

A CRITICAL HISTORY OF GERMAN FILM



STEPHEN BROCKMANN

A Critical History of German Film

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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Stephen Brockmann

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Rochester, New York

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To Johnny Packard

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I was an undergraduate at Columbia University during the late 1970s and early 1980s, during the heyday of what was known as the New German Cinema, and my interest in German cinema goes back to that period, when masterpieces like Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* and

Herzog's *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* were playing in New York movie theaters. Thanks to institutional support from New York's Goethe House, I was also able, as a freshman and sophomore in college, to see films like *Deutschland im Herbst* or Herzog's *Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen* in film series at Columbia. I did not always understand these films when I first viewed them, but I became fascinated by them and wanted to learn more. I therefore owe a debt of gratitude to all those institutions — particularly the Goethe Institute, but also numerous universities — that make it possible to have noncommercial screenings of German films in the United States and other English-speaking countries. I also wish to thank the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for enabling me to make several study visits to Germany over the past two decades, during all of which I continued my engagement with German cinema.

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I dedicate the book to one of my first students, who has been exploring German cinema with me for well over two decades: Johnny Packard.

Introduction: Critical Film History and German Studies

GERMAN CINEMA CONSTITUTES one of the world's most important cinema traditions, featuring some of the greatest films ever made, from Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1920) and F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh, 1924) through Leni Riefenstahl's notorious but undoubtedly important *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1934) to postwar triumphs like Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (Aguirre, The Wrath of God, 1972) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (The Marriage of Maria Braun, 1979). These films, and many others, constitute a unique body of work, part of the fundamental heritage of world cinema, without which the history of film would be poorer. As one of the great film traditions, German cinema is as distinct from other nations' cinemas as the German language, culture, and history are. At the same time, German cinema and its practitioners have continually interacted with other traditions, particularly the American one; in fact, some of the best and most famous directors of American films originally came from the German-speaking world — Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Fred Zinnemann, and Robert Siodmak.

It's not just for aesthetic reasons that German cinema is important, however, but also as a reflection of one of the most dynamic, if problematic, nations of the modern world. As Modris Eksteins has persuasively argued, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Germany, with its "disruptive energy," had become "the principal activist, and hence modernist, nation of the *fin-de-siècle* world."¹ The First World War confirmed this status as a powerful disruptive force, and the country became, in Eksteins' words, "the revolutionary power of Europe. Located in the center of the continent, she set out to become the leader of Europe, the heart of Europe, as she put it."² Germany was, for better or worse (and unfortunately, often for the worse), one of the principal movers of the twentieth century; its culture and its actions had a profound impact not

¹ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 117.

² Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 169.

only on its European neighbors but on the rest of the world as well. The Italian literary theorist Franco Moretti has called Germany “the centre and catalyst of the integrated historical system we call Europe.”³ Hence, German cinema is as important for political and historical reasons as it is for artistic ones: it provides access to one of the key players in twentieth-century history.

But why a new critical history of German cinema? The answer is relatively simple. There is currently no comprehensive, critical history of German cinema in the English language — that is to say, one that traces the development of German film from its beginnings through the post-unification years (including both the East and West German cinemas from the Cold War period), and that also engages in criticism of individual films as works of art. This book therefore fills a two-fold gap — first, the lack of a contemporary critical history of German cinema, and second, the inevitable absence of contemporary material in earlier critical histories.

The only other English-language history of German cinema to include both East German cinema and the post-unification period is Sabine Hake’s excellent study *German National Cinema* (2008), a book that can be recommended to anyone with an interest in the subject.⁴ Hake’s volume, however, is not a critical history in my sense because it does not engage in any analysis of individual films. Rather, it provides a broad overview of trends in German cinema from 1895 to the present. Hake’s book is an alternative to that older standard, eminently critical history of German cinema, Siegfried Kracauer’s influential *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), which, for obvious reasons, could not take the history of German cinema much past the end of the Weimar Republic.⁵ Kracauer’s work has exerted a strong influence on subsequent film scholars and historians, becoming, as Anton Kaes has written, “the master narrative for the critical study of film within a national context.”⁶ Kracauer’s “psychological” approach treated German films as national dreams that needed to be interpreted, and he believed he could identify a direct link between the fantasies of early movies like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and the later emergence and triumph of Hitler in 1933. Kracauer’s book was critical or interpretive in the sense that it analyzed individual films as symptoms of

³ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London: Verso, 1988), 251.

⁴ Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002); second edition 2008.

⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947).

⁶ Anton Kaes, “German Cultural History and the Study of Film: Ten Theses and a Postscript,” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (Spring/Summer 1995): 47–59; here, 49.

Germany's collective psyche, and it was teleological in its claim that film history provided privileged access to a political and social history that led, with seeming inexorability, to Hitler.

Hake's book, published first in 2002 and in a revised edition six years later, offers a counter-program to Kracauer. Hake makes no broad claims about film as a mirror of the German soul and does not treat history in a teleological fashion. She is as interested in those aspects of the cinema of the Weimar Republic that pointed *away* from Hitler as in those that may have pointed *toward* him, and in her analysis of the cinema of the Third Reich itself, she is at pains to show ways in which it was not as monolithic as Kracauer and most later critics have perceived it to be. One could call Hake's project "revisionist" in the sense that it runs counter to most of the standard accounts of Third Reich cinema, including Kracauer's. Hake, moreover, is less interested in individual directors or films than she is in large-scale trends in the industry; she treats cinema as an economic and not just an aesthetic, political, or psychological phenomenon. She looks at stars, audiences, and producers, not just at famous directors like Fritz Lang or Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Finally, she is also more interested in those aspects of German cinema that make it international than she is in its German peculiarities. What is missing in Hake's account, however, is the interpretation of individual films as works of art.

My own approach is to try to move closer to Kracauer but to update the analysis and take into account justified criticisms of Kracauer's method. Although Kracauer has been rightly criticized for his teleology and for his broad claims about cinema as a mirror of the German soul, his approach nevertheless offers a powerful heuristic tool for understanding Weimar cinema and its significance — and indeed for understanding cinema's significance more generally. As Kaes argues, scholars learned from Kracauer "that films signify something not *in abstracto*, but concretely at a certain moment in time, at a certain place, and for a certain audience. They offer responses to burning questions; they are meant to resonate and have an impact."⁷ Kracauer's approach suggests that the study of German cinema can provide special access to the understanding of German history. That is an aspect that German Studies scholars would not wish to lose. In addition, Kracauer offers interpretations of individual films in support of his thesis, and since film is, among other things, an aesthetic object, such an approach is useful, and at present is particularly necessary. As Thomas Elsaesser pointed out as early as 1984, film history over the last few decades "has decisively moved away from films, in particular from film criticism, and toward what used to be called the sociology of film," addressing itself to economic and studio history, stars,

⁷ Kaes, "German Cultural History and the Study of Film," 49.

“court actions and patent wars, real-estate deals, popcorn franchises,” and the like.⁸ This move away from criticism, however, risks treating film like any other consumer product — in Elsaesser’s words, it risks accepting the film industry’s own commodification of its products “as accumulations of dead labor moving through time and space in order to realize surplus value for an industry” that is essentially similar to other industries.⁹

It is for this reason that Andrew Higson, at the end of the 1980s, noted that “the current state of film studies is characterised by a tension between those who are working on the political economics of cinema and those who analyse and investigate textuality.”¹⁰ This tension still exists two decades later, and my own approach is to “investigate textuality,” as Higson puts it — that is, to interpret. I contend that the serious study of German film history must confront German films themselves as aesthetic objects, however they are produced or consumed. For both Kracauer, and for me, it is not primarily the economics of the film industry — its producers, stars, and audiences — that is of interest, but the individual films themselves. This is what I mean by a “critical film history” — one that treats film not as a product, but as a producer of aesthetic pleasure and a bearer of meaning, and further, that seeks to discover, analyze, and interpret that meaning. Of course, any interpretation is open to question, and any film can and will have multiple interpretations. As Kaes points out, feature film is a form of fiction, and fictions “add ambiguity as well as the possibility (and necessity) of a multiplicity of readings. Ambiguous speech is one of the central distinctions between fictional and nonfictional texts. Any analysis must acknowledge and stress the undecidability inherent in fiction.”¹¹ However, history itself is fundamentally an interpretive field of inquiry, and it is my contention that the interpretation of aesthetic objects, including film, can help to understand history. Kaes argues that “the fictional world of the movies should not be seen as the opposite of the factual realm, but rather as a site in which men and women symbolically express their understanding of life in a particular socio-cultural milieu.”¹² Films are primary historical documents that are produced and consumed collectively, by groups of individuals, and therefore they offer

⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, “Film History and Visual Pleasure: Weimar Cinema,” in *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp and Philip Rosen (Frederick, MD: UP of America, 1984), 47–84; here, 49.

⁹ Elsaesser, “Film History and Visual Pleasure: Weimar Cinema,” 49.

¹⁰ Andrew Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema,” in *Film and Nationalism*, ed. Alan Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002), 52–67; here, 65. This essay was first published in 1989.

¹¹ Kaes, “German Cultural History and the Study of Film,” 53.

¹² Kaes, “German Cultural History and the Study of Film,” 51.

access to the history of collectivities: in this case, the collectivity of the German nation. The critical study of German film history is, then, among other things, part of the study of twentieth-century German history.

There are a number of other English-language books that have offered critical overviews of German cinema, including Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel's *The German Cinema* (1971), which, necessarily, could not treat the cinema of the 1970s or later; Frederick W. Ott's *The Great German Films* (1986), which ignored East German cinema; and, most recently, Robert C. Reimer's and Reinhard Zachau's book *German Culture through Film* (2005).¹³ The latter offers useful information and readings of over thirty canonical German films, but what it does not provide is precisely what the books by Manvell and Fraenkel, Ott, and Hake offer: an overview of German cinema history. Moreover, Reimer and Zachau's book, as useful as it is, does not treat interpretation as an ongoing process of inquiry and debate, a process with its own history and its own importance to the interpretive project. In approaching a film like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, for instance, it can be useful to know how Kracauer or others have interpreted it. Of course, interpretations that take into account other interpretations in a self-reflexive way can, in a worst-case scenario, lead to an endless regression of analyses of other analyses rather than of the aesthetic object itself. In a best-case scenario, however, such interpretations can produce a better-grounded understanding that retains the freshness and immediacy of the aesthetic object while opening itself to the history of interpretive discourse — which is itself part of the history of any art work.

Over the course of many years, thanks to the work of Kracauer and others, a broadly accepted canon of German cinema has emerged that starts with films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and moves from the Weimar Republic to classics of the New German Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Herzog's *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* and Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*. There is less consensus on the canonical films of the German Democratic Republic, partly because East German cinema did not become a serious object of study in the western world until after German reunification in 1990, and partly because some of the most important East German films were actually banned at the time of their intended release and did not become available for viewing until 1990. There is even less critical consensus on the canonical films of the post-unification period, a period still relatively under-treated in critical inquiry. I am grateful for the work that

¹³ Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The German Cinema* (New York: Praeger, 1971); Frederick W. Ott, *The Great German Films* (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1986); and Robert C. Reimer and Reinhard Zachau with contributions by Margit Sinka, *German Culture through Film* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2005).

Kracauer and others have done in establishing a canon, and I do not wish to challenge it. However, since there is no established canon for East German or post-unification cinema, I am proposing my own canon for these periods. Any critical film history establishes its own canon since, by definition, it has to focus on a particular corpus of key films. There is strong reason to believe that the East German and post-unification films included for analysis in this book will stand the test of time and be accepted into the larger canon of German film history.

The book is structured around the seven key periods of German cinema history: (1) German cinema from 1895 to 1918, during what was referred to as the *Kaiserreich*; (2) the cinema of the Weimar Republic from 1919 to 1933; (3) the cinema of the Third Reich from 1933 to 1945; (4) the cinema of the Zero Hour from 1945 to 1949, between the German defeat in the Second World War and the founding of the two competing postwar German states; (5) East German cinema from 1949 to 1989; (6) West German cinema in the same period; and (7) the cinema of post-reunification Germany from 1989 to the present. Though each of these periods rightly belongs to the history of German cinema, I do not wish to claim that each is equally important. For example, I have given the cinema of the Third Reich relatively short shrift, treating it with only two films, because I do not consider it as significant as its Weimar predecessor, and also because it is difficult to find Nazi-era German films with English subtitles. Nonetheless, the films I have chosen give insight into the most important elements of Nazi cinema, even if *Die große Liebe* (The Great Love, 1942) is not currently available with English subtitles. In choosing West German films, I have been guided partially by a well-established canon and partially by films' availability and accessibility to English-language audiences. *Die Brücke* (The Bridge, 1959) is one of the most notable West German films of the 1950s, but it is also, unlike most other West German films from this period, commercially available with English subtitles. And I have chosen Volker Schlöndorff's *Der junge Törless* (Young Törless, 1966) for similar reasons: it is both one of the key West German films of the 1960s, it is available with English subtitles, and it is relatively accessible to general viewers (unlike Alexander Kluge's *Abschied von gestern* (Farewell to Yesterday, aka Yesterday Girl, 1966), which is arguably just as important). Seemingly banal practical considerations such as the availability of German films with English subtitles or the accessibility of films to nonspecialist audiences should not be underestimated in the selection of a film canon; no matter how good a film may be, if it can not be understood by an audience, it is unlikely to have an impact. With two exceptions, all of the films I have chosen are available with English subtitles.

My concept of interpretation includes attention to aspects that are specific to film (such as camera movements) as well as to aspects that are not

film-specific (such as plot, character, dialogue, framing, color, sound, etc.) that exist in other art forms. Some film scholars may find that I pay too much attention to non-film specific elements and too little to film-specific ones. However, film is very much a brother or sister of the other arts — theater, literature, painting, photography, architecture, music, dance, design, etc. — and film historians need to treat it in conjunction with those forms. In particular, film is closely related to literature and theater, and in most cases the tools that enable one to interpret those can also help in interpreting film. Three decades ago the writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge acknowledged that “a careful review of the history of the expressive forms of film would probably reveal . . . that film is more at home in literature than in photography.”¹⁴ Kluge may well be right; at any rate, film includes aspects from all of the arts that contributed to its creation. In the middle of the nineteenth century, long before the invention of film, the composer Richard Wagner railed against the isolation of the arts from each other, and proposed what he called the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). In many ways, film is the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the twentieth century.¹⁵ It is an art form in its own right, but it is fundamentally based on, pre-conditioned by, and open to all of the other arts. As Higson has argued, “cinema inserts itself alongside other cultural practices, and . . . draws on the existing cultural histories and cultural traditions of the producing nation, reformulating them in cinematic terms, appropriating them to build up its own generic conventions.”¹⁶ Film is by nature not an isolated or egotistical art form but rather is gregarious. That is part of its power.

On the other hand, my notion of German Studies keeps this book narrowly focused on Germany, and does not include Austria. Of course, in the history of Germany, and of German cinema, it is not always easy to distinguish between Germany and Austria, or between German and Austrian cultural products. Nevertheless, for most of the period since 1866 (well before the invention of cinema), Austria has not been part of Germany, and since 1945 Austria’s separate existence has been unproblematic and uncontroversial. My focus on Germany has forced me to ignore some films that I consider truly important — in particular, the films of Michael Haneke, a filmmaker born in Munich but associated primarily with contemporary Austrian and French cinema — but it is necessary for an analysis of German film in the context of German nationhood.

¹⁴ Cited in Heide Schlüpmann, “‘What is Different is Good’: Women and Femininity in the Films of Alexander Kluge,” trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *October* 46 (Autumn 1988): 129–50; here, 137.

¹⁵ See Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979), 62.

¹⁶ Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema,” 62.

In both film studies and elsewhere, the concept of the national has come into question over the last few decades. We are told, first, that the nation is an outdated concept in the globalized world of today, and, second, that film itself is by nature an international phenomenon. It is true that the peoples and nations of the world are interacting with each other now more frequently, and more intensely, than ever before, but there is little evidence that for this reason the concept of the nation has become outdated. In fact, nations remain the primary players on the global stage, far more important than any international organizations, including economic organizations like corporations or banks. In times of prosperity it is possible to overlook this fact, but at moments of crisis, such as the terrorist attack on the United States in September of 2001 or the worldwide economic meltdown of 2008–2009, it becomes immediately apparent: in moments of crisis it is primarily nations that are expected to take action. As Philip Rosen has asserted, “the institution of the nation is basic to confronting a number of crucial historical processes of the last several centuries,” or, in the words of Stephen Crofts: “it would be foolhardy to underestimate the continuing power of the nation-state.”¹⁷ I find it hard to disagree with such statements. As for cinema, it is indeed an international phenomenon, but it is an international phenomenon that is created in, and often for, nations. Randall Halle argues that the process of transnationalization, particularly evident in Europe, “preserves a national cinema, even as it recontextualizes that cinema.”¹⁸ Many film scholars refer to “national cinemas,” with the implication that of all the cinemas in the world, only one, American cinema, is not “national.” Others might argue that even American cinema is eminently a “national cinema,” made by and in the first instance for a particular nation. It is not the task of a critical history of German film to decide the question of whether American cinema is or is not national; it can merely accept the overwhelming critical consensus that German cinema does in fact constitute a “national cinema”—in fact, one of the world’s great national cinema traditions. It is true that German cinema, like the German nation itself, is not cut off from the rest of the world, and that there are movements of influence and personnel among different national cinemas, including between Germany and the United States. And it is also true that over the past few

¹⁷ Philip Rosen, “History, Textuality, Nation: Kracauer, Burch, and Some Problems in the Study of National Cinemas,” *Iris* 2, no. 2 (1984): 69–84; here, 83; and Stephen Crofts, “Reconceptualizing National Cinemas,” in *Film and Nationalism*, ed. Alan Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002), 25–51; here, 44–45.

¹⁸ Randall Halle, *German Film after Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2008), 7.

decades German cinema has begun to resemble American cinema. Nevertheless, it remains distinct both at home and abroad, and there are strong economic and political factors that are, for the foreseeable future, likely to maintain that distinction. As Higson has noted, among other things, national cinemas are not only assertions of “national specificity” but also marketing strategies, “enabling the maximisation of an industry’s profits while at the same time bolstering a nation’s cultural standing.”¹⁹ National cinemas, including German cinema, need to be understood as existing in continuing tension with Hollywood, the world’s dominant cinema; they are sometimes unpopular even in their home countries, but they nevertheless assert a distinct national identity in opposition to the perceived homogenizing tendencies of global culture. Moreover, national cinemas, including German cinema, should be understood not as the expression of an unchanging, stable national identity but as one element in the ongoing creation and contestation of national identity, while the nation itself can be seen, in Rosen’s words, “as a construction of . . . [national cinema’s] discourse, and its address.”²⁰ The process of globalization does not simply lead to uniformity but also includes a powerful counter-movement toward distinctness and singularity. Nations and their national cinemas are part of that counter-movement. German cinema is part of the complex web of words, images, stories, and music that Germans use in order to create, maintain, enforce, and contest their sense of the German nation, and of themselves as part of that nation.

¹⁹ Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema,” 54.

²⁰ Rosen, “History, Textuality, Nation,” 81.

Part One: Early German Film History 1895–1918

1: Early German Film History 1895–1918: Historical Overview

THE ADVENT OF PHOTOGRAPHY in the nineteenth century, made possible by advances in the chemical industry, ultimately led to the invention of what came to be called motion pictures, which were in essence nothing but the projection of large numbers of sequentially ordered still photographs. The word “film” still shows the provenance of cinema from photography and the chemicals that make it possible. The history of film in Germany began on November 1, 1895, when Max Skladanowsky — working together with his brother Emil — showed a fifteen-minute series of eight short movies as the main attraction in a vaudevillelike program at Berlin’s Wintergarten theater. This was the first showing of a movie before a paying audience in Europe.¹ Skladanowsky had invented a machine that he called the “Bioscop” — literally, the “viewer of life” — that enabled the rapid projection of images, creating the impression of motion. This was a technical novelty and stirred great interest, but it was not at that time considered art. A promotional flier for Skladanowsky’s Bioscop emphasized not the content of what was to be shown but the novelty of the invention itself: “The Bioscop! The most amusing and most interesting invention of modern times. . . . Photographs presented through the original invention of Messrs. Skladanowsky.”² A critic for Berlin’s *Lokal-Anzeiger* newspaper explained the apparatus thus: “Hundreds of quickly moving and illuminated pictures come together to compose lively scenes from life.”³ Another promotional flier tried to explain the workings of the new apparatus, noting that what the Bioscop accomplished was “the

¹ Manfred Lichtenstein, “The Brothers Skladanowsky,” in *Before Caligari: German Cinema, 1895–1920/Prima di Caligari: Cinema tedesco, 1895–1920*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai and Lorenzo Codelli (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell’Immagine, 1990), 312–25; here, 312.

² Sabine Hake, *The Cinema’s Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany 1907–1933* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993), 3.

³ Wolfgang Jacobsen, “Frühgeschichte des deutschen Films: Licht am Ende des Tunnels,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler, second edition (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 13–37; here, 16. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German sources are my own.

naturalistic reproduction of life . . . through the lightning projection of innumerable photographs in front of large audiences.”⁴

On the whole, the emphasis on the technical novelty and fascination of the apparatus itself remained dominant in Germany for at least a decade. What the apparatus enabled was something completely new in human history: the illusion that a picture could actually move and seem to have a life of its own. One review in the German press of an early performance stressed the pleasure engendered by the invention: “It is . . . such a rare and nice pleasure to view these various street scenes and other settings, which are reproduced so naturally that one almost believes in a miracle. The opportunity to study the apparatus is also worth mentioning.”⁵ As these early reactions to Max Skladanowsky’s Bioscop demonstrate, the most interesting thing about early movies was their technical novelty, and the emphasis was on the projector — the apparatus that created the illusion of real life. Despite the fact that these early films were in black and white and were silent, audiences were nevertheless impressed by their realism.

As a technical curiosity, then, film in its beginnings — and not just in Germany — had a kind of circuslike quality to it. And in fact most early films were shown in circuslike environments — at fairs and in vaudeville theaters. Films were only one of the many attractions at such venues, which offered a wide variety of amusements from juggling and trapeze acts to freak shows. And just as circuses tend to travel from venue to venue, so too the early film apparatus traveled from place to place. After a stint at one venue, the projection apparatus would move to the next venue, along with all the other acts. Audiences for these early films were the same as the audiences for circuses and vaudeville acts: often working class people with not much education — people who would have felt uncomfortable or out of place at a conventional theater or opera house, but who now suddenly had the opportunity to enjoy a new and technically interesting kind of entertainment. Films did not pretend to be great art, and great art was not what their audiences were interested in. Nor did films demand much patience from their audience, since most early films were only a few minutes long at most. Film screenings were always accompanied by live music — usually someone playing the piano, occasionally a small orchestra.

The invention of film — as opposed to the Skladanowskys’ moving pictures — is generally credited to another team of brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumière in France, who, in December of 1895, demonstrated their pioneering projection apparatus — they called it the “Cinématographe” — to audiences in Paris. The Lumière brothers tended to show very

⁴ Hake, *The Cinema’s Third Machine*, 3.

⁵ Hake, *The Cinema’s Third Machine*, 3.

simple, short scenes from everyday life. For instance, one of their most famous early films, slightly less than a minute long, is called *The Arrival of a Train at the Station*, and that is precisely what the film shows. This may seem relatively banal today, but at the time it was revolutionary — the Russian writer Maxim Gorky saw this film in Nizhny-Novgorod in 1896 and recalled that the train “speeds right at you — watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones.”⁶ There were even reports that some people at early film viewings thought that what they were seeing on the screen was actually happening, that the train really was coming right at them and that their lives might be in danger. And yet, as the film scholar Tom Gunning has pointed out, spectators were probably complicit in their own delusion: they were seeking thrills and perhaps *wanted* to be terrified, motivated by what Gunning calls “an almost unquenchable desire to consume the world through images,” even or especially if that consumption involved terror.⁷ Whether early cinema audiences were actually fooled or not, however, audiences did ultimately learn to differentiate between the screen and real life, but those first experiences with cinema reveal something about the power of cinema to this day: its ability to portray events convincingly and realistically, giving audiences the impression that what they are seeing is real and is happening right now.

The beginnings of cinema were generally documentary: early films tended to show events in everyday life. Far from being banal, this was considered an enormous novelty since it was the technical apparatus itself, not the content of the film, that was the focus of attention. However, at the same time, another kind of cinema began to develop, one based on illusion and the fantastic. The pioneer of this type of cinema is generally considered to be the French cinematographer Georges Méliès, who created his own movie studio; in 1902 Méliès made the first major science fiction movie in film history, *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*). This was an unusually long movie for the time, almost ten minutes, and rather than showing a slice of everyday life, it showed (as its title suggested) a fantastic voyage, replete with a dramatic battle between earthlings and moon men. The distinction between the Lumière brothers and their documentary films on the one hand, and Georges Méliès and his fictional films on the other, still exists today, with films generally being identified

⁶ Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, fifth edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 818–32; here, 822.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 828.

as either documentary or as feature films. An early German film theorist, the writer Ferdinand Hardekopf, explained the distinction between documentary and feature film as one between “two kinds of cinematographic subjects”—“natural and staged, discovered and invented.”⁸ A third category beyond documentary and feature, that of the avant-garde film, is sometimes added to these two, but it is not particularly significant for early film history. After all, in the first decade of its existence cinema was almost by definition avant-garde in the sense of being at both the technological and artistic forefront. Moreover, both documentary and feature filmmakers were fascinated by the experimental possibilities of cinema—the ability to show things in reverse, for instance, or to slow things down or speed them up. Such effects were enabled by the apparatus of cinema, and had hitherto been unknown in film’s more established artistic brother, conventional theater. Film scholars and historians tend to talk about “visual pleasure” (German: *Schaulust*) with respect to these things, emphasizing the sheer pleasure of watching. As early as 1913, the Dadaist writer Walter Serner argued that the chief attraction of cinema was visual pleasure, a powerful sensation that was increasingly denied to modern Europeans. “If one looks to where cinema receives its ultimate power,” Serner argued, “into these strangely flickering eyes that point far back into human history, suddenly it stands there in all its massiveness: visual pleasure.”⁹ People had a natural inclination to be voyeuristic, Serner argued, and the bloodier the action they are watching, the better. It was this powerful desire that was thwarted by European modernity, and that was being brought back by contemporary cinema. The term “Schaulust” also has strong psychoanalytic connotations, which Sigmund Freud developed in a 1910 lecture, and it should be remembered that Freud was originating his psychoanalytic theories at precisely the same time as film began emerging as a new art form.¹⁰ It is no coincidence that film theory has been strongly influenced by Freud.

In the United States it was Thomas Edison who pioneered early cinematography with his film studio, which he called the “Black Maria” and his film viewer, which he called a “kinetoscope” (literally: movement viewer) in 1889. What we see with the emergence of early cinema is that inventors in several western countries—the United States, France, and Germany—were working on the development of motion pictures at

⁸ Jacobsen, “Frühgeschichte des deutschen Films,” 18.

⁹ Walter Serner, “Kino und Schaulust,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über den Stummfilm*, ed. Fritz Göttinger (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1984), 189–93; here, 189.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis,” *American Journal of Psychology* 21 (1910): 181–218.

roughly the same time. For many decades people had known that the human brain registers a rapid succession of sequential still images as flowing motion — i.e., that the brain fills in the gaps between still images by imagining realistic motion — and even before the invention of photography there had been visual games that allowed people to take advantage of this phenomenon, such as flip books. With the simplification of the photographic process in 1871 by Richard Leach Maddox, who used silver bromide gelatins, and the development of celluloid by the Americans John and Isaiah Hyatt in 1870, the stage was set for further advances in motion, but the great problem that prevented real progress was always the problem of projection: How was it possible to project sequences of photographs to large audiences, not just to an individual viewer looking into a viewfinder, as was the case with Edison's kinetoscope? It was this projection problem that was solved by people like Max Skladanowsky with his Bioscop and the Lumières with their Cinématographe, making it possible to show movies to large numbers of people. A member of the audience at an early presentation of the Lumière brothers' projection device in Cologne in April of 1896 compared it favorably with Edison's kinetoscope: "The Kinetoscope has various disadvantages — only one person could use the device, and the pictures were small and only weakly lit. Not so the new device invented by Auguste and Louis Lumière. We watch on a large screen as the different scenes unfold before our eyes. It is as if we were standing in front of an open window, looking out now at a factory yard, now at the open sea, now at a city railway station. All this appears before the eyes of the audience in such a natural way that those watching cannot contain their cries of astonishment."¹¹

Although celluloid was durable, it was also extremely flammable, and therefore early cinema was not without its dangers. Because of the hot light of the projector and the flammability of celluloid, there were a number of early theater fires, some of them deadly. The first cinema fire in history occurred at a demonstration of the Lumières' projector at the Berlin Trade Fair on August 16, 1896, when, as one newspaper subsequently reported, "the strips of celluloid loose in a basket underneath the device were ignited by particles of charcoal falling from the arc lamp."¹² As a result of this fire, both the projectionist and the electrical engineer suffered burns, and the Edison Pavillion in which the projector was being used was completely destroyed; fortunately, no one was killed. Later cinema fires were to be more deadly. On September 5, 1926, for instance,

¹¹ Martin Loiperdinger, "1896 — The Arrival in Germany of the Cinématographe Lumière," in *Before Caligari*, 30–49; here, 34.

¹² Loiperdinger, "1896 — The Arrival in Germany of the Cinématographe Lumière," 36.

forty-six people died at a makeshift cinema in Limerick, Ireland, after a burning candle fell into a roll of celluloid. Three years later, on New Year's Eve in 1929, at the Glen Cinema in Paisley, Scotland, seventy-one boys and girls died in a stampede when a spool of celluloid film caught fire in the projection room.

By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, movies in Germany had become established and popular enough that they began to put down roots in specific locations and no longer had to travel around from fairground to fairground. Because of the popularity of movies, bar owners discovered that they could attract more customers if they had projection apparatuses to entertain them. Therefore, a coffeehouse or a bar would become an informal neighborhood storefront cinema known in German as a *Kientopp*, and it was in the *Kientopp* that most viewers of German cinema in the first decade of the twentieth century saw movies. Movies were generally shown on a continual basis, without any set starting time. People would arrive, order a beer and something to eat, and watch whatever they wanted of a series of usually rather short movies — anywhere from three to fifteen minutes each. Audiences were still working-class laborers and generally uneducated — the kind of audience that would hang out at an ordinary working-class bar. Out of the word *Kientopp* came the word *Kino*, which is generally the word that Germans still use today to refer to a movie theater. The word can be used both for the place where a movie is seen and for *cinema* itself. It came from the Lumière brothers' *Cinématographe*, and the emphasis was still on the technical apparatus of projection and movement of images, not on the content of what was projected.

It was not until eleven years after the invention of cinematography, in 1906, that the first permanent movie theater was established in Germany, in Mannheim. After that, there was a rapid growth of movie theaters; by 1910 there were about one thousand movie theaters throughout Germany. These theaters were still relatively informal, and movies were still shown continuously, with no set starting times. They were also still relatively short, usually no more than ten or fifteen minutes long, and people came and went, eating and drinking. In the early years, theater owners had to purchase movies since there was no system of distribution; this changed after 1905 when, in response to the high cost of movies, distributors began to emerge who rented rather than sold movies to theater owners. This system made it possible for theater owners to pay less for films, and it also gave filmmakers a guaranteed revenue stream.¹³ By 1910, distributors moved toward renting exclusive rights for the showing of particular movies, which

¹³ See Peter Bächlin, *Der Film als Ware* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Fischer Taschenbuch, 1975), 25–26.

prevented movie theaters from entering into direct competition with other nearby theaters. As a result of these changes, movie producers began to invest more money in their movies, since they were guaranteed purchasers.¹⁴ Movies became longer. Because of the threefold system of production, distribution, and screening, and of the limited monopoly that local movie theaters now had on the screening of particular films, the so-called star system began to emerge, and German movie producers began offering large amounts of money to particular stars. The greatest early stars of German cinema were Henny Porten and Asta Nielsen, though the latter came from Denmark. Because films were silent, there were no language barriers for actors working in other countries.

Because early movies in Germany were quite popular with their relatively uneducated, working-class audience, they faced criticism from the upper classes. Movies were often seen as dangerous and perhaps even immoral or revolutionary. Like all other western countries, Germany at the time faced severe social problems. The nation had undergone breathtaking economic growth since its foundation as a unified *Reich* or empire in 1871, and by the beginning of the twentieth century it was the greatest economic power in Europe, with a formidable industrial base. The workers for those industries came from the country to the city, and within a single generation many German cities became overcrowded, with large lower-class slums. In essence, Germany had transformed itself from the sleepy agricultural country it had been at the beginning of the nineteenth century into one of the world's major industrial, economic, scientific, and military powers by the end of the nineteenth century. Germany's large and generally impoverished working class tended to have more children than the upper class, and they usually voted for their own political party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which was the largest working-class party in the world, and which favored a socialist transformation of the capitalist economy. The German upper class and the educated bourgeoisie, known in German as the *Bildungsbürgertum*, were afraid of both the working class and the SPD, and they suspected the *Kientopp* of having both revolutionary and immoral effects on its audience. The actor Paul Wegener, a strong promoter of cinema, acknowledged cinema's attractiveness to workers in a 1916 lecture: "Hardly ever has an art form captured the imagination, especially of the lower classes, in such breadth as film today."¹⁵ However, it was precisely cinema's attractiveness to the proletariat that made it suspect to the bourgeoisie, who, as

¹⁴ On the development of this system, and of the longer feature film, see Corinna Müller, "Emergence of the Feature Film in Germany Between 1910 and 1911," in *Before Caligari*, and Bächlin, *Der Film als Ware*, 28.

¹⁵ Paul Wegener, "Neue Kinoziele," in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 341–50; here, 342.

Wegener acknowledged, sometimes looked down on or ignored it. Even more so than in other western countries, Germany's social elites tended to define themselves in terms of the quality of their literary and cultural education — hence the term *Bildungsbürgertum*: literally, a bourgeoisie (*Bürgertum*) defined by its education and refinement (*Bildung*). These elites saw their country as a *Kulturnation*, a nation founded above all on the greatness of its culture, and they often viewed cinema as a degenerate, inferior, and possibly even dangerous form of cultural entertainment, very different from the sublime greatness attributed to German cultural heroes like Schiller and Goethe. The *Kientopp* was seen by many as pandering to the lowest common denominator by indulging in violence, sex, and low humor. In 1907 the German writer Hanns Heinz Ewers — who, six years later, was to work with Paul Wegener on one of the most important early German films, *Der Student von Prag* (The Student of Prague) — complained: “Like any young art form, moving pictures are for the time being basically just copying nature. And right now that’s the best they have to offer. What human beings have added to them is partly awful, like the silly magic scenes, and partly funny and amusing, like the scenes of Paris burlesque, but highly unsatisfactory for finer tastes. Where are the poets and painters who create for the movies?”¹⁶ Moreover, movies were without language and poetry, since they were silent; therefore, they did nothing to improve the literacy or linguistic acumen of the lower classes.

However, cinema had strong defenders among the educated bourgeoisie as well. By the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century, some proponents of cinema believed that it had become a necessity for European masses who were tired of the intellectualized, abstract culture of words, logic, and philosophy. One German novelist, Friedrich Freksa, wrote in 1912 that films had become as necessary to contemporary Europeans as basic food items; cinema, he argued, “is just as important for our era as the potato was for its time, when it made it possible to feed the rapidly growing masses of human beings.” Just as the potato had satisfied the hunger in Europeans’ stomachs, so too the cinema satisfied what Freksa called Europeans’ “hunger of the eyes” (*Augenhunger*): “Rarely has an era suffered so much from *hunger of the eyes* as our own. For telegraphs, newspapers, and connecting roads have brought the world closer together. From all sides strange ideas press upon the working man who is bound to one place, but who is unable to connect these ideas with tangible visual sensations. This is reflected in our abstract language, so bereft of images, a language that has become the common currency of the bourgeoisie in place of the visually rich, illustrative language of

¹⁶ Hanns Heinz Ewers, “Der Kientopp,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 12–14; here, 13.

our grandfathers, who were not troubled by the incoherence between eye and idea that plagues us.”¹⁷ Almost all contemporary Europeans, Freksa believed, suffered from visual deprivation because they tended to live regulated, strictly circumscribed lives that offered little that was visually new or interesting: “All of us are like the worker in his factory who, day after day, does nothing but drive in the same screw. The result of this condition is a hunger of the eyes rarely experienced in human history. Human beings long to fill their abstract concepts with tangible images.”¹⁸ Cinema’s purely visual language, Freksa believed, offered a welcome antidote to the monotony of contemporary European visual hunger: “People who spend eight or ten hours a day working mechanically, whose brains are drying out on the work table, on the writing desk, or in the dust of the streets, find their relief, their visual nourishment, their tangible material for the imagination in the cinema.”¹⁹

Another German writer, the Expressionist Walter Hasenclever, conceded in 1913 that cinema was not really an art form at all, but he argued that it nevertheless had its justification: “Hatred of the movies is a result of a misunderstanding: movies are not an art form like theater, they are not sterile intellectualism; movies are in no way an idea. . . . Movies have something American, something brilliant, something kitschy about them. That’s what makes them popular; that’s what makes them good.”²⁰ Cinema, Hasenclever argued, had a kind of hypnotic impact on its viewers: “Of all the art forms of our time, cinema is the strongest, because it’s the most contemporary. Space and time in cinema serve to hypnotize the viewers.”²¹ Movies filled their viewers with a kind of naïve pleasure, placing them into the position of children enjoying their toys. Just as one would not dream of taking toys from children, so too one should not take cinema from its fans: “They shouldn’t spoil this naïveté for us with preachy sermons about a more noble art.”²²

The criticism of traditional German literary culture articulated by Freksa and Hasenclever demonstrates that by the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century, the cinema was fighting back against its highbrow literary critics in the cinema debate (*Kino-Debatte*). Not only

¹⁷ Friedrich Freksa, “Vom Werte und Umwerte des Kinos,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 98–100; here, 98.

¹⁸ Friedrich Freksa, “Die künstlerische und kulturelle Bedeutung des Kinos,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 100–102; here, 100–101.

¹⁹ Freksa, “Vom Werte und Umwerte des Kinos,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 99.

²⁰ Walter Hasenclever, “Der Kintopp als Erzieher: Eine Apologie,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 282–84; here, 283.

²¹ Hasenclever, “Der Kintopp als Erzieher,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 282.

²² Hasenclever, “Der Kintopp als Erzieher,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 284.

was it refusing to concede its inferiority to them, it was actually claiming superiority. And relatively well-established literary intellectuals like Freksa and Hasenclever were offering the cinema ammunition in its battle.

Some of *Kientopp*'s harshest critics nevertheless called for drastic intervention. In 1910 one critic asked rhetorically: "When will the Hercules arrive who can clean out this Augean stable?"²³ With this allusion to Greek mythology, the critic was demonstrating his superiority to the uneducated working-class moviegoers he was criticizing; after all, they would not have known that one of the tasks of the Greek hero Hercules had been to clean out a massive stable filled to the rafters with horse dung. In 1913 another critic declared that movies were probably not capable of improvement: "I do not believe that cinematography, just because it is relatively new, still suffers from developmental shortcomings that will disappear automatically in the near future. On the contrary, I believe that it is in the very nature of cinematic representation — at least with today's commercial orientation — that cinematography cannot be improved."²⁴ The prejudice of cinema's detractors is clear: movies were a purely commercial enterprise catering to the worst instincts of the masses, and it was only with state interference that movies could be improved.²⁵ In 1914, the year that saw the outbreak of the First World War, another critic expressed his fear that movies spoke to the worst in audiences, bringing the entire western world to the brink of a revolution: "In the internationalist cinema drama, the wildest passions of all nations come together for a gruesome rendezvous."²⁶

As a result of such criticisms, films were subjected to special entertainment taxes that varied from locality to locality, but that were occasionally quite exorbitant. These taxes were like those imposed on other consumer goods that are discouraged, but not actually banned, by governments, such as cigarettes or alcohol; like these items, movies were seen as dangerous, intoxicating, and in need of government regulation. Censorship measures were also introduced, not on a national but on a local level; censorship rules varied from city to city, and for this reason films were chopped and cut in a multitude of different ways. This is one of the reasons why there are so many different versions of some early cinema classics.

²³ Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine*, 34.

²⁴ Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine*, 34.

²⁵ Such beliefs ultimately led to the *Reichslichtspielgesetz* (censorship law) of 1920. On film censorship and state interference, see Martin Loiperdinger, "Filmzensur und Selbstkontrolle: Politische Reifeprüfung," in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, ed. Jacobsen, Kaes, and Prinzler, 525–44.

²⁶ Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine*, 36.

In response to the intense debate about cinema among the educated bourgeoisie, filmmakers in the second decade of the twentieth century tried to move film from the level of a technical curiosity of limited artistic value to the level of a genuine art form in its own right. Films began to be longer, expanding from one to two reels and telling longer stories. Audiences now clearly preferred feature films to documentaries: they no longer wanted a simple reflection of reality; rather, they wanted something that went beyond reality and transported them out of their everyday lives. In order to counter their critics, German film producers began to hire famous writers and actors to work on their films, and they began to create ambitious productions that drew on the traditions of German literature and theater, particularly the long tradition of German Romanticism that had dominated much of the nineteenth century. The 1913 production *Der Student von Prag* is one such film, aimed no longer at a working class audience but primarily at the educated bourgeoisie. Its purpose was, in part, to convince the *Bildungsbürgertum* that film could be a genuine, and specifically German, art form — even without the help of the German language.

Throughout the first two decades of film history, from 1895 to 1914, French cinema was the dominant cinema of the world. Since films were silent, there was no language barrier, and cinema was a truly international art form, as the critic who had spoken contemptuously of the “internationalist cinema drama” had noted. Film in Germany was decentralized in its production and distribution, and prior to 1914 fewer than 12 percent of all films shown in Germany were of German origin; the vast majority came from France, and some came from the film industry in the United States, which was beginning to be centered in Hollywood.

The internationalism and openness of film in Germany changed dramatically with the outbreak of the First World War, which had an impact on the film industry for two reasons. First, because Germany was now at war with France, imports of French films were banned. This protectionism ultimately allowed the German film industry to grow without competition from the French film industry; by the end of the First World War, German producers had the large and growing German market to themselves. In the early years of the war the German film industry was dominated by a Danish company, Nordisk, which had secured production and distribution facilities in Germany. Partly in reaction to this foreign competition, German companies began to see the need for greater economic concentration of the domestic film industry.²⁷ Secondly, after the beginning of the war, the German government began to intervene and support the centralization of the German film industry for military and political reasons. Film's

²⁷ Bächlin, *Der Film als Ware*, 35.

elite critics had convinced the *Bildungsbürgertum* of film's impact on the masses, and the German government was keenly interested in gaining the masses' support for the difficult war against France, England, and Russia, which demanded tremendous sacrifices, particularly from the working class who comprised the bulk of the German infantry. The German government also became aware of Britain's use of film as an effective propaganda weapon against Germany, and it decided that it needed to respond in kind. Even Kaiser Wilhelm II took a personal interest in film. German companies began to make newsreels about the war, along with patriotic dramas intended to strengthen the bond between soldiers at the front and their families at home.

Ultimately, in 1917, the German army's High Command under General Eric Ludendorff founded its own film propaganda unit, declaring: "We have underestimated the political influence exerted by film for mass suggestion. . . . Modern warfare not only involves economic, military, and financial weapons, but also journalistic ones."²⁸ By this point it was clear that film had become a significant part of the political and military landscape, and that film would play a major role in the political movements of the twentieth century. General Ludendorff also decided to centralize and strengthen the bond between the German government and private producers, such as the early cinema innovator Oskar Messter, and out of his program for centralization came the Ufa or "Universum-Film AG" in 1917, a massive German production and distribution conglomerate comprised of several previously separate companies, which was to dominate the German film industry through the classic era of Weimar cinema in the 1920s and early 1930s and during the years of Hitler's Third Reich as well. Ufa brought together the government, large banks, and several major production companies into a single overarching enterprise. The German film company Bioscop had established studios in the Potsdam suburb of Babelsberg in 1911, and in 1921, after the end of the First World War, the Bioscop company was incorporated into the Ufa conglomerate; Babelsberg quickly became the center of the German film industry, the German equivalent to Hollywood, and it was here that most of the classic films of the next decades were made.

Between 1910 and 1920 German cinema grew explosively, in spite of all criticisms. Prior to 1910 there had been about 1,000 movie theaters; by 1912 there were 1,500, and by the beginning of the First World War there were 2,446. After the end of the war, in 1919, there were 2,836. This explosion in the number of movie theaters, however, does not show the true extent of cinema's growth. In 1910 all existing movie theaters

²⁸ Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine*, 17.

together could accommodate about two hundred thousand patrons; nine years later, theaters could accommodate one million — five times as many.²⁹ By the end of the First World War, German films enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the German market, and German film production had become centered in Babelsberg. Moreover, the harsh criticism of cinema that had dominated in the early teens of the twentieth century during the *Kino-Debatte* began to diminish as producers saw that film could be a major money-making business and not just inferior entertainment for the working class. As movie theaters became larger, they also became more elegant. In the middle of the First World War, the actor and early film promoter Paul Wegener, star of *Der Student von Prag*, noted that “through the elegance of their design and the rather high ticket prices, the movie theaters in the large cities are already beginning to target the upper classes.”³⁰ Movies were increasingly posing a real threat to traditional forms of elite entertainment, particularly the theater. As early as 1912 Friedrich Freksa welcomed this development, proclaiming: “There ought to be even more theaters that bite the dust! Because theater in the traditional sense is outdated! Admit it! All of you who are involved in the life of the theater, you all know that the old theater is destined to die.”³¹ The writer Hanns Heinz Ewers agreed with Freksa on the superior strength of cinema. “The theaters,” he wrote in 1912, “should watch out: they’ve never had to deal with the intense competition they’re facing now, and they’ll start noticing it more and more in their ticket sales. Today it’s the cheap seats that are emptying out — but before too much longer the expensive seats will start emptying, too, and then the theater folks will have to watch *Don Carlos* or Ibsen by themselves. The audience is saying no thanks and running to the movies.”³² In that same year Erich Schlaikjer, writing in a journal for theater actors, proclaimed: “An enemy is marching. . . . That enemy is the cinema.”³³

All of these developments in early film history suggest a gradual trend toward redefining or broadening the concept of art. Throughout the nineteenth century art had been understood primarily as the creation of individual geniuses like Ludwig van Beethoven or Johann

²⁹ Figures from Thomas J. Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), 20–21.

³⁰ Wegener, “Neue Kinoziele,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 343.

³¹ Friedrich Freksa, “Vom Werte und Unwerte des Kinos,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 98–100; here, 99.

³² Hanns Heinz Ewers, “Vom Kinema,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 20–23; here, 22.

³³ Helmut H. Diederichs, “The Origins of the *Autorenfilm*,” in *Before Caligari*, 380–401; here, 382.

Wolfgang von Goethe, whose remarkable, awe-inspiring talents enabled them to rise above the common run of ordinary people. Art, in other words, was generally understood to be an individual enterprise dominated by great men. Geniuses worked alone, directed only by their own inspiration. Film's immediate high-art predecessors were the novel and theater; in particular, the novel tended to focus on the individual human being and his or her development, and it was written by only one person and also generally experienced by only one person at a time. Film, however, was not the product of one person: It required significant amounts of capital, the participation of a great many people in production and distribution, a technical apparatus and space for screening, and it generally did not have the psychological depth of the novel, since it was without language and usually had a large number of characters. For all of these reasons, as well as its lower-class stigma, film was initially not viewed as an art form at all, but rather as a low form of entertainment. The high-culture response to this state of affairs was either to reject cinema altogether or to "raise" it to the status of traditional theater. Paul Wegener complained that contemporary filmmakers and critics were simply trying to transform cinema into "the theater of the little guy," a kind of low-culture substitute for high culture.³⁴ And indeed in 1912 the German film industry had produced a brochure entitled *Kino als modernes Volkstheater* (Cinema as Modern People's Theater).³⁵ Wegener himself wanted to refocus cinema as an art form away from competition with traditional German high culture, such as the theater and the novel, and toward what he saw as cinema's own inherent technical possibilities, the ultimate goal of which was an art form governed "solely by photographic technology," not by stage actors or directors.³⁶ Rather than competing with other art forms on their own terms, therefore, Wegener believed that cinema should constitute itself as a new art form with new and different aesthetic possibilities. People's consciousness of new aesthetic potential always lagged behind the development of technology, Wegener argued; thus, the first automobiles had looked very much like horse-drawn carriages. So too early movies, trying to prove their artistic value, tended to look like bad copies of traditional high culture. But these problems were not inherent in film technology itself; they resulted, rather, from a lack of consciousness of cinema's new possibilities. "The movies pretend to be pantomimes, dramas, or illustrated novels. But there are film

³⁴ Wegener, "Neue Kinoziele," in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 343.

³⁵ Diederichs, "The Origins of the *Autorenfilm*," in *Before Caligari*, 382.

³⁶ Wegener, "Neue Kinoziele," in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 348.

³⁷ Wegener, "Neue Kinoziele," in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 343.

possibilities that come from the technology of moving pictures themselves, and for which not theatrical plays, not exciting dramas, and not sensational novels need to be written but rather content whose fascination lies primarily in the effects of the pictures themselves.”³⁷ It was Wegener’s goal to offer the cinema such new possibilities, and his first chance to do so was the film *Der Student von Prag*.



The unhappy student Balduin sits apart while others revel.

Courtesy of the Filmmuseum Potsdam.

2: *Der Student von Prag* (1913) and Learning to Look

Director: Stellan Rye

Cinematographer: Guido Seeber

Screenplay: Hanns Heinz Ewers

Producer: Deutsche Bioskop

Art Directors: Klaus Richter and Robert A. Dietrich

German Release Date: August 22, 1913

Actors: Paul Wegener (Balduin); John Gottowt (Scapinelli);

Grete Berger (Komtesse Margit Waldis-Schwarzenberg);

Lyda Salmonova (Lyduschka); Lothar Körner (Graf von Schwarzenberg); Fritz Weidemann (Baron Waldis-Schwarzenberg)

DER STUDENT VON PRAG (The Student of Prague) should be seen as part of the general battle over cinema culture in the second decade of the twentieth century. The film was directed in 1913 by the Danish-born director Stellan Rye — who was to die only a year later as a prisoner-of-war in France in the First World War — photographed by Guido Seeber, and written by Hanns Heinz Ewers, based on a novel by Ewers and derived in part from Edgar Allan Poe’s tale “William Wilson” (1839). It was filmed largely on location in Prague. *Der Student von Prag* is representative of German cinema at a crucial turning point: the point where it was seeking to lose its lower-class, inferior status and to assert a claim as a viable art form in its own right. Ewers proclaimed in the year that he helped make this film, “*I want to prove that good art is possible even in cinema, even without words.*”¹ The film critic Lotte Eisner has noted that *Der Student von Prag* points forward to many of the classic German films of the 1920s because of its emphasis on Romanticism and the irrational.² The

¹ Hanns Heinz Ewers, “Der Film und ich,” in *Kino-Debatte: Literatur und Film 1909–1929*, ed. Anton Kaes (Munich and Tübingen: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1978), 103–4; here, 104. Emphasis in the original. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German sources are my own.

² Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969), 41.

film stars Paul Wegener, a stage actor who had worked with the great German director Max Reinhardt, and who, in a 1916 lecture on the art of cinema, proclaimed his own goal to be “a kind of kinetic lyricism . . . in which, ultimately, we can completely do without the reflection of reality.”³ For Wegener, cinematography was to be a kind of visual poetry that was not reliant on everyday life, documentary technique, or even conventional notions of artistic excellence.

Ewers, the screenplay writer, was already a well-known author at the time with serious literary ambitions. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Ewers had been involved in vaudevillelike theater, and he was, as he himself admitted, a tireless promoter of cinema as an art form. He criticized educated elites who looked down at film: “The people who are still railing against the cinema are precisely the same people who once railed against bicycles, then against automobiles, and now against airplanes: they’re the idiots.”⁴ Ewers was later to write the screenplay for an early Nazi film, *Hans Westmar* (1933), a bio-pic based on the life of the Nazi Horst Wessel, who was killed by a political opponent in 1930 and had attained the status of a martyr.

The involvement of Wegener and Ewers in *Der Student von Prag* — the former already successful in the conventional theater and the other successful as a writer — is indicative of the way that the German film industry at this juncture was beginning to attract artists from other, more established art forms. Major writers like Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal saw their plays adapted for the cinema, and theater directors like Max Reinhardt also had movies produced. In 1907 Ewers had complained about what he saw as the second- and third-rate nature of contemporary cinematic production, which he believed consisted mostly of imitations of lower-class entertainment — nothing capable of pleasing people of finer tastes. “Where,” Ewers asked, “are the poets and painters who create for the movies?”⁵ With *Der Student von Prag*, Ewers was trying to answer his own question by creating a movie that would be capable of pleasing people of good taste. The very presence of artists like Ewers and Wegener was intended to confer a higher social status on the films they made; however, such artists — even Ewers and Wegener, who were well aware of cinema’s new technical and aesthetic possibilities — tended to import the conventions of their own art forms into film, making it more acceptable to German elites. The German critic Heide Schlüpmann

³ Paul Wegener, “Neue Kinoziele,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über den Stummfilm*, ed. Fritz Göttinger (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1984), 341–50; here, 348.

⁴ Hanns Heinz Ewers, “Vom Kinema,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 20.

⁵ Hanns Heinz Ewers, “Der Kientopp,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 13.

has called this process “the cooptation of film by the middle class.”⁶ By means of this process, as one film publication proclaimed, “film has become worthy of the arts pages.”⁷ Another publication announced that “the German cinema public shall be afforded through the so-called *Autorenfilm* to experience some of the most important and characteristic works of our writers.”⁸ One German film company, Deutsche Bioscop, boasted that “Films of famous authors are the future of cinema,” and that by offering such films, “we will do even more for the moral and artistic elevation of the cinema!”⁹

Der Student von Prag may be somewhat difficult for contemporary audiences to view for several reasons. In contrast to contemporary cinema, the camera in this film, as in all early films, is static: it stays in one place and does not “travel.” There are no tracking shots and no zooms. The only movement that occurs is achieved through editing, by cutting off one scene and beginning another with the camera in a different location. For contemporary viewers used to fluid camera movements, this can be a difficulty. In addition, the picture quality of these early movies is not as good as contemporary movies’, and of course they are in black-and-white rather than in color. Furthermore, it should be remembered that *Der Student von Prag* is almost a century old, and that film stock tends to deteriorate over time, sometimes drastically, both naturally and as a result of human intervention such as censorship or war damage. Even as far back as 1952, Eisner remarked of *Der Student von Prag* that “nowadays the photography . . . seems rather grey. One has to remember that the contemporary prints, toned in brown, green or (for night scenes) dark blue, were more subtle.”¹⁰

By far the most difficult problem for contemporary viewers, however, is that, like all early films, *Der Student von Prag* is silent. “Silent” is in fact a misnomer, however — early films were screened with accompanying music, and almost all currently available copies of these films have had musical soundtracks added to them. Nevertheless, these films have no running dialogue; the only language associated with them is occasional

⁶ Heide Schlüpmann, “The First German Art Film: Rye’s *The Student of Prague* (1913),” in *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York: Methuen, 1986), 9–24; here, 10.

⁷ Helmut H. Diederichs, “The Origins of the *Autorenfilm*,” in *Before Caligari: German Cinema, 1895–1920/Prima di Caligari: Cinema tedesco, 1895–1920*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai and Lorenzo Codelli (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell’Immagine, 1990), 380–401; here, 386.

⁸ Diederichs, “The Origins of the *Autorenfilm*,” in *Before Caligari*, 386.

⁹ Diederichs, “The Origins of the *Autorenfilm*,” in *Before Caligari*, 386.

¹⁰ Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 42.

intertitles that tell viewers what is happening or what the characters are thinking or saying. Though a silent film may be unusual or difficult to deal with now, it is important to remember that for the first three decades of film history — not just in Germany but everywhere else as well — films were silent, and there was nothing unusual about it.

The “silence” of these films differentiates them both from our twenty-first-century expectations of film — since audiences now expect films to have a synchronized soundtrack — and from the conventional theater, which was their most immediate high-culture competitor at the time. The absence of language in these films is both a disadvantage and an advantage, and twenty-first-century audiences would do well to remember the advantages as well as the disadvantages of silent cinema. Of course, the absence of a soundtrack was based on a technological problem that was not definitively solved until 1927 in the United States and 1929 in Germany — the problem of how to inscribe sound into celluloid and synchronize sound with action — and once that problem was solved, silent film quickly disappeared. It is also true that there were early attempts at sound film in Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century, but such attempts did not bear enduring fruit. Still, because it lacks a soundtrack, twenty-first-century viewers tend to regard silent film as inferior and primitive, and from a purely technological standpoint they are probably correct. Even Paul Wegener, writing in 1916, predicted that future generations would look at early cinema as crude and inadequate: “a later generation [will] look back on our early efforts as childish stammering . . . I’m convinced of that.”¹¹ Nonetheless, these films were not actually technologically primitive at the time.

There are, however, a number of advantages that come from the lack of a spoken soundtrack. The most obvious is that the films are comprehensible to anyone anywhere, regardless of language barriers. Plays, novels, and poems can be appreciated only by those who understand the language being used, but silent film could be appreciated by anyone who saw it, regardless of what he or she spoke. As Wegener noted in his 1916 lecture, “a motion picture, once produced, can be played anywhere in the world with minimal costs. Language plays no role. Films, which weigh so little, move like lightning all over the world — with an international speed that the art of theater and the Varieté cannot achieve!”¹² Or, in the words of a fictional film producer in Gore Vidal’s novel *Hollywood*, “the beauty of movies is that they don’t talk.”¹³ But silent film had the advantage not

¹¹ Wegener, “Neue Kinoziele,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 350.

¹² Wegener, “Neue Kinoziele,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 343.

¹³ Gore Vidal, *Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 1990), 98. The fictional producer is based on the publisher William Randolph Hearst, who is explaining cinema’s advantages over his own newspapers.

only of overcoming the barrier between one language and another — such as, for instance, between German and English — but also the barriers that existed within the same language. Spoken language is one of the primary markers of regional and class distinctions, and, moreover, much of the language used on stages (and now, of course, in movies and on television) is relatively ritualized and meaningless and does not contribute much to genuine understanding or feeling. The conventions of language on the German stage in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were particularly ritualized, and actors had to learn a specific, artificial, and highly declamatory — some might even say pompous — way of speaking known as *Bühnensprache* (stage language); likewise, writers learned a particular, not very realistic way of writing characterized by the excessive use of adjectives and dependent clauses. With the early silent cinema, all of the elaborate linguistic ritual associated with German high culture — lengthy sentences, stilted vocabulary, pompous enunciation — was necessarily discarded, and a story had to be told directly in easily comprehensible pictures, not in words. One can imagine that for early film audiences, used to seeing the theater as a strange place where people spoke highfalutin language, the lack of spoken dialogue and the immediate visual presence of moving images must have been a relief rather than a disappointment — like going from a stilted parliamentary debate into a circus show. Without language and its accompanying complexities, film was more accessible to ordinary people, and directors and actors were forced to focus on purely visual rather than linguistic communication. Paul Wegener proclaimed in his 1916 lecture that “the real poet of the movie must be the camera itself.”¹⁴ If traditional literary art was generally for and about nobility or the bourgeoisie — kings, queens, aristocrats, or the rich — films could be about ordinary people. The writer Karl Hans Strobl wrote in 1911 that film “is very much a democratic institution and, as such, a valuable counterweight against all cultural efforts and artistic activities that demand a dinner jacket as their first precondition. Cinematic theater doesn’t make any demands on one’s wardrobe.”¹⁵ *Der Student von Prag* is somewhere in between the extremes of high art and proletarian culture: it features a middle-class protagonist — the student Balduin, who aspires to climb socially by marrying a countess and acquiring lots of money. Just as cinema itself was trying to climb socially from the lower classes to the middle classes at the time this movie was made, so too the film’s protagonist is trying to rise above his station in life.

Ewers was not at all apologetic about film’s lack of language; he considered it very much an advantage, not a limitation. In 1913 he argued

¹⁴ Wegener, “Neue Kinoziele,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 348.

¹⁵ Karl Hans Strobl, “Der Kinematograph,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 54.

that because of its lack of words, cinema was ultimately superior to literary art forms: “But that was precisely what drew me to it: the possibility of finally, finally, doing without *words*, without words, which had previously been everything to the poet, and without which poets didn’t even seem to be possible. Words — in spite of everything, they are only a vague and inadequate surrogate for the very *deepest feelings!*”¹⁶ Cinema, Ewers believed, offered the possibility of allowing “the soul to speak even without words.” After all, he asked, “in everyday life, doesn’t a mere glance often tell me more than words?”¹⁷ One is reminded, when reading Ewers’s thoughts, of the old adage “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Already in 1907, when many intellectuals and upper class people scorned the cinema, Ewers had criticized the cinema’s snobbish critics: “Are all of these journalists really blind? Don’t they know that moving pictures are more important, more overwhelming and primary, than any other factor in our culture? Don’t they know that movies can easily be compared to Gutenberg’s invention, to which we writers of books owe our lives?”¹⁸ In Germany, the much-vaunted land of *Dichter und Denker* (poets and thinkers), so proud of its literary heritage, this was a radical and powerful defense of cinema. Ewers claimed that even the smokiest storefront cinema was better than most legitimate German theaters, and he complained: “On the theatrical stage people talk and force me to pay attention to what they’re saying, to follow their thoughts. But in the movies I can dream.”¹⁹

The rise of film from 1895 through 1920 coincided with the simultaneous emergence of psychoanalysis, founded by the Viennese psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, some of whose most important works and theories were developed during this period. Freud wrote his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1906, “On Narcissism” in 1914, and “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” in 1915. Dreams, he argued, satisfy unmet, repressed desires, of which modern human beings, cooped up in big cities and leading abstract, alienated lives, have a great many. Freud did not specifically write about the cinema, but his ideas about visual pleasure, dreams, and the unconscious have had a major influence on thinking about film and its function. It is probably not a coincidence that the German psychiatrist Otto Rank, one of Freud’s followers, began a 1914 treatise on the psychological problem of the *Doppelgänger* (the double) with an invocation of *Der Student von Prag*. Film, Rank argued, “reminds us of dream techniques in more ways than one, expresses certain psychological facts and

¹⁶ Ewers, “Der Film und ich,” in *Kino-Debatte*, 104. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ Ewers, “Der Film und ich,” in *Kino-Debatte*, 104.

¹⁸ Ewers, “Der Kientopp,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 12.

¹⁹ Ewers, “Vom Kinema,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 21.

relationships — which the poet cannot clearly articulate in words — in a distinct and manifest imagistic language and thus makes their meaning more accessible.”²⁰ *Der Student von Prag* is an assertion by the cinema of its unique status as an art form on a par with or even better than traditional literary forms. The film was largely successful on these terms, as a review in one journal noted: “The film is not just capable of being a surrogate for this or that art — it is much more a means for creating a self-sufficient and worthy art of a distinctive kind. To express it simply and clearly: film creates a bridge between painting and poetry — both arts which we have until now thought of as divided by irreconcilable boundaries. It[s] means go beyond those of painters, since it joins images with movement, and thus crosses over into the domain of drama; yet it does not inherit fully the domain of drama, since it lacks dialogue.”²¹ Paul Wegener explained that by 1913, when the film was made, he had come to understand that because of its technological possibilities the cinema could actually present certain kinds of Romantic motifs — such as the motif of *Doppelgänger* — more successfully than literature itself. As a screenwriter, Ewers asserted the film’s high-art status by immersing *Der Student von Prag* in the literary atmosphere of German Romanticism. For Ewers, film gave to ordinary people the Romanticism that they were lacking in ordinary life. “The cinema,” he argued a year before the film was made, “is a feast for the eyes of our blind longing. And if you don’t want to believe that our era is Romantic, then go to the movies. The masses want Romanticism — and the movies give it to them.”²² *Der Student von Prag* uses an old Romantic tale: a young, poor student in the city of Prague, in order to get money to impress the wealthy countess he loves, sells his mirror image to an evil sorcerer. It also draws on a number of Romantic motifs: the act of selling part of oneself to an evil power harks back to the most famous German national legend, that of Faust, who sold his soul to the devil and was ultimately damned. The idea of a mirror image recalls Romantic motifs of the *Doppelgänger* or “double,” and people selling their shadow. For instance, Adalbert von Chamisso’s celebrated “Peter Schlemihl” (1814) tells the story of a man who becomes separated from his shadow, and E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tale “Die Abenteuer der Silvester-Nacht” (The Adventures of New Year’s Eve, 1815) tells the story of Erasmus Spikher, who barters

²⁰ Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychological Study*, trans. Harry Tucker, Jr. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1971). Cited in Schlipmann, “The First German Art Film,” in *German Film and Literature*, 13.

²¹ Kristin Thompson, “*Im Anfang war . . .*: Some Links Between German Fantasy Films of the Teens and the Twenties,” in *Before Caligari: German Cinema, 1895–1920/Prima di Caligari: Cinema tedesco, 1895–1920*, ed. Usai and Codelli, 138–61; here, 142.

²² Ewers, “Vom Kinema,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 22.

away his mirror image. The Irish writer Oscar Wilde, whose primary works appeared shortly before the invention of cinema in 1895, also wrote books and fairy tales based on similar motifs, such as his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890–91) and his story “The Fisherman and His Soul.” And as was mentioned earlier, Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson” was in many ways the template for *Der Student von Prag*. In all such stories there is something distinctly threatening about being separated from one’s mirror image or one’s shadow. The separation suggests that somewhere there is an alternate self running around and committing crimes in one’s own name, and that one can do nothing to stop it; one has literally lost control of oneself. Frequently this loss of one’s mirror image or one’s shadow occurs because of a Faustian pact with an evil being, and one must pay for it, as the legendary Faust did, with the loss of one’s soul. In the case of *Der Student von Prag*, the student Balduin’s double constantly torments and stalks him, and in the end the protagonist shoots his mirror image with his revolver, only to discover that he has actually killed himself. Psychologically, the *Doppelgänger* was always just a projection of the protagonist Balduin’s own evil tendencies. The story thus revolves around narcissism, madness, magic, individual identity, violence, and suicide — all common elements of German Romanticism. In making the film, Ewers and Wegener were demonstrating that film is just as capable as literature of dealing with Romantic motifs, and that film can play an important role in propagating the values of the German *Kulturnation* (a nation based on notions of culture). One critic, commenting ironically on the film’s 1913 premiere, conjured up the spirits of Ewers’s literary predecessors as spectators: “It was a real première. A lot of tuxedoes. The poet sat in a private box, occasionally visible with very pretty ladies. A monocle gave its master the necessary bearing. Goethe, Chamisso, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Alfred de Musset, and Oscar Wilde were also present.”²³ Another writer noted that the film was “a dramatic production and very literary. Very literary. Its illustrious relations are Goethe, Chamisso, Amadeus Hoffmann and Oscar Wilde. . . . The blood races through your veins in a highly satisfactory and ghostly way during this fantastic drama.”²⁴

One way of looking at a film like *Der Student von Prag* is to analyze it as a reflection of the national psyche, as pioneering film theorist Siegfried Kracauer did in *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), his classic study of German cinema from its beginnings through the start of the Nazi period. Kracauer wrote the book in exile in

²³ Originally cited in *Hätte ich das Kino! Die Schriftsteller und der Stummfilm*, ed. Ludwig Greve, Margot Pehle, and Heidi Westhoff (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), 111. Cited in Schlipmann, “The First German Art Film,” in *German Film and Literature*, 10.

²⁴ Thompson, “Im Anfang war . . . ,” in *Before Caligari*, 140.

the United States while working at the Museum of Modern of Art during the Second World War, when Americans were seeking to understand exactly what made Nazi Germany tick.²⁵

Heide Schlüpmann, strongly influenced by Kracauer, asserts that “films, even so-called *auteur* films, are not the products of individual authors as in literature. Due to their collective production, films reflect — as Kracauer insists — the ‘collective mentality’ of a nation, the ‘super-individual’ layer, much more directly than traditional arts.”²⁶ Kracauer claimed that film “more than any other medium offers an access to the inner dispositions of broad strata of the population.”²⁷ Kracauer’s argument was similar to one that had already been made by Friedrich Freksa in 1912, a year before the filming of *Der Student von Prag*. Whereas contemporary literary authors, Freksa argued, were interested primarily in forcing upon viewers their own individual thoughts and morality, thus ensuring that literature was no longer “the instrument of a universal cultural force like the poets of the Greek era,” cinema allowed viewers to find their own vision, and thus it expressed a more generally applicable collective feeling. “The people,” Freksa claimed, “have the age-old, purely artistic approach: they want the events, the experiences, what they can grasp in their hands — and they want to create their own morality and ideas themselves.” Cinema allowed for this kind of freedom, Freksa believed, making it possible for ordinary people to see “the amazing things that they know from novels or local legends.”²⁸

A reading of *Der Student von Prag* that seeks to examine it as an expression of Freksa’s “universal cultural force” or Kracauer’s collective psyche might point to the split between the protagonist Balduin and his *Doppelgänger* as a reflection of a psychically unstable and divided Germany shortly before the beginning of the First World War, a Germany worried about its status and willing to enter into morally questionable pacts to defend and enhance that status. Such a reading might also point out that the protagonist Balduin’s actions are ultimately self-destructive, since the film ends in suicide; such a reading might infer from this the presence of a German national death wish. Kracauer himself calls *Der Student von*

²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947).

²⁶ Schlüpmann, “The First German Art Film,” in *German Film and Literature*, 13.

²⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, letter to Carl Mayer, 29 May 1944. Cited in Uli Jung and Walter Schatzberg, *Beyond Caligari: The Films of Robert Wiene* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), 73, note 4.

²⁸ Friedrich Freksa, “Die künstlerische und kulturelle Bedeutung des Kinos,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 100–102; here, 101.

Prag “a dreamlike transcription of what the German middle class actually experienced in its relation to the feudal caste running Germany” prior to the First World War.²⁹ For him, the protagonist Balduin’s split personality represents the division among the classes in Germany, and the film’s psychological claustrophobia “reflects the profound aversion of all German middle-class strata to relating their mental dilemma to their ambiguous social plight” — i.e., a preference among the educated middle classes for abstract psychologizing and philosophizing and a distaste for materialist, political, or economic explanations for individual problems.³⁰

Such readings can be criticized, since it is possible to argue that there is no such thing as a “collective” or “national” psyche but only the individual psyches of particular human beings who are the viewers of films. However, in positing the existence of a collective psyche, Kracauer has the support of Sigmund Freud, who argued in one of his most famous essays, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Civilization and its Discontents, 1930) that there truly is something like a collective superego and collective psychic illnesses. The “process of civilization,” Freud wrote, “is one of uniting separate individuals into a community bound together by libidinal ties.”³¹ Therefore, he concluded, “it can be asserted that the community, too, evolves a super-ego under whose influence cultural development proceeds.”³² Kracauer’s book can be understood as an attempt to follow up on Freud’s theories, using film as a basis for the study of collective states of mind — reading films much in the way that Freud himself might have analyzed the dreams of his patients, or in the way that Otto Rank actually did read *Der Student von Prag*.

