

Introduction: German Film since the *Wende*

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The five papers in this volume are a first selection from the conference ‘German Film since the *Wende*’ held at the London School of Economics in April 2005 and organized by the Association for Modern German Studies with support from the Goethe-Institut London. A further selection of papers from the conference will be published as volume 3/2006 of this journal.

Writing in 2000 in an essay on ‘the post-wall cinema of consensus’, Eric Rentschler recorded a commonly held view of the German cinema of the 1990s:

Journalists, cineastes and intellectuals at large have frequently rebuked German film-makers for ignoring the nation’s social problems and political debates. Contemporary productions, they tell us, studiously and systematically skirt the ‘large’ topics and hot issues: the messy complications of post-wall reality, thematics like right-wing radicalism, chronic unemployment, or the uneasy integration of the former GDR into the Federal Republic. (Rentschler 2000: 262)

As this quotation suggests, many of those observing the German film industry in the decade after reunification were convinced of the poor quality of films produced, lamenting their lack of political engagement or socially critical perspectives and their adherence to commercial aesthetics. Even those films which did directly address the social and political upheavals after 1989 were often condemned for failing to do justice to their subject matter. Thus Christine Ivanović, also writing in 2000, directs her criticisms specifically at the ‘Film zur Einheit’:

Aus künstlerischer Perspektive ergibt sich für den Film zur Einheit vor allem das Problem, die politische Geschichte in eine Filmgeschichte zu transportieren, die historisch glaubhaft und trotzdem ästhetisch überzeugend ist: die Forderung scheint bisher jedoch noch von kaum einem Film befriedigend erfüllt worden zu sein. (Ivanović 2000: 228)

Although at the end of her paper she does suggest that ‘die spielerische Auflösung des historischen Dramas in eine postmoderne Groteske’ as demonstrated in Leander Haußmann’s *Sonnenallee* (1999) and Tom Tykwer’s *Lola rennt* (1998) might signal the beginnings of a renaissance in German cinema (Ivanović 2000: 235).

The success, both critical and commercial, of these two films and, of others like Wolfgang Becker’s *Good bye, Lenin!* (2003), has contributed to the fact that since the

turn of the millennium substantially more positive views about developments in German cinema can be heard from both inside and outside Germany. This is not least the case because films like *Sonnenallee* and *Good bye, Lenin!* have been willing to explore uncharted aspects of recent German history and to do so in a way which combines popular appeal with a critical take on contemporary German society.

The papers in this volume focus on eight films made between 1991 and 2003 all of which testify in very different ways to the quality of recent German filmmaking and illustrate that even in the immediate aftermath of reunification German films worthy of critical acclaim were being produced. Not all are as well known as Haußmann's, Tykwer's and Becker's productions and some can be considered to belong to a counter current of filmmaking in the 1990s identified by Rentschler as the product of "offbeat voices and less reconciled visions", producing "less visible films with a historical ground, a post-national sensibility and a critical edge" (Rentschler 2000: 275). It is precisely the challenging aesthetics of these films which have limited their popular appeal but which make them all the more fascinating as material for the kind of critical analysis undertaken in this volume.

The majority of films examined here focus directly on the state of Germany since the *Wende* and their socially critical edge is therefore inevitable, although they range remarkably in tone – from Michael Klier's gloomy *Ostkreuz* (1991) to Becker's upbeat *Good Bye, Lenin!* – and look – from the starkness of the black-and-white images of Oskar Roehler's *Die Unberührbare* (2000) to the technicolour exuberance and self-conscious theatricality of Haußmann's *Sonnenallee*. Taken together they demonstrate a willingness on the part of Germany's filmmakers to reflect on recent history and to produce films which serve to document the changing nature of German society in the period since reunification, and especially the successes and failures of the attempts of its two halves to come to terms with one another. While some, particularly those produced more recently, like *Sonnenallee* or *Good bye, Lenin!* strive to give voice to collective experiences (in these cases that of former citizens of the GDR who had struggled in the immediate aftermath of the *Wende* to give expression to their sense of history), all also at some level provide an indication of the variety of different experiences of and responses to reunification and thus also serve to keep open debates about history, memory and national identity in the new Germany.

