dream: Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush." Here, different temporalities of past, present, and future merge, yielding the interplay of the agency of lost causes, the socialist self-image embedded in the wall mural, and the songs taped by disillusioned socialist youth. Young's song is explicitly linked to the story of Tilo and his friends, which was never told because Heise's student film project had been cancelled.

What remained ten years later was only his taped singing voice. The abruptly appearing film title dedicates *Eisenzeit* to Tilo and his friends. The sound of a moving train accompanies this title sequence, although we only see the image of a train after several more minutes (filmed through the window of another train arriving in Eisenhüttenstadt). The train is not only a vehicle that brings the viewers into the city, which comes into focus when it arrives, but the train also signifies the passage of time and resonates with Heise's voiceover describing his archeological concept: "Something is always left over. Remnants that don't work out."

Failed Futures and Ephemeral Pasts

The way cinematic remnants of the East German past both encapsulated and preserved traces of possible but unrealized futures as well as failed opportunities is distinct. Official GDR imagery ignored such failures; evidence of failed opportunities documented accidentally was in most cases censored, suppressed, or concealed. Heise once described the difficulties of visually expressing reality in a society in which artificiality characterizes the visible and hidden clues or implicit references communicate the real. He transformed this specific East German interplay of the visible and the non-visible into an aesthetic and historiographical approach: "In a dictatorship the idea is to amass hidden stores of images and words, portraying the things that people living under the dictatorship might have actually experienced, but that could not necessarily be seen or heard. Then, when the dictatorship was no more, those images bore witness to it" ("Archeology" 9). In other words, Heise reverses the direc-

tion of encounters with past time. While the historian seeks material, memories, and traces that persist in the present in order to reconstruct the past, Heise collects in the present material for the future, like an archivist or archeologist, hoping that the hidden traces safeguarded in this material reveal in hindsight the encapsulated time. Given the impossibility of contemporaneously releasing any of his films shot in the GDR, they functioned like messages in a bottle. As postponed documents they did not aim to address the present, but rather responded to an unknown future that was still inconceivable, potentially beyond the existing socialist state.

The primal scene of Heise's archives for the future originates in his inadvertent experiences as a student at the Babelsberg film school. Located close to the West Berlin border in a suburb of Potsdam, the school was a paradox. While it provided a place to try out different approaches to filmmaking, its goal was to prepare students for employment in the state-controlled media. They learned about creative, even oppositional traditions of cinema history, but student films were criticized for being Neorealist or infected by New Wave tendencies in Poland or Czechoslovakia. Heise later recalled the film school as a "schizophrenic" place:

> *The rectory was in Stalin's house, in the building where he lived during the Potsdam conference […]. I remember the dominant feeling was suspicion, coupled with a calm that simply ignored this suspicion, and an underlying fear. It was all schizophrenic and obviously not healthy. I latched onto the few foreign students and moved around as if I were in enemy territory. But I was obviously a native.*

of this land, part of this. In any case, I was rather a loner. ("Thoughts" 223)

Today the Film University Babelsberg "Konrad Wolf," successor to the former state film school, contains a continually growing catalogue of approximately 4,000 films of different genres and types from all six decades of the school's history (Brombach, Ebbrecht-Hartmann, and Wahl 81). These include, for example, the earliest student films produced in 1956–57 by later well-known DEFA directors such as Jürgen Böttcher, Kurt Tetzlaff, Hermann Zschoche, and Ingrid Reschke. The erratic and unsystematic archive kept conformist and idealizing documentaries about East German society as well as films the administration criticized and even banned, premature exercises that randomly depicted GDR life as well as films that offer the perspective of the school's foreign students. However, there are also archival voids and gaps, making it difficult to reconstruct the history of films that were produced but did not make their way into the archives (Löser). In the 1970s the school formalized the process of archiving, but only after the transformative turmoil following 1989 did the archive become an inventory to be explored in other contexts. This is how *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* came to see the light of day.

