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**Falling Walls, Sliding Doors, Open Windows:
Berlin on Film after the *Wende***

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This essay takes as its focus the treatment of space in Berlin films since the *Wende*, asking how this city, so freighted with historical meaning and yet also, at key temporal and spatial points, vacated of its historical fabric, is figured after unification. The focus of the essay will be on key topographic structures, hinging or blocking the relationship between the inside and outside of urban experience: walls, doors, and windows. Through readings of the representation of these features as framing devices in several films of divergent styles (Klier's *Ostkreuz*; Roehler's *Die Unberührbare*; Haußmann's *Sonnenallee*; Becker's *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*; Ataman's *Lola und Bilidikid*; Tykwer's *Lola rennt*), I will show the special ambivalence attached to the negotiation of both interior and exterior space in the filmic representation of Berlin. What emerges after the historical 'turn' is a cinema apparently divided between entrenchment or return on the one hand and a turn towards new freedom of movement on the other. Whatever their surface mood and character, however, each of these films in fact articulates an ambiguous, intermeshed relation between these two modes, and the architectural framing features provide a focus for that double-bind.

Film has played a fundamental role in fashioning Berlin's image and cultural self-understanding throughout the twentieth century and not least in the post-*Wende* years. The aim of this paper is to see what film has to say about Berlin as a crucible for the political and cultural upheavals since 1989. What emerges after that historical turn at once breaks with the past, responding to a new cultural-political situation, and it displays historical continuities, not least in an interfilmic network of quotations and resonances from earlier film-making, references which range from the satirical to the nostalgic, the melancholic, and the haunting.

Film provides us with an instrument for gauging how the space of the city has been organized in ideological terms. The marshalling of narrative by the artificial eye of the camera allows film to provide a particularly compelling sense of orientation and disorientation, especially in the complex, interpenetrating space of the city. In Berlin films, this involves scanning the cityscape for its organizing features, its points of reference, for what is lost and what is still there. The Wall is the most palpable example of a structure

designed to demarcate ideological spaces, and it has provided a focus for a series of films in various genres. It is the most striking feature in a uniquely burdened and contested urban topography, as well as representing, in exemplary form, the special susceptibility of Berlin's built structures and topographic boundaries to dismantling or effacement.

Berlin has been both a stage and a screen for the drama of modern German history. In particular, it provided the setting for the motion pictures relayed around the globe of unification, both as a more or less spontaneous demonstration of people power and as a highly orchestrated form of official political spectacle using the Reichstag and the Brandenburger Tor for its *mise-en-scène*. This film of German unity was designed to counter the memory of Berlin as a stage for the ideological cult spectacles of totalitarian regimes, and yet the redemptive sequel also, inevitably, summons up the earlier versions. The films under discussion here can all be understood as producing active counter-images, alternative footage, to what we might call *Wiedervereinigung: ein Film aus Deutschland* – the official version of unification.

Berlin is a city at once of monumental sites of memory,¹ past structures that remain present and can continue to act as memorials, and of emptied spaces, sites of removal or displacement, what Andreas Huyssen (1997) has called the voids of Berlin. These voids, at once physical and ideological, also correspond to those spaces that may have buildings and life in them but are effaced from the city in its representative sense: hidden places where alternative cultural meanings are produced. Both the voids and the hidden spaces have the potential to act as counter-sites to the official sites or realms of the city's memory. The empty spaces of the cityscape can thus become a medium for coming to terms with and drawing attention to traumas past and present. The films under review here are interested at once in the memories attached to Berlin, not least the filmic memories, and in exposing the sort of past and present experience that has been and continues to be elided by the master or official narrative of twentieth-century Berlin.

¹ The term is taken from the influential work on the national memorial sites and *topoi* of France by Pierre Nora (1984), and extended to Germany in the *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* project by François and Schulze.

The Wall, an intrusive, monumental structure that was also a void, demarcating no-man's land at the centre of the divided city, is the prime site of memory here. As such, it works in ambivalent ways. On the one hand, it serves as a monumental emblem of containment and of blocking, political, economic, and cultural. On the other, it provokes creative resistance. The Wall was of course also a monumental slate for graffiti and canvas for pop art and it might also be understood as a kind of film screen, a space for the projection of cultural fantasies about German identities on either side of it. Several of the films I discuss here revisit the space organized by the Wall to view it more dialectically: to see how there were certain kinds of freedom of movement in its shadow (as in *Sonnenallee*) and, conversely, that forms of traumatic containment still operate after its removal (as in *Ostkreuz*). This gives the cue to read the films especially for their spatial organization, to think about framing, enclosure, and issues of freedom of movement within and between interior and exterior spaces. These are insistent features in the films to be discussed here, hence the walls, windows, and doors of my title. These architectural features are cast between fixture and mobility: the potential to hold and organize space, whether positively or negatively, and the negotiation, whether in liberty or at a loss, of the void.