In his contribution, Andrew Webber examines six films, all of which are set in Berlin – both pre- and post-*Wende* – and all of which are concerned in different ways with the consequences of division and reunification as they are made manifest in the city and experienced by its inhabitants: *Ostkreuz*, *Die Unberührbare*, *Sonnenallee*, Wolfgang Becker's *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (1997); Kutlug Ataman's *Lola und Bilidikid* (1999) and Tykwer's *Lola rennt*. He shows how these films explore the city's historically loaded and ideologically determined spaces – including the Wall, the Potsdamer Platz, the Olympic Stadium, the 'Siegessäule' and the 'Oberbaumbrücke' – and examines particularly issues relating to freedom of movement and the often very different ways in which walls, doors and windows can be seen to mediate the relationship between inside and outside in an urban context.

Andrea Rinke's paper focuses on *Sonnenallee*, the only film included in this volume with a director from the East, exploring particularly its reception and its ability to appeal to both eastern and western German viewers. An examination of the way the film's humour works suggests that it provides different points of access for westerners who enjoy both its universal story of the trials of adolescence and its construction as a postmodern pastiche of familiar genres, and for easterners who take pleasure in the homage it pays to a specifically East German cultural heritage and whose specialist knowledge of the context in which the film is played out allows them privileged access to aspects of its ironical take on life in the GDR. It is above all this latter dimension, the film's self-consciously ironic staging of the past in which nostalgia is at once celebrated and subverted, which helps to make it much more than just another contribution to the recent *Ostalgiewelle*.

Seán Allan also focuses on the different possibilities open to eastern and western audiences to read a post-*Wende* film which focuses on the East German context, in this case Becker's highly successful *Good bye, Lenin!* Here too a universal theme – this time the story of the relationship between a mother and son – is coloured by a remembrance and sometimes celebration of the specific social and cultural legacy of the GDR which privileges eastern Germans' first-hand knowledge. The film, however, is highly critical of aspects of the GDR past. Here too, it is argued, humour and irony are used to cast a critical light on *Ostalige* while at the same time the film insists on the importance of the preservation of memories of the GDR in a post-*Wende* context for those who grew up in the now extinct state. The film examines the

complex interrelationships between history, memory and fiction and explores the way in which memory and the construction of history influence its protagonist's – and by extension Germany's – search for a sense of identity under changed historical circumstances.

Owen Evans looks at two films which, like *Good bye, Lenin!*, have been directed by Germans who have spent their adult lives in the West but which explore in a more 'grittily realist' style than Becker's film the often negative consequences of the end of the GDR for its former inhabitants and therefore offer an interesting contrast to it. *Ostkreuz*'s depiction of the individual's struggle for survival in an environment of urban decay after a period of great social upheaval is located in relation to early post-war *Trümmerfilme*, and its neorealist aesthetic is probed for the way it is used to highlight the scale of post-*Wende* socio-economic distress. The substantially less bleak *Berlin is in Germany* is shown, like the earlier film, to offer a nuanced and sensitive portrayal of the social, economic and psychological difficulties facing eastern Germans in the reunified Germany. Taken together the films can be understood as marking the progress made towards integrating the two parts of Germany in the course of a decade and they can also be seen to challenge some of the stereotypical notions of how the *Wende* has been perceived in both East and West.

The final contribution examines one of the few films to focus on a specifically West German response to the events of November 1989 and their aftermath, exploring the reasons for the despairing reaction of the protagonist of Roehler's *Die Unberührbare* to the *Wende*. The paper reads her on one level as a representative of the '68 generation who fails to come to terms with the loss of the anti-capitalist ideals of her youth but also demonstrates that on another level her trauma must be understood as an existential rather than as a directly political one which stems from her inability to come to terms with the passing of time. It goes on to examine the extent to which the film in both its thematic concerns and its aesthetic can be said to share some of the nostalgic longings of its protagonist, exploring its relationship to the filmic antecedents its director cites, but concludes that ultimately it manages to avoid the dangers of becoming an anachronism, utilizing instead filmic models from the past to offer critical perspectives on the post-*Wende* present.

Common to all the contributions to this volume is a concern to demonstrate how the films examined interact with aspects of German (both GDR and FRG), European and

Hollywood film history: from the inspiration *Sonnenalle* takes from Woody Allan's *Radio Days* as well as its ironic reference to the DEFA cult film *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, via *Die Unberührbare*'s indebtedness to Fassbinder, Bergmann and Malle and *Ostkreuz*'s quotation of Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero*, to references in *Good bye, Lenin!* to Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three*, Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and – anachronistically – to the *The Matrix*. This range of references suggests that contemporary German filmmakers are as comfortable with the legacy of mainstream Hollywood cinema as they are with European arthouse traditions and that they locate their own filmmaking practice somewhere between the two. If this is the case, then it might well offer one more reason for the vital nature of contemporary German filmmaking to which the films examined in this volume testify.

References

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