After two short film exercises in the first years of his studies, Heise completed a documentary about two brothers in East Berlin's inner-city Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood who starkly deviate from acceptable role models of socialist youth. Surviving as small-time criminals, Bernd and his brother Norbert lack any prospects for meaningful employment yet possess a vivid sense of self-confidence (Öhner

57–58). Heise depicts the two protagonists as free spirits and situates them as antipodes to the dominant concept of the socialist hero. In contrast to traditional GDR documentaries focusing on thoughtful and socially responsible working-class heroes, this film draws attention to unemployed criminals. While the classical socialist hero incorporates ideals such as collectivity and solidarity, Heise's protagonists are introduced as defiant individualists with a strong sense of self. Certainly, other GDR filmmakers such as Jürgen Böttcher had already undermined and transformed the concept of the socialist hero. Although Böttcher often featured representatives from the working class, the patient, observational mode of his films as well as the speaking subject in front of the camera communicate less visible and even hidden dimensions of social reality. Indeed, Heise's film echoes Böttcher's own student film from twenty years earlier, *Notwendige Lehrjahre* (*Necessary Years of Apprenticeship*, 1960), which also portrayed criminal youth but in this case living in a GDR reformatory. While Böttcher structures his film around the contradiction between a freedom-seeking, searching camera and a conformist voice over, Heise explores through his deviant and non-conformist protagonists the margins of GDR society with its ambiguities and inner contradictions.

When Heise test-screened his documentary about the brothers before a committee of film school teachers and administrators, they were shocked: "Why should one make a film about these people?" one of the teachers allegedly commented (Keuschnigg and Heise). This statement became the film's title: *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* The committee requested that he rework the film. Although he changed

some parts for the second screening, it was subsequently banned. As a result, following two more cancelled projects, one of which was *Anka und…*, Heise decided to leave the school.[5] "The reason it was banned," recalls Heise, "was the casual way the film portrayed those young men living their lives untouched by ideology, including taking their careers as petty criminals for granted, meaning the film's author accepted their existence, as is, and simply wanted to explore it" ("Archeology" 9). This interest in exploration turned *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* into an archeological project. It contained images and sounds that could bear witness for the future, a way of life that was not shown in the offi-

Figure 2: TV-still from Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film? (1980). Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

cial East German media. Although never screened publicly, it did land in the school's archival storage. Locked there, it survived the GDR and preserved the voices and faces that were encapsulated in the material. Now, in hindsight, it offers the viewer significant hints about how to read the material. Some scenes address, for instance, the concept of archives for the future by referring to the formulaic pathos of East Germany's ideology: "How do you imagine the future?" Heise asks his young protagonists in one of the film's most striking scenes. Bernd answers that he cannot. The GDR's ideologically overdetermined concept of the future cannot be applied to their world. Their small apartment is both a safe haven and a prison, a reality excluded from the state's official self-image. Here, at the margins of society, the future only exists as an empty phrase proclaimed by socialist rhetoric, not unlike the desire for a peaceful world, Norbert's girlfriend Regina's response to Heise's question. Bernd immediately counters by asking, equally rhetorically: "Do you really believe there will be another war? Then you can fight." The film preserves communicative acts, statements, and attitudes absent from the official media. At the same time it formulates elements of a random "archeology of real existence," as Heise once described his approach in the subtitle of a publication about his works (*Spuren*).