Another way of looking at a film like *Der Student von Prag* is to focus on its formal elements and qualities and to ask what they have to say about the process of watching a film itself. A film, after all, is a visual event: it appeals to the eye. Hence, it is entirely legitimate to ask in what ways a particular film deals with the visual, and with the act of looking. This aspect of film is particularly important for early film, since in the first decades of film’s existence cinematographers still had to educate audiences — and themselves — about the difference between reality and the illusion they were seeing on the screen. It is striking how predominant the problem of vision is in *Der Student von Prag*: after all, the entire film revolves around a mirror image and its presence or absence. The protagonist Balduin becomes obsessed with the actions of his *Doppelgänger*,

²⁹ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 30.

³⁰ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 30–31.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1989), 104.

³² Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 106.

and in the end he seeks to destroy it, thereby destroying himself. Certainly *Der Student von Prag* is, among other things, a demonstration of film's considerable technical possibilities, even at this early stage of film history: it is possible to make mirror images appear or disappear in a movie. The film's star Paul Wegener noted three years after the making of *Der Student von Prag*: "When I made my first movie three years ago, I did it because I believed I had an idea that could not be carried out in any other art form. I recalled trick photographs where a man played cards with himself or a student crossed swords with himself. I knew that this could be accomplished through dividing the picture's surface, and I said to myself: that must be possible in cinema, and here one could show E. T. A. Hoffmann's fantasies of the *Doppelgänger* or the mirror image in reality, thus producing effects impossible in any other art form."³³ Hanns Heinz Ewers later boasted about this technical innovation; for him, it was just one of the many "firsts" that characterized *Der Student von Prag*: "It was the first time that a cameraman, Guido Seeber, managed to carry out the idea of putting the same actor into the same image with himself, a trick that was subsequently imitated thousands of times."³⁴ One can think of this film as engaging in a dialogue about how to look at film images in general: as separated from the body that produces them and somehow "independent" agents acting of their own accord, as if by magic. The entire world of film is a *Doppelgänger* world that gives its viewers an extraordinary feeling of reality, and it can induce confusion, madness, and even self-destruction — or so, at least, many critics feared in film's first few decades. Cinema's figures become separated from the actors who play them and ultimately lead an independent existence, continuing to move about the screen even long after the actors who played them are gone. All of these problems are reflected in *Der Student von Prag*, and they echo the various arguments made in the *Kino-Debatte* about the power and danger of film as a medium. The evil deeds of the protagonist's mirror image might then be seen to reveal a deep underlying anxiety about the power of film to make people do things they wish they wouldn't do. This is a debate that, in various forms, is with us to this day.

³³ Wegener, "Neue Kinoziele," in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 347–48.

³⁴ Ewers, "Geleitwort zu 'Der Student von Prag,'" 29.

Part Two: Weimar Cinema 1919–1933



*Max Schreck as Count Orlock in F. W. Murnau's Nosferatu (1922).
Screen capture.*

3: Weimar Cinema 1919–1933: Historical Overview

WEIMAR CINEMA IS THE CLASSIC CINEMA of Germany, the period in which Germany was, along with the United States, at the pinnacle of world cinema production, at least in terms of film quality, and in which German cinema was at its most influential internationally and historically. The names of Germany's great movie directors of the Weimar period — Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Fritz Lang — and of German film stars like Emil Jannings and Marlene Dietrich became internationally known and recognized during this period. Many of them, such as Lubitsch, Lang, and Dietrich, ultimately wound up in Hollywood, either before or soon after the Nazi ascension to power put an end to the Weimar Republic in January of 1933. Weimar classics like Murnau's *Nosferatu* or Lang's *Metropolis* continue to have an impact on world cinema today, and Weimar Expressionism and the Weimar detective film ultimately mutated in the United States into film noir in the 1940s and 1950s, often under the leadership of directors who had gotten their start in Germany in the 1920s: people like Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, or Robert Siodmak.

The development of German cinema in the Weimar period was closely connected to political and economic events. In general, Germany's cultural strength in the 1920s stood in marked contrast to its political and military weakness. The Weimar Republic, which put an end to the *Kaiserreich* (empire) that had lasted from German national unification under Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1871 to the end of the First World War in 1918, was the first German democracy. From the very beginning, it was characterized by profound political instability. The Weimar Republic began with a humiliating national defeat — Germany's military defeat at the hands of England, France, and the United States, in which over two million German men lost their lives and many millions more were wounded — and ended in exhaustion and chaos in a kind of republican suicide, when the aged aristocratic war hero President Paul von Hindenburg, who had never been a strong proponent of German democracy anyway, handed power to Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party.

Weimar history is generally divided into three periods. The first period, 1918–23, represents the aftermath of the First World War, in which the German empire collapsed, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated, a

democratic Republic was formed, the economy suffered severely, and the country witnessed ongoing battles between left-wing groups propounding a socialist revolution and right-wing groups seeking a restoration of the monarchy or a dictatorship. This initial period of Weimar history culminated in the great inflation of 1923, in which the German currency, the Reichsmark, lost virtually all of its value, and many ordinary citizens saw their life savings disappear; it ended with the American-assisted stabilization of the currency at the end of 1923. The second period of Weimar history, 1924–29, was a period of relative political and economic stability in which the German economy recovered and even began to prosper. During this period, antagonisms between the left wing and the right wing diminished somewhat, and the political center grew stronger; Germany also entered into treaties of friendship with many of its former enemies. Finally, the 1929–33 period witnessed Germany's rapid slide into economic and political chaos; it ended with Hindenburg's appointment of Hitler as Chancellor of the *Reich* on January 30, 1933. This third period of Weimar history saw the onset of the world economic crisis known in the United States as the Great Depression, a massive rise in unemployment in Germany — over six million by 1932 — and increasingly violent and open street fights between the growing National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP — the Nazi party's official name) and the Communist party, which was dominated by the newly formed Soviet Union.

Paradoxically, the economic history of the German film industry more or less precisely mirrored the political and economic history of the Weimar Republic, but in a negative way. When Germany as a whole was doing well economically and politically — i.e., in the middle years of the Weimar Republic — the German film industry suffered; when Germany as a whole descended into turmoil and crisis — i.e., at the beginning and end of the Weimar Republic — the German film industry tended to prosper, or at least to consolidate its position with respect to foreign competitors. What at first seems counterintuitive turns out to make eminent economic and political sense. In the early years of the Weimar Republic, when the German currency was relatively worthless, the German market was not attractive to foreign filmmakers, and therefore the German film industry faced little economic competition. Moreover, the very weakness of the German currency gave German filmmakers an advantage when competing abroad: a movie like Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), made at a time of tremendous economic and political turmoil in Germany, was an economic and artistic success in the United States and elsewhere. With the stabilization of the German economy in 1924, the German market became an attractive target for foreign — particularly American — producers, and the German film industry went through years of financial crisis in which even prestige projects like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) turned into financial flops. Finally, with the onset of the worldwide economic crisis in 1929

and the simultaneous introduction of sound film in Germany, the German market once again began to turn in on itself, offering domestic filmmakers protection from international competition.

The political turmoil and uncertainty that so often characterized the Weimar Republic are well reflected in its films, from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* through F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh, 1924) and Lang's *Metropolis* to movies like G. W. Pabst's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera, 1931) and Lang's *M* (1931). In many of these films, particularly in *Metropolis*, one sees large groups of people stricken with uncertainty and fear and sometimes openly rebelling against the established political order. Many of the most important films of the Weimar Republic show established authority as problematic or even crippled. Cinema thus gave expression to a very real sense of change and insecurity that persisted throughout the Weimar Republic. At the same time, for many high-culture critics, cinema itself became associated with unwanted cultural or political change, and with the very masses who presumably represented a threat to the established order. Many of the same criticisms of cinema as an art form for the uneducated masses that had been leveled prior to 1918 continued to be leveled at cinema in the years of the Weimar Republic. In 1919, for instance, the conservative critic Wilhelm Stapel warned that cinema was contributing to the radicalization of the despised masses: "Under the influence of cinema a new kind of psychological type is growing up among us. A kind of person who 'thinks' only in crude generalizations, who lets himself be sucked without resistance from impression to impression, who no longer has the ability to make clear, self-determined judgments. The kind of person who already caused calamities during the revolution, and who will grow and grow, remaking culture (including political culture) in his own image, as more generations go through the psychological wringer of the cinematic apparatus. Cinema is creating a new form of human being who is morally and intellectually inferior: homo cinematicus."¹

The Weimar Republic has sometimes been called a *Republik ohne Republikaner* (a republic without republicans), meaning that it was characterized by a weak political center unable to resist the antidemocratic machinations of the strong left and right of the political spectrum. Democracy had been achieved only with the defeat of Germany's armies in France, and it came to be seen by many Germans on the right as a foreign import alien to the true German spirit, and by many Germans on the left as a continuation of the rule of Germany's previous economic elites by other means. Both the political right

¹ From *Deutsches Volkstum*, October 1919. Cited in Anton Kaes, "Film in der Weimarer Republik: Motor der Moderne," in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 39–98; here, 39. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German sources are my own.

and the political left found their expression in German film production of the Weimar Republic. As a kind of compensation for the loss of the monarchy and the international humiliation in the First World War, the film industry offered nostalgic Germans a rash of historical epics, frequently based on the Prussian hero Frederick the Great — from the Hungarian-born Arzèn von Cserèpy's four-part *Fridericus Rex* in 1922–23 to Gustav Ucicky's *Das Flötenkonzert von Sanssouci* (The Flute Concert of Sanssouci) in 1930 and Friedrich Zelnik's *Der Choral von Leuthen* (The Hymn of Leuthen), which opened a month after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. All of these films featured Otto Gebühr in the role of Frederick the Great and offered a Germany that had been deprived of its monarchy a phantasmatic king. Particularly toward the end of the Weimar Republic, left-wing filmmakers offered moviegoers different, more realistic films that dealt with contemporary social problems. Piel Jutzi's *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (Mother Krausen's Trip to Happiness, 1929), for instance, dealt with the plight of the urban working class and ended with the suicide of its protagonist; while Slatan Dudow's *Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt* (Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World, 1929), named after a working class campground in Berlin that features prominently in the film, made in cooperation with the playwright Bertolt Brecht and the composer Hanns Eisler, dealt with the struggle of the working class and the unemployed for economic fairness and challenged conventionally melodramatic notions of filmic storytelling.

Between Weimar's far left (represented largely by the KPD, the German Communist Party) and the Weimar right (represented particularly by the DNVP, the German National People's Party, as well as by Hitler's NSDAP), a group of centrists coalesced around the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Catholic Zentrumspartei (Center Party, whose name was already a political program), and the Deutsche Volkspartei (DVP, German People's Party) to form the Weimar Coalition of relatively weak and unstable governments that held the country together until the onset of Weimar's final crisis. Between 1919 and 1933 Germany saw over ten different governments and nine national elections. No chancellor was able to govern the country for as long as three years, and most chancellorships were much briefer. In the final years of the Weimar Republic the nation was essentially governed not by the democratic parliament but by presidential emergency decrees, since no single political party or even group of parties, including the former Weimar Coalition, was able to achieve a parliamentary majority. To its critics, the Weimar Republic seemed a perfect example of the failure and weakness of democracy and the need for dictatorial, decisive rule. Many Weimar films, such as Lang's *Metropolis*, reflect the political instability and turmoil of the Weimar years. Many others, from Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* to Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (1930) and Lang's *M* (1931), also depict a profound crisis in male subjectivity that accurately reflects significant currents of the

German psyche in the Weimar Republic. Male pride and honor had been severely wounded by the defeat in the First World War, and that wounded pride is clearly on display in German cinema of the period.

The term “Weimar” Republic derives from the fact that in 1919, when Germany’s national assembly met to draft a new constitution in the wake of the nation’s defeat, the capital Berlin was too dangerous to meet in, because it was full of struggles between the German military and right- and left-wing paramilitary groups; therefore, the assembly met in the sleepy provincial town of Weimar, where the streets were not full of groups of men fighting. It was in Weimar’s national theater that Germany’s new democratic constitution was ratified in 1919, with the town giving its name to the republic created by that constitution. Friedrich Ebert, the Social Democratic leader who became the first president of the Weimar Republic, was also hoping that a bit of the national pride and idealism associated with Weimar’s famous citizens Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller — the two primary figures of German classicism at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, whose statues stood in front of the national theater where the Weimar constitution was ratified — would rub off on the proceedings. Germany was seeking to invoke the aura of the *Kulturnation* in its re-founding of the *Staatsnation* (political nation). The reverence for German classicism and German literature also left its mark on the film of the Weimar Republic. F. W. Murnau’s *Faust* (1926) was a genuflection to Goethe’s most famous work, complete with specially composed rhymes by Gerhart Hauptmann, the Weimar Republic’s most famous living playwright, and Fritz Lang’s *Nibelungen* epics (*Siegfried* and *Kriemhilds Rache* [Kriemhild’s Revenge], both 1924), based on a medieval German epic, sought to demonstrate the national and artistic legitimacy of film. However, not all representatives of German high culture were satisfied with cinema as an artistic form: Thomas Mann, who had been disappointed by the film version of his celebrated novel *Buddenbrooks* in 1923, declared in 1928, a year before he won the Nobel Prize, that film “is not art, it is life and reality, and its effects, in their silent motion, are crudely sensational compared to the spiritual effects of art.”² When G. W. Pabst filmed Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s *Dreigroschenoper* at the beginning of the 1930s, after the introduction of sound film in Germany, Brecht actually sued the production company Nero Film for violating his rights as an author; although Brecht lost his lawsuit, he did ultimately receive twenty-five thousand marks from the production company and wrote an essay entitled *Der Dreigroschenprozeß* (The Threepenny Lawsuit) in which he addressed the dichotomy between capitalist society’s avowed celebration of the autonomous artistic genius on the one hand and its de facto violation of individual artistic rights on the other.³

² Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 85.

³ Bertolt Brecht, “The Threepenny Lawsuit,” in *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, trans. and ed. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), 147–99.

In the midst of the Weimar Republic's political instability and turmoil, German culture and science flourished. In fact, it could be argued that during the Weimar Republic Berlin became the cultural capital of the world. Playwrights and directors like Brecht, Ernst Toller, and Erwin Piscator created radical, pioneering works that constituted breakthroughs in modern theater. In music, composers like Arnold Schönberg, Kurt Weill, Paul Hindemith, Hanns Eisler, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and Ernst Krenek developed radically new and challenging forms, such as Schönberg's twelve-tone system. In architecture Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe espoused a new international style associated with the Bauhaus, an organization of progressive artists that thrived in Germany throughout the entire period from 1919 to 1933. Germany's art scene witnessed a powerful flowering of visual artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Otto Dix, Emil Nolde, and Max Beckmann, who pioneered styles like Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity, or New Sobriety). In the natural sciences physicists like Albert Einstein and Max Planck opened up some of the secrets of the universe, from relativity to quantum mechanics. In literature Thomas Mann, Alfred Döblin, and Gottfried Benn wrote pathbreaking novels and poems. And in philosophy Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger were doing major work on the problems of existence and phenomenology. The list could go on and on. In spite of all of its political and economic problems at this time, Germany was witnessing a veritable ferment of cultural and scientific activity at the very highest level.⁴ Film was very much a part of that ferment.

The Weimar Republic was also sexually freer than the *Kaiserreich* had been. Women now had the right to vote in Germany, and Weimar films such as Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (Pandora's Box, 1929) or *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (Diary of a Lost Girl, also 1929), both starring the American actress Louise Brooks, depicted sexually independent women who, for better or worse, insist on taking charge of their own fates. In films like Lang's *Metropolis* and Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel*, independent female sexuality even becomes a threat to the male ego. But films of the Weimar Republic did not just portray the problems and tensions of heterosexuality; some films also explicitly addressed homosexuality and the persecution of homosexuals. In 1919 — the same year that the Weimar Republic's constitution was ratified — Magnus Hirschfeld, a gay German Jew who pioneered the field of sexology in Germany, created the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexual Science) in Berlin; also in 1919, Hirschfeld helped create the film *Anders als die Anderen* (Different from the Others), directed by Richard Oswald and starring Conrad Veidt (who plays the somnambulist Cesare in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*) as a tortured

⁴ The classic statement on Weimar's cultural ferment is Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

homosexual who is blackmailed and ultimately commits suicide. Such films were intended to give strength and comfort to German homosexuals who still suffered from widespread discrimination under the notorious paragraph 175 of the Reich's criminal code, and to educate non-homosexuals about the plight of those who were sexually “different” from them. The aesthetically more demanding *Mädchen in Uniform* (Girls in Uniform, 1931), directed by Leontine Sagan, depicted the plight of a lesbian school-teacher and student in a repressive girls' boarding school. Films like *Anders als die Anderen* and *Mädchen in Uniform* reflected the liberalization of sexuality in the Weimar Republic, a period when Berlin and other major German cities featured thriving gay subcultures that exercised a powerful attraction on non-German homosexuals like the English writer Christopher Isherwood, whose short stories “Goodbye to Berlin” and “The Last of Mr. Norris” affectionately depicted Berlin's sexually liberal atmosphere; these stories ultimately resulted in the American musical *Cabaret* (1966) by John Kander and Fred Ebb, transformed into a popular movie with Liza Minelli in 1972.⁵ Thus Weimar Berlin's sexual freedom and cultural ferment ultimately had an impact on the American sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. However, even at the beginning of the Weimar Republic, conservative critics objected to the new openness of German cinema in sexual matters, and they explicitly connected forbidden expressions of sexuality with criminality. One legal expert, for instance, complained in 1919 that films about sexuality and criminality were particularly dangerous for vulnerable German youth, for whom “the danger of seduction is far greater” than for adults. “How innumerable are the young people,” he said, “that cinema has brought before the courts and sent to jails, and every day it brings new victims. The judge at juvenile court, the pastor, the defense lawyer looking for reasons for the crime hears again and again from relatives of the youth: he was incapable of anything else, he had to run to the movies, and there he sees and learns how he is to do it.”⁶

Aesthetically, the most important influence on German film during the Weimar period was Expressionism. Although it had a significant forebear in the work of the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863–1944), Expressionism was a specifically German artistic style pioneered in the first decade of the twentieth century by painters like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff of the group *Die Brücke* (The Bridge, founded in 1905) and Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc of *Der blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider, founded in 1911). The program of Expressionism is evident in the name itself: it is a highly psychological kind of art that seeks not to record what is happening on the outside (like Impressionism,

⁵ Christopher Isherwood, *The Berlin Stories* (New York: J. Laughlin, 1963).

⁶ Cited in Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 42–44.

pioneered in France in the 1870s) but to express what is happening on the inside, within the psyche of an individual human being. Whereas Impressionism seeks to accurately record the play of light and color in the outside world, eschewing sharp contours and favoring gentle transitions, curves, and blurring, Expressionism seeks access to an interior world characterized by garish and unnatural colors, jagged lines, and sharp distinctions between color spheres. As an artistic style, Expressionism had already been at the forefront of German art by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, but it was only at war's end that it made its breakthrough into German film with Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. In film, Expressionism is characterized particularly by the use of chiaroscuro (an Italian word containing the words for light and dark and indicating sharp contrasts between light and shadow), by jagged and bizarre sets that indicate an otherworldly or inhuman space, or that reflect the torments of the individual soul, and by stylized, unnatural acting. Whereas Expressionism in the visual arts more or less disappeared after 1924, with the relative stabilization of the German economy and the political situation, and was replaced by *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity, or New Sobriety), it remained a powerful influence in German film until the end of the Weimar Republic. Expressionism also had a major impact on German literature, influencing figures like Ernst Toller and Fritz von Unruh, who wrote Expressionist poems and plays characterized by gigantic emotions and inner and outer turmoil. As an artistic style in the visual arts, literature, and film, Expressionism well reflected the situation of a Germany that was itself undergoing radical turmoil, change, and uncertainty. As Lotte Eisner wrote in her study *The Haunted Screen*, the First World War gave "a new stimulus . . . to the eternal [German] attraction towards all that is obscure and undetermined, towards the kind of brooding speculative reflection called *Grübelei* which culminated in the apocalyptic doctrine of Expressionism."⁷

The three most important Weimar-era directors in Germany were Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang. Lubitsch was above all a consummate director of social comedies such as *Ich möchte kein Mann sein* (I Don't Want to Be a Man, 1918), *Die Austernprinzessin* (The Oyster Princess, 1919), or *Meine Frau, die Filmschauspielerin* (My Wife the Movie Star, also 1919). Such comedies disprove the common stereotype that German film is always serious or depressing. Murnau, famous for the revolutionary camera work of *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh, 1923), directed the first Dracula movie, *Nosferatu*, in 1922; in that film he made horror a form of high art. Murnau was very much a product of German cultural traditions, and one of his most famous movies, *Faust* (1926), was based on the old

⁷ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969), 9.

German legend. Fritz Lang was a skilled director of crime films such as the two-part *Die Spinnen* (The Spiders, 1919–20), *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (Dr. Mabuse the Gambler, 1922), and *M* (1931). But he also excelled at science fiction with *Metropolis* (1927), the retelling of traditional German stories (the two-part *Die Nibelungen*, 1924), and Expressionist lyricism (*Der müde Tod* [Destiny], 1921). The fact that Weimar cinema's three most important directors all ultimately wound up in Hollywood says a great deal about the power of Hollywood in world cinema and about German political and cultural history in the 1920s and 1930s.

Throughout the 1920s, cinema continued to rise in prestige and popularity in Germany. By 1920 there were 3,731 movie theaters in Germany; ten years later there were over 5,000. Moreover, the 1920s witnessed the creation of several very large, grand movie theaters designed in the style of opera houses or princely theaters; some of these massive movie theaters were capable of seating as many as two thousand patrons. One of Germany's largest theaters was the Ufa-Palast in Berlin, whose very name (palace) suggested grandeur and nobility; the Ufa-Palast, which still exists to this day, seats 2,165 people. Such large and ornate venues indicated that movies in Germany — and elsewhere, as indicated, for instance, in the still-extant Radio City Music Hall in New York, which dates back to 1932 — had become not just a popular entertainment but an attraction with significant cultural prestige. The architecture of such movie palaces declared that cinema strove to portray itself as an art form on a par with opera and theater, and that cinema's audiences sought all the comfort and luxury afforded to the patrons of the more traditional elite arts. In the 1920s, between one and two million Germans went to the *Kino* every day, which means that the average German went to the movies between seven and fourteen times a year.

In the 1920s the German star system blossomed, with major male and female actors becoming celebrities throughout the country. Female stars like Henny Porten, Asta Nielsen, Louise Brooks, Pola Negri, and Lilian Harvey won the hearts of many Germans, while a male star like Willy Fritsch embodied the cinematic ideal of the dashing, sexy young man. Major actors from the German theater, like Emil Jannings, Heinrich George, and Werner Krauss, started working for the cinema. Even Weimar literature reflects the status of film and film stars as cultural commodities. For instance, in Erich Kästner's celebrated novel *Fabian* (1931), the major female figure ultimately becomes a film star, thus achieving the goal of all her dreams: power and recognition. Arnold Zweig's bittersweet short story “Cinéma” (1931) features an unattractive, down-on-his-luck adolescent whose entire fantasy life takes place in the world of the movies. Hans Fallada's Depression-themed novel *Kleiner Mann, was nun?* (Little Man, What Now? 1932) underlines the difference between the slick fantasies of the movie world and the petty reality of everyday life. Such works illustrate the way in which movies, by the 1920s, had become a major

cultural commodity, extending their influence even into the previously dominant and more prestigious world of literature. They also demonstrate the way that movies were able to attract their audience by offering a kind of alternate reality that was better and more attractive than the real world. In movies, Arnold Zweig's pathetic, pimply protagonist could become a dashing, swashbuckling hero and win the beautiful maiden as his lover, and Fallada's struggling young parents could enjoy the pleasures of the comfortable and beautiful upper classes, at least vicariously.

One writer, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, summed up movies' function in such contexts as an “*Ersatz für die Träume*” (substitute for dreams). According to Hofmannsthal, movies allowed ordinary people to enter into a happier world; at the same time, they prevented ordinary people from dreaming their own dreams. “What people are looking for in the cinema,” Hofmannsthal wrote, “is a substitute for dreams. They want to fill their imagination with images, strong images, that bring together the essence of life; that seem to come from inside the viewer himself and that go right back into his gut.”⁸ Movies were an *Ersatz*, a substitute, not the real thing — not even a real dream, since Hofmannsthal claimed that contemporary German working-class people did not have access to genuine self-created dreams. Instead, films had to be industrially mass-produced for them. German cultural critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who lived through the Weimar Republic, were later to call the film industry part of the *Kulturindustrie* (culture industry); they claimed that throughout the modern world people's private lives and even their dreams were being subjected to the same economic regimentation and instrumentalization as human bodies in Henry Ford's automobile factories or as the bodies of dancers in spectacular stage shows like those of the Tiller girls, where large numbers of “girls” moved in absolute unison on a stage.⁹

As the product of an industry requiring large amounts of capital investment and significant teamwork among screenwriters, directors, set designers, cinematographers, and actors, movies generally fell into particular generic categories that were believed to have a particular impact on the audience and therefore to be likely to make money. Among the most prominent genres in Weimar Germany were historical movies, like *Fridericus Rex*; exotic adventure movies like Joe May's *Das indische Grabmal* (The

⁸ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Der Ersatz für die Träume,” in *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über den Stummfilm*, ed. Fritz Göttinger (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1984), 446–49; here, 446.

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “Kulturindustrie, Aufklärung als Massenbetrug,” in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1998), 128–76. English translation: “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991), 120–67.

Indian Tomb, 1921); melodramas like Leopold Jessner and Paul Leni's *Hinterstreppe* (Back Stairs, 1921); movies about the dangers of life on the street, often called "street films" from Karl Grune's melodrama *Die Straße* (The Street, 1923); detective and crime movies like Fritz Lang's Mabuse series, from *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* to *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, 1933); and the "mountain films" pioneered by Arnold Fanck, such as *Der heilige Berg* (The Holy Mountain, 1926, starring Leni Riefenstahl and Luis Trenker), *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (The White Hell of Piz Palu, 1929, starring Leni Riefenstahl and Gustav Diessl), and *Stürme über dem Montblanc* (Storm over Mont Blanc, 1930, starring Leni Riefenstahl, Sepp Rist, and Ernst Udet). Together with the film theorist and writer Béla Balázs, Riefenstahl went on to direct her own mountain movie, *Das blaue Licht* (The Blue Light, 1932) before making documentaries for the Nazi party after the end of the Weimar Republic.

Whereas German films had enjoyed a virtual monopoly in their own market during the First World War, the end of the war naturally saw the end of protectionist barriers and the beginning of stiff foreign competition, particularly from American films. By 1920, largely thanks to the collapse of the French film industry during the war, American cinema had become the most popular in the world, a position that it has not relinquished since. Just as the American economy as a whole had profited from the war, so too did the American film industry. During the 1920s, German cinema was Hollywood's most serious international challenger. By 1923, the year of Germany's great inflation, the United States was already exporting over 100 feature-length films to Germany. The stabilization of the German currency at the end of 1923 made the German market even more attractive to American film producers. From 1926 to 1928, the film market in Germany was divided as follows: German share: 42.5 percent, Hollywood: 39.5 percent, all other countries combined: 18 percent. From 1929 to 1931 the film market was divided differently: Germany: 48.4 percent, Hollywood: 31.3 percent, all other countries combined: 20.3 percent. As these statistics indicate, German films predominated in the German market, but American films offered stiff competition, and no other country even came close to challenging the dominance of these two cinemas. The middle period of the 1920s, in which the German film industry faced increasing challenges in its efforts to compete with American cinema, witnessed an agreement between Germany's Ufa conglomerate and the American film producers Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (known as the Parufamet Agreement) designed to ensure distribution of Ufa films in the United States and films by the American producers in Germany. This agreement did not particularly help the struggling Ufa, and in 1927 the right-wing German industrialist Alfred Hugenberg came to the rescue, making Ufa part of his media empire. The German government made several attempts to help the nation's film industry in its struggle against the Americans: in the early 1920s it required that

for every foreign film shown in Germany, a German film had to be shown abroad, and later on in the 1920s it required that for every foreign film imported to Germany, a new German film had to be made. This resulted in the production of a great many German films made not for the purposes of quality but simply to fulfill the government quota as cheaply as possible. In the mid-1920s, as American cinema began to gain ground on the German market, the critic Herbert Jhering complained that what was happening in Germany was essentially an imperialist takeover on the part of the United States at the expense of German high culture: “The number of people who watch movies and don’t read books is going into the millions. They are all being conquered by American tastes, transformed into identical, uniform beings. The problem is not Chaplin, Keaton, or Harold Lloyd but the crude, sweet run-of-the-mill films imported in overwhelming numbers from America or simply made here. American film is the new world militarism. It’s coming closer. It’s far more dangerous than Prussian militarism. It doesn’t just gobble up human individuals. It gobbles up entire nations.”¹⁰

The steep drop in the popularity of American films in Germany between the 1926–28 period and the 1929–31 period is attributable to a single simple but highly significant factor: the advent of sound film in Germany in 1929, which meant that American films were suddenly faced with a significant language barrier that made them difficult for German audiences to understand. Of course, American films were dubbed into German on the German market, but nevertheless such dubbed films were less popular than films originally shot in German. The advent of sound was the single greatest change in the history of film in the 1920s, and probably in the entire history of film from 1895 to the present: suddenly films were no longer “silent” but could have dialogue and a synchronized soundtrack. This meant that films became less purely visual and more like conventional theater, with spoken dialogue and conventional language.

Sound was introduced in the United States in 1927, two years earlier than in Germany. Al Jolson’s sound film *The Jazz Singer* was premiered in New York in October of that year. It was not until June of 1929 that Jolson’s second Warner studios picture, *The Singing Fool*, premiered in Germany, inaugurating sound film there. The first years of the sound industry witnessed intense legal battles about which companies had the best and most valid sound technology — essentially a war between German and American companies.¹¹ The primary protagonists in this war were AT&T and General Electric in the United States, with their subsidiaries Western Electric and

¹⁰ Herbert Jhering, “UFA und Buster Keaton,” in *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht: Vier Jahrzehnte Theater und Film, 1924–1929*, ed. Jhering (Berlin: Aufbau, 1959), 2:508–9; here, 509.

¹¹ Thomas J. Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U of California P, 1994), 224–25.

RCA; and Tobis (Tonbild-Syndikat) and the electric companies Siemens & Halske and A.E.G. in Germany. Tobis won the right to create sound films in Germany, while the two German electric companies, via their subsidiary Klangfilm, won exclusive rights to machines that could reproduce sound in movie theaters. The battle between German and American companies over sound technology lasted until June of 1930, when the competing groups essentially agreed to divide the world into zones of noncompetition and competition. The German group won the rights to purvey sound equipment to most of Europe, while the American group won the right to distribute sound equipment to most of the English-speaking world.¹²

Some basic statistics on production show how quickly the introduction of sound film changed the cinema landscape in Germany: in 1928 Germany made 224 films, all of them silent. In 1929 Germany made 183 films, with 175 silent and 8 sound. The next year, in 1930, Germany made a total of 146 films, of which 100 were sound and only 46 silent. By 1931, Germany made only two silent films and the other 142 films were sound. Within two years there had been a total revolution in technology, and the silent film essentially disappeared from German production. America's role in the German film market steadily decreased from 1928 on, going from a total of 199 films in 1928 to only 84 films in 1931.

The introduction of sound to cinema accomplished two things: it naturally made film more national and less international, since film now relied on a particular language. As film critic Fritz Olimsky declared after the breakthrough of sound technology in film, “We'll have to become more and more accustomed to the idea that sound film is the pacemaker of a predominantly nationally oriented film production.”¹³ Second, sound technology made film more like the conventional theater, since it could now have dialogue. This resemblance to theater was further heightened by the fact that, since early sound technology was still relatively primitive, actors needed to stay close to the microphones. This restricted their movements to a smaller stage, and also limited the movement of the camera itself, which had, in Lotte Eisner's words, become “unchained” with the production of F. W. Murnau's breakthrough film *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh) in 1924.¹⁴

Given the fact that some of film's defenders in the teens of the twentieth century had argued that film was superior to conventional forms of literature because of its lack of language, it is understandable that not all critics or film theorists were happy about the development of sound technology. Some viewed it as a step backwards towards conventional theater and conventional language and away from the unique visuality and fluidity previously achieved

¹² On the battles over sound film, see Peter Bächlin, *Der Film als Ware* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Fischer Taschenbuch, 1975), 56–65.

¹³ Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin*, 232.

¹⁴ Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 213.

by silent cinema. One of the most prominent of the critics of sound was the theorist Rudolf Arnheim, who claimed that the essence of cinema is silent movement because of its unique focus on visuality. Arnheim believed that the attachment of sound to images actually hampered them, returning the cinema to the aesthetics of ordinary, stilted stage productions. Sound was not an aid to visuality, Arnheim argued; rather, it placed the visual into an audio straightjacket. Arnheim proclaimed that it was impossible “to transfer the montage technique of the silent film to the sound film. Because the superiority that we have painfully reached for the silent film, which constructs a scene out of the multitude of single shots, cannot be utilized in the sound film. An acoustic presentation always appears in the form of a temporal process, whereas an optical one must be described as a static scene.”¹⁵ The visual, in other words, was more flexible and allowed for more simultaneity than the aural, which required chronological ordering; montage — the juxtaposition of a great many photographic images simultaneously — was possible visually but impossible aurally. In general, Arnheim believed that sound made movies inflexible and boring. Sound was, he believed, a technological gimmick that avoided the specific aesthetic challenges of silent film.

The leftist film theorist Béla Balázs was also highly critical of the introduction of sound. Balázs believed that film was a fundamentally visual, not an aural medium, and that its essence was the close-up on the human face, a technique that was impossible in the conventional theater. As early as 1924 — i.e., before the introduction of sound film — Balázs wrote that “the silence of film is not a lack of expressive possibilities but rather constitutes, in itself, film’s special and richest expressive possibility.”¹⁶ Six years later, after the introduction of sound film, Balázs declared that “silent film was on the path to achieving a psychological differentiation, a spiritual creative power that hardly any art form has had before. Then the technological invention of sound film crashed down like a catastrophe.”¹⁷ However, Balázs believed that sound film offered new opportunities as well as dangers: “the acoustic film will open up for us the language of things, just as the optical film revealed the face of things. It will teach us to hear the world, just as the optical film taught us to see.”¹⁸

As early as 1922, the critic Herbert Jhering had been less sanguine about the possibilities of sound. He claimed that “talking movies are not

¹⁵ Cited in Sabine Hake, *The Cinema’s Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany 1907–1933* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993), 281.

¹⁶ Cited in Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 81.

¹⁷ Cited in Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 81.

¹⁸ Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 82.

¹⁸ Hake, *The Cinema’s Third Machine*, 240.

just a danger because they mechanize the most spiritual and intellectual attribute human beings are blessed with — words — but also because they abrogate the laws of cinema that have developed over the course of film history. Talking movies negate what moving pictures had achieved in order to overcome mechanization: the abbreviation and the rhythm. Because talking movies force actors to move in conjunction with words. The talking picture is nothing more than a reproduction of reality. The moving picture, through its own laws, stands apart from reality as something new.”¹⁹

Because sound had originated in the United States, its advent in the cinema also caused German critics to take a sharp look at American cinema as German cinema’s most serious international competitor. Many critics were in agreement with Arnheim that sound represented a technological gimmick that was not aesthetically convincing. The critic Maxim Ziese, for instance, wrote: “In the search for a flaw in its production method for silent film, movie-America hit upon the brilliant way out not of seeking the shortcoming in its intellectual approach, but of finding it in the technical imperfection of the medium. At the moment America is trying to remedy the deficiencies in its worldview, which carried over into its films, by expanding filmic technology.”²⁰

Another critic wrote that America was trying to protect itself from the superiority of Russian and German imports by lulling its audiences “back into the slumber of mental inertia.” He declared: “Millions were invested in the play toy, sound film, and when the harmless mental babies enjoyed the noise, when this record player nation was captivated by musical hits, the movie moguls of Hollywood went back unscrupulously with regard to screenplays to the primitive beginnings of 1905 . . . For the present they calculate only in dollars. But one day they will have to reinsert the notion of film art into their calculation.”²¹

It is easy to dismiss such criticisms now as ridiculous attempts to stop the march of time and progress. However, if one looks with an open mind at the visual beauty, elegance, and fluidity of silent film classics like Murnau’s *Der letzte Mann* or his American film *Sunrise* (1927), it is hard to escape the conclusion that there is some truth to the criticisms of sound film, and that silent film had indeed, by the middle of the 1920s, reached a remarkable pinnacle of artistic accomplishment. Film had now truly become an art form on a par with literature, music, and painting. And with Expressionism, German cinema had achieved a unique visual style that continues to influence world cinema to this day.

¹⁹ Herbert Jhering, “Der akustische Film,” in *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht: Vier Jahrzehnte Theater und Film, 1909–1923*, ed. Jhering (Berlin: Aufbau, 1958), 1:428–30; here, 429.

²⁰ Cited in Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin*, 226.

²¹ Cited in Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin*, 227.



Cesare abducts Jane against an Expressionist background.
Courtesy of the Filmmuseum Potsdam.

4: *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) or Film as Hypnosis

Director: Robert Wiene

Cinematographer: Willy Hameister

Screenplay: Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer

Producer: Decla Filmgesellschaft (Erich Pommer)

Production Design: Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig

Costume Design: Walter Reimann

German Release Date: February 26, 1920

Actors: Werner Krauss (Dr. Caligari); Conrad Veidt (Cesare);

Friedrich Feher (Francis); Lil Dagover (Jane Olsen); Hans

Heinrich von Twardowski (Alan); Rudolf Lettinger (Dr. Olsen);

Rudolf Klein-Rogge (criminal)

DAS *CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari), the quintessential example of German Expressionist cinema, was both popular with the general public and well respected by critics. It was recognized abroad as representative of a distinct German cinematic style characterized by Expressionist set designs, careful studio work and photography, and intense psychological exploration. For Lotte Eisner, it was in the “mysterious world” of Expressionism, particularly as epitomized by *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, “that the German cinema found its true nature.”¹ *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* is an early psychological and criminal thriller — foreshadowing such films as Fritz Lang’s series about Dr. Mabuse, the evil criminal mastermind — and it is also an early horror film, laying the groundwork for films like F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, as well as subsequent horror movies.² At the same time, the possibly evil genius of the film’s title, Caligari, embodied the threatening power that the critic Siegfried Kracauer believed Germans were all too prone to worship slavishly. For Kracauer and others, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, with its undeniable cinematic power, seemed to focus and make visible some

¹ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969), 17.

² On Caligari’s influence on subsequent horror movies, see S. S. Prawer, *Caligari’s Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980).

of the neuroses plaguing the Weimar Republic. Lotte Eisner likewise believed that *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* resonated with “the tortured soul of contemporary Germany,” seeming to present that soul with “the reflection of its own grimacing image.”³ Kracauer argued that the film reflected Germans’ post-First World War “retreat into themselves”—away from engagement with the political sphere—while at the same time suggesting that “a psychological revolution” was preparing “itself in the depths of the collective soul.”⁴ *Caligari* was “a premonition of Hitler,” Kracauer believed.⁵ Both because of its own merits as the pathbreaking Expressionist film and because of Kracauer’s prominent use of the film in his book *From Caligari to Hitler*, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* continues to influence the historiography of German cinema and to be one of the most hotly debated movies of the Weimar Republic.

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari was directed by the German-born Robert Wiene, who had previously worked in both theater and film, and it featured camera work by Willy Hameister, who was also to work with Wiene on a number of subsequent movies. The film’s revolutionary design was by three Expressionist artists active in cinema: Hermann Warm, Walter Röhrig, and Walter Reimann. As Hermann Warm later recalled, after reading the original scenario for the movie, he and his colleagues “realized that a subject like this needed something out of the ordinary in the way of sets. Reimann, whose painting in those days had Expressionist tendencies, suggested doing the sets Expressionistically. We immediately set to work roughing up designs in that style.”⁶ The designers then approached Wiene with their Expressionist concept, to which he readily agreed.

Erich Pommer, the great German producer who was to influence cinema strongly during the Weimar Republic, had a slightly different view of the film’s turn toward Expressionism. As he later explained, German cinema chose Expressionism as a way of differentiating itself from American and French cinema in the wake of the First World War: “Germany was defeated; how could she make films that would compete with others? It would have been impossible to try and imitate Hollywood or the French.

¹ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969), 17.

² On Caligari’s influence on subsequent horror movies, see S. S. Prawer, *Caligari’s Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980).

³ Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 17.

⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947), 67.

⁵ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 72.

⁶ Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 19.

So we tried something new: the expressionist or stylized films. This was possible because Germany had an overflow of good artists and writers, a strong literary tradition, and a great tradition of theater. This provided a basis of good, trained actors. World War I finished the French industry; the problem for Germany was to try to compete with Hollywood.”⁷ George A. Huaco has called this a strategy of “production-differentiation.”⁸

According to Kracauer — who in turn bases his account largely on an account by the Czech screenwriter Hans Janowitz — the story, originally created by Janowitz and the Austrian Carl Mayer, was partly influenced by Janowitz’s near-encounter with a sex murderer in Hamburg in 1913 and Mayer’s unpleasant experiences with an army psychiatrist in the First World War.⁹ Kracauer accuses Wiene of having added a reactionary frame story to the original scenario by Janowitz and Mayer, thus transforming a purportedly revolutionary story into a conformist one. However, the original scenario, which resurfaced in 1976 and was published in 1995, also contained a frame story — albeit a story different from the one that was ultimately filmed — thus disproving Janowitz’s and Kracauer’s assertions about Wiene.¹⁰

As a result of its frame story, *Caligari* actually tells two stories — one story within the other. The outer story, with which the movie begins and ends, is set in a madhouse, where two patients sit on a bench in a courtyard. The first patient announces that there are spirits all around, while the second patient, Francis, begins to tell the other a strange story. It is this second story, the story-within-the-story, that makes up the bulk of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. In other words, the bulk of the film is apparently — but not definitely, since the film tends to destabilize any narrative position — narrated by a madman. What the audience sees throughout most of the film is therefore not reliable truth but possibly the visions of a madman. *Caligari*’s sets and lighting, as well as its stylized acting, seem to show the world as experienced by a madman. However, unsettlingly, the film’s Expressionist style governs not just the framed story, the one

⁷ Cited in George A. Huaco, *The Sociology of Film Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 35–36.

⁸ Huaco, *The Sociology of Film Art*, 36.

⁹ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 61–62. Janowitz’s reminiscences, available to Kracauer and entitled *Caligari: The Story of a Famous Story*, are in the Theater Collection of the New York Public Library. See Uli Jung and Walter Schatzberg, *Beyond Caligari: The Films of Robert Wiene* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), 51–76.

¹⁰ Jung and Schatzberg, *Beyond Caligari*, 74, note 19. The script was published as *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wienes Film von 1919/1920*, ed. Helga Belach and Hans-Michael Bock (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995).

told by Francis, but also the framing narration, the one that seems to be an objective account of reality. As a reviewer for the *New York Times* wrote in April of 1921, “everything is unreal in ‘The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.’ There is nothing of normalcy about it.”¹¹ Although Kracauer recognizes this fact, acknowledging that “Expressionist ornaments also overrun the film’s concluding episode,” he does not allow it to cast doubt on his disparagement of the framing narration as reactionary and conformist.¹² In *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* Expressionism does not just represent the world as seen from the perspective of a madman; it also seems to portray an inherently unstable world in which any viewpoint, including the viewpoint of the supposedly sane Dr. Caligari, is thrown into question. The audience of *Caligari* does enter into the world of Francis’s brain, but in the end it is unclear whether Francis is the madman and Caligari is sane, or vice versa — or whether both are insane. In *Caligari* shapes, things, and light begin to take on a life of their own, as if the entire world were animated by a will that is other than human.¹³ The 1921 *New York Times* reviewer asserted that the film “gives dimensions and meaning to space, making it an active part of the story, instead of merely the conventional and inert background,” and for him this was the key to the film’s “importance as a work of cinematography.”¹⁴ In the end, the film is not just about one unfortunate madman; it is about an entire world that is possibly out of balance. In *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, filmed entirely inside a studio, there is no access to a natural world beyond the realm of the tortured human psyche. Even the movie’s trees are twisted and leafless.

Francis’s story is set in the fictional town of Holstenwall — in reality Holstenwall is part of Hamburg, not far from the red-light district known as the Reeperbahn — and it begins with a visit to town by a traveling fair. The people in town go out to enjoy the fair, among them two students: the narrator Francis and his friend Alan. One of the acts at the fair is a magicianlike figure named Caligari (played by the prolific German stage and screen actor Werner Krauss, who ultimately became a Nazi and performed a number of minor Jewish roles in the notorious antisemitic film *Jud Süß* [1940]), whose performance features an almost inhuman-looking somnambulist named Cesare (played by the equally prolific stage and screen actor Conrad Veidt, who, in an interesting bit of historical symmetry, went to England after the Nazis came to power in 1933 and played the lead role in the English film *Jew Süß* [1934], which is actually a critique of antisemitism). Cesare somewhat resembles later images of

¹¹ “The Screen,” *The New York Times*, 4 April 1921, 18. (No author specified.)

¹² Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 70.

¹³ See Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 23.

¹⁴ “The Screen,” *The New York Times*, 4 April 1921, 18.

Frankenstein's monster in subsequent American horror movies; in particular the moment when Cesare first opens his eyes from within his coffinlike box — thus becoming not just a spectacle but a spectator — points forward to many similar scenes in Frankenstein and Dracula movies. Most of the time Cesare is kept in the box — his “cabinet” — by his master, unable to see or be seen, but during Caligari's performance, the box is opened, and Caligari invites members of his audience to have their future told by the ghoulish somnambulist. Francis and Alan watch with fascination as Cesare awakens from his deathlike trance, and Cesare also tells Alan's future: that very night Alan will die. Cesare, of course, is right. That night Alan really does die, the victim of a murder. Evidently a madman is loose in Holstenwall. The paranoia and fear of murder and mayhem that ensues is a portent of things to come in German cinema of the Weimar Republic.

Of course, Francis wants to get to the bottom of the crime, which is not the first of its kind. And of course he suspects Caligari himself of foul play. After a little sleuthing he discovers what is happening: Caligari has hypnotized Cesare into being a killer. When Cesare tells the future, he is simply proclaiming what he himself will make happen, at the behest of the evil Caligari. Francis's story comes to a climax with an exciting scene in which Francis chases Caligari into a madhouse, where he discovers, to his horror, that Caligari is the director of the institution. Among the papers of the asylum's director, Francis finds a book about the power of hypnotism and evidence of Caligari's evil plans to murder people by using a somnambulist surrogate. Francis then reveals what he knows about Caligari to the other authorities in the institution, and his story ends with Caligari in a straitjacket. The evil hypnotic mastermind who had sought to transform his patients into murderers has been caught.

The catch is that the end of Francis's story is not the end of the film itself; it is just the end of Francis's story. Francis's story is followed by a return to the framing, narration, in which Francis sits on the bench with his fellow asylum inmate. It turns out that Caligari is not in a straitjacket at all, and that he is very much in control of the insane asylum of which he is the director. It is not Caligari but Francis who is evidently the madman, and it is Francis, not Caligari, who is under control. In one of the final shots of Francis's story, and also at the end of the framing story around it, there is a close-up iris (a circular shot that limits the scene and resembles the anatomical structure in the eye) of Caligari himself — in the first instance in a straitjacket, in the second instance as a threatening figure who is taking control of Francis — now in a straitjacket himself. The parallelism of these two endings undermines any straightforward reading of Caligari as sane and Francis as insane.¹⁵ The final iris focusing

¹⁵ See Jung and Schatzberg, *Beyond Caligari*, 66.

on Caligari places the sanity of Caligari in question, thus undermining the seemingly stable frame story. In the end there is no certainty: is it Francis who is insane? Or is it Caligari? Or are they both insane? It is hard to know what is really “real” in this movie, or if there is such a thing as reality at all. Perhaps the whole world is a madhouse.

Every scene in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* radiates horror and foreboding, including the movie’s end, in which Francis is in a straitjacket and Caligari promises to cure him, but a number of the movie’s scenes deserve special mention. In one early scene Caligari appears at a town office building to request permission from the town clerk to open his tent at the fairground. This scene is a wonderful example of Expressionist set design. The clerk sits on an absurdly high stool, towering over the small and humiliated Caligari. He is entirely focused on his paperwork and treats Caligari arrogantly. The power of the official and the weakness of the supplicant are expressed in the set design itself. (That night, of course, the clerk is the first victim of Cesare’s murder spree.) The same expressiveness of set design can be found in the courtyard of the insane asylum. Here everything is out of proportion — the people too big and the building too small — and a bizarre pattern on the courtyard floor seems to reflect the compulsive disorder in the patients’ brains. This is an insane asylum that seems designed not to heal people but to drive them mad.

Willy Hameister’s camera works with contrasts between light and dark. The most famous such contrast occurs in the scene where Cesare enters a bedroom in order to kill the sleeping Alan. The audience does not see Cesare himself, but rather his shadow on the wall, and in particular the silhouette of the knife he is wielding. The audience never sees the actual act; what it sees is the shadow play of the murder.

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari works with a number of key themes, the primary one being the destabilized contrast between insanity and sanity and hence the destabilization of the very notion of sanity itself. This is interwoven with the themes of paranoia and violence: the town is being plagued by a murderer, and it seems that anyone could be a victim at any time — and that the murderer could be anywhere. *Caligari* and a number of subsequent Weimar movies show an authority figure who is violent and possibly insane. That figure is the focus of a third theme: brutal and irrational authority. The film thematizes this both in instances when Caligari is a victim of oppressive authority, as with the city clerk described above, and when he himself is the authority as the foreboding director of the insane asylum.

Like its prewar predecessor *Der Student von Prag*, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* is also heavily influenced by German Romanticism. The camera’s focus on Cesare’s shadow harks back to the Romantic motif of the shadow that becomes detached from its body and begins to act on its own. In a sense, Cesare is precisely such a shadow: he no longer has control over

his own actions and instead carries out the will of the hypnotist Caligari. Even Cesare's dark outfit emphasizes his shadowlike qualities. More specifically, though, the film bears similarities to *Der Sandmann* (The Sandman, 1816), a psychological horror story by E. T. A. Hoffmann that also inspired an essay by Sigmund Freud. Francis, the film's possibly insane narrator, strongly resembles the protagonist Nathanael in Hoffmann's novella, while Caligari resembles the villains Coppola and Spalanzani. Even the somnambulist Cesare harks back to a figure in *Der Sandmann*: the mannequin Olimpia who is created by Spalanzani and is completely under his control. For Freud, Hoffmann's story provides a good example of what Freud terms *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny) — something that is both familiar and frighteningly strange, an everyday object or event with a nightmarish, dreamlike quality.¹⁶ Part of the nightmarish fear of such scenarios is the loss of power and control, which Freud associates with castration anxiety. This is very much the sense that viewers of Caligari also have: at the end of the movie they return to the seemingly familiar setting of the insane asylum, but Francis's story and the doubts about Caligari's sanity make this familiar (*heimlich*) setting uncanny (*unheimlich*); at the end of the movie Francis has indeed lost power and control, as he helplessly awaits whatever "cure" Caligari has in store for him.

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, then, pays homage both to its Romantic predecessors and to the then-current debates about the efficacy or dangers of psychiatry. The central problem of Janowitz and Mayer's original screenplay (in which Caligari himself was clearly insane, while Francis was sane and living happily ever after) had been the question of whether a psychiatrist can force his patients to do evil things while under hypnosis, or while sleepwalking, that they would not otherwise be capable of doing. Robert Wiene's transformation of the original story keeps that question intact — hypnosis and crime remain the obsession of Caligari in Francis's story — but eliminates any notion of a happy ending.

In his book *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer invokes *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* as a prime example of what he sees as German cinema's — and therefore by extension the German nation's — failure to rebel against deranged authority. In Kracauer's view, if the film told just the rebel Francis's story — just the story of Caligari's capture and punishment, ending with the brutal authority figure's appearance in a straitjacket — then it would be the story of successful and praiseworthy rebellion against authority and might be a sign of German psychic health and independence. But Kracauer argues that by undermining Francis as

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche," in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1986), 12:229–68. English translation: "The 'Uncanny,'" trans. Alex Strachey, in *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 193–233.

narrator of the main story, Robert Wiene withdrew any critical thrust the film might otherwise have had against established authority figures. (Here Kracauer curiously ignores Caligari's own status as a victim of authority in the scene with the town clerk.) Instead, Kracauer argues, the film subscribes to what he sees as the typical German stance: obedience to authority and unwillingness to resist tyrants. This argument leads Kracauer to his claim about *Caligari*'s significance as a portent of the German future: "Caligari is a very specific premonition in the sense that he uses hypnotic power to force his will upon his tool — a technique foreshadowing, in content and purpose, that manipulation of the soul which Hitler was the first to practice on a gigantic scale."¹⁷

Kracauer's argument has some serious weaknesses. Above all, it is not at all clear that Francis's story is disproved and Caligari's status validated by the film's conclusion. It is true that at the end of the film Francis is in an insane asylum of which Caligari is the director, but this sudden change of perspective is anything but comforting. Caligari the insane murderer has now become an authority figure, but that transformation does not necessarily imply that he is sane: it is doubtful that any of the film's viewers would want to be under his psychiatric care because they cannot be entirely sure, at film's end, that Francis is wrong in his portrayal of Caligari. In fact, it could be argued that the film's ending makes *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* far more disturbing than it otherwise would be, because it shows that the person in control of the insane asylum is very possibly insane and dangerous himself. This is hardly a reassuring conclusion leading to trust and respect for authority figures.

Another problem with Kracauer's thesis comes from the implied parallelism between the somnambulist Cesare and the supposedly willless German people, which purportedly foreshadowed a German future in which "self-appointed Caligaris hypnotized innumerable Cesares into murder."¹⁸ Kracauer explicitly suggests that the German nation, under Hitler's spell, later became a nation of Cesares obeying and even murdering in a kind of dreamlike hypnotic spell, and that therefore *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* is a foreshadowing of subsequent German history. Even if one accepts this argument as reasonable, however — and many subsequent critics do not — that does not invalidate the film or its depiction of Cesare. On the contrary, it very much validates it. After all, if *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, as early as 1920, showed Germans the danger of becoming mindless puppets in the hands of an evil criminal mastermind, then surely that was a valid and important warning, coming thirteen years before the actual beginning of the Hitler dictatorship in 1933. It would be hard to argue that the film is suggesting that it is good to become

¹⁷ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 72–73.

¹⁸ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 272.

a Cesare in the hands of a Caligari. Quite the contrary: if one accepts Kracauer's argument about Cesare and his relationship to the German people, then one must see *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* as a significant and unfortunately unheeded warning to Germans of horrors to come.

Another of Kracauer's primary arguments concerns the contrast between rigid control on the one hand and chaos on the other. For Kracauer, chaos is represented by the Holstenwall fair and the crowds of people who go to it; it is also, of course, represented by mental breakdown and insanity. In other words, chaos has both a social face — the fair and the unruly people who go to it — and a personal face: that of the insane individual. At the other end of the spectrum is rigid control, represented, for instance, by the town clerk with whom Caligari negotiates in an early sequence and, at the end of the film, by Caligari himself as the director of the insane asylum. Kracauer's point is that, between these two extremes of rigid control on the one hand and chaos on the other, there is no healthy middle ground in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* or in many other German films of the Weimar era — no space for human freedom. To phrase it more specifically, there is no way for the film's viewers to establish a position for themselves that allows them to reject both insanity and rigid control. Instead, Kracauer suggests, the film's viewers are faced with an either-or choice: if they reject rigid control (i.e., Caligari) then they have to embrace insanity (i.e., Francis). If, on the other hand, they reject insanity, then they have to embrace authoritarian rigidity. Kracauer implies that this kind of either-or choice predisposes the audience to favor authority and rigid control, since most sane people will reject insanity.

Psychologically and historically, there may be some truth to Kracauer's argument about Weimar Germany; it is an argument that has been made about Germans and German history by others as well, for instance by Eric Fromm in his classic study *Escape from Freedom* (1941), in which Fromm argues that Germans supported the Hitler dictatorship because they were afraid of freedom and the lack of control that freedom implied.¹⁹ As a critique of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, however, Kracauer's argument is convincing — if at all — only if one agrees to view films as strict morality plays that have to have positive heroes and clearly drawn villains for viewers to identify with or reject. If one is willing to accept films that are more challenging and complex, then Kracauer's argument loses its weight. Moreover, the lack of anyone in the film that a viewer would necessarily want to identify with might be seen as positive: as a spur for reflection and for the viewer's search for a reasonable middle ground outside the sphere of the movie, which is, after all, the sphere in which politics and history actually take place. If *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* is a distorted reflection of the topsy-turvy German world in the immediate aftermath of the First

¹⁹ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941).

World War, then surely it is not simply a positive, conformist reflection but rather a critical one.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Kracauer's argument is important, because it suggests that film can be used to gain access to Freud's group unconscious — what Kracauer calls “the collective German soul.”²⁰ Whether or not one accepts Kracauer's specific reading of this particular film, one can nevertheless acknowledge the importance of his method, a method that has, for good or ill, exerted profound influence on the subsequent historiography of German cinema. Certainly Kracauer is right to point out the role that the theme of authority/insanity/violence was to play in subsequent Weimar cinema, and in German culture as a whole during the Weimar Republic. This theme found expression not just in the cinema, but also, for instance, in Thomas Mann's novella *Mario und der Zauberer* (Mario and the Magician, 1930), in which the evil magician Cipolla — another Italian name! — is a direct reflection of fascist authority, and in which Mann's protagonist, unlike the weak film protagonists that Kracauer criticizes, actually does rebel against and even kill the evil magician.²¹

One aspect of the film's themes that is neglected by Kracauer is its film-specific suggestiveness. It should be remembered that *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* is still a relatively early film, coming only a quarter of a century after the invention of cinema itself. As was pointed out with *Der Student von Prag*, many early films were still seeking to educate their audiences about the problems and possibilities of film, and to demonstrate what cinema is and can accomplish. One of the major themes of *Der Student von Prag* had been the theme of seeing, and of loss of control over the self — themes reflected in educated elites' criticisms of film throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. In *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* there are similar suggestions of a self-referential discourse about cinema itself. As Anton Kaes has argued, ultimately Caligari's cabinet “is nothing other than cinema itself” — that darkened room in which phantoms seem to come to life.²² Much of the movie's plot takes place in a fairground or circus atmosphere, and that is precisely the kind of milieu where many early films were shown

²⁰ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 74.

²¹ Thomas Mann, “Mario und der Zauberer,” in Mann, *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1967) 2:502–42. English translation: *Mario and the Magician*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Martin Secker, 1930).

²² Anton Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik: Motor der Moderne,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 39–98; here, 48. Here and elsewhere, quotations from German sources are my own translations unless otherwise specified.

before the establishment of permanent movie theaters. Caligari himself could be a traveling film impresario showing people his movies. Movies themselves are nothing but shadow plays of light — one German word for the cinema is in fact *Lichtspiel* (light play) — and that is precisely what we see in some of the most famous scenes in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. And just as *Der Student von Prag* shows a person who has lost control of one part of himself — his mirror image — so too *Caligari*, in the figure of Cesare, shows a man who is subject not to his own will but rather to the will of someone else. Cesare acts, but he does not control his actions. He is in a sense a projection of Caligari. Caligari, Cesare's hypnotist controller, is in many ways both a scientist (as a psychiatrist) and a magician (as a hypnotist circus act). So too early viewers of cinema saw the apparatus of cinema itself as both scientific/technological and strangely magical.²³ And so too early critics of cinema feared that film audiences might lose control and become dangerous revolutionaries or soulless automatons — what the conservative critic Wilhelm Stapel had scornfully called the “*homo cinematicus*.²⁴ Cesare, in other words, is in part a worst-case reflection of the film audience itself: under a kind of hypnotic spell that causes it to commit horrendous crimes. We can hear echoes of that fear of movies' power even today in discussions of youthful violence purportedly caused by movies, television, or video games. And just as the student protagonist of *Der Student von Prag* ultimately loses control of himself, so too the student protagonist of *Caligari* ultimately loses control and winds up in an insane asylum. It is remarkable how many of these early films deal with similar plots, suggesting that in its first decades film was very much concerned with the tremendous possibilities — and potential dangers — of its own power as a medium.

²³ This is a conjunction that was effectively revisited in Neil Burger's 2006 movie *The Illusionist*, in which a magician's ultimate magic act depends on cinematic tricks.

²⁴ Kaes, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 39.



Mirrored abjection and success in the hotel restroom.
Courtesy of the Filmmuseum Potsdam.

5: *Der letzte Mann* (1924) or Learning to Move

Director: Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau

Cinematographer: Karl Freund

Screenplay: Carl Mayer

Producer: Universum Film-Aktiengesellschaft (Erich Pommer)

Production Design: Robert Herlth and Walter Röhrig

German Release Date: December 23, 1924

Actors: Emil Jannings (doorman); Maly Delschaft (his niece);

Max Hiller (her fiancé); Emilie Kurz (the fiancé's aunt); Hans

Unterkircher (hotel manager); Georg John (night watchman);

Hermann Vallentin (hotel guest); Emmy Wyda (thin neighbor)

F. W. MURNAU'S *DER LETZTE MANN* (The Last Laugh) is one of the indispensible masterpieces of German film; some might even argue that it is the greatest film ever made in Germany. It eloquently demonstrates the possibilities of silent film at the height of its powers, in the last decade before the introduction of sound film. Throughout the entire film, intertitles are unnecessary and therefore not present; there is only one intertitle at the end. The film's story is told, instead, purely in images. Those images flow smoothly and beautifully, and there is no need whatsoever for language. The silent figures moving in the light on the screen have an eloquence that would be destroyed by language. This film is a perfect embodiment of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's description of silent film as epitomizing the logic of dreams.

Der letzte Mann also makes good on film's early promise as a medium for and about the common man. The protagonist of the film — and the audience entirely sympathizes with him, although it also occasionally laughs at him affectionately — is a lower-middle-class hotel doorman played by the great stage and screen actor Emil Jannings, who impresses audiences here with the expressiveness of his performance, just as he was to impress audiences six years later with his moving portrayal of a doomed schoolteacher in Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel, 1930), one of the early German movies to utilize sound technology. The hotel doorman in *Der letzte Mann* — who has no name both because his name is not important, and because names are necessarily part of language, with which this film dispenses — lives in a typical Berlin backyard tenement surrounded by working-class and petit-bourgeois neighbors. This lower-class city milieu is rather like a village — everybody knows everybody else, and everybody's life is like

an open book. Although the apartment building in which the film's lower-class protagonist lives is large, all his neighbors live around a single courtyard that can be observed from every apartment. Therefore, everyone knows when everyone else leaves for work or returns home. Everyone can see everyone else literally hanging their wash out to dry or beating carpets. Whereas a film like *Der Student von Prag* had featured a middle-class protagonist and middle-class concerns in its efforts to make film respectable to German elites, *Der letzte Mann* leaves such concerns behind. It is no longer seeking to use the trappings of the German cultural tradition to demonstrate that film can be a great art form. Rather, it uses entirely cinematic means to tell its story, and it starts from the assumption that film *is* a great art form. It does not set out to prove anything — and yet in the end it proves far more than most of its seemingly more ambitious predecessors. At the same time, because *Der letzte Mann* dispenses with film's previous inferiority complex about its social standing, it can also make lower class concerns about social standing one of the major themes of the movie. Only a film completely convinced of its own value could do this.

From the standpoint of film history, the most notable aspect of *Der letzte Mann* is what Lotte Eisner and others have called the film's "unchained" camera. In this film the camera ceases to be a static spectator registering whatever happens to come in front of it. Instead, the camera starts to move in smooth, confident, fluid motions. The film's breathtaking opening sequence has often been commented on, and for good reason: in this sequence, the camera follows a hotel elevator down to the lobby and then moves forward to the revolving door of the hotel's entrance, where it ultimately focuses on the film's protagonist, the hotel doorman. The camera, in other words, completes a fluid vertical motion downward and then a fluid horizontal motion forward. Whereas in most previous films the camera had been passive and static, in this film the camera moves from the very beginning as if it had a will of its own: a desire to see. It in essence enacts the spectator's own *Schaulust* (visual pleasure or desire to see). The camera's mobility also makes it possible for the camera to behave like a character in its own right — for instance, in the opening sequence, it is as if the camera were one of the hotel's guests coming down the elevator to the hotel lobby and then walking to the hotel's entrance to solicit the assistance of the doorman. The camera's movements are made possible by tracks: the camera is attached to a vehicle that moves smoothly along a track, and the track prevents the camera from jerking as it moves. It is to F. W. Murnau's credit that he not only developed this method, together with his talented cameraman Karl Freund and his screenwriter Carl Mayer (one of the coauthors of the screenplay for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and one of the most productive German screenwriters during the Weimar Republic) but also used it to great effect in this and other films. Freund's fluid camera motions are so convincing and so advanced that it took many years for any other director to even come close to his accomplishments here.

As a retrospective in a German film magazine noted, three years after the making of *Der letzte Mann*, Freund “was the first who saw the camera as an artistic factor, and he first understood that the prevailing use of the cinema apparatus could not grasp the essence of the filmic because of its inflexibility. Until then, one had adhered to the axiom that the apparatus must be set up on a fixed tripod, and this principle naturally implied a certain rigid limitation of the available possibilities for shooting. In other respects, the ambition generally predominated, to produce the most painterly and artistic images possible. One was basically confined to fixed framings.”¹ With Murnau’s and Freund’s conception of a moving camera, cinema was no longer limited to such “fixed framings,” and the camera began to move.

F. W. Murnau was, together with Ernst Lubitsch and the Austrian-born Fritz Lang, one of the first indisputably great German film directors. Born Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe, he came from a middle-class background, served as a fighter pilot in the First World War, and used the name Murnau (the name of a town in Bavaria) for his films. Murnau was a homosexual, and some argue that his affection for men can clearly be seen in his sympathy for the main protagonist of *Der letzte Mann*, and in the fact that none of the female characters in the movie is particularly sympathetic; in fact, the main character’s only true and reliable relationship seems to be with his male friend, the hotel’s night watchman.² Such speculations about a connection between the portrayal of men and women in *Der letzte Mann* and Murnau’s homosexuality, however, should be taken with more than a grain of salt, since it is by no means obvious that a male homosexual is incapable portraying women sympathetically; the complete work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the other most influential gay German film director, would seem to suggest the opposite.³

¹ Cited in Kristin Thompson, “*Im Anfang war . . .*: Some Links between German Fantasy Films of the Teens and the Twenties,” in *Before Caligari: German Cinema, 1895–1920/Prima di Caligari: Cinema tedesco, 1895–1920*, Paolo Cherchi Usai and Lorenzo Codelli (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell’Immagine, 1990), 138–61; here, 154–56.

² On Murnau and homosexuality, see Richard Dyer, “Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany,” *New German Critique*, no. 51 (Fall 1990): 5–60. See also Richard W. McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and “New Objectivity”* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 33.

³ Murnau’s homosexuality has led many to speculate about how it affected his filmmaking. There has even been one novel based partly on it: *Nosferatu* (1998), by Jim Shepard. The novel takes its title from another of Murnau’s remarkable works, the first major Dracula movie, *Nosferatu* (1922), which starred Max Schreck as the Dracula figure; the filming of *Nosferatu* is in turn the subject of the American film *Shadow of a Vampire* (2000, directed by E. Elias Merhige), starring John Malkovich as Murnau and Willem Dafoe as Max Schreck, who is (in *Shadow of a Vampire*) supposedly a real vampire.

If one were to add dialogue to *Der letzte Mann*, its plot would become banal; likewise, any retelling of the film's plot is also relatively banal. All that really happens in the movie is that the nameless hotel doorman loses his job and the impressive semi-military uniform that goes with it — wearing it, Emil Jannings looks like a soldier in an operetta — and is relegated to the hotel's basement washroom, where he must wear much less impressive work clothes. Murnau's genius is the ability to transform this minimal storyline and everyday plot into a gripping movie. What is important in the movie is not so much the bare outline of the plot as the way that the film's protagonist, the nameless doorman, as well as his family and neighbors, react to the doorman's loss of his job. In other words, this is above all a movie about social perceptions and about status. Lotte Eisner writes that "this is pre-eminently a German tragedy, and can only be understood in a country where uniform is King, not to say God. A non-German mind will have difficulty in comprehending all its tragic implications."⁴ And yet *Der letzte Mann* was a big hit in the United States as well as Germany, and in fact its story of loss of job and loss of status can readily be understood in most cultural contexts. While it certainly resonates with the specifically German history of the post-First World War years, it also has a much broader appeal.

The hotel doorman's semi-military uniform becomes particularly important in this context. Dressed in his hotel doorman's uniform with its shiny buttons, cap, and ornamental braid, Emil Jannings's figure is invested with authority and importance. His large Wilhelmine mustache makes him look somewhat like a member of the former Prussian royal family — perhaps Kaiser Wilhelm I — and he carries himself with obvious pride. Likewise, he is respected by everyone, from the hotel guests to his family and neighbors. The hotel doorman may live in a lower-class tenement, and he may not earn much more money than anyone else in the tenement, but what separates him from his neighbors — in both his eyes and theirs — is his flashy uniform and the prestige it confers. Every day the doorman comes home from the exciting world of the hotel to his tenement wearing his uniform, and it is as if a being from a higher sphere were deigning to visit and shed his grace on the denizens of a lower sphere, who wear ordinary work clothes. The doorman's family and neighbors clearly respect him for the status and authority the uniform conveys on him, and thereby on them. He is their connection to another, more fashionable and exciting world. Although the doorman is a bit pompous in his gaudy uniform, he is also kindly and well-disposed to children and gallant to ladies.