Michael Klier's *Ostkreuz* (1991) concerns the struggle of a young girl, Elfi, to make the money to allow her to move with her mother into a new flat. The film locates itself in a counter-space, off-centre in the post-*Wende* city. It takes its name from a station on the S-Bahn, a place of intersection on the city's transportation system, but one that offers no security of refuge. For the purposes of the film this site of transit is a symbolic location, representing the condition of people from the East held up at a crossing-point in the city's economic and cultural networks, if not on a sort of urban crucifix. The film is set in an inverted space: what appears to be a waste-ground hinterland, a marginal place, which is, however, located at what is designated once more to become the centre of the city, the not yet reconstructed Potsdamer Platz. Fringed by semi-derelict *Plattenbauten*, it makes the uncanny impression on the contemporary viewer who knows the Potsdamer Platz in its reconstructed form, of being elsewhere, in a site created by a topographic transplant from the Eastern edge of the city, the environment of Ostkreuz or beyond. The Potsdamer Platz was one of the city's main squares in the period before the Second World War, a place of

confluence and of intersection for urban crosscurrents. In the early nineties, before being engineered into a new version of that pivotal space, it is a place for more difficult, stumbling acts of passage and encounter, a perpetual transit camp in the no-man's land between the old East and West.

Stylistically, the film is marked by short, syncopated sequences, with intrusive cuts and gaps, repeatedly stopping the action, excising sections from the narrative, and subjecting the spectator to estrangement. It follows the trend of the Brechtian legacy in the 'neuer deutscher Film', resisting the lure of identification that is such a powerful element in conventional narrative cinema and aiming to elicit critical viewing. Its aim is to tell a story that would not conventionally be told, to give cinematic life to one of the voided spaces of post-unification Berlin, but to resist tragic or melodramatic cinematic formulas. The film is accordingly shot in a virtually monochromatic style, but not in the sort of black-and-white chic – the 'Pseudopoesie' that the director is suspicious of.² The film also resists becoming a postcard film, offering the pleasure of cinematic tourism to the viewer by travelling into the historically recognizable environment of Berlin, but restricts itself largely to the austerity of the city's wastelands and to the architecture in transit of the containers where Elfi and her mother live. Its style is closest to that of Italian neorealism, the pared down social dramas of the postwar period, often set in urban boundary spaces. In particular, there is an interfilmic relation to Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (1947). Rossellini's film explores the life that is left in Berlin, reduced more or less to the degree zero, after the war. In *Ostkreuz* a new form of *Trümmerfilm* is shot in the wasteland at the empty centre of post-Cold War Berlin. While the protagonist of *Germania anno zero*, Edmund, a child representing the orphan-status of the postwar generation, kills himself by jumping from an opening where there was once a window,³ his namesake in Klier's film is abandoned, but finds some kind of alternative family relationship with Elfi. At the end of the film, Elfi is

² 'Andererseits passiert es ganz schnell und man läuft mit Schwarzweiß in die Falle der Pseudopoesie' (Klier 1991: 4).

³ The suicide scene is the culminating point in the architecture of empty window spaces that figures throughout *Germania anno zero*. Edmund jumps from one of these holes as his gaze fixes on the fronts of buildings opposite, broken up by more such shadowy voids. The suicidal leap from the window recapitulates that of another lost son, from the pre-war era, in *Kuhle Wampe* (1932).

silhouetted against a window of the derelict building they have occupied together. Having blocked off one window to give themselves protection in their makeshift home, they retain this other empty and open frame on the world outside. It creates the effect of a screen within a screen, with Elfi as spectator, beholding a potential new space for her life's narrative. It remains open whether this *mise-en-abyme* effect frames a forward-looking space or one merely of frozen isolation, as intimated by the tiny snowbound figures in the distance. Elfi, at least, unlike Rossellini's Edmund, does not close her film by jumping to her death.

In the run-up to this final frame, the camera tracks past a run-down vestige of GDR film culture – the Kino Vorwärts. It is possible that it is in this representative abandoned building that they take refuge – hence the screening effect of the window at the end; at any rate, it is under its sign. On the one hand this is an ironic acknowledgement of an ideology attached to an idea of progress that has led nowhere and is now evacuated. As the children pass in front of it, in a forward direction, so a figure in the uniform of the old regime walks past in the other direction. At the same time, and notwithstanding the intrusion of state ideology, DEFA (Deutsche Film AG) produced, at its best, films to rival the masterworks of Italian neorealism, and in *Ostkreuz* Klier is also setting an agenda for a new form of cinema, one represented emblematically in the abandoned but potentially inhabitable architecture of the Kino Vorwärts and that has continuities with those traditions of socially engaged filmmaking.

