FILM CENSORSHIP IN A "CLEAN STATE":
THE CASE OF KLEIN AND KOHLHAASE'S
BERLIN UM DIE ECKE

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This article focuses on one of the most spectacular cases of film censorship which occurred in the GDR at and in the wake of the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in 1965 and which resulted in the ban of almost the entire year's feature film production. After sketching the complex mechanisms of film control and censorship through the state, the article explores why feature films, notably those belonging to the genre of the Gegenwartsfilm (films about contemporary society) emerged as the key target at the Eleventh Plenum. The forbidden films of the mid-sixties supported topical reforms which aimed to restructure GDR society by opening it up towards Western influences. Originally these reforms had been promoted by the Party but by 1965 a political and cultural backlash had occurred so that the liberal attitudes expressed in these films were at odds with the Party's revisionist notion of a "clean state with unshakeable moral standards".

Berlin um die Ecke (Berlin Around the Corner), the fourth 'Berlin-film' made by the director-scriptwriter-duo Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase, was one of twelve films that fell victim to one of the most ferocious instances of film censorship that ever affected East German film production. Decisions reached at and in the wake of the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in December 1965 – also appropriately referred to as Kahlschlag (clearing the ground) – led to the banning or withdrawal of nearly the entire annual production of DEFA's feature film studio and to the suspension from office of several figureheads of the film industry. Among them were one of

2 The previous three 'Berlin-films' are: Alarm im Zirkus (Circus Alarm, 1953), Berliner Romanze (A Berlin Romance, 1956) and the popular but controversial film Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser (Berlin – Schönhauser Corner, 1956).
DEFA's best-known directors, Frank Beyer, the head of the DEFA studio, Jochen Mückenberger, and even the Minister and Deputy Minister of Culture, Hans Bentzien and Günter Witt. The grand scale of the censorship as well as the fact that the guardians of socialist film culture in addition to its creators were implicated raises a number of questions that this paper will address. First, in order to be able to understand how the Kahlschlag, which had such a devastating effect on East Germany's film industry could come about it is necessary to examine how the mechanisms of film regulation and control could be rendered ineffective prior to the Eleventh Plenum. Second, if we believe the protestations of Klein and Kohlhaase, as well as numerous other prominent filmmakers whose films were banned, that they had no intention of making subversive films but, on the contrary, wanted to further the progress of socialist society by liberating it from the fetters of Stalinism, then how was it possible that their films were so severely attacked for undermining the fundamental principles on which socialist society was based? How was it possible for DEFA filmmakers as well as cultural officials collectively to misjudge the political climate? What factors determined the ideological instability of the political and cultural climate of the early to mid-sixties and led filmmakers to overestimate the boundaries of the permissible? And third, by exploring the censorship history of Berlin um die Ecke, which has as yet received comparatively little critical attention, this paper explores in what respects Klein and Kohlhaase's film conflicted with DEFA's mission to create a representative socialist film culture.


In books, articles and dissertations which examine film censorship in the GDR, Spur der Steine and Das Kaninchen bin ich are by far the most frequently discussed films, cf. for example Mückenberger (ed.), Prädikat: Besonders schädlich; Steinborn / von Eichel-Streiber (eds), Verbotene Filme; Reid, "Erik Neutsch's Spur der Steine"; Berghahn, "Censorship in GDR Cinema"; Feinstein, The Triumph of the Ordinary; Feinstein, "Constructing the Mythic Present"; Soldovieri, "Censorship and the Law"; while there exists no chapter-length analysis of Berlin um die Ecke, this film is cursorily discussed or documented in the following publications: Richter, "Zwischen Mauerbau und Kahlschlag"; Wischnewski, "Die zornigen jungen Männer"; and Claus, "Rebels with a Cause".