The problem is that the doorman has also grown old and is no longer capable of lifting the heavy trunks of the guests who arrive at the

⁴ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969), 207.

hotel in their taxis and carriages. In one sequence the audience sees the doorman staggering under the weight of a heavy trunk. (Lotte Eisner writes that Fritz Lang once remarked to her that no self-respecting hotel doorman would actually have deigned to carry trunks.⁵) It is raining heavily, and after carrying the trunk, the doorman sits down to rest, wiping perspiration and rain off of his face. In the meantime another guest needs help, and the doorman is not there to do his job. The hotel's manager — like the film's viewers — witnesses this moment, and the next day, without ever having been told that he was being demoted, the poor doorman arrives at the hotel to find another, younger man, wearing an identical uniform and doing his job. In this moment of recognition, when Jannings sees his younger, stronger double, there is an echo of the *Doppelgänger* motif from *Der Student von Prag*: it is as if part of the doorman's personality, the one that he is most proud of, had been cut away from him, together with the uniform that symbolized and embodied that personality. The initial moment of recognition occurs when the two men are inside the moving glass plates of a revolving door, thus increasing the sense of a mirror image. The hotel doorman does a double-take and can hardly believe his eyes. When he enters the hotel, he is informed of his new position in the basement washroom and is ordered to take off his shiny doorman's uniform and put on the uniform of a washroom attendant. All of this happens without words; everything is told through camera movements, facial expressions, gestures, ways of standing or stooping, etc. When another hotel employee none-too-gently removes the uniform from Jannings's almost paralyzed figure, it is as if he were stripping a man of his identity. The uniform seems to have a life and authority of its own, completely independent of its wearer, who becomes a mere shadow of himself without it. The unchained camera then follows Jannings down into the depths of the basement washroom; that descent is both physical and social. It is as if the camera were following the former doorman into the depths of hell.⁶ The upper sphere, the sphere of the hotel's lobby, is full of light; the lower sphere, the sphere of the washroom, is dark and dingy. It is here that the poor doorman will have to spend the rest of his working life, holding out fresh towels to arrogant male guests who may toss a few coins or even a bill onto the washroom plate for him if he is lucky.

But there is worse to come. The doorman knows instinctively that his social position at home is based entirely on his status as the respected doorman of a major hotel. There is no real separation, therefore, between his private life and his work life. There is no private sphere in which he can find solace and comfort from the problems of his work life. The thought

⁵ Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 207.

⁶ Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 210.

of going home to his tenement without his gaudy uniform is unbearable to the former doorman, because he knows that he will immediately lose the respect of his family and neighbors. Therefore, after work on the day that he is demoted, he breaks into the wardrobe where his fetishized uniform is kept and returns home wearing it. He thus uses the uniform to impersonate what he no longer is. The following day the former doorman leaves for work wearing his uniform, which he then keeps checked in a railway station cloakroom before going to the hotel. When the former doorman's deceit is inevitably discovered by his neighbors and family, his worst fears come true: he immediately loses their respect and love. In one brilliant sequence the women in the tenement shout the bad — or perhaps from their perspective it is good, since they seem to take pleasure in it — news from one tenement window to the other throughout the courtyard, and their faces become a montage of laughing, mocking female mouths that eloquently express what the former doorman is feeling and how he sees the world. He believes that he is the laughing stock of his neighborhood, and he is right. This is an example of Expressionist cinema at its most effective: the film shows not everyday reality but the world as the former doorman is experiencing it: as a painful, humiliating jumble of malicious gossip. Another sequence, which occurs on the night that the former doorman returns home after having been demoted to washroom attendant, depicts a party to celebrate the marriage of the former doorman's niece. In this sequence, the Jannings character drinks too much, and again the camera begins to view the world from his perspective. It begins to move jerkily and wildly, focusing in on this and that; the camera shots even become blurred, like the vision of a drunk man. In reality Karl Freund, the cameraman, simply strapped the camera onto his body and then moved around shakily. The effect is that the camera moves as if it were itself drunk. Such scenes transform the camera — and therefore the spectator — into what Marc Silberman has called a "voyeur of this man's inner psychic world."⁷ These scenes, contrasted with the smooth camera movements of the opening sequence of *Der letzte Mann*, demonstrate the variety of ways in which Murnau and his cameraman Karl Freund exploit the possibility of a moving camera.

Murnau's Expressionist use of light and dark is very much in evidence throughout the film. Particularly impressive are the nighttime scenes — for instance, the one in which the Jannings character steals back his uniform, trying to escape discovery by moving from light into darkness and evading the flashlight of the night watchman. When the Jannings figure returns home the night after his subterfuge has been discovered, his shadow precedes him, far larger than the man himself. Equally impressive is the penultimate scene in the movie, when the former doorman returns to the hotel,

⁷ Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1995), 26.

gives up his uniform to the night watchman, and ultimately collapses on a chair in the basement washroom. Throughout this scene, the night watchman uses his flashlight to illuminate what is happening; the flashlight shows the complete humiliation and degradation of the former doorman, and its light reveals the darkness in which he finds himself both literally and figuratively. Darkness here symbolizes social exclusion, the fact that below a certain social threshold people simply are often no longer seen. The film's contrasts between darkness and light can be compared to similar scenes in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, except here they reflect not extreme and unusual horror but rather the humiliation of everyday life in a society where human identity itself has become a commodity like the fetishized uniform, and where social and familial status can be purchased for money. What makes this story so painful and yet so compelling is precisely the fact that it is ordinary and common. This is not Max Schreck's Nosferatu or Conrad Veidt's Cesare, this is someone who could open the door for us at a hotel anywhere. And yet this ordinary protagonist's life is as full of pain as the lives of characters in horror films.

Clearly one of the primary themes of *Der letzte Mann* is the “social question” that was of such great concern in Germany in the 1920s, particularly in the wake of the Russian Revolution (1917): the problem of inequality and unfairness among the classes. The Hotel Atlantic's clientele can live in luxury, but the people who live in the tenements where the Emil Jannings character resides are relatively impoverished and cramped in their existence. For the one class of people, life seems to be a pleasant and amusing game; for the other class of people, life seems to be full of hard work, squalor, and desperation. The Emil Jannings character connects the two worlds: he works in the one and lives in the other. His uniform confers on him a status that elevates him above the other denizens of the tenement. But when he loses that status, he falls even below the level of his neighbors, and that fall is signified by the camera's descent into the basement washroom. There the Jannings character is not just surrounded by human waste, he has himself *become* human waste. Yet the story doesn't end there: the film adds a sly, tongue-in-cheek final scene that gives audiences the happy ending they crave — the poor man becomes rich beyond his wildest dreams and returns as a newly wealthy guest of the hotel, stuffing himself full of expensive food and treating his old friend the night watchman to a magnificent meal. This seemingly happy ending is still not without a trace of bitterness: it shows excess and waste that contrast pointedly with the squalor and deprivation of the doorman's previous existence. And at the same time, in spite of the former doorman's wealth, people still look down at him. Although he has huge amounts of money now, he still does not have the style and smoothness of an upper-class gentleman; he is, in fact, a caricature of the gauche, nouveau riche bourgeois. Murnau does not fail to show that people are laughing at the Jannings character, even as he triumphs. This apparently

happy final scene in no way eliminates the pain of the movie's real ending that comes right before it — the doorman's collapse and probable death. Instead, it ironizes that ending, emphasizing the cinema audience's reluctance to face the reality of social exclusion.

Certainly another of the primary themes of *Der letzte Mann* is the ritualistic worship of authority. In the film, authority is embodied not in a person but in the uniform. That uniform becomes a fetish — an inanimate object endowed by its worshipers with magical qualities. Since the Emil Jannings character, when wearing the uniform, looks very much like a puffed-up member of the Wilhelmine army that fought and lost the First World War, it is not particularly far-fetched to see the movie as, in part, a reflection of Germany's loss of pride and authority in that terrible and costly war, a war in which Murnau himself, like so many other German men, fought. In such a reading, the Jannings character becomes a representative of Wilhelmine Germany itself, and his humiliation is the humiliation of that former Germany. It is not just a particular doorman at a particular hotel who has become human waste at the Hotel Atlantic; it is Germany itself, defeated by a trans-Atlantic alliance, and just as the doorman loses his uniform, so too Germany after the 1919 Treaty of Versailles was deprived of the large army of which it had previously been so proud. Marc Silberman suggests that the film's happy ending — in which an American millionaire named A. G. Monney leaves his entire fortune to the Emil Jannings character — is a reference to the financial situation of a Germany that, in 1924, was itself emerging from the economic catastrophe of the great inflation with the help of the American-financed Dawes plan.⁸

Another way of reading the movie is as a commentary on contemporary urban life. Germany in the 1920s was undergoing rapid urbanization, and a city like Berlin, where *Der letzte Mann* takes place, had become a thrilling but also frightening space where people from different nations and classes crossed paths. Expressionist art took up the challenge of portraying the big city, creating street scenes full of excitement and danger. In Berlin millions of people crowded together, using old and new forms of transportation that ranged from the horse and buggy and the bicycle to automobiles, trams, trains, buses, and subways. German society had become more mobile than ever before, and that mobility was very much on display in Berlin, Germany's major metropolis — just as it was on display, figuratively, in the motion of Murnau's and Freund's unchained camera. The hotel doorman is a figure whose job it is to watch and direct traffic in front of the hotel. Although his uniform links him to an old-fashioned order and military pride, his actual job involves front-line activity in a growing, modern metropolis. The hotel is a kind of microcosm of the city itself, with its lofty lobby on the one hand

⁸ Silberman, *German Cinema*, 32. In German, the letters "AG" mean *Aktiengesellschaft* (corporation).

and its dingy washroom on the other. It is here, in the hotel, that various classes and nations come together and meet. The excitement and threat of the big city, and the tensions that existed between upper and lower classes within it, were to be depicted in many other German films of the period, such as Walter Ruttman's *Berlin, Symphonie der Großstadt* (Berlin, Symphony of the Big City, 1927) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), and also in Vicki Baum's famous novel *Menschen im Hotel* (Grand Hotel, 1929), which was later to become both an American movie in 1932 (*Grand Hotel*) and an American musical (*Grand Hotel*, 1989). In many ways, *Der letzte Mann* shows what happens to individuals from an older, slower German order suddenly confronted with the onslaught of urban modernity.

It is also possible to see the film as an exploration of the battered male ego of the ordinary German. At the beginning of the movie, Jennings's character is a proud, strong, and respected male; by the penultimate scene in the movie, however, he has become humiliated, losing all the male authority that he once had. The doorman's emasculation is made particularly evident in the mouths of the neighbor women laughing at him, and of course the loss of his uniform can easily be interpreted as a symbolic castration. There is no doubt that after the First World War, many German men did indeed feel humiliated, and their fears of impotence are expressed in many cultural documents; Murnau's film is one of the most eloquent.

Finally, one should not forget the film's status as a commentary on film itself. After all, the happy ending of the movie is in effect an ironic commentary on audiences' expectations and desires for movies to offer them not a slice of real life but rather a fantasy that is prettier and happier than reality can be. *Der letzte Mann* offers audiences precisely what they want — a happy ending in which the lowest of the low (the "last man," as the German title indicates) is elevated to the height of wealth and power — but at the same time it mockingly encourages audiences to critically analyze their own expectations and demands of the cinema. The film's only intertitle occurs right before this final happy ending — and the sudden introduction of conventional language here is a sign that we are leaving the truth of dreams and entering the lying world of conventional storytelling — and tells the audience such an ending could happen only in films, not in real life. Audiences are therefore invited to see the ending not as real but as precisely the fantasy that it is, and that they long for. *Der letzte Mann in der Hauptrolle* (the last man in the leading role, as the full German title runs) thus ultimately shows our wish for movies to achieve the happiness and fairness that we seem to be incapable of achieving in real life. At the same time, it shows us gently but firmly that such a wish is nothing but a fantasy, and that it is only in reality, not on the movie screen, that justice could ever be truly meaningful.



The M-machine before it becomes Moloch. Courtesy of the Deutsche Kinemathek.

6: *Metropolis* (1927) or Technology and Sex

Director: Fritz Lang

Cinematographers: Karl Freund and Günther Rittau

Screenplay: Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang

Producer: Universum Film-Aktiengesellschaft

Production Design: Otto Hunte, Erich Kettelhut, and Karl Vollbrecht

Special Effects: Eugen Schüfftan

Costume Design: Anne Willkomm

Sculptures: Walter Schultze-Mittendorff

German Release Date: January 10, 1927

Actors: Brigitte Helm (Maria); Gustav Fröhlich (Freder Fredersen);

Alfred Abel (Johann [Joh] Fredersen); Rudolf Klein-Rogge

(Rotwang); Heinrich George (Grot); Theodor Loos (Josaphat);

Fritz Rasp (thin man); Erwin Biswanger (worker 11811)

FRITZ LANG'S *METROPOLIS*, one of the most influential science fiction movies of all time, was a huge blockbuster featuring advanced technology and special effects. It cost well over five million marks and was, at the time it was made, the most expensive German movie ever. It was so expensive — costing three times its original budget — that it almost bankrupted the massive Ufa film company, and even though it was reasonably successful in cinemas, it did not make enough money to recoup its production costs.¹ At the time that *Metropolis* was made, German cinema was at a competitive disadvantage with respect to American cinema; it had lost the protection provided by the great inflation in Germany during the immediate postwar years, and it did not have the financial resources available to American cinema. However, *Metropolis* was intended precisely as a competitor to American cinema, part of an Ufa plan “to challenge Hollywood at its own game and to move seriously into the American film market,” as Klaus Kreimeier writes.² *Metropolis* put the creative resources and technical abilities of the German film industry on display at the same time that it presented a dark vision of a dystopian future that looked strangely American.

¹ Anton Kaes, “Cinema and Modernity: On Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” in *High and Low Cultures: German Attempts at Mediation*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994), 19–35; here, 19.

² Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany’s Greatest Film Company 1918–1945*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 126.

From the beginning of film history, science fiction has been one of the major genres. As noted in Chapter One, one of the first feature films was a 1902 science fiction movie entitled *A Trip to the Moon* by the French film pioneer Georges Méliès. There are at least two interconnected reasons for the frequency and importance of science fiction in film history. First, the invention of film in 1895 and its development throughout the twentieth century coincided with a period of extraordinarily rapid and far-reaching scientific and technological development, leading to radical changes in westerners' everyday lives — from telecommunications to automobile and airplane travel. It was only natural that such changes, and the prospect of even more changes in an unknown and open-ended future, would find expression in an art form that was new in the twentieth century.

Second, film itself was a product of the rapid scientific and technological development that science fiction novels and movies made the subject of their plots. Film did not just reflect technological progress; it was the result of it. Cinema was not a traditional artistic genre like theater, which dated back millennia to the ancient Greeks, or the novel, which dated back centuries to at least the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. Lacking the long tradition of those older, more established art forms, there was no accepted wisdom about what a film had to be about — as there was for tragic theater, for instance — and so some filmmakers were drawn to introduce new and different kinds of subject matter to their art. Paul Wegener, the star of *Der Student von Prag*, declared in 1916 that because film's newness, "there could be no tradition for films."³ Literature had already begun to move in the direction of science fiction with novels like Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873); the former provided the basis for the plot of Méliès's 1902 film *A Trip to the Moon*. As a technology, however, books had been around for centuries; no matter how new their content, their look and layout was fundamentally unchanged — and remains so to this day, despite frequent predictions of the demise of the traditional book. Cinema was something entirely different and new. It caused early film theorists to decry the disconnect between technological development on the one hand and the artistic imagination on the other. In 1912, for instance, Friedrich Freksa complained: "The imagination of the poet is still driving around in horse-drawn carriages, while the imagination of the engineer zooms around in airplanes."⁴ As a product of new technologies itself, film could not only convey new content, it could actually, in a sense, embody it. Since its beginning, film has both reflected and embodied

³ Paul Wegener, "Neue Kinoziele," in *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über den Stummfilm*, ed. Fritz Göttinger (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1984), 341–50; 343.

⁴ Friedrich Freksa, "Vom Werte und Unwerte des Kinos," in *Kein Tag ohne Kino*, 98–100; here, 98.

humans' hopes and fears for the future. For large numbers of people, it has helped to shape the concept of what the future might be.

Metropolis was not the first German science fiction movie; Lang was influenced by some of his predecessors, particularly the 1920 epic *Algol* by Hans Werckmeister (starring the great Emil Jannings, who was to star in Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* four years later), which features some strikingly similar plot themes and action.⁵ For instance, if one compares the scenes of angry workers destroying the machines that run their city in *Metropolis* with the scenes of workers destroying machines in *Algol*, one notices similarities even down to the way the workers move in a kind of ecstatic, crazed dance. *Metropolis* was far more prominent and expensive than its predecessors, however, and it has overshadowed them. It has also been remarkably influential in film history — in spite of some initially negative reviews — exerting an influence on later science fiction movies like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) or Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). The former film, much like Lang's *Metropolis*, portrays robotic "replicants" with an uncanny resemblance to human beings, while the latter, also like *Metropolis*, ends in a dramatic chase scene at the top of a cathedral where the villain, who has kidnapped a beautiful, innocent woman, meets his deserved demise. (Both these cathedral scenes also owe a debt to the American director Wallace Worsley's film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* from 1923, as well as to Cesare's kidnapping of Jane in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*.) *Metropolis* has even influenced a number of pop music videos — for instance, Madonna's *Express Yourself* (1989). In 1984 the Hollywood composer Giorgio Moroder created a new soundtrack for the movie based entirely on contemporary pop music.

The screenplay for *Metropolis* was written by Lang and his second wife, Thea von Harbou, who had written a 1926 novel with the same name based on similar themes.⁶ Harbou was a successful science fiction and fantasy author who wrote or co-wrote the screenplays for most of Lang's other Weimar-era films; the couple separated in 1933 after the Nazi party came to power in Germany. Whereas Harbou became a member of the party and elected to stay in Germany, Lang left the country and emigrated to the United States; there he became a successful and influential director of such American classics as *Fury* (1936) and *The Big Heat* (1953), as well as the anti-Nazi thriller *Hangmen Also Die* (1943, with a screenplay by the

⁵ On the connection between *Algol* and *Metropolis*, see Dietrich Neumann, "The Urban Vision in *Metropolis*," in *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), 143–62; here, 144; and Dietrich Neumann, "Algol: Eine deutsche Parabel," in *Walter Reimann: Maler und Filmarchitekt*, ed. Hans-Peter Reichmann (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1997 [Kinematograph no. 11, 1997]), 72–85, especially 84.

⁶ Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis* (New York: Ace Books, 1963).

great German playwright Bertolt Brecht). Lang was one of the transmission mechanisms by which German Expressionist sensibilities influenced American film noir. Although he was born in Vienna, he worked in the German film industry throughout the Weimar period, from 1919 to 1933. Among his creations are some of the great masterpieces of Weimar cinema, including the *Dr. Mabuse* series — *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler* (1923) and *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933), which was banned by the Nazis — *Die Nibelungen* (1924), *Der müde Tod* (Destiny, 1921), and *M* (1931). Lang's last film was a third Mabuse movie, *Die tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse* (The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse), released in 1960. His films are widely regarded as an indispensable part of the canon of world cinema; as a person, however, Lang was and continues to be relatively controversial, since he was rumored to be quite difficult to deal with at times, even cruel and violent.⁷ Lang's movies tend to deal with large social themes involving not just a single individual but an entire society, and sometimes feature large numbers of people acting in unison. Whereas Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* focuses primarily on the story of one man and his misfortune, *Metropolis* has a great many characters and includes scenes with masses of people. The film is a portrait not of a single person, nor, as with the *Dr. Mabuse* films, *M*, and his later American films *Fury* and *The Big Heat*, is it merely a bleak picture of the present world; *Metropolis* is a vision of a possible future world. The film's camera work is not as fluid and seemingly effortless as in F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (even during scenes with a great deal of activity, the camera tends to remain in one place), but Lang's cinematography — spearheaded here by Karl Freund, the great German cameraman who had also worked on Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* — is nevertheless based on careful composition and lighting and precisely executed camera movements.

Lang is particularly famous for his choreography of large groups of people — what Siegfried Kracauer, in a 1927 essay, called the “mass ornament,” something that could be seen, for instance, at gigantic synchronized dance shows in the 1920s by the Tiller Girls in England, or still today by the Rockettes in New York.⁸ Lotte Eisner notes that the massed human figures in *Metropolis* become “a basic factor of the architecture itself, immobilized with other bodies into triangles, ellipses or semicircles.”⁹ One early sequence in

⁷ Patrick McGilligan even goes so far as to imply, without convincing evidence, that Lang murdered his first wife Lisa Rosenthal. See McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 76–80.

⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 75–86. German original: “Das Ornament der Masse,” in Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 50–63.

⁹ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969), 229.

Metropolis is an excellent case in point: the movie's viewers see a precisely measured rectangle of human beings moving in unison on the right. A large elevator awaits as these machine-men march in perfect unison towards and into it. At the same time, on the left, another elevator has arrived, carrying another rectangle of human beings. They exit the elevator in perfect unison to the left as the other perfect rectangle of human beings is entering the other elevator to the right. Although the group of people to the left is composed of hunched men who look tired, they nevertheless march in formation. This scene, which takes about a minute on screen, effectively encapsulates some of the major themes of Lang's movie: industrialization, the transformation of human beings into cogs in a large industrial machine, the plight of the working class, the masses as a faceless, de-individualized entity, rigid control. What the audience is witnessing in this scene is the changing of work shifts: one group of laborers is coming from work after a long day of dreary toil; the other group, looking fresher but equally faceless, is moving toward work. In the workers' dress and in their very movements there is a kind of unity that proclaims: this is not a group of individuals, this is a mass of people that functions as one organism. The world of *Metropolis* is divided between the workers, who live beneath the earth and work the machines, and the upper class, which lives high above in sunlight and never has to work physically. In Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* the Hotel Atlantic had featured a similar spatial geography in which the lower level of the hotel was dark and dreary, representing social decline, while the lobby level was bright and clean, representing social respectability. Where Murnau's film had focused on the unsuccessful efforts of one man to negotiate this social geography, however, Lang's *Metropolis* paints a broad picture of the downtrodden masses and their masters, and its wanderer between the upper and lower worlds is not a poor old hotel doorman but Freder, the son of Joh Fredersen, the lord and master of the city of Metropolis. Lang's carefully choreographed scenes of mass movement suggest that the end of individualism has come, at least for the workers, and that a new type of man has been born: the entirely rationalized man who has become part of the machines that he serves. Lang's *Metropolis* precedes by five years the literary emergence of this new machine-man in the German writer Ernst Jünger's tract *Der Arbeiter* (*The Worker*, 1932),¹⁰ but both Lang and Jünger are describing a similar phenomenon, one that hung in the air in the age of Henry Ford's assembly lines.

Of course, the orderly precision demonstrated by the workers at the beginning of *Metropolis* forms a stark contrast to other scenes that depict frightening chaos and anarchy in the movie's second half. In these scenes, the workers destroy the machines of which they had previously seemed to be a part. Their movements are no longer precise and controlled; they are

¹⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932).

threatening and chaotic. The two states of the workers — precise control on the one hand and chaos on the other — correspond to two different artistic styles converging in Germany in the mid-1920s. The dark, chaotic scenes in *Metropolis* reflect both Expressionism's end-of-the-world view of urban turmoil — for instance, in Ludwig Meidner's painting *Apokalyptische Landschaft* (Apocalyptic Landscape, 1913) — and its rejection of technology, as displayed, for instance, in Ernst Toller's play *Die Maschinenstürmer* (The Machine Breakers, 1922). The more controlled, choreographed scenes correspond to the style of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Sobriety, or New Objectivity) that emerged in Germany's stabilization period. The New Sobriety featured a pragmatic reconciliation between human beings and technology and an end to the titanic struggles characteristic of Expressionism. As Andreas Huyssen has noted, by the end of *Metropolis* the New Sobriety has won out over Expressionism: control and pragmatism have triumphed over chaos and emotion.¹¹

Whereas the groups of workers featured at the beginning of the film have clearly defined boundaries, in the chaotic scenes of revolution and anarchy they flow everywhere, destroying machines and the very substance of their city. The latter scenes are epitomized by the flood that the workers cause in the underground city: the water spreading everywhere emerges from and reflects the workers' own chaotic power. They have become an anarchic force, threatening to destroy all of society and even their own children. They are also a lynch mob: toward the end of the film they literally burn the woman (in reality, a robot) whom they had previously followed so mindlessly.¹² Finally, in the last scene, the workers once again become a controlled and geometrically defined unit: a large triangle that marches precisely to the central gate of the cathedral, where the movie's protagonist Freder (played by Gustav Fröhlich) brings together his father the industrialist Fredersen (played by Alfred Abel) with the workers' foreman Grot (played by the physically imposing actor Heinrich George). In contrast to the human rectangles at the beginning of the movie that had suggested stasis and drudgery, the sharply pointed human triangle at the end suggests dynamism and positive, but nevertheless strictly controlled, change.

These scenes sum up the basic plot of the movie, which has three main parts: (1) total control of the masses; (2) the outbreak of chaos and the near-destruction of Metropolis; (3) the restoration of order in a new, fairer, but equally controlled regime. The outbreak of chaos and revolution is associated not just with the workers' rebellion against their domination and

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*," *New German Critique*, no. 24/25 (Fall/Winter 1982): 221–37; here, 236.

¹² Scenes of threatened lynchings also play a major role in Lang's films *M* and *Fury*.

exploitation by an unjust and arrogant boss, Fredersen, but also by an evil and licentious female figure, the robot Maria (played by Brigitte Helm), who is a *Doppelgänger* of the real, peaceful, good Maria (also played by Brigitte Helm) with whom Freder has fallen in love. Interestingly enough, the two Marias are never shown together in the same scene — at least in the footage that is available to us today — although cinema's technical potential had made such scenes possible since Stellan Rye's double images in *Der Student von Prag* (1913).

The evil Maria's association with social chaos and revolution suggests that these are not just economic problems: they are also sexual problems. The robot Maria, who incites the workers to destroy their machines and to cause the flood that threatens to destroy the underworld of Metropolis, is a sexual force that exerts hypnotic power over both working-class and upper-class males. The audience sees the robot's control over upper-class males in a scene in Yoshiwara, Metropolis's red-light district — named after the storied but real red-light district in Tokyo — where the half-naked robot dances licentiously in front of upper-class men who, in a brilliant Expressionist montage, become a set of peering, hungry eyes that seem to want to devour the female figure they are watching. In this shot Lang is turning a linguistic phrase — “to devour someone with one's eyes” — into a visual montage. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* featured an Expressionist montage of female mouths; Lang's *Metropolis* features a montage of male eyes.

The German cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit has written of Weimar culture's fascination with and fear of “women, floods, and bodies,” and the scenes of the robot Maria's revolution are a good illustration of his point: social revolution and chaos are associated in German culture of the 1920s with female sexuality, symbolized by water itself.¹³ In the third part of *Metropolis*, when the revolution and chaos have been controlled, it is because the false Maria has ceased to exist — she is burned at the stake as a witch, ultimately revealing her robot form — and the true, gentle Maria has replaced her. The good Maria is chaste and nonaggressive. She does not spur the masses on to self-destructive action; she urges patience, self-control, and trust in an upper-class savior: Freder. As Tom Gunning has pointed out, in the scene where she dances in front of upper-class males, the false Maria “does a *tableau vivant* from *The Book of Revelations*, the whore of Babylon with her golden goblet and the beast whereon she sits with seven heads and ten horns.”¹⁴

¹³ Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, two volumes (Frankfurt: Roter Stern, 1977–78). English translation: Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis, MI: U of Minnesota P, 1987). Andreas Huyssen has noted the applicability of Theweleit's theses to the film, and vice versa. See Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine,” 232n17.

¹⁴ Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 73.

In another scene, Freder sees his father apparently embracing the false Maria and then falls into a feverish sickness in which he sees an image of death — the Grim Reaper coming at him with a scythe. These scenes thematize vision itself as potentially harmful: it is his sight that causes Freder to become sick, and in his feverish vision death begins to swing its scythe at him. As Stephen Jenkins has noted, the situation is clearly Oedipal in the Freudian sense: Freder is engaged in an unacknowledged sexual rivalry with his omnipotent father Fredersen, and the Grim Reaper is a powerful instantiation of castration anxiety.¹⁵ Moreover, the evil Maria is clearly connected to Freder's own mother Hel, who had died giving birth to Freder. The evil, licentious female figure threatens to bring not just chaos and destruction on the social level, but also quite specifically sexual death and castration at the individual level. One of the major questions for any interpretation of *Metropolis* is precisely how the movie's story of technology and social domination fits into its story of sexual tension and Oedipal desire. As Gunning has noted, "*Metropolis* converts psychoanalytical imagery into visual tropes as creatively as the medieval cathedrals did the Holy Scriptures."¹⁶ And yet the film's very creativity and proliferation of tropes complicates any interpretation of it. Andreas Huyssen has suggested that the two themes — technology and female sexuality — are linked precisely in the evil robot Maria, and that the film depicts an ultimately successful male attempt to keep female sexuality/nature at bay by means of technology.¹⁷ However, R. L. Rutsky has provided a rather different reading of the film, arguing that in fact *Metropolis* stages merely an *attempted* repression of female sexuality/nature, followed by the return of the repressed (represented by the false Maria and Rotwang, as well as by the flood that engulfs the lower levels of the city), with an ultimate reconciliation between technology and female sexuality/nature at the end of the movie.¹⁸ Rutsky's reading is ultimately more convincing, since it treats female agency in the film as more than just obeisance to male power, and it suggests that by the end of the film something fundamental has changed: nature and technology have been reconciled (however problematically) in a way that they were not at the beginning of the movie.

¹⁵ Stephen Jenkins, "Lang: Fear and Desire," in *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look*, ed. Jenkins (London: British Film Institute, 1981), 38–124; here, 86.

¹⁶ Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 76.

¹⁷ See Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine," 227.

¹⁸ See R. L. Rutsky, "The Mediation of Technology and Gender: *Metropolis*, Nazism, Modernism," *New German Critique*, no. 60 (Fall 1993): 3–32. Rutsky's reading, however valid in other respects, rejects the film's stated message about mediation between the brain and the hands; for Rutsky, the real mediation is between the brain and the heart. See Rutsky, 220. To my mind, this overlooks the very real importance of the "social question" in Weimar culture, and in the film itself.

Another key moment in which sexual relations are on display is the scene in which the sorcerer Rotwang, holding a flashlight, uses it to spotlight the defenseless Maria, who faces him alone in the depths of Metropolis's catacombs. This scene is in essence the reverse of the one in which the robot Maria hypnotizes a group of upper-class men with her dancing; here it is Rotwang who gains control of Maria. She desperately tries to escape, but no matter where she goes, Rotwang's flashlight finds her. That flashlight is associated with Rotwang's eyes, which both Maria and the film's audience can sometimes see burning above the flashlight, almost as if his eyes themselves were emitting rays of light. Huyssen has called this a symbolic rape scene: Rotwang's spotlight takes possession of Maria, just as Rotwang will soon literally take possession of and replicate her.¹⁹ The use of the flashlight here, with its Expressionist contrast between light and dark, can be compared with similar visual effects in *Der letzte Mann* except that in the latter film the flashlight is held not by an aggressive figure but by a sympathetic one: the night watchman. In *Metropolis*, Rotwang's flashlight also deprives Maria of sight by temporarily blinding her (as Freder's vision of the scene between the false Maria and his father Fredersen will later temporarily blind him, causing him to see round circles of light). Rotwang can see Maria, but she cannot see much of him outside of his eyes staring at her. This scene represents the power of both the male gaze and of film itself, since film is based on both gazing (for the audience) and being gazed at (for the actors), and even the projection apparatus can be seen as a kind of flashlight that captures human figures and makes them visible. In this scene it is Rotwang who possesses the power of the gaze; later, it will be the false Maria who possesses that power by deliberately attracting the gazes of men. Yet the false Maria is not the only female figure with hypnotic powers; in the real Maria's first encounter with Freder, her gaze also possesses the power to transfix Freder — to force him to be looked at (by Maria and also by the children she has brought with her) and also to look back. As Stephen Jenkins has noted, “the threat which Maria represents is . . . marked specifically in terms of the power of her gaze.”²⁰ Both kinds of power — looking and being looked at — are at work in film.

Of course, there is more to the plot of *Metropolis* than just the three main parts identified above (control, loss of control, and the reestablishment of a more benevolent control), but both choreographically and narratologically those are the essential ones. Beneath these are several

¹⁹ Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine,” 230.

²⁰ Jenkins, “Lang: Fear and Desire,” 84. This is a problem with Andreas Huyssen's interpretation of the gaze in *Metropolis* as purely male, and of the good Maria as essentially passive. See Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*,” 230.

subplots, the most important of which are, first, the real Maria as a virginal mother-of-God figure working for the workers' good, and second, the evil magician Rotwang, who creates the false Maria robot to destroy Metropolis out of a spiteful desire for revenge on his rival Fredersen, who had married and, Rotwang believes, caused the death of Hel, the woman he once loved. What is important in these subplots is not so much the details — which are sometimes difficult to understand, or even nonsensical due to extensive cuts made to the film, shortening it drastically from the versions available when it was originally released eight decades ago — but rather the general atmosphere they create.²¹

In the first subplot, the one that revolves around Maria as a Madonna-like figure worshipped by the workers (and by Freder), the references to the Christian church and the cult of the Virgin Mary are unmistakable — Maria is, in fact, the German version of Mary. The workers who march down into the subterranean catacombs where Maria preaches her sermons of peace resemble the early Christians, members of a banned and persecuted religion that sought refuge, often literally, underground. She preaches to the workers in front of ten Expressionist crosses that — in spite of their odd angles and positioning — unmistakably point to the Christian religion and its message of redemption. Maria even speaks of the coming of a Christlike redeemer figure who will save the workers and relieve them of their misery. In this updated metropolitan religion, the redeemer is not Jesus of Nazareth but rather Freder himself, who is not the son of God but the son of Joh Fredersen, the lord of Metropolis. When Maria speaks of the coming redeemer, Freder beats his breast as if to inform the film's viewers — and himself as well — that he is the redeemer of whom Maria speaks. Fredersen has been an unforgiving Old Testament kind of god-king, showering destruction and contempt on his people — even the flood is, after all, a biblical motif, as is the Tower of Babel story that Maria tells the workers — but his son Freder intercedes on the workers' behalf, becoming the mediator about whom Maria speaks when she proclaims that the heart must intercede between the brain (Fredersen) and the hands (the workers). In the new religion of the future, God is a capitalist, but his son has a warm heart for the proletariat. Thus, *Metropolis* stages a movement from an Old Testament religion in which workers are punished to a New Testament religion in which they are loved (and expected to love). Just like Jesus Christ, Freder

²¹ In January of 2008 most of the missing scenes from *Metropolis* turned up at a museum in Buenos Aires — unfortunately in very poor condition. This find necessitated a new version of the film, which will probably become commercially available in several years. In response to the discovery, Anne Wilkening, a film restorer who works for Germany's Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Foundation, remarked: "Suddenly everything makes sense." See Karen Naundorf, "Die Reise nach Metropolis," *Zeit Magazin Leben*, 3 July 2008, 23–29.

is also crucified. In one visually effective scene, he replaces one of the laborers at a machine that resembles a large clock, becoming a worker and taking on the worker's suffering just as, in Christianity, Christ became flesh and took on mortal suffering. Freder's job is to move the two arms of a clock-like machine, following blinking lights that direct him.²² As he frantically moves the arms of the clock around, he ultimately takes the position of Christ crucified, both arms spread wide and an expression of agony on his face. Like Christ on the cross, he even cries out to his father. Significantly, the cross on which he, and by implication the workers themselves, are martyred is a clock — time is one of the instruments of torture in Lang's science-fiction society of the future.

The second subplot, the one involving Rotwang, harks back not to the Christian religion but to German Romanticism and to the Faust legend. Rotwang is an embodiment of the evil magician who plays a frequent role in German fairy tales, and who surfaces in the stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann and, of course, in early German films like *Der Student von Prag* and *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. He lives in a strange, old-fashioned house that resembles a witch's cottage in a Grimm brothers' fairy tale — it comes complete with pentagrams and doors that open and close seemingly of their own volition. This archaic building looks completely out of place in the otherwise futuristic world of Metropolis; it is a remnant from an earlier age, demonstrating that the fantastic future emerges from and depends on the past, which it does not erase, but simply builds upon. Rotwang the magician is in essence an alchemist, someone who combines the world of magic with the world of modern science. Although he represents the past (his old-fashioned robe, for instance, is a stark contrast to Joh Fredersen's jacket and tie), he also embodies the brave new world of the future: it is he who, in his alchemical laboratory, has come up with the technique for creating a perfect physical copy of a human being. Where Maria herself is chaste and righteous, though, her evil *Doppelgänger*, Rotwang's creation, is wicked, a science-fiction echo of Hoffmann's artificial Olimpia in "Der Sandmann," as well as of Balduin's double in *Der Student von Prag* and of the hypnotized Cesare in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. *Caligari* features a moment when Cesare first opens his eyes and stares directly at his, and the movie's, audience; in *Metropolis*, also, there is a moment when the replicant Maria opens her eyes and gazes straight at her audience. Like Cesare and Balduin's *Doppelgänger*, the false Maria represents the dangers that cinema was thought to pose to its viewers: loss of control, hypnosis, mind-control, licentiousness, and revolutionary chaos. Just as screen images are technological copies of human beings, so too the false Maria is a technological copy of a human being.

²² On some of this Christian imagery, see Rutsky, "The Mediation of Technology and Gender: *Metropolis*, Nazism, Modernism," 5–6.

Kaes calls her “an emblem for the cinema as such: a product of technical ingenuity, an incarnation of visual pleasure, and a temptress out to delude anyone who falls for the illusion of a replica.”²³

The problem of technology and science plays a fundamental role in this movie. In *Metropolis*, science is both utopian and dystopian: it has tremendous positive potential, but also a great power for evil. The movie’s images of the city of the future are striking and impressive, albeit undoubtedly threatening. The architecture of *Metropolis* was carefully thought out by Lang’s set designers Erich Kettelhut and Otto Hunte, who were in turn heavily influenced by Lang’s own encounter with New York City in 1924. After that trip Lang had proclaimed: “the view of New York by night is a beacon of beauty strong enough to be the centerpiece of a film.”²⁴ Lang’s and his designers’ urban vision, with its cars, airplanes, and vast central New Tower of Babel may seem somewhat dated now, but in 1927 it was cutting-edge; no one had ever seen anything like it before in a film. Luis Buñuel, the great Spanish film director, remarked after seeing the movie: “*Metropolis* will fulfill our wildest dreams, will astonish us as the most astonishing book of images it is possible to compose.”²⁵ Otto Hunte, Buñuel proclaims, “annihilates us with his colossal vision of the city in the year 2000.”²⁶ Just as remarkable as the film’s architecture and city planning is the coexistence of all this futurism and modernity with remnants of the archaic past, such as the cathedral that plays such a central architectural role in the final scenes of the movie or Rotwang’s house. That house led H. G. Wells to comment wryly that, “even at Ufa, Germany can still be dear, old, magic-loving Germany.”²⁷ Wells intensely disliked *Metropolis*, calling it “the silliest film” and arguing that it was probably impossible “to make one sillier.”²⁸ *Metropolis* had “nothing to do,” he proclaimed, “with any social or moral issue before the world, or with any that can even conceivably arise.”²⁹ The film was “ignorant old-fashioned balderdash.”³⁰ He concluded: “Six million marks! The waste of it!”³¹

²³ Kaes, “Cinema and Modernity: On Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” 25.

²⁴ Cited in Neumann, “The Urban Vision in *Metropolis*,” 147.

²⁵ Luis Buñuel, “*Metropolis*,” in *Fritz Lang’s Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, ed. Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 106–7; here, 106.

²⁶ Buñuel, “*Metropolis*,” 107.

²⁷ H. G. Wells, “Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film,” in *Fritz Lang’s Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, 94–100; here, 98.

²⁸ Wells, “Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film,” 94.

²⁹ Wells, “Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film,” 98–99.

³⁰ Wells, “Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film,” 99.

³¹ Wells, “Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film,” 99.

The most powerful image of the juxtaposition of the extremely modern with the distant past is Freder's experience at the M-machine that provides power to Metropolis. As Freder watches workers toiling at the massive machine, and observes an explosion in which a number of workers appear to die, the machine gradually changes in his imagination into a gigantic pyramidal idol, with living human beings marching up its steps and being thrown as sacrifices into its maw. The M-machine has become Moloch, an archaic god. The brave new high-tech world of the future meets the human sacrifice of the ancient world.

How can we explain this juxtaposition and simultaneity of the extremely old with the extremely new? R. L. Rutsky astutely suggests that the archaic imagery in the movie represents the return of the repressed: "the film suggests . . . that it is the repression of this older magical element by a rationalized technological modernity that brings about . . . its inverted, uncanny form."³² And yet Rutsky's answer presupposes a distinction between the archaic and the modern that may not have been obvious to the film's creators or original viewers. The opposition between science on the one hand and archaic magic on the other is by no means necessary. It is a distinction that contemporary scientists like to make, and that to some extent defines contemporary science, but it has by no means always been made. Historically, science has often been seen not as the opposite of magic but as part of it, and this is demonstrated in the film itself. Here — as in *Algol* before it and in the Romantic world of Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann" — technology and science are based on magic. This is likely the way that a great many Germans during the Weimar Republic (and a great many human beings elsewhere, then and now) viewed science: not as something radically new but as a particularly powerful kind of magic. Sigmund Freud, for instance, declared in his 1930 essay *Civilization and Its Discontents* that "Man has . . . become a kind of prosthetic God," i.e., people have, as a result of modern technology, attained the kinds of magical powers previously possessed only by mythical and divine creatures.³³ The German philosopher Ernst Bloch, living and writing at the same time, also noted the strange intersection between technology and magic. In his 1929 essay "The Anxiety of the Engineer," Bloch wrote that "technology was the ignoble sister of magic, devoted to its service in a world interwoven with spells and miracles."³⁴ Moreover, Bloch argued, "technology ultimately arrives at the same destination as magic; their area of intersection is so astonishing that

³² Rutsky, "The Mediation of Technology and Gender: *Metropolis*, Nazism, Modernism," 18.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1989), 44.

³⁴ Ernst Bloch, "The Anxiety of the Engineer," in *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron et al. (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998), 304–13; here, 309.

The Thousand and One Nights could almost be used as a manual for inventions yet to come.”³⁵ The more advanced the technology, the more magical it became, Bloch believed, intersecting “with the realm of taboo, with mists and vapors, unearthly velocity, golem-robots, and bolts of lightning. And so it comes into contact with things that were formerly conceived as belonging to the *magical sphere*.”³⁶ The science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke’s oft-cited Third Law states that: “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”³⁷ By this view, cinema itself was part of the magic of contemporary technology in the 1920s: it enabled visions that, in the popular imagination, had previously been reserved for sorcerers and witches. Science can therefore be thought of not as an alternative to magic but as its fulfillment and destiny.

In his American years Fritz Lang liked to tell a story about an encounter that he claimed to have had with Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, in 1933. According to Lang, Goebbels offered him a leading role in the German film industry, based at least partly on Hitler’s supposed love of the film *Metropolis*.³⁸ Whether or not this story is true — and it is entirely possible that Lang embellished or even invented it, although it is equally possible that the Nazis would have liked to keep Lang in Germany — there is much in *Metropolis* that points toward a fascist or National Socialist solution to the “social question” that was so urgent in the Weimar Republic. Siegfried Kracauer was not wrong when he wrote in his book *From Caligari to Hitler* that Maria’s demand for the heart to mediate between the hand and the brain “could well have been formulated by Goebbels” himself.³⁹ When the redeemer comes to Metropolis, he is a member of the upper class; the movie ends not with a social revolution but with the overcoming of revolution and the renewed regimentation of the workers, and of society — this time in a community of feeling embodied and represented by Freder as the “heart” of capitalism. It was precisely in these terms that both Italian fascism and German National Socialism liked to present themselves: as both an alternative to a Communist overthrow of capitalist relations of production and a way of integrating the working class into a *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the people), as the Nazis called it. At

³⁵ Bloch, “The Anxiety of the Engineer,” 311.

³⁶ Bloch, “The Anxiety of the Engineer,” 310. Also cited (in a different translation) in Anton Kaes, “Cinema and Modernity,” 25.

³⁷ Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future*, revised edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 21.

³⁸ See Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 164 and 248. On myths and reality in the Lang-Goebbels relationship, see Gösta Werner, “Fritz Lang and Goebbels: Myth and Facts,” *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 24–27. See also Michael H. Kater, “Film as an Object of Reflection in the Goebbels Diaries: Series II (1941–1945),” *Central European History* 33, no. 3 (2000): 391–414; esp. 392–93.

³⁹ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 164.

the end of *Metropolis*, something like a *Volksgemeinschaft* has indeed been achieved. The power of the workers, of threatening machines, and of unrestrained female sexuality has been successfully contained by the upper-class son of the boss. This is hardly a progressive vision of social change — just a kinder and gentler form of regimentation.⁴⁰ Fritz Lang himself later disavowed the explicit message of his own movie: “I was not so politically minded in those days as I am now. You cannot make a social-conscious picture in which you say that the intermediary between the hand and the brain is the heart — I mean that’s a fairy tale — definitely.”⁴¹

However, Lang divorced his Nazi wife and left Germany after the Nazi rise to power, and even if Hitler was a fan of *Metropolis*, it is clear that Lang was not a fan of Hitler. Certainly there are aspects of Lang’s work in this movie, particularly his choreography of large groups of people, that prefigure the use that the Nazis were to make of masses of people in the 1930s. It is instructive, for instance, to compare the human formations marching in *Metropolis* (and also in Lang’s *Nibelungen* films) with those that were to march eight years later through Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1935). However, it would be unfair to blame Lang for the Nazis’ predilection for the careful choreography of masses of human beings, and it is likely that the Nazis would have developed those ornamental techniques even without the existence of movies like Lang’s *Metropolis* or *Die Nibelungen*, where similar techniques are used. Lang’s 1933 movie *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* was actually banned by the Nazis, and with good reason, since it was clearly an anti-Nazi film. Instead of blaming Lang and his corporatist vision in *Metropolis* for helping to pave the way for the Nazis, as Kracauer comes close to doing, it would make more sense to see both *Metropolis* and the Nazis themselves as different attempts to answer fundamental questions about modernity, sexuality, and economic relations that were very pressing during the Weimar Republic. Lang’s film provides a fictional answer; the Nazis sought to provide an answer in all-too-brutal reality. The two phenomena — *Metropolis* the movie and Hitler’s NSDAP as a political party — are connected to each other not directly, but indirectly, as part and parcel of the same era. As such, *Metropolis*, although it cannot be blamed for Nazism, can nevertheless offer important insights into the kind of culture that led to Nazism’s rise. In *Metropolis* Lang created one of the inexhaustible texts of world cinema, a work that, as Anton Kaes has argued, resonated with most of the major debates of the Weimar Republic.⁴² It is also a work that has had an impact on a great many other films since its appearance over eight decades ago. *Metropolis* is not just a past vision of the future; its dark vision continues to affect the way that we look at the future today.

⁴⁰ See also Kaes, “Cinema and Modernity,” 21, who speaks of a “kinder, more gentle management.”

⁴¹ Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* (New York: Praeger: 1967), 124.

⁴² Kaes, “Cinema and Modernity,” 20.



Lola Lola on stage. Courtesy of the Filmmuseum Potsdam.

7: *Der blaue Engel* (1930) and Learning to Talk

Director: Josef von Sternberg

Cinematographers: Günther Rittau and Hans Schneeberger

Screenplay: Josef von Sternberg, Robert Liebmann, Karl Vollmöller, and Carl Zuckmayer, based on the novel by Heinrich Mann

Producer: Universum Film-Aktiengesellschaft (Erich Pommer)

Editor: Sam Winston

Production Design: Otto Hunte and Emil Hasler

Music: Friedrich Hollaender, performed by the Weintraub Syncopators

Soundtrack: Fritz Thiery

German Release Date: April 1, 1930

Actors: Emil Jannings (Professor Immanuel Rath); Marlene Dietrich (Lola Lola); Kurt Gerron (Kiepert); Rosa Valetti (Kiepert's wife Guste); Hans Albers (Mazeppa); Reinhold Bernt (clown); Eduard von Winterstein (headmaster); Hans Roth (doorman); Ilse Fürstenberg (Professor Rath's landlady); Gerhard Bienert (policeman); Friedrich Hollaender (piano player); Wilhelm Diegelmann (ship captain); Karl Huszar-Puffy (nightclub owner); Rolf Müller (Angst); Rolant Varno (Lohmann); Carl Ballhaus (Ertzum); Robert Klein-Lörk (Goldstaub); Wolfgang Staudte (a schoolboy)

WITH JOSEF VON STERNBERG'S *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel), we enter the era of sound film, which was introduced in Germany in 1929. The following year, 1930, marked the first year that the majority of German films produced were sound films. It is fitting that many of these early sound films, like *Der blaue Engel*, included song numbers and music, often as a significant part of the film plot. The music, in other words, is often not just background music — heard only by the audience and intended to put them into the right mood — it is, rather, incorporated into the story and heard by the film's characters. Film theorists use the term *diegetic* to refer to music that is part of the film's plot and *nondiegetic* to refer to music that is part of the soundtrack for the film's audience and not part of the plot. *Der blaue Engel* is characterized by a

large amount of diegetic music, which is plausible since one of the main characters, Lola Lola (played by Marlene Dietrich), makes her living as a nightclub singer, and some of the most important moments in *Der blaue Engel* involve Dietrich singing.

Josef von Sternberg was actually an American director who had been born in Vienna and moved to the United States with his family when he was a boy. He was invited to Germany to direct *Der blaue Engel*, a film that the Ufa studio wanted to use to demonstrate the artistic possibilities of sound, as well as Germany's ability to compete with Hollywood in the era of sound. As was typical for early sound films, two versions of *Der blaue Engel* were shot, one in German and one in English, to make it easier for the film to compete on the international — and in particular on the American — market. The German-language version of the film became a classic, and it was in Germany, not in the United States, that the film became a blockbuster hit.

One of Germany's greatest actors, Emil Jannings, who had played the role of the down-on-his-luck hotel doorman in F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann*, now played the hapless schoolteacher Professor Rath. Jannings had already worked for Sternberg in the silent 1928 American film *The Last Command*, for which he won the first-ever Oscar for best actor, and it was Jannings who asked Sternberg to direct him in his first sound film.¹ At the time, Jannings was a major star on stage and screen; his co-star Marlene Dietrich, however, was less well known. She had enjoyed some modest success on the Berlin cabaret stage as well as in a number of minor movies, but the part of Lola Lola in *Der blaue Engel* was her first major role in a prestige film, and it catapulted her to fame, becoming what the feminist film scholar Judith Mayne has called the “founding myth” in “the creation of the Dietrich persona.”² Dietrich was so successful in *Der blaue Engel* that Sternberg asked her to play the lead in his next film, *Morocco* (also 1930), where she repeated her role of a sexually provocative nightclub singer. *Morocco* launched Dietrich's career in the United States where, over a long career, she made many other films, including a sensational series with Sternberg himself, such as *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Blonde Venus* (also 1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) — in all of which she plays a dangerous woman. She became,

¹ Richard W. McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and “New Objectivity”* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 113–15.

² Judith Mayne, “Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance,” in *Seduction and Theory: Readings of Gender, Representation, and Rhetoric*, ed. Dianne Hunter (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989), 28–46; here, 31.

in Alan Lareau's words, "an icon of modern sexual emancipation."³ After the Second World War, Dietrich continued playing the role of the femme fatale, now often with a Nazi twist, as in Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948) and Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). In reality, however, Dietrich was an avid anti-Nazi. She was an outspoken critic of the Nazi regime and became famous for entertaining American troops and campaigning for U.S. war bonds during the Second World War. It was not until she died that Dietrich finally came back permanently to Germany, and to the city of Berlin that she loved; at her own wish, she was buried in Berlin's Friedenau cemetery in 1992. During her life, however, after the outbreak of war and even after her death, Dietrich was not universally popular among Germans; some considered her to be a traitor for her support of the United States during the Second World War, and not long after she was buried, her grave was vandalized.

Like so many other films then and now, *Der blaue Engel* was based on a novel — *Professor Unrat* (literally: Professor Garbage; English version: *Small Town Tyrant*, 1905) by Heinrich Mann.⁴ Mann's novel is a bitter critique of Wilhelmine society and its hypocrisy. Its major character, Professor Immanuel Rath, is a teacher at an elite school for teenage boys in Lübeck in northern Germany, a major port city. Rath's name in German can, via the addition of the prefix "un-", be changed to mean "garbage," which is the nickname given him by his students. Rath meets and becomes infatuated with Lola Lola, a beautiful young singer performing at a local nightclub called "Der blaue Engel" (The Blue Angel; the name of the movie is, hence, the name of the nightclub where the movie's most dramatic scenes take place). Rath eventually marries Lola, scandalizing the local bourgeoisie, and since he is no longer considered an appropriate role model for the town's youth, he is fired from his job as a teacher. In Mann's novel, Rath, the former defender of bourgeois propriety, becomes a criminal who, together with his wife Lola, exacts revenge on the society that has ostracized him. Sternberg's film has a very different ending in which Rath's marriage to Lola begins a long and painful psychological and social descent, and, far from exacting revenge, he is destroyed by his social faux pas. The formerly powerful and respected teacher winds up selling the titillating pictures of Lola that he used to forbid his students

³ Alan Lareau, "Lavender Songs: Undermining Gender in Weimar Cabaret and Beyond," *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 15–33; here, 16.

⁴ Heinrich Mann, *Professor Unrat, oder Das Ende eines Tyrannen* (Munich: A. Langen, 1905).

to view. By the end he even goes on stage in his old hometown, at the Blue Angel nightclub, as the clown in a cruel comedy show during which he is humiliated and laughed at. To make matters worse, Lola is unfaithful to him — she was attracted to him when he was socially respectable and enjoyed a certain prestige, but now that he has lost his social standing, he no longer interests her as a man. Rath's fate, then, is much like the fate of the hapless doorman in *Der letzte Mann*: his descent into social humiliation is also a descent into private familial hell. Upon the troupe's return to the Blue Angel nightclub, Lola immediately takes up with the strongman Mazeppa, played by Hans Albers. In the movie's most dramatic scene, Rath is on stage dressed in his clown suit and having eggs broken on his head while backstage Lola flirts with Mazeppa. Beside himself with humiliation and anger, Rath walks offstage and tries to strangle his wife.

The movie's final scenes contain strong echoes of previous Weimar film history. In the penultimate scene, Rath, who has just failed at strangling Lola Lola, sits in a straightjacket, defeated and powerless. This scene, depicting a former authority figure now stripped of his power and physically confined, resembles a similar scene from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, in which the once formidable Caligari sits wearing a straitjacket. It is as if in *Der blaue Engel* Sternberg were echoing the beginning of Weimar film history and suggesting to his audience that Immanuel Rath is one more in a long line of real and fictional German authority figures who, in the wake of the First World War, have been rendered impotent. This echo of earlier Weimar cinema is redoubled in the next and final scene when Rath, released from his straightjacket, comes back in the dark of night to his old school to die. He rings the school bell, and the astounded porter, recognizing who he is, lets him in; Rath then goes up to the classroom where he had once tried to teach his reluctant students English, and dies. The porter slowly follows him, searching with his flashlight, which pierces the dark of the stairwell and halls. This scene, too, is an echo, recalling the penultimate scene of Murnau's *Der letzte Mann*, in which the humiliated former hotel doorman returns to the hotel washroom to collapse. In both scenes the porter/night watchman follows the male protagonist with a flashlight, and in both scenes the flashlight illuminates the inert body of a once proud and strong man.⁵ The echo effect of this final scene is all the more powerful since the same actor — Emil Jannings — plays both roles.

⁵ See McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity*, 117.

Paradoxically, in this final scene of *Der blaue Engel*, Sternberg shows what a powerful force silence can be in a sound film.⁶ Unlike the rest of the movie, this occurs in complete silence until the very end as the camera, along with the porter's flashlight (which can be read as a metaphor for the cinematic apparatus here, as well as in films like *Metropolis* and *Der letzte Mann*) pans along the rows of desks in Rath's former schoolroom, only to find the professor himself sitting dead at his old desk in front of the room. During this sequence, after complete silence, the audience begins to hear the climactic but restrained nondiegetic music that tells them that Rath has met his inevitable fate. The school porter cannot hear it; only the audience can. It is this nondiegetic music of death — a music outside of and beyond all plots — that all of the film's previous diegetic music has led up to, at least for Professor Rath.

As Rath sneaks away from the nightclub in order to return to his old school, Lola performs on stage: sitting provocatively backward on a chair with her legs wrapped around the chair's back and the insides of her legs exposed to the view of the camera, she sings her most famous song, which includes lines that help to explain Professor Rath's unhappy fate:

Men swarm around me like moths to the flame
And if they burn up, then I'm not to blame.
From my head to my toes I'm all about love,
For love is my world, and all I'm made of.⁷

Professor Rath, in other words, is just a moth who has flown into the flame of Lola's sexuality and been destroyed by it. Neither he nor Lola herself can do anything about it. In some American versions of *Der blaue Engel*, the scene with Lola singing is appended as a coda to the end of the movie, after the final scene. The two extant endings — one featuring Rath's death and the other featuring a singing Lola — stress different things: if the film ends with Rath's death, then the emphasis is on tragedy, as Hart Wegner argues when he claims that “in his original, Sternberg approached the elusive goal of screen tragedy.”⁸ If the film ends with Lola

⁶ Robert Bresson has asserted that it was really the sound film that created silence. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 21. Cited in Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 167.

⁷ Hart Wegner, ed., *Der blaue Engel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 97. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

⁸ Hart Wegner, “*Der blaue Engel*: A Feature Film in Foreign Language Literature,” *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1979): 30–36; here, 33.

singing, then the emphasis is on the continuation of life. However, in either version the tension between Rath's tragedy and Lola Lola's continued existence remains unresolved.

There are echoes of *Metropolis* in this movie as well as of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and *Der letzte Mann*. In many ways Lola is a sexually dangerous figure resembling the false Maria in *Metropolis*. Like the false Maria, Lola enjoys power over men; just as they love to look at the false Maria, so too they love to look at Lola. Whereas in the film's final scenes the porter's flashlight searches for and ultimately finds Rath, throughout much of the movie the spotlight is quite literally on Lola, who sings on stage. If Rotwang's flashlight in *Metropolis* had symbolically raped Maria in the underground catacombs, however, Lola Lola is never similarly vulnerable; it is she who controls the light and by extrapolation also sexual power. She demonstrates this when Rath first enters the nightclub by turning the spotlight directly onto him; just as the words of Lola's song suggest, he appears to be trapped and immobilized by the light. In a later scene, Rath's presence is announced directly to the nightclub's audience and the spotlight is again turned on him. He appears flustered but slightly pleased to be the subject of Lola's attention, and to literally be in the spotlight. Throughout the film such instances of spotlighting lend credence to Lola's musical claim that she is the light that attracts and also kills her male victims. Lola's spotlight on Rath in the earlier scene has a direct connection to the flashlight that, later on, will reveal to the night watchman and the film's viewers that Rath is dead. In *Der blaue Engel*, it is not Rath or the film's male viewers but rather Lola Lola who seems to control sexual and visual power. Lola, in other words, may be an object of male desire, but like the false Maria in *Metropolis* this gives her the power to bind and destroy — a power that the real Maria does not have. She is not the passive victim of an oppressive male gaze; she uses men's passions to turn them into victims. Gaylyn Studlar writes that Dietrich, in all of her roles with Sternberg, "looks back or initiates the look. She seems to question her objectification in defiance of the implicit cinematic rule against an illusion-breaking confrontation of gazes."⁹

A number of critics have suggested that by changing the plot of Heinrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat*, Sternberg transformed a socially progressive book into a reactionary movie. Whereas Mann's protagonist rebels against bourgeois society, Sternberg's protagonist ultimately creeps back to the very classroom from which he had originally escaped; his attempt at escape is punished by death. The theorist Theodor W. Adorno

⁹ Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988), 48.

complained about this ending, arguing that *Der blaue Engel* ultimately “has no other purpose than to silence a denunciation of inhumanity evident in Heinrich Mann’s novel.”¹⁰ This criticism of *Der blaue Engel* assumes that audiences identify with the film’s protagonist Immanuel Rath, i.e., that by the end of the film they learn not to rebel against the bourgeois order, as Rath had done. However, it is likely that many of the film’s viewers, even in 1930, would not have identified with a man who leads a rather lonely life and tyrannizes his pupils. Viewers may feel sympathy for him at the end of the movie, but that does not necessarily mean that they identify with him. Angela Carter is no doubt intentionally provocative when she writes, “How anybody has ever been able to see this film as the tragedy of an upright citizen of Toytown ruined by the baleful influences of a floozy is quite beyond me.”¹¹ However, her basic point that viewers of *Der blaue Engel* are not restricted to Rath’s perspective is a good one. As Richard McCormick has persuasively argued, Rath “represents precisely the stuffy, pompous bourgeois type so often ridiculed” in Weimar culture.¹² McCormick is right in arguing that if the film is viewed from Lola’s perspective, it takes on an entirely different tone — perhaps more progressive, perhaps not. And yet Judith Mayne is also correct when she points out that even in the depths of his humiliation, “Rath continues to exercise supreme narrative authority” in the film.¹³ Moreover, any interpretation of the film as solely a depiction of patriarchy’s subversion will need to come to terms with Lola’s reasons for liking and ultimately agreeing to marry Rath in the first place. When Rath defends Lola’s honor by fighting with a drunken ship’s captain, and when Rath calls her a “lady,” she does not laugh at him but is, rather, touched.¹⁴ Rath is behaving in a patriarchal way by assuming that Lola cannot defend herself, but she nevertheless seems to enjoy, at least temporarily, the pleasure of being a lady whose honor is defended by a chivalrous male.¹⁵ Ultimately, the film’s viewers do not really have to choose between Rath’s and Lola’s perspectives. Film, like any narrative art form based on human personalities, allows its audience to take on multiple perspectives. At any rate, audiences do not necessarily imagine

¹⁰ Cited in Gertrud Koch, “Between Two Worlds: Von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel*,” in *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 60–72; here, 61.

¹¹ Cited in Mayne, “Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance,” 32, from Angela Carter, *Nothing Sacred* (London: Virago, 1985), 122.

¹² Richard McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity*, 124.

¹³ Mayne, “Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance,” 35.

¹⁴ Wegner, ed., *Der blaue Engel*, 77.

¹⁵ See also Mayne, “Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance,” 35.

a one-to-one correspondence between a particular cinematic character's perspective and their own future actions in the real world.

Der blaue Engel is just one more proof that Expressionist techniques and settings exerted a powerful influence on German and international film long after the decline of Expressionism. *Der blaue Engel* is not, strictly speaking, an Expressionist film, but in many ways it is Sternberg's homage to German Expressionist cinema. The play of light and shadow throughout the film is one Expressionist element, as is the opening scene, strongly reminiscent of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, with its shot of the rooftops of Lübeck looking jagged and out of proportion. Professor Rath's nighttime walk through the dark streets, full of shadows briefly interrupted by light, is fundamentally Expressionist; it too could be out of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* or one of the street movies of the 1920s, so many of which featured dark streets frequented by women of the night. Likewise Emil Jannings's emotive acting style is essentially Expressionist: in the movie's most painful but perhaps most brilliant moment, when Professor Rath tries to crow like a rooster on stage, that Expressionism is on full display. This is sound without words, and no words are necessary. The language teacher who used to be in complete control of his students, has lost all control of himself, even of language. He is not even capable of sounding like a rooster. Instead, his tortured cock-a-doodle-doo expresses, far more powerfully than words ever could, all the pain and torment of his soul. *Der blaue Engel*, one of the major early German sound films, is about the downfall of a professor whose job it is to teach his students to speak a foreign language, and in this scene Rath fails to sound like an animal, just as previously one of Rath's students had failed in his efforts to speak English.¹⁶ The feminist film critic Gertrud Koch has disparaged Jannings's acting style in *Der blaue Engel*, arguing that he remained "tied to the conventions of a naturalistically tinged psychology."¹⁷ However, this scene is hardly naturalistic. Koch is right that Jannings's and Dietrich's acting styles are diametrically opposed, and that "Dietrich as Lola knows better how to present herself as a type rather than a character."¹⁸ However, Koch seems to overlook the fact that this is precisely the point: Professor Rath represents an old-fashioned notion of individuality, whereas Lola Lola is the quintessential "New Woman" of the Weimar Republic, a type rather than an individual psychology. The clash between the two acting styles, far from detracting from the movie, actually adds to its tension and

¹⁶ Mayne notes that this scene "is a parody of Rath's teaching techniques." Mayne, "Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance," 36.

¹⁷ Koch, "Between Two Worlds," 68.

¹⁸ Koch, "Between Two Worlds," 69.

pathos. As Judith Mayne has argued, *Der blaue Engel* “is structured by a tension between different modes of performance.”¹⁹

At the same time, the movie’s Expressionist elements are always counterbalanced by more matter-of-fact elements characteristic of the New Sobriety. Rath’s death scene, for instance, is set against Lola Lola nonchalantly singing her song on stage. Rath’s quasi-Expressionist stroll through the mysterious nighttime streets of Lübeck is interrupted by a prostitute and the sound of female laughter. The film’s opening shot of an almost Expressionist cityscape is immediately followed by a humorous scene in which a distinctly matter-of-fact washerwoman cleans a window and tries to imitate the pose of Lola Lola on a poster. It is as if this cleaning woman, from the very beginning of the film, were indicating that the film will ultimately wash away all overblown pathos. In a way, this film stages the contrast between Expressionism and New Sobriety in the confrontation between Professor Rath and Lola Lola. She is the matter-of-fact, no-nonsense representative of a new culture without illusions or the romantic excesses of Expressionism. When he gives her a wedding ring, her initial and most honest reaction is to break out into laughter: “Mich willste heiraten?” (“You want to marry *me*? ”)²⁰ For Lola Lola the concept of true love and happily-ever-after is just a myth, something she does not lose much sleep over. Her world is one of business and pleasure, not of great emotions or profound duties. Sexuality is just part of the way that Lola makes her living, not something attached to strong or lasting feelings like love or duty. She is just doing her job, like everyone else. During this period, women in Germany entered the job market in large numbers, moving beyond their traditional roles as wives or serving girls and becoming secretaries, telephone operators, and receptionists in a great many large and small enterprises. The life of such women is well described in Weimar-era novels like Irmgard Keun’s *Gilgi — eine von uns* (*Gilgi — One of Us*, 1931).²¹ The entry of so many women into the job market and the

¹⁹ Mayne, “Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance,” 32. The two modes that Mayne is pointing out are the more chaotic carnivalesque mode at the beginning of the movie and the more structured mode in the movie’s second half. However, her argument about different performance modes also holds true for the difference between Jannings’s and Dietrich’s acting styles. Indeed, if one takes Mayne’s argument about the carnivalesque and the structured as one’s starting point, one notes that just as Lola Lola makes a transition from the carnivalesque to the structured over the course of the movie, so too Rath makes an opposite journey from the structured to the chaotic. See also Mayne, “Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance,” 37.

²⁰ Wegner, ed., *Der blaue Engel*, 115.

²¹ Irmgard Keun, *Gilgi — eine von uns* (Düsseldorf: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989).

decline of previous moral and religious conventions had both positive and negative effects. Although it meant that women were in many ways freer than ever before from the constraints of family and church, it also meant that they were deprived of some of the — admittedly inadequate — protections previously afforded them in a traditional patriarchal society. At the same time, many men saw the presence of women on the job market and in public life as a whole as threatening, and as contributing to the perceived emasculation of Weimar culture. *Der blaue Engel* is an eloquent document of that fear, showing a strong, young, sexually powerful woman in conflict with a weaker, older, sexually unattractive and possibly impotent man (a rooster who cannot crow, as it were).

Dietrich's counterpart in the movie, Professor Rath, is the representative of the old order. He lives alone in a room that he rents from a landlady who makes him breakfast every day. His only companionship is a canary (yet another bird) that Rath finds dead in one of the early scenes of the movie. His landlady, every bit as matter-of-fact and sober as the washerwoman at the movie's beginning, throws the dead canary into the heating oven, leaving Rath completely friendless. Her gesture indicates that there is no time for great emotion or pathos here; just a need to get rid of some trash. In the end, Rath himself will have become trash (*Unrat*) that needs to be disposed of. His fate will match the fate of his bird.

Rath is initially an authority figure at his school, where he enforces strict discipline. When he arrives in the classroom, all of his students stand up and greet him respectfully, and they fear his anger. When the sound of girls singing fills the classroom from open windows — an example of diegetic music being used to indicate the presence of longing and temptation, albeit somewhat awkwardly since filmmakers had not yet figured out how to create gradual sound transitions — Rath spots a student ogling a picture of Lola Lola and immediately shuts the windows, stopping the siren song that is distracting his students from their work: Rath's job is to keep out the world of temptation and to enforce order in the classroom. The girls are singing an old East Prussian love song called “Ännchen von Tharau” with music by Friedrich Silcher and words by Johann Gottfried Herder (who translated an original poem from the Low German dialect):

Ännchen von Tharau's the girl that I love,
My money, my life, and all I'm made of.

Ännchen von Tharau, she gives me again
A heart full of love, and also of pain.

Ännchen von Tharau, you're all that I own,
You are my soul and my flesh and my bone.²²

²² Wegner, ed., *Der blaue Engel*, 25.

This song suggests the intrusion of female sexuality into the closed, male world of Rath's classroom. At the same time, some of its later words, such as the line "du bist . . . mein Huhn" (you are my chicken) seem to hint at Immanuel Rath's ultimate fate.

Rath leads a disciplined life himself, and he demands discipline from his students. He gets up every day at the same time, goes to school every day at the same time, and goes home at the same time. The clock bells that listeners can hear at the beginning of the school day indicate the kind of Wilhelmine discipline that Rath enforces on himself and the young men under his care. They chime the tune of another old German song with lyrics by Ludwig Höltz and music by Mozart from the opera *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), whose words run:

Be always honest and faithful
Till you lie in your grave
And do not take even one step
From the paths God has laid.²³

This song embodies the old-fashioned wisdom by which Rath tries — or wants to be perceived as trying — to live his life, and which the school tries to impart to its students: discipline, hard work, honor. The two tunes — the one promoting discipline and the other, sung by female voices, speaking of beauty and love — trace the dilemma that both Rath and his students face: loveless, pointless discipline on the one hand and the sirens of temptation and sexuality on the other. In order to beat down temptation, Rath must do more than just teach.