The closing image of *Ostkreuz*, framed by a window and shot against the light, configuring openness and closure, matches that of Oskar Roehler's film *Die Unberührbare* (2000). Here, though, the protagonist, Hanna Flanders, does indeed follow the lead of Rossellini's Edmund. For Roehler, the figure of his mother, the untouchable title figure, serves ambivalent purposes. She joins the ranks of mother figures standing emblematically for the historical experience of Germany, like the one in Helma Sanders-Brahms's allegorical film of Germany at war, *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* (1979). In *Die Unberührbare*, the mother is at once a grotesquely overproduced version of the consumer fetishism that she critiques, a woman at war with the world, and a figure of extreme vulnerability, experiencing the scars of German history with a hysterically heightened sense of trauma. She is as much of a construction, a spectacle, as the celebration of unification that is broadcast into the opening

sequence of the film on her television: she embodies in hyperbolic, allegorical form the condition of a nation that may be deeply scarred and alienated but conceals this in a show of glamorous self-possession.

Roehler's use of black-and-white as integral to a carefully posed and framed aesthetic is, it seems, elicited by the performance of the title figure. It works anachronistically to show a figure stranded by history, melancholically attached to nostalgia for a lost time and place. For Günther Blamberger, it is the style not only of old films, or of films when they turn to history, as 'die Farbe des Präteriums', but also of a filmic landscape that corresponds to a reduced, monochromatic landscape of the soul in another kind of latter-day *Trümmerfilm*: "Die Seelenlandschaften scheinen nicht nur nach 1945, sondern auch nach dem Zerschlagen der ideologischen Dogmen 1989 in Trümmern zu sein" (Blamberger 2002: 163). These two types of ruined landscape and broken topography relate in their turn to the pantomime face of the untouchable protagonist: a study in black and white that records in its restrained mimic effects the anxieties and the pain behind the mummification of the mask. Space both internal and external provides the framing structure for this subtly agonized exploration of psychosomatic terrain. Blamberger (2002: 157f) contrasts this with the colourful, energetic negotiation of the city in *Lola rennt*: the two female performances in and of the post-*Wende* capital could hardly be more different in style and scope.

The protagonist's status as in exile from historical place and moment means that *Die Unberührbare* is not a Berlin film as such; only its central section is actually set there. But the city – projected in virtual form into the establishing scene – is pivotal as the scene of Flanders's confrontation with Germany present and historical.⁴ When Berlin was divided, its polarization allowed her to live in the West and abhor it by comparison with the East. Now East and West coalesce in a Germany that she cannot call her own and yet which holds a mirror up to her. The parodic mirroring of the westernized condition of the East Germans in the figure of their critic is displayed in the sight of her stumbling around a wasteland in East Berlin in the masquerade of her cosmetics, wig, and coat by Dior.

⁴ The ironic relaying of the national spectacle of triumph into the home of the desolate protagonist echoes the closing scenes of another film allegorizing the German historical condition, Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979).

Whether enclosed by the insistent framing of the film, not least by the doors and windows of her sequence of temporary domiciles, or stumbling in the open, this figure between doll and mummy, unable to live in the temporal or spatial present, experiences space as *unheimlich*. Not least in her negotiation of internal and external spaces in Berlin, between conditions of claustrophobia and agoraphobia, she is subject to an uncanny sense of displacement, a kind of uneasy local knowledge that is fraught with disorientation and exclusion from community. The telephone kiosk outside Bahnhof Zoo represents the two conditions in conjunction: she is at once isolated and surrounded in this structure that combines openness and closure in an architecture between window, door, and wall.⁵ Her desperate sense of displacement in the city is put on show. Similarly, the shots into the bungalow through closed windows in the opening sequence and elsewhere indicate that the protagonist is placed in separation, screened off. The windows as screens within the film screen are set in relay with the television screen, in either case suggesting an intrusive form of estrangement. This is repeated in switched form in the point-of-view shot through windows into darkness when she is in East Berlin, described in the screenplay in the language of the uncanny.⁶ And in the final scene, this is switched once more into its negative, as it were, as the camera detaches itself from the protagonist's point of view to look through an open window from within, a perspective that is blanked out by intense light.