Beyond observation and conversation, the audience also encounters visual sources such as photographs, which become "an essential part of Heise's 'archaeological' work" (Estrada 46). Mostly taken from a family album, the photographs reveal the unfulfilled longing for nostalgically transfigured "better times," but also trigger a mutual act of communication within the fragmented family. In contrast, another

sequence uses audiovisual sources in depicting the silent gathering of the brothers and Regina in front of a television. [Clip 2] The broadcast images situate the moment through the West German live news footage, which relay the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and mass demonstrations in Cairo. At first sight, this scene refers to the commonly known but tabooed fact that many GDR citizens had more interest in watching West German broadcasts than their own media. This particular news footage also introduces not only the trope of mass protest and revolution but also international solidarity, all examples of the GDR's

Clip 2: Sequence with television footage from Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film? (1980). Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

pathos formulae. More to the point, however, the television images self-reflexively comment on the film itself. For a brief moment Norbert switches to a TV report about archeologists, which suggests the film's own approach, an archeological excavation of social existence. Furthermore, the sequence's final images from an adventure film or a fairy tale movie show a flying horse falling to pieces, a visual metaphor for the fragmentation of life as depicted in the film as well as for the fragmentary character of the archives for the future. [Fig. 2] *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* became a postponed document of everyday existence that revealed its traces only after the fall of the Wall.

Hidden Traces and Unrealized Possibilities

Many of the student films produced at the Babelsberg film school, even the more conformist examples preserved in the school's archive, can be conceptualized as "lost causes" in the GDR's visual memory. Produced in a protected, semi-official environment, they rarely realized their potential because they were screened only for a limited public or not at all. This characterizes their complex temporal character: a mode of existence I call archival delay. *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* not only documents and preserves social reality more or less randomly, but it also helps us see the invisible by means of the visible. Like *Material* and *Eisenzeit*, this film serves as a historiographical agent. Again, Kracauer's comment on the "revealing power" of photographic film helps us read these films in hindsight as a cinematic trace (*Theory of Film* 16). Establishing the parallel between historiography and the photographic medium, he states: "History resembles photography in that it is, among other things, a means of alienation" (*History* 5). If the camera gives access to the margins of social reality, it also maintains a position of observation, which is an important precondition for a potentially reflexive approach. This interplay of closeness and distance, which is constitutive for both photography and film, points to an "intermediary area" (Kracauer 16), which historiography shares with the photographic. Kracauer then links this approach to the interest of the explorer: "Owing to the camera's revealing power, he [the photographer] has also traits of an explorer who, filled with curiosity, roams yet unconquered spaces" (55). This too resembles the traits of an archeologist in Heise's mold, bringing together cinema, historiography, and archeology.

Having quit the film school and faced with a dead end, Heise started to collect sound, footage, and other visual material that he deposited in his private collection or even in official archives—the only way to conceal his own images and thoughts in the "enemy's institutions" (Stöhr 112). In the mid–1970s the GDR State Film Archive established the Staatliche Filmdokumentation (State Film Documentation) to archive raw film footage of everyday life not included in officially produced documentaries (Barnert 30). The idea behind this project was that in future times such raw footage would be useful for films that would retrospectively document GDR progress over the course of time. In other words, its goal was to preserve audiovisual documents of events and living conditions that were not expedient for the present self-depiction of the state but could be used to illustrate the past in future films. As a result, the Staatliche Filmdokumentation collected footage of inadequate housing conditions, poverty, and even the Berlin Wall, which would never have been shown in official documentaries. It did not exist to document taboo aspects of life in the GDR, but—corresponding to the concept of socialist realism—to record and archive typical aspects of everyday life (Barnert 31). For Heise this institution came closest to what he saw as a counter-archive within an official archive because it supported the collection of footage "for an unknown, far-off future" ("Archeology" 12). Hence, in 1984 and 1985 Heise was able to make two films for the State Film Archive, one about state bureaucracy and the other about the East German "people's police." Both projects were driven by his general interest in investigating how the state communicates with its citizens, but instead of cinematic documents of everyday life, which the Staatliche Filmdokumentation intended to collect, he produced traces.

Moreover, embedded in the footage were nuanced instructions about how to read the visual documentation. Hence, these "preliminary films" were actively fabricated remnants *to be preserved*, which could be construed as a unique form of reversed archeology (Öhner 59).