Therefore, Rath is not just a teacher, he is also a tyrant. He not only disciplines his students, he also humiliates and torments them. Although he is an English teacher, he does not seem to be a very good one. The first thing he does on entering the classroom in the morning each day is to blow his nose in a highly dramatic way while glaring balefully at his students. He yells and virtually spits at a student for mispronouncing the English word "the." This scene is a priceless bit of physical and aural humor, one that would, of course, be impossible in the absence of sound. Rath teaches Shakespeare, but his method appears to be sheer rote, with no emphasis on meaning. There is no discussion in class whatsoever — only drill and performance. Rath is also a hypocrite. When he finds his students with pictures of Lola Lola, he becomes angry and yells, but in secret he likes to look at the pictures himself. In reality the strict discipline and order of Rath's world is only a bulwark against the internal disorder of his mind, a disorder indicated at the very beginning of the movie when

²³ Wegner, ed., *Der blaue Engel*, 184.

Rath's landlady comments on the chaos of his room, which is full of stinking cigar stubs.

When Rath enters the Blue Angel nightclub, he is immediately trapped, a fact made plain by his literally walking into a fish net, since the nightclub is cluttered with seafaring paraphernalia. The presence of a female ship's mascot with large breasts seems to discombobulate him, Lola's underwear overwhelms him, and Lola's talcum powder, which she blows in his face, renders him defenseless. All of these physical objects indicate the incipient disorder in Rath's mind, and he is unable to master them; they master him. The sexual power struggle between Rath and Lola is decided almost immediately: he is no match for her, and because he succumbs to her attractions, he also loses his standing among his students, who see that he is attracted to precisely the same charms as they are, and that he has punished them for being attracted to. Unlike his more sober students, however, Rath does not know how to deal with Lola's charms. They would never seriously think of marrying Lola Lola, but Rath immediately does. For his sexually aware students the English words "I love you" are just a game; for the sexually innocent Rath, declarations of love are entirely serious. He has not yet comprehended, and will never comprehend, that love is now an obsolete ideal, rendered outdated by the progress of capitalist society. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno were to write in their philosophical treatise *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947) — in many ways an analysis of the Weimar period and its ideological structures — "Under the aegis of heavy industry, love was eliminated. The decay of the small property owners, the decline of the free economic subject affects the family: it is no longer the previously famed kernel of society, because it no longer forms the basis of bourgeois economic existence."²⁴ Romantic love, in other words, is an ideal that belongs to a previous stage of capitalist development, one that favored the creation of strong, altruistic family units; contemporary capitalism, in contrast, is based on selfishness rather than love. New Sobriety and its proponents viewed the ideology of love as fakery, what Horkheimer and Adorno call "a mere cover-up, a rationalization

²⁴ Cited in Brockmann, "Weimar Sexual Cynicism," in *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), 165–80; here, 169. German original: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1998), 114. The English translation by John Cumming in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 107, is problematic because it eliminates the crucial sentence "Under the aegis of heavy industry, love was eliminated."

of bodily impulses.”²⁵ It is therefore insufficient simply to choose one of these views over the other, as McCormick does when he argues that “there is something emancipatory in the power and sexual ambiguity of Dietrich’s Lola,” because to do so is to ignore the very dialectic at work between emancipation and enslavement.²⁶ Lola’s emancipated status, after all, comes at the expense of Rath — who in essence becomes Lola’s sex slave — and it is a status that Lola could herself easily lose if she were to become less beautiful. Mayne is well aware of this problem when she writes that there is a risk in “ascribing a resistant function to an element” such as Lola’s flouting of patriarchal conventions “that may function quite well within the logic of patriarchal discourse.”²⁷ Some social conservatives may want to sympathize with Rath, whereas some feminists may want to sympathize with Lola, but ultimately the viewer may want to reject both of their positions.

Throughout the first two-thirds of the movie, it looks as if Rath’s story might end happily and love might triumph in spite of everything. After all, Rath is no longer lonely, he has found a companion, he has left his boring everyday existence as a teacher and become part of a traveling entertainment group. The high point of Rath’s happiness comes during his wedding dinner with Lola and the rest of the company; it is here, after the entertainment group’s director, the magician Kiepert, played by Kurt Gerron, has magically produced some eggs from Rath’s head, that Rath begins to crow like a rooster — with convincing happiness. The message is clear: Rath really does feel like a rooster in a chicken coop here. From then on, however, everything goes downhill for Rath. When Rath first enters Lola’s dressing room, he runs into a thin, sad clown who is blocking the way; by the end of the movie, that clown has disappeared and Rath has himself become the not-so-thin, sad clown. In the first half of the movie, in other words, Rath receives two visions of himself as he will be by movie’s end: the dead canary and the sad clown.

Der blaue Engel provides support for Kracauer’s thesis that in Weimar cinema there is no middle ground between authoritarian control and chaos. This is certainly true for Rath’s life. Either Rath is the martinet school-teacher of the beginning of the movie, or he is the pathetic, psychologically unhinged clown of the movie’s end. Either Rath’s students are

²⁵ Cited in Brockmann, “Weimar Sexual Cynicism,” 172.

²⁶ McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity*, 126. McCormick is not wrong; he is just disregarding the more negative aspects of Lola Lola’s emancipation. It should be noted that in this passage McCormick is taking issue with my own more negative view of Lola Lola. See Brockmann, “Weimar Sexual Cynicism,” 179.

²⁷ Mayne, “Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance,” 41.

under his complete domination, or they become little tyrants themselves, tormenting both Rath and his favorite pupil, the teacher's pet. Kracauer even describes these young men as future Hitler youth in their cruelty and brutality.²⁸ When these students attack the teacher's pet in his bed one night, their threatening shadows on the wall recall the shadows of the somnambulist murderer Cesare in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*.

The career of Kurt Gerron, who plays the magician Kiepert in *Der blaue Engel*, had its own sad conclusion. Gerron, an important Jewish figure in Weimar entertainment life, was later to be featured as an example of the supposedly bad influence of Jews on Weimar cultural life in Fritz Hippler's notorious antisemitic Nazi documentary *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew) in 1941. Even worse, Gerron was later imprisoned in the Theresienstadt concentration camp where, as a film expert, he was induced by the Nazis to direct *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (The Führer Gives the Jews a City, 1944), a propaganda film intended to convince the outside world that Hitler and the Nazis were treating European Jews well. The movie shows the Jewish inmates of Theresienstadt leading entirely normal lives: going to concerts, enjoying plentiful food, etc., though it was never completed and today exists only in fragmentary form. Unfortunately, Gerron's participation did not save him from the Nazis; he died at the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1944, along with so many other Jews. Gerron's descent from *Der blaue Engel* in 1930 to *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* in 1944 is a powerful example of the terrible fate encountered by Jews and other Nazi victims during Hitler's Third Reich.²⁹ It also clearly illustrates the steep decline in German cultural and moral life between the Weimar era and the end of the Nazi period.

Emil Jannings, meanwhile, sympathized with the Nazis. He went on to make a number of films for them, including the anti-English propaganda film *Ohm Krüger* in 1939. Jannings died in 1950. His career can perhaps be compared to that of Heinrich George, who played the foreman in *Metropolis* and went on to play the father in *Hitlerjunge Quex*

²⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 218.

²⁹ In 1998 the playwright Roy Kift created *Camp Comedy*, a play about Gerron's fate in Theresienstadt. A year later, in 1999, Ilona Ziok made a documentary, *Kurt Gerrons Karussel* ("Karussel" was the name of the cabaret that Gerron ran at Theresienstadt), with Kift as the narrator. In 2002 Malcolm Clark and Stuart Sender also created a Gerron documentary entitled *Prisoner of Paradise*. Kift has also written an article about Gerron's work at Theresienstadt: Kift, "Reality and Illusion in the Theresienstadt Cabaret," in *Staging the Holocaust: The Shoah in Drama and Performance*, ed. Claude Schumacher (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 147–68. W. G. Sebald also addresses the film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* in his novel *Austerlitz* (2001).

(Hitler Youth Quex, 1933), one of the first major Nazi feature films, as well as the Duke of Württemberg in the notorious antisemitic Nazi feature film *Jud Süß* (Jew Süß, 1940). George, who was a talented actor, died in Soviet custody while undergoing an appendectomy at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1946, and his son Götz George is now one of the most distinguished living German actors. The Swiss-born Jannings and the German-born George were both excellent actors, and both demonstrate the susceptibility of even some of the most talented artists to Nazi blandishments and ideology. To what extent these and other actors' cooperation with the Nazis was based on true conviction or pure careerism is difficult to say. It is likely, however, that in most cases both factors played a role. If we compare their fates with that of the German Jew Kurt Gerron, forced to direct a propaganda film about the very concentration camp he was living in before being murdered by the Nazis, we are confronted with some of the horrible ironies of German history in the first half of the twentieth century. Both Gerron and George — the Nazi victim and the Nazi sympathizer — died in concentration camps.



Beckert and his reflection. Courtesy of the Deutsche Kinemathek.

8: *M* (1931) or Sound and Terror

Director: Fritz Lang

Cinematographer: Fritz Arno Wagner

Screenplay: Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang

Producer: Nero Film (Seymour Nebenzahl)

Editor: Paul Falkenberg

Production Design: Emil Hasler and Karl Vollbrecht

Soundtrack: Adolf Jansen

German Release Date: May 11, 1931

Actors: Peter Lorre (Hans Beckert); Otto Wernicke (Karl Lohmann);

Gustaf Gründgens (Schräner); Ellen Widmann (Frau Beckmann);

Inge Landgut (Elsie Beckmann); Franz Stein (government

minister); Ernst Stahl-Nachbauer (chief of police); Rosa Valetti

(Beckert's landlady); Fritz Gnass (burglar); Fritz Odemar

(safecracker); Georg John (blind balloon salesman); Karl Platen

(night watchman); Hertha von Walther (prostitute); Paul Kemp

(pickpocket); Rudolf Blümner (Beckert's "lawyer"); Theodor

Loos (Inspector Groeber)

FRITZ LANG's *M*, one of the great Weimar thrillers, and to this day one of the most gripping crime films ever made, makes brilliant use of sound, even though large portions of it occur in silence. In one of the key scenes, a blind balloon seller hears a man whistling a melody, and he recognizes it immediately as the same one he had heard when a little girl named Elsie Beckmann was kidnapped and murdered. The melody — "In the Hall of the Mountain King" by Edvard Grieg — becomes a kind of Wagnerian *Leitmotiv*, giving the murderer away to his pursuers, but also revealing his psychic turmoil to knowledgeable viewers, since the music refers to a moment in Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* when the protagonist is surrounded and about to be attacked by trolls. In the movie's climactic scene, that is what almost happens to the murderer Hans Beckert: he is surrounded and almost killed by an angry mob of criminals.¹

¹ On the connection to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, see Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 179; Anton Kaes, *M* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 20; and Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995), 158.

It turns out that the child murderer Beckert whistles this tune whenever he feels the urge to commit a murder, and it appears to be part of his own private soundtrack: in one scene, after the sudden arrival of a girl's mother has thwarted his attempt to kidnap and murder another child, Beckert sits down at an outdoor café and drinks two shots of brandy. He whistles the Grieg tune but then covers his ears as if to prevent the sound from entering his head — apparently unsuccessfully, since his agitation does not stop and the tune ultimately continues. At the end of the movie, in his final monologue, Beckert confesses that he is always hearing sounds in his head — except when he commits murder. "Who knows what it looks like inside of me? Who knows . . . the screaming and shouting inside?"² Murder itself, then, is a response to sound and an effort on Beckert's part to achieve silence.

The only person in the film's panoply of characters who recognizes the tune's significance is blind, oriented primarily to the world of sound and its possibilities. In many ways *M*, Lang's first sound film, seems almost to be a warning to its audience about the manipulative, Dionysian power of sound. In 1872, twenty-three years before the invention of cinematography, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had associated vision with restrained rationality, and linked sound, particularly music, with irrational, chaotic rapture.³ In Greek mythology both the god Dionysus and the human musician Orpheus are torn to pieces by groups of frenzied women; in *M*, the murderer Beckert is threatened with being torn apart by a crowd that includes angry women. Tom Gunning calls Beckert's possible fate a *sparagmos* — an ancient Greek word meaning ritual dismemberment and pertaining to tragedy.⁴ Nietzsche had argued for a balance between vision and sound, between the sober Apollonian principle that establishes clear borders between particular individuals, and the irrational Dionysian principle that destroys individuality and individuals — with the word "individual" meaning, quite literally, that which cannot be divided. For Nietzsche, the Dionysian principle is based on terror and pain intermingled with joy: "At the very climax of joy there sounds a cry of horror or a yearning lamentation for an irretrievable loss."⁵ *M* shows a character who is unable to achieve a synthesis between the two opposing principles:

² Fritz Lang, *M: Protokoll*, ed. Gero Gandert (Hamburg: Marion von Schröder, 1963), 116. Here and elsewhere, all quotations from German sources are my own translations unless otherwise noted.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 29–144.

⁴ Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 197.

⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40.

he is completely governed by the Dionysian principle, driven to destroy (divide and cut) other individuals and ultimately also himself. Beckert is tormented and controlled by the sounds that he hears in his head, and that he himself creates with his whistling. Lang, however, refrains from manipulating his own audience with sound. In *M* almost all sound is diegetic, serving a specific role in the plot.

Lang does not rely solely on sound, since large portions of *M* occur without sound or without a synchronized sound track — the audience does not always hear footsteps when it sees people walking, for instance — almost as if *M* were an attempt at achieving a compromise between silent and sound film.⁶ Less than a year before *M* opened, Lang proclaimed his intention of making a sound film that would be able to “carry on the heritage of silent film,” and in many ways that is precisely what *M* does.⁷ It achieves a kind of balance between sight and sound, giving its audience access to the murderer Beckert’s world of sound but balancing that sound-based world with a more rational visual world. The film’s rightly famous opening sequence is a case in point. It shows an interplay between sound and vision that characterizes the rest of the film. Tom Gunning has analyzed this sequence well, but a brief retelling is in order.⁸ At the beginning of the movie, after a stylized logo featuring a hand inscribed with the letter *M*, the audience sees a black screen and hears a loud, piercing, unidentifiable noise (probably nondiegetic, i.e., not heard by any of the characters in the film). This sound is immediately followed by a high-pitched, childlike voice that chants a counting song about a “black man” who will come to get little children and make mincemeat of them:

Wait, just wait a little while,
And soon the black man will get to you
He’ll use his little knife with style
To make mincemeat of you, too.⁹

The camera then shows, from above, the film’s first moving image: a group of children in a tenement courtyard playing a counting game; the chanter is revealed to be the little girl leading the game. One of the children is

⁶ Of course, as with all early movies, there are variations in prints, and audiences today cannot be certain that the film they are seeing is identical to the film that audiences saw eight decades ago.

⁷ Cited in Kaes, *M*, 19.

⁸ Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 165–72. See also Noel Burch’s excellent analysis of the film’s structure: Noel Burch, “Fritz Lang: German Period,” in *In and Out of Sync: The Awakening of a Cine-Dreamer*, ed. Burch (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1991), 3–31; especially 20–30.

⁹ Lang, *M: Protokoll*, 9.

counted "out," and the song continues. The position of the camera then moves down and to the left, while at the same time it looks up to the right to reveal a washer woman, who leans over a banister and chastises the children for singing a song about a child murderer. The audience thus learns that there is a reality behind the children's game: a child murderer really is on the loose. Nonetheless, the washer woman's chastising does not stop the children from singing for more than a few seconds; they continue with their gruesome game, and with the song, unperturbed. This opening suggests that the entire plot of *M* — including the murder of Elsie Beckmann that is about to occur — emerges out of music, just as Nietzsche had argued that tragedy emerges from the spirit of music. And indeed the children's song precisely tells the audience what is about to happen to Elsie: she is about to be counted "out," i.e., murdered.

Meanwhile, the washer woman — who appears to be pregnant — makes her way laboriously up the stairs of the tenement, carrying a load of laundry, to the apartment of Elsie's mother, who is preparing lunch and herself doing some washing. The washer woman's arrival at the apartment is signaled by yet another sound, as she manages to ring the doorbell without putting down her load. After exchanging the laundry, the two women talk about the children's song, with the washer woman complaining about it while Elsie's mother notes that as long as the children are singing at least they are all right. The camera cuts to the interior of Elsie's mother's apartment, showing a very modest place. Sound — in the form of a cuckoo clock and a loud bell somewhere outside the apartment, apparently coming from Elsie's school — now signals the arrival of the noon hour, and the audience sees Elsie's mother smile in anticipation of her daughter's arrival home from school. But the audience soon learns, in a series of shots that alternate between Elsie's mother at home and Elsie on the streets of Berlin, that Elsie Beckmann is not all right. The camera shows the front of Elsie's school, where well-dressed parents await their children. Elsie, whose mother is at home working, is alone, threatened from the very first moment the audience sees her. She steps out into the busy street in front of the school and is almost run over by a car, whose presence is indicated first and foremost by sound (a honking horn). Elsie is then helped across the street by a policeman. She bounces a ball along the sidewalk until she reaches a round column featuring a poster advertising a reward for information that might lead to the capture of a serial killer who has already murdered several little children. As Elsie bounces her ball against the advertising column, a shadow comes over it and moves down toward her. This, of course, is the shadow of the murderer Hans Beckert, who comments appreciatively on Elsie's ball. Beckert, the "M" or murderer of the movie's title, thus appears first as a shadow and then as a sound. It is only later that the audience sees him (although his back is to the camera) buying a balloon in the shape of a grotesque human being for

Elsie from the blind beggar. At this point Beckert begins to whistle the ominous tune from Grieg — the same tune that the beggar will remember later on in the film. The camera cuts back to Elsie's mother in the tenement apartment; she has prepared lunch and is waiting for the return of her daughter. She has carefully put two place settings at the table. She has become increasingly nervous. She has heard a group of children run up the stairs of the apartment building and has asked them whether Elsie came with them. The film's viewers, of course, know that Elsie is with her murderer. The doorbell rings, and Frau Beckmann once again goes to the door, hoping that Elsie has arrived. But it is only a man selling the latest installment of a crime thriller, which he routinely, and with obvious boredom, praises as sensational. Frau Beckmann distractedly makes the purchase, asking the salesman if he has seen her daughter. She goes to the stairwell of the tenement and cries out "El-sie?" The camera shows an empty stairwell, and the audience hears silence. Elsie's murder, then, is first and foremost figured as silence. Frau Beckmann hears a man on the street singing something, and in desperation she opens the window of her apartment and shouts out "El-sie? . . . Elsie!" — as if hoping that by calling out her daughter's name she can conjure up Elsie herself.¹⁰ The camera cuts to images that reveal Elsie's absence — the empty stairwell, the building's attic, where children's clothes are hanging, and Elsie's empty place setting, devoid of both food and the girl who might eat it. In the final scenes of the sequence, the camera shows Elsie's ball, now without its owner, rolling from behind some trees. The camera then cuts to the balloon that Beckert had previously bought for Elsie. The balloon is caught in telegraph wires, struggling for and finally attaining freedom against an empty sky. The words "Elsie, Elsie" still echo in the audience's mind, even though they are no longer part of the film's soundtrack, which is now completely silent, a silence that, as Gunning notes, emphatically means death.¹¹ The images that the audience sees are nevertheless, in essence, the answer to Frau Beckmann's cries. They show the film's audience part of what is left of Elsie — objects without their owner, who now figures solely as an absence. Without ever showing Elsie's murder, Lang has made it clear that little Elsie has become the serial killer's most recent victim. Lang later noted that he wanted to "make the audience an integral part in the creation of this special scene by forcing each member . . . to create the gruesome details of the murder according to his personal imagination."¹² In spite of Maria Tatar's assertion that this is "a sanitized and aestheticized version of the murder," the audience's imagination and uncertainty

¹⁰ Lang, *M: Protokoll*, 14.

¹¹ Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 169.

¹² Cited in Tatar, *Lustmord*, 156.

are possibly more unsettled than by an actual blow-by-blow depiction of the murder.¹³ After all, audiences have a desire to know precisely what has happened, and it is exactly that detailed knowledge that Lang withholds from his audience. Hence, he forces his audience to think, a process that would likely have been overwhelmed by graphic images of murder (and which, at any rate, would not have gotten past the censor in Germany in 1931, even if Lang had wanted to show them).

There are several points that should be noted about this opening sequence. First, the murderer Beckert appears as a shadow, which recalls the shadowy image of the murderer Cesare in Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Like Cesare, Beckert is a killer without control of himself. Kracauer notes that Beckert as a "modernized Cesare is a killer because of his submission to the imaginary Caligari within him."¹⁴ Second, Lang's editing carefully moves from the domestic milieu of Elsie's and her mother's apartment, together with the building in which it is located, to the urban context of Berlin. Lang demonstrates an interest that goes well beyond the private drama of Elsie and her mother, embedding that drama in a larger social context: the 4.5 million people who live in Berlin, as an irate government minister informs the chief of police at one point in the movie. The film shows the effect that Elsie's absence has on her mother, but it also — immediately after the opening sequence — shows the effect that Elsie's murder has on the entire city. Anton Kaes has noted that the very telegraph wires in which Elsie's balloon gets caught immediately transmit the news of her murder to the waiting city.¹⁵ As in his other films, here too Lang is above all interested in large social groupings rather than in merely private stories. Tom Gunning has even suggested that the real protagonist of the film is Berlin itself, since there is no single character in the movie through whose eyes the audience primarily views events.¹⁶ Third, the film never makes it clear exactly what Beckert does to his victims. The characters in the film — from Beckert to the police and criminals who try to find him — know precisely what has happened to the children, but the audience does not. At one point a policeman tells his colleagues, "and we know *how* we have found them," but he never elaborates on the "how."¹⁷ Lang refuses to satisfy the audience's curiosity on this point, thus giving them less information than

¹³ Tatar, *Lustmord*, 156.

¹⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947), 222.

¹⁵ Kaes, *M*, 14.

¹⁶ Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 168.

¹⁷ My own rendering of the film's text; not in the film script edited by Gero Gandert.

the characters in the film have. On the other hand, the audience knows from the very beginning that Beckert is the murderer and so has access to information that is feverishly sought by most of the characters in the movie. In effect, Lang creates an imbalance between the film's audience and the film's characters: the former know the answer to the question "Who?" but not to the question "How?" while the latter know the answer to the question "How?" but not to the question "Who?"

M resonates with Weimar-era visions of the city as a place full of crime, brutality, and social anomie. During the period when *M* was being planned, the city of Düsseldorf was in fact the site of a series of shocking murders, and various other German cities had previously been rocked by serial killings. As Lang noted later, "because, at the time that I decided on the theme for *M*, a lot of mass murderers were committing their crimes in Germany — Haarmann, Großmann, Kürten, Denke — I naturally asked myself: what moved these people to their deeds?"¹⁸ Lang was particularly interested in the effects that such killings had on the social fabric of the city, as neighbors began to suspect each other of heinous crimes and people contacted the police with usually useless tips. Lang shows an entire city in the grip of hysteria over one man's actions, but he also shows that murder is entertainment (as in the crime thriller that Elsie's mother purchases around the time that Elsie is being murdered, or in the gruesome counting song from the movie's opening sequence). In other words, murder horrifies the residents of the city, but it also fascinates them. The murderer is entirely aware of his status as a cultural icon; he even writes a letter to the press that is promptly published on the front page of a newspaper, and in his letter the word "press" is featured in particularly large letters: "Because the police kept my first letter from the public, I now turn directly to the *press!*"¹⁹ On the one hand, the residents of the city want to find and put a stop to Beckert; on the other hand, they cannot get enough of his deeds. Immediately after Elsie Beckmann is murdered, the audience sees newspaper sellers rushing through the streets hawking special editions about the crime. Lang is at pains to show a society that lives in a weird, symbiotic relationship with the very crimes that it purports to condemn. In discussing *M*, Lang claimed that he wanted his subject to be "the most heinous crime" and ultimately hit upon "a child-murderer, a man who is forced by some urge, by some perverted urge . . . a sick man . . . to kill."²⁰ The real subject of *M* is not Beckert's crimes or even his motivations, however, but rather society's reactions to those crimes.

¹⁸ Lang, *M: Protokoll*, 124.

¹⁹ Lang, *M: Protokoll*, 16.

²⁰ Frederick W. Ott, *The Great German Films* (Secaucus: Citadel, 1986), 116.

Beckert is played by Peter Lorre, an actor from the pre-1919 Austro-Hungarian empire who, like a number of others in the Weimar film industry, went to the United States after the Nazi accession to power in 1933 and made a successful career in Hollywood, where he played in such films as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Casablanca* (1942). In *M* Lorre plays a relatively harmless-looking man who leads a sad, lonely life. Beckert lives in an apartment owned by a woman with conspicuous hearing problems (and who is therefore probably not bothered by his whistling), and he does not appear to have any acquaintances or friends aside from his landlady. He is not the kind of man who gets noticed by anybody—he is neither particularly attractive nor particularly ugly, neither particularly strong nor particularly weak. He is, in short, the kind of man who can slip through crowds without attracting attention, tempt little girls with balloons and candy, and then kill them. The letter “M” that designates Beckert suggests that he is really not particularly important in and of himself but is, rather, a variable in an equation, a structural element to which other elements in the equation (the police, the mothers of Beckert’s victims, the city’s criminals) respond. Likewise, Beckert tailors his own actions to the reactions of the other variables around him.

The question in the film is not who is committing the crimes but rather who is going to find the criminal, and what is going to happen to him. Two groups work separately to catch him: the police on the one hand, and Berlin’s organized criminals on the other. Lang plays off Berlin’s police against its organized criminals, cutting from one group to the other in scenes that point out paradoxical and often humorous parallels between them. Members of the two groups, meeting separately, smoke cigarettes, finish each other’s sentences, and make the same kinds of gestures. The chief of police is Karl Lohmann, played energetically by Otto Wernicke, who went on to play the same character in Lang’s next film, *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933). Lohmann smokes big, fat cigars and is a rational, no-nonsense leader who knows his job. He and the other members of the police sift through a mountain of evidence, draw concentric circles around crime scenes, follow up clues, use new forms of police technology, and are ultimately able to locate the apartment where the murderer lives by systematically examining the records of recently released mental inmates. Schränker, the leader of Berlin’s organized criminals—played by the great German actor Gustaf Gründgens, famous for his portrayals of Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*—is also rational and no-nonsense. But whereas Lohmann is sloppy and disheveled, Schränker is elegant, with pressed clothes, polished manners, and a sleek leather coat. Schränker directs his troops in a manner that is just as logical and orderly as that of the police. He divides the city into sections, and it is he who devises the scheme of soliciting help from Berlin’s beggars in the effort to find the child murderer. Schränker’s access to Berlin’s beggars gives him

a head start, because from the moment the blind beggar recognizes the Grieg tune, Berlin's criminal underground knows who the murderer is; it even brands him with a chalked "M" on his shoulder. From this letter the film gets its title: "M" for "Mörder," or murderer. Originally, Lang had planned to call the film "Mörder unter uns" (Murderer among Us).

As mentioned above, the cross-cutting between the police and the organized criminals reveals that the two groups are surprisingly similar. Both rely on structures of order and hierarchy, and both discourage individual peculiarities — the criminals even more so than the police. Commenting on this, the German film critic Rudolf Arnheim called the two groups "representatives of two solid bourgeois professions who earn their daily bread through the commission and obstruction of punishable offenses."²¹ Far from offering a path of escape for those who resist order and authority, organized criminality, the film seems to suggest, is even more reliant on respect for authority than the legal system. Both groups behave as rational, logical organizations — in contrast to the crazed, lonely murderer, who stands outside of human society and order. There are several reasons why the organized criminals want to catch the murderer: they are genuinely horrified by his senseless crimes, but also by the police and the public's implicit association of them with the child murderer; they are worried that the crackdown on crime in Berlin as a response to the murders is beginning to have a negative impact on their operations; and they are in general opposed to any freelance criminality that is not under their control. They stand for criminality as an orderly, rational business pursuit — an economic enterprise like any other. In this sense Lang's depiction of criminality and criminal organizations is not fundamentally different from Bertolt Brecht's even more radical depiction of criminality in his opera *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera, 1928), made into a film by G. W. Pabst in 1931, the same year as *M*. For Brecht — just as for Lang in *M* — organized criminality is merely one more form of capitalist enterprise. Brecht's opera had also featured the association between organized criminality and organized beggars, and it is likely that Lang was influenced by it. During the same year that he performed the role of Beckert in *M*, Peter Lorre was also playing the lead role in Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* (A Man's a Man, 1926), a play about the fundamentally malleable nature of human identity.²² In *Mann ist Mann*, as one character says, "man is nothing. Modern science has proved that everything is relative," including humanity.²³ What is really important is the social context

²¹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. Brenda Benthien (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1997), 165.

²² See Kaes, *M*, 24.

²³ Bertolt Brecht, *Man Equals Man*, in Brecht, *Man Equals Man and The Elephant Calf*, trans. Gerhard Nellhaus (New York: Arcade, 2000), 1–76; here, 42.

in which the human variable finds itself. Another character in the play declares: "People are taken much too seriously. Only one equals no one. Anything less than two hundred at a time is not worth mentioning."²⁴ It was entirely appropriate, then, that in *M* Lorre depicted the interrelationship between a lone murderer and the mass society in which he lives.

Not surprisingly, Berlin's organized criminals, with their head start, are able to capture Beckert before the police can get to him. The chase scene in which they trap him is cleverly filmed and acted: Beckert is about to capture another little girl, who notices the "M" on his back and draws it to his attention. Beckert sees his reflection in a shop window, and then notices that he is being stalked (just as he has stalked little children), and the audience can see the terror in both his face and his reflection in the window. Once again, as so many other times in Weimar cinema, the audience sees a visual reflection or doubling that suggests a human being who is not at one with himself—who is in essence his own *Doppelgänger*. Beckert's horror when he sees the "M" in the window is possibly not just horror that he has been discovered but also real horror at himself and what he is: the shock of self-recognition. This aspect comes out in Beckert's monologue at the end of the film, when he reveals that the person who is pursuing him in his dreams is none other than himself. "Always . . . always I must walk through streets . . . And always I sense that there's someone behind me . . . : It's me myself! And follows me . . ."²⁵ In other words, the doubling of Beckert's image, and of the person following him, is an enactment in reality of Beckert's own personal nightmare. This is a man who acts on orders that come from a place that he himself cannot control, even though it exists inside himself: "but I can't! I can't escape!"²⁶ Another scene that makes Beckert's loss of control over himself clear comes when he is standing in front of a window display that is full of knives. His face is framed by these potential weapons; he looks trapped by them, as if trapped by his own violent emotions.²⁷ At the same time, Beckert sees the reflection of a little girl and begins to move in such a way that viewers know he is now under the grip of emotions that he cannot control. He begins to whistle the Grieg tune. Many of the scenes in which Beckert stalks little girls involve shop windows, suggesting a critique by Lang of the culture of consumption that was so prevalent in Weimar Germany. These shop windows do precisely what they are supposed to do:

²⁴ Brecht, *Man Equals Man*, 31.

²⁵ Lang, *M: Protokoll*, 115.

²⁶ Lang, *M: Protokoll*, 116.

²⁷ This scene, first commented on by Kracauer, has invited extensive subsequent commentary. See Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 220–21; Kaes, *M*, 59; and Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 189–90.

they arouse Beckert's emotions, his desire to possess and consume. Here too the society in which Beckert lives appears to egg him on to further action. It is as if this lonely criminal were, at another level, no more than a reflection or creation of the society of which he is a part.

At one point in the movie, Beckert takes out a knife to cut an orange for a little girl. It is a harmless enough gesture — if the film's audience did not know that the knife may also be a murder weapon. As an actor, Peter Lorre excels at turning seemingly harmless gestures — cutting an orange, giving a child a balloon — into threatening acts. Lang uses objects like Beckert's knife to good effect: this is not the last time that the knife will play a role in the story, and Beckert is already being followed by the criminals who will ultimately catch him.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the movie is the way that Peter Lorre is able to make the audience at least partially sympathize with Beckert. Although the audience knows that Beckert has killed several young children, it also finds him pathetic. When Beckert tries to escape from the organized criminals, disappearing into a warehouse where he is trapped but hides himself from view in an attic storage closet, the audience almost finds itself on his side, hoping that the criminals will not find his hiding place. The criminals noisily search the entire building and are on the verge of failure when once again sound betrays the murderer: he is using his now-broken knife (again that knife!) to beat against a nail that he wants to use to open the lock on the attic storage area, and the criminals hear the pounding. Again Lang has combined sound and silence to dramatic effect. When Beckert is finally spotted in the back of the storage area, the criminals' flashlights exposes him just as mercilessly as Rotwang's flashlight had exposed Maria in the catacombs of Lang's *Metropolis*. By the time the police arrive at the warehouse, the criminals have departed with their captured prey, leaving just one hapless accomplice at the scene. It is from this accomplice that the police finally learn where the criminals have taken the murderer for his tribunal.

This trial scene — of course, it is not a legal trial, since there is no judge, and the prosecutor, defense attorney, and jury are criminals themselves — is one of the most dramatic sequences in all of Weimar cinema. It is clear from the very beginning that this is a rigged trial, and that the jury has already decided on the murderer's guilt and punishment: he will be put to death, just as he has himself put so many children to death. In this tribunal, the criminals represent the outraged community, seeking vengeance but also parodying the legal system of which they are themselves the object. The "court" even hears the pleas of a group of women who sympathize with the mothers of the girls that Beckert has killed. Peter Lorre's monologue, in which he finally gives voice to the urges that drive him to commit murder, is a powerful piece of acting. This formerly boring-looking man, apparently

devoid of visible emotion, gradually works himself into a frenzy. What is he speaking about? He is speaking about sound, the voices that he constantly hears in his head. These are sound effects that the audience cannot hear, but Lorre, speaking like a man possessed, is able to convince the audience that his character does indeed hear them (it even sees him cover his ears with his hands again). The sounds in Beckert's head are the voices of the mothers of the children he has murdered, voices like the voice of the women who plead for his execution. These voices, Beckert tells the jury, are constantly speaking to him, preventing him from getting any rest or release. There is only one way for him to silence them: to kill. It is only then, the murderer says, that he can finally achieve release and silence. His voice, previously at a high pitch of intensity, descends to a lower, more relaxed pitch as he says: "... when I do it."²⁸ In other words, the dramatic climax for the audience, when the murderer talks about killing little children, is not a climax for the murderer himself but rather a descent from a climax, which is the voices in his head. Lorre underlines that release and peace with his body as well. When he utters the words "... when I do it," he twists his hands as if he were strangling a little girl, and then he releases them and his entire body, which had previously been tense and strained. He has found peace, at least momentarily. This stunning piece of theater convinces the film's viewers, and indeed the unsympathetic jury of criminals, that the murderer is indeed acting not out of some intentional desire to be evil, but at the behest of forces that are beyond his own control. He does not murder because he *wants* to murder, he murders because he *has* to: "Don't want to! Have to! Don't want to! Have to!"²⁹ That is his defense.

For the criminals, however, and particularly for Schränker, the chief criminal, this is no defense but rather an all-the-more-convincing reason to execute Beckert. If there is no rational will or argument that could induce the murderer not to murder, then surely he is a permanent danger to society and must be eliminated. The criminals make a clear distinction between themselves and the child-murderer. They too commit crimes, of course, and they even resort to murder occasionally. Beckert's "defense attorney" wryly points out that Schränker himself is being sought by the police for no fewer than three murders. But the criminals' acts have a goal and a logic. They make sense. Beckert's acts have no apparent rhyme or reason. They do not make sense. Whereas the criminals have rational control over themselves, Beckert has no control. This, in the criminals' eyes,

²⁸ Lang, M: *Protokoll*, 116.

²⁹ Lang, M: *Protokoll*, 116.

makes the murderer far more dangerous to society and far more worthy of being eliminated than they are.

Beckert's defense attorney insists that Beckert is not evil but merely sick, and that as a sick person he belongs in a hospital. He demands that Beckert be turned over to the police. The other criminals refuse and rush at Beckert to kill him, but just as they are about to reach him, they stop and raise their hands above their heads, signaling to the film's audience that the police have arrived. The audience never actually sees the police, but it can infer their presence from the reactions of the criminals. Here too Lang underscores the way that various players in the social game respond to other players. A hand reaches down to grasp Beckert's shoulder, and the audience hears Lohmann's voice proclaim "In the name of the law . . ."³⁰ The irony of this ending is that Beckert's capture by the police is quite literally a life-saver. If they had not shown up, he would certainly have been put to death by the criminals. Now that the police have caught up to him, this irrational murderer will be subjected to the rational, orderly, and even merciful procedures of the Weimar criminal justice system. A court will quite likely — as the criminals have predicted — agree with him that he is not in control of his own actions, and he will therefore probably be remanded to a psychiatric institution, not to death row. This man who has killed so many innocent children will not himself be executed by the state; instead, the state will care for him in an institution, and if it ever declares that he is cured, he may even be able to walk the streets again, whistling his crazed "Hall of the Mountain King" jingle (which was actually whistled by Fritz Lang, since Peter Lorre was unable to whistle).

What makes this ending so unsettling is that it is hard for the audience to sympathize completely with any of the three viewpoints — the police, the organized criminals, or the lone murderer Beckert. Georg Seeßlen argues that "M is an amoral, at any rate a non-melodramatic film. It gives no support for sympathy or antipathy."³¹ The most rhetorically powerful statement comes from the murderer himself, which would ordinarily lead the audience to sympathize with him. In an interesting critique of *M* and of Weimar culture generally as misogynistic, Maria Tatar even claims that *M*'s audiences really do sympathize with Beckert: "Lang begins, early in the film, to mobilize sympathy for the man who has committed the 'most heinous' crime possible." For Tatar, Beckert ultimately "moves from the

³⁰ My own rendering of the film's text; not in the film script edited by Gero Gandert.

³¹ Georg Seeßlen, "M — Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder," in *Der Filmkanon: 35 Filme, die Sie kennen müssen*, ed. Alfred Holighaus (Berlin: Bertz+Fischer, 2005), 41–50; here, 46.

role of . . . cold-blooded murderer to abject victim.”³² Tatar overemphasizes the degree to which Beckert elicits sympathy from the jury of criminals and from the film’s audience, however. In fact, the criminals wind up laughing at Beckert, clearly discounting his insanity plea, and at the end of the movie they are about to kill him when the police arrive. No matter how powerful Beckert’s pleas, he remains an insane murderer, and neither the criminals nor most members of the film’s audience are likely to have much sympathy for him. On the contrary, many audience members will tend to agree with the organized criminals that Beckert deserves to be executed immediately: that he should pay for the deaths of his victims with his own death. And yet if one agrees with this position, one is taking, at least within the framework of the film, a standpoint against the regular justice system and the rule of law and for organized criminality, with its swift and remorseless judgments. Therefore, many audience members will be just as reluctant to side with the organized criminals, no matter how much they may sympathize with some of their arguments. This leaves only one other clearly defined position: that of the police. In many detective stories and films, the audience is indeed expected to side with the police, and in this film some audience members may find themselves on the side of Lohmann and his officers by force of habit or out of revulsion at the two other possible subject positions. A number of factors militate against this identification in the final scene, however, not the least of which is that the audience never actually sees Lohmann, but only sees a hand and hears a disembodied voice. Given that the police have, in effect, just gone to great trouble and spent a lot of the taxpayers’ money in order, ultimately, to *save* the life of a child murderer, it is also hard to be fully on their side here emotionally. *M* leaves its viewers profoundly unsettled and with no easy answers. Film audiences long to be on the side of one group or protagonist and against another; in *M*, Lang makes such easy identifications impossible. A kind of justice has been done and a kind of order restored by the end of the film, but it is a formal, abstract justice that leaves the audience’s thirst for retribution unslaked. In fact, at the end of the movie, the audience sees a court proclaim justice “in the name of the people,” but the audience does not even learn what the verdict against Beckert was: capital punishment, imprisonment, or institutionalization in a psychiatric ward.³³ And no matter what the verdict was, it will not bring the victims back to life, as three black-clad women (one of them Elsie’s mother) proclaim in the film’s final shot. If the audience identifies with anyone in the film, it is with these mothers in mourning.

³² Tatar, *Lustmord*, 161.

³³ My own rendering of the film’s text; not in the film script edited by Gero Gandert.

M probably does not argue for mob justice or lynching, in spite of a 1931 diary entry by Joseph Goebbels, the future Nazi propaganda minister, that claimed it did: “In the evening I went with Magda to see Fritz Lang’s film *M*. Fantastic! Against all the claptrap about humanity. For the death penalty! Well done. Lang will be our director. He’s creative.”³⁴ Goebbels’s enthusiasm for the film, however, suggests that *M* does not clearly align its viewers with Beckert or with the police who “save” him, and it casts some doubt on Lang’s subsequent claims that the Nazis did not like the movie, as well as on subsequent interpretations of *M* as an anti-Nazi movie.³⁵ There are a number of scenes in *M* that clearly show the danger of mob rule, however; in one of them, a harmless old man who responds to a little girl’s request for the time is immediately suspected of being the murderer and is threatened by an angry crowd. The film’s audience knows, of course, that he is not the murderer, but the crowd does not. This scene eloquently demonstrates the dangers of mob justice, and it is a foreshadowing of Lang’s later American movie *Fury* (1936), which deals precisely with lynching and mob justice. In *M*, no one, including the organization of criminals, has perfect information, and therefore all actions are based on incomplete knowledge. This suggests that, as clumsy as it is, the democratic state’s legal bureaucracy is preferable because it allows for the possibility of trial and error. Lohmann may not be an action hero, but he is a reliable and creative bureaucrat who is seeking the truth.

There is a sad and ironic coda to *M* in German film history. In Fritz Hippler’s notorious Nazi antisemitic documentary *Der ewige Jude* (1940), Peter Lorre’s dramatic monologue from the trial scene in *M* was used as documentary evidence of the supposed degeneracy of Weimar culture. In other words — in stark contrast to Joseph Goebbels’s initially positive reaction to *M* — a fiction film by an emigrant director featuring a Jewish actor in the role of a murderer was used as documentary evidence of sympathy with (purportedly Jewish) degeneracy in reality.

³⁴ Joseph Goebbels *Tagebücher 1924–1945*, ed. Ralf Georg Reuth (Munich: Piper, 1992), 2: 68. Notation from 21 May 1931.

³⁵ See Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 218–19; and Kaes, *M*, 16.

Part Three: Nazi Cinema 1933–1945



*Joseph Süß Oppenheimer (Ferdinand Marian) shortly before his execution in Veit Harlan's *Jud Süß* (1940). Screen capture.*

9: Nazi Cinema 1933–1945: Historical Overview

ON JANUARY 30, 1933, the president of the German Reich, Paul von Hindenburg, appointed Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, NSDAP), chancellor of Germany. Although initially Hitler ruled Germany as the head of a parliamentary coalition of right-wing parties, it was not long before the Reichstag, the German parliament, passed the *Ermächtigungsgesetz* (enabling law) in March of 1933, which gave Hitler dictatorial powers. Soon the Communist and Social Democratic parties were banned, the first concentration camp was established for Hitler's political enemies (Dachau, in March of 1933), and even the right-wing allies who had helped Hitler come to power found themselves sidelined or worse. In June of 1934 Hitler ordered the murder of his Nazi lieutenant Ernst Röhm, leader of the SA, the *Sturmabteilungen* (storm divisions), a paramilitary organization that had fought pitched street battles against the Communists throughout the final years of the Weimar Republic, and that had backed up Hitler's words with raw, brutal power even before the Nazis gained control of the government. Germany remained a dictatorship from 1933 until the end of the Second World War, on May 8, 1945, when the German army surrendered to the Soviet Red Army in Berlin after having surrendered to the American army in Reims, France the day before. Hitler had committed suicide a week earlier, on April 30, and prior to his death he had ordered the incineration of his body to keep it out of the hands of his enemies. He knew the indignities to which the body of his ally Benito Mussolini in Italy had been subjected only a day earlier: it had been hung upside down from a meat hook and made the subject of mockery. Hitler did not want that to happen to him.

Although the Nazi dictatorship was undemocratic, brutal, and ultimately led Germany to disaster, it enjoyed a significant amount of popular support. Paul von Hindenburg had appointed Hitler chancellor of the Reich not because the German president was an enthusiastic supporter of Hitler's policies, but because by 1932 Hitler's NSDAP was the largest party in the German parliament, with over 30 percent of the seats. For the president to ask the leader of the largest party to form a coalition government was by no means unusual; that is what usually happens in parliamentary democracies, and the fact that Hindenburg waited until January of 1933

before he offered Hitler the chancellorship is a testament not to eagerness but to reluctance. In Germany's last marginally free elections in March of 1933, the NSDAP received 43.9 percent of the popular vote, far more than its closest competitor, the Social Democratic Party, which got 18.3 percent of the vote. Although it is impossible to tell for sure because there were no more free elections after 1933, it is likely that in the following years popular support for Hitler became even stronger. The nation, after all, had been in crisis in the early 1930s — a severe economic crisis as Germany, like the rest of the western world, faced the Great Depression, and also a political crisis due to slackening support for the political center and increasing support for extremists on the left and right of the political spectrum — and Hitler appeared to have brought that crisis to a successful end. Although there is disagreement among historians about exactly why so many Germans supported Hitler and the NSDAP — whether it was primarily for ideological reasons or for purely selfish economic reasons — there is general agreement that most of them did indeed support him throughout the 1930s and even well into the Second World War, especially in the years from 1939 to 42, when Germany appeared to be winning. What this means is that although the Nazis discriminated against and oppressed significant numbers of people — Jews, Communists, gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others — most people in the German Reich believed that such discrimination and oppression would not negatively affect the majority and were therefore unwilling to withdraw their support from a regime that appeared to be achieving considerable successes in other areas, such as lowering unemployment, reestablishing a strong German army, winning respect abroad, and building the Autobahn. It is likely that some Germans, for whatever reasons, shared Hitler's hatred of Jews while others did not, but that even among those who did not, other factors were more important in determining support for or opposition to the regime. And there was relatively little organized, overt opposition to the regime, partly because Hitler moved so quickly to eliminate any potential opponents.

The onset of the Third Reich — the term was intended to confer historical legitimacy on the Nazis as the supposed heirs to the “first” Reich (the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which had ended in 1806 during the Napoleonic wars) and the “second” Reich (the Wilhelmine empire from 1871 to 1918) — resulted in significant changes throughout German society, including the film industry. The most immediate and obvious of those changes occurred at the level of personnel. Because antisemitism was one of the fundamental tenets of National Socialism, the Nazis banned Jews from participation in the German film industry. Many German and Austrian Jews, like Billy Wilder, Fred Zinnemann, Robert Siodmak, and Peter Lorre, left the country and ultimately went to Hollywood. The emigration of these people resulted in a significant loss of talent for the German film industry. Moreover, the ban on Jews had an echo

effect, because it induced even some non-Jewish Germans working in the film industry to leave the country. Probably the most significant example is Detlef Sierck, a skilled director of melodramas like *Schlussakkord* (Final Chord, 1936), *Zu neuen Ufern* (To New Shores, 1937), and *La Habanera* (1937), who left Germany in 1937 and went to the United States. There he was to change his name to Douglas Sirk and direct such classic Hollywood melodramas as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). Perhaps Sierck's main reason for leaving Germany was that his wife was Jewish and he did not want to divorce her. The example of Sierck shows the way in which the Nazis' antisemitic personnel policies had an impact that went beyond the exclusion of Jews and reverberated into the more general community. One of the saddest and most dramatic instances of a family in Germany's film and theater community affected by antisemitism was the 1941 suicides of Joachim Gottschalk and his Jewish wife Meta Wolf, together with their son, in response to Nazi pressure for a divorce to end a marriage between a non-Jew and a Jew. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, in 1947, the East German director Kurt Maetzig made an anti-Nazi film, *Ehe im Schatten* (Marriage in the Shadows), about this terrible incident.

The Nazis viewed Jews as responsible for much of what they saw as the degeneracy of Weimar art, and they vilified Jews publicly in art shows like the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich in 1937, the *Entartete Musik* (Degenerate Music) exhibition in Düsseldorf in 1938, and the book *Film-“Kunst,” Film-Kohn, Film-Korruption* (Film “Art,” Film-Cohen, Film Corruption) in 1937.¹ In all of these instances the message about Jews was the same: that Jews were responsible for much if not most of what was wrong with German art, including German film, during the Weimar Republic. This antisemitic position was once again made explicit in Fritz Hippler's documentary *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew, 1940), one of the most notorious documentaries ever made, which preaches virulent hatred of Jews and, in one famous sequence, compares Jews to rats that spread the plague. Nazi antisemitism also found expression in such feature films as Hans H. Zerlett's *Robert und Bertram* (1939), Erich Waschneck's *Die Rothschilds* (1940), and Veit Harlan's *Jud Süß* (Jew Süß, 1940). The first, set in the first half of the nineteenth century, was a musical in which two happy-go-lucky

¹ See Stephanie Barron, ed., “Degenerate Art”: *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991); Albrecht Dümling and Peter Girth, eds., *Entartete Musik: Zur Düsseldorfer Ausstellung von 1938 — Eine kommentierte Rekonstruktion*, third edition (Düsseldorf: Dkv, 1993); and Carl Neumann, Curt Belling, and Hans Walther Betz, *Film-“Kunst,” Film-Kohn, Film-Korruption: Ein Streifzug durch vier Film-Jahrzehnte* (Berlin: H. Scherping, 1937).

vagabonds took advantage of rich Jews. The second used the history of the famous Rothschild family in order to depict Jews as controlling a financial network throughout Europe, while the third sought historical justification for contemporary antisemitism, and for the Nazi ban on miscegenation between Jews and non-Jews, in an incident involving a Jewish court banker in eighteenth-century Württemberg. In all three films the Nazis used historical film to show the supposed connection between their own antisemitic policies and European tradition, i.e., to try to demonstrate that their policies, far from being a break with the past, were a continuation of it. It was no coincidence that a rash of antisemitic movies appeared toward the beginning of the Second World War. After all, even before the war began, Hitler warned in a speech to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939, that if war came, it would be the Jews' fault, and that he would therefore visit destruction on them, with the final result being "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."² In the following years the Germans were to kill about six million Jews in concentration camps and elsewhere in occupied Europe.

In addition to wide-ranging changes in film personnel resulting from antisemitic ideology and policies, the Nazis rapidly moved to take control of the entire system of film production and distribution. Hitler appointed one of his most trusted lieutenants, Joseph Goebbels, as head of the newly created Reich Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, and Goebbels established a large bureaucracy that exerted control over all of the arts, from painting and music to literature and film. The agency specifically responsible for film was the Reichsfilmkammer (Reich Chamber of Film), and one of the ways that the Nazis exerted control over the content and personnel of films was by ordering that anyone involved in the film industry had to be a member of the Reichsfilmkammer. If someone was not, he or she was also not allowed to be involved in the production of a film. This was a simple and efficient way to keep unwanted people out of the film industry, and to exert control over the people who were in it; having one's membership in the Reichsfilmkammer revoked would have meant the end of one's career in film. Hence, many film artists were reluctant to oppose Nazi ideology or practices, and there was little need to censor them, because they usually censored themselves.

The Nazi bureaucracy was characterized by a significant amount of redundancy, with various agencies and bureaus responsible for similar things. In addition to the Reichsfilmkammer, which housed everyone working in the German film industry, there was a division within the Nazi party itself with the responsibility to deal with film. There was also the Propaganda Ministry, which was a government agency. In the end,

² Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932–1945*, trans. Chris Wilcox (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1997), 3:1449.

most of these bureaucracies were under the control of Joseph Goebbels; the only one that he did not directly control was one headed by Alfred Rosenberg, the chief Nazi ideologist, who had the long-winded title *Beauftragter für die gesamte geistige und weltanschauliche Schulung der NSDAP* (Plenipotentiary for the Entire Spiritual and Ideological Education of the NSDAP). Whereas Goebbels was cautiously willing to accept certain kinds of modernity in art, including films, Rosenberg stubbornly opposed any form of modernism. The first years of Nazi rule saw some struggles between Goebbels and Rosenberg for power, but, particularly in the film industry, Goebbels was destined to win these struggles.

Less than two months after the Nazis came to power, Goebbels announced his intentions in a speech he gave to key representatives of the film industry on March 28, 1933. Goebbels declared himself to be “a passionate lover of cinematic art,” but he warned German filmmakers — many of whom did indeed sympathize with the left rather than the right of the political spectrum — that they had false, oppositional conceptions of National Socialism that needed to change.³ Goebbels demonstrated his ideologically eclectic tastes by listing some of his favorite movies, including Russian director Sergei Eisenstein’s Communist film *Battleship Potemkin*, and he warned that he particularly disliked “wishes-washy and formless films” of any kind. His stated goal was for “German film” to “become a world power whose limit is still entirely unimaginable today” — indeed, he suggested that German film might have the possibility “of conquering the world,” i.e., of competing successfully with Hollywood on its own terms.⁴ Goebbels complained that the cinema of the Weimar Republic had lost touch with the German people’s lived reality, especially political reality, and that “it is without contact with actual events among the people.”⁵ While the German people, Goebbels proclaimed, had recently “endured the greatest drama of suffering in history, the gentlemen of cinema ignored it.”⁶ He warned that German cinema would have to become more committed to National Socialism in the future, and indeed that “art is only possible when it is rooted in the National Socialist soil.”⁷ German cinema, Goebbels proclaimed, needed not only new ideas but also new people. “Public taste,” he argued, “is not as it plays itself out inside the mind of a Jewish director.” In order to make good German films, one must “have oneself planted one’s roots in the German soil. One must be a

³ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” trans. Lance W. Garmer, in *German Essays on Film*, ed. Richard W. McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pal (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 153–58; here, 154.

⁴ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” 155.

⁵ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” 156.

⁶ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” 155.

⁷ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” 156.

child of this people.”⁸ Films, however, were part of the daily struggle of ordinary people “against boredom and tribulation,” and they did not need to be overly propagandistic. “One should not think about political ideology from morning till night.”⁹ Art should be free, he proclaimed, but it should still be tied to certain norms. What all of this boiled down to was a clear signal that Goebbels planned to purge the German film industry of Jews and anyone he saw as overly critical of National Socialism, but at the same time he wanted something more than just obvious political propaganda in film. He and Hitler, he admitted, had sat “in the movie theater on many evenings . . . after the nerve-racking struggles of the day and found relaxation. Do not think that we do not remember this in gratitude.”¹⁰ It was all right, in other words, for film to be primarily entertainment, as long as it was not overtly or covertly critical of National Socialism.

The period from 1933 to 1945 was characterized by a steady increase in the government’s control of the film industry. Since the German film industry in the early 1930s was in a period of considerable crisis — due to the Great Depression, the introduction of sound film and the corresponding loss of foreign markets, and increasing expenses for film production — many in the film industry actually welcomed the government’s interventions, which featured considerable financial incentives. In 1933 the Nazis smashed all independent trade unions, including the film industry’s own trade union. In the same year the government created the Filmkreditbank (film credit bank) to organize the financing of films and to exercise a level of control over what films got funding. In 1934 the government promulgated a new film law that required extensive censorship of all film projects both before and after a film was made. This law made it possible to prevent any unwanted projects from being produced, and to ban any unwanted films that actually did get produced, but in reality there was so much ideological control at other stages of the filmmaking process that relatively few films were actually banned outright.¹¹ In 1936 Goebbels also proclaimed that because of his dissatisfaction with film criticism, he was banning “criticism in its current form.”¹² Henceforth it would be

⁸ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” 157.

⁹ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” 157.

¹⁰ “Dr. Goebbels’s Speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933,” 158.

¹¹ About two dozen films were censored after being produced. See Kraft Wetzl and Peter Hagemann, *Zensur: Verbotene deutsche Filme 1933–1945* (Berlin: Volker Spiess, 1978); K.-J. Maiwald, *Filmzensur im NS-Staat* (Dortmund: Nowotny, 1983); and William Moritz, “Film Censorship during the Nazi Era,” in “*Degenerate Art*,” 185–91.

¹² Karsten Witte, “Film im Nationalsozialismus: Blendung und Überblendung,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 117–66; here, 119.

acceptable to publish positive reports and descriptions of films, but not to engage in extensive critical analysis, let alone negative judgment, of films. In an attempt to sidetrack any independent film criticism, Goebbels had begun expanding the existing system of government labels for film in 1933. This system labeled particular films “politically valuable” or “artistically valuable” or even “especially politically valuable” or “especially artistically valuable,” or both, and it allowed for tax breaks for films that were deemed to be exceptionally worthy. The highest accolade a film could receive from the government was “politically and artistically especially valuable,” a status that released a film from entertainment taxation.¹³

In the second half of the 1930s and in the early 1940s, the Nazi government exerted even more pressure on film. The government’s moves were partly motivated by a decline in the film industry’s profits, which were in turn partially caused by a decline in revenues from film exports. When the Nazis came to power, German film exports had accounted for 40 percent of the film industry’s revenues, but four years later they accounted for only 6–7 percent of those revenues.¹⁴ In 1937 a government-owned trust company named Cautio-Treuhandgesellschaft (Cautio trustee agency) began purchasing shares in the major German film companies. In 1938, after Austria’s *Anschluss* (annexation) by Germany, Cautio also gained control of the Austrian film industry, and by 1939, it had control of all the major German film companies. With the beginning of the Second World War in September of 1939, the agency also expanded to other countries — ultimately Czechoslovakia, France, Poland, the Netherlands, and the Soviet Union.¹⁵ In 1942 all German film companies became part of one massive holding company called the Ufa-Film GmbH, called Ufi to distinguish it from the old Ufa.¹⁶ Individual units within this company still retained their old names — thus largely shielding the Nazi government’s wholesale takeover of the film industry from public scrutiny — but by now the entire German film industry had been

¹³ See David Welch and Roel Vande Winkel, “Europe’s New Hollywood? The German Film Industry under Nazi Rule, 1933–45,” in *Cinema and the Swastika: The International Expansion of Third Reich Cinema*, ed. Roel Vande Winkel and David Welch (Houndsills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 6–24; here, 11; and Julian Petley, “Film Policy in the Third Reich,” in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 173–81; here, 177.

¹⁴ Julian Petley, *Capital and Culture: German Cinema 1933–45* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 60.

¹⁵ David Welch and Roel Vande Winkel, “Europe’s New Hollywood?” 21.

¹⁶ Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany’s Greatest Film Company 1918–1945*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 321.

nationalized.¹⁷ With German military expansion into most of Europe in the Second World War, the German film industry basically had a captive market and was able to match and even outstrip its previous financial and export successes. German film literally dominated European screens.

In some instances, such as the production of major propaganda films like the antisemitic melodrama *Jud Süß* or the historical battle drama *Kolberg* (1945), which was intended to induce the German people to resist invasion by Allied troops (both films were directed by Veit Harlan, one of the propaganda minister's favorite directors), Joseph Goebbels himself exercised an active and direct influence on particular films. Such active supervision was more the exception than the rule, however. Goebbels and his associates laid down the general guidelines for the film industry, and they set up a structure that ensured that those guidelines would be followed. For them, film was a popular art with the potential to have a powerful impact on large segments of the population, and as such, it had to be easier to understand than modernist literature, and it had to feature clear-cut heroes and villains and, for the most part, happy endings. Fritz Hippler, Goebbels's protégé, declared in 1942 that "in film more than in theater the audience has to know: *Whom should I love, whom should I hate*. If I'm making an antisemitic film, for example, it's clear that I can't portray the Jews sympathetically."¹⁸ Ambiguity was undesirable, especially since, as Hippler asserted, ordinary people often modeled themselves on the positive figures they saw portrayed in film: "Film creates not just a personal connection between the spectator and the principle actor but also, simultaneously, a desire on the part of the spectator to be like the principle actor."¹⁹

Some subsequent commentators have seen all of German cinema from 1933 to 1945 as, in essence, directly controlled propaganda from the Nazi Propaganda Ministry, a kind of devil's kitchen with Goebbels in control of pretty much everything.²⁰ And yet as early as 1969, the German sociologist Gerd Albrecht pointed out that the vast majority of German films produced between 1933 and 1945 were not in any direct or obvious sense propaganda films. Albrecht counted 1,094 feature films premiered during the Nazi period, of which he believed only 153, or 14 percent, were clearly and directly political or propagandistic.²¹ These included

¹⁷ David Welch and Roel Vande Winkel, "Europe's New Hollywood?" 22.

¹⁸ Fritz Hippler, *Betrachtungen zum Filmschaffen* (Berlin: Max Hesses Verlag, 1942), 100. Unless otherwise noted, translations from German-language sources are my own.

¹⁹ Hippler, *Betrachtungen zum Filmschaffen*, 102.

²⁰ See, for instance, Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, trans. Gertrud Mander and David Wilson (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

²¹ Gerd Albrecht, *Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik: Eine soziologische Untersuchung über die Spielfilme des Dritten Reichs* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1969), 107.

Hitlerjunge Quex (Hitler Youth Quex, 1933), Hans Steinhoff's early Nazi weepy about a heroic Nazi boy who dies a martyr's death and *Ich klage an* (I Accuse, 1941), Wolfgang Liebeneiner's skillful pro-euthanasia film about a woman suffering from multiple sclerosis: a film intended to shore up support among the German population for the government's program of killing the mentally retarded and physically abnormal. But for Albrecht, the other 941 movies made in Germany between 1933 and 1945 — the vast majority — were not overt propaganda films at all. Instead, they were traditional genre films: historical dramas, melodramas, adventure films, detective films, comedies, or musicals. Nazi cinema, in other words, was largely a genre-based cinema, featuring many of the same types of films that were popular in the United States at the same time. This has led the film scholar Julian Petley to note that “the really striking aspect of most” Nazi cinema is not its strangeness but rather “just how closely it resembles contemporaneous Hollywood, with its stars, studios, genres, formulae, ‘classical’ narrative structures and so on.”²²

It is true that in some ways many Nazi films, even some of the most notorious ones, such as *Jud Süß* or *Hitlerjunge Quex*, resemble Hollywood movies of the same period — with clear-cut villains and heroes, melodramas, musicals, and the like. Relatively few of them openly show Nazis. A commentator for a Nazi youth publication wrote in 1938 that one would have to look long and hard before finding “a cinema program announcing a film with an obvious political slant.”²³ However, even though many Nazi-era movies were melodramas, adventure films, or musicals — i.e., some of the same genres available in Hollywood at the time, with the notable exception of the Western — the ideological messages of many of the Nazi films are clearly different from the messages of their Hollywood counterparts. Nazi Germany was unique in developing overtly antisemitic films, and whereas many Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s — such as René Clair's *The Countess of New Orleans* (1941), starring the German emigrant Marlene Dietrich — featured, and validated, female independence, Nazi films tended to discourage and invalidate it, as in Rolf Hansen's *Die große Liebe* (The Great Love, 1942), starring Zarah Leander, whom the late German film historian Karsten Witte has called an “Ersatz-Marlene-Dietrich.”²⁴ Witte has suggested that Nazi cinema essentially made war on women.²⁵ The same can hardly be said for 1930s

²² Petley, “Film Policy in the Third Reich,” 178.

²³ Cited in Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996), 19; from Gert Eckert, “Filmtendenz und Tendenzfilm,” *Wille und Macht: Führerorgan der nationalsozialistischen Jugend* 6, vol. 4 (15 February 1938): 19–25.

²⁴ Witte, “Film im Nationalsozialismus: Blendung und Überblendung,” 145.

²⁵ Witte, “Film im Nationalsozialismus: Blendung und Überblendung,” 141.

and 1940s American movies, which often featured strong, sympathetic female figures.

Albrecht's distinction between political films and nonpolitical films raises the question of exactly what it means to say that a film is political. Does it mean that a film from this period must have a direct political message — i.e., support Hitler in an obvious, direct way — or can a film without such a direct political message also be seen as political in a more subtle sense? Must a Nazi film depict Nazis, or can it have other subject matter, such as historical drama? Nazi cinema has been a subject of intense scholarly debate and interest, and some of the most important historical and critical studies of Nazi cinema in the last two decades have demonstrated that even supposedly nonpolitical movies, such as Josef von Baky's 1943 fantasy/adventure film *Münchhausen*, served a political and therefore propagandistic function by propping up key elements of the Nazi world view and helping the German public to forget or overlook the problems of dictatorship and war.²⁶ Eric Rentschler even claims that "the National Socialist state's production of death and devastation would not have been possible without Goebbels' dream machinery."²⁷ This is a radical claim, but even if it may be an exaggeration, it emphasizes the importance of cinema to the Nazi leadership, and to the mobilization of popular support for the regime.

Another strand of recent scholarship, however, best represented by Sabine Hake's study *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich* (2001), while not denying cinema's political and propagandistic possibilities, nevertheless suggests that its propaganda value and importance for the Nazi project have generally been overestimated by subsequent observers, and that cinema in the Third Reich needs to be seen not just as state-controlled and state-operated but as a genuinely popular cinema, organized not so much to dominate and control people as to respond to their own wishes. Hake suggests that in many ways German cinema from 1933 to 1945 gave Germans what they wanted, and that much of Nazi-era cinema therefore came not from an oppressive and unresponsive propaganda machinery but from ordinary Germans themselves. Whereas Rentschler and Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien see the Nazis as having largely been successful in using propaganda to control the German people, Hake sees them as having been, in many ways, unsuccessful. In her view, the Nazis' "propaganda campaigns sought, unsuccessfully, to realize the project of ideological dominance, but then quickly settled for more pragmatic solutions."²⁸ Her study, she

²⁶ See, for example, Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, and Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment: The Politics of Entertainment in the Third Reich* (Rochester: Camden House, 2004).

²⁷ Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 223.

²⁸ Sabine Hake, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2001), 22.

writes, is intended “to challenge preconceived notions about the power of the Propaganda Ministry and the pervasiveness of Nazi ideology.”²⁹ German cinema of the Third Reich, Hake suggests, was not terribly different from contemporaneous Hollywood cinema, or even from much genre-based cinema in the world today. Nazi cinema, Hake argues, was “an impoverished, derivative version of the Hollywood original.”³⁰

In her insistence on the popularity of Nazi-era cinema and its present-day relevance, Hake’s position is not entirely different from that of Rentschler, who also suggests similarities between Nazi and contemporary cinema. Rentschler even claims that Nazi cinema prefigures the contemporary infatuation with illusion and special effects in cinema: “one might speak of Nazi Germany’s irrepressible imagemakers as postmodernity’s secret sharers, as grasping entrepreneurs who profited from the industrialized means of enchantment, as master showmen who staged extravagant spectacles as the ultimate political manifestations,” Rentschler writes.³¹ In language reminiscent of Kracauer’s invocation of the real Hitler as the ultimate culmination of the fictional Caligari in *From Caligari to Hitler*, Rentschler suggests that Joseph Goebbels was the real-life counterpart of Fritz Lang’s filmic master criminal Dr. Mabuse, the villain, among others, in Lang’s 1933 film *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, which was banned by Goebbels): “These real-life Mabuses have enacted the worst nightmares of any community whose social viability and collective identity depend on the media and mass culture. More than fifty years since the demise of National Socialism, the testament of Dr. Goebbels continues to haunt us.”³² In spite of their joint insistence on Nazi cinema’s relevance for the contemporary world, however, Hake and Rentschler still take distinctly different positions. Rentschler, whose very terminology indicates a view of cinema as a kind of omnipotent hypnotic force, sees both contemporary and Nazi cinema as essentially manipulative, controlled by a few Mabuse-like masterminds, whereas Hake, who tends to be critical of Kracauer’s social psychology, sees both Nazi cinema and contemporary cinema as fundamentally less manipulative and more popular, essentially beyond the complete control of any single political group or party.

My primary purpose in this brief overview is not to decide in favor of the one or the other position but rather to make the two positions clear. It is likely that for the foreseeable future discussions of Nazi cinema will revolve around two questions: what precisely *is* political propaganda, and

²⁹ Hake, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich*, 14.

³⁰ Hake, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich*, 12.

³¹ Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 223.

³² Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 223.

is it possible to use popular media like cinema to manipulate large masses of people to do things they otherwise would not do? This second question could be rephrased more pointedly: is it possible to use cinema as a medium for individual or mass hypnosis?

In seeking to answer these two questions, it would be helpful to consult what the Nazis themselves had to say about them. Such a consultation alone cannot decide the issue, of course, but at least it can help frame it in a historically appropriate way. Clearly, the Nazis themselves defined political propaganda quite broadly and did not restrict it to obvious, blatant political messages; they stated this on many occasions. In a 1937 speech to the Reich Film Chamber, Goebbels proclaimed: “In general it is a fundamental characteristic of effectiveness that it [propaganda] never appears to be intended. The moment people become conscious of propaganda, it becomes ineffective. When propaganda remains in the background as a tendency, as a character, as an attitude, and only becomes apparent through plot, through development, through actions, and through contrasts among people, it becomes effective in every way.”³³ Goebbels also declared: “The best propaganda is not that which is always openly revealing itself; the best propaganda is that which as it were works invisibly, penetrates the whole of life without the public having any knowledge at all of the propagandist initiative.”³⁴ Such statements suggest that for Goebbels, at least, there was no hard and fast distinction between political propaganda on the one hand and harmless entertainment on the other. Fritz Hippler, Goebbels’s protégé, who was in charge of the weekly German newsreels called the *Wochenschau*, and who directed the antisemitic documentary *Der ewige Jude* in 1940, had a similar perspective. Hippler declared that “in a certain sense every film . . . has to have its ‘moral,’ but we should admit right away . . . that it is better to not to aim at it in an obvious way and thus to achieve it more forcefully.”³⁵ Although Hippler did not follow his own advice in *Der ewige Jude*, which aims quite obviously at an antisemitic message, many other Nazi directors did. Even *Jud Süß*, Veit Harlan’s antisemitic feature film, is less obvious and blatant in its message than Hippler’s *Der ewige Jude*. It transmits its message not through authoritative voice-over narration but by character and dialogue, leading its audience to antisemitic conclusions, but without the overtness of a propaganda documentary.

The question as to whether the Nazis believed that it was possible to make people do things that they otherwise would not by means of film or other kinds of propaganda, is more complicated. On the one hand,

³³ Albrecht, *Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik*, 456.

³⁴ Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, 124.

³⁵ Hippler, *Betrachtungen zum Filmschaffen*, 98.

Goebbels obviously believed that cinema had a very real power. In 1940 he declared: “We must give film a task and a mission in order that we may use it to conquer the world.”³⁶ On the other hand, however, he also understood propaganda’s dependence on the preexisting attitudes and beliefs of the people to whom it is addressed. Goebbels believed, in other words, that propaganda, just like entertainment, had to give people what they already wanted. As Goebbels proclaimed in 1937: “Let no one . . . raise the objection that the people desire only to be entertained. The people seek joy. They have a right to it. We have the duty of giving this joy to them. Most of us have barely an idea of how joyless in general is the life of the people and therefore of how important it is to provide a remedy.”³⁷ In this description it is the demands of the people that generate propaganda, a kind of process emerging from the bottom, as it were, and moving to the top. But the fact that propaganda works with the already-existing predispositions and prejudices of the masses does not necessarily mean that the masses cannot be manipulated. As Hitler stated in his book *Mein Kampf* (1925): “The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and thence to the heart of the broad masses.”³⁸ In other words, a propagandist has to begin with the people and their “emotional ideas,” but he does not have to end there. Rather, he can use those ideas as a way to get the people’s “attention” and “heart,” as Hitler puts it, in order to achieve goals that go beyond what the people already want and feel. In 1934, Goebbels declared that “the genuine propagandist must be a real artist. He should be at home in the soul of the people and, on their instrument, play chords that together produce the majestic concert of a unified, unfalsified political will.”³⁹ From this it is clear that both Hitler and Goebbels believed that propaganda could have a significant impact on the people — and this is only to be expected, given the amount of attention they both paid to propaganda — but that they did not believe propaganda to be completely

³⁶ Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 215.