While the dispossessed figures, the untouchables, of *Ostkreuz* seem to be ready to find a way of surviving what history has done to them, finding some form of relationship and domicile, the uncanny and untouchable Hanna Flanders is more radically alone at the end of her film. She is stripped of her make-up and costume, of the masquerade that she performed in relation to and defiance of the march of German history. A figure whose proper rite of sacrifice would be to fall or jump from the Berlin Wall in a public act of

⁵ The telephone kiosk as communication structure with glass walls is used in a comparable fashion in *Lola rennt*, creating an open and yet closed-in spectacle of Manni's desperation. Its combination of the public and the private, viewing from without and hearing as if from within, represents in emblematic fashion the sort of ambiguous relation that is constructed, albeit in very different ways, between spectator and character in both films.

⁶ The protagonist's point-of-view is described in the screenplay as vertiginous or demonic, as figured by 'die unheimlichen Subjektiven' (Roehler 2002: 89).

resistance instead goes to her death in the isolation of a provincial sanatorium. The sequence gravitates between long shots of her isolation in empty space and intense close-up, as she is insistently framed by the uncanny, oneiric architecture of the sanatorium, its walls and doors, stairs and window.⁷ When she tumbles out of the window into the void, her death by defenestration not only mimics, at a geographical and historical distance, the suicidal self-sacrifice of Rossellini's Edmund but also one of the forms of Wall-death from the divided Berlin. The figure of uncanny displacement is definitively turned out of her final *un-heimlich* domicile.

After the degrees of monochromatic brutalism that characterize the two films discussed so far comes the colourful, all-singing and dancing retrospective of life in East Berlin under the GDR, *Sonnenallee* (1999). The question to be asked of this film is whether it is any more than an exercise in the kind of crass commercialization of socio-historical experience that is ultimately the death of Roehler's fatally nostalgic Hanna Flanders. Is the version of nostalgia for the GDR it constructs merely a product of what a review article in *Die Zeit* calls the 'Nostalgiebude' of recent German film (Nicodemus 2003)? If, as Hanna responds to the teacher who comes on to her in the bar in East Berlin, 'Deutsch und Geschichte' – the two subjects he teaches – are a 'fatale Mischung', how does a comic popular success like *Sonnenallee* deal with that fatal combination?

The answer is in a different type of stylized performance from that of Hanna Flanders and her film: in the mode of burlesque. For Thomas Brussig, who wrote the screenplay and the book that followed it, this is the only appropriate genre for the filming of the GDR: "Die [DDR] eignet sich nur zur Burleske" (Haußmann 1999: 12). This is comedy in a self-consciously theatrical, almost pantomimic style. It is a film that constantly draws attention to its own constructedness, whether in the stylized performances and set-piece encounters of its characters or in the setting that is prepared for the film. Set, costumes, and props are minutely observed replicas of the original, but they make no pretence of being anything other than simulated, questioning the very idea of the original in the mode of what could be

⁷ The lead-up to the suicide quotes the ending of Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), with its plunging point-of-view shot into the institutional stairwell. Roehler tellingly reworks the shot by luring the spectator into the sense of an intimate sharing of what we take to be his protagonist's point of view, before breaking that illusion as the camera swings up to view her head-on.

called, after Baudrillard, the simulacrum of a simulacrum. The ‘antifaschistischer Schutzwall’ is here a massive simulacrum in cardboard, part of the Babelsberg studio set for the focal scenes of the film, at once monumental and ready to be removed like its historical counterpart when it is needed no more, and recycled for the next retro-film that can make use of it.⁸ By insisting on its anti-realistic aesthetic at every turn, the film controls the uncritical pleasures of nostalgia and mockery that it might seem to purvey and that attracted negative comment in many of the reviews of the film. *Sonnenallee* at once trades in ‘Ostalgie’, the fetishistic nostalgia for the trappings of GDR culture that has developed to industrial proportions over recent years, and subverts it as a method of appropriation of the past. A telling moment in the film is when Micha, the young protagonist, as he bounds up the stairs to the flat of his heartthrob Miriam, encounters and exchanges words with a figure at the door of another flat. This is Winfried Glatzeder, who played Paul in Heiner Carow’s *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1974), one of the best known of DEFA films. Glatzeder’s appearance is on the one hand an act of film-cultural nostalgia, paying homage to DEFA at its finest via a film that could be seen as a model for *Sonnenallee*. *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* is a love story surrounded by domestic problems and challenging the tenets of Socialist Realism by adopting the stylized mode of burlesque, with a pop music soundtrack. Like the cultural contraband that circulates in *Sonnenallee*, the film was soon subject to the censorship of the regime and thus became even more of a cult object. At the same time, this staged encounter on the stairs has ironic knowledge of the element of contrivance that the films share. While *Sonnenallee* is shot in a reconstructed studio-set East Berlin of yesteryear, the artifice of the narrative in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* is set against the ‘unreal’ destruction of the buildings of the past and the construction of new architectures in its ‘real’ location setting. The reappearance of Paul on the stairs recalls the scene where he is exiled from Paula’s apartment and has to break down the door to be with her again. When the scene is revisited in *Sonnenallee*, the doors are opened, but it is held for a while in a more uncertain, liminal position; Micha may have access to his Miriam, but Paula, the Mother Courage of the GDR, was already lost at the end of her legendary film.