Figure 3: The administrative building at Alexanderplatz from Das Haus 1984. Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

For *Das Haus* Heise collected footage together with his cameraman Peter Badel in an administrative building near East Berlin's governmental center at Alexanderplatz. [Fig. 3] The film observes different departments of a district administration. It documents requests for state support, housing problems, and a civil marriage. Structured by weekdays, the preliminary editing emphasizes typical procedures within the administrative process, following the demands of

the Staatliche Filmdokumentation. Yet the film also makes visible structures of power and the automation of the bureaucratic process. To this end its distinctive stylistic devices are long shots and repetition. Both emphasize the exhausting administrative routine and its machine-like operations. These cinematic devices parallel techniques of observational documentaries and the specific style of ephemeral films. Heise and Badel repeatedly witness the encounters of public servants with ordinary people and preserve on film the same phrases and unsatisfying answers about the critical housing situation. What counts as typical is the repetition of the same, revealing the bureaucracy's structural dysfunction while articulating shattered dreams and disenchanted hopes.
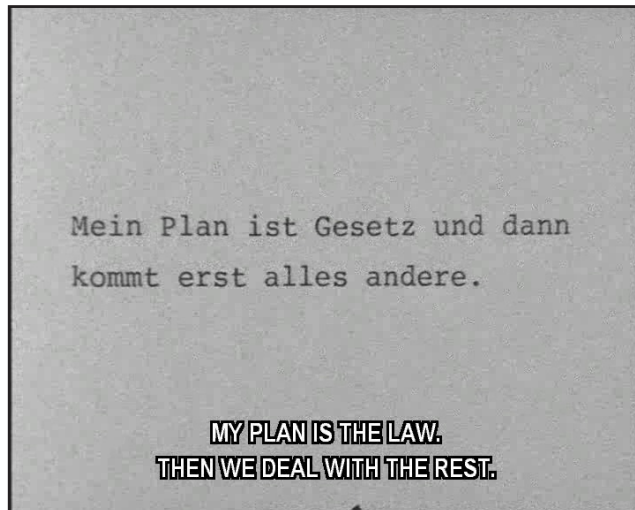

Figure 4: Inter-title from Das Haus 1984. Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Although the mission of the Staatliche Filmdokumentation allowed only for raw film footage that could be used in the future for retrospective compilation films, Heise succeeded in producing meaningful films with commenting intertitles and carefully ordered montage. In contrast to the expected approach, he not only documented what he witnessed as GDR bureaucracy, but he also introduced a level of self-reflection or irony by emphasizing discrete sentences or phrases, which served as printed headlines for the film's chronological chapters. [Fig. 4] This ambiguous interplay of captions, voices, and images furthermore foregrounds the relationship between word and image. These compositional techniques—contrast, captions, repetition—construct a communicative relationship with the viewer that makes possible its legibility in hindsight. This preliminary editing, which created a sense of ambiguity, transforms the archival footage into active images in Bredekamp's sense, even as the films vanished into the archive, waiting for their time to arrive: "The workprint and the negative were expertly and safely warehoused and survived the frost, safe in the ice" (Heise, "Archeology" 12). Only after the end of the GDR did Heise manage to retrieve and publicly screen them on television and in cinemas; only then could those films, originally made for "archival purposes," reveal their archeological potential (Heise, "Arbeit" 264).

Conclusion

The exploration of Thomas Heise's unfinished cinematic material from the GDR leads to the concept of archives for the future as a strategy in-the-making that originated in his experiences as a student at the Babelsberg film school. Both the school's film archive and the film collection of the Staatliche Filmdokumentation comprised alternative spaces where footage survived while waiting for an unknown future when it could reveal traces preserved from GDR social reality. Although institutionalized and part of the state-controlled system, these collections were characterized by their ephemeral status. Within a system of political control and inclusion, their ambiguity lent them the status of a partially extraterritorial space in Derrida's sense of the archive (11). Heise was able to appropriate this space and create his own archives for the future as a place of consignment that would reveal its substance only in a state of delay. For this reason, my examination does not treat these ephemeral cinematic remnants as historical sources but rather as traces that need to be understood in a certain context, appropriated, arranged, and re-read.6 Such visual exploration—in Heise's words, a form of archeology—discovers the agency incorporated in the preserved images. Films from the archives of the future are driven by what Hal Foster has described as "an archival impulse." Such works "make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present, [are] fragmentary rather than fungible," and are less concerned "with absolute origins than with obscure traces […] or incomplete projects—in art and in history alike—that might offer points of departure again" (Foster 3–5). Heise's archiving films generated techniques of visual archeology, while their fragmentary character evoked a future archive in-becoming, an ef-