³⁷ Joseph Goebbels, “Freedom and Organization,” in *Nazi Culture: A Documentary History*, ed. George L. Mosse (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 151–59; here, 157–58. From a speech to the *Reichskulturrat* on November 26, 1937.

³⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 180.

³⁹ Joseph Goebbels, “Die Propaganda und Aufklärung als Voraussetzung praktischer Arbeit auf zahlreichen Gebieten,” in *Der Kongress zu Nürnberg vom 5. bis 10 September 1934: Offizieller Bericht über den Verlauf des Reichsparteitages mit sämtlichen Reden* (Munich: Franz Eher, 1934), 130–41; here, 131–32.

free of limitations and restrictions in its power and use. Propaganda had to work with what was already in existence, and it could not ignore that.

All of this suggests that neither of the positions described above — the one that views propaganda as strict control of the people on the one hand, and the one that views propaganda as essentially responding to the people's own wishes on the other — reflects the full complexity of the Nazi conception of propaganda. Rather, Nazi propaganda was conceived of by the Nazis themselves as both flowing from and returning to the people, just as the *Führer*, the absolute leader, was conceived as an emanation of the German people themselves. At the Nazi party rally in 1934, which is the subject of Leni Riefenstahl's documentary *Triumph des Willens*, Goebbels succinctly expressed this view of propaganda: "It rose to us from the depths of the people, and to the depths of the people it must constantly descend again in order to look for its roots and find its strength."⁴⁰

During the period of Hitler's Third Reich, from 1933 to 1945, German film reached the height of its popularity, a height never reached before or since. The efforts of Goebbels, Hippler, and others to create a genuinely popular cinema were largely successful, based on the available statistics, which demonstrate a remarkable growth in film's mass popularity. In 1933, the year the Nazis came to power, there were 5,071 cinemas in all of Germany and 245 million cinema admissions.⁴¹ Six years later, at the start of the Second World War in 1939, the number of cinemas had grown considerably, to 6,923 nationwide, while the number of admissions had more than doubled, to 624 million. In other words, not only were there a great many more cinemas, but the cinemas were also far more crowded with people. By 1943, the admissions figure had almost doubled again to 1,116 million admissions. In other words, German cinema reached its all-time peak of popularity in 1942 and 1943, just as the Second World War reached its turning point. During this period, the average German went to the movies about fourteen times a year, i.e., more than once a month. The Reich had 2.6 million cinema seats, with eight theaters having a capacity of over two thousand. Berlin had 400 screens, Vienna 221. Ufa alone had 159 cinemas in 69 cities — a total of 162,171 seats. The Ufa-Palast am Zoo, the largest Ufa theater with well over two thousand seats, was where many of the major movie premieres, including the premiere of Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, took place. For many Germans after 1945, the years of the Third Reich marked the golden years of German cinema. Stars like Hans Albers, Marika Rökk, Willy Birgel, Heinz Rühmann, Brigitte Horney, and Zarah Leander were enormously popular. Although it is easy for subsequent generations to

⁴⁰ Goebbels, "Die Propaganda und Aufklärung als Voraussetzung praktischer Arbeit auf zahlreichen Gebieten," 141.

⁴¹ My figures here come from Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 13.

remember only the obvious propaganda movies of the Third Reich, it is important to keep in mind that for the vast majority of Germans, cinema continued in the 1930s and 1940s to be entertainment above all. If it was effective as propaganda, that effectiveness was due at least in part to cinema's popularity as sheer, pleasurable entertainment. Especially during the difficult years of the war, "entertainment" for Goebbels primarily meant optimistic movies with a happy ending. In 1942 he wrote in his diary: "In this time of highest tension, film and radio should give the people relaxation. People have to stay in a good mood. Because a war as big as this can only be won with optimism."⁴²

It is important to be cautious about making all-too-sweeping assumptions about the effectiveness of film as a propaganda tool. Two anecdotes about *Jud Süß*, the antisemitic feature film, illustrate the need for caution. The film's Jewish villain, played by Ferdinand Marian, rapes and causes the suicide of a beautiful non-Jewish German woman, played by the Swedish actress Kristina Söderbaum, wife of the director Veit Harlan. Although in *Jud Süß* he plays a Jewish tormentor of women, Ferdinand Marian reportedly received fan mail from female viewers infatuated with his character in the film.⁴³ In other words, if the Nazi intention in creating the film was to show Jews as despicable and not worthy of affection or love (let alone by non-Jewish German women), they obviously did not entirely achieve their goal: some German women, far from despising the Jewish main character, became infatuated with him. Linda Schulte-Sasse writes that in some ways the film's Jewish protagonist is portrayed as "sexy," a man without equal among his Aryan counterparts, "a figure essentially unchallenged and unchallengeable."⁴⁴ At one of Veit Harlan's postwar trials, a Danish interpreter claimed that when *Jud Süß* was shown in Copenhagen "the Danish audience was particularly impressed by the portrayal of the Jew Süß, and they found this figure to be sympathetically portrayed."⁴⁵ It is well to remember such anecdotes, which suggest that the intention of a film's makers is not necessarily identical to the film's impact on its viewers. If this were not

⁴² Albrecht, *Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik*, 79.

⁴³ See Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 158.

⁴⁴ Linda Schulte-Sasse, "Courtier, Vampire, or Vermin? *Jew Süß*'s Contradictory Effort to Render the 'Jew' Other," in *Perspectives on German Cinema*, ed. Terri Ginsberg and Kirsten Moana Thompson (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), 184–220; here, 207.

⁴⁵ Veit Harlan, *Im Schatten meiner Filme*, ed. H. C. Opfermann (Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohn, 1955), 231. Other anecdotes suggest that the film did achieve some of the desired antisemitic effect. See also Harlan, *Im Schatten meiner Filme*, 273; David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933–1945*, second edition (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 245; and Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, 152–53.



Joseph Süß Oppenheimer (Ferdinand Marian) with his victim *Dorothea Sturm* (Kristina Söderbaum) in Veit Harlan's *Jud Süß* (1940). Screen capture.

the case, almost every feature film would be a blockbuster, and every propaganda film would achieve the desired effect.

The most important technical development in German cinema between 1933 and 1945 was the advent of color film, which became particularly important after the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. When Goebbels saw David O. Selznick's color epic *Gone with the Wind* (1939) in the summer of 1940, he complained that it was too long but also noted admiringly that it was "fantastic in its color and gripping in its power. You become completely sentimental watching it. Leigh and Clark Gable are wonderful. The scenes of mass mobilization sweep you away. A great achievement for the Americans. We'd like to see this more often. This should set an example for us."⁴⁶ Goebbels wanted to make sure that

⁴⁶ *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente*, ed. Elke Fröhlich (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1987), 4:259. Notation from 30 July 1940. See also Michael H. Kater, "Film as an Object of Reflection in the Goebbels Diaries: Series II (1941–1945)," *Central European History* 33, no. 3 (2000): 391–414. *Gone with the Wind* obviously made a big impression on Goebbels, because a year and a half later, on February 20, 1942, he noted that he and a group of film specialists had watched the movie and engaged in intensive debate on it. See *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, part 2, *Diktate 1941–1945*, ed. Elke Fröhlich (January–March 1942) (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1994), 3:347.

German cinema could produce something equally powerful. Color film seemed to both Goebbels and Hitler a good means for prosecuting total war, “rescuing the German cinema from black-and-white,” as the cultural theorist Paul Virilio argues, and giving it “a competitive edge against the tonic power of American productions.”⁴⁷ Certainly Goebbels wanted to use the advent of the Second World War to expand the domination of German cinema throughout Europe, and ultimately the world, and to compete successfully with the American film industry. As Goebbels wrote in his diary on May 19, 1942: “We must take a similar course in our film policy as pursued by the Americans on the North American and South American continents. We must become the dominant film power in Europe. Films produced by other states should be allowed to have only local and limited character.” Already in 1940 Goebbels had expressed the conviction that American film “will not be easily overcome. But it can be overcome.”⁴⁸ Color film was to be part of the German effort to compete with and ultimately defeat American cinema. Hence, German production of color films expanded after 1940, and several of the Third Reich’s major productions, including *Münchhausen* (1943) and *Kolberg* (1945), appeared in Agfacolor. As the popular German male star Hans Albers, who played the hero in *Münchhausen*, declared, color film “permits new possibilities and unimagined effects; now eyes really will appear blue and hair really blond.”⁴⁹

One should imagine a typical *Kinoabend* (film evening) in Nazi Germany as containing not just a major feature film but also advertisements, a newsreel (called in German a *Wochenschau*), and a short documentary called a *Kulturfilm* (cultural film). Even if there was no overt propaganda in the feature film, there was almost certain to be some in the newsreel and the *Kulturfilm*.⁵⁰ Most Nazi feature films tended to avoid realism and instead created self-contained imaginary worlds that at first glance had little to do with contemporary life in Germany. Karsten Witte writes that, in contrast to some realist films of the Weimar Republic (like Fritz Lang’s *M*), Nazi cinema favored illusionism: “The outside world is once again, at all costs, to be subjected to the all-powerful control of the studio.”⁵¹ The point for film in the Third Reich, in general, was not for an audience to be confronted with reality, but for the audience to find an escape from reality.

⁴⁷ Cited in Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 203. From Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 8.

⁴⁸ Cited in Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 215.

⁴⁹ Cited in Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 203.

⁵⁰ On the typical film evening, see Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 20.

⁵¹ Witte, “Film im Nationalsozialismus,” 124.

Veit Harlan's film *Kolberg*, the most expensive and last major film production of the Third Reich, is a testament both to Joseph Goebbels's belief in the effectiveness of film as a propaganda tool, and to the futility of that belief. The film was made in the final years of the Second World War, when Germany was clearly losing the war, and it told the story of a North German town named Kolberg that had successfully resisted Napoleon's troops in 1807.⁵² The message to Germans a century and a half later, in the midst of another European struggle that Germany was losing, was clear: to heroically resist the Allied invasion of Germany, even if it meant the physical destruction of German towns and the deaths of many Germans. A wise old man's message to his niece contains the essence of this message: "You have sacrificed everything, Maria — but not in vain. Death is entwined with victory. The greatest achievements are always borne in pain, and when a person takes all the pain on herself then that person is indeed a great person. You did your duty and were not afraid of death. You helped us to win, Maria, you are great too!"⁵³

The German Reich went to great trouble and expense to create this movie in the final years of the war. At a time when the Nazis needed every soldier to be fighting at the front, thousands of soldiers were ordered to serve as extras in the battle scenes, which were far more elaborate than the actual skirmishes of 1807. The movie finally premiered simultaneously in Berlin and in La Rochelle, France (a city surrounded by Allied troops), on January 30, 1945, the twelfth anniversary of Hitler's rise to power — just three months before the final end of the war. A few months later, on March 16, the real town of Kolberg was under attack by Soviet troops, and Goebbels wrote in his diary: "The enemy has forced his way into Kolberg and fierce street fighting has flared up." Two days later, on March 18, Goebbels wrote: "We have now had to evacuate Kolberg. The town, which has been defended with such extraordinary heroism, could no longer be held. I will ensure that the evacuation of Kolberg is not mentioned in the OKW [army high command] report. In view of the severe psychological repercussions on the Kolberg film we could do without that for the moment."⁵⁴ Goebbels, in other words, was now concerned about the effect that the real course of the war would have on his propaganda rather than about the effect his propaganda might potentially have on the real course of the war. In 1934 Goebbels had declared that propaganda was a

⁵² See Peter Paret, "'Kolberg' (1945) as Historical Film and Historical Document," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 4 (1994): 433–48.

⁵³ David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933–1945*, second edition (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 193.

⁵⁴ David Culbert, "'Kolberg': Film, Filmscript and Kolobrzeg Today," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 4 (1994): 449–66; here, 453.

means and not an end.⁵⁵ Now, a decade later, propaganda had become an end in itself. A month later, when the end of the war was clearly in sight, Goebbels focused on posterity. On April 17, 1945, after a private screening of *Kolberg*, he proclaimed to his staff: “Gentlemen, in a hundred years’ time they will be showing another fine colour film describing the terrible days we are living through. Don’t you want to play a part in this film, to be brought back to life in a hundred years’ time? Everybody now has a chance to choose the part that he will play in the film a hundred years hence. I can assure you that it will be a fine and elevating picture. And for the sake of this prospect it is worth standing fast. Hold out now, so that a hundred years hence the audience does not hoot and whistle when you appear on the screen.”⁵⁶ Less than two weeks later, Hitler put a bullet in his brain; the following day, on May 1, 1945, Goebbels and his wife committed suicide after killing all of their six children to save them from having to live in a non-Nazi world.

In the end, the Nazis had made great efforts and spent a lot of money to produce a film that few Germans could actually see. By 1945 German cities lay in ruins — much like the city of Kolberg in Harlan’s film — and many movie theaters were closed or nonexistent. Even if Germans had been able to see Harlan’s epic about heroic resistance to foreign enemies and the value of death and struggle, however, it is doubtful if they would have been impressed by it, given their grim situation. *Kolberg* is a testament above all to Nazi megalomania, not to Nazi effectiveness. It shows that propaganda has definite limits in the real world.

In what follows I will analyze two films, both of them clearly propaganda. It should be remembered that most other films made in the Nazi period are less obviously propagandistic. I have chosen the films — *Triumph des Willens* and *Die große Liebe* — both for their historic significance and because they represent the difficulty of clearly defining what propaganda in the Third Reich means, even for films that are generally considered to be propaganda films. *Die große Liebe* is not just propaganda, it is also a compelling melodrama with musical elements, and *Triumph des Willens* is not just propaganda, it is also a documentary film about a real event.

⁵⁵ Goebbels, “Die Propaganda und Aufklärung als Voraussetzung praktischer Arbeit auf zahlreichen Gebieten,” 131.

⁵⁶ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933–1945*, 197.



*Riefenstahl high above the Luitpoldarena. From Riefenstahl's book *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Filmes*.*

10: *Triumph des Willens* (1935): Documentary and Propaganda

Director: Leni Riefenstahl

Cinematographers: Sepp Allgeier, Karl Attenberger, Werner Bohne, and others

Producer: Universum Film-Aktiengesellschaft (Leni Riefenstahl and Adolf Hitler)

Editor: Leni Riefenstahl

Music: Herbert Windt

German Release Date: March 28, 1935

Appearances by: Adolf Hitler; Rudolf Hess; Joseph Goebbels; Julius Streicher; Robert Ley; Alfred Rosenberg; Heinrich Himmler; Viktor Lutze and others

Awards: National Film Prize, 1935; Venice Biennale, 1936: Gold Medal; Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques, 1937: Grand Prize

LENI RIEFENSTAHL, WHO DIRECTED *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will), was born in Berlin in 1902 and started her artistic career as a dancer. Her approach to dance came out of a worship of nature, strength, and beauty that was widespread in the final years of the Wilhelmine *Kaiserreich* and during the years of the Weimar Republic. In many ways this approach to nature drew its strength from the same roots as the turn-of-the-century German youth movement and the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, whose ideas about natural education and what he called “anthroposophy” resulted in the founding of the Waldorf Schools in Germany and other countries starting in 1919. Similar conceptions of human oneness with nature also led to the development of *Freie Körperkultur* (FKK; free body culture) — i.e., nudism — which spread throughout Germany during the first decades of the twentieth century. As a result of the FKK movement, Germany to this day continues to be one of the leading world centers of nudism. The idea behind all these developments — the youth movement, anthroposophy, and FKK — was that the human body is not only beautiful but also a part of nature, not a separate entity unto itself but rather a functioning part of a whole. A surviving film from the middle years of the Weimar Republic, *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit: Ein Film über moderne Körperkultur* (Ways to Strength and Beauty: A Film about Modern Body Culture, 1925), includes shots of the young Riefenstahl

seminude. As Steven Bach has suggested, many of the images from *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit* — with its glorification of the perfect human body and of physical strength and athleticism — prefigured images that Riefenstahl herself would later use as a director.¹

In June of 1924, a knee injury forced Riefenstahl to interrupt and ultimately end her career as a dancer. According to Riefenstahl, it was in the same month, while in a Berlin subway station, that she saw an advertisement for a movie by Arnold Fanck called *Der Berg des Schicksals* (Mountain of Destiny, 1924). After seeing the movie, Riefenstahl claims, she was filled with the desire to act in similar films and traveled to the Dolomite Mountains in northern Italy in hopes of meeting the movie's makers. There she encountered the movie's star Luis Trenker and promptly announced: "I'm going to be in your next picture."² Shortly thereafter, Riefenstahl arranged a meeting in Berlin with the director Arnold Fanck himself, the inventor of the *Bergfilm* (mountain film) genre. The mountain film was a specifically German genre that celebrated the romanticism of the Alps and the heroism of the people who live in and climb them.³ In old age, Arnold Fanck proclaimed: "I admit without reservation . . . to my heroic conception of the world and in this respect I share the good company of almost every great German mind from centuries before Hitler."⁴ Unlike the great Weimar classics of the 1920s, which were filmed in studios, *Bergfilme* were filmed on location in the Alps and featured daring stunts and cinematography. The movies tended to have lots of beautiful imagery but not a lot of plot or character development, and not many women, either; they featured a primal and very male struggle between man and nature. Riefenstahl's appearance on the scene, and her expressed interest in working in mountain films, made it possible for Fanck to add a romantic love interest to his plots, thus broadening the movies' popular appeal. As Bach notes, Riefenstahl filled a gap in the mountain film "that no other actress was willing or able to fill."⁵ In order to act in these movies, Riefenstahl (from the flat northern city of Berlin, but with athletic talent) learned how to ski. A mountain film generally features a brave and noble hero who is able to climb and survive on the mountain; such men live far from the purportedly softening, feminizing influences of modern urban society. After Riefenstahl's

¹ Steven Bach, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 34.

² Bach, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl*, 39.

³ See Eric Rentschler, "Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the *Bergfilm*," *New German Critique*, no. 51 (1990): 137–61.

⁴ Cited in Rentschler, "Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the *Bergfilm*," 141–42, note 9.

⁵ Bach, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl*, 43.

appearance on the scene, the hero of a *Bergfilm* was able to have a love interest, a good woman who was usually in tune with mountains and their message. As this kind of heroine, Leni Riefenstahl made her debut as an actress in mountain films, playing the mysterious dancer Diotima in Fanck's *Der heilige Berg* (The Holy Mountain, 1926), which features a love triangle whose other members are a mountaineer played by Luis Trenker and his friend and rival Vigo (played by Ernst Petersen), a ski champion; both men compete for Diotima's love. Fanck's primary cinematographer was the talented Sepp Allgeier, who was later to serve as Riefenstahl's chief cameraman in *Triumph des Willens* and *Olympia*, her much-praised two-part documentary of the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. Ultimately, Riefenstahl went on to create and act in her own mountain film, *Das blaue Licht* (The Blue Light, 1932), which she directed together with the Hungarian-born screenwriter and film theorist Béla Balázs. Riefenstahl played Junta, a natural "wild" woman who lives in union with nature and with the mountain but at odds with the village people at the mountain's base, especially with the village women, who fear Junta's magical power, not least her potential to cast a spell on their men. Only Junta knows the secret of the mysterious blue light that emanates from the mountain and gives the film its name. Ultimately, Junta falls in love with a man to whom she reveals her own and the mountain's secret, but he betrays her.

According to Riefenstahl's memoirs, Adolf Hitler had seen and admired *Das blaue Licht*, which appeared shortly before he came to power. Riefenstahl had also experienced Hitler at one of the Nazi party's 1932 rallies, and she was tremendously impressed by him. "I was . . . fascinated," she later remembered, sensing that the audience was "in bondage to this man."⁶ "I had an almost apocalyptic vision that I was never able to forget. It seemed as if the earth's surface were spreading out in front of me, like a hemisphere that suddenly splits apart in the middle, spewing out an enormous jet of water, so powerful that it touched the sky and shook the earth. I felt quite paralysed."⁷ She wrote a letter to Hitler, asking to meet him personally, and Hitler granted her wish only a few days later. According to one of Hitler's associates, shortly before her letter arrived, Hitler had gushed that "the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in a film was Riefenstahl's dance on the sea in *The Holy Mountain*."⁸ The meeting between Riefenstahl and Hitler was the beginning of a productive relationship; she claims that he told her, "Once we come to power, you must make my films."⁹ After Hitler's appointment to the chancellorship and his decision to hold the first post-victory nationwide

⁶ Leni Riefenstahl, *A Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 101.

⁷ Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, 101.

⁸ Bach, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl*, 91.

⁹ Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, 106.



*Hitler and Riefenstahl in Nuremberg. From Riefenstahl's book *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Filmes*.*

Nazi party rally — called, appropriately enough, the *Parteitag des Sieges* (Party Rally of Victory) — in Nuremberg, Hitler asked Riefenstahl to direct a documentary of the rally, for which he himself came up with the title *Sieg des Glaubens* (Victory of Faith). Riefenstahl had just turned 31 when she began filming her first documentary for the Nazis.

Sieg des Glaubens, which documents the Nazi rally held from August 31 to September 3, 1933, in Nuremberg, premiered on December 1, 1933, at the Ufa-Palast in Berlin. It was warmly greeted by the party and by many film commentators, who waxed enthusiastic about the access the film gave viewers to the experience of the Nuremberg rally and to Hitler himself. As one reviewer raved, the film offered “pictures of the *Führer* as we have never seen him before.”¹⁰ Another reviewer noted that even for

¹⁰ “Filmbesprechung: ‘Der Sieg des Glaubens’: Der Film vom Reichsparteitag 1933 der NSDAP. Ufa-Palast,” *Lichtbildbühne*, 2 December 1933, 3. All translations from German-language sources are my own unless otherwise noted.

viewers who had actually been to the Nazi victory rally in Nuremberg, the film was well worth seeing, since it showed “the connection among specific things, and no participant could see and hear them all.”¹¹ In other words, a film was capable of seeing far more than any individual spectator — even the most privileged: Hitler himself — could. This was particularly important for the Nazis, because the Nuremberg rallies constituted for them the apex of the party’s self-understanding and self-representation; if film provided privileged access to the rallies, then for that reason alone it was worth supporting. Linda Schulte-Sasse has written that “the film spectator soaring with Riefenstahl’s camera has the illusion of possessing” an almost superhuman gaze, and that “it is only in the medium of film that this experience of masses watching themselves” from such a privileged position is possible.¹² It is no wonder that Hitler was so insistent on filming the Nuremberg rallies: film provided the ideal medium for capturing the essence of Nazi self-representation. As Riefenstahl herself noted in 1935, “*The belief that the genuine and strong experience of a nation can be experienced anew in film was born in Germany.* Thus the *Führer* has given films about the present their meaning and their mission.”¹³

In Nuremberg the Nazi party came together every year from 1933 to 1938 to celebrate its own identity for itself and the rest of the world. Because of the hundreds of thousands of people who participated in a typical rally, and the multiplicity of different events scheduled every day, some of them in direct conflict with each other, it was impossible for any single participant to experience them all. Film enabled what would otherwise have been physically impossible, and it also provided a document that would make it possible for later generations to experience something of the rallies’ mystique. The important thing for the film was not to convey a moment-by-moment chronology of the Nazi rally itself but rather to give viewers a sense of the grandeur that Riefenstahl called the “experience” of “Nuremberg.”¹⁴ As one observer wrote, “What matters in this film is not the chronological progression of the rally — what matters is something more important: making visible and tangible the electrifying rhythm of the greatest movement of the people that has ever taken place on German soil.”¹⁵ In an interview with the film press, Riefenstahl herself pointed out

¹¹ “Gestern im UFA-Palast: Der Sieg des Glaubens: Der Film vom Reichsparteitag,” *Reichsfilmblatt* 1933, no. 49, 2 December 1933, 1.

¹² Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996), 293.

¹³ Leni Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films* (Munich: Franz Eher, 1935), 15. Emphasis Riefenstahl’s.

¹⁴ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 11.

¹⁵ “Der Sieg des Glaubens,” *Die Filmwoche* 1933, no. 50, 1602–3; here, 1603.

that what she had intended to achieve in *Sieg des Glaubens* was “artistic structuring,” not mere newsreel reportage: “My job in Nuremberg was to collect, from the huge number of powerful occurrences, the best possible filmic effects: to choose from the masses in the audience, the marching SA, and from the course of the imposing events the ones appropriate for the camera.”¹⁶

Sieg des Glaubens is indeed a remarkable documentary of the 1933 rally, and of Hitler’s effect on the crowds who came out to greet him. But for many years *Sieg des Glaubens* was virtually forgotten, and it is by no means the best-known documentary of the Nazi rallies in Nuremberg. *Sieg des Glaubens* was supplanted a little over a year after its opening by another documentary made by Riefenstahl. In September of 1934, the Nazis held their second post-victory rally in Nuremberg, and once again Hitler asked Riefenstahl to document the event, this time with a greatly expanded film crew. The film that ultimately resulted from this work — also named by Hitler — was called *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will), and it premiered at the Ufa-Palast, which was decked out with swastika flags for the occasion, on March 28, 1935. Hitler and other major party leaders, as well as members of the diplomatic corps, all came to the opening of *Triumph des Willens*. Changed circumstances had made it possible for Riefenstahl to create a lasting film documentary that was to become a permanent record not only of the 1934 Nazi rally, but of all the Nazi rallies in Nuremberg, and in fact of the Nazi dictatorship as a whole.

What exactly had changed? The most important change was that Hitler’s chief lieutenant, Ernst Röhm, the head of the Nazis’ paramilitary SA, had been murdered at Hitler’s order on June 30, 1934. Along with Röhm, many of the other major leaders of the SA had been murdered; in all, well over one hundred people were killed. There were several reasons for Röhm’s murder. He and his men were fervent believers in Nazism as a quasi-socialist revolutionary force, and some of them spoke of the need for a second revolution that would genuinely spread socialism throughout Germany. This quasi-socialist radicalism scared some of the right-wing economic and military elites from whom Hitler wanted support. The German army, the Wehrmacht, was also infuriated by the SA’s status as a paramilitary organization that seemed to want to rival the army. Röhm, moreover, was a charismatic leader revered by his men. His status might have made him, if he had ever wanted, a potential rival to Hitler himself. Finally, Röhm, along with some of his top lieutenants, was a homosexual. In order to justify what became known as the “Night of the Long Knives,” Hitler claimed that Röhm had tried to seize power

¹⁶ “Imposante Wochenschauberichte: Vorschau auf den Film vom Parteitag,” *Lichtbildbühne*, 6 September 1933, 1.

himself, and he accused Röhm and his men of unnatural and disgusting sexual practices. Albert Speer, Hitler's top architect and the designer of the party rally grounds in Nuremberg, writes in his memoirs that Hitler had talked about his disgust for the "homosexual atmosphere" in the SA, and had declared: "In one room we found two naked boys!"¹⁷ Röhm had been homosexual long before 1934, however, and the "homosexual atmosphere" in the SA does not seem to have particularly bothered Hitler prior to June of 1934. Hence, it is likely that Hitler's purported disgust with homosexuality was primarily a justification, not a real reason for Röhm's murder.

The reason why the murders of Röhm and the other top SA leaders are relevant to the making of *Triumph des Willens* is that Röhm had played a prominent role in *Sieg des Glaubens*, second only to that of Hitler himself. In one of the film's longest sequences, Röhm and Hitler stand together in Hitler's Mercedes on Nuremberg's market square (renamed Adolf-Hitler-Platz during the years of the Third Reich), saluting storm troopers who march by. In another important sequence, Hitler and Röhm march together through the ranks of the storm troopers, assembled in an outdoor forum called the Luitpoldarena, to a First World War memorial, where they stand in silence to honor both the war dead and fallen Nazi "heroes." As a promotional brochure for *Sieg des Glaubens* had rhapsodized, "one of the most impressive pictures of the national movement is the one where Hitler and his chief of staff [Röhm] march alone past the long columns of the faithful to the monument for the dead, where they stand for several minutes in silent prayer."¹⁸ A year later there were two things wrong with this picture: one was the fact of Röhm's existence, and the second was that in *Sieg des Glaubens*, Hitler is not singular but merely the preeminent part of a collective represented by "Hitler and his chief of staff."

In the late summer of 1934, Röhm himself was one of the Nazi dead, and Hitler needed to erase the memory of his former lieutenant and to make clear his complete and unchallenged dominance over the party. The rally of 1934 occurred from September 5 to 10, a little over two months after what Hitler called the "Röhm putsch." The rally, therefore, needed to demonstrate that Hitler was in control of the Nazis, that the SA stood resolutely behind him, and that there was no split in the unity of the party. The Nazis called this rally the *Parteitag der Einheit und der Stärke* (party rally of unity and strength) in order to emphasize its internal significance for the party.

¹⁷ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 51.

¹⁸ *Der Sieg des Glaubens: Der Film vom Reichs-Parteitag der NSDAP* (Berlin: Illustrierter Film-Kurier, 1933 [promotional brochure]), no page number.



Hitler with Ernst Röhm at the 1933 Nazi rally. Screen capture from Riefenstahl's film *Sieg des Glaubens* (1933).

It was to a large extent in order to erase the memory of Ernst Röhm, and of his place in *Sieg des Glaubens*, that Hitler ordered the making of *Triumph des Willens*, for which he gave Riefenstahl unprecedented support. Riefenstahl had a staff of 170 people in Nuremberg, including sixteen cameramen, the same number of assistants, and twenty-two chauffeurs. Unlike with *Sieg des Glaubens*, whose shooting occurred in a relatively haphazard way since Riefenstahl had not had much time or a large staff to plan it, the shooting of *Triumph des Willens* was carefully planned. In order to achieve effective shots of the solemn SA and SS rally at the outdoor Luitpoldarena, for instance, Riefenstahl had an elevator platform installed on one of the flag masts in the arena. This platform could rise to a height of almost forty meters, enabling the film camera to survey a large portion of the Luitpoldarena and capture not just one or two individuals but the movements of the nearly one hundred thousand storm troopers on the field below. The presence of the elevator platform helps to make this one of the film's most memorable scenes, and one of the most prominent images of the entire Nazi period, as it shows Hitler — now standing alone, although flanked by the leaders of the SS and SA, who keep a respectful distance behind him — walking slowly through the ranks of his massed storm troopers to the war memorial, where he stands in silence,

honoring the First World War dead, including the recently deceased German president, Paul von Hindenburg, as well as the “martyrs” of Hitler’s failed beer-hall putsch of November 9, 1923, represented in the film by the presence of the *Blutfahne* (blood flag) that had purportedly been spattered with Nazi blood during the failed putsch attempt. Hitler then walks slowly back to the tribune, where he makes an impassioned speech claiming that anyone who believes “*that there is even a single tear in the fabric of our unified movement*” is mistaken.¹⁹ If one compares these images in *Triumph des Willens* to the respective images in *Sieg des Glaubens*, one can see that both Riefenstahl and the Nazis have made significant advances in their technique. Riefenstahl films the sequence from a variety of different angles, creating a visual rhythm and diversity not present in *Sieg des Glaubens*; the Nazis themselves march in a far more disciplined, organized way, always giving Hitler a great amount of space and emphasizing the distance between him and even his closest lieutenants. Whereas the masses of Hitler’s followers are frequently filmed from above, emphasizing their smallness and interchangeability, Hitler is frequently filmed head-on or from below, emphasizing his individuality and superiority. As Riefenstahl wrote, “above everything the *Führer!*”²⁰ When Hitler is filmed from above, his body is clearly separated from those of his followers by a great amount of space that is carefully marked out, and his body is in motion, whereas those of his followers, massed around and focused on him, do not move. When Hitler walks through the ranks of his storm troopers, it is almost as if he has parted them with the magical presence of his body and his will. They are a kind of geometrical backdrop against which Hitler’s stark individuality is profiled. This sequence has left a lasting impression on world culture; the final scene of George Lucas’s first *Star Wars* film (1977), for instance, directly references it.

In *Triumph des Willens*, as in *Sieg des Glaubens*, Riefenstahl does not aim at an objective documentary or chronology of the Nazi party rally. Rather, she aims for what in 1933 she had already called “artistic structuring.” As she put it in a book entitled *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Filmes* (Behind the Scenes of the Reich Party Rally Film), whose publication was timed to coincide with the film’s opening as part of a carefully coordinated public relations campaign, any objective attempt simply to film the Nazi party rally would, given the rally’s sheer length, take “several evenings to accomplish,” and, because it would simply be a reflection rather than an intensification of a real event, it would bore

¹⁹ *Der Kongreß zu Nürnberg vom 5. bis 10. September 1934: Offizieller Bericht über den Verlauf des Reichsparteitags mit sämtlichen Reden* (Munich: Eher, 1934), 177.

²⁰ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 11.

²¹ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 11.

viewers “with a cheap copy, with photographic faithfulness.”²¹ What Riefenstahl instead hoped to capture was the essence of the excitement and “meaning of Nuremberg” by structuring the film in a way that would lead viewers to ever greater excitement “from act to act, from impression to impression.” As Riefenstahl wrote, “the point is not for everything to appear on screen in chronological order. The structural line requires one, buoyed by the real experience of Nuremberg, to find the unified path” that would give order and meaning to the film.²² Whereas the actual party rally had taken almost a week, Riefenstahl, via careful editing — she and her crew had to sort through 393,700 feet of film, and the editing took half a year — created a fictive chronology that makes the party rally seem to last only three and a half days. Her chronology, she admits, might seem “idiosyncratic” to someone familiar with the actual progression of the party rally, since events are not necessarily shown in chronological sequence, and many events are not shown at all.²³ Because Riefenstahl’s editing is not oriented to the actual chronology of the 1934 rally, observers have noted that *Triumph des Willens* sometimes has an air of unreality or fictionality, as if the film existed in its own world.²⁴

Instead, Riefenstahl places images in a dramatic sequence that leads viewers to long for the presence of Hitler. In *Triumph des Willens*, excitement is created by the presence, or promised presence of the *Führer* himself. In the first part of the film, crowds eagerly await Hitler’s appearance, and their expectation creates a similar expectation among the film’s viewers. When Hitler arrives like a god from the clouds, the crowd goes wild with joy, but film viewers, for the most part, see the crowd and not Hitler himself. Seeing the crowds’ frenzied joy, viewers are led to desire the image of Hitler, and the joy that he creates, for themselves. In the second part of the film, when Hitler dominates the screen, these expectations and desires are met. *Triumph des Willens* stages a meeting between the men of the Nazi party and German tradition, as represented by the medieval city of Nuremberg and its civilian inhabitants, many of them female, and also between Hitler himself and his uniformed male followers. Hitler is the

²¹ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 11.

²² Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 28.

²³ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 28.

²⁴ Brian Winston, for instance, writes: “So disoriented, so fictionalised, is the editing that it calls into question quite often material the veracity of which is assured us by other sources, other witnesses.” Winston, “Reconsidering ‘Triumph of the Will’: Was Hitler There?” *Sight & Sound* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 107. See also Steve Neale, “*Triumph of the Will*: Notes on Documentary and Spectacle,” *Screen* 20, no. 1, 63–86, who argues that in many ways *Triumph des Willens* bears the markings of a feature (i.e., fiction) film.

“will” that achieves the “triumph” of his people, as Riefenstahl puts it: “in the will of the *Führer* his people triumph.”²⁵

Because of its remarkable photography and excellent editing, as well as the unusually dramatic nature of the events it depicts, *Triumph des Willens* is probably the most famous and successful political documentary of all time. In its time it won a number of major awards, including not only the German National Film Prize but also a gold medal at the 1935 Venice Biennale and the Grand Prix at the 1937 Paris World Exhibition. *Triumph des Willens* is certainly the most famous German movie made during the Nazi dictatorship, and it is also the most famous movie ever filmed by a woman, anywhere. Some would argue that it is the greatest propaganda film of all time.²⁶

However, *Triumph des Willens* also illustrates how difficult it can be to define terms like “propaganda” and “documentary.” Although the Nazis themselves did not view the word “propaganda” as negative and frequently and unashamedly used it with reference to their own public relations efforts — Joseph Goebbels, after all, was Minister of Propaganda, and one publicity booklet put out for the film explicitly labeled itself as “propaganda” — subsequent political groups and cultures have tended to view the word “propaganda” in a negative light and to use it only with reference to enemies, not to themselves. (The implicit definition seems to be that propaganda is anything that expresses a political opinion with which one does not agree.) Whereas neither Riefenstahl nor the Nazis would have objected to an analysis of *Triumph des Willens* as a “propaganda” film in 1935, Riefenstahl — who lived for almost seven decades after making her most famous film and died in 2003 at the age of 101 — subsequently claimed that *Triumph des Willens* had not been “propaganda” at all but rather an objective documentary. As Riefenstahl put it in her memoirs, published in the 1980s, “I have so often been accused of having made propaganda films, but such charges are misguided. This film was a factual documentary, which is something very different. No one, not even the Party, gave me any sort of instructions on what to do.”²⁷

The distinction that Riefenstahl makes between “propaganda” and “documentary” film is specious, since there is no necessary or obvious distinction between the two. In fact, a film may be simultaneously a “documentary” (a nonfiction film purporting to say something about reality), and also “propaganda” (a film supporting a particular point of view or party). All parties claim that their own point of view is the truth, or at least

²⁵ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 28.

²⁶ See, for instance, Guido Knopp, *Hitler's Women*, trans. Angus McGeoch (New York: Routledge, 2003), 125.

²⁷ Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, 148.

closer to the truth than that of any other party, and therefore if a party makes a film representing its own point of view, it will also claim that the film is a truthful documentary. It will certainly not claim that the film is a lying piece of fiction intended to deceive or brainwash its viewers. Hence, Riefenstahl's claim that documentary is necessarily "something very different" from propaganda is both historically and theoretically wrong. In fact, some film theorists would argue that there is no such thing as "objective" documentary whatsoever, and that every film, even the most seemingly "objective" documentary, necessarily represents a particular point of view and is therefore propaganda.²⁸ Although the view that all films, even all films made today, are propaganda, may be uncomfortable, it is also surprisingly difficult to disprove.

In fact, however, Riefenstahl did not "just" film what she found at the 1934 Nazi party rally. As she herself admitted at the time, the film was not primarily intended to be objective, but rather to excite viewers about the events in Nuremberg, and about Hitler. Hitler worked with Riefenstahl on the film, and he ordered the Nazi party to support her in whatever way possible. In order not to disturb the uniform images of men in Nazi uniforms at the party rally, Riefenstahl even had her cameramen dress in SA uniforms.²⁹ Such costuming hardly suggests disinterested objectivity. In her book *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Filmes* Riefenstahl claimed that her film's images were "unique and can not, as in a feature film, be repeated. A mistake here can't be made good."³⁰ Her cameras had to capture what was actually happening, and if any mistakes were made, there would be no way to recover those events for posterity. However, Albert Speer, Hitler's chief architect and the overall designer of the Nuremberg rally grounds, recounts in his memoirs that that was exactly what happened with some of the party leaders' speeches:

I recall, incidentally, that the footage taken during one of the solemn sessions of the 1935 Party Congress was spoiled. At Leni Riefenstahl's suggestion Hitler gave orders for the shots to be re-filmed in the studio. I was called in to do a backdrop simulating a section of the Kongreßhalle, as well as a realistic model of the platform and lectern. I had spotlights aimed at it; the production staff scurried around — while Streicher, Rosenberg, and Frank could be seen walking up and down with their manuscripts, determinedly memorizing their parts. Hess arrived and was asked to pose for the first shot. Exactly as he had done before an audience of 30,000 at the Party Congress, he solemnly raised his hand. With his special brand

²⁸ See in particular Steve Neale, "Triumph of the Will."

²⁹ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 18.

³⁰ Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 19.

of ardor, he turned precisely to the spot where Hitler would have been sitting, snapped to attention and cried: “My Leader, I welcome you in the name of the Party Congress! The congress will now continue. The Führer speaks!”³¹

Speer’s recollection demonstrates that even at the level of simply reproducing what actually happened, *Triumph des Willens* was not entirely authentic. He recounts that although he was irritated by the Nazi leaders’ prowess as actors, suspecting them of insincerity, “Frau Riefenstahl, on the other hand, thought the acted scenes better than the original presentation.”³²

Because of the film’s staged qualities, some critics, especially Siegfried Kracauer, have claimed that *Triumph des Willens* is fundamentally fictional and fantastical, not a film about a real, authentic event. In fact, Kracauer claimed, the 1934 party rally was planned not as an authentic event but simply as the backdrop for Riefenstahl’s film. Kracauer argued: “from the real life of the people was built up a faked reality that was passed off as the genuine one, but this bastard reality, instead of being an end in itself, merely served as the set dressing for a film that was then to assume the character of an authentic documentary.”³³ In an influential 1974 essay about Riefenstahl entitled “Fascinating Fascism,” the late American critic Susan Sontag, herself influenced by Kracauer, similarly argued that from the very beginning the 1934 Nazi rally in Nuremberg had been “conceived as the set of a film spectacle.”³⁴ According to this way of looking at *Triumph des Willens*, Riefenstahl’s film was not a real documentary at all but rather simply a feature film with a cast of tens of thousands. This idea has been highly influential with theorists of postmodernity and postmodernism, who tend to claim that the primary characteristic of postmodernity is the disappearance of authenticity and reality and the dominance of what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls the “simulacrum.”³⁵ In other words, in the postmodern world nothing is real, and everything is just an image of something else. The Nazis, with their theatrical staging of political life and their “introduction of aesthetics into political life” (in the words of German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin) can be

³¹ Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 62.

³² Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 62.

³³ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947), 301.

³⁴ Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), 73–105; here, 79.

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994).

seen as helping to pave the way toward this postmodern condition.³⁶ Eric Rentschler argues that the Nazis are “postmodernity’s secret sharers.”³⁷

Such theoretical speculations should be taken with a grain of salt, however, no matter how prominent their proponents — and there can be no doubt that Kracauer and Benjamin were distinguished and insightful analysts of Nazi culture.³⁸ Nevertheless, the Nazi party rallies in Nuremberg were a real, not a fictional, event. They were not a Potemkin village, as Kracauer claims.³⁹ They mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in Nuremberg, demonstrating the unity that existed between the people, the party, and the *Führer*. Many of the images in *Triumph des Willens* astound viewers not only because of Riefenstahl’s skill as a filmmaker, but also because of what her cameras are depicting. As Brian Winston noted in 1981, “shots of 200,000 men in close formation become impressive not through the fact of filming, but because of the formation itself.”⁴⁰ It might be convenient for Germans then or now to imagine that the unity between the people and their *Führer* on display at Nuremberg was somehow fictional or inauthentic, but in fact what the Nazi rallies and Riefenstahl’s most famous film clearly demonstrate is the German people’s love for Hitler. One should remember, after all, that in Nuremberg Hitler was surrounded at relatively close range by hundreds of thousands of strong men, many of them armed. Many of them could easily have killed him, had they wanted to. But no such attempt was ever made in Nuremberg, even in 1934, just a few months after Hitler had ordered the murder of Ernst Röhm and other leaders of the SA. As William Shirer, a historian who worked as an American reporter in Germany during the Hitler dictatorship, wrote of his visit to the 1934 rally, “We wondered if just one of those fifty thousand brownshirts wouldn’t pull a revolver, but not one did.”⁴¹ What Shirer, along with hundreds of thousands of other

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–51; here, 241.

³⁷ Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996), 223.

³⁸ For a more detailed critique of readings of *Triumph des Willens* as fiction, see Brockmann, *Nuremberg: The Imaginary Capital* (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), 200–205. See also Martin Loiperdinger, *Der Parteidagsfilm “Triumph des Willens” von Leni Riefenstahl: Rituale der Mobilmachung* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1987), 34.

³⁹ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 303.

⁴⁰ Winston, “Reconsidering ‘Triumph of the Will,’” 102.

⁴¹ William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934–1941* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 22.

people, witnessed at Nuremberg was a real, not a fictional event. *Triumph des Willens* continues to be disturbing today not because it is fictional but because it is, for the most part, real — in spite of the cooperation between Riefenstahl and the Nazis. In 1935 Riefenstahl had expressed the hope that, via her film, the hundreds of thousands of uniformed Nazis would be able to come to life again “on the shimmering screen,” and her hope was fulfilled.⁴² *Triumph des Willens* performs a feat that film can accomplish like no other medium: it allows the past to come to life again. It is a remarkable filmic accomplishment, but it is also a record of a remarkable, indeed an unprecedented event: the party rally itself.

⁴² Riefenstahl, *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Films*, 11.



*An Ufa publicity shot for Die große Liebe showing Zarah Leander as
Hanna Holberg and Viktor Staal as Paul Wendlandt.
Courtesy of the Filmmuseum Potsdam.*

11: *Die große Liebe* (1942) or Love and War

Director: Rolf Hansen

Cinematographer: Franz Weihmayer

Screenplay: Peter Groll and Rolf Hansen

Producer: Universum Film-Aktiengesellschaft (Walter Bolz)

Editor: Anna Höllering

Production Design: Walter Haag

Music: Michael Jary

Song Lyrics: Bruno Balz

Soundtrack: Werner Pohl

German Release Date: June 12, 1942

Actors: Zarah Leander (Hanna Holberg); Viktor Staal (Paul

Wendlandt); Grethe Weiser (Käthe); Paul Hörbiger (Alexander

Rudnitzky); Wolfgang Preiss (Etzdorf); Hans Schwarz (Alfred);

Ilse Fürstenberg (air raid warden)

ROLF HANSEN'S *DIE GROSSE LIEBE* (The Great Love) premiered at the Ufa-Palast in Berlin on June 12, 1942, and became the most popular German movie of all time. It earned eight million Reichsmarks and played to an audience of over twenty-seven million spectators, nearly half the German population.¹ It was one of a series of *Durchhaltefilme* (getting-through-it films), movies created during the war to raise the spirits of German civilians who were experiencing bombing raids on their cities and separation from their loved ones. Such films emerged in response to propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels's demand for films "that have the power to move the *Volk* beyond this time of trouble, worries, and inner tension, to shift its gaze elsewhere toward another, happier time to come."² The basic message of all of these films, from *Wunschkonzert* (Listeners' Choice, 1940, directed by Eduard von Borsody) to *Kolberg* (1945,

¹ Helmut Regel, "Zur Topographie des NS-Films," *Filmkritik* 10 (1966): 5–18; here, 15. See also Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment: The Politics of Entertainment in the Third Reich* (Rochester: Camden House, 2004), 135 and 154n41.

² Cited in Reinhard Andress, "Verschoben, aber nicht aufgehoben: Zur Topographie der Liebe im Kontext von Volksgemeinschaft und Krieg in erfolgreichen NS-Filmen," *Monatsshefte* 91, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 359–75; here, 359. Unless otherwise noted, translations from German-language sources are my own.

directed by Veit Harlan), was that war is not all bad, and that it is certainly not the end of the world, as one of the popular musical hits in *Die große Liebe* assures the film's viewers to the tune of a chirpy waltz sung by Zarah Leander, who plays the fictional entertainer Hanna Holberg. The lyrics to the waltz were written by Bruno Balz, who had served time in prison because of his homosexuality; he was released after an intervention by the composer Michael Jary, who wrote the music for the songs.³

Hanna Holberg sings the hit “Davon geht die Welt nicht unter” (It’s Not the End of Everything) to a group of Wehrmacht soldiers in Paris — real soldiers, according to one witness, in order to save the studio from having to hire extras — where she has rushed in a vain attempt to be near her dashing lover Paul Wendlandt, a Luftwaffe fighter pilot (played by the handsome Viktor Staal, with whom Leander was rumored to have had an affair in real life).⁴ The song sums up some of the pain and joy of Germans going through the war, particularly women suffering separation from their soldier-lovers and soldier-husbands, a pain that Hanna experiences repeatedly throughout the movie, since the war separates her from her lover no fewer than four times:

Sometimes in love I feel sorrow
 And my heart is heavy with untold woe.
 Then I always think:
 It's all over now, I'm on the brink.
 Where's someone who can love me,
 That's what I longed to see.
 Yes, but then I got used to it and I let it be.

 It's not the end of everything,
 Even if sometimes you're sad.
 Soon again you'll find you're glad,
 Soon you'll find a love that sings.
 If things are topsy-turvy now

³ See Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany's Great Film Company 1918–1945*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 317; Alan Lareau, “Lavender Songs: Undermining Gender in Weimar Cabaret and Beyond,” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 15–33, esp. 27; and Guido Knopp, *Hitler's Women*, trans. Angus McGeoch (New York: Routledge, 2003), 248. According to Knopp, the lyrics to Balz’s songs also contained a message that could be read positively by persecuted homosexuals; Knopp suggests that even in concentration camps these songs “were in fact anthems for persecuted homosexuals.” Alice A. Kuzniar writes that “Bruno Balz let Leander be his own voice and ventriloquize his longings.” See Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 59.

⁴ Knopp, *Hitler's Women*, 238, 252.

And even if your head's on fire
 You'll soon find a way somehow,
 You will find your heart's desire.
 The world will last a long, long while
 And once again you'll smile.

As she sings this song, Hanna herself is full of fear and doubt because she has been unable to see the man she loves; Paul Wendlandt has, because of lack of communication, rushed off to Berlin to be with her. The two have just missed each other. In spite of her unhappiness, Hanna sings her song to the assembled soldiers, who link arms with each other and sing and sway in unison to the beat of the waltz; at least one of the soldiers is wounded. The song's message is also the fundamental message of the movie: although hard times will come, and although it will be difficult to get through them, we must soldier on together — women and men, the home front and the real front, the healthy and the wounded — and make the best of it. And although war can separate men and women from each other, it can also bring them together in new and exciting ways. It intensifies their longing for each other and the pleasure of their few moments together. As Hanna comes to understand by movie's end, even one hour with her beloved outweighs weeks and months of absence. In Hanna's song, and in the movie as a whole, music helps to create a national community of men and women, soldiers and civilians determined to get through the war together.

The function of music in bringing the *Volkgemeinschaft* (people's community) together is even more prominent in *Wunschkonzert*, made a year and a half earlier, which also features a love affair between a Luftwaffe officer and a beautiful civilian woman. *Wunschkonzert* was another remarkably popular Nazi-era movie — it achieved an audience of twenty-six and-a-half million — about a German Sunday afternoon radio call-in show (which existed in real life) in which soldier-listeners got to call in and make musical requests.⁵ In *Wunschkonzert*, the *Volkgemeinschaft* is the virtual community of a people held together by the radio's air waves: from the front to the German homeland, listeners are joined together in a musical community that identifies Germany not just as a militarily powerful nation but as a *Kulturnation*, a nation of culture. In one early scene of *Wunschkonzert*, future soldiers are brought together by a Beethoven sonata; later on in the film, the same soldier-musician who had previously played Beethoven at home helps his fighting comrades in Poland to find their way through impenetrable fog by playing Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" on a church organ.⁶ In this scene a young man

⁵ O'Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment*, 121.

⁶ Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996), 296.

literally sacrifices his life by playing German music, and it is the German music of this man's sacrifice that saves the lives of his comrades-in-arms. No matter how separated the members of the German *Volksgemeinschaft* may be from each other, music draws them together spiritually and aesthetically in this film, since they are all listening to the same music at the same time. As the official film program to *Wunschkonzert* proclaimed:

A magical bond joins front and homeland together. In the trench in France, in the submarine looking for the enemy, in the fighter squadron on the coast, in the mother's quiet chamber, in thousands, hundreds of thousands of homes everywhere the flow of words and songs and music resonates and throbs.⁷

In *Die große Liebe*, which prominently features four songs sung by Zarah Leander and written by Jary and Balz, the community of the people is not virtual but real and palpable. As a live performer, Hanna brings her audiences together in a musical celebration of community values and perseverance. Throughout the movie, key scenes show Hanna performing, and just as important as her performance is the audience's reaction to her. Linda Schulte-Sasse has pointed out that the shots of the fictional audience reacting to Leander's singing in *Die große Liebe* allow "the film audience to watch its surrogate, the fictional audience, watching the unifying spectacle."⁸ In other words, the movie provides its viewers with pre-packaged lessons on how to react to the unifying force of art — in the form of music, but also, by implication, in the form of film. Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien has suggested that *Die große Liebe* strategically conflates war with entertainment, bringing the enjoyment of musical hits together with the excitement of watching aerial adventures, and featuring both the civilian Hanna Holberg and the Luftwaffe officer Paul Wendlandt alternately as spectators and as performers.⁹ Ultimately, it is the reality of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, prefigured in the relationship between musical performer and adoring audience, that brings Hanna and Paul together. Their love is the result of that first experience of a *Volksgemeinschaft* constituted by the listening audience and the singing performer.

Hanna's first musical performance, which is also her first appearance in the film, brings her together with her future husband and lover Paul. Hanna, played by the tall, sultry, red-haired Leander — the most popular female singer of the Nazi period, who had a remarkably low voice — is performing a sold-out concert in Berlin, and it just so happens that the dashing Wendlandt, in Berlin on military business, is in the audience, together

⁷ Cited in Reinhard Andress, "Verschoben, aber nicht aufgehoben," 371n10.

⁸ Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, 294.

⁹ O'Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment*, 140–41.

with his comrade and friend Etzdorf, also a fighter pilot. Wendlandt and Etzdorf — who are wearing civilian clothing and hence not identifiable as Luftwaffe officers — only manage to make it into the concert thanks to Wendlandt’s “proverbial good luck” — about which Wendlandt boasts throughout the film — since a man brings some unneeded tickets to the box office just after the two off-duty officers have learned that there are no more tickets available. The popular radio call-in show *Wunschkonzert* plays a role here, too, since at the theater Wendlandt is given a cute puppy that he has won as a prize on the show. He cannot take the puppy into the theater, of course, but he is able to leave it with the theater’s concierge. Although Paul does not know it at the time, the puppy will later play a key role in his life by helping to bring him and Hanna together. When Paul hears Hanna sing a song about how she can’t live without the love of a man, he decides that he is precisely the kind of man whose love she needs and sets out to meet her and win her heart. The sentiment of Hanna’s song is remarkably similar to that of Marlene Dietrich’s popular hit “Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt” (inaccurately translated into English as “Falling in Love Again” — a more accurate translation is: “From my head to my toes I’m all about love”) from *Der blaue Engel*. Just as Lola Lola, played by Marlene Dietrich in *Der blaue Engel*, had charmed Professor Rath, played by Emil Jannings, by singing that song, so too Hanna Holberg — in a black dress with a provocatively deep-cut décolleté — now charms Paul Wendlandt by singing “Mein Leben für die Liebe” (My Life for Love). And just as the poster for Lola Lola’s show had played a role at the beginning of *Der blaue Engel*, so too the poster for Hanna Holberg’s show features at the beginning of *Die große Liebe*, capturing the attention of Paul Wendlandt and his comrade Etzdorf. However, whereas Professor Rath had both literally and figuratively been caught in the snare of a femme fatale, Paul Wendlandt, with his “proverbial good luck,” is never really in danger. And Hanna Holberg is in every respect a higher-class singer than Lola Lola.

What ensues is essentially an inverse image of *Der blaue Engel*.¹⁰ Just as *Der blaue Engel* had featured a struggle of wills between Lola Lola and Professor Rath, so too *Die große Liebe* features a struggle of wills between Hanna Holberg and Paul Wendlandt. However, as befits a Nazi-era musical, the outcome of this struggle is quite different from the outcome

¹⁰ In fact, in some ways *Die große Liebe* recalls the plot of Josef von Sternberg’s second film with Marlene Dietrich (which was her first American film), *Morocco* (1930), in which Dietrich plays a singer who gives up everything in order to follow her soldier-lover (played by Gary Cooper). However, *Die große Liebe* does not have the erotic absolutism of *Morocco*. Whereas the latter film ends with the Dietrich figure wandering off into the Sahara in the footsteps of her lover, *Die große Liebe* ends with the two lovers comfortably together on the terrace of a hospital.

of *Der blaue Engel*, which had ended with the symbolic castration and death of Rath. Whereas Professor Rath's encounter with Lola Lola had destroyed him, metaphorically burning him up just like the moths drawn to the flame in Lola Lola's song, Paul Wendlandt is a hero who not only survives but actually conquers the femme fatale, thereby giving her the happiness that she never knew she lacked. *Die große Liebe* might also be called *The Taming of the Vamp*, since, like Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, it shows how a strong male breaks the will of a recalcitrant female. By the end of the movie Hanna Holberg, previously an independent woman who flitted from man to man, just like Lola Lola, and declared in her first show-stopper that "Erlaubt ist, was gefällt" ("whatever you like is what's permitted"), has given up her career as a famous singer and joyfully embraced her role as the submissive, adoring wife of a Luftwaffe pilot. Whereas Professor Rath in *Der blaue Engel* had symptomatically reflected the Weimar Republic's crisis of masculinity, Paul Wendlandt reflects the Nazi era's celebration of masculine power and heroism. Far from being emasculated, like Professor Rath in *Der blaue Engel*, he is an emasculator, transforming the mannish vamp Hanna into a real, happy woman. The role of the ineffectual, unmanly man falls to Paul's self-deprecating rival, the Viennese composer and musician Alexander Rudnitzky (played by Paul Hörbiger), who is unhappily married and would like to divorce his wife and marry Hanna, even though he — unlike Rath in *Der blaue Engel* — knows that Hanna does not, and cannot, truly love him. The film's implicit message is that a transformation like the one Hanna undergoes can be achieved only by a real man, someone like Paul, and it is for that reason that Hanna, by the end of the movie, would happily trade almost anything for just one hour with him. "Just one hour of happiness is a reward for all my pain," Hanna declares.¹¹ Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and war makes the man manlier. The film suggests that it is not just Hanna Holberg but Germany itself that is saved from the crisis of lovelessness by the appearance of a military hero. In one key scene, just before a bombing raid, Hanna and Paul stare out at the darkened city of Berlin, and when Hanna declares that the world is beautiful in spite of all danger, Paul responds that the world is beautiful *because* of danger.

Zarah Leander was born Zarah Stina Hedberg in Sweden in 1907 and came to German-speaking Europe in the mid-1930s. Her first big musical stage hit occurred in Vienna in 1936, and it was immediately followed by stage and screen appearances in the German Reich, including two 1937 films by Detlef Sierck (aka Douglas Sirk), *La Habanera* and *Zu neuen Ufern*, in both of which Leander, as in *Die große Liebe*, played a fiercely independent woman who comes to accept the sometimes difficult realities of life. Leander essentially filled the role that Marlene Dietrich had

¹¹ Regel, "Zur Topographie des NS-Films," 17.

left unoccupied in German film and musical life after she left the country in 1930, shortly after making *Der blaue Engel*. Leander became, as Guido Knopp has written, “the diva of the Third Reich.”¹² She played the sexually and emotionally powerful woman full of talent who is capable of breaking men’s hearts, but unlike Marlene Dietrich’s Lola Lola in *Der blaue Engel*, Leander’s figures are ultimately tamed by reality, and by male power. The typical woman played by Leander was beautiful but also dangerous and possibly threatening; Leander’s low voice and unusual height signaled the extent of that threat, as well as her acquisition of some of the attributes of male power. It is partly because of her sexual ambiguity — her low voice, height, and dominating personality — that Zarah Leander continues to this day to be an icon of German gay male culture: indeed, “the most important gay icon Germany has ever known” (Alice Kuzniar), in much the way that Judy Garland is an icon of American gay male culture.¹³ Judy Garland, however, is an icon because of her vulnerability, which is marked as quintessentially feminine, whereas Zarah Leander is an icon because of her apparent strength, which is sexually marked as possibly masculine. Zarah Leander, in other words, raises the specter of cross-dressing and gender confusion, while Judy Garland does not. Both Marlene Dietrich and Zarah Leander were women with attributes of conventionally constructed masculinity, whereas Judy Garland was a woman with only attributes constructed as feminine. It would be an interesting study in comparative gay culture to analyze the differences between the worship of these two rather different female divas in Germany and the United States. Such a study might possibly hint at slightly different constructions of homosexuality or queerness in the two countries.

The hint of manliness exuded by Zarah Leander as Hanna Holberg is confirmed by an anecdote about the movie’s making that did not become public until long after the end of the Nazi era. For one of her major production numbers — a final song about the miracle of love — Zarah Leander needed chorus girls as tall as she was. Since not enough tall women could be found for this purpose, members of the SS, the elite Nazi paramilitary guard, were used, dressed up as chorus girls. Wolfgang Preiss, who played the role of Etzdorf in the movie, recalls how he once got a chuckle at the expense of the cross-dressing Nazis:

I was completely unknown as an actor. One day, when I was dressed as an *Oberstleutnant* (wing-commander), I walked past the extras’ changing-room, and the SS men were there, dressing up in their costumes. Some devil got into me and I bawled: “Atten-*shun!*” They all stood strictly to attention just as they were, in women’s dresses,

¹² Knopp, *Hitler’s Women*, 209.

¹³ Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema*, 57.

wigs askew, half made-up or in their underwear — it was a grotesque scene. I then said, as naturally as I could: “All right, men. Carry on!” but inside I was killing myself with laughter.¹⁴

The struggle between Hanna and Paul goes through various stages during the course of the film, but its ultimate outcome is prefigured on the evening of their first meeting. Although Hanna resists Paul’s advances, he is so insistent, and so charming that her resistance gradually begins to weaken. Paul, accompanied by the puppy Putzi — the theater’s concierge insists on giving it back to him — follows Hanna into a streetcar, where he stares down another of Hanna’s male admirers, who immediately knows better than to mess with a man like Paul. When Hanna tells Paul that she does not like puppies, he informs her that Putzi is “boundlessly unhappy” as a result of the lady’s coldness. Paul follows Hanna to an apartment that he believes is hers, and when she asks who has invited him there, he replies that it is the lady of the house, whom he has just had the pleasure of meeting. As it turns out, this is not Hanna’s apartment, as Paul thinks, but rather the apartment of friends of hers who are throwing a party that she is attending, more out of duty than pleasure. Like the intrepid hero he is, Paul bravely soldiers on, walking right into the party with Hanna. No one at the party quite knows what he is doing there, but when he has a moment alone with Hanna, he declares his love to her, and she begins to weaken. It is just at that moment that Hanna is drawn away by a telephone call from another male admirer, Alexander Rudnitzky. Rudnitzky offers to pick Hanna up and take her back home, saving her from a party that she had told him would likely be tedious. Hanna replies that the party is just beginning to get interesting, and she returns to Paul, only to find him sound asleep. She leaves in a feminine huff.

It is at this point that the puppy Putzi saves the day, and the romance, by waking Paul up in the nick of time. He manages to catch up with Hanna and follow her back to her home, where he brazenly declares that he is a prophet, and that she will invite him into her house that evening. Hanna, of course, replies that she will never do this, but Paul knows better. At that very moment the air raid siren sounds. The city of Berlin is under attack — as Paul, with his Luftwaffe intuition, had already realized — and everyone now has to get to the closest air raid shelter as fast as possible. So of course Paul is right: Hanna really does now have to invite him into her house. They leave the puppy Putzi in her apartment, since dogs are not allowed in air raid shelters; Putzi thus gives Paul a convenient reason for returning to Hanna’s apartment after the all-clear has sounded, just as he gives Hanna a convenient reason for letting Paul

¹⁴ Knopp, *Hitler’s Women*, 253–54. I have corrected “walked passed” in the original to “walked past.”

come into her apartment. The soon-to-be lovers go down to the air raid shelter in the building's basement, carrying with them some genuine coffee given to Hanna's female assistant by yet another of Hanna's many male admirers, the acrobat Alfred. (Alfred is another echo of *Der blaue Engel*, since Lola Lola had ultimately betrayed Rath by taking up with a circus strong man. Of course, Alfred poses no threat whatsoever to Paul Wendlandt.) In the air raid shelter, Paul manages to charm all of Hanna's neighbors, helping to make what could otherwise be a terrifying experience — sitting in a basement while the city above is being bombed — into an exciting evening full of fun and games. The scene in the air raid shelter is another of the film's key depictions of the *Volkgemeinschaft*, and here it is not Hanna but Paul who performs, providing a model of coolness and good humor that is infectious to the rest of the denizens of the air raid shelter. In essence this scene teaches Germans how best to endure a bombing raid: to treat it as an opportunity for strengthening the community, for adventure, and for romance. It also cements Paul's and Hanna's interest in each other, since Hanna is able to see the paternal, caring qualities of Paul as he plays with a young boy, while Paul is able to see the motherly, nurturing side of Hanna.¹⁵ As Paul and Hanna play a game with the little boy in the air raid shelter, their happiness and contentment together suggest the future happiness that the couple will enjoy with their own children.¹⁶ When the all-clear sounds and Hanna and Paul are able to return to her apartment, they find that Putzi, no doubt terrified by the sound of the bombs, has knocked over bottles and caused a mess. Hanna puts her hand on the doorknob, opening the door to let Paul out, but he covers her hand with his and closes the door. The close-up on Paul's hand covering Hanna's demonstrates visually that all other distractions have disappeared, and that the only thing that matters now is the love between man and woman. There is a moment of sexual electricity between Paul and Hanna, and in the background we hear nondiegetic string music and see clouds and the sky. The Luftwaffe pilot Paul has metaphorically taken Hanna on a trip to heaven, a trip that is visually connected to his literal trips through the skies. War and love, far from being opposites, contribute to each other.¹⁷ The dark clouds of Hanna and Paul's night of love glide

¹⁵ See O'Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment*, 142.

¹⁶ Andress, "Verschoben, aber nicht aufgehoben," 365.

¹⁷ According to Joseph Goebbels's diary of 23 May 1942, the high command of the Wehrmacht complained about this depiction of a Wehrmacht officer engaging in premarital fornication; Goebbels responded in his diary: "In contrast to that, Göring rightly thinks that any fighter pilot who wouldn't take advantage of such an opportunity is simply not a fighter pilot. Göring makes fun of the prudishness of the high command." Cited in Andress, "Verschoben, aber nicht aufgehoben," 373n47.

visually into the lighter clouds of Paul's trip back to the front. Of course, Hanna does not yet know that Paul is a fighter pilot, and over the course of the movie she will have to learn both who he is, and who she needs to become in order to be his wife.

The intricacies of this plot may be silly, but they are also important, because they teach the audience of *Die große Liebe* a key lesson about the opportunities for romance and adventure that are offered — only — by war. The air raid on Berlin ultimately brings Paul and Hanna together, and without it the two might well have gone their separate ways. Paul himself is a Luftwaffe pilot, and of course his job is to do to other, enemy cities what Germany's enemies do to Berlin in the film's air raid scene (although unsurprisingly the film shows no real damage). As Mary-Elizabeth O'Brien has pointed out, the first major bombing raid on a German city, which destroyed large parts of Cologne on May 31, 1942, occurred less than two weeks before the premiere of *Die große Liebe*.¹⁸ One of the major ideological missions of *Die große Liebe* was to make the air war seem acceptable, even fun.

The entire romance of this movie is made possible courtesy of the Luftwaffe. Hanna's job throughout the rest of the movie will be to learn precisely what it means to be the lover and then the wife, of a Luftwaffe officer. Over the course of the movie she will sing three more songs: "Davon geht die Welt nicht unter," "Blaue Husaren" (Blue Hussars), and "Ich weiß, es wird einmal ein Wunder gescheh'n" (I Know Someday a Miracle Will Happen). Each of these songs reflects key plot elements of the movie and also the message that the movie sends to the German population watching the film. "Davon geht die Welt nicht unter" teaches a lesson about pluck and determination, and it shows Wehrmacht soldiers responding to the cheerful enthusiasm of a beautiful woman, thus demonstrating the necessity of solidarity between male and female, and soldier and civilian. "Blaue Husaren" is full of admiration for the fine looks of military men, teaching Hanna and other German women a lesson about soldierly masculinity and its erotic allures; it's all right, the song gently suggests, to like a man in uniform. And "Ich weiß, es wird einmal ein Wunder gescheh'n" expresses Hanna's firm belief that miracles really can happen, and that true love will triumph even, or especially, in the midst of war. As she sings her final song, the movie's most popular hit, Hanna's transformation from vamp to Madonna becomes visually complete. In contrast to the provocative low-cut black dress she had worn at the beginning of the movie, she now wears a virginally white dress, and her figure is transfigured by heavenly light; in the background angelic voices croon. Hanna's tears show the depth of her feeling, but the song

¹⁸ O'Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment*, 134.

also reveals the strength of her determination.¹⁹ In fact, it is war that makes miracles possible in the first place, since it makes heroism possible; Paul, after all, could not be the hero that Hanna loves without a war in which to prove his mettle. This is why Hanna cannot know at the beginning of the movie that Paul is a Luftwaffe officer: her process of coming to recognize and love him is a process of coming to recognize and love what he stands for. Hanna, in other words, must learn that the man she loves is not just any man but rather a war hero. Hanna's final song comes up in the movie at precisely the moment when the German army, unbeknownst to Hanna, is preparing the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union, in June of 1941, one of the key turning points of the war — and of the movie. Here the personal fate of Hanna and Paul, and the fate of the German Reich, are completely intertwined. The planned invasion takes Paul away from Hanna once again and causes a final temper tantrum on Hanna's part and what seems like her ultimate break with Paul. Hanna resolves to make do with the musician and composer Alexander Rudnitzky, who has finally succeeded in getting his wife to divorce him. But this is a half-hearted affair. Rudnitzky is affectionate and talented, but he is hardly a youthful hero and certainly not the kind of man capable of invading the Soviet Union by air, or of taking Hanna to romantic heaven. Hanna's ultimate, and inevitable return to Paul is precipitated by an injury that Paul sustains — not terribly serious, but sufficient to remind her that heroes are always in danger, that they are always putting their lives on the line, and that her true place is and must be with the man she loves. But she cannot be with her man reliably unless she gives up her glamorous, peripatetic lifestyle, marries Paul, and becomes a traditional housewife. As both Helmut Regel and Mary-Elisabeth O'Brien have noted, Paul's injury occurs during his breakup with Hanna, suggesting that if woman and man, and civilian and soldier, had remained united in solidarity, the Russians would never have had a chance to shoot down Paul's plane.²⁰ Moreover, the fact that Paul's comrade Etzdorf, who has no steady lover and prefers to flit from woman to woman, is shot down and killed by the Russians, shows that a soldier needs his wife just as much as she needs him. Each has a role to play in the creation of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. It is Paul who will now have to perform as a warrior, while Hanna's role as wife will be to watch and wait. Hanna's role as a member of the national audience is prefigured in a scene that shows her watching newsreel footage of Luftwaffe fighters earlier in the movie, a scene that initially disorients the film's viewers, since the camera

¹⁹ Regel, "Zur Topographie des NS-Films," 17.