⁸ Thus, the street-scenes of *Sonnenallee*, constructed in the Babelsberg studios, were redeployed for Polanski’s *The Pianist* (2002) and von Trotta’s *Rosenstraße* (2003).

While *Sonnenallee* may trade with nostalgia for the old East, it mediates this through critical distance, at once ironic and melancholic.

Unlike the other two films discussed so far, *Sonnenallee* is a film in colour, a film indeed that uses colour as if it still had novel appeal, hence the ironic anachronism of the title of the book of the film: *Sonnenallee: Das Buch zum Farbfilm*. Haußmann takes the grey that is the requisite colour of his cold-war Berlin setting and uses it as a foil for heightened colouration. As the headline of the *taz* review (7 October 1999) has it: “Endlich Schluß mit Grau! Die DDR in Farbe”. At its end however, the colour bleeds out of the film. Its climax, in keeping with the burlesque style, is a full-scale song and dance act, as the inhabitants of the shorter end of the *Sonnenallee* of the 1970s rehearse the popular overwhelming of the Wall in 1989. The film, however, refuses to enter into the space that the dance routine aims to open up. Micha and Wuschel enact their version of the leap from the window or balcony that is part of the traumatic history of the Wall. The leap seems to transcend at once the fatal jumping and falling that informed the relationship between window and Wall and the blocking that characterized the walled-up windows of the border area. What they leap into, however, is not the light that opens up through the window-frame at the end of the other two films, but a grey void, a set that is emptied of its final theatre as the camera withdraws from it with its back to the West. The ‘Farbfilm’ turns to grey, to the ironic strains of the pop-song ‘Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen’, suggesting that the formal aesthetic of the film, the mode of fantasy it has constructed, is bound up with the uncertain reliability of memory; in the words of the song: “alles, grau und weiß und grün und später nicht mehr wahr”. The exposure of an abandoned film-set, complete with tumble-weed, as the camera withdraws to the other side of the Wall, mounts a reversal of the fantastical transformation of Wenders’s *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987), where the film moves from black-and-white to colour when the angel falls from the heavens into Berlin on the West side of the Wall and becomes human. At the end of *Sonnenallee*, the sober aftermath to the burlesque of nostalgia is the depopulated spectacle of melancholy.

This ambivalent treatment of the memory of the GDR, part false memory in the nostalgia generated by a new memory-industry, and part traumatic and melancholic, also prevails in the hybrid structure and mood of Wolfgang Becker’s *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003). The combination of popular appeal and more critical edge there is already at work in his earlier

film, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (1997), indeed there is a signature of continuity between them in the shape of the supermarket chicken that reappears in *Good Bye, Lenin!* as a grotesque embodiment of survivalist strategies in the consumer networks of the city between slaughterhouse and hypermarket. *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* is perhaps the ultimate film of Berlin in the years of reconstruction following the Wende (with many of the interiors themselves reconstructed in the abandoned McNair barracks in Lichterfelde). Building-sites and refurbishments are a constant feature of the film and always also representing reconstruction on other than physical levels. As Buddy remarks as he and Jan cross that most time-honoured of places of urban flux and searching, the Alexanderplatz: “Die Wände kannst du anders streichen, aber die Erinnerungen wirst du nicht mehr los”. The adage is nicely open to an alternative reading, replacing the symbolic ‘Wände’ of more localized reconstruction projects with the national reconstruction project of the *Wende*, which may also be painted in different ways but will remain unsettled by the past. Reconstruction in ‘Baustelle Berlin’ is shadowed by memories of what went before. The reunified city presents itself as a place of progress, but the film is interested in those left behind in a more uncertain condition.