fect he described as the unique character of *Material*, which he argues:

> *[…] does not provide a finished product. And it stands in open contradiction to the generally remembered images on public television of the fall of the Wall, which was called "The Change" [Wende] in German, and the annexation of East Germany by West Germany that was its goal. The film depends on the reality of possibility, such as it could be found in the utopian pictures from that era. It is about the audience and the stage, about up and down, the first words spoken after a long silence, and a silence that returns after that brief moment of freedom.* ("Archeology" 15)

His films preserve traces simultaneously of a vanished state and of the rapid return of another precarious future. As a last, unrealized attempt to continue such an archive for the future, he proposed to document a meeting of DEFA filmmakers and personnel during which they could talk about concealed accusations, suspicions, hopes, and dreams. In Heise's opinion such visual documentation would constitute an important archeological artifact, essential for writing, in the future, the history of East German cinema (Dell and Rothöhler 9). However, such a meeting never took place and no cinematic records from such a discussion were preserved. Yet in his postponed work as a GDR filmmaker Heise collected fragments and remnants and demonstrated how to use them as a starting point for visual archeology, understanding film as a mediator between the contingent present and an undefined future. In Heise's words, "Archeology is about digging. It's like the work of moles, who live underground. A mole is virtually blind, but it has a nose and

a feel for finding what it needs. And it has the patience to collect what it finds. It collects provisions to last through the winter" ("Archeology" 9). By revealing traces instead of subordinating his footage to an artificial image of the past, his films enable the preserved images to actively disclose their present contingency to a future audience: to us, in a subsequent present.

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Image and Clip Notes

Title Image: Remnants of postponed futures from Material; still from *Material*. Dir. Thomas Heise, Germany 2009. DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Clip 1: Sequence depicting the protest rally on November 4, 1989, from *Material* (2009). Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Figure 1: Wall mural from opening sequence of *Eisenzeit* (1991). Dir. Thomas Heise, VHS, Unidoc, 1993.

Clip 2: Sequence with television footage from *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* (1980). Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Figure 2: TV-still from *Wozu denn über diese Leute einen Film?* (1980). Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Figure 3: The administrative building at Alexanderplatz from *Das Haus 1984*. Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Figure 4: Inter-title from *Das Haus 1984*. Dir. Thomas Heise, DVD Edition Filmmuseum 56, 2011.

Notes

1 There are additional archives that preserved semi-official and sometimes even subversive films. Among these collections are films made in amateur film circles and in semi-professional studios related to companies and factories as well as works produced by underground filmmakers. See Forster; Löser (*Strategien der Verweigerung*); Löser and Fritzsche.

2 In this context see also Mitchell's observation that we often "talk and act as if pictures had feeling, will, consciousness, agency and desire" (31).

3 The script of *Material* and additional documents are published in Heise (*Spuren*).

4 The letter can be found among a collection of files from the school's film production department, which are today stored in the archive of the Potsdam Film Museum.

5 Heise (*Spuren*) includes additional documents about Heise's early film projects during his studies at the Babelsberg film school as well as files the Stasi collected about Heise with the help of several unofficial informers—fellow students and teachers alike.

6 Heise's own collection of texts and documents emphasizes this character of archival material by choosing the title "Spuren" (traces) for the presentation of material, leftovers, and written remnants (*Spuren*).