²⁰ Regel, "Zur Topographie des NS-Films," 18. O'Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment*, 142.

first shows the fighters themselves, as if they were part of the film's plot, and as if one of them were Paul himself, only to pull back later to reveal that the Luftwaffe fighters are in fact on a movie screen.²¹ Ultimately, the union between man and woman, performer and audience, guarantees the unity of the German *Volksgemeinschaft*, a unity that makes the *Volk* victorious. In this scene Hanna begins to understand that her own individual lover Paul is part of a much larger national story involving thousands of individual heroes. When Hanna and Paul come together at the end of the movie, their union is accompanied by the music to the song "Ich weiß, es wird einmal ein Wunder gescheh'n," and by the visual image of German fighter planes heading toward the Soviet Union. Paul and Hanna raise their heads to observe the planes together. The miracle that will occur, by implication, is not just the union of man and woman, hero and heroine, but also the miracle of victory over a powerful enemy.²² That victory is assured as long as man and woman, military and civilians, and performer and audience, remain united.

If the glamorous Hanna Holberg, a famous star with a successful career, is happily willing to give up her independence and autonomy in order to be the wife of a Luftwaffe hero, and if she sees this fate as nothing short of miraculous, then by implication the wives of other German soldiers, whether officers or enlisted men, should happily put up with their fate, a fate depicted as far preferable to a life without commitment, heroism, or real love. It is true that army life interferes with a planned, orderly domestic existence. And it is true that the demands of the army take precedence over the demands of married life. But for Hanna the only alternatives are Alexander Rudnitzky, an unmanly and ageing composer, and the acrobat Alfred, who, although strong, does not combine physical with mental potency in the way that Paul does. The film suggests, in other words, that the only real men are in the military. And although Hanna is surrounded by men, before she meets Paul she lives in a world without eroticism, since all the men she knows are somehow unmanly — perhaps like the SS cross-dressers dancing on stage with her in her final stage number about miracles. It is not until Paul enters her life that she meets a real man, and her love for him becomes all-consuming. The more this real man is called away, the more his value in her life increases, for two reasons: she is forced to confront the boring sameness of the men in her ordinary life; and Paul's heroism, and therefore sexual attractiveness, increases with each dangerous mission. As Helmut Regel has pointed out, Hanna's transformation from vamp to Madonna is really not a transformation at all. What has actually occurred is that Hanna's real

²¹ Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, 299–300.

²² See Andress, "Verschoben, aber nicht aufgehoben," 366 and Cornelia Zumkeller, *Zarah Leander: Ihre Filme — ihr Leben* (Munich: Heyne, 1988), 127–28.

motherly essence, which had been there all along, however hidden, has been revealed to her and to the movie's viewers.²³

Die große Liebe suggests that participation in the great adventure of war, either as a soldier or as the wife or lover of a soldier, is the ultimate in glamour, far surpassing any role on stage or screen. And it also suggests that the Third Reich, via the glamour of war, has overcome the gender uncertainties and castration complex of the Weimar Republic. Professor Rath has been replaced by Paul Wendlandt, and Lola Lola has been replaced by the obedient lover and wife Hanna Holberg. The war that makes heroism and glamour possible may well pose difficulties for the individual, but in the end it ennobles him or her. And a sense of humor and some waltz music, as well as true love, make it possible for individuals to overcome even the greatest difficulties. They can, in fact, perform miracles.

²³ Regel, "Zur Topographie des NS-Films," 18.

Part Four: German Cinema at the Zero Hour 1945–1949

12: German Cinema at the Zero Hour 1945–1949: Historical Overview

THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR and its immediate aftermath are frequently referred to in German culture as a Zero Hour to signal the fact that by 1945 Germany had reached a historical nadir. The country's major cities had been destroyed in Allied air raids, and many cities like Dresden, Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, and Nuremberg were little more than massive piles of rubble. For this reason much of the literature of the immediate postwar period, which dealt with Germany's devastation in a relatively realistic way, was disparagingly referred to by its critics as *Trümmerliteratur* (rubble literature), just as many of the first postwar German films, which likewise focused on the problems of Germans trying to dig themselves out of the literal and metaphorical rubble, were referred to as *Trümmerfilme* (rubble films).

In 1945 the victorious Allies — led by the United States and the Soviet Union, which had defeated Germany in concert with each other — declared that the German Reich had ceased to exist and that, as a result, they reserved all political authority in Germany for themselves. The eastern parts of the Reich were separated from Germany and given to its neighbors: East Prussia became part of Russia, while eastern Pomerania and Silesia became part of Poland, whose borders moved significantly to the west as Poland lost a chunk of its former territory to the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia regained the Sudetenland, which Hitler had annexed in 1938. Austria, whose annexation by the Reich in the same year had been celebrated by Hitler as the fulfillment of his patriotic dreams, regained its existence as a separate state. In and around 1945, over twelve million ethnic Germans fled west to Germany from the country's lost eastern territories. These eastern refugees were to have a significant impact on the nation's economic, political, and cultural life in the coming years. As had been agreed upon by Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill at the Yalta Conference in February of 1945, what was left of Germany was divided into four zones of occupation, one for each of the four major Allied powers: the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and France. From 1945 to 1949, Germany did not exist as a sovereign legal entity; "Germany" was nothing more than these four occupation zones, each with its own regulations and laws. In each occupation zone ultimate political authority rested with the occupying Allied power, not with German officials. After four

years of this four-part division, the three western zones — those occupied by the United States, Great Britain, and France — came together to form a new German state, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) on May 23, 1949, when West Germany's *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law) went into effect. Several months later, on October 7 of the same year, the Soviet occupation zone became a new German state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The division of Germany into two states, the FRG in the west and the GDR in the east, was to last for over four decades, until October 3, 1990, when the territory of the GDR finally became part of the FRG and Germany was reunited.

The division of the nation's capital, Berlin, mirrored the division of Germany itself. Like the nation as a whole, Berlin was divided into four occupation sectors: Soviet, American, British, and French. Since Berlin was entirely surrounded by the Soviet zone of occupation, it became subject to Soviet pressure in the cold war that developed shortly after the end of the "hot" war, as the United States and the Soviet Union jockeyed for power in postwar Europe. In 1948, Soviet authorities blocked all land and water routes into the western half of Berlin; in response, the western powers organized the Berlin Airlift, in which many of the necessities West Berliners needed — as well as other key items, such as western media and films — were flown in on British, American, and French planes. It was only after the end of the Berlin blockade in May of 1949 that it became possible for the West German zones of occupation to declare themselves a new state. The creation of the GDR in the Soviet zone was largely a response to the creation of the FRG in the western zones.

In retrospect, the division of Germany and the enlistment of the two Germanys in the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States came to seem inevitable. However, it is important to remember that the situation in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was far more fluid than was the situation that emerged after 1949 and the creation of the two German states. Particularly in 1945 and 1946, it was not clear that Germany was going to be divided into two, or even that the cold war would definitively pit the victorious Allies of the Second World War against each other. For most of this period, many Germans of all political persuasions hoped and believed in the ultimate unification of their country.

The invasion of Germany and its division into four occupation zones had an immediate impact on the film industry. When the Allies marched into the country, they banned all German work on cinema, though this ban was gradually lifted over the course of the next year and a half. Whereas prior to 1945, German film production had been centered in Babelsberg, a suburb of Potsdam near Berlin that fell into the Soviet zone of occupation at war's end, after 1945 such centralization was impossible, at least in the western zones. Major film production centers emerged in

the American zone in Munich, and in the British zone in Hamburg. Ufa, the major film conglomerate that had dominated German film production and distribution throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, was slated for disbanding in conformity with the Allies' stated policy of eliminating the industrial cartels that had played such a major role in German economic life during the years of the Third Reich. Film studios continued to exist in Babelsberg, but they were no longer the center of film production in Germany as a whole; rather, they became the center of film production in the Soviet zone, and it was in Babelsberg, near the destroyed capital Berlin, that the first signs of life emerged for postwar German cinema. That emergence occurred with surprising rapidity, given the devastation of the country and of the infrastructure for the production and distribution of film. The first postwar German feature film, Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (The Murderers Are among Us) began production in March of 1946 at the Althoff studio in Babelsberg — which had not belonged to the Ufa conglomerate — and had its premiere on October 15 of the same year, not quite a year and a half after the official end of the war and less than two years after the bizarre premiere of the Nazi war epic *Kolberg* on January 30, 1945.

Two months before the opening of Staudte's film, Erich Pommer, the great Weimar-era film producer who had emigrated to the United States and then returned to Germany after the war to help with the reconstruction of the film industry in the American zone, visited the ruined city of Berlin, the center of the German film industry from the 1920s to the 1940s, and wrote back to his family in California: "The first impressions I got of this utterly destroyed town and its inhabitants were so dreadful that, despite all efforts, I could not put them down on paper. Whatever you may have seen in the newsreels gives you only a feeble impression of the real extent of the destruction of Berlin."¹ In the midst of this destruction, movie theaters often provided ordinary people a few hours' shelter from the cold and a chance to think about something other than their day-to-day concerns for survival. In a report to one of his associates, Pommer commented ironically on the difficulties facing him in his attempts to revive German cinema: "Rebuild the German film industry. Open motion picture theatres. Keep them supplied with films. And keep those blacklists handy. No Nazis. Well, the only trouble was that the industry, especially its most important center, Berlin, was almost completely destroyed. And the only Germans able to do the rebuilding were," Pommer believed, former Nazis or Nazi collaborators.² Pommer, working primarily in Munich,

¹ Ursula Hardt, *From Caligari to California: Eric Pommer's Life in the International Film Wars* (Providence: Berghahn, 1996), 176. In spite of the book's title, the generally accepted spelling for Pommer's first name is Erich.

² Hardt, *From Caligari to California*, 177.

was faced with the problem of creating a new center for the German film industry in the American zone. His counterparts in the Soviet zone were in the less difficult position of helping to recreate a German film industry where one had already existed: in Berlin and Babelsberg. The Soviet-controlled parts of Germany had 75 percent of Germany's film studios, and they also happened to be the home of Agfa, the German film industry's main producer of raw film stock.³

From the very beginning Soviet authorities took an interest in influencing all forms of German culture, including literature and film. In spite of the brutality of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union and the behavior of German soldiers and uniformed Nazis in the territories they had occupied, some Soviet officers also demonstrated notable respect for German cultural traditions. Major Alexander Dymshitz, for instance, a Soviet military officer largely responsible for cultural policy in the Soviet zone during the immediate postwar period, was a trained specialist in German literature who greatly admired the German classical tradition. Along with German communists who had spent the years of the war in the Soviet Union, Dymshitz sought a democratic socialist transformation in German culture that would, he and other communists hoped, make good on the promises of German humanism.⁴ This dream was reflected as early as 1945 in the creation of the Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands (Cultural Federation for the Democratic Renewal of Germany), whose stated goal was to achieve a transformation of the German spirit. The head of the Kulturbund was Johannes R. Becher, a German communist writer who had spent the years of the Third Reich in Soviet exile and who was later to become the first minister of culture of the GDR. Becher declared at the inaugural meeting of the Kulturbund in July of 1945:

In the political and moral attitude of our people we must now give clear, strong, convincing, shining expression to this rich heritage of humanism, of classicism, to the rich heritage of the workers' movement. Our classicism never corresponded to a classical politics. On the contrary, in our political actions we always acted against our best traditions. We were never able to find a political expression that corresponded to those high cultural achievements. We must now get beyond this unholy contradiction between intellect and power,

³ Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 15.

⁴ See Peter Davies, "Johannes R. Becher and the Agony of Responsibility, 1945–1949," *German Life and Letters* 53, no. 2 (April 2000): 243–60; Alexander Stephan, "Johannes R. Becher and the Cultural Development of the GDR," *New German Critique*, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 72–89; and Klaus Ziermann, ed., *Alexander Dymshitz: Wissenschaftler, Soldat, Internationalist* (Berlin: Henschel, 1977).

which has led to the worst catastrophe in our history, and which ultimately even destroyed any free intellectual activity.⁵

Communist leaders like Becher believed that by creating a new socialist, democratic Germany, they were fulfilling the greatest hopes of the German classicists, achieving, what Faust had longed for at the end of Goethe's eponymous play: "Such teeming throngs I long to see, / and to stand in freedom, with the people free."⁶ Invoking the legacy of Germany's best cultural traditions, they hoped to enlist even bourgeois skeptics to their cause.

Soviet leaders and German communists believed that film could play a key role in the democratic-socialist reeducation and transformation of Germany. Soviet authorities took an interest in German film from the very beginning, even before the end of the war itself. In late April of 1945, the Soviet commander of Berlin, Colonel Nikolai Bersarin, allowed theaters and cinemas to reopen. During the month of May, employees of the Tobis sound studio in Berlin-Johannisthal began the work of trying to reconstruct their ruined studios, and by June of 1945, sound synchronization for a number of Soviet films began, including the documentary *Berlin* — about the Soviet capture of the city — which premiered in July.⁷ Another film dubbed into German under Soviet authorization in the summer of 1945 was Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*; Wolfgang Staudte, a director who had remained in Germany during the years of the Third Reich, supervised the dubbing.

By August 25, 1945, the Central Administration for Public Education, led by Paul Wandel — who, like so many of the new German leaders in the Soviet zone, had spent the years of the Third Reich in Soviet exile, and who was later to become the GDR's first Minister of Education — was created. One of its departments dealt with film production. At the end of October, the Soviet Military Administration (SMAD) took official control of all

⁵ Johannes R. Becher, "Auferstehen?" in Becher, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 16, *Publizistik 2, 1939–1945* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1978), 454–62; here, 461. Unless otherwise noted, translations from German-language sources are my own.

⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Part Two, trans. Philip Wayne, Great Books of the Western World 45 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1996), 63–162; here, 155 (translation modified). Original German: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie zweiter Teil* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980), 207 (lines 11579–80). See Becher's invocation of this line from Goethe in Becher, "Aus: Der Befreier," in *Goethe im Urteil seiner Kritiker: Dokumente zur Wirkungsgeschichte Goethes in Deutschland Teil IV 1918–1982*, ed. Karl Robert Mandelkow (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1984), 318–32.

⁷ Christiane Mückenberger, "Zeit der Hoffnungen: 1946 bis 1949," in *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg: DEFA-Spielfilme 1946–1992*, ed. Ralf Schenk (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), 8–49; here, 9–10.

the assets of Ufa, Tobis, and other film companies in the Soviet zone. On November 22, 1945, an important meeting of various cultural functionaries interested in the creation of a new German film industry took place at Berlin's Hotel Adlon, not far from the Brandenburg Gate. The *Filmaktiv*, a new film collective that took shape that day, was led by Paul Wandel, and it included among its members the director Wolfgang Staudte and the writers Günther Weisenborn and Friedrich Wolf; the latter, like Wandel, had spent the Third Reich years in Soviet exile. By January of 1946, the *Filmaktiv* took up residence in the former headquarters of Ufa in Berlin and was recognized officially as an organization by SMAD.

It took many months for all the legal formalities to be settled and money to be found, but the Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (German Film Corporation, or DEFA), which ultimately replaced Ufa in the Soviet zone, was officially founded in Babelsberg on May 17, 1946. DEFA was to be the East German film production company for over four decades. In fact, the first DEFA film, Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, which was to be the prototype for all *Triumferfilme*, had been in production for two weeks by the time that DEFA was officially founded. At the founding meeting of DEFA, Paul Wandel declared:

What is happening today is no small thing. When we gathered together months ago . . . in the ruins of the Hotel Adlon in order to discuss the future of German film, most of the people present . . . doubted whether there was any point to it at all. . . . Film today must give answers to all the life questions of our people.⁸

Of course, Wandel was asking a lot of film, but his declaration was also a testament to the strong belief that DEFA's leaders had in the potential power of film as a tool in the democratic transformation of Germany. Wandel declared that film gives people strength to go on living, and that it "proclaims the truth and shakes up the conscience."⁹ Both German filmmakers and Soviet officials were convinced that film could play a key role in reeducating the German people away from Nazism.

In spite of the fact that Germany was divided into four occupation zones and suffering from food shortages, there was much optimism in the nascent film industry, particularly in the eastern zone. One important director, Kurt Maetzig, a chemist who directed the first postwar German newsreels, and who became DEFA's artistic director in 1946, declared:

When I came in 1945, so much had been dammed up, there were so many plans, so many good intentions that we just had the feeling: now it's starting, now it's really about to happen. And for that reason the period after 1945 wasn't primarily a time of worries, of fears, of

⁸ Mückenberger, "Zeit der Hoffnungen: 1946 bis 1949," 14.

⁹ Mückenberger, "Zeit der Hoffnungen: 1946 bis 1949," 14.

problems, and of poverty for me, although it was all of that. Sometimes I just couldn't go on any more. I can still see myself sitting in the office of Klering [DEFA's artistic director], and one day I said to him: "Listen, I can't go on any more, see to it that I get a piece of butter, otherwise I won't be standing up again from this chair." And all of us worked . . . without pay back then, the whole *Filmaktiv*, there wasn't any money yet, but we still had to eat. It was a time of poverty, but even more than that it was a time of discoveries, of the beginning, so to speak, of a land of unlimited possibilities.¹⁰

In particular, there was a desire to create films that would somehow combat the deeply rooted problem of Nazism and reeducate a public used to Nazism. Films were to be simultaneously entertaining and educational and moral. One of the most important early DEFA films was Erich Engel's *Affäre Blum* (The Blum Affair, 1948), which analyzed the everyday German antisemitism that had ultimately led, under the Nazis, to the murder of six million European Jews. Another key anti-Nazi film was Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten* (Marriage in the Shadows, 1947), which depicted the sad fate of an interethnic couple in the German entertainment industry during the Nazi period and was thus also an attempt by DEFA to come to terms with the film industry's own Nazi past. DEFA's idealists hoped that by making films like *Affäre Blum* and *Ehe im Schatten* they could educate the German people to more democracy and less racism. They hoped to get as far away as possible from Nazi films, which they saw as both racist and tending to ignore real political or social problems. One director, Werner Hochbaum, spoke out against "the sugar-coated operetta cake that was one of the privileges of the Nazi film factory . . . the distorted picture of social problems that was presented to us so often."¹¹ Instead, Hochbaum proclaimed: "We want to look things and people in the eye, and we should try to get to the bottom of our problems."¹² Sometimes this was done at the cost of film quality — the message was more important than the medium, content more important than form. Engel and Maetzig were representative of the personnel of DEFA in the immediate postwar period: leftists who had been active in the progressive entertainment industry of the Weimar Republic and survived the Third Reich in low-level jobs. Engel, who had directed the premiere of Bertolt Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera) in Berlin in 1928, remained active in the entertainment industry throughout the Third Reich, although his work was no longer as obviously political; Maetzig, whose mother was

¹⁰ Mückenberger, "Zeit der Hoffnungen: 1946 bis 1949," 11.

¹¹ Christiane Mückenberger and Günter Jordan, "Sie sehen selbst, Sie hören selbst . . ." *Eine Geschichte der DEFA von ihren Anfängen bis 1949* (Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1994), 14.

¹² Mückenberger and Jordan, "Sie sehen selbst, Sie hören selbst . . ." 14.

Jewish, and who was hence denied membership in the Nazi Reichsfilmkammer, had joined the underground Communist Party in 1944.

Starting in 1947, as the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union became increasingly hostile, the situation in the East German film industry also began to worsen. Up until the end of 1947, DEFA film was relatively free of government and party control. However, in the middle of November, 1947, DEFA became a Soviet-German company, with the Soviets owning 55 percent of the shares. At the same time, the Socialist Unity Party (SED — the party that resulted from the forced unification of the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party in the Soviet zone and that became the ruling party of the GDR) created a film commission, frequently called the DEFA Commission, and DEFA was required to submit all scripts and films to the commission for approval. DEFA was required to carry out the political will of the party in both its film productions and its personnel decisions. Thus, by 1948, DEFA had come more directly under the control of both the SMAD and the SED. They began to interfere in film more frequently, and more intensively, insisting on positive endings with unambiguous, optimistic political messages.¹³

The SED had stated in 1946 that Germany could follow its own path to socialism, independent of developments elsewhere in the socialist world, even in the Soviet Union. By 1948, however, the SED had transformed itself into a “party of a new sort” and proclaimed that Germany must follow the purportedly shining example of the Soviet Union. The party proclaimed in October that “feature films should be imbued with the progressive and optimistic spirit of the human being of the new sort, they should, indirectly, serve political and economic enlightenment and thereby the goals of the two-year plan.”¹⁴ This hardening of the party line signaled a general Stalinization inside the Soviet zone. For the party, art was to play a role in awakening people’s *Arbeitsfreude* (joy in work).¹⁵ Nevertheless, many of the DEFA films made between 1945 and 1949, during the period of the Zero Hour, were of high quality — films like Wolfgang Staudte’s *Die Mörder sind unter uns* and *Rotation* (1949), Maetzig’s *Ehe im Schatten*, or Engel’s *Affäre Blum*. Occasionally these DEFA films had problems being distributed in the other occupation zones, but their quality and power was generally recognized even by their critics.¹⁶

¹³ Mückenberger, “Zeit der Hoffnungen: 1946 bis 1949,” 24–26.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Gersch, “Film in der DDR: Die verlorene Alternative,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 357–404; here, 363.

¹⁵ Mückenberger and Jordan, “Sie sehen selbst, Sie hören selbst . . .” 192.

¹⁶ On distribution difficulties, see Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), 15.

The situation in the western zones during the Zero Hour was significantly different, as Erich Pommer noted with concern in a letter to one of his associates. In the east, Pommer wrote, “they have assembled every branch of the film industry in one interlocking organization. Raw stock manufacture, film production and distribution are monopolies. . . . They have built a powerful industry along the lines of the old Ufa,” an industry, Pommer warned, that could easily destroy the western film industry if intra-German borders ever fell.¹⁷ Whereas film in the Soviet zone remained centralized with DEFA, film in the west was radically decentralized, with competing production facilities, particularly in Munich and Hamburg. Whereas Soviet authorities focused from the very beginning on the creation of an indigenous German film industry, American officials — prompted by the American film industry — initially placed their emphasis on the importation of American films to the German audience; they were less interested in indigenous German productions. For the American film industry, the military defeat of Germany provided a golden opportunity to strike a blow against one of its major foreign competitors of the 1920s and 1930s. One prominent representative of the American film industry declared in an interview with the *New York Times* in 1947 that “Nazi propaganda poison so deeply pervaded the whole German mentality . . . that extreme measures must be taken to provide the necessary mental catharsis.” He believed that Germans “should be fed heavy doses of all pictures except those of their own making.”¹⁸ The avowed political interests of the American film industry thus neatly corresponded with self-serving economic ones.

The extent to which the economic and political interests of the American film industry coincided is illustrated by remarks made by Spyros Skouras, head of 20th Century Fox, eight years after the end of the war:

It is a solemn responsibility of our industry to increase motion picture outlets throughout the free world because it has been shown that no medium can play a greater part than the motion picture in indoctrinating people into the free way of life and instilling in them a compelling desire for freedom and hope for a brighter future. Therefore, we as an industry can play an infinitely important part in the worldwide ideological struggle for the minds of men and confound the Communist propagandists.¹⁹

¹⁶ On distribution difficulties, see Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), 15.

¹⁷ Hardt, *From Caligari to California*, 171.

¹⁸ Hardt, *From Caligari to California*, 182. See also Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995), 64.

¹⁹ Cited in Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969), 125. Original interview in *Variety*, January 28, 1953.

This statement neatly combined business with idealism, since exporting American movies to foreign countries could be portrayed as not just good for Hollywood's pocketbook but good for democracy.

American officials were just as interested as Soviet officials in the reeducation of the German public, but they had different means of going about it. In part, differing American and Soviet perspectives on the Germans can be attributed to different ideas of what had caused fascism. For the Soviets, fascism was simply an extreme form of capitalism, whereas for the Americans it was a German peculiarity. In contrast to the American film industry, U.S. military officials were not intent on economically harming the German film industry, but they worked toward decentralization and de-Nazification. In 1945 an American film officer argued that "film production is inextricably wound up with the future generation of the German people."²⁰ Two years later, in 1947, American occupation authorities declared that U.S. propaganda policy should bring the Germans "to understand and accept the program of the American occupation forces."²¹ The U.S. government and the U.S. film industry often disagreed with each other about the future of German cinema. On a trip to the United States in late 1945, General Robert A. McClure, the head of the army's Psychological Warfare Division and thus in charge of media and propaganda in the American zone, complained that Hollywood was trying to "utilize the military occupation to establish an exclusive position for American films and American distribution machinery."²² Whereas U.S. officials wanted Hollywood to provide more high-quality films to the German market, the American film industry, in spite of its idealistic statements, was reluctant to do so as long as the German currency was weak and there was no profit to be made. One military government official complained that "the real difficulty in getting more motion picture houses opened lay in the short supply of films."²³ In fact, the American film industry held back many of its most recent hit films until after the West German currency reform of 1948, when it became possible actually to make money in Germany again. In 1948, as a way of encouraging Hollywood to release more films to Germany, the United States Congress decided to promote American film in Germany and elsewhere with government funds in an Informational Media Guarantee

¹⁹ Cited in Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969), 125. Original interview in *Variety*, January 28, 1953.

²⁰ Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany*, 58.

²¹ Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company 1918–1945*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 370.

²² Cited in Guback, *The International Film Industry*, 130.

²³ Cited in Guback, *The International Film Industry*, 129.

Program that would guarantee profits for Hollywood.²⁴ By 1951 over two hundred American films were being released annually in the western zones, although on the whole, German audiences still preferred to see German rather than American films.²⁵ Meanwhile, American studio executives were highly critical of Pommer's efforts to rebuild the German film industry, and in fact, they made efforts to have him relieved from his position as America's film czar in Germany.

A significant contrast between early DEFA film and film in the western zones was that while DEFA films were often made by communists and leftists who had not prospered in Germany under the Nazis, in the western zones many of the same directors who had made Nazi films ultimately became active in the creation of postwar West German cinema. In the west, a director like Veit Harlan, who had directed both *Kolberg* and the infamous antisemitic propaganda film *Jud Süß*, was able to direct another ten films after the end of the war. Wolfgang Liebeneiner, who had directed the pro-euthanasia propaganda film *Ich klage an* (I Accuse) in 1941, was able, in 1949, to direct a film called *Liebe 47* (Love 47), an adaptation of Wolfgang Borchert's popular postwar play *Draußen vor der Tür* (The Man Outside, 1947); this rubble film, created at a studio in Göttingen, opened in March of 1949. Of course, DEFA cinema also featured many professionals who had been active in Ufa during the Third Reich, and in fact Wolfgang Zeller, who composed the music for the anti-Nazi, antiracist film *Ehe im Schatten* in 1947 had also composed the music for *Jud Süß* seven years earlier.²⁶ However, such personnel continuities were far more widespread and egregious in the west than in the east. One American officer recognized the extent of continuity between postwar cinema and the cinema of the Nazi years when he warned that it would be a mistake to believe "that German filmmakers who stayed in Germany will come up with movie ideas overnight that are not influenced, colored, or shaped by the nightmare of the past twelve years. The Germans are having a hard time learning the new grammar of democracy in their everyday lives. Can we really expect them to grasp instantly the democratic syntax of film the minute we issue them a license?"²⁷

In general, one can characterize the contrast between film in the east and film in the west during the years of the Zero Hour as a contrast between the hope for a democratic new beginning in the east, in the context of a centralized film industry, on the one hand, and on the other an

²⁴ Guback, *The International Film Industry*, 132.

²⁵ Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, 10; and Heide Fehrenbach, "Persistent Myths of Americanization: German Reconstruction and the Renationalization of Postwar Cinema, 1945–1965," in *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan*, ed. Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 81–108; here, 95.

²⁶ Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 14.

²⁷ Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story*, 373.

initial radical decline in filmmaking followed by a continuation of previous filmic traditions in the west — without centralization. As an example of the contrasting situation in the western and eastern zones, the first western feature film made after the war in 1946 was Helmut Weiss's *Sag die Wahrheit* (Tell the Truth), a romantic comedy that had already been planned during the Third Reich; the conservative Catholic Film Service condemned it as “morally and artistically a false start.”²⁸ The first feature film in the east, by contrast, was Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, which appeared to widespread critical acclaim. The first new German film to be created and shown in the American zone was Josef von Baky's tear-jerker *Und über uns der Himmel* (And above Us the Sky, 1947), whose message is communicated in the final words of the movie's title song — “for above us the sky / will not let us fall” — and reaffirmed by the final words of the film's primary character: “Somehow there's always a way.” Harald Braun's rubble film *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (Between Yesterday and Tomorrow, American zone, 1947) was a postwar reprise of the grand hotel theme of movies like *Der letzte Mann*, since it takes place in a partially destroyed Munich hotel.²⁹ The film ends, typically, with one of the characters' proclamation: “We have to go on living, don't we? There's no other alternative.”

Until German filmmakers in the western zones could start making films of their own, older German films as well as films from other countries were shown in cinemas. In the year after the end of the war, American authorities also tried showing Germans documentaries about Germany's wartime atrocities, such as *KZ* (Concentration Camp, 1945) and *Die Todesmühlen* (The Death Mills, 1946). Germans were sometimes lured to these movies under fall pretenses, thinking they were going to see an entertainment film, and they were sometimes required to see them in order to validate their ration cards. The emigrant director Billy Wilder, working for the army's Office of War Information, traveled with Davidson Taylor to one German city to witness a screening of *KZ* in 1945, and Taylor reported that “when the title *KZ* came on the screen there was a gasp throughout the audience.”³⁰ After the end of the movie, Taylor remembered, “all of the audience except three women who looked rather ill waited for the cowboy film. They were much disappointed when the manager announced that was all.”³¹ Unsurprisingly, German civilians did

²⁸ Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler, eds. *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 583.

²⁹ Robert R. Shandley, *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001), 64.

³⁰ Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman, eds., *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), 59.

³¹ Haggith and Newman, eds., *Holocaust and the Moving Image*, 60.

not always appreciate such efforts.³² Once film started being made in the west, the major products were not radical critiques of German antisemitism, like Engel's *Affäre Blum*, but rather uplifting *Trümmerfilme* that tended to portray ordinary Germans not as criminals but as victims, and that offered hope for a cheerful, ideology-free new beginning. Such films celebrated renewal and rebuilding, and the ultimate triumph of human courage, but they did not ask hard questions about what had made the catastrophe of Hitler's Third Reich possible, or about German complicity in crimes against humanity. Helmut Käutner's first postwar movie, *In jenen Tagen* (In Those Days, British zone, 1947), told various stories about recent German history from the perspective of an abandoned Volkswagen automobile that, naturally enough, was incapable of admitting any guilt or responsibility. The film affirmed the indestructible nature of positive humanity, and its final image was one of flowers blooming in the midst of rubble.³³ The main character in Robert Stemmle's 1948 *Berliner Ballade* (Berlin Ballad) conveys the reassuring message that in spite of all adversity Otto Normalverbraucher (Otto the normal consumer) will not give up the ghost; he is literally resurrected during his own burial at the "Graveyard of the Resurrection." Significantly, all of these directors — Weiss, Baky, Braun, Käutner, and Stemmle — had also directed films in the Nazi period. Prior to making *Und über uns der Himmel* in 1947, Baky had directed the Nazi blockbuster *Münchhausen* in 1943. The post-war film even had the same star as *Münchhausen*: Hans Albers. In many of these *Trümmerfilme* the rebuilding of Germany is celebrated, but the reasons for its destruction are never explored. As Chris Marker, a critic for the distinguished French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, observed in 1951 about the difference between films made in the east and in the west: "Touched by war and defeat in similar ways, production in the east tries, sometimes too sweepingly, to identify political causes and exact responsibilities, while production in the west accuses fate, the Kaiser, Wotan, Mephisto, Adam, and the good lord himself."³⁴

In both the east and the west, the films of the immediate postwar period, the Zero Hour, remain underexplored. Although the Zero Hour was a relatively short period in the history of German film, it set the stage for later directions in both East German and West German film. And in both east and west, the films produced between 1945 and 1949 clearly show many of the preoccupations of Germans in the aftermath of the devastating war and the Hitler dictatorship.

³² See Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany*, 56–58.

³³ See the critique of Käutner's film in Shandley, *Rubble Films*, 61–63.

³⁴ Cited in Fritz Göttler, "Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm: Land der Väter," in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 167–206; here, 172. Original in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, July-August, 1951.



Susanne Wallner and Hans Mertens. Courtesy of the DEFA-Stiftung.

13: *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946): The Rubble Film

Director: Wolfgang Staudte

Cinematographers: Friedl Behn-Grund and Eugen Klagemann

Screenplay: Wolfgang Staudte

Producer: Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) (Herbert Uhlich)

Editor: Hans Heinrich

Production Design: Otto Hunte and Bruno Monden

Costume Design: Gertraude Recke

Music: Ernst Roters

Soundtrack: Klaus Jungk

German Release Date: [Berlin and Soviet Zone] October 15, 1946

Actors: Hildegarde Knef (Susanne Wallner); Ernst Wilhelm Borchert (Dr. Hans Mertens); Robert Forsch (Gustav Mondschein); Albert Johannes (Bartolomäus Timm); Arno Paulsen (Ferdinand Brückner); Erna Sellmer (Frau Elise Brückner); Christian Blackwood (Otto Brückner); Elly Burgmer (mother of the sick girl)

GIVEN THE DIFFICULT CONDITIONS under which it was created, Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (The Murderers Are among Us), the first German feature film to be made after the end of the Second World War, is a remarkably accomplished film. The film was largely made at the Althoff Studio in Babelsberg, but parts of the film were made on location in the ruins of Berlin. Filming on location was a relatively unusual thing for German cinema, which had previously been known for careful studio work. The journalist Curt Riess later remembered the making of *Die Mörder sind unter uns* in the ruins of Berlin: "Ruins that are visible from a kilometer away. Shot-up machine guns are still lying around, steel helmets, bombed-out tanks." Berlin was, Riess wrote, "a world in ruins, but lit according to all the rules of film technology," and in the midst of this ruined landscape Wolfgang Staudte and his crew were suddenly making a movie: "Lights! Camera! Action! The spotlights light up, the clapper board snaps shut, and now the most terrible thing happens, suddenly the dead stone desert comes alive. Suddenly people emerge from the ruins, people who have been living here since the end of the war," people who want to know "why they can't be left in peace."¹

¹ Malte Ludin, *Wolfgang Staudte* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1996). Unless otherwise noted, translations from German-language sources are my own.

Rubble films (*Trümmerfilme*) like *Die Mörder sind unter uns* in fact allowed many Germans their first glimpse of a radically transformed national capital, one starkly different from the bustling, prosperous metropolis of the mid-1920s and of Weimar film culture. Toward the beginning of the film, Staudte thematizes the contrast between conventional tourist perceptions of beautiful Germany and the reality of a destroyed nation in an ironic tracking shot that moves from the rubble of Berlin to a tourist poster advertising the charms of old-time Germany.² Staudte assembled a formidable crew, including Otto Hunte, the set designer who had worked with Fritz Lang on such masterpieces as *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*. Hunte created a brooding, dark set that, along with the lighting for *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, helped create an Expressionist effect that harked back to the great German films of the Weimar Republic. Friedl Behn-Grund, an accomplished Ufa cinematographer who had worked on such Nazi-era feature films as Wolfgang Liebeneiner's *Ich klage an*, worked together with Eugen Klagemann to provide beautiful camera work characterized by stark lighting contrasts and fluid, dramatic traveling shots. Behn-Grund had lost his leg at the end of the war, and Hildegard Knef, the movie's female star, remembered that during the filming of the movie's first scene, which takes place on a railroad platform, he "limped across the plowed-up platform spreading sweetness and light, squeezed in behind the antique camera wiping away the tears which rolled down his rosy cherub's cheeks and furtively massaged his stump, which had not yet healed and still caused him great pain under the crude wooden peg attached to it."³

The film's cinematography drew particular praise from critics. Writing in West Berlin's *Tagespiegel*, Friedrich Luft commented on Staudte and Behn-Grund's "very strong sensitivity to optical possibilities."⁴ Knef, who plays the heroine Susanne Wallner, was to be one of the most prominent and popular German film actresses of the immediate postwar period, exuding both strength and beauty and becoming the quintessential cinematic *Trümmerfrau* (rubble woman) — the German word for the many women employed at war's end in the job of clearing away the rubble of the country's destroyed cities. (One of the film's street shots shows precisely such a line of rubble women at work.) The strength and courage of these women was to become something of a founding myth in the postwar German national imagination, and Knef's Susanne Wallner embodies all

² Jaimey Fisher, "Wandering in/to the Rubble-Film: Filmic Flânerie and the Exploded Panorama after 1945," *The German Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 461–80; here, 468.

³ Frederick W. Ott, *The Great German Films* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1986), 24–241.

⁴ Egon Netenjakob et al., *Staudte* (Berlin: Volker Spiess, 1991), 174.

the determination and pluck that Germans projected onto these women who were trying literally to pick up the pieces of their lives, to reestablish social order in a world suddenly bereft of men, and also to give hope and courage to the German men who did manage to make it home from the war. Four decades after the end of the Second World War, West German president Richard von Weizsäcker was to invoke the vaunted accomplishments of these women when, in a famous speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the war's end, he declared: "At the end of the war, without the prospect of a secure future, they were the first to get back to work and place one stone upon the other, the rubble women in Berlin and everywhere."⁵

In many ways *Die Mörder sind unter uns* is an homage to the great Expressionist tradition in German cinema, a tradition largely broken off in 1933 when the Nazis — who condemned Expressionism as "degenerate art" — came to power. Staudte's homage to Expressionism is also a stylistic proclamation that the Nazi period has come to an end not just politically but also artistically. A great many of the most important scenes in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* hark back to key moments in Expressionist cinema. The scene in which gossipy neighbors discuss the purportedly scandalous fact that Dr. Hans Mertens, the film's reluctant hero (played by Ernst Wilhelm Borchert), is cohabiting with Susanne Wallner, recalls a similar scene of vindictive neighborhood gossip in F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* — although Staudte does not break the image into a montage of gossiping female mouths, as Murnau had.⁶ In the climactic scene of *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, the shadow of Dr. Mertens completely covers up the figure of the villain Ferdinand Brückner, a German war criminal, recalling the Expressionist play of shadow and light in films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, *Der letzte Mann*, *Metropolis*, *M*, and *Der blaue Engel*. Moreover, the end of *Die Mörder sind unter uns* recalls the end of Lang's *M*, in which the serial killer Beckert, played by Peter Lorre, is captured and threatened with death by a vengeful mob, only to be rescued by the duly constituted legal authorities led by inspector Lohmann. In Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, the mass-murderer Brückner, who had ordered the killing of scores of Polish civilians on Christmas Eve a few years earlier during the war, is hunted down and almost killed by his former subordinate Hans Mertens, only to be rescued in the nick of

⁵ Richard von Weizsäcker, "Der 8. Mai 1945 — Vierzig Jahre danach," in Weizsäcker, *Brücken zur Verständigung: Reden* (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1990), 31–46; here, 34.

⁶ For more on such scenes of surveillance by nosy neighbors, and on the movie's critique of Nazi-era denunciations of one's fellow citizens, see Robert Schechtman, "The Lives of Neighbors: Modes of Surveillance and Voyeurism in *Die Mörder sind unter uns*," *German Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (February 2009): 107–28.

time by the heroine Susanne, who urges Mertens to turn Brückner over to the appropriate legal authorities. Brückner's plaintive cries of "I am not guilty" resemble the similar cries of Beckert in *M.* Even Staudte's title is an homage to *M.*, which was originally to be called *Mörder unter uns* (Murderer[s] Among Us); according to Kracauer, Lang had changed the title only because he feared that it might be seen as an affront by the Nazis.⁷ Staudte chose the same title precisely as a gesture of affront to the Nazis: as a way of urging the German public to hold the Nazi criminals living among them accountable for their crimes.⁸ Toward the end of the Weimar Republic, Staudte had dubbed into German the voice of one of the characters in Lewis Milestone's great American antiwar classic *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930, itself based on Erich Maria Remarque's classic antiwar novel *Im Westen nichts Neues*, 1929), a film fiercely vilified and contested by the Nazis.⁹ Milestone's film had ended with a shot of the film's main characters marching into death and turning briefly to face the film's viewers against a background of crosses in a military cemetery; in yet another homage to the film culture of the Weimar era, Staudte chose a similar ending for *Die Mörder sind unter uns*. The film ends with pictures of presumably murdered civilians and a montage of crosses in a cemetery, reminding its viewers of the horrible waste of human life caused by Nazism and war.

Staudte had originally taken his film idea to western occupation authorities, but it proved too political for them. As he later recalled, he first went to the British, then to the French, and then to the Americans — "I wanted to make the film, and it didn't matter with whom."¹⁰ The American officer, Staudte remembered, told him: "In the next five years no films at all will be made in this country except by us."¹¹ Therefore, he approached the authorities in the Soviet zone. Staudte's original plan was to call the film *Der Mann, den ich töten werde* (The Man I'll Kill) and to have Hans Mertens actually kill the Nazi war criminal Brückner,

⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947), 218–19.

⁸ *Die Mörder sind unter uns* was also a title that Bertolt Brecht had considered for the work that ultimately became known as *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera). See Joachim Lucchesi, "Die Dreigroschenoper," in *Brecht Handbuch*, ed. Jan Knopf (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 1:197–215; here, 198.

⁹ See Andrew Kelly, *Filming All Quiet on the Western Front: "Brutal Cutting, Stupid Censors, Bigoted Politicos"* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 122; and Hubert Rüter, *Erich Maria Remarque Im Westen nichts Neues: Ein Bestseller der Kriegsliteratur im Kontext* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1980), 27.

¹⁰ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 133.

¹¹ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 133.

who is now living a quiet, comfortable life as an industrialist and paterfamilias in postwar Berlin. The Soviet officer to whom Staudte submitted his script feared that such an ending might incite Germans to vigilante justice against the Nazis among them; at his insistence, Staudte therefore agreed to change the ending, concluding his film with an exchange between Susanne and Hans to the effect that although “we” do not have the right to pass judgment, “we” do have the duty to raise accusations in the name of the millions of the Nazis’ victims.¹² These millions of victims are also explicitly mentioned in a newspaper that lies on the murderer Brückner’s breakfast table one morning, announcing the fact that millions were gassed in Auschwitz; he ignores it and comfortably munches away. “And he savors his food, the bourgeois!” wrote the critic Werner Fiedler in his review of the film.¹³

As it happened, *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, which premiered in Germany on October 15, 1946, coincided neatly with the proclamation of the judgment in the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials against the major Nazi war criminals, a judgment that was handed down only two weeks earlier, on October 1; only a few hours after the film’s premiere, in the early morning hours of October 16 — the very day that Fiedler’s review of the film appeared — ten of the leading Nazi leaders were executed in accordance with the verdict of the International Military Tribunal. Staudte’s *Die Mörder sind unter uns* therefore precisely captured not only one of the major political and legal problems of the time — what to do with Nazi war criminals — but also reflected the fact that since Germans themselves had not overthrown the Nazis, they did not, at least in the first instance, have the power or the right to execute judgment themselves. That, after all, was why the Soviet officer had ordered Staudte to change the film’s ending. On May 4, 1945, four days before the German surrender to the Soviets, Wilhelm Pieck, the head of the German Communist Party, had publicly regretted the fact “that the German nation did not liberate itself from this band of murderers, but rather followed them to the very end and supported them in their war crimes.”¹⁴

Staudte was born in Saarbrücken in 1906 and became involved in the Weimar entertainment industry in the second half of the 1920s. He did not begin to direct his first short films until 1936, already under the Nazi dictatorship, and his first feature film, a circus movie entitled *Akrobat Schö-ö-ö-n* (Pretty Acrobat), came in 1943. Throughout the years of

¹² Peter Pleyer, *Deutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946–1948* (Münster: C. J. Fahle, 1965), 191.

¹³ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 176.

¹⁴ Christiane Mückenberger, “Zeit der Hoffnungen: 1946 bis 1949,” in *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg: DEFA-Spielfilme 1946–1992*, ed. Ralf Schenck (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), 8–49; here, 15.

the Third Reich, Staudte remained relatively unpolitical; he was neither part of the underground opposition nor an active National Socialist. Staudte actually played a minor role in Veit Harlan's antisemitic feature film *Jud Süß* (1940); in an uncredited role, he had also played one of the pupils in Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* ten years earlier. After the war, Staudte actively worked to rebuild the German film industry and even wrote a letter to the military commander of the Soviet occupation zone urging the centralization and reinvigoration of German film production, which, he argued, "will remain questionable for a long time to come" without Soviet help.¹⁵ Two years later, Staudte proclaimed that German filmmakers had only one trump in their hand: "the chance to begin again!" They could either produce cheap entertainment or, instead, "choose the laborious hike on the narrow paths of art's domain, bearing the burden of an inner accountability."¹⁶ Asked many years later what had moved him to create his most famous film, *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, Staudte claimed that it was partly a response to a nasty encounter he had with an SS officer in the last years of the war. "I slunk away and thought about what would happen when I found that guy again, because it was clear that it would all soon be over. I didn't catch him again, because he was dead."¹⁷ But Staudte also admitted that "during the Nazi period I was relatively inactive politically, concerned more with the question of how I was to survive personally."¹⁸ He acknowledged that "the fact of my existence, that I survived, became a call to duty for me, and I had something like a feeling of guilt, a feeling of guilt that I haven't lost to this day and that I'm still trying to deal with."¹⁹

The "feeling of guilt" that Staudte describes here is clearly apparent in his main character, Hans Mertens, the physician who returns to Berlin shell-shocked and cynical, having participated in a war and in crimes of which he is ashamed. Mertens is not himself a murderer, but he has failed to take action against the murder of Polish civilians ordered by his commanding officer Brückner, and he bears the guilt for the murder of

¹⁵ Wolfgang Staudte, "A Letter to the Central Military Commander of the Soviet Occupation Zone (October 9, 1945)," in *German Essays on Film*, ed. Richard W. McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pal (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 195–98; here, 197.

¹⁶ Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995), 209.

¹⁷ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 132.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Staudte and Albert Wilkening, "Künstler und politisches Bewußtsein: Gespräch zwischen Wolfgang Staudte und Albert Wilkening," *Filmwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen* 7, no. 1 (1966) 113–20; here, 114.

¹⁹ Staudte and Wilkening, "Künstler und politisches Bewußtsein," 114.

innocent women and children to which he considers himself at least partly an accessory. This guilt has robbed Mertens of any peace of mind, and he lives in a slough of despond, drinks too much, and no longer practices his profession as a doctor. Jaimey Fisher has pointed out that in his haunting by the memory of past crimes Mertens resembles the murderer Beckert in Lang's *M*: "Just as in *M*, Beckert fought the voices in his head that the city evoked, *Mörder's* Mertens hears the voices of the past that the city similarly summons."²⁰ According to Fisher, Mertens is a postwar version of the Weimar flaneur, wandering aimlessly through a ruined city whose exterior rubble reflects the chaos of his psyche. Mertens no longer wishes to cure people, since he has seen the worst that people are capable of, and he no longer has any interest in curing himself. He has become cynical and bitter. He spends his free time drinking, playing cards, and associating with showgirls vaguely reminiscent of the low-brow cultural milieu of Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel*. In fact, one scene shows Mertens having to push a lamp out of the way at the nightclub almost as Professor Unrath had had to push a fish net out of the way in order to enter the Blue Angel; the same scene features a clown who recalls the clown in *Der blaue Engel*.

Mertens's female counterpart is Susanne Wallner, a concentration-camp survivor who returns to Berlin, and to her former apartment, only to find Mertens living in it. *Die Mörder sind unter uns* tells the story of Wallner and Mertens's gradually blossoming relationship, a story of male reluctance and bitterness slowly overcome by the energy of female optimism and hard work. If *Der blaue Engel* had recounted the fate of a formerly uptight man who married a loose woman, and if the Nazi war film *Die große Liebe* had narrated a heroic man's overcoming of a former vamp, then *Die Mörder sind unter uns* tells the story of a virtuous woman who is capable of transforming a cynical, demoralized man. This is an archetypal constellation in the German culture of the immediate postwar period, from literature to film. Arrayed on the one side are all the forces that urge the resumption of normal, everyday life, including the embedding of the German Zero Hour into a continuous flow of ordinary quotidian time. Arrayed on the other side are the forces that fight against such a resumption, arguing that everyday life now stands revealed as deeply problematic and immoral, and that there can be no normality in a world whose horror is so obvious. From Wolfgang Borchert's famous postwar play *Draußen vor der Tür* (The Man Outside, 1947) and Harald Braun's film *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (Between Yesterday and Tomorrow, 1947) to Heinrich Böll's novel *Und sagte kein einziges Wort* (And Never Said a Word, 1953), a great many literary, theatrical, and filmic works wrestled with

²⁰ Fisher, "Wandering in/to the Rubble-Film," 472.

this fundamental opposition and conflict. Frequently, but not always, the force of everyday life and optimism is embodied in a female figure, like Staudte's Susanne Wallner, while the force that seeks to arrest the flow of ordinary time is conceived of as male, like Staudte's Hans Mertens. In most of the films of the period, including Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, it is the female force of optimism and hard work that ultimately triumphs over the male force of cynicism and resignation. As Georg Seeßlen ironically notes about such films, they basically turn the story of Sleeping Beauty on its head, because in them it is the woman who kisses the man back to life rather than vice versa: "Remorseful and resigned men, men who had become tired and who were even bowed down with shame, had only to be lightly kissed by one of these girls . . . and already they had awoken from the exhaustion of their self-doubt, had forgotten the guilt they had piled upon themselves in this war . . . and went about creating the German economic miracle."²¹ This constellation is profoundly representative of a nation in which so many men had died or been taken prisoner, and in which so much of the task of national rebuilding had fallen to women.²²

Susanne's desire to resume an everyday life is evident from the very beginning of the movie. Her return home is purposeful and quick; unlike Mertens, she does not pause to dilly-dally on the way. Susanne's desire for normality becomes even more evident in the powerful scene where she cleans up the apartment that she and Mertens now share with each other. Out of the messy apartment where he has been living, with its broken window symbolizing the intrusion of historical chaos into the private sphere, she quickly and efficiently creates a home closed off from the rubble outside. She sweeps the floor, cleans the surfaces, cooks a meal. All of these ordering tasks are both literal and metaphorical, since the chaotic apartment also reflects Mertens's chaotic psyche. When Mertens returns home, far from being happy about the intrusion of female beauty and graciousness, as well as cleanliness and order into his life, he goes into a rage and tells Susanne not to interfere. The X-ray images that Susanne ultimately uses to stop up the window of the apartment are symbols of the depth of Mertens's relentless examination of the human spirit, as well as of Susanne's determination to move on and

²¹ Cited in Fritz Göttler, "Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm: Land der Väter," in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 167–206; here, 182–83.

²² See Erica Carter, "Sweeping up the Past: Gender and History in the Post-war German 'Rubble Film,'" in *Heroines without Heroes: Reconstructing Female and National Identities in European Cinema 1945–51*, ed. Ulrike Sieglohr (New York: Cassell, 2000), 91–110.

to be practical. Other scenes reinforce the same point — particularly the scene in which Mertens and Brückner, while wandering through the ruined streets of Berlin, encounter a mother desperate to save the life of her little daughter. Mertens has the power but not the desire to save the child; here too it is the female will to live that calls him back to normality. Mertens becomes a reluctant hero at the mother's urging, which, as Jaimey Fisher has suggested, calls him "back to the domestic constellation of conventionally paternal man, maternal woman, and compliant child."²³ Ultimately the female drive toward life triumphs over Mertens's cynical reluctance, and the child is saved.

The ruins of Berlin are themselves part of the movie's set, providing a threatening, dark background to the slow resumption of everyday life. Just as Expressionist film sets involved jagged lines and weird angles — angles that were not just literal but also metaphorical, representing the disturbances of the human psyche — so too the ruins of Berlin hover over and seem to engulf the figures in the film. Werner Fiedler wrote:

The camera bores into the ruins, it creates frighteningly beautiful landscapes of ruins. It bores into the destroyed lives of human beings, creates magnificently dark landscapes of the soul. The elements in the film are not light and shadow, but rather shadow, whose oppressive blackness is only deepened by the few hesitant, weak lights. Huge shadows again and again destroy any possible glimmer of hope.²⁴

Against this formidable background of shadow and ruin, Susanne Wallner's determination to survive and persevere become even more heroic. In a landscape of ruined people and ruined buildings, she is a person who has remained both physically and psychologically intact. Although she has purportedly survived a concentration camp — viewers never learn exactly why she was in a camp — she is a beautiful young woman with an unblemished face and body. Viewers' sympathies naturally gravitate to her, not to the cynical Mertens. In this respect *Die Mörder sind unter uns* breaks from many of its Expressionist Weimar models. Whereas the center of consciousness in those films — from Francis in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* to Immanuel Rath in *Der blaue Engel* — had generally been with male figures, however problematic, the center of consciousness in this film is Susanne Wallner. It is through her eyes that viewers see both the city and Hans Mertens. And it is ultimately she who teaches Hans Mertens to see. Thus, at the end of the film, when Hans Mertens's shadow virtually

²³ Fisher, "Wandering in/to the Rubble-Film," 461–80; here, 477.

²⁴ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 176.

blots out the figure of Brückner, she intervenes, and the next image is of Brückner encased not in Expressionist shadow but behind the bars of a prison cell. Susanne Wallner has taught Hans Mertens to see the world anew — not with the cynical, desperate eyes of German Expressionism, but rather with new, optimistic eyes capable of seeing a better postwar future.

Of course, there are different kinds of optimism, as the subplot that involves Herr Mondschein and Herr Timm clearly demonstrates. Herr Timm, a quack fortune teller, is a distant echo of threatening Weimar figures like Dr. Caligari. Instead of dispensing doom and gloom, however, he dispenses cheap optimism — for a price. Herr Mondschein is a poor old shopkeeper — possibly Jewish, although this is not made explicit — whose son has disappeared in the war, and who desperately longs for his son's return. Timm tells Mondschein precisely what he wants to hear: that his son is alive and will soon return. In the end, Timm dies just before a letter arrives announcing that his son really is alive. It was Timm's hope for his son that had kept him alive; as he tells Susanne in one early scene, it is possible to forget the horrible past and move on in life if one has something worthwhile to live for. This subplot affirms the value of selflessness and love but cautions the film's viewers against false optimism and its purveyors, urging them toward a realistic determination to continue with normal life. The figure of Brückner is also a cautionary tale against the dangers of optimism and normality at all costs. Brückner would like to continue with ordinary life as well, and when viewers first see him, he is enjoying a quiet bourgeois meal with his family. He seems to be an ordinary, pleasant man. Only later in the film do viewers learn the truth: Brückner is a murderer and a war criminal. This figure, and his moral culpability, demonstrate that ordinary life and optimistic normality have their drawbacks, since they can lead to the denial of Nazi crimes and legal impunity for Nazi criminals. Both Timm and Brückner wear glasses that symbolize their inability to see clearly. The solution to the dilemma posed by Hans Mertens, on the one hand, with his all-too-piercing X-ray vision resulting in cynical bitterness, and Timm and Brückner on the other, with their lack of vision, cheap optimism, and normality, is provided by Susanne Wallner: realistic optimism, coupled with a determination to face up to the past.

For the most part, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* was greeted with positive reviews. The film suggested to some critics a powerful return for an aesthetically ambitious and ethically aware German cinema. On the day of the film's premiere, Walter Lennig wrote in the *Berliner Zeitung*: "This film has been created with such exemplary élan that almost in a single leap it has made contact with the great German films of the past, which had garnered worldwide acclaim for German cinema." For Lennig, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* was "German reality, a reality belonging to us all,

an agonizing journey through the darkened landscape of our souls!”²⁵ In a review published the day after the film’s premiere, Friedrich Luft praised Staudte for daring “the leap into the new German film” and stated: “As of yesterday we have a German feature film again.”²⁶ Luft admitted that “it’s hard to find the new form for the new film,” and that “this first effort is characterized by all the heaviness of the new beginning.”²⁷ In a review published the following day in East Berlin’s Christian Democratic newspaper *Neue Zeit*, Werner Fiedler agreed on the difficulty of the task Staudte had taken on: “He doesn’t avoid anything, he doesn’t make it easy for himself, and he doesn’t take paths that have already been taken. He makes no concessions to the taste of a public oriented toward entertainment. He takes his task with too much seriousness for that, a task that comes to him in making the first German antifascist film: to give a reckoning, to wake people up, to clean up, to get rid of psychological rubble and above all to document the new German attitude.”²⁸

Not all viewers and critics were convinced of the film’s excellence, however. The *New York Times* criticized Ernst Wilhelm Borchert’s Hans Mertens and called the film itself “a confused and rambling study of disillusionment in post-war Germany.” It complained that Staudte was interested merely “in camera effects” and had “no feeling for characterization.”²⁹ Howard Barnes of New York’s *Herald Tribune*, meanwhile, called the film “a dull amalgam” that was “full of indignation and scant filmic sense,” but he acknowledged that it had “fine acting . . . and a deal of sincerity.” In contrast to the judgment of the *Times*, Barnes called Borchert “particularly convincing as the man in white” but complained that Staudte’s script did “not match the performing.”³⁰

The most damning criticism of the film came from the young German writer Wolfdietrich Schnurre, who argued that, far from presenting clear ethical alternatives, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* was ethically and morally confusing, since it did not give Germans a coherent message about what they should do with any Nazi war criminals they encountered. The most important part of the film, Schnurre complained, “the punishment of

²⁵ Walter Lennig, “Ein Film der deutschen Wirklichkeit: Zur Uraufführung des Defa-Films ‘Die Mörder sind unter uns,’” in Eva Orbanz, ed., *Zur Retrospektive: Wolfgang Staudte* (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1974), 57–58; here, 57.

²⁶ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 173.

²⁷ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 176.

²⁸ Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 176–77.

²⁹ T.M.P. (Thomas M. Pryor), “The Screen: Film From Germany,” *New York Times*, 17 August 1948, 19.

³⁰ Howard Barnes, “On the Screen,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 August 1948, 13.

the murderer Brückner,” disappeared into symbolism; morality was overwhelmed by artistic excellence.³¹ Far from clearly addressing the problem of collective guilt, Schnurre contended, Staudte had obfuscated it, laying all blame on a single figure. “The murderers are among us?” he asked rhetorically. “We are the murderers. Even Dr. Mertens, who twice wants to make himself into an instrument of judgment in the film, is the murderer. Because he allowed the bloodbath on Christmas Eve to happen. He clicked his heals in resignation when he saw that his objection didn’t bear fruit. He did what we all did: he surrendered to violence.”³²

In spite of Schnurre’s criticisms, it must be acknowledged that Staudte presents a picture of German guilt that goes significantly beyond that of even many literary documents of the period. He clearly addresses the issue of the German military’s crimes against civilian populations — an issue that is controversial even to this day — and also makes his male protagonist, Hans Mertens, a party to that guilt. After all, it is precisely the murder of these innocent civilians — a murder that he failed to stop but did not participate in directly — that prevents Mertens from achieving peace throughout most of the movie. Such a depiction can be contrasted to that of Wolfgang Borchert in *Draußen vor der Tür* (and that of Wolfgang Liebeneiner in the 1949 film based on Borchert’s play, *Liebe 47*), where German soldiers are presented not as murderers but as victims. Like Mertens, the main character of that play is also tormented by guilt — not for murdered foreign civilians, who are never mentioned, but for fallen German military comrades.³³

With *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, German cinema had announced its return to world screens. Staudte’s film could be favorably compared to the contemporary world cinema, including the Italian neorealism of directors like Roberto Rossellini, who, in 1947, also filmed a movie in

³¹ Thomas Brandlmeier, “Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme,” in *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946–1962*, ed. Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schobert (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1989), 32–59; here, 39.

³² Netenjakob et al., *Staudte*, 27. “Die Mörder sind unter uns?”

³³ The emphasis on the murders of non-German civilians separates *Die Mörder sind unter uns* from many other rubble films, and hence I take issue with Daniela Berghahn’s contention that “the suffering of the real victims is typically marginalized in most rubble films, and *Die Mörder sind unter uns* is no exception.” See Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 70. Berghahn does not seem sure of herself here, since she also notes (p. 67): “Of all the rubble films, Staudte’s *Die Mörder sind unter uns* is the most explicit in appropriating guilt not only for the crimes and atrocities committed by the Germans during the war but also for their tacit acceptance of the presence of murderers in their midst.”

the ruins of Berlin, *Germania anno zero* (Germany, Year Zero) — a film that was partly responsible for the designation of the immediate post-war period in Germany as a Zero Hour. For the Bulgarian writer Angel Wagenstein, Staudte's film was proof of the existence of a non-Nazi Germany: “Back then, when it was so difficult to overcome the skepticism and anger that we felt toward the Germans, and toward Germany — then came Staudte. For me he was the first ambassador,” Wagenstein remembered, “who through his film renewed our faith in a nation capable of self-reflection, of looking into the mirror and acknowledging its own guilt, of making a confession that very few nations would be able to make.”³⁴ *Die Mörder sind unter uns* has even been called a kind of German Western. Robert Shandley has suggested that its pictures of empty, ruined streets and “rubble canyons” resemble the pictures of empty streets and dramatic showdowns in American westerns.³⁵ Finally, with *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, DEFA had announced its preeminence in postwar German film, stealing a march on the West German film industry. Nothing that the latter was able to produce in the immediate postwar period could compare to Staudte's film.

It was, therefore, a sad irony when Staudte decided, in 1955, to leave DEFA and work in West Germany, where he ultimately wound up in television. In both the east and the west, Staudte was considered politically unreliable, and his 1951 DEFA interpretation of Heinrich Mann's classic novel *Der Untertan* (The Kaiser's Lackey) was actually banned in the west for several years. In the words of the influential West German film critic Enno Patalas, Staudte's case “was a chain reaction of missed opportunities, political stupidities, and authoritarian arrogance on both sides of the ‘Iron Curtain.’”³⁶ Staudte made two highly critical West German films in 1959 and 1960 — *Rosen für den Staatsanwalt* (Roses for the District Attorney) and *Kirmes* (The Fair) — both of which thematized the persistence of Nazis and Nazi mentalities in contemporary West Germany. Because of his critical attitude, Staudte was marginalized in the west, and even when a younger generation of more radical filmmakers emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, they did not, for the most part, seek him out. However, the filmmaker Alexander Kluge, a major force in the renaissance of West German cinema in the 1960s, declared that Staudte's problems were

³⁴ Cited in Uschi and Andreas Schmidt-Lenhard, eds., *Courage und Eigensinn: Zum 100. Geburtstag von Wolfgang Staudte* (St. Ingbert: Röhrlig, 2006), 22–23.

³⁵ Robert R. Shandley, *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001), 26. The second chapter of Shandley's book is called “Coming Home through Rubble Canyons: *The Murderers Are among Us* and Generic Convention,” 25–46.

³⁶ Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany*, 204.

themselves “a result of the faulty system governing the film industry.”³⁷ In the midst of a West German popular culture characterized frequently by the obfuscation of German history and German crimes, Staudte was an anomaly. The filmmaker Christian Ziewer was later to assert that no other country had, like Germany, “robbed itself of its own tradition, no country has in this manner destroyed its own film history because of the burden of its past.”³⁸ In the midst of this destruction, Ziewer believed, Staudte stood out as a beacon of hope, becoming, he contended, one of the most important German postwar directors. “Here was someone,” Ziewer argued, “who after the end of the Third Reich refused to resign himself to forgetting . . . who posed incisive questions about the past and present and thereby hoped to influence the future.”³⁹ Because of this, Staudte was accused of dirtying his own nest. In 1964, almost two decades after making *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, Staudte charged that “the murderers are still among us, strolling out of prison cells, receiving Federal Crosses of Merit, and being placed on ministerial seats.”⁴⁰ It was time, he declared, to clean up the “dirt in our nest,” i.e., eliminate the remaining vestiges of Nazism in the German film industry.

³⁷ Alexander Kluge, “What Do the ‘Oberhauseners’ Want?” in *German Essays on Film*, ed. McCormick and Guenther-Pal, 203–6; here, 204.

³⁸ Christian Ziewer, “Last Words for Wolfgang Staudte,” in *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 118–20; here, 119.

³⁹ Ziewer, “Last Words for Wolfgang Staudte,” 118.

⁴⁰ Wolfgang Staudte, “A Reflection: Befouling Our Own Nest?” in McCormick and Guenther-Pal, eds., *German Essays on Film*, 206–8; here, 207.

Part Five: Postwar East German Cinema 1949–1989

14: Postwar East German Cinema 1949–1989: Historical Overview

FOR THE FOUR DECADES OF SEPARATION between the two German states, the cinema of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) remained relatively unknown in West Germany and in the rest of the western world. Whereas some East German literature — novels by Christa Wolf and plays by Heiner Müller, for instance — became popular in the west, East German cinema was a largely unknown quantity. Books by East German writers were relatively easy to distribute in West Germany, but film requires a complex and expensive distribution system, and in western capitalist countries that distribution system is oriented toward profit. Therefore, there was little interest among western distributors in showing East German films prior to the reunification of Germany. This situation changed dramatically after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic, when interest in the GDR and its history skyrocketed and mechanisms were set up for the distribution of films from a country that no longer existed. Historians began to explore the cinema of the GDR as an important resource in understanding the history of the socialist German state, and with freer access to archives in Potsdam and Berlin it became possible for scholars to work on projects involving East German film history that would previously have been quashed or impeded by East German authorities. Moreover, the collapse of the Socialist Unity Party's power in 1989–90 made it possible to release many previously banned films, some of which were met with great interest on the part of the movie-going public.

A case in point were the banned East German films of the mid-1960s. These films had disappeared in the aftermath of the eleventh plenum of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), which took place in December of 1965. Following that meeting of party leaders with cultural figures, almost an entire year's worth of films — twelve in all — were banned. In 1990 it became possible to see those films again; they were screened first at the Academy of Arts and then at the Berlin International Film Festival¹ in February of that year. Frank Beyer's *Spur der Steine* (Trace of Stones, 1966), which featured the popular actor Manfred Krug in a leading role, became a hit in Berlin and elsewhere. After 1990

¹ Often referred to using the short form “Berlinale.”

East German films also found a distributor in the United States — Icestorm International — and since the middle of the 1990s it has been possible for Americans and others with an interest in East German cinema to view not only many of the banned films of 1965–66, but also much of the corpus of East German cinema from 1946 to 1992. Ironically, it is now easier to access East German films than West German films in the United States. About seventy-five films are available for purchase as DVDs in the United States, about twenty-five more can be purchased as VHS tapes, and even more films can be borrowed in the original film format from the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts. Many American cities have hosted East German cinema festivals and series, most prominently at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Far from ushering in the end of interest in or scholarship on East German cinema, then, the GDR's collapse ultimately led to a major scholarly project of exploring and coming to terms with the cinematic legacy of the socialist German state. A similar project has been ongoing in other areas of GDR cultural and political history, as the former German Democratic Republic has been reassessed and reevaluated on the basis of new archival materials — including the vast archives of the former Stasi or state security apparatus — and from the perspective not of rivalry between two existing German states but of curiosity to learn about a no-longer-existing German state. Prior to 1989–90, explorations of GDR culture and GDR history risked being sucked into ongoing arguments between the two German states about their relative historical and ethical legitimacy. Although such arguments have by no means disappeared since 1990, they have become less politically volatile, since one of the primary state combatants in intra-German political squabbles of the cold war era — the GDR — has disappeared. Since 1990 it has been easier for scholars to explore East German history and East German culture for their own sake — and as part of German history as a whole — without having to declare allegiance to the one or the other of the two German states. The process of exploration is still ongoing, and it is likely that for many years to come historians and other scholars will continue to uncover fascinating aspects of East German cultural history, including the history of East German cinema.

GDR film history was characterized by significant shifts between liberalization and restrictiveness. Key dates in the history of the SED, the GDR's ruling party, and of the Soviet Communist party and the East Bloc more generally, also found their reflection in GDR film history. The death of Joseph Stalin in March of 1953, for instance, was followed by major protests against the socialist regime in Berlin and elsewhere in June of the same year; these protests, and GDR artists' and intellectuals' analysis of them, ultimately led to a liberalization of cultural policy in the mid-1950s. Nikita Khrushchev's February, 1956, Secret Speech about Stalin's crimes

at the twentieth congress of the Soviet communist party represented the high point of the general trend toward liberalization throughout the Soviet Bloc, but the Hungarian revolution in October and November of that year resulted in yet another crackdown. In 1958 a film conference organized by the GDR's Ministry of Culture reinforced that crackdown. The building of the Berlin Wall in August of 1961 paradoxically ushered in another period of liberalization in GDR cultural politics, but that liberalization was followed by a further crackdown after the eleventh plenum of the SED's Central Committee in December of 1965. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 further inhibited any liberalization in cultural policy. Erich Honecker assumed power in the GDR in 1971, making the much-ballyhooed promise that as long as artists and filmmakers proceeded from the standpoint of socialism, there would be no more taboos on cultural practice, but the expatriation of the critical East German poet and songwriter Wolf Biermann five years later, in 1976, signaled yet another cultural crackdown — one from which East German culture never truly recovered. One of the great problems for East German filmmakers was that, given the length of time it takes to work on a film from conception to screening — usually well over a year — it was possible for them to conceive and carry out a project in a period of liberalization that would prove unscreenable in a period of crackdown. To a large extent this is precisely what happened to the filmmakers whose works were banned in the wake of the eleventh plenum: they had begun making their films in the period of cultural thaw that followed the erection of the Berlin Wall, but those films were fated to be finished and submitted for official approval at a moment of renewed cultural-political crackdown. As Kurt Maetzig, one of the GDR's most respected filmmakers and the director of the banned film *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (The Rabbit is Me, 1965) declared publicly after his film was criticized: “I . . . believed I was firmly in line with the Party. It has only now become clear to me that I got out of line, and I don't even know if I've gotten to the bottom of it yet.”² Filmmakers could never be sure, when they began working on a film, exactly what kind of cultural climate might prevail on its completion.