Das Leben ist eine Baustelle is a film about possibilities of relationship, between inhabitants of the city under construction, and between the past and the present states of that city. It moves between the domestic spaces of the city, its kitchens and bedrooms, and more public ones. Like *Ostkreuz*, it is a film about displacement and the quest for a place to be at home in the city. The condition of displacement in both internal and external space is an ambivalent one, at once marked by the estrangement of urban exile and supporting the possibility for new encounter. The condition is figured topographically by the film’s physical negotiation of urban space. The beginning of the film establishes a model for this: outside on the street a riot is being put down by the police, inside Jan is having sex in a bedroom. In the intimate domestic scene he finds only alienation (he has to ask directions for the toilet, where he will brood alone), while in the brutal street-scene he finds intimacy. The move between the two is figured by matching shots of windows and doors. As the lover he leaves looks from inside through the window onto the street, we see Jan standing on an underground train and the glazed door closing as he moves off on the transport system. When he is on the run from the police with the woman he literally bumps into, he is

found hiding in somebody else's flat; and now he holds the broken glazed door of the shower cubicle, a nakedly ineffectual response to the riot-shields held by the police. The visual matching introduces us to a film about the search for a habitable space, and the broken door of the shower is a comic emblem of structures of access and enclosure, social and domestic, that provide no protection and transparently need mending.

If Jan is transported between these two flats in which he cannot be at home by the U-Bahn, this indicates its role in the film as a system of linkage but also of isolation and disjuncture between the different sites of the city. Relationships in the city, encounters and chases, are both mediated and blocked or frustrated by the transport system, and U-Bahn and tram serve a leitmotif function here. Not for nothing is the first date of Jan and Vera in an U-Bahn station: he appears to have missed her, but she makes a connection by a personal take-over of the public address system. The film bears the imprint of its screenwriter Tom Tykwer, serving as a rehearsal for *Lola rennt*, in being so attached to the idea of chance as a peculiar dimension of the filmed city. The transport network embodies at once regulation and chance, a system of sliding doors. Chance has it, for instance, that the family driving back after Jan's father's funeral almost knock down the itinerant Kristina, leading to her being provided with an adoptive home.

The near miss here, like the accidents that happen or narrowly fail to happen in *Lola rennt*, is an indication of the potential trauma in the system, in traffic, but also in the traffic between people.⁹ HIV/AIDS haunts the film as a contagion that circulates in the city; not for nothing does Jan encounter both an AIDS victim reduced to begging and his ex-lover Moni, apparently now also HIV-positive, in an underground train. The networks of sexual relations, intimate and passionate or more routine, also carry the subterranean possibility of infection. Berlin in the nineties is a city under plague conditions. Jan and Vera pass a hoarding – one of the many improvised walls blocking the space of 'Baustelle Berlin' – with the graffiti slogan, 'Die Liebe in den Zeiten der Kohl-Ära'. While the Wall and its graffiti are now dismantled, this mock wall provides a canvas for new forms of resistance and

⁹ The near miss is a characteristic of the uncertainty principle that informs so much post-*Wende* film. Another emblematic example would be that of the taxi in the introductory sequence of another film about fateful encounters in the city, Dresen's *Nachtgestalten* (1999).

provocation; the slogan is clearly designed to suggest both the real fear of the HIV virus and the life-and-death struggle for love under the political conditions, diagnosed as pathological, of the reunified Berlin.

At its end, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* is reminiscent of the ending of *Ostkreuz*, with the members of an alternative family, their status and relationships uncertain, in a bright icy scene set apart from the recognizable topography of Berlin. More particularly, the closing scene of skating on a frozen pond is a quotation of that of another film altogether, the provocative 1981 film on the Berlin gay-scene, Ripplow's *Taxi zum Klo*. While *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* is a resolutely heterosexual buddy film, it thus carries a sort of memorial at its end to Berlin as a city providing unusual liberties for other sexualities. The promiscuous vitality of *Taxi zum Klo*, which caused such scandal when the film was released, is as it were a victim of the virus remembered here. The final scene of *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* is thus, like the film as a whole, suspended between vitality and community and a more melancholic, death-touched modality.

This also provides a link to the next film, with a different take on marginal inhabitants of Berlin, Kutlug Ataman's *Lola und Bilidikid* (1999). As in *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, existences at the margins of the new Berlin are enabled here by the continuation of one of the city's key traditions, not least in filmic terms, that of performance. But just as Buddy's nocturnal crooning in *Das Leben* mixes nostalgia with melancholy, the acts of performance in Ataman's film are deeply ambivalent in their implications. Ataman is interested in the crossing of two of Berlin's subcultures, Turkish and gay, which converge in the transgender Turkish cabaret culture in Kreuzberg. All of the characters in the film are engaged in acts of performance in relation to the requirements of the dominant culture. Performance is here best understood in the way that is theorized by Judith Butler in her pioneering book *Gender Trouble* (1990) and elsewhere: in its model form, the drag act, performance is seen at once as an opportunity for challenging the rule of heterosexist culture and yet as an act that is substantially conditioned by the terms of that culture. Ataman's work, in film and video, is constantly preoccupied by drag acts of one kind or another – whether transgender or what can be called ethnic drag – the imitative performances that are played out by minority cultures in relation to majority ones. When the group of Turkish drag artistes, the 'Gastarbeiterinnen', perform their versions of migrant women living in Berlin, they are

exposing at once the masquerade of femininity and that of ethnic otherness. Ataman sees the performance of identity as tightly prescribed, but also explores possibilities for subjects to take control of their performances and counter the normative.