Representatives of the GDR state demonstrated an interest in cultural life generally and film specifically that went well beyond the interest ordinarily demonstrated by political leaders in western democracies. This was not surprising, given the attention paid to cultural matters by the leaders of the Soviet Union, the GDR's primary international patron

² Günter Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag: Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965 — Studien und Dokumente*, second edition (Berlin: Aufbau, 2000), 307. Unless otherwise noted, translations from German-language sources are my own.

and role model. The founder of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, was often quoted as having proclaimed that film, because of its appeal to the broad masses, is the “most important of all arts” and Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union’s party leader in the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s, believed that film was a “powerful ideological weapon and an easy-to-understand method of education.”³ At the eleventh plenum of the SED’s central committee in December of 1965, the GDR’s party and state leaders spent four days discussing recent developments in East German culture, including film culture, and the SED’s leader, Walter Ulbricht, proclaimed that since films were a key method of education for youth, the party must not allow “a few artists and writers” to create whatever kind of art they wanted, thus negatively determining “the entire development of society.”⁴ Such a declaration by a leading politician about the potential political and social power of art would be hard to imagine in a western capitalist society (although even in the west there are occasional arguments about the purportedly negative impact of film, television, and music on young people). In the GDR, art generally, and film art specifically, were conceived not just as entertainment but as ways of shaping and molding an entire society. Hence, party leaders were keenly interested in artistic developments, sometimes seeking to encourage and at other times to hinder them. Whereas film in western capitalism tends to be seen primarily or even exclusively as a commodity intended to make a profit, film in East Germany was only secondarily expected to make a profit. Its primary goal was the ideological shaping of socialist society. In order to achieve that goal, it had to be both accessible to ordinary people (i.e., not too difficult to understand) and partisan in its support of socialist goals. Both Nikita Khrushchev and Walter Ulbricht were fond of proclaiming the necessity for all art to be both “connected to the people” and “aligned with the party.”⁵

Because of the secondary nature of the profit motive, East German cinema was quite different both from conventional western cinema and from the cinema of the Third Reich, which had also been focused primarily on entertainment and profit. Cinema in the GDR was often more cerebral, making more intellectual demands on its viewers; at its best, it showed complexities that had usually been lacking in Nazi cinema. Filmmakers and party leaders in the GDR often used the appearance of major films as an opportunity for entering into wide-ranging discussions about political and social developments more generally. This too differentiates the cinema of the GDR from the cinema of the Third

³ Cited in Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 46.

⁴ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 21.

⁵ See Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 44 and 313.

Reich. Whereas qualitative film critique had actually been banned by the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in 1936, in the GDR film criticism was encouraged and indeed practiced, not only by professional critics but also by party leaders themselves. Whereas cinema in the Third Reich was generally intended to close down or short-circuit debate, cinema in the GDR was often aimed at opening up debate. In a country that lacked a free and open public sphere, film specifically and the arts more generally sometimes became a forum for the discussion of fundamental social and political issues. This had, as the filmmaker and screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase remarked, “the effect of bestowing a greater importance on art. The lack of public discussion which increased over the years led the public to seek questions and answers in films and books or in the theatre.”⁶

GDR films were made by the DEFA studio, which had been founded in 1946, and whose primary material basis was the old Ufa studios of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. DEFA was organized into two primary segments, one of which specialized in feature films while the other specialized in documentary films. In addition, DEFA ultimately came to have dubbing and animation studios, and it made a wide variety of television movies. Within DEFA’s feature film production, children’s films played a particularly large role, and DEFA was justly famous for making excellent ones, some of which also managed to be distributed successfully in the west. In 1953, for instance, Wolfgang Staudte’s fairy-tale film *Die Geschichte vom kleinen Muck* (The Story of Little Muck) became hugely successful; it was ultimately seen by over twelve million viewers and is reported to have been the Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh’s favorite movie.⁷ DEFA also made excellent documentaries. Of particular interest to Americans and other westerners are Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann’s searing documentaries about the Vietnam War, made in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Heynowski and Scheumann traveled to North Vietnam, where they were given access to American prisoners of war; their documentaries revolve around interviews with Vietnamese fighters and with the American POWs on their motivations and reflections. In these films American fighter pilots, for instance, are asked by their interlocutors about what their motivations and feelings were while they dropped napalm on Vietnamese villages. These documentary films are valuable historical artifacts that illuminate a crucial period of American

⁶ Wolfgang Kohlhaase, “DEFA: A Personal View,” in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 117–30; here, 123.

⁷ Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 44.

history from an unusual perspective: the perspective of America's enemies and victims in the cold war, which all too frequently turned hot.⁸

Feature films, however, were by far the largest part of DEFA's work and budget, and in order to encourage friendly competition and productivity, DEFA, in the second half of the 1950s, set up a number of different production teams called *Künsterliche Arbeitsgruppen* (Artistic Working Groups). About seven hundred feature films were made between 1946 and 1992 — well below the over one thousand feature films made in Hitler's Third Reich in only twelve years — with typical annual production hovering around fifteen. Of course, films were subjected to state censorship, but in spite of the state's ultimate control, it did not usually intervene in a prominent public way. Because of the nature of film production in the GDR, it did not have to. Most problematic or controversial projects could be stopped long before they were actually produced, either through mechanisms of self-censorship among writers and filmmakers or through internal vetting by DEFA's party officials or its dramaturges. As Frank Beyer, one of the GDR's best filmmakers, declared in his autobiography, “the chief censor preferred not to appear at all, at least not in public, he preferred to delegate decisions to a lower level: in other words, Honecker delegated to the member of the Politburo in charge of culture, the member of the Politburo delegated to the head of the Cultural Section in the Central Committee, the head of this section to the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Culture delegated to the Deputy Minister of Culture, the Deputy to the director of the DEFA studio, the studio director to the chief dramaturge, the chief dramaturge to the head of the Artistic Working Group, the head of the Group to the director and the author. When censorship reached this level it was at its most effective. Once author and director no longer even tried to tell stories that broached taboos, censorship had become self-censorship.”⁹

From 1954 onward, the GDR state had a Hauptverwaltung Film (HV-Film, or Central Film Administration) whose job it was to supervise the DEFA studio and ensure a steady stream of high-quality but ideologically acceptable films that would appeal to a broad segment of the East German population. The government official in charge of the HV-Film was the Deputy Minister of Culture. However, in the East German state the government was subordinate to the ruling party, and therefore it was not the government but rather the SED that had ultimate authority. In

⁸ See Nora M. Alter, “Excessive Pre/Requisites: Vietnam through the East German Lens,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 35 (Winter 1996–97), 39–79; and Rüdiger Steinmetz, “Heynowski & Scheumann: The GDR's Leading Documentary Film Team,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 3 (August 2004): 366–78.

⁹ Cited in Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 136.

addition to the government officials whose job it was to supervise film production and distribution, the SED had its own apparatus for dealing with film. The party's Central Committee had an Abteilung Kultur: Sektor Film (Department of Culture: Film Section) that supervised the work of both the DEFA studio and the HV-Film. It occasionally happened that films approved by the HV-Film and the Deputy Minister of Culture were actually stopped by the party's film apparatus after production; this was the case with the banned films of 1965–66, when the party's Politburo itself, the ultimate source of political power, intervened to stop the distribution of a year's worth of films. In this instance, leading party bureaucrats even criticized their own party's primary film bureaucrat, Siegfried Wagner, who had dared to voice cautious doubts about the party's drastic intervention.¹⁰ Not only Wagner but also a great many other cultural workers concerned with film, including Jochen Mückenberger, DEFA's head, and the Minister of Culture and his deputy, were ultimately removed from their posts after this cultural-political debacle.¹¹ Such interventions were relatively rare, however, because vetting mechanisms within DEFA itself generally prevented the production of truly objectionable films. In order for a film to be produced and submitted for distribution approval, it generally had to be approved by a great many people via a series of interagency meetings. The GDR's mechanisms of film regulation were peculiar to it, but western observers should not imagine that film in a capitalist democracy is completely free from interference and censorship of various sorts. The primary difference is that in the GDR, censorship and self-censorship were unabashedly political, whereas in the west censorship and self-censorship generally occur for allegedly economic, not political reasons. In the west a production company generally declines to produce a film, or a distribution company declines to distribute a film, because it claims that the film will not make money, not because it publicly believes that the film will be politically offensive. However, in practice it is often difficult to draw a clear line between economic and political censorship in the west.

DEFA's filmmakers were generally free of the economic insecurity that often afflicts even successful filmmakers in the west: they were guaranteed a salary for their work, no matter how many or how few tickets a film sold, and even independent of whether or not they made or released films at all. These salaries, however, were modest in comparison with western film salaries, and even the GDR's filmmakers and movie stars lived a life that was much closer to the life of an ordinary citizen than the lives of Hollywood filmmakers and movie stars. The historian Joshua

¹⁰ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 22.

¹¹ Bergahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 140.

Feinstein has described DEFA cinema as portraying “the triumph of the ordinary,” and in many ways he is right: DEFA films were often intended to be about ordinary human beings dealing with typical situations. In the same way, DEFA’s filmmakers and stars were to a large extent “ordinary,” not wrapped up in a cult of personality or a star system — although DEFA did produce a number of popular movie stars, such as Erwin Geschonneck, Angelica Domröse, Armin Müller-Stahl, or Manfred Krug. DEFA’s distribution was handled by Progress Film-Verleih, which controlled a wide variety of movie theaters throughout the country. In addition, films were frequently shown in other public venues, such as assembly halls and even in outdoor venues at popular vacation resorts.

Art in the GDR, including film, was governed by the concept of Socialist Realism, which prescribed that art works should address the world in a realistic, readily comprehensible way — extreme fantasy or modernism were frowned on — but that all realism should be optimistic as opposed to pessimistic, i.e., present a world that was moving forward in a positive way toward a just and prosperous society. Socialist Realist art was supposed to have a “positive hero,” usually a member of the working class, with whom the audience could identify and whom it should strive to emulate. Films with overly cynical or negative protagonists were discouraged.

One of the key themes of GDR cinema from its inception onward was coming to terms with the Nazi past, and therefore the early 1950s witnessed a number of films whose goal was the exploration of the reasons and mechanisms for Germany’s descent into Nazi barbarity. Kurt Maetzig’s *Rat der Götter* (Council of the Gods, 1950) explored the IG-Farben chemical conglomerate and its complicity with the Nazi regime, up to and including the mass murder of European Jews using Zyklon B gas produced by IG-Farben itself. The film also highlighted the complicity between American industrial giants and the German-Nazi chemical industry, thus suggesting, within the context of the cold war, that the United States on the one hand and the West German state on the other, together with their industrial conglomerates, represented a continuity with Nazi crimes against humanity.¹² In accordance with the dictates of Socialist Realism, Maetzig’s film also featured a positive worker hero who saw through the machinations of German and American capitalists, as well as an indecisive but ultimately brave scientist who wound up joining the socialist cause. Wolfgang Staudte’s *Der Untertan* (The Kaiser’s Lackey, 1951), based on the classic novel by Heinrich Mann, explored the prehistory of Nazism by focusing on the despicable life of an authoritarian petit-bourgeois man during the German *Kaiserreich*. Diederich Heßling’s

¹² See Martin Brady, “Discussion with Kurt Maetzig,” in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, 77–92; here, 77.

tyrannical behavior to his subordinates, including the women in his life, coupled with his slavish worship of authority figures, is presented as typical of the German bourgeoisie and a major reason for Germany's ultimate descent into barbarism. Like Staudte's *Der Untertan*, a great many DEFA films tended to be based on literary works, particularly novels and plays. This was partly because, especially during the 1950s, DEFA experienced a severe lack of screenwriters and original screenplays.

The early 1950s also witnessed the first film banning in the GDR: Falk Harnack's *Das Beil von Wandsbek* (The Axe of Wandsbek, 1951), based on a 1947 novel by Arnold Zweig. Although Zweig himself was a socialist and supported the East German state, and although Harnack was the brother of one of the great heroes of the resistance to Nazism, Arvid Harnack — in 1971 DEFA made a movie about Arvid Harnack's resistance group called *KLK an PTX: Die rote Kapelle* (KLK to PTX: The Red Orchestra) — this movie was banned after it had already been in release for a month and seen by hundreds of thousands of people, largely because of displeasure on the part of the Soviet communist party, which was uncomfortable with the film's portrayal of a petit-bourgeois Nazi butcher who agrees to serve as an executioner for primarily economic, not political reasons. The Soviet communist party and also members of the GDR's socialist bureaucracy feared that the film might cause viewers to sympathize with rather than condemn a Nazi murderer. A 1952 resolution of the SED's Politburo proclaimed that the film was problematic "for the rise of a progressive German film art" because it "does not choose as its protagonist the fighters of the German working class, but rather their executioner."¹³ In other words, the film did not portray enough "positive" worker heroes.

Stalin's death in March of 1953 ultimately initiated a period of relative freedom for DEFA cinema in the mid-1950s. Several months after Stalin's death, on June 17, 1953, there was an uprising in the GDR when construction workers and others in East Berlin demanded higher wages and a lowering of production norms. This uprising shook the socialist government to its core, but the uprising was quickly put down by Soviet military force; hundreds of people are thought to have been killed. The uprising inspired the playwright Bertolt Brecht, who had chosen to live in the GDR, to write his famous poem "The Solution":

After the uprising of the 17th June
 The Secretary of the Writers' Union
 Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee.
 Stating that the people

¹³ Ralf Schenk, ed., *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg: DEFA-Spielfilme 1946–1992* (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), 70.

Had forfeited the confidence of the government
 And could win it back only
 By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
 In that case for the government
 To dissolve the people
 And elect another?¹⁴

The 1953 uprising also made an impact on DEFA: at the studio various workers gathered together to complain to management, and in one instance a Jewish party leader named Lea Grosse, who had spent several years in Nazi prisons, and who now had the courage to speak with workers, was actually denounced as a Jew and a “Russian whore.” In response, one studio worker defended her by shouting to the assembled crowd: “Aren’t you ashamed to be insulting this woman . . . has it gotten to the point again in Germany where we spit at Jews?”¹⁵ This anecdote, and Brecht’s poem, are indications of the extent to which the SED and its leaders mistrusted their own people, who had only recently supported Hitler, the sworn enemy of both Jews and communists.

The end result of the uprising of June, 1953, was a cautious loosening of ideological control on the part of the party and an effort to make films that would actually appeal to broader segments of the population. The government promised more support for artistic innovation, and it agreed to set up a Ministry of Culture. On February 15, 1954, the filmmaker Kurt Maetzig argued successfully for a more liberal approach to the creation of film in particular: “With respect to themes and genres, our film art must show a much richer palette than before. We should only exclude films that are directed against our national unity or against peace, or that offer a distorted or untruthful picture of reality. . . . Uninhibited, free discussion about questions of art is necessary. It is useful if we are thereby able to create more and better films. It is harmful if we wind up talking our projects to death.”¹⁶

In the period of liberalization that followed the June 1953 uprising, a number of major film projects were completed that signaled a new, promising direction. In particular, filmmakers’ great challenge was to create films that actually dealt with present-day GDR society — not just with history — in a critical, interesting way. Such films, called *Gegenwartsfilme* (films about the present), were very much desired by the GDR’s party leadership, but because of their subject matter they also risked offending

¹⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “The Solution,” in Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (New York: Routledge, 1979), 440.

¹⁵ Schenk, ed., *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg*, 82, 83.

¹⁶ Schenk, ed., *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg*, 83.

various elements of the socialist bureaucracy. In the mid-1950s Gerhard Klein (director) and Wolfgang Kohlhaase (screenwriter) began a series of very popular Berlin films that focused on the problems of East German youth, particularly young men trying to find a path within the new socialist society. Klein's *Berlin — Ecke Schönhauser* (Berlin — Schönhauser Corner, 1957), for instance, dealt with a group of young rebels who come into conflict with the staid, conformist adult world around them. This film about troubled youth, together with similar films like Klein's *Alarm im Zirkus* (Circus Alarm, 1954) and *Eine Berliner Romanze* (A Berlin Romance, 1956) echoed corresponding themes in West German films like Georg Tressler's *Die Halbstarken* (The Hooligans, 1956), as well as in contemporaneous American films like Richard Brooks's *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and Nicholas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (also 1955). *Berlin — Ecke Schönhauser* was wildly popular with East German young people, but for many party officials it was problematic, since — however accurately — it suggested that East German socialism was plagued with some of the same youth unrest that afflicted the western world in the 1950s. The production of critical *Gegenwartsfilme* was to be one of DEFA cinema's main challenges from the 1950s through the 1980s, and while it resulted in some of DEFA's greatest artistic triumphs, it also often led to film bannings or public interventions on the part of socialist bureaucrats.

More to the party's liking were Kurt Maetzig's two communist epics *Ernst Thälmann — Sohn seiner Klasse* (Ernst Thälmann — Son of his Class, 1954) and *Ernst Thälmann — Führer seiner Klasse* (Ernst Thälmann — Leader of his Class, 1955). These historical epics were made to glorify the memory of the German communist leader Ernst Thälmann — the ultimate East German positive hero — who had been murdered by the Nazis at the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944.¹⁷ Looking back on the Ernst Thälmann films forty years later, in 1996, Maetzig remembered that the party had frequently interfered in order to prevent him from making the more complex, challenging films he had intended: "They had young people in mind who during the fascist period had not heard anything about Thälmann, except the worst possible things — that he was a criminal and so on. And so they wanted to build a kind of monument for these young people. Accordingly they put this sympathetic and simple man Thälmann on a pedestal and corrected the scenario all the time. They eliminated everything that was personal and not affirmative in the obvious sense of the word; they wanted a film of an idealized person.

¹⁷ Russel Lemmons, "'Great Truths and Minor Truths': Kurt Maetzig's *Ernst Thälmann* Films, the Antifascism Myth, and the Politics of Biography in the German Democratic Republic," in *Framing the Fifties: Fifties Cinema in Divided Germany*, ed. John E. Davidson and Sabine Hake (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 91–105.

It is a film which you can no longer watch today. It is terrible. When I saw it once again I had red ears and was ashamed.”¹⁸ In spite of Maetzig’s own displeasure with the film, however, it pleased party leaders and was seen by large numbers of East German citizens.

Far more daring artistically, as well as politically challenging, were Konrad Wolf’s films of the 1950s, particularly *Lissy* (1957), *Sonnensucher* (Sun Seekers, 1958), and *Sterne* (Stars, 1959). *Lissy* returned to the problem of German fascism and its origins, exploring the mentality of the German petite bourgeoisie that had supported Hitler in such overwhelming numbers. The eponymous heroine of Wolf’s film, Lissy, is married to a young SS man; although she initially enjoys the economic prosperity that her husband’s association with Nazism brings, she ultimately becomes far more critical of her husband and separates from him. *Sonnensucher* dealt with the early years of the GDR itself and thus came close to the ideal of a critical *Gegenwartsfilm*, although it was ultimately banned at the request of Soviet — and no doubt also GDR — officials and not officially released until 1972. *Sterne* was the first and one of the most important DEFA films to deal specifically with the Holocaust, and it did so far earlier than West German films. Like *Lissy*, *Sterne* focuses on a young German — in this case a soldier stationed in occupied Greece — who, after a series of bitter experiences, ultimately comes to distance himself from Nazism. In this case the young soldier Walter falls in love with a Jewish woman and is forced to witness her deportation to Auschwitz.

After the Hungarian revolution of 1956, cultural policy in general and film policy in particular began to tighten in the GDR once again. At a film conference organized by the Ministry of Culture in July of 1958, officials criticized the mid-1950s liberalization of film and urged a far stricter adherence to the principles of socialist realism. They warned “that naturalism and critical realism are completely unsuited to depicting socialist reality.”¹⁹ Alexander Abusch, one of the party’s chief ideologists, declared: “Some film-makers . . . have offered an absurdly exaggerated critique of a number of isolated instances of dogmatic and inflexible aspects of everyday life and in the process convinced themselves that they have discovered the key to making marvelous films.”²⁰ Whereas the antagonism between the generations in western societies was based on the fundamental problems of capitalist society, Abusch claimed, seemingly

¹⁸ Brady, “Discussion with Kurt Maetzig,” 84.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Gersch, “Film in der DDR: Die verlorene Alternative,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 357–404; here, 372.

²⁰ Séan Allan, “DEFA: An Historical Overview,” in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, 1–21; here, 10.

similar antagonisms in the east were merely “solvable contradictions of a temporary nature.”²¹ Abusch argued that attempts by East German filmmakers to mix socialist realism with what he called critical realism failed to present the truth of German socialism on its path toward a better world. GDR leaders’ displeasure with critical films echoed that of leaders in the Soviet Union, where Khrushchev’s regime followed an often unclear path between cultural liberalization and severe criticism of cultural figures who dared to address real problems in socialist society.²²

After the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, cultural policy in the GDR loosened up once again, and between 1961 and 1965 some of the greatest DEFA films were made. The director Frank Beyer recalled the paradoxically liberating effect of the Wall’s creation by noting that “I had the feeling after the Wall’s construction, now we are no longer in the front trench. Now we can talk with each other in another fashion. We can deal with each other in a critical fashion. We can talk about things that were forbidden before.”²³ Kurt Maetzig’s memories were similar to those of Beyer; in Maetzig’s recollection, “After the erection of the Wall, the situation in the country stabilized and became calmer. We thought the time had come to tackle the problems in our country more critically and more outspokenly.”²⁴ These memories reveal that even critical East German filmmakers were largely in sympathy with the SED government’s erection of the Berlin Wall. They were, for the most part, loyal socialists whose criticisms were directed not at the existence of the GDR state or its economic basis but rather at the SED’s dictatorial methods. These filmmakers believed that the apparent stabilization of the GDR’s political situation brought about by the erection of the Wall could be used to gain more openness in the cultural sphere. As the sociologist Wolfgang Engler has argued, in the early 1960s the DEFA studio, “without making much of a fuss about it, had placed itself at the forefront of cultural modernization.”²⁵ In a period of economic experimentation and innovation that culminated in Walter Ulbricht’s New Economic System of 1963 — which featured cautious economic liberalization — DEFA also began to experiment with liberalization and modernization. An obvious example of this modernization was DEFA’s first science fiction film, Kurt Maetzig’s *Der schweigende Stern* (The Silent Star, 1960), an East German-Polish coproduction based on a novel by the great Polish science fiction writer

²¹ Gersch, “Film in der DDR: Die verlorene Alternative,” 372.

²² See Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 39–42.

²³ Cited in Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002), 153.

²⁴ Cited in Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 143.

²⁵ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 23.

Stanislaw Lem that had been in planning for several years but was held up in the wake of the crackdown of the late 1950s. Artistic working groups were now able to operate more independently, and the position of chief dramaturge at the DEFA studio — a person who had sometimes functioned as a kind of ideological watchdog — was eliminated.

Among the exciting new films produced in the early 1960s was Konrad Wolf's *Professor Mamlock* (1961), based on a play by Wolf's father, the writer Friedrich Wolf, about a Jewish doctor who is engulfed in the catastrophe of Nazism. Gerhard Klein's *Der Fall Gleiwitz* (The Gleiwitz Incident, also 1961) dealt with the beginning of the Second World War, when German Nazis staged a fake attack by supposed Polish fighters on a German radio station in the border town of Gleiwitz in order to justify their own invasion of Poland. The film featured a cool, fast-paced aesthetic that made it a gripping historical feature. Some of these films, like Frank Beyer's *Nackt unter Wölfen* (Naked among Wolves, 1963) — a film about the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald — dealt with DEFA's tried-and-true topic of coming to terms with the Nazi past, but by the mid-1960s a growing number of films attempted to address key issues of the GDR's present: to achieve the ideal of a critical *Gegenwartsfilm*. One of the most important of these, Konrad Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* (Divided Sky, 1964), based on Christa Wolf's novella of the same title, dealt with the construction of the Berlin Wall and the problem of negotiating conflicts between private and public life. Rita, the heroine of both the novel and the film, falls in love with the chemist Manfred, but when the Wall is built, Manfred chooses to live in West Berlin, while Rita makes the difficult decision to stay in the east. Not only was the subject matter of this film daring, its aesthetic construction was also highly modernist and provocative: *Der geteilte Himmel* featured fast cuts and unusual perspective shots that allowed viewers to get inside Rita's head and not just observe her from the outside. As Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel have noted, *Der geteilte Himmel* was “stylistically as well as thematically close to the international art cinema” of its day — from Michelangelo Antonioni in Italy through Alain Resnais in France to Alexander Kluge in West Germany.²⁶

In GDR cultural life generally, the building of the Berlin Wall, oppressive as it was to GDR citizens, took economic and political pressure off the government, which in turn allowed the government to take pressure off artists. At the same time, GDR filmmakers were struggling with the growing popularity of television, which led to drastic decreases in cinema

²⁶ Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, “Defining DEFA's Historical Imaginary: The Films of Konrad Wolf,” *New German Critique*, no. 82 (Winter 2001): 3–24; here, 18.

attendance. In order to combat the unpopularity of DEFA cinema, many key filmmakers began to address important problems in GDR society and the foundation of socialism itself. As Daniela Berghahn has observed, “in a repressed society a greater degree of openness and criticism promised to have nearly as much popular appeal as sheer escapist entertainment.”²⁷ Explaining his motivation for turning to critical realism, Kurt Maetzig later wrote that he had for some time been dissatisfied with the relatively poor quality and low international prestige of DEFA films, as well as with these films’ lack of popularity with the GDR public. “In opposition to that, I believed that we should make the art of socialist realism more effective among the masses,” Maetzig noted, and this suggested to him the idea of enhancing “the critical aspect of our films.”²⁸

Among the most important of the new films dealing critically with present-day GDR reality were Maetzig’s own *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (1965), Frank Vogel’s *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* (Just Don’t Think I’ll Cry, 1965), Jürgen Böttcher’s *Jahrgang 45* (Born in ’45, 1965), and Frank Beyer’s *Spur der Steine*. All of these films, and several others made in the mid-1960s, dealt with key problems in contemporary East German society. Maetzig’s *Das Kaninchen bin ich* dealt with the problem of unfairness and hypocrisy in the East German justice system. Vogel’s *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* problematized the oppression of critical young people in East German schools. Böttcher’s *Jahrgang 45* also took a critical look at the lives of East German young people, while offering a gritty, realistic view of East Berlin. And Beyer’s *Spur der Steine* addressed the Socialist Unity Party itself, its hypocrisy and double-talk, and its separation from the real life of the people. These films were characterized by a high degree of openness, they addressed important topics of general public interest, and they were made with consummate skill. However, by the mid-1960s the GDR’s ruling party had begun to reconsider the cautious openings in cultural policy made after the construction of the Berlin Wall. Those cultural openings had coincided with new experiments in economic policy intended to increase production in GDR factories and the overall efficiency of the GDR economy. By the mid-1960s it appeared that the GDR’s leaders had decided to decouple economic from cultural modernization by cracking down on cultural policy but maintaining cautious economic liberalization. In December of 1965 the Central Committee met in plenary session to discuss cultural policy in general and Maetzig’s and Vogel’s films in particular; the films themselves were actually screened for Central Committee members at the meeting. Erich Honecker, the party’s second in command — and very

²⁷ Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 142.

²⁸ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 304, 305.

likely the key political figure behind the attack on cultural artifacts — condemned the new films and various other trends in contemporary East German cultural life. He declared: “In some of the films produced by DEFA in the last few months, *Das Kaninchen bin ich* and *Denk bloß nicht, ich heule* . . . we can see tendencies and beliefs that are foreign and harmful to socialism.” Honecker went on to assert that “in these artworks there are tendencies to proclaim that contradictions are absolute, to disregard the dialectic of development, there are constructed situations of conflict that have been forced into a preconceived framework. The truth of social development is not grasped. The creative character of human labor is negated. The collective and the leaders of the Party are often perceived by the individual as cold and foreign powers. Our reality is . . . only seen as a difficult temporary state of affairs, full of sacrifices, on the way to an illusionary future.”²⁹ A lower-level party functionary, Inge Lange, was far more economical in her condemnation of the new films: “What we saw yesterday in these films is absolute crap,” she snarled.³⁰

In the wake of this attack by party leaders on key DEFA films of the mid-1960s, most of the films made in the year 1965 — including the two singled out for attack by Honecker — were banned. Because of the title of Maetzig’s film, the banned films of 1965–66 came to be known in East Germany as the *Kaninchenfilme* (the rabbit films). The attacks of party leaders on contemporary East German cinema at the eleventh plenum were completely unexpected by filmmakers. The screenwriter Ulrich Plenzdorf remembered later: “Within the studio it was as if a civil war were about to break out.” As he explained: “At first we were pretty much caught off guard. We hadn’t been prepared for something like this. Actually, we’d been full of hope.”³¹ Now those hopes had been dashed. Filmmakers and others responded by moving away from utopian hopes and dreams and toward a more private, more personal approach that Wolfgang Engler has characterized as a retreat into individualism and away from stories having broad political or collective import.³² Some filmmakers responded to the cultural crackdown of the mid-1960s by making politically innocuous, intellectually undemanding films — musicals like the popular *Heißer Sommer* (Hot Summer, 1968, by Gottfried Kolditz), about two groups of youthful vacationers and their adventures in love and life, or Westerns like Joseph Mach’s *Die Söhne der großen Bärin* (The Sons of Great Bear, 1966), based on a novel by Liselotte Welskopf-Heinrich

²⁹ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 242.

³⁰ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 22.

³¹ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 30.

³² Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 30–31.



Gokjo Mitić as Tokei-Ihlo in Josef Mach's Die Söhne der großen Bärin (1966).
Courtesy of the DEFA-Stiftung.

and featuring noble Indians fighting against scheming capitalist Americans. This was the first of a series of popular East German Westerns starring the Serbian actor Gojko Mitić as an honorable, frequently bare-chested Indian.³³ DEFA also continued producing science fiction movies in the 1970s: *Signale — Ein Weltraumabenteuer* (Signals — An Adventure in Space, 1970, by Gottfried Kolditz), *Eolomea* (1972, by Hermann Zschoche), and *Im Staub der Sterne* (In the Dust of the Stars, 1976, by Gottfried Kolditz). In addition to genre film, the late 1960s witnessed a number of serious explorations of German history, such as Konrad Wolf's moving *Ich war neunzehn* (I Was Nineteen, 1968), based on Wolf's own experiences as a young German fighting with the Soviet Red Army in Germany in 1945.

Erich Honecker's accession to power in 1971 was accompanied by a promise that now there would be no more artistic or cultural taboos for socialist artists. As a result of this proclamation and of the loosening of cultural policy that followed it, DEFA's directors, including a new generation of filmmakers like Lothar Warneke, Rainer Simon, Ingrid Reschke, and Hermann Zschoche began making films significantly different from previous DEFA films in their emphasis on personal happiness and sexual liberation as opposed to larger social issues. While these films shared in the post-eleventh-plenum turn towards the personal, they also seemed to imply that there is no clear distinction between the personal and the political. By focusing intensely on the conflicts and problems of individuals and couples, they raised fundamental issues about feminism, sexuality, personal happiness, and the relationship between individual and society. The most successful of these films was Heiner Carow's cult hit *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (The Legend of Paul and Paula, 1973), which has remained a hit to this day. The film deals primarily with the love between a man and a woman, not with larger social issues, but it also connects its heroine's struggle for personal happiness with a struggle for a better society. In its sexual frankness, use of musical sequences by the popular East German rock group Die Puhdys, and dream sequences, the film was highly unusual. At the end of the 1970s, veteran filmmaker Konrad Wolf made his own contribution to the new genre with his popular *Solo Sunny* (1980, together with Wolfgang Kohlhase), also about the life and loves of a woman struggling for happiness. Films like these echoed the popular 1970s slogan in the western feminist movement that “the personal is

³³ On the genre of the East German *Indianerfilm*, see Gerd Gemünden, “Between Karl May and Karl Marx: The DEFA Indianerfilme (1965–1983),” *New German Critique*, no. 82 (Winter 2001): 25–38.

the political,” and they connected cultural developments in East Germany with cultural developments in West Germany, where the 1970s likewise witnessed a cultural turn toward explorations of the personal, particularly in the *neue Innerlichkeit* (new interiority) in literature.

The expatriation of the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann in 1976 marked yet another radical break in East German cultural life, crushing artists’ hopes that the Honecker regime would move toward a more democratic and open form of socialism. In the wake of Biermann’s expatriation, a number of the most popular and charismatic East German movie stars left the country — particularly Manfred Krug, Armin Müller-Stahl, and Angelika Domröse. The writer Jurek Becker also left the GDR after the Biermann affair; Frank Beyer’s moving film *Jakob der Lügner* (Jacob the Liar, 1975) had been based on a novel by Becker. This was the only East German film ever to be nominated for an Oscar for best foreign film, and it was ultimately remade as a Hollywood vehicle for Robin Williams in 1999. The novel and the film are moving portrayals of life in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1944. East German film never really recovered from the loss of the great stars and fine artists who left the country after the Biermann affair; this was another example of real-existing socialism working to quash its own most fervent defenders and supporters. In 1980 there was another brief moment of hope for DEFA cinema, as Wolf’s and Kohlhaase’s *Solo Sunny* became an unexpected hit. But the SED did not really like spontaneous, unexpected hits, and it quickly cracked down on other ambitious films, such as Rainer Simon’s *Jadup und Boel* in 1980 and Evelyn Schmidt’s *Das Fahrrad* (The Bicycle, 1982).

By the 1980s, DEFA films had become widely unpopular in the GDR; moviegoers generally preferred to stay at home and watch television or to go to American movies being shown. In 1980 the average GDR citizen only went to the movies about five times a year.³⁴ The party exercised strict control over which western products could or could not be distributed in the GDR, but quite a few American films made it through nevertheless. For instance, Mike Nichols’s *Silkwood* (1983), about shady dealings in the American nuclear industry, played in East Germany in the mid-1980s. The 1980s also witnessed a number of ambitious films about important subjects, such as Frank Beyer’s *Der Aufenthalt* (Turning Point, 1983), about the gradual learning process experienced by a young German prisoner of war in Poland in the immediate postwar period or Lothar Warneke’s *Einer trage des anderen Last* (Bear Ye One Another’s Burden, 1988), about the rapprochement between a devout Christian and a communist in a sanatorium in

³⁴ Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 214.

the early 1950s. Warneke's moving *Die Beunruhigung* (Apprehension, 1982), dealt with a middle-aged female psychologist who must deal with the possibility that she has breast cancer. These were important films, but they did not reach a wide audience in the 1980s, when large segments of the GDR populace had simply written off DEFA cinema. November 9, 1989, saw the premiere of a radical new movie by Heiner Carow called *Coming Out*, which for the first time in GDR film history dealt openly and sympathetically with homosexuality. Under ordinary circumstances this film would probably have been a sensation. However, as it happened, on the very night of the film's premiere, Günter Schabowski, a member of the SED's Politburo, announced that the Berlin Wall would no longer inhibit freedom of travel from East Berlin to West Berlin, and instead of going to the cinema, East Berliners streamed noisily into West Berlin.

The opening of the Berlin Wall marked the beginning of the end for the East German state, and hence, necessarily, for the East German film industry. Less than a year later, at midnight on October 3, 1990, the GDR ceased to exist. What had once been the GDR became five new *Länder* (states) in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and the former GDR capital, East Berlin, was reunited with West Berlin to become yet another *Land* within the FRG. DEFA continued to exist and make films for a few more years, until 1992. Just as DEFA's foundation had preceded the foundation of the East German state, so too its dissolution came well after the dissolution of the East German state. However, by the early 1990s it was clear that DEFA would cease to exist, and that its assets would be sold to a capitalist film production company. DEFA made a number of interesting films in its final years — films like Peter Kahane's *Die Architekten* (The Architects, 1990), about a group of architects trying to create an ideal community in a Berlin suburb. This film addressed key problems in GDR public life — the lack of adequate living space, the aesthetic ugliness and sterility of many planned communities, and the interference of party bureaucrats in the artistic sphere — but by the time it was released in the spring of 1990, the political community to which the film had addressed itself hardly even existed any more. Instead, *Die Architekten* became a historical footnote. The truly popular DEFA films of 1990 were the previously banned films of the mid-1960s.

In 1992 the Treuhandanstalt, the trustee agency set up by the German government to privatize formerly state-owned enterprises in the GDR, sold DEFA's assets to the French conglomerate CGE (Compagnie Générale des Eaux). That company, engaged in a process of rapid expansion, took on the name Vivendi four years later, and in 2004 Vivendi sold the Babelsberg studios to a German company, Filmbetriebe

Berlin Brandenburg (FBB). The Babelsberg studios continue to be used for film and television production — now quite successfully under the conditions of a market economy.³⁵ In 1991, the year after German reunification, the Filmpark Babelsberg, an amusement park based on various themes from famous films made in Babelsberg, was opened.³⁶ It continues to operate to this day.

³⁵ Randall Halle, *German Film after Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2008), 60–61; and Klaus Grimberg, “The German Hollywood: Babelsberg Studios Win Respect in the International Film Industry,” *The Atlantic Times*, May 2008, 14.

³⁶ On the park and its plans for expansion, see Andrea Beyerlein, “Kita ohne Schließzeit: Der Filmpark Babelsberg expandiert. Geplant sind eine Wohnsiedlung und später auch ein Hotel,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 22 July 2009, 20.



Emmi Jahnke and Lotte Lutz. Courtesy of the DEFA-Stiftung.

15: *Sonnensucher* (1958) or Searching for the Socialist Sun

Director: Konrad Wolf

Cinematographer: Werner Bergmann

Screenplay: Karl Georg Egel and Paul Wiens

Producer: Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA)
(Hans-Joachim Schoeppe)

Editor: Christa Wernicke

Production Design: Karl Schneider and Alfred Drosdek

Costume Design: Elli-Charlotte Löffler

Music: Joachim Werzlau and Hans-Dieter Hosalla

German Release Date: [East Germany] September 1, 1972
(banned in 1959)

Actors: Ulrike Germer (Lotte Lutz); Günther Simon (Franz Beier);
Erwin Geschonneck (Jupp König); Manja Behrens (Emmi
Jahnke); Viktor Avdyushko (Sergei Melnikow); Willi Schrade
(Günter Holleck); Erich Franz (Weihrauch); Norbert Christian
(Josef Stein); Vladimir Yemelyanov (Colonel Fedossjew)

KONRAD WOLF'S FILM *Sonnensucher* (Sun Seekers) was conceived in the mid-1950s, filmed in 1957–58, and, after various bureaucratic battles in 1958 and 1959, ultimately scheduled for release on October 23, 1959, a few weeks after the tenth anniversary of the founding of the German Democratic Republic. In many ways the film would have been an appropriate vehicle for celebrating that anniversary. It featured a working-class hero, the miner Jupp König — played by one of DEFA's most popular actors, Erwin Geschonneck — who becomes the leader of the Socialist Unity Party's organization within his mine. *Sonnensucher* portrays workers struggling to create a new and better socialist world, and Germans trying to overcome the horrors of the Nazi past while working for friendship with the Soviet Union. In the film's climactic scene, Germans and Russians — former enemies in the Second World War — work together to save the lives of four miners who have been trapped in a mining accident. Like much of the Socialist Realist culture of the 1950s, *Sonnensucher* shows workers and managers trying to raise production norms. “The productivity of work must be increased!” declares one of the miners in the midst of a heated argument underground.¹

¹ All transcriptions from the film are my own. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

Sonnensucher starts with the first anniversary of the GDR's founding on October 7, 1950; one of the film's opening shots shows a banner proclaiming "Long Live October 7th 1950!" Viewers see and hear workers and other citizens celebrating the new state by marching and singing songs. The film ends with voice-over commentary from Erwin Geschonneck as the film's protagonist, the pretty young female worker Lutz — played by the West German actress Ulrike Germer — leaves the mining town where she has been working and sets off on new adventures, holding the hand of her toddler, the presumed beneficiary of a brighter future: "Go, you two. You will be happy — and not alone. Your path, which is the path of all of us, has just begun. Good luck!" Since the early 1950s, both the SED and the DEFA film studio had been looking for realistic, exciting films that dealt not just with the pre-socialist past but with the actual construction of socialism in the GDR. Konrad Wolf's film dealt with precisely this subject.

Konrad Wolf himself was to become the GDR's most respected film director; the state film and television academy was named after him in 1985, three years after Wolf's untimely death in 1982 at the age of 57. He was almost predestined to make a film celebrating the GDR's purportedly heroic origins. Konrad Wolf came from a famous Communist family distinguished for its service to the party and the state. His father Friedrich Wolf had been a respected playwright of socially engaged dramas, and he had taken his family, including his sons Konrad and Markus, into exile with him in the Soviet Union during the Nazi dictatorship. In Moscow Konrad and Markus grew up speaking both German and Russian. At the age of seventeen Konrad joined the Red Army, and two years later he was among the Soviet troops who conquered Berlin; his moving film *Ich war neunzehn* (I was Nineteen, 1968) explores those experiences autobiographically. Konrad Wolf studied film at Moscow's All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography from 1949 to 1954. His older brother Markus, meanwhile, became the leader of the GDR's foreign spying operations and was probably the real figure behind novelist John le Carré's fictional Russian spymaster Karla.

In spite of its subject matter and pedigree, *Sonnensucher* was mysteriously withdrawn from public viewing in October of 1959. On the day of the film's planned opening, October 23, a brief article appeared in the SED's main press organ, *Neues Deutschland*, announcing that *Sonnensucher* had been withdrawn, supposedly at the behest of the filmmakers themselves, who, together with the DEFA studio, were purportedly motivated by "the general political situation as it has developed since the conception and creation of the film *Sonnensucher*."² With this brief announcement, which was

² Reinhard Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972): Notizen zur Werkgeschichte," *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 39 (1990): 34–64; here, 58.

printed on page five of the newspaper — a page generally devoted to foreign news — *Sonnensucher* disappeared from public discussion in the GDR, not to reappear until 1972, when, at the behest of Konrad Wolf and the GDR's new leader Erich Honecker, the film was finally released for public viewing and even broadcast on television.

Why was *Sonnensucher* suddenly withdrawn in 1959? Apparently the Soviet Union had vetoed the film's distribution at the last minute.³ Whereas the history of GDR cinema is replete with banned movies, most such movies were banned because the SED itself found fault with them. It was rare for a film to be banned for foreign policy reasons, even though the leaders of the SED itself — including Walter Ulbricht, the general secretary of the party — liked and even welcomed the film. In June of 1959 the GDR's Politburo itself had viewed the film and determined *Sonnensucher* to be crucial "for the future work of DEFA," since "it corresponds to our Party's demands for the aesthetically powerful and convincing portrayal of the life and struggle of the working class at the decisive nodal points of the construction of socialism." In order to encourage other artists to follow in Konrad Wolf's footsteps and portray the heroic struggle to create socialism in the GDR, the Politburo declared that "the public screening of the film should be secured."⁴

Sonnensucher was a first-rate movie — well written, directed, filmed, and acted — about a topic of utmost importance to the SED and its Politburo: the founding and construction of the East German socialist state. The fact that it was nevertheless ultimately banned highlights the precarious and unpredictable nature of film production in the GDR, which was subject not just to the whims of the GDR's ruling party but also to various foreign policy constraints, not to mention the demands of the East German public and to filmmakers' own aesthetic considerations. The fact that, in spite of these often conflicting constraints and demands, quite a few high-quality movies were made is remarkable. Sadly, however, some of the best of these movies were never seen by the audience for whom they were intended. The disappearance of *Sonnensucher* in 1959 cast a pall on future East German filmmaking, causing writers, directors, and dramaturges to be justifiably fearful of making films that dealt with the real problems and conflicts of the GDR itself. In 1961, two years after the banning of *Sonnensucher*, Wolfgang Wätzold, party secretary in the GDR's culture ministry, wrote a report to the party's central committee complaining that many new GDR films were characterized by superficiality, simplicity, and a fear of real conflict. In Wätzold's opinion, one reason for the malaise within GDR cinema was the disappearance of *Sonnensucher*: "Then as now the great majority of our film people see this film

³ See Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)."

⁴ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 56.

as the guiding star for a profound artistic confrontation and a truthful reflection of human conflicts from life in the GDR.”⁵

Although it is not clear why the Soviet Union did not want *Sonnensucher* to appear — the solution to the question may well lie hidden in Russian archives — it seems probable that the film’s setting in and around a uranium mine was a prime consideration. *Sonnensucher* celebrates the Soviet Union’s atomic program as a primary factor in the preservation of world peace. The film’s worker-hero Jupp König proclaims to workers dissatisfied with the production pressures being put on them that they are working for world peace: “The Russians secure peace, support workers throughout the world, and are helping us in the construction of socialism. That is proletarian internationalism. And the Americans would long since have used their atomic bombs if the Soviet Union didn’t have any.”⁶ Given that in 1959 the Soviet Union’s General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, who had succeeded Joseph Stalin, was engaged in diplomatic negotiations with the United States, it is likely that the Soviet Union did not want to publicize its dependence on East German uranium for its nuclear weapons programs. It is also possible, as Reinhard Wagner has suggested, that Soviet authorities were afraid that a relatively accurate filmic depiction of the Soviet Union’s aggressive efforts to retrieve uranium from an East German mine in 1950, only a year after the USSR’s first successful explosion of an atomic bomb in 1949 — an explosion that had profoundly shocked the U.S. government, which had until then believed the Soviet Union incapable of producing a nuclear weapon — would further anger western governments precisely at a time when the Soviet Union was looking for diplomatic cooperation.⁷ Wagner may be right that such fear would have represented an “extreme overestimation of the power and credibility of a feature film,” but both Soviet and East German authorities did indeed take film seriously as a mass medium; moreover, in the context of the cold war, both the Soviet Union and the United States exercised extreme caution in the release of delicate information about their nuclear weapons programs. At any rate it seems probable that *Sonnensucher* was ultimately withdrawn not because of its depiction of the construction of socialism in the early GDR but because of its depiction — however heroic — of work in a Soviet–East German uranium mine.

Aesthetically, *Sonnensucher* is a Socialist Realist film: it depicts workers — particularly Geschonneck’s Jupp König — as positive heroes, and it shows its figures as struggling for the creation of a better society. The motif of the sun plays a central role throughout the movie. In the film’s

⁵ Wagner, “‘Sonnensucher’ (1958/1972),” 61.

⁶ Cited in Wolfgang Gersch, *Szenen eines Landes: Die DDR und ihre Filme* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2006), 71.

⁷ Wagner, “‘Sonnensucher’ (1958/1972),” 59.

symbolic economy, uranium represents the energy of the sun that is stored underground, and hence the film's "sun seekers" are the miners searching for uranium below the earth's surface. At key intervals throughout the film Wolf turns his camera toward the sun, which is seen shining dimly through clouds and soot. Geschonneck's voice-over narration in the film's opening sequences informs viewers that "the sun shone — distant and cool." The sun also represents socialism itself: the dream of a better, more just society. In the film's opening sequences, a banner proclaims "Brothers, to the sun, to freedom!" with the sun clearly representing the dream of a socialist society. In 1950, one year after the foundation of the GDR, that dream is clearly perceptible but not overpowering. Just as the sun must struggle to shine through smog and mist, so too socialism must be built in the midst of a society full of former Nazis. The new beginning that the film's protagonists are struggling for is not easy, and it is not simply given to them; they have to work hard for it. However, the difficult nature of these characters' task should not be seen as a criticism of the socialist project; on the contrary, it is precisely because the new socialist order is difficult and makes great demands on individuals that those who are working to achieve it are heroic. Wolf's use of the sun as a symbol for the dream of a socialist GDR was very much in consonance with the state's own foundational mythology; after all, in his national anthem for the GDR, Johannes R. Becher had invoked the hope that "the sun will shine more beautifully than ever / Over Germany."⁸ The flag of the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ, Free German Youth), the youth group of the SED, featured the rising sun against a blue background. "And from the blue the sun is shining, / Shedding light, Germany, on you," ran the triumphant words to Becher's "Lied von der blauen Fahne" (Song of the Blue Flag).⁹ Wolf's film, made a decade after the GDR's founding, invokes this foundational mythology. It begins with written captions that explain the Wismut uranium mine to viewers and remind them that the GDR's difficult origins are now largely forgotten. By implication, the whole purpose of the film is to remind viewers of those origins. "Thus we began and became . . . Sun Seekers," the titles proclaim, with the final word representing the title of the movie and also proclaiming its characters', and by implication also its audience's, search for socialism. The film's viewers and its characters are connected to each other by the words *unsere Republik* (our republic), suggesting that the history being

⁸ Johannes R. Becher, "Auferstanden aus Ruinen," in Becher, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 6, *Gedichte 1949–1958* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1973), 61.

⁹ Becher, "Lied von der blauen Fahne," in Becher, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 6, *Gedichte 1949–1958*, 66. On some of the GDR's foundational mythologies, see my book *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour* (Rochester: Camden House, 2004), 248.

portrayed here ties viewers and fictional characters together in a common identity as “sun seekers.”

The sun also has other kinds of symbolic meanings within the film. It represents love, as when Lutz’s friend Emmi proclaims that male miners, stuck underneath the earth’s surface all day, long for the sun after their return to the earth’s surface. “Can you imagine how we shine?” she asks Lutz rhetorically, with “we” referring to the women that the male miners long for on their return to the earth’s surface. One of the quiet dramas of the film is Lutz’s own struggle to “shine,” i.e., to smile. At the beginning of the movie she is a downtrodden, abused woman who hates men, proclaiming: “Men are swine!” Throughout the movie the three men who are vying for her attention try to get her to smile, and by the end of the movie she actually does smile. She smiles as her husband Beier, the mine’s civilian boss, descends below the surface, giving him the ability to dream happily of her as he dies in a mine catastrophe shortly thereafter. Two years later, as she and her toddler are about to leave the mining town, the Soviet engineer Sergei — another of her male admirers — expresses the hope that her child will be able to smile just as she can. In fact, after the child’s birth, Lutz’s friend Emmi had proclaimed that the baby was “searching and grabbing for light,” suggesting that the baby, too, was a “sun seeker.” One of the miners, Josef Stein, a devout Christian, associates the sun with absolute truth. For Lutz’s Soviet admirer Sergei, meanwhile, the sun resides in the wine that he shares with her — “the sun of the Caucasus” — and he reminds her that for his superior officer, Colonel Fedossjew, the sun no longer shines since all of Fedossjew’s children were killed by Germans in the war. Sergei goes on to say that his eighteen-year-old wife, likewise murdered by Germans in the war, had also, as a painter, been a sun seeker; one of her works hangs prominently in his living quarters. Finally, Lutz’s third male admirer and the biological father of her child, the young German miner Günter Holleck, contrasts the warmth of love against the radioactive power of uranium by saying to her that she should not need her Geiger counter to feel how much they care for each other. The sun, then, represents a whole array of interconnected meanings: it symbolizes radiating uranium, but it also symbolizes the radiation of love and happiness, as well as the radiant dream of a better, socialist world. Shortly after the catastrophe of Nazism and the Second World War, the film’s characters are in search of all these positive things, and for this reason they are “sun seekers.”

The figure of Lutz is central to the film’s narrative strategy. Like the Hildegard Knef character in *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, and like a great many other figures in subsequent East German movies, Lutz represents far more than just herself: she represents the larger collective of which she is a part, in this case the vulnerable young society of the GDR struggling toward socialism and away from Nazism. As the film begins, the GDR’s

first anniversary is being celebrated throughout the country. Geschonneck's voice-over narration informs viewers that "for most of us it was really a holiday. But in this village, on this farm, for this girl . . . for Lutz," it was not. The film's viewers then see Lutz being raped on a haystack by an older man; when she manages to escape from him, the man's wife calls her a piece of dung. This introduction shows that Lutz is one of the many German women who were victims of the war and postwar horrors. When Lutz goes to Berlin to stay with her friend Emmi Jahnke — played by Manja Behrens — viewers are introduced to yet another aspect of female sexuality, since Emmi works as a prostitute. A neighbor woman whom Lutz asks about Emmi's whereabouts is almost as spiteful and nosy as the petit-bourgeois housewives depicted by F. W. Murnau in his 1924 film *Der letzte Mann*, or as the nosy neighbor in Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns*. In a subsequent scene Emmi and Lutz go to a bar where workers from the Wismut company — the Soviet-East German uranium mining company — are celebrating in a rowdy, macho way. Here Lutz meets the young uranium miner Günter Holleck, and the two are attracted to each other. Meanwhile, Emmi meets her lost lover Jupp König, a communist whom she had once saved from the Nazis; the two even have tattoos representing their love for each other. A brawl ensues between the Wismut miners and the ordinary Berlin citizens who resent the obviously well-paid workers' access to women and alcohol. In the process, various objects in the bar are smashed, and ultimately the police arrive. These scenes are reminiscent of Weimar Republic cinema, with its nosy neighbors, seedy bars, loose women, and sexually provocative songs. When Emmi sings about her love for manly men — Hans Dieter Hosalla's "Song of the Strong Man" — she seems straight out of Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel*, and a picture in her apartment even features her wearing a top hat, just as Marlene Dietrich had in that film. After the bar brawl, Emmi and Lutz are taken into custody by the police for being part of the disturbance — in a brief segment, viewers learn more about Lutz's unhappy history during and after the war — and are ultimately forced to leave Berlin and work in the Wismut mine. This sequence is based on historical fact, since many thousands of East German women arrested as prostitutes were in fact forced to work in Wismut in the late 1940s.¹⁰ As she travels south from Berlin, Lutz can see the sun shining through the window of the train — a foreshadowing of the "sun" that she will soon be seeking underground with a Geiger counter in Wismut. The sun that she sees outside the train window then dissolves into the light carried by a miner underground.

¹⁰ See Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007), 48.

Sonnensucher portrays the difficulties that Germans, as former Nazis and invaders of the Soviet Union, have in working together with Russians. To emphasize this, Konrad Wolf makes Franz Beier, the mine's civilian chief — played by Günther Simon — a former member of the very SS regiment that murdered the Russian engineer Sergei's wife. At the end of the film, as he lies dying, Beier admits to Sergei that he and other SS men had watched passively and done nothing to stop their comrades as they perpetrated these atrocities; Sergei tells Beier that he has known this all along. This sequence, as well as others throughout the film, suggest how difficult it is to create out of the ruins of a brutish Nazi state an enlightened socialist society. (The European Enlightenment, as its very name suggests, also used the sun as its primary symbol.) However, German socialists and their Soviet comrades must work with the human beings that they have; they cannot invent or create new ones (as in Brecht's poem "Die Lösung" [The Solution, 1953] with its tongue-in-cheek call for the government to elect a new people).¹¹ Therefore, as Beier stresses throughout the film, the Soviets need him for his expertise, no matter how much they may dislike him personally. This point echoes much of the GDR's production literature of the 1950s: although the GDR is a self-proclaimed workers and peasants' state, it is also dependent on the know-how of bourgeois experts — engineers and technicians — who may not always be in sympathy with the goals of socialism. The climactic mine fire toward the end of the film, in which both Sergei and Beier are trapped, emphasizes that no matter how much the two may dislike and distrust each other, they are now working for the same goal. This moment is reminiscent of a famous scene from G. W. Pabst's 1931 film *Kameradschaft* (Comradeship), which had featured Germans and French — former First World War enemies — working together to save a group of French miners trapped underground.

Sonnensucher also echoes American Westerns of the 1940s and 1950s, since Felsach, where Wismut is located, resembles a town in a Hollywood wild-west production. Morals are loose and miners frequently get drunk, visit prostitutes, and get involved in barroom brawls. Barton Byg has called Felsach "Konrad Wolf's gold-rush town transported to the GDR Wismut uranium mines . . . complete with saloon fight scene but minus the six-shooters."¹² These scenes reflected the historical fact that Wismut was in fact a rowdy place where its well-paid workers often did tend to

¹¹ Bertolt Brecht, "The Solution," in Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (New York: Routledge, 1979), 440.

¹² Barton Byg, "DEFA and the Traditions of International Cinema," in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), 22–41; here, 29.

drink and go to prostitutes when they got out of the mines. Given the difficulty of the working conditions at Wismut, the company even witnessed labor unrest in 1951.¹³ Some East German socialist apparatchiks were annoyed by scenes suggesting that the construction of socialism was accompanied by dissolution and immorality and, according to Karl Georg Egel, co-author of the movie's screenplay, some even complained that *Sonnensucher* transformed Wismut into "a branch of the American gold rush milieu."¹⁴ Workers from the real-life Wismut mine who saw the film complained about its portrayal of women, according to Egel: "The way the women are portrayed means that our wives aren't honorable, to put it euphemistically. If our wives see this movie, they'll probably throw us out as comrades, out of the house and out of the family."¹⁵

Sonnensucher was made in the period of flux between liberalization and renewed crackdown in GDR cultural policy that followed Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech about the crimes of Stalinism at the twentieth congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February of 1956. Delivered three years after Stalin's death, Khrushchev's speech signaled a turning away from hard-line Stalinism, but because of the Hungarian revolution in October of 1956, cultural policy in the GDR began to tighten up again by the end of the year, with the clearest signal of the crackdown being the arrest of the liberal socialist publisher Walter Janka in December; Janka and the young philosopher Wolfgang Harich were charged with counter-revolutionary conspiracy in June of 1957. Conceived and begun in this difficult period of transition from openness to renewed repression in cultural policy, *Sonnensucher* invoked the spirit of liberalism and open debate within the socialist party. It shows a hard-line socialist functionary being thrown out and replaced by a more liberal, more honest man. As a piece of socialist self-criticism, *Sonnensucher* was attacked by some SED functionaries as *too* critical and *too* disrespectful of socialist bureaucrats. Critics were particularly displeased by the negative portrayal of Weihrauch, the clueless SED party secretary who is ultimately replaced by the more capable and respected Jupp König. Anton Ackermann, a party functionary who led the GDR's HV-Film, the primary state organization charged with supervising the GDR's film industry, even called *Sonnensucher* "the biggest mistake that DEFA has made since it was founded."¹⁶ Erich Wendt, another SED functionary who worked in the Ministry of Culture, accused the film of counterrevolutionary tendencies: "When I analyze this film and imagine it happening in Hungary, then it would take place in about

¹³ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, 177.

¹⁴ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 44.

¹⁵ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 45.

¹⁶ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 47.

June–July 1956. That's the way things began there, too!"¹⁷ Such comments suggest that it was not just officials in the Soviet Union who were uncomfortable with *Sonnensucher*, and that some SED officials may have welcomed subsequent Soviet demands to suppress the film. In fact, *Sonnensucher* was so heavily criticized by SED functionaries that it ultimately was shown to the entire East German Politburo, including party leader Walter Ulbricht; the Politburo ordered a number of changes to make the movie more politically palatable. As DEFA's director Wilkening noted in August of 1959, "The director and the screenwriters took great pains to follow all the suggestions made during the presentation at the Politburo, especially those from the first secretary of the Central Committee, comrade Walter Ulbricht."¹⁸ But *Sonnensucher* was not only criticized; other East German socialists vigorously defended it. Erwin Geschonneck, the popular actor who played Jupp König and provided the film's voice-over narration, went so far as to proclaim that *Sonnensucher* was "the beginning of the portrayal of communists as human beings," not just as stereotypical cardboard figures.¹⁹

It was these debates about the film's suitability as a portrayal of the GDR's heroic beginnings that delayed *Sonnensucher*'s planned opening from the spring of 1958 to October of 1959. However, in these internal party struggles, it was ultimately the film's supporters who won. As a result of criticisms, a few scenes were cut and some were added, all with the aim of presenting the Socialist Unity Party and its functionaries in a more favorable light. These deletions and additions did not fundamentally change the movie, however. The SED suggested that in conjunction with the film's opening in October of 1959, the party organ *Neues Deutschland* should run a series of articles discussing the film's pros and cons — those aspects that pointed the way toward a better future as well as the ones that remained rooted in a less pleasant past.²⁰ This plan for a generalized public discussion following the film's premiere suggests that significant elements within the SED viewed film in general, and this film in particular, as a major vehicle for positive, progressive social communication. After the film's sudden and unexpected withdrawal, Walter Ulbricht himself — whose picture is featured prominently in Jupp König's office as party secretary — is reported to have apologized several times to Konrad Wolf.²¹

¹⁷ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 50–51.

¹⁸ Dagmar Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime: Die Filmpolitik der SED im Spiegel der DEFA-Produktionen* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2002), 94.

¹⁹ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 50.

²⁰ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 56.

²¹ Wagner, "'Sonnensucher' (1958/1972)," 60.

By the time *Sonnensucher* was actually shown publicly in the GDR in 1972, Ulbricht was no longer party leader, and the film had become historical. However, it was still one of the best DEFA films of the 1950s, an impressive and committed depiction of the GDR's origins. It is a sad irony of GDR culture — and particularly of GDR film culture — that some of its very best and most convincingly pro-socialist creations were, for a variety of reasons, rendered politically ineffective in their own time. Even as a banned film, however, *Sonnensucher* continued to exert a political and aesthetic influence in the years to come, and it remained a challenge to both filmmakers and the party to create a convincing film about the GDR present.



Manfred Krug as Hannes Balla. Courtesy of the DEFA-Stiftung.

16: *Spur der Steine* (1966) or Traces of Repression

Director: Frank Beyer

Cinematographer: Günter Marczinkowsky

Screenplay: Karl Georg Egel and Frank Beyer, based on the novel
by Erik Neutsch

Producer: Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA)

Editor: Hildegarde Conrad

Production Design: Harald Horn

Costume Design: Elli-Charlotte Löffler and Günther Pohl

Music: Wolfram Heicking

Soundtrack: Werner Dibowski

German Release Date: [East Germany] June 15, 1966

Actors: Manfred Krug (Hannes Balla); Krystyna Stypulkowska (Kati Klee, dubbed into German by Jutta Hoffmann); Eberhard Esche (Werner Horrath); Johannes Wieke (Hermann Jansen); Walter Richter-Reinick (Richard Trutmann); Hans-Peter Minetti (Heinz Bleibtreu); Walter Jupé (Kurt Hesselbart); Ingeborg Schumacher (Marianne Horrath); Gertrud Brendler (Frau Schicketanz); Helga Göring (Elli); Erich Mirek (Oswald Ziener)

FRANK BEYER'S FILM *Spur der Steine* (Trace of Stones), based on Erik Neutsch's prizewinning novel of the same name, was already mostly completed when, in the fall of 1965, the cultural atmosphere in the GDR began to tighten up in the wake of Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power in the Soviet Union. Hardliners in the SED Politburo disliked the cautiously liberalizing tendencies of Walter Ulbricht's New Economic System (Neues Ökonomisches System der Planung und Leitung or NÖSPL, introduced in 1963), which had begun to move away from top-down central planning and to place more decision-making power in the hands of individual managers. Probably as a result of the NÖSPL, the GDR's economy grew at a rate of 5 percent and 6 percent in 1964 and 1965, respectively.¹ A central characteristic of Ulbricht's New Economic System was an increasing emphasis on competition with

¹ Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007), 241.

the advanced capitalist countries of the world, particularly the Federal Republic of Germany, and a decreasing emphasis on slavish imitation of the Soviet Union and its economic policies. While *Spur der Steine* had nothing to do with the Soviet Union, it did highlight many of the problems of the East German economy by dealing with the trials and tribulations involved in the creation of a large petrochemical plant. The bureaucratic malfeasance and central planning that impeded the plant's construction in Beyer's film were an example of the problems facing the NÖSPL in the GDR at large.

The eleventh plenum of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party, at which cultural production, and particularly DEFA's cinematic output, was a central topic of discussion, took place from December 14–17, 1965, about two and a half months after Beyer had completed most of the scenes for his film. Initially, the topic of discussion at the eleventh plenum was to be East German economic policy, but on December 3 Erich Apel, the head of the GDR's state planning commission and thus the man responsible for carrying out the New Economic System, shot himself in his office. Apel's suicide was probably motivated by the Soviet Union's refusal to cooperate with the terms of the NÖSPL, which called for a more equitable trade agreement between the GDR and the USSR; the USSR's refusal placed the entire NÖSPL in jeopardy and strengthened the hands of Apel's enemies in the Politburo, who included, among others, the hardliner Erich Honecker. As Frank Beyer wrote in his autobiography well over three decades after filming *Spur der Steine*, there were rumors that Erich Apel "had unsuccessfully objected to making the GDR economy 100 percent dependent on Soviet raw materials and to the GDR's participation in the Soviet Union's armaments policy" — a policy that meant "high prices for raw materials" from the Soviet Union "and low prices for shipments of consumer goods" from the GDR.²

In the midst of the *Sturm und Drang* surrounding the GDR's economic and political problems, it may seem surprising that the SED chose to address primarily cultural and not economic issues at the eleventh plenum. The precise reasons for this criticism of DEFA films and of major cultural figures in the GDR still need to be investigated more thoroughly. It seems likely, however, that Honecker and his hard-line allies in the Politburo chose to launch a large-scale attack on cultural policies because they did not yet feel themselves strong enough to launch a similar attack on the NÖSPL itself. Such an attack, after all, would have required open criticism not only of Erich Apel but also of Apel's mentor

² Frank Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht* (Munich: Econ, 2001), 136. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

Walter Ulbricht, who remained leader of the SED and therefore also of the GDR. Culture, in other words, probably served a kind of proxy function in an ongoing internecine struggle among two factions within the East German socialist party. Honecker could not openly criticize the NÖSPL yet, but he could openly criticize the cultural liberalization that had accompanied it. It was less politically risky to criticize a movie or a book than to criticize a major figure — particularly Ulbricht, *the* major figure in the SED. At the plenum, Honecker did indulge in a vague attack on “leading comrades” in the party who were allegedly seeking to imitate the economic success of the west, while they were at the same time allegedly neglecting “the economic successes and scientific accomplishments of the Soviet Union.” Most insiders at the plenum would probably have understood that by defaming “leading comrades” and urging an intensification of “cooperation with our Soviet brother Party,” Honecker was actually obliquely and namelessly criticizing the deceased Apel.³ But such rhetorical sleight-of-hand would only have been understood by communists already steeped in the arcana of debates within the SED, not by the general public.

The public face of the eleventh plenum, therefore, showed the SED as a unified party. When Erich Honecker led the charge against cultural figures, Walter Ulbricht did not fail to join in. As Beyer recalled in his autobiography, the basic message of all the major party leaders at the eleventh plenum was “that society was healthy and moving forward, but that there were some harmful tendencies in various areas of culture that needed to be fought.”⁴ Quite likely Ulbricht understood that cultural policy was a pawn in a much larger political chess game, and was willing to go along with hardliners’ attacks on cultural liberalization in order to save his own pet project, the NÖSPL. It was not until 1971 that, with Soviet cooperation, Honecker finally succeeded in ousting Ulbricht from his position and taking over as East German leader. Tellingly, when he did so, he immediately put an end to the last vestiges of Ulbricht’s NÖSPL but ordered a liberalization of cultural policies. He thus precisely reversed his own course during the eleventh plenum, showing that for him, too, culture was primarily a pawn in a larger political chess game.

It is worth noting that the eleventh plenum of the SED’s central committee was not the only venue in which culture served as a discursive proxy for other elements of East German society; throughout its

³ Monika Kaiser, *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker: Funktionsmechanismen der SED-Diktatur in Konfliktsituationen 1962 bis 1972* (Berlin: Akademie, 1997), 207.

⁴ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 137.

four-decade history, the GDR often placed culture in this position. Lacking an open public sphere for discussion — in newspapers, on television or radio, let alone at public meetings or demonstrations — matters of social import often found their way into novels or feature films. Almost all of the films that were banned in the wake of the eleventh plenum served this function: they addressed key issues in the development of contemporary East German society, potentially opening those issues up to widespread debate.

Beyer's *Spur der Steine* ultimately became the most famous case in point. The entire film is framed around a discussion taking place at the fictional Schkona petrochemical plant, whose real-life model was the Leuna II plant begun on October 8, 1959, the day after the tenth anniversary of the GDR. Konrad Wolf's *Sonnensucher* had begun with the foundation of the GDR a decade earlier, in 1949, and had revolved around the early years of the construction of the GDR, with a particular emphasis on Soviet–East German cooperation. Beyer's film, made seven years later, tells a similar narrative, showing the developmental problems faced by the GDR when the war is a distant memory and there are few Soviets in sight. The GDR is now faced with its own internal problems, which it must solve primarily on its own without the help of the Soviet Union; this change is entirely in line with Ulbricht's and Apel's NÖSPL. As in Wolf's *Sonnensucher*, so too in Beyer's *Spur der Steine* a portrait of Walter Ulbricht hangs on the wall of the plant's party office. However, the GDR is now a much more developed state; Beyer's Schkona is not quite as wild as Wolf's Wismut had been — it is not, for instance, filled with prostitutes — but it is plagued by bureaucratic paper-pushing and passing of the buck, which had been less of a problem at Wolf's Wismut. Like *Sonnensucher*, *Spur der Steine* features a pretty female protagonist — Kati Klee, played by the Polish actress Krystyna Stypulkowska, with German-language dubbing by Jutta Hoffmann — who goes to work at a major industrial plant; also, like *Sonnensucher*, *Spur der Steine* combines the politics of work with the politics of the personal as Klee tries to make her way as an engineer in a male-dominated world. Where Wolf's female protagonist Lutz had three male admirers (a Soviet officer and two Germans, one a worker and the other a manger), Beyer's Klee has only two. The rowdy, macho construction carpenter Hannes Balla (played by the popular East German star Manfred Krug) has his own brigade of seven carpenters — a kind of “Magnificent Seven” of East German men, since the carpenters' traditional broad-brimmed hats and vests make them look uncannily like the heroes of American Westerns — while the married Werner Horrath (played by the East German stage star Eberhard Esche) arrives at Schkona at the same time as Klee in order to lead the plant's SED organization. During the first half of the film Horrath is a kind of sheriff who has come to bring law and order to Schkona and to ensure that the plant gets

built professionally and in a timely fashion. This mission inevitably brings him into conflict with the troublemaker Balla, who, although a top-notch worker, is unwilling to accept party discipline. In one particularly dramatic scene, Horrath and Balla face each other in a kind of ersatz shootout, each sitting on a chair and engaging in an aggressive clapping competition — each man hitting the other's palm rhythmically with increasing intensity and speed — that ultimately leaves Horrath on the floor. Significantly, Balla does not push Horrath to the floor until Klee arrives on the scene; he clearly wants to demonstrate to her that he is the stronger man. But it is precisely because of Kati's sympathy for Horrath that she chooses him, and not Balla.

Although Beyer's Kati Klee may partially resemble Wolf's Lutz in making her way in a world of hard physical labor dominated by strong men, she is also significantly different. Whereas Lutz had been a disadvantaged vagrant arrested by the police and sent to Wismut with other women of low repute, Klee is a member of the socialist elite, the daughter of an important party leader in Dresden. She chooses to go to Schkona because of her idealism and her determination to participate in the construction of a developed socialist society, something her colleague Hesselbarth dismissively refers to this "FDJ-Idealismus" (the idealism of the party youth). Schkona's director Richard Trutmann, a bureaucratic paper-pusher who is out of his depth at the large construction site, tries to discourage Klee from coming, telling her that she will only be unhappy, but Klee insists. At the real Leuna chemical complex on which Beyer's filmic Schkona is based, male workers had in fact openly protested the promotion of women to leading positions in the 1950s; the film's depiction of misogyny on the part of management and workers reflects historical truth.⁵ Whereas Lutz in *Sonnensucher* had been an uneducated and unskilled worker, Klee in *Spur der Steine* is an engineer in a managerial position. And whereas Lutz ultimately marries Franz Beier, Wismut's civilian chief, Klee never gets married to either of her admirers — neither Werner Horrath nor Hannes Balla. Instead, she has an affair with the married Horrath, gets pregnant, and ultimately gives birth to a son who resembles his father. This particular plot element — an adulterous affair with a married man — reflects the reality that in the GDR many working husbands lived away from their wives during the work week and were hence sometimes tempted into adulterous affairs, particularly with their unmarried female coworkers.⁶ It is Klee's extramarital pregnancy that causes consternation at Schkona; when Horrath finally admits that he is the father of her child, the SED organization within the plant has

⁵ See Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, 107.