Lola und Bilidikid announces in its title another kind of crossing, that of two film genres, the musical with its performance of femininity as a stage act (following cabaret acts from Marlene Dietrich as Lola Lola in the Weimar classic *Der blaue Engel* (1930) to Fassbinder's *Lola* (1981)) and the western, with the young gay Turks like Bilidikid compensating for their unacceptable sexuality by playing out hyperbolic forms of masculinity. While the film certainly derives pleasures from the flair and swagger of these two alternative forms of performance, it ultimately questions their viability as modes of survival. Both of the title figures are sacrificed in their masquerade roles, while the end of the film appears to show the potential for performing more freely. That this freedom is vulnerable is shown in the scene when the film revisits one of the key filmic sites of memory, the Olympic Stadium, and mounts a parodied form of the racist and masculinist supremacy cult of 1936 when three of the young protagonist Murat's classmates first enact a performance of their version of Nazi ideology and then queer-bash him in the stadium toilets.¹⁰ The scene is an example of how the film explores counter-spaces, scenes behind walls – here the monumental walls of the Nazi arena – and doors, providing alternative spaces to perform. Ataman conceives the film through a dual topography, gravitating between the over-ground world and the underground: an ambivalent, covert world, which has spaces at once for alternative, liberating forms of identity performance and for the abject spectacle of xenophobic and homophobic violence.

The film is framed by two scenes in open space that show the precariousness of the balance between the hidden and the open performance of dissident identities. The opening scene is a counter-culture version of the establishing shot in the postcard film style. Murat, in his first tentative explorations of the gay scene, finds it around the base of that iconic site of memory, the 'Siegessäule'. While Wenders's angels in *Der Himmel über Berlin* and *In weiter Ferne so nah* (1993) appropriated the imperialist icon from above in the establishing

¹⁰ For a more extended discussion of this scene as a subversive reenactment of Riefenstahl's *Olympia* films (1938), see my essay 'Berlin is Running' (Webber 2005).

sequences of those two films, here it is re-appropriated as a figure of aegis over the nocturnal cruising grounds around the column which has been counter-colonized by the Berlin gay scene. A new, potentially liberating world is opened up to the young Murat, but one that is shot in the style of horror and experienced as dark and disorientating. The establishing scene shows how the over-ground topography of postcard Berlin slips or is transformed into a more underground, counter-cultural space, opening up uncertain prospects of exploration through nocturnal cruising.

At its end, the film returns to the 'Siegessäule' and in something more like an open victory parade. It enacts a small-scale version of the Love Parade or Christopher Street Day Parade that have reclaimed that parading ground of German history, as two of the transgender performers from the 'Gastarbeiterinnen' group flirt with a Turkish taxi driver as they drive through the Tiergarten. Here they perform in daylight right at the city's centre, in a space without walls that has been appropriated in their different ways by both Turkish and gay cultures. The taxi, which had been part of the film's system of oppression, constraining the lives of Turks in Berlin, here becomes a vehicle for a more open negotiation of the city, with clear windows on the world and doors that will open where they want them to.

I have said that the city's appeal to film is partly as a place of coincidence, and I finish with an extraordinary one: *Lola und Bilidikid* and *Lola rennt* were shot at the same time, in different parts of Berlin, both figuring flame-haired Lola figures on the run in sequences which are sometimes uncannily alike,¹¹ but apparently Tykwer and Ataman knew nothing of each others projects. For Tykwer, the city is above all appealing as a place of orchestrated movement and exchange which is however also a site of unaccountable chance encounters and accidents.¹² His version of the cabaret figure Lola is another kind of performer altogether: an epic woman runner, though she never enters the stadium designed to display feats of this kind. The opening sequence of the film is set in a sporting arena, in

¹¹ A particularly striking parallel is that between the sequence when Ataman's Lola, reenacted by her brother Murat, runs through the factory, framed by a series of windows, and the virtuoso sequence representing Tykwer's Lola racing across the Oberbaumbrücke and framed by the more open window structures of its arcades.

¹² For a more extended discussion of these features in relation to the film's gender politics, see Webber (2003).

order to establish the construct of the game of chance, but in an abstracted form, without reference to the Olympic Stadium.¹³ It is characteristic of the film that such sites of memory are not taken in, or at most obliquely and incidentally. Tykwer feels free to manipulate the city's topography and liberate it from the burden of history. Not for nothing is an aerial map of the city used as a sort of clapper-board at the end of the opening sequence; the city is here emblematically divided and then clapped together again, suggesting that the divisive memories of a fraught century can be superseded by the creative energy of the film, the walled city converted into an open one. While Tykwer argues that "*Das Leben ist eine Baustelle zeigt ein realistisches, aussterbendes Berlin im Auf- und Umbruch, noch im Sog von Mauerfall und Wende*" (Töteberg 1998: 135), he sees *Lola rennt* as marking a new stage in the cultural history of the city. The film uses Berlin as what he calls in the publicity brochure for the film a kind of studio, not in the sense of an historical set for another retro-film, but as a site for new licence in experimental *mise-en-scène*. It is a space to be played with in a pressing present tense. It would be wrong, however, to assume that this Berlin film is just a glorified play-station. Lola's performance here may not be deadly in the way of her namesake in Ataman's film, but it certainly has a potential to be so. The pane of glass, a mobile window ready to block the street and cause accidents is emblematic of this, just as the window of the supermarket through which the voices of Lola and Manni can magically be heard before she enters by the sliding door is the emblem of the counter-possibility of special forms of communication across dividing lines in the city.¹⁴

Lola rennt has of course been so successful a German export precisely because it is global in its reach – through its generic narrative moves, its music, its pace, and its technology. It suggests that perhaps Berlin is ready to become a different kind of film-studio, not for superficial entertainment, but for a type of performance both entertaining and serious that

¹³ The marshalling of the figures in this sequence to form the title of the film might be read as an ironic reworking of the mass choreographies of the Olympic Stadium, as featured in Riefenstahl's Olympia films. Tykwer's sporting spectacle subverts the ideology of mass control by introducing the forces of chance and individual resistance.

¹⁴ Glass, as a transparent, communicative medium, but also as a potentially traumatic material, has a special function in Tykwer's filmmaking. His early short, *Because* (1990), a structural prototype for *Lola rennt*, follows three possible versions of a domestic scene between lovers, each determined by whether a glass falls and breaks.

could in principle take place anywhere in the postmodern world but takes place here in Berlin because it provides such an extraordinary setting for filmic staging and movement. We could perhaps think of Lola's run as passing by the other figures that we have seen in this diverse group of Berlin films – like the characters that she encounters, whose possible fates are then played out in alternative forms of mini-film. One point of convergence would be the Oberbaumbrücke, which appears as a key architectural feature in the last three films discussed. This is a bridge once part of the system of the Wall between East and West, and representing both linkage and separation, open and closed architectures and topographies.¹⁵ When Tykwer's Lola runs over it, following in the footsteps of Jan in *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, this is either a profoundly symbolic linking construction between divided spaces or it is merely a great cinematic opportunity, as Becker suggests.¹⁶ There is just a possibility that on the same day that Tykwer was filming his Lola racing across the bridge, Ataman was also filming his, floating dead in the Spree with the bridge as backdrop. A young girl asks the dead Lola if s/he is a 'Meerjungfrau', suggesting that s/he remains an impossible, floating figure of hybridity to the end. Berlin film since 1989 is cast somewhere between these versions, alluring, energetic and sexy or brutal and melancholic, vital and fast-moving or deadly still, related or divided. In the publicity brochure for *Lola rennt*, Tykwer describes Berlin as uniquely 'synthetisch und lebendig', but all the Berlin films discussed here have also shown the elements of breakage in the synthesis and of mortification in the life of the city.

¹⁵ The bridge is a key site both of chance encounter and controlled transfer (as one of the border-crossings between the two Berlins, now a part of the 'Geschichtsmühle Berliner Mauer'). In 1997, a work entitled *Übergänge* was installed on it, a playful meditation on human and political transfers and transitions, both chance and guided, with randomly illuminated neon figures representing the game of 'stone, paper, scissors'.

¹⁶ 'Ein Regisseur in Paris oder New York bekäme niemals die Frage gestellt, warum er seine Protagonisten über eine bestimmte Brücke gehen läßt. Nur in Berlin ist so was gleich 'ne Sensation ... Die Oberbaumbrücke ist einfach ein tolles Motiv' (Becker in the publicity brochure for *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*). This is how the bridge is used, for instance, in the

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Biodata

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photographically disposed aesthetic of Schadt's *Berlin: Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (2002), an exquisite, crepuscular shot of it providing the cover image for the book of the film.