⁶ See Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, 217.

an emergency meeting to review his sexual misbehavior and the problems at the plant itself, which Horrath, with his unconventional methods, had come close to solving. This meeting forms the framework for the film's entire narrative, which consists primarily of the meeting, with flashbacks occasioned by the topics under discussion. This structure enabled director Frank Beyer to transform Erik Neutsch's massive socialist realist chef d'œuvre into a movie of two-and-a-quarter hours. As Beyer wrote three decades later in his autobiography, "theoretically, I'm against flashbacks, because I consider them to be a second-rate film technique. In our case the technique proved advantageous not only because entire subplots of the film could be summarized in a few sentences, but above all because the present-time plot and the flashbacks constantly supplemented each other, creating additional tension."⁷

As Joshua Feinstein has noted, the party meeting that forms the central framework for *Spur der Steine* also makes the film particularly relevant for the political situation in the GDR in 1965–66. After all, the eleventh plenum of the SED was precisely such a party meeting, and it took place at the very highest level of society, combining a discussion of economics, culture, and politics, and requiring self-criticism from various party members. The meeting that takes place in *Spur der Steine* is fundamentally similar: it is attended by the highest functionary of the district SED, and it combines a discussion of the successful new production methods introduced by Horrath with a discussion of Horrath's shocking and hypocritical personal life. The highpoint of this hypocrisy had come at an earlier party meeting when Horrath, who knows he's the father of Klee's baby, had asked her, point-blank and publicly, who the father was. Within the context of the film's production narrative, it is clear that Horrath feigns innocence not in order to save his own skin but to save the beneficial economic innovations that he has pioneered; he rightly fears that openness on his part would allow his enemies to torpedo not only his career but also his work for the Schkona plant. Nevertheless, Horrath is not just putting himself at the disposal of a larger economic goal; he is also putting his lover Klee at the disposal of that goal. Just as SED hardliners at the eleventh plenum had used cultural issues as a proxy for attacking Erich Apel and Walter Ulbricht's NÖSPL, in *Spur der Steine* party bureaucrats like Trutmann and Horrath's second-in-command Heinz Bleibtreu use Horrath's personal failings as a way of attacking his successful economic innovations. Although its filming was largely completed before the autumn of 1965, *Spur der Steine* uncannily reflected the unrest and recrimination that was soon to come.

⁷ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 129.

A number of the scenes in *Spur der Steine* were bound to cause consternation among conservatives in the SED. One of the movie's most famous scenes features Hannes Balla and his brigade of carpenters stripping naked and jumping into a duck pond; when a policeman comes to order them out, Balla pulls the policeman in instead. Public nakedness coupled with disrespect for authority were not calculated to win over the hearts and minds of party hardliners. Toward the end of the film, some of the workers at the plant engage in a wildcat strike, and even in violence against strikebreakers. This was the kind of thing that was taboo for the SED, which explicitly viewed itself as a party of, by, and for German workers. The idea that German workers might engage in open rebellion against their own party and its policies was unthinkable and certainly not appropriate in a prominent film. As Honecker's hard-line ally Kurt Hager, the party's ideological watchdog, argued in a March 1966 discussion of the film: "It's questionable whether one should show the strike at all. . . . It's not communicated clearly that strikes are a way of fighting against one's own class, and that one can't resort to such methods without having to suffer the consequences."⁸

Other hardliners criticized the negative role that many party members played in the film. Trutmann is not particularly intelligent, and he is afraid of taking responsibility for his own actions, while Horrath's assistant Bleibtreu is an opportunist looking out exclusively for his own interests, not for the greater good of the community. Horrath himself becomes tangled up in hypocrisy, setting himself up as a moral example to the community while secretly leading a double life and ultimately betraying both his wife and his lover. Film politician Hans Rodenberg asked rhetorically, "Who represents the Party in this film?" Rodenberg answered his own question by noting: "Comrades are shown who can not take decisions in their private lives. The Party is represented by Horrath, who lies to the Party. The Party, moreover, is the incompetent construction manager and the hidebound, dangerous Bleibtreu."⁹ Klaus Gysi, another of the SED's cultural experts, complained that "the Party appears petit-bourgeois on the one hand and, on the other, inhuman. The Party leadership meeting about who the child's father is and Horrath sleeping on the job are just two examples. The Party has the character of a petit-bourgeois Sunday school. The working class does not find expression in the Party leadership or elsewhere."¹⁰

Such arguments reveal that many high-level members of the SED essentially saw art in general, and film in particular, not as a forum for

⁸ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 141. Ellipses in the original.

⁹ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 140.

¹⁰ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 140.

open public discussions about social problems but rather as a means of propagandizing the populace with depictions of positive socialist heroes, as if there were a primitive, one-to-one correspondence between the kind of art a population is exposed to and the way that population behaves. If one shows the population images of striking workers, for example, then the population might strike. If, on the other hand, one shows them images of happy workers successfully building a socialist industrial plant under the wise leadership of blameless communist leaders, then they would happily work for leaders, whom they would imagine to be blameless.

Other members of the party, however, praised the film and argued in its favor. At a discussion about the film among leading cultural politicians in the ministry of culture in April of 1966, most participants spoke in favor of *Spur der Steine*, as was noted by one of Kurt Hager's associates in a memo. A month later, one of the administrators in the GDR's government film bureaucracy asserted in a confidential memo to the ministry of culture that *Spur der Steine* was one of "the most significant and interesting films to have been created in the DEFA studio." He praised "the passion and high expressive power of the film and its masterful aesthetic structuring," even while acknowledging that in a number of decisive points the film succumbed to ideological errors.¹¹ Although *Spur der Steine* was ultimately banned at the beginning of July of 1966, many East German film workers continued to praise it, as the head of the HV-Film noted on July 4: "Although they knew about the very serious and principled objections to the film, they have nevertheless attempted in various ways to play up the film and proclaim it as a role model for contemporary cinema." Several months later, long after many in the GDR's film industry had knuckled under to pressure from the SED's hardliners, Konrad Wolf wrote a letter to the SED party organization at the DEFA studio praising *Spur der Steine* for honestly showing "our people's struggle to achieve consciousness of themselves in the most important sphere of socialism, the sphere of work!"¹² It was true, Wolf argued, that *Spur der Steine* did not show a direct and easy path to a happy communist future, but "the fact that this development is not a straight line and doesn't occur without setbacks — that is due to how complicated it is to influence human beings."¹³ Ultimately, he insisted, *Spur der Steine* deserved particular praise for showing "the dialectic of the interrelationship between personal

¹¹ Dagmar Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime: Die Filmpolitik der SED im Spiegel der DEFA-Produktionen* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2002), 148.

¹² Günter Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag: Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965 — Studien und Dokumente*, second edition (Berlin: Aufbau, 2000), 320.

¹³ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 320.

and social effects" in a multifaceted, challenging way.¹⁴ Wolf's defense of *Spur der Steine* annoyed the SED's hardliners so much that, as Frank Beyer later remembered, "in a specially convened meeting of the Party leadership they placed him under so much pressure that even he finally changed his opinion."¹⁵

Wolf was correct in arguing that Horrath and his failings were not the only part of the story of *Spur der Steine*, and that the interrelationship between Horrath and Balla was fundamental to a genuine understanding of the film. While it was true that Horrath behaved indecisively and hypocritically, it was just as true that the film told the story of Balla's development from a rowdy troublemaker to a model socialist worker filled with class-consciousness. At the beginning of the movie, Balla respects neither the SED nor its leaders, but by the end of the film he has come to understand the need for discipline at the workplace; instead of pulling policemen into duck ponds, he actually calls on the police to arrest a violent troublemaker in his own brigade. In contrast to the beginning of the movie where Balla disrespects and sexually harasses Klee, by the end he not only loves but also respects her, even when she has lost respect for herself. In one particularly poignant scene, when both are visiting Berlin as part of a work delegation, Klee gets drunk and leaves her hotel door open for Balla; as he himself acknowledges, this is the moment he has been awaiting for months, but nevertheless he declines to take advantage of her. By the film's end, Balla has committed himself to the responsible construction of socialism; he has been transformed from a hooligan and a bully into a model worker — from an outlaw to the sheriff, in terms of the film's stylistic references to American Westerns. And even Horrath, in spite of his betrayal of his lover, behaves with integrity in other respects; he ultimately admits freely that he is the father of her child, even though he does not have to, and even though he knows that he will lose his position as a result of his admission. By the end, Horrath has been stripped of his rank and title and kicked out of the SED, but he is still committed to the construction of the Schkona petrochemical plant as an ordinary worker. And Klee herself, despite her personal problems, remains a committed socialist. *Spur der Steine* is anything but a virulent attack on the SED or on the construction of socialism in East Germany. Rather, it shows how difficult the construction of socialism is, and how much it demands of individual socialists.

Reports about *Spur der Steine* had already appeared in the East German press, and its premiere had been set for June 30, 1966, when the party, in the last week of June, decided to ban it. As Frank Beyer later

¹⁴ Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 321.

¹⁵ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 151.

remembered, Berlin's Alexanderplatz featured a massive poster advertising his movie, featuring "the larger-than-life head of Manfred Krug with a carpenter's hat as Balla in *Spur der Steine*."¹⁶ Since many copies of the film had already been made, and since it was already scheduled for an initial run in major cities like Berlin, Leipzig, and Rostock, the party decided to let the film have its premiere in Berlin and in a few other venues, but at the same time it took steps to ensure that the public reaction to the film would be so negative that the party could be seen to be responding to the will of the people in banning it. As a telegram from the Politburo in Berlin to the SED's district leaders throughout the GDR explained, the GDR's minister of culture had ordered that there be no further advertising for *Spur der Steine*, and "that the film should be shown in the predetermined movie theaters of the district capitals in the period from 1–8 July (at most 8 days), 1966. During the temporary screening of the film *Spur der Steine*, which will certainly not be received uncritically by the public, a number of other popular films shall . . . be shown in the district capitals."¹⁷

The Politburo then sent paid saboteurs into most of the theaters where *Spur der Steine* was being shown. As Frank Beyer, who was present for the film's June 30 Berlin premiere, remembered: "About ten minutes went by before the first catcalls came. It turned out that among the 600 viewers there were between 80 and 100 people who already knew the film and had been sent to the premiere in order to play the 'voice of the people.' Their job was to shout the film down. The result was chaos in the movie theater."¹⁸ Two months later, when Beyer was called upon to explain himself and his film to a group of party activists in the DEFA studio, he bravely proclaimed: "The subject of this discussion is whether the film *Spur der Steine* is harmful to the Party. This will be clarified. But what's already clear to me is that the organizers of the incidents and shouting matches in the cinemas have damaged the Party's image at home and in the international public sphere."¹⁹ In his autobiography, Beyer noted that there had never been a similar incident of public sabotage of a film in the GDR. "I knew that at the beginning of the 1930s the Nazis had gone into movie theaters to shout down the pacifist American film *All Quiet on the Western Front*. . . . But I simply could not wrap my mind around the fact that the SED, of which I was a member, had organized a similar top-down 'provocation.'"²⁰

¹⁶ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 126.

¹⁷ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 146. My ellipsis.

¹⁸ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 146.

¹⁹ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 151–52.

²⁰ Beyer, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht*, 149.

Because he refused to apologize or to exercise the “self-criticism” that the party demanded of him, Beyer was expelled from work in the GDR film industry for many years and had to find employment in the theater in Dresden and in the GDR television industry. Almost a decade went by before he managed to make another film — *Jakob der Lügner*, the only GDR film ever nominated for an Oscar for best foreign-language film.



Paul and Paula. Courtesy of the DEFA-Stiftung.

17: *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1973) or East Germany in the '70s

Director: Heiner Carow

Cinematographer: Jürgen Brauer

Screenplay: Ulrich Plenzdorf and Heiner Carow

Producer: Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) (Erich Albrecht)

Editor: Evelyn Carow

Production Design: Harry Leupold

Costume Design: Barbara Braumann

Music: Peter Gotthardt, performed by the Puhdys

Soundtrack: Werner Blaß and Georg Gutschmidt

German Release Date: [East Germany] March 14, 1973

Actors: Angelica Domröse (Paula); Winfried Glatzeder (Paul);

Heidemarie Wenzel (Paul's wife); Fred Delmare (Reifen-Saft);

Jürgen Frohriep (Martin); Dietmar Richter-Reinick (a friend);

Eva-Maria Hagen (the blond woman); Rolf Ludwig (the

doctor); Hans Hardt-Hardtloff (owner of the shooting gallery);

Käthe Reichel (his wife)

RELEASED IN 1973, HEINER CAROW'S FILM *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (The Legend of Paul and Paula) quickly became one of the most popular East German movies of the 1970s, helping to counteract a steady decline in East German cinema attendance that had set in during the 1960s. The film was so popular that many East Germans named their daughters "Paula" after its female protagonist.¹ It continues to enjoy cult status today as an icon of GDR culture.

Die Legende von Paul und Paula reflects the cultural preoccupations of the early Honecker period. In 1971 Erich Honecker finally succeeded in ousting the GDR's long-ruling leader, Walter Ulbricht,

¹ Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 201.

from his position as general secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED).² Honecker promptly embarked on a political-economic course characterized by increasing attention to satisfying basic consumer demands. Whereas Ulbricht had emphasized the development of heavy industry (such as coal and steel), Honecker wanted to ingratiate himself to individual citizens by giving them the cars, homes, and groceries they wanted. East German film culture reflected this with a shift in emphasis from large-scale production to small-scale consumption; the heroines of Konrad Wolf's 1959 *Sonnensucher* and Frank Beyer's 1966 *Spur der Steine* had both worked in heavy industry (a uranium mine and a petrochemical plant, respectively), but Paula, the heroine of Carow's *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, works at a state-run supermarket selling groceries and accepting or rejecting recycled bottles. One of the movie's supermarket scenes shows Paula happily singing to customers at the checkout counter, and her enthusiasm spreads to the store's previously tense customers, who also begin to sing good-naturedly as they wait to purchase their goods. This scene of satisfied customers fulfilling their desires as socialist consumers corresponded to Honecker's vision for the GDR.

Under Honecker the GDR embarked on an ambitious construction program of large, concrete-and-steel apartment buildings to provide adequate, albeit not beautiful, living space, replacing run-down buildings from the turn of the century. Honecker's shift in emphasis away from heavy industry and toward consumer goods corresponded to a transition in emotional energy away from large-scale social and political concerns and toward the fulfillment of individual personal dreams. Ulbricht had emphasized the GDR's status as a transitional society on its way toward the utopia of communism; Honecker emphasized what was called *real existierender Sozialismus* (real existing socialism), i.e., the admittedly imperfect socialism that actually existed in the GDR. In the 1950s and 1960s, East German culture had radiated enthusiasm for the construction of the socialist German state — an enthusiasm well documented in Wolf's *Sonnensucher*. In conjunction with the transition from Ulbricht to Honecker, however, East German culture addressed itself more intensely to the everyday lives, hopes, and dreams of individual people like the protagonists of *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*. The films of the 1950s and 1960s had portrayed individuals' hopes and dreams for a better life for themselves coinciding with, and even reinforcing,

² On Honecker's machinations, see, among others, Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946–1973: Conflict and Crisis* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999), 160–93; and Monika Kaiser, *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker: Funktionsmechanismen der SED-Diktatur in Konfliktsituationen 1962 bis 1972* (Berlin: Akademie, 1971).

an idealistic emphasis on a better life for everyone — along the lines of Bertolt Brecht's poem "Keiner oder alle" (No One or Everyone) from his play *Die Tage der Kommune* (The Days of the Commune, 1948–49).³ Kati Klee in Beyer's *Spur der Steine*, for instance, sought both personal happiness and a better society. These films also frequently focused on the workplace as the site where individual lives came into contact most profoundly with the construction of socialist society. With the shift from Ulbricht to Honecker, however, the workplace gradually lost its overwhelming significance for GDR culture, and the emphasis shifted to people's personal lives, now reconceived as more or less separate from the greater world of politics and society. Carow's Paula is certainly a worker, just like Lutz in Wolf's *Sonnensucher*, but her work does not define her identity; it merely accompanies it. Where most of the action in *Sonnensucher* took place in and around the world of work, most of the action in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* takes place in the private sphere — its protagonists are prototypical representatives of the shift in emphasis from the public to the private. They are not seeking to create a better society for everyone; they are simply trying to achieve personal happiness and to find love.

Carow thematizes Honecker's construction program at both the beginning and the end of *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*. The film's first sequence shows the demolition of an old building, and after it has collapsed the audience can see the crane that workers are using to construct one of the large new concrete buildings favored by Honecker. This sequence is accompanied by a lively song from the GDR rock group the Puhdys — who became hugely popular as a result of their prominence in the film — proclaiming the inevitability, and necessity, of change: "If a person lives a long time / The world says it is time for him to go."⁴ In many ways the Puhdys' song is a riff on the Book of Ecclesiastes that everything in the world has its time and place — a message prominently taken up by the American rock group the Byrds in their 1965 hit song "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There is a Season)," written by the folksinger Pete Seeger in the 1950s. If Seeger and the Byrds had proclaimed in the 1950s and 1960s, at a time of cultural change in the United States, that there is "A time to be born, a time to die / A time to plant, a time to reap,"

³ Bertolt Brecht, "Keiner oder alle," from *Die Tage der Kommune*, in Brecht, *Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. Werner Hecht et al., *Stücke* (Berlin, Weimar, and Frankfurt: Aufbau and Suhrkamp, 1992), 8:243–317; here, 307–8.

⁴ Ulrich Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 9. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

then the Puhdys proclaimed in the GDR in the 1970s, also at a time of cultural change, that “Everything has its time / Collecting stones and throwing them away / Planting trees and cutting them down / Living and dying and peace and war.”⁵ The Puhdys’ genuflection to the Byrds reveals another of the major themes of the transition from Ulbricht to Honecker in the GDR: more or less official acceptance of East Germans’ desire for cultural and economic imitation of the west. Whereas previously the party had attacked western music, they now accepted it, and in fact permitted East German rock groups to imitate it. Whereas previously the party had punished those who viewed West German television, they now tacitly accepted that GDR citizens watched it. Increasingly, under Erich Honecker, the west, together with the west’s popular and consumer culture, became the implicit and even explicit horizon of expectations for the GDR’s government and citizens. This disappointed some who shared the utopian dream of a truly socialist society. Two feminist critics from the west accused *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* of being part of a general movement away from socialist ideology and toward the imitation of western consumerism, in which, purportedly, “an advertisement for camels (‘i’d walk a mile for a camel’) or blue jeans appears to be the ambassador of a promising, more beautiful world,” thus helping to make “capitalism or capitalist forms of exchange in general into a synonym for freedom and personal development.”⁶

Shortly after he came to power, Honecker famously proclaimed that for artists who did not question the basic commitment to socialism, there could be no more taboos: “Provided one starts from an established socialist standpoint, there cannot, in my opinion, be any taboo subjects for art and literature. This concerns issues of both content and style — in short: all issues relating to artistic mastery.”⁷ Many GDR artists — who well remembered the eleventh plenum’s wholesale attack on committed socialist artists in 1965 — greeted this pronouncement as a fundamental and positive change. The onset of the Honecker era filled them with hope for the development of a freer, more open role for art in socialist society.

The sense of excitement and optimism about art’s longed-for ability to address issues of public and private interest more freely and openly is very much on display in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, not only

⁵ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 9.

⁶ Helke Sander and Renée Schlesier, “*Die Legende von Paul und Paula*: Eine frauenverachtende Schnulze aus der DDR,” *Frauen und Film* no. 2 (September 1974): 8–47; here, 28. Sander and Schlesier do not capitalize.

⁷ Cited in Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 196.

in the film's subject matter but perhaps even more importantly in the lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek approach to that subject matter, what Honecker called style or "artistic mastery." In addition to western-style pop music of the sort that had come in for heavy criticism at the SED's eleventh plenum less than a decade earlier, Carow's film features open eroticism and partial nudity, and Paul, the primary male lead (played by the craggily handsome Winfried Glatzeder) is a party member and mid-level bureaucrat who has an adulterous affair with the passionate, pretty single mother Paula (played by Angelica Domröse). At least in part, two of the banned films of 1965–66 (Beyer's *Spur der Steine* and Kurt Maetzig's *Das Kaninchen bin ich*) had gotten in trouble with communist party authorities for a similar plot line: for showing a party bureaucrat engaged in an adulterous love affair. No doubt one of the reasons for the success of Carow's film was its open and frank portrayal of sexuality. As Fred Gehler, a reviewer for East Berlin's weekly newspaper *Sonntag*, noted in April of 1973, shortly after the movie's GDR release, "We have not been spoiled with moving love stories in the cinema. Therefore my unconditional praise for this treatment of the love theme. I am all for talking about love in the appropriate sensual terms rather than having the topic rhetorically exhausted."⁸

Die Legende von Paul und Paula was unusual not just for breaking what had previously been taboos, but also for the *way* that it broke them. Shot in vivid color (unlike most previous DEFA movies, including *Sonnensucher* and *Spur der Steine*), it radiated optimism and lightheartedness, even when it addressed difficult or depressing subjects like adultery and death. The movie was partly based on the real story of a woman who gave up great passion in order to make do with a dependable but unexciting man, but the screenwriter Ulrich Plenzdorf chose to make it about absolute love, as Plenzdorf admitted: "if we had told what really happened, it would have been absolutely depressing, much more depressing than Paula's death. The story ends with her marrying Reifen-Saft. This is much more hopeless than our end, which transfigures the matter."⁹ The film even played lightheartedly with its own status as a film fiction, a playfulness already evident in the title, which refers not just to "Paul and Paula" but to the two lovers' "legend." It was, as Joshua Feinstein has suggested, a "self-ironizing fairy tale."¹⁰

⁸ Frank Gehler, "Die Legende von Paul und Paula: Ein DEFA-Film von Ulrich Plenzdorf und Heiner Carow," *Sonntag*, 22 April 1973, 7. Translation cited from the Umass/Defa Web site: <http://www.umass.edu/defa/films/legend.shtml>.

⁹ Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 199.

¹⁰ Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002), 207. I have corrected the original "fairly tale" to "fairy tale."

In subject matter and in tone, then, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* was both a significant departure from previous party orthodoxies and also very much part of Honecker's calculated liberalization of the cultural sphere. Honecker, the very man who had led the attack on prominent GDR artists at the eleventh plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in December of 1965, was also the party leader who personally intervened to permit the screening of *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* in 1973, even though the film had come in for heavy criticism from party apparatchiks upset that the film's protagonists showed so little concern for the development of socialist society. A review in *Neues Deutschland* in March of 1973, for instance, had denounced Paul and Paula's commitment to their own "biological interests" rather than to "the cause of socialism."¹¹ On April 29, 1973, the day before the film's scheduled release, Honecker made a dramatic visit to the Cosmos Movie Theater in Berlin to see *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* for himself.¹² Honecker overrode the concerns of the movie's critics and permitted Carow's film to play to packed theaters throughout the GDR.

But *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* goes even further in its departure from prudish party orthodoxy. One of the film's most famous sequences, which depicts both literally and metaphorically the climax of Paul and Paula's romantic relationship, and which comes about half-way through the film, shows the two lovers engaged in a kind of love orgy in Paula's bedroom. Paula has decorated herself and the room exotically, and the flowers artfully strewn everywhere seem to suggest a sort of South Sea adventure. The space of Paula's ordinary life now signifies something absolutely out-of-the-ordinary. Paul arrives at this newly exotic rendezvous literally wearing a uniform, the uniform of the GDR's Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse (fighting groups of the working class), the quasi-military organization that many party members in blue- and white-collar jobs belonged to. Paula, meanwhile, is wearing only an erotic slip — also decorated with flowers — that shows off her voluptuous body, and a wreath of flowers in her hair. Paul takes off his uniform jacket and clunky boots, and he gets into Paula's bed, thus symbolically leaving his own straight-laced, uptight, male-dominated world of work for party and state and entering Paula's realm of eroticism and pleasure, which is encoded as emphatically female, especially since Paula tells Paul that the women in her family only give birth to

¹¹ Cited in Irene Dölling, "We all Love Paula but Paul Is More Important to us': Constructing a 'Socialist Person' Using the 'Femininity' of a Working Woman," *New German Critique*, no. 82 (Winter 2001): 77–90; here, 79. Originally from a review of *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* in *Neues Deutschland*, 3 March 1973.

¹² Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 211.

girls. Even Paula's bed — the site of Paula's previous lonely drinking sessions, where the film's audience had first witnessed her longing for a more exciting life filled with romantic satisfaction — has been decorated with flowers, and scrawled on the headboard are the words "Paul" and "Paula," together with pictures of hearts, as if the bed itself were now consecrated solely to Paul and Paula's love for each other. In effect, by scrawling Paul's name on her bed, Paula has declared the bed off limits to any other man. The two lovers consume a shish kebob feast while facing each other half-naked in the bed, and then Paula begins to help Paul undress, telling him, after she has taken off his shirt, that she prefers him bare-chested because he is so "schön griffig" (wonderfully handy, or touchable).¹³ She then takes salt and pepper shakers and proceeds to pour salt and pepper on her lover's shoulders, as if she were about to eat him. "I'm not spicy enough for you?" he asks, suggesting that he quite literally needs to be spiced up.¹⁴ After Paula disposes of the leftover food and dirty dishes by wrapping them up in a bed sheet and putting them on the floor — hardly the cleaning methods of the stereotypical German *Hausfrau* — it is clear that the second part of the feast — the sexual part — is about to begin. The two lovers have consumed exotic food; now they will consummate their love for each other. Plenzdorf, who co-wrote the screenplay for *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* together with Carow, calls this a *Liebesmahl*, a "love feast" or "feast of love."¹⁵ This scene's open and sensual display of female sexual desire for the beautiful male body was unprecedented in GDR cinema. It is true that Lutz in Konrad Wolf's *Sonnensucher* had longed for the body of the German mineworker Günter Holleck, but in the end she had overcome her own sexual desire by committing herself to a relationship with the older, physically disabled Franz Beier. In Wolf's 1964 film *Der geteilte Himmel*, the female protagonist Rita must choose between her love for the chemist Manfred and her commitment to productive work in the socialist GDR; she chooses the latter. Paula in Carow's *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* has no intention of sublimating her sexual desires for any reason.

As if such an open display of sexuality and female desire were not enough, the film even seems to imply that there may be drugs at work in Paula's seduction of Paul: "What was that stuff?" asks Paul, as he begins to hallucinate and hear strange noises; she replies that it was not the schnapps they were drinking that is giving him visions, but rather

¹³ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 53.

¹⁴ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 54.

¹⁵ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 54.

some other source of magical power.¹⁶ Paul and Paula then proceed to go on a trip together — almost like an LSD trip — at least in Paul's erotic fantasy. Paula takes him on a journey through time and space as their bed, now on a river barge named "Paula" — apparently inspired by the barges operated by Paula's ancestors, but psychedelically decorated — floats along the water, with Paula's ancestors watching the two lovers. It appears to be their imaginary wedding night, since Paula is wearing a bridal veil, although she is completely naked otherwise. Paula is now both a person and a ship that takes Paul on a journey, and he is "riding" her in more than just one way. This scene is accompanied by another popular song by the Puhdys, who sing, as if giving advice specifically to Paul:

Go to her
 And let your kite fly.
 Hold onto her
 Because life's not just a duty.
 Close your eyes
 Then you'll see only her
 Go to her
 And let your kite fly.¹⁷

This song commands Paul to close his eyes to the rest of the world and to see only Paula and her love for him, and it warns him that life requires more than just doing one's duty — the previous guiding star of his life — but also affection and love. The kite (*Drachen*) about which the Puhdys sing suggests both the carefree world of childhood and also the sail of the ship (Paula) that the two lovers are sailing on. Paul is thus urged to fly his kite, to raise the sails of his ship and travel away, and also to have sex with Paula since the word "to rise" (*steigen*) also has sexual implications. While Paul and Paula alternately make love to each other and bow to Paula's ancestors, two buttoned-up male bureaucrats wearing suits and ties and the kind of hats favored by Erich Honecker — they are Paul's straight-laced colleagues from the office — appear, and one of them complains: "But that's porno!" The other one replies: "Just look away."¹⁸ Which the prudish bureaucrat proceeds to do, although he can't help looking at Paul and Paula's lovemaking again.

This entire scene contradicted the strictures of SED orthodoxy in numerous ways. At the most basic level, it violates the dictates of socialist

¹⁶ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 55.

¹⁷ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 59.

¹⁸ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 57.

realism by interrupting the plot sequence of a dream with a sequence of (implicitly quite real) criticism from representatives of the GDR's socialist bureaucracy. In this scene, Carow has anticipated the criticisms that GDR bureaucrats would later make of his movie ("But that's porno!") and introduced them into the diegesis of the movie itself at its most disruptive and potentially objectionable point. The imaginary bureaucrat's complaint about pornography makes fun of similar complaints about frank portrayals of sexuality from SED bureaucrats in the 1960s, especially during the eleventh plenum when, for instance, the cultural policy-maker Alexander Abusch had denounced what he called GDR filmmakers' "overemphasis on the sexual" and their alleged imitation of purportedly decadent western models in "our completely different social relations."¹⁹ The scene's "trip" is a journey away from engagement with the socialist sphere of work and society — a sphere that forms the background to a great many GDR films, including Wolf's *Sonnensucher* and Beyer's *Spur der Steine* — and toward individual fulfillment in the private sphere of sex and the family. By redecorating her apartment, Paula has made it into an exotic destination far removed from the ordinary everyday world of socialist society. Her apartment represents an autonomous sphere, and the bed in which Paul and Paula make love becomes part of a boat — "This is what I've always dreamed of: traveling by bed," exclaims Paula — that, at least in the realm of imagination, takes the two lovers even further away from the limitations of the ordinary represented by a walled-in Berlin and the party bureaucrats.²⁰ In a sense, this dream scene represents Paula's secession from the world of everyday socialism and her attempt to lure Paul into her own world of love, femininity, and pleasure. Paul resists halfheartedly — "Paula! We have to turn back!" he declares to her in his dream, but her response shows that she refuses to recognize the claims of the workaday world: "Do you know, for the first time I don't want to turn back again at all!"²¹ Paula has become an enchantress like Calypso in Homer's *Odyssey* or Venus in Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*, and in this scene she represents a principle directly opposed to the ordinary world of work and responsibility. In the scene's dream sequence, Paula actually has her ancestors chain Paul to her bed as the Puhdys sing "Reit als Welle meinen Leib!" (ride my body like a wave).²² The scene even imagines a kind of Wagnerian *Liebestod* (love death) for the two lovers, as

¹⁹ Dagmar Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime: Die Filmpolitik der SED im Spiegel der DEFA-Produktionen* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2002), 131. See also Bergahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 200.

²⁰ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 55.

²¹ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 58.

²² My own transcription; not in the published film script.

the bed they are chained to ultimately becomes a burning funeral pyre. This imagined *Liebestod* resonates with a long tradition of literary depictions of absolute love between two human beings as being incompatible with everyday life in the social world. In most of these depictions, it is the woman who is represented as the primary force of absolute love, while the man often resists.

Of course, Paul ultimately escapes from Paula's enchantment. In the dream sequence, one of the party bureaucrats sets fire to the lovers' bed, now completely covered with flowers like an Indian funeral pyre. As the imaginary bed with the two lovers in it burns, the real Paul wakes up in the real Paula's bed, and he complains that it is hot in Paula's apartment. He then proceeds to put his boots and his uniform back on — thus reversing the process of enchantment that had begun the previous evening — and when Paula asks him when he will visit her again, he snaps at her impatiently. The entry back into the world of work and ordinary duties is signaled when Paula asks Paul, for the first time, what he actually does for a living. His response of "Persönlicher Referent" (personal consultant) suggests some sort of bureaucratic management job, but it also implies that what Paul does — however well remunerated and socially validated — is so vague and unspecific as to be devoid of real meaning.²³

The next scene shows Paul dressed in a jacket and tie at a work party where East Germans and Africans in colorful, flowing robes dance and drink together. The exoticism and sexuality of this scene, in which Paul's scheming, money-hungry, and adulterous wife plays an important role as the object of desire for various male gazes, are entirely contained; they are instrumentalized in order to help the GDR attain its economic goals (in this case, profitable trade with an African nation). Where Paula's eroticism and sexuality had been self-sufficient and noninstrumental, the sexuality on display at Paul's work party is instrumentalized and bound to a particular function; far from being dangerous or disruptive, it actually works to support the state and its goals. As if to symbolize the instrumentalization of eroticism musically, the scene features not the rock music of the Puhdys but rather big band music in the style of the 1950s or 1960s. Paula tries to steal her way into this highly controlled celebration, but Paul himself whisks her away. The scene is the reverse of the previous one: where Paul had entered Paula's private erotic world to be enchanted by her, here Paula tries to break into the controlled world of Paul's day job and is deflected by him.

Die Legende von Paul und Paula has come in for heavy criticism from feminists, particularly in West Germany, because of its depiction of

²³ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 62.

a woman who, far from seeking fulfillment in work or society, devotes herself exclusively to fulfillment in love. Paula's commitment to Paul is overwhelming, and she is even willing to die for it. Although she knows perfectly well that a third pregnancy is likely to kill her, she insists on getting pregnant and giving birth to Paul's child, arguing that Paul is the "only man for me."²⁴ A year after the film's release, the West German feminists Helke Sander and Renée Schlesier criticized as sentimental and male chauvinistic Carow's depiction of a woman who finds her greatest fulfillment in loving a man and in bearing his child.²⁵ For Sander and Schlesier, the figure of Paula revealed "how sexists like to see women: as uneducated, masochist, sentimental beings underneath the man."²⁶ Even for these two critics, however, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* was the "expression of a strong critique of the repressive reality of the gdr."²⁷ In a post-1989 analysis of the film, the East German feminist Irene Dölling, although taking into account the various ways in which Carow's film contravenes established socialist dogma, called the depiction of Paula at least partially conventional, since as she argues, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* "reproduces, almost as a by-product, the familiar codes of modernity's symbolic gender order."²⁸ That gender order reserves the sphere of love, sexuality, child-rearing, and the home for women, while it allots to men the privilege of public social activity. Implicit in the criticism of these three feminists is the argument that *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, while presenting itself as a subversive message about individual liberation from oppressive social constraints, actually reinforces traditional gender stereotypes and encourages both men and women to conceive of liberation and personal happiness as nothing more than acquiescence to those stereotypes.

These criticisms need to be taken seriously, particularly in a film that so many in the GDR welcomed as a paean to personal liberation. Paula's ultimate death reinforces the motif, featured in countless operas and love stories, of the female protagonist dying for love, while the male goes on with everyday life, albeit as a better and changed man, improved by his

²⁴ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 87.

²⁵ Sander and Schlesier, "Die Legende von Paul und Paula," 8. See also Andrea Rinke, "From Models to Misfits: Women in DEFA Films of the 1970's and 1980's," in *Triangulated Visions: Women in Recent German Cinema*, ed. Ingeborg Majer-O'Sickey and Ingeborg von Zadow (Albany: State U of New York P, 1998), 207–18.

²⁶ Sander and Schlesier, "Die Legende von Paul und Paula," 23.

²⁷ Sander and Schlesier, "Die Legende von Paul und Paula," 29.

²⁸ Dölling, "We All Love Paula but Paul Is More Important to Us," 80.

relationship with the woman. As Dölling persuasively argues, the potentially dangerous force of female sexuality — always viewed as problematic by patriarchal regimes, not only in socialism — is contained by Paula's death, while the more positive aspects of female sexuality are incorporated into Paul's new personality. At the end of the movie, Paul lies in bed with three children — a son from his unfaithful wife Ines, Paula's daughter with another man, and the son born to him by Paula — and the Puhdys sing, "I've placed myself in her shadow," suggesting that his relationship with Paula has made Paul become a different man, a better man living with her shadow at his side.²⁹ When, in one of the movie's most famous scenes, Paul breaks down the door of Paula's apartment with an axe, he has become a fairy-tale prince freeing the princess from her own self-imposed isolation.³⁰ Paula is Sleeping Beauty, and Paul is waking her up to a new life of romantic fulfillment, evidently ignoring the Puhdys' command: "Don't wake her until she wakes herself."³¹ But in fact, Paula has already woken up, and Paul is just freeing her from the stasis and isolation she has imposed on herself out of guilt for her first son's death in a traffic accident, a death for which she blames herself. It is no wonder that feminists objected to this scene, which appears to come close to validating rape. As Paula screams "No, no, no," Paul barges in and takes her into his arms, and ultimately her verbal "No" becomes a visual "Yes" as Paula begins to smile in self-fulfillment.³² Paula has become the woman who says no but really means yes.³³

As problematic as this scene may be, however, it needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Heiner Carow suggests as much by casting himself in the role of a nosy but well-meaning neighbor who appears with a camera to take pictures while Paul breaks down the door. As he enters and embraces her, the two lovers play to an audience of Paula's well-meaning older neighbors — who cheer as the two lovers find their happiness — and of the director himself, who is there to photograph the scene both in the film's diegesis (as Paula's neighbor) and extradiegetically in his real-life role as the film's director. Here once again Heiner Carow breaks

²⁹ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 88.

³⁰ The post-Wall film *Sonnenallee* (1999) by Leander Haussmann, one of the most important films in the *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the GDR) wave that set in several years after the end of the GDR, has an ironic reference to this already ironic scene. See Paul Cooke, "Performing 'Ostalgie': Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee*," *German Life and Letters* 56, no. 2 (2003): 156–67.

³¹ Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 9.

³² See Plenzdorf, *Die Legende von Paul & Paula: Filmerzählung*, 85.

³³ Sander and Schlesier, "Die Legende von Paul und Paula," 15.

into the film's diegesis, encouraging his audience to be aware of the movie's operatic, unrealistic elements. It is precisely the nosy neighbor's black-and-white photograph of Paul and Paula embracing each other that the audience sees as the movie's final image, and that the audience had seen Paul holding at the beginning of the movie. Carow's tongue-in-cheek casting of himself as a voyeuristic but well-meaning neighbor-photographer reinforces the staged, "legendary" aspect of a film that explicitly calls itself a *Legende* and that, by implication, does not claim to depict life in a realistic, straightforward way. As Volker Baer wrote in West Berlin's *Tagespiegel* in April of 1973, the title of Carow's film suggested "a detached approach to East Berlin reality — in an imaginative and easy-going way, placing it between reality and imagination."³⁴ For Baer *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, while characteristic "for the East Berlin mentality" of the 1970s, demonstrated "fresh humor and aggressive charm," in spite of realistic elements.³⁵ In the film's title and in his playful approach to the diegesis, Carow is acknowledging the dream of absolute fulfillment in romantic love as precisely that: a dream, a memory. The film's beginning and conclusion reinforce this message, as the very apartment building in which Paula and Paula had their love nest is demolished to make way for a new, more modern building. Here the modern and the efficient are not simply a positive representation of social progress but also part of a force that is eliminating older, sometimes healthy social traditions represented by both Paula and the building in which she used to live.³⁶ It is no wonder that *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* became a significant part of GDR nostalgia, what was ironically referred to as *Ostalgie*, after 1989. In many ways the film is already constructed as nostalgia, as memory.

In response to the feminist critics of *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, it is worth pointing out that in the context of East German socialism, the depiction of a woman seeking fulfillment primarily in love had the potential for being more transgressive than in the context of western consumerism. The SED had placed great emphasis on getting women into the workforce, and it had encouraged them to receive specialized training in order to claim higher-level jobs. Although Paula

³⁴ Cited from the University of Massachusetts Web site: <http://www.umass.edu/defa/films/legend.shtml>.

³⁵ Ralf Schenk, ed., *Worte/Widerworte: Volker Baer — Texte zum Film 1959–2007* (Marburg: Schüren, 2009), 176, 177. From the article "Voll Neugier und Optimismus: Angelica Domröse mit neuem Aufgabenbereich," published in the *Tagespiegel* on 21 September 1980 and reprinted in *Worte/Widerworte*, 176–80.

³⁶ See Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 210–11.

³⁷ See Dölling, "We all Love Paula but Paul is More Important to us," 85.

is certainly in the workforce, she ignores the possibility of a higher-level job and seems content with her work as a supermarket cashier.³⁷ Paula does not expect her primary fulfillment to come from work; she wants it to come from love. Paula is thus hardly a model socialist woman worker. While it might appear reactionary in a western context, Paul and Paula's retreat to a private sphere of personal happiness can, in the context of East German socialism, be seen as a critique of the socialist public sphere itself. The West German journalist and diplomat Günter Gaus — who became the Federal Republic's first official representative in East Germany after the partial normalization of relations between the two German states that occurred as a result of the *Grunddlagenvertrag* (Basic Treaty) of 1972–73 — famously referred to East Germany as a *Nischengesellschaft* (society of niches) in which individuals sought refuge from the demands of an oppressive social and political sphere in the womb of personal relationships. Gaus's description of GDR society and culture is particularly applicable to the Honecker era that began in 1971, and *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* is a good illustration of this culture: Paul and Paula are able, at least briefly, to create a utopian private niche in whose confines they are free. It is true that Carow plays into traditional gender stereotypes in the creation of a film that he openly admits is a “legend,” but that does not necessarily negate the film's transgressive qualities.

The two lovers' quest for personal freedom and fulfillment in each other's arms is not, of course, unique to GDR society. In fact, throughout the 1970s the western world — including the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States of America — witnessed the gradual abandonment of the radical social projects of the 1960s and an increasing emphasis on individual personal fulfillment. In West Germany this turn became known as the *Tendenzwende* (the change of tendencies). In the United States the 1970s were the classic decade of feminism and the gay liberation movement — movements that insisted on the social and political importance of everyday personal life. A similar shift occurred in the GDR, and for some of the same reasons. Hence, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, in spite of its emphasis on the personal, is paradoxically part of a large-scale cultural convergence between the capitalist and the communist worlds perceived by many observers between East and West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁸ The western feminist movement argued that “the personal is the political,” and *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* showed that this was at least partially

³⁸ See Sander and Schlesier, “*Die Legende von Paul und Paula*,” 45, who cite a review in the *Spandauer Volksblatt* in which the film is seen as proof of the convergence theory.

true. In her refusal to compromise on her own happiness, and in her insistence on a fulfilled life here and now, Paula resonated with deep utopian longings in both the socialist and the capitalist worlds, and among both men and women. And Paula's dilemma — the dilemma of trying to combine individual happiness with responsible life as a citizen, a parent, and a worker — continues to resonate today, long after the demise of the GDR.



Renate Krössner as "Sunny." Courtesy of the DEFA-Stiftung.

18: *Solo Sunny* (1980) or Even Socialism Can't Stave Off Loneliness

Director: Konrad Wolf

Cinematographer: Eberhard Geick

Screenplay: Wolfgang Kohlhaase and Konrad Wolf

Producer: Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) (Herbert Ehler)

Editor: Evelyn Carow

Production Design: Alfred Hirschmeier

Costume Design: Rita Bieler

Music: Günther Fischer

Soundtrack: Konrad Walle

German Release Date: [East Germany] January 18, 1980

Actors: Renate Krößner (Ingrid "Sunny" Sommer); Alexander

Lang (Ralph); Heide Kipp (Christine); Dieter Montag (Harry); Klaus Brasch (Norbert); Fred Düren (doctor); Ulrich Anschütz (graphic artist); Ursula Braun (Frau Pfeiffer); Michael Christian (man at Sunny's place); Regine Doreen (Monika); Harald Warmbrunn (Benno)

Awards: Berlin International Film Festival, 1980: Silver Bear for Best Actress to Renate Krößner; Reader Jury of the *Berliner Morgenpost* to Wolfgang Kohlhaase and Konrad Wolf; Prix FIPRESCI to Konrad Wolf and Wolfgang Kohlhaase; Chicago International Film Festival: Gold Plaque for Best Script to Wolfgang Kohlhaase

IN SPITE OF ITS OFTEN BLEAK SUBJECT MATTER, Konrad Wolf's last film, *Solo Sunny*, which he directed in conjunction with his screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase, was a surprise DEFA hit at a time — after the expatriation of the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann — when DEFA very much needed a hit. Kohlhaase later admitted that neither he nor Wolf had expected this film to be a popular success: “the massive public response to it from the moment it went on release was something we hadn't bargained for, it really took us by surprise.”¹ East German cinema attendance was continuing to decline in the 1970s and 1980s, since GDR citizens were watching more

¹ Wolfgang Kohlhaase, “DEFA: A Personal View,” in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 117–30; here, 126.

television and, when they went to the cinema at all, tended to prefer foreign films. As Anke Westphal writes, many East Germans “ignored the officially licensed GDR culture . . . , but some of them went to see *Solo Sunny* four times in 1980 alone.”² Renate Krößner’s portrayal of the lonely singer Ingrid Sommer (Sunny) resonated with viewers in the GDR and elsewhere and won her a Silver Bear at the 1980 Berlinale for best actress. *Solo Sunny* thus became the first East German film to be honored at Germany’s most important film festival.³ Sunny’s life in Berlin as a single woman, and the film’s powerful soundtrack, faintly echo Heiner Carow’s more upbeat 1973 film *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*. Both Carow’s Paula and Wolf’s Sunny are in search of happiness and love, but whereas Paula had imagined happiness as coming exclusively from her romantic relationship with her lover Paul, Sunny wants to find fulfillment in her professional life. Unlike Paula, Sunny is not satisfied with an ordinary blue-collar job, and she has embarked on a life as a singer.

In its emphasis on Sunny’s work life, Wolf and Kohlhaase’s film in a sense returns to the focus on work characteristic of some earlier GDR films, such as Wolf’s own *Sonnensucher* (1958) and Frank Beyer’s *Spur der Steine* (1966). Like the female protagonists of those films, Sunny is trying to find both professional fulfillment and love.⁴ Like Lutz in *Sonnensucher*, Sunny is also very much a “sun seeker,” and the film’s emotionally powerful title song — which Sunny performs repeatedly, allowing viewers to see its genesis and development throughout the film — describes the multi-colored hues that Sunny imagines for herself at some point in the future: “She is Sunny they will say some day.”⁵ Krößner’s voice has a roughness and a sadness vaguely reminiscent of Billy Holiday, and Sunny’s song implies that, for now, the singer is not yet “Sunny.”

Sunny’s life as a single woman in Berlin features a series of one-night stands. A nosy neighbor of Sunny’s complains to the police about her lifestyle, which includes the pigeons that congregate outside the window of her apartment, the loud music that she sometimes plays, and the various men who visit her from time to time. Confronted with this complaint at a police station (that features a portrait of GDR leader Erich Honecker

² Anke Westphal, “Die Solistin: Sie war das Vorbild für die ungewöhnliche Heldin in dem Defa-Film ‘Solo Sunny’ — Angepasst hat sich Sanje Torka nie,” *Berliner Zeitung Magazin*, 25–26 July 2009, 1–2; here, 1.

³ Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002), 246.

⁴ Kohlhaase’s screenplay was based on the real-life figure Sanje Torka. See Westphal, “Die Solistin.”

⁵ All transcriptions from the film are my own. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are also my own.

on the wall, just as a party office in Wolf's *Sonnensucher* had included a picture of Honecker's predecessor Walter Ulbricht), Sunny responds by informing a policeman that she has a male neighbor who lives across from her and masturbates while watching her through his window. Should she close her curtains, she asks rhetorically, so that he cannot see her and live in complete darkness even during the daytime? She then announces that she will not file a complaint against the man (though later in the film, she confronts him by looking directly at him from her open window across the courtyard of her apartment building), and when she returns home from the police station, she responds to the nosy old woman's complaints about her in two ways. First, she asks her other neighbors to sign a statement saying that they are not bothered by her lifestyle, and second, she deliberately steps onto the hand of the old woman as she is cleaning the stairwell. These and other incidents suggest that Sunny is not someone who responds to life passively or who expects others to take care of her problems. Instead, she forthrightly searches out her own answers.

Sunny's search for happiness takes her not into the mines, factories, or supermarkets depicted in *Sonnensucher*, *Spur der Steine*, and *Die Legende von Paula und Paula*, but rather into smoky, half-filled performance spaces where Sunny and her band, the Tornadoes, play to audiences as bored with their lives as many of the performers they are watching. Audience members come to these performances to escape from that boredom, but what they find is just more of the same. The stage shows to which Sunny contributes are mostly humdrum affairs, and the MC Benno Bohne (played by Harald Warmbrunn) repeats again and again the same tired joke about GDR shoes being unwearable, showing how canned even the supposedly spontaneous humor in these shows is (like so much "spontaneous" humor everywhere). Further, since he tells this joke while promoting the stage show to his understandably unappreciative audience, the joke becomes a jab at all of the performers on stage: it suggests that their work is just as "unwearable" and poor quality as the GDR shoes that — in his joke — one cannot actually walk in but can only carry under one's arms. (The joke plays on the fact that the word *tragen* in German means both "to wear" and "to carry.")

Like Paula in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, Sunny has a devoted male admirer who offers her love and comfort, but to whom she is not attracted. In both movies the heroine, in despair at the loneliness and insecurity of her life, is on the verge of actually marrying this figure when something intervenes. In *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* what intervenes is Paula's "legendary" love for Paul; what intervenes in *Solo Sunny* is not the arrival of a fairy-tale prince who breaks down her door but rather Sunny's own emotional honesty: she is unwilling to pretend that she loves someone when she doesn't. In fact, the person who breaks down doors in *Solo Sunny* is not a male lover but the resourceful Sunny herself, and

she does it without the help of an ax lent by a friendly neighbor (as in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*) but all on her own, with the strength of her legs. This scene is Wolf and Kohlhaase's answer to the storybook qualities of the similar scene at the end of Carow's movie. Sunny is kicked out of her band because she refuses to sleep with the band's saxophonist, and is publicly insulted by the MC who introduces as her an up-and-coming singer who has been up-and-coming for years. In response, she walks off stage and goes to the apartment of her lover Ralph (played by Alexander Lang), only to be told that she can't come in because he wasn't expecting her and so is in an uncomfortable situation. Like Paul in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*, she hangs out in the hallway outside the apartment before finally breaking down the door and entering. But here the similarities between the two movies end. Paul's breaking and entering had immediately led to reconciliation between the two lovers, and ultimately to the birth of a child; Sunny's breaking and entering, in contrast, reveals that Ralph is not alone and that another, younger lover has taken Sunny's place. Sunny throws a temper tantrum and leaves; the next time she comes to Ralph's bed, she brings a knife, and later tells him that if she hadn't fallen asleep too soon, she would have made him as "dead as possible."

Since Ralph is a philosopher whose work is preoccupied with the implications of death, there is more than a little dark humor in this scene: Sunny proposes to personally acquaint Ralph with a topic that until now he has only viewed from an academic perspective. His apartment is filled with books about death; he engages in lengthy speeches to her about death's impact on society; he even likes to take her on walks through a graveyard; however, it is really Sunny who has more intimate experience with it. She was raised as an orphan, and toward the end of the movie, after performing the new song, which she has been working on for months, in front of an unappreciative audience, she makes an unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide with sleeping pills. When an elderly neighbor of Ralph's dies, it is Sunny, and not Ralph, who answers the door to a concerned neighbor looking for a key to the woman's apartment; Ralph, quite typically, is absent when death makes a real appearance in life. For him death is primarily an intellectual construct; for Sunny it is real.

Solo Sunny's emphasis on loneliness and death addresses the profound alienation of contemporary urban society, which is characterized by large numbers of single-person households, a high suicide rate, and the all-too-frequent lonely deaths of old people, whose bodies lie for days or weeks in their apartments before being discovered by neighbors. Problems like these are widespread throughout the western world, but, officially, the German Democratic Republic was not part of the western world, and socialism typically claimed to have eliminated many of the causes for human unhappiness prevalent in the allegedly decadent west. Konrad Wolf said that he was concerned about the spread of "casual brutality"

in contemporary life, and that the “mixture of indifference, insensitivity, [and] selfishness . . . leads to catastrophe.”⁶ Wolf chose to make the film after he had been urged in an audience discussion to address himself to contemporary problems in the GDR and not just to history.⁷ *Solo Sunny* suggests that in many ways socialist society was just as susceptible to human unhappiness and isolation as capitalist society. This may be why the film was a success not just in the GDR but also in West Germany and other countries: the problems it portrayed were by no means unique to the GDR. In some ways *Solo Sunny* resembles another popular product of early 1980s GDR culture, Christoph Hein’s novel *Der fremde Freund* (The Distant Lover, 1982), which, like *Solo Sunny*, told the story of an isolated woman living in Berlin and dealing with problems of work and love; that work, too, includes the death of an old female neighbor alone in an apartment.

The SED’s bureaucrats were not happy with *Solo Sunny*’s depictions of contemporary life in the GDR, and there appears to have been a debate within the Politburo about the film’s merits.⁸ In the end, because Konrad Wolf was the country’s best-known filmmaker, the film was permitted to be shown, and the East German journal *Die Weltbühne* even asked rhetorically how the party’s hardliners would be able to cope with desires for change in far-away places like postcolonial Africa if they were unable to cope with similar desires in East Berlin itself.⁹ The year after *Solo Sunny* appeared, however, a letter purporting to be a complaint about recent DEFA films by an ordinary member of the film-going public was published in the party’s leading newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. Written by a man using the patriarchal pseudonym Hubert Vater (literally: father), the letter was entitled “Was ich mir von unseren Filmemachern wünsche” (What I want from our filmmakers). Hubert Vater complained about what he saw as “a lack of pride in what the working class and its Party” had “accomplished in this land during the last decades,” and he asked rhetorically: “Where are the artworks that bring to light the titanic nature” of the

⁶ Cited in Andrea Rinke, “From Models to Misfits: Women in DEFA Films of the 1970s and 1980s,” in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, 183–203; here, 193.

⁷ Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 51.

⁸ Elke Schieber, “Anfang vom Ende oder Kontinuität des Argwohns,” in *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg: DEFA-Spielfilme 1946–1992*, ed. Ralf Schenk (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), 265–326; here, 270.

⁹ Klaus Wischnewski, “Träumer und gewöhnliche Leute,” in *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg: DEFA-Spielfilme 1946–1992*, ed. Ralf Schenk (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), 213–63; here, 261.

¹⁰ Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 247.

socialist state?¹⁰ It was generally assumed that “Hubert Vater” was really Erich Honecker himself.¹¹ In the wake of this letter’s appearance, Rainer Simon’s promising *Jadup und Boel* (1981), which dealt forthrightly with dishonesty and hypocrisy in GDR society, was banned outright. Likewise, a new film by first-time director Evelyn Schmidt called *Das Fahrrad* (The Bicycle, 1982), dealing, like *Solo Sunny*, with the problems of a contemporary East German woman, was suppressed but not banned.¹² The GDR’s ruling party was attacking the most promising creations of its own film industry at a time of growing stagnation and resignation throughout the country. The hopes for a real change in attitudes that had emerged with Honecker’s accession to the leadership had now evaporated. Evelyn Schmidt later remembered that the party had attacked her approach in *Das Fahrrad* as completely wrong-headed and continued to hold the film against her until the GDR’s end in 1989.¹³

Solo Sunny resonates with another German film about a singer, Josef von Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel* (1930). Like the singer Lola Lola in Sternberg’s film, Sunny is a sexually active, self-confident nightclub singer who performs in venues of doubtful quality. Wolf and Kohlhaase’s Sunny, however, is in some ways a cross between Sternberg’s Lola Lola and Professor Rath, the male protagonist of *Der blaue Engel*. Sunny resembles Rath in a number of ways: she lives alone but longs for companionship, she is fond of birds (in Rath’s case a canary, in Sunny’s case pigeons), she is mocked on stage by the MC of the show that she is performing in, and she subsequently interrupts a tryst between her lover and a romantic rival, just as Rath had interrupted a tryst between Lola Lola and the strongman Mazeppa. Of course, Sunny is also profoundly different from Rath: she is young and sexually desirable, and she is a reasonably good performer without the pomposity and self-importance of Rath.

The fact that Wolf’s Sunny is reminiscent not just of female figures from other German films (such as *Lola Lola* and *Paula*), but also of male figures (such as Rath and Paul), suggests that *Solo Sunny* radically breaks with traditional gender stereotypes. Sunny is neither a femme fatale like *Lola Lola* nor a woman who lives primarily for her man, like *Paula*; rather, she is a woman with an independent personality and many characteristics traditionally ascribed to men. She is willing to fight, and when the saxophonist in her band the Tornadoes tries to rape her, she actually beats him up; she does something similar when she breaks into Ralph’s apartment. At the end of the movie, Sunny has decided to make a new start, no matter how doubtful — she auditions for a group of younger male musicians in an old warehouse in Berlin, admitting that she was kicked out of

¹¹ Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, 207.

¹² Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 247–48.

¹³ Schieber, “Anfang vom Ende oder Kontinuität des Argwohns,” 270.

the Tornadoes, but also insisting frankly that she will sleep with whom-ever she wants to. Sunny does not appear to have any desire for children or even for marriage (unlike Paula in Carow's film, who had died giving birth to Paul's child). Although *Solo Sunny* resonates with the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s by showing an autonomous woman rejecting traditional gender stereotypes, it by no means idealizes or glorifies that rejection, since Sunny's life is a hard one. Nevertheless, she became what Andrea Rinke has called a "cult figure for fans in Berlin, who copied her confident, sexy dress-sense down to tight jeans, high-heeled shoes and a fox-fur collar."¹⁴ Sunny's suicide attempt breaks a taboo on the depiction of suicide in the GDR, especially in film. This taboo was also broken by Christoph Hein in his novel *Horns Ende* (Horn's End, 1985), and suicide was also thematized in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's popular post-Wall movie about the GDR, *Das Leben der anderen* (The Lives of Others, 2006): one of that film's protagonists, a GDR writer, publishes an article on suicide in the GDR in the West German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, and his lover's death is possibly a suicide.

As Thomas Elsaesser has suggested, *Solo Sunny* also resonates with some of the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who, in the early 1980s, created a number of movies about German female singers: *Lili Marleen* (1981), *Lola* (1981), and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (The Longing of Veronika Voss, 1982). Both Fassbinder's and Wolf's films recall, as Elsaesser has argued, the "Ufa revue and operetta films of the 1930s and 1940s."¹⁵ However, whereas Fassbinder's heroines, in spite of their rebelliousness, succumb to the male-dominated world around them, Wolf's Sunny never knuckles under to patriarchy. The film leaves her not as a radically changed person who has accepted the wisdom of the men in her life, but rather as the same aggressive, self-determined woman that she was at the beginning, when she had refused to serve one of her lovers breakfast (a one-night stand with her means sex "without breakfast," she tells him; he responds that she is "decidedly unfriendly").¹⁶ At the end of the film, Sunny is still in search of her future and her fulfillment, just like the heroines of Wolf's *Sonnensucher* and Beyer's *Spur der Steine*.

It's an interesting question exactly why so many of the GDR's most important films, although mostly directed by men, featured female heroines.

¹⁴ Rinke, "From Models to Misfits: Women in DEFA Films of the 1970s and 1980s," 194.

¹⁵ Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, "Defining DEFA's Historical Imaginary: The Films of Konrad Wolf," *New German Critique*, no. 82 (Winter 2001): 3–24; here, 22.

¹⁶ Anke Westphal writes that Sunny's response was considered so "cool" in the early 1980s that it was imitated by other East German women. See Westphal, "Die Solistin," 1.

It appears that for many of its most important filmmakers, the socialist German state was coded as primarily female, not male. This is perhaps not entirely surprising for a state that took upon itself the mission of responding to and replacing the male-coded fascism that had preceded it. With its promise of cradle-to-grave social security, the GDR state also in some ways took on the traditionally female-coded role of nurturer: it offered its women and children widespread access to child care and nursery school, and more than any other German state it encouraged women to enter into the work force. Likewise, the GDR always perceived itself as and ultimately proved to be the “weaker” (because less long-lived) of the two competing postwar German states. Even if only for that reason it was coded as female, and it should not be surprising that when cartoonists and others imagined German reunification in 1990 as a marriage between a man and a woman, it was the GDR that was perceived as female while the Federal Republic was perceived as male.¹⁷

Such gender codings, while they to some extent buy into conventional stereotypes, nevertheless reflect the fact that the GDR positioned itself differently with respect to women from any previous or subsequent German state. By 1980, when *Solo Sunny* was released, the GDR accorded women an unprecedented level of autonomy, not necessarily encouraging them to live lives independent of men but at least making it economically possible for them to do so. In the GDR to a very great extent a single woman did not have to rely on a man for economic survival, and this simple fact is reflected in the plot and milieu of *Solo Sunny*.

¹⁷ See Susan S Morrison, “The Feminization of the German Democratic Republic in Political Cartoons 1989–90,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 25, no. 4 (1992): 35–52.

Part Six: Postwar West German Cinema 1949–1989



*Sonja Ziemann as Helga and Rudolf Prack as Walter Rainer in
Hans Deppe's *Grün ist die Heide* (1951). Screen capture.*



*Freddy Borchert (Horst Buchholz) with a friend in Georg Tressler's
Die Halbstarken (1956). Screen capture.*

19: Postwar West German Cinema 1949–1989: Historical Overview

WHEREAS EAST GERMAN CINEMA after the end of the Second World War received the active support and encouragement of Soviet authorities and the East German government, West German cinema received less assistance from the western occupation authorities and the West German government. In fact, in many ways the first years after the end of the war saw a systematic attempt on the part of Hollywood studios to weaken the German film industry. The Ufa conglomerate that had dominated German cinema for decades was broken up in the western zones, and West German cinema had to compete on the open market with the cinemas of other nations, particularly the United States. Shortly after the war, major Hollywood studios joined together in the MPEA (Motion Picture Export Association) and sought, with some success, to diminish the capacity of the West German and other foreign film industries to compete with Hollywood.¹ Nevertheless, the decentralized West German film industry was largely able to withstand the onslaught of Hollywood up through the beginning of the 1960s. German films remained, in general, more popular in West Germany than American films until the 1970s. Until the end of the Second World War, German cinema successfully competed against the growing challenge of Hollywood; after the Second World War, however, German cinema ultimately lost the economic battle against its formidable rival. In the post-First World War period, German cinema had sought to compete with Hollywood on both the domestic and international markets; it had become centralized, and it had created a number of blockbuster films that were successful in other countries. In the post-Second World War period, Allied rules forced the West German film industry to decentralize, and West German film turned inward, seeking and reaching primarily a domestic audience, not an international one.

West German cinema after the end of the Second World War had two major production centers, Hamburg and Munich, one in each of the two largest zones of occupation, British and American. Ultimately

¹ Reinhold Wagnleitner, “American Cultural Diplomacy, the Cinema, and the Cold War in Central Europe,” in *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*, ed. David W. Ellwood and Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: VU UP, 1994), 196–210; here, 201.

Munich became the most important of these two cities for the West German film industry. Whereas the major players in the creation of postwar East German cinema were political progressives or socialists who had been marginalized or gone into exile during the Nazi period — people like Erich Engel, Konrad Wolf, or Kurt Maetzig — many of the major players in West German cinema, including key actors, had enjoyed successful careers under the Nazis. Hans Albers, one of the major stars during the Nazi period, was also a star in West German cinema after 1945; in fact, he starred in the first feature film licensed by U.S. authorities in the postwar period, Josef von Baky's sentimental rubble film *Und über uns der Himmel* (And above Us the Sky, 1947). Marika Rökk, who had been a prominent female star under the Nazis, continued to enjoy popularity after 1945. Among the major West German directors in the immediate postwar period, many of them had been active and successful in cinema prior to 1945. Prominent examples include Wolfgang Liebeneiner and Veit Harlan. Even some of the movies that were popular in West Germany during the late 1940s and 1950s had been made during the Third Reich. Particularly popular in the 1950s were *Heimat* (homeland) movies, films about the beauty of the German land and the moral integrity of the people living in it. Typical of the *Heimatfilm* genre were hits like Hans Deppe's *Schwarzwaldmädchen* (Black Forest Girl, 1950) and *Grün ist die Heide* (The Heath is Green, 1951), as well as Alfons Stummer's Austrian blockbuster *Der Förster vom Silberwald* (The Forester of the Silver Wood, 1954). Such films painted a pretty picture of the German (or Austrian) countryside, reassuring Central Europeans that the core of their cultural identity was intact even after a brutal war.² In a context in which so many German refugees had actually lost their ancestral homelands in eastern Europe, the *Heimatfilm* acquainted Germans with the beauty of a more western homeland.

While such films appealed to large numbers of Germans, the West German film industry nevertheless faced major structural problems in the 1950s. Because West German films tended to have limited international appeal, they had to recoup their costs on the domestic market alone, which it was almost impossible for them to do. Typical films cost a little under a million West German marks to produce, but in order to break even they had to bring in considerably more than that amount at the box office. Therefore, the West German film industry was in a state of chronic economic malaise throughout the 1950s, even though West German films

² On the significance of the *Heimatfilm* genre, see Heide Fehrenbach, "Persistent Myths of Americanization: German Reconstruction and the Renationalization of Postwar Cinema, 1945–1965," in *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan*, ed. Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 81–108; especially 93–95.

continued to be popular in West Germany.³ The industry sought to alleviate the problem by soliciting government financing guarantees, and for this reason the 1950s saw a gradual reintroduction of government involvement in the West German film industry. For instance, the government refused to provide a guarantee for the planned Wolfgang Staudte film *Gift im Zoo* (Poison in the Zoo, 1952) because of Staudte's association with the East German film company DEFA, and therefore the production company had to find a different director. The result of this kind of political meddling was often aesthetically and politically uninteresting films that — to make matters worse — usually failed to make money. There were, of course, exceptions to the general dearth of interesting movies in West Germany in the 1950s. The Austrian director Georg Tressler's film *Die Halbstarken* (The Hooligans, 1956), which starred Horst Buchholz as a rebellious teen, was a timely, albeit rather didactic, depiction of rootless and directionless West German youth in the 1950s. It thematized a generation gap that was particularly strong in West Germany after the end of the Second World War, when older German elites reestablished their authority, causing many young people to feel shut out of the system, but it did not inquire into the deeper structural reasons for that generation gap in the experience of the Hitler dictatorship and the German defeat in the Second World War. Robert A. Stemmle's film *Toxi* (1952) was a relatively candid portrayal of German racism, telling the story of a young black girl — the daughter of an African American GI and a German woman — growing up in a white society. Rolf Thiele's film *Das Mädchen Rosemarie* (The Girl Rosemarie, 1958), meanwhile, told the story of a Frankfurt prostitute who had been mysteriously murdered in 1957; it explored the intersection of sex and money in the economically successful West Germany of the 1950s. Kurt Hoffmann's *Wir Wunderkinder* (We Miracle Kids, 1958) was a satirical look at the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) and its excessive focus on financial success. All four of these films cast a cautiously critical look at West German society, uncovering some of its seamier and more problematic sides without ever really posing difficult questions. Even if such films might have demonstrated a certain amount of political courage in the relatively conformist 1950s, however, they generally remained aesthetically static, heavily indebted to the melodramatic Ufa style of the 1930s and 1940s.

In West Germany, the 1950s became known as the decade of the “economic miracle” — the remarkably rapid economic growth of the western half of the divided nation after the end of the Second World War.

³ Knut Hickethier, “The Restructuring of the West German Film Industry in the 1950s,” in *Framing the Fifties: Fifties Cinema in Divided Germany*, ed. John E. Davidson and Sabine Hake (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 194–209; here, 197.

If Germany had seemed hopelessly ruined in 1945, incapable of rebuilding itself, in the 1950s the rebuilding of West Germany occurred so quickly and thoroughly that by the beginning of the 1960s most major West German cities seemed clean and modern, showing few traces of the devastating war. In the 1950s the West German economy once again surpassed the economies of France and England, making the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) Europe's largest economy. Along with Germany's defeated former ally Japan, the FRG was one of the three most powerful economies in the world during — and after — the 1950s; the other one, of course, was the United States. For many West Germans it seemed somehow miraculous that the nation had recovered so quickly from what the historian Friedrich Meinecke, in a famous 1946 book, had called the “German catastrophe.”⁴ Hence the term *Wirtschaftswunder* or “economic miracle.”

Of course, West Germany did not achieve this economic growth entirely on its own; it had help from the United States via the Marshall Plan, named after President Truman's Secretary of State George C. Marshall. As a result of this plan, officially known as the European Recovery Program, monetary assistance began flowing from the United States to West Germany in 1948. The West German economy had two other advantages that gave it an edge over the East German economy: first, Germany's most important economic region, the Ruhr, the home of the coal and steel industries, lay in the west; and second, unlike East Germany, much of whose remaining industrial infrastructure had been dismantled by the Soviets as compensation for the damage Germany had inflicted on their country during the Second World War, West Germany was not forced by its former Western enemies — who, in the 1950s, became its NATO allies — to pay reparations. As a result of these advantages, and of West German determination to move into a more prosperous economic and political future, the Federal Republic of Germany achieved a high standard of living by the end of the 1950s. Moreover, its conservative Christian Democratic government — prompted by the left-leaning Social Democrats, the major opposition party — instituted a generous social welfare system that ensured a minimum level of comfort even for the less well off, as well as social consensus. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's economics minister Ludwig Erhard, who liked to puff on large cigars, became a human symbol of the FRG's economic miracle, and his book *Wohlstand für alle* (Prosperity for Everyone, 1957) suggested that all West Germans could share in the nation's economic success.

In contrast to much of the rest of the West German economy, however, the film industry during the 1950s stagnated. Figures from the

⁴ Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Brockhaus: Wiesbaden, 1946). English translation: *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections*, trans. Sidney B. Fay (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1950).

1950s show that the industry was in dire economic straits: in 1955 the West German film industry earned fifteen million marks in exports, but at the same time the FRG spent 138 million marks on foreign films; in other words, the country was spending almost ten times more on foreign films than its own films were earning abroad.⁵ With the market for domestic films relatively small, indigenous films had to be made cheaply, and they often lacked basic production values, looking crude and primitive. This condemned West German films to failure on the international market, and it meant that even at home they sometimes compared unfavorably to popular Hollywood blockbusters. By the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the situation for the West German film industry became radically worse, as television began to spread through West German households. Between the late 1950s and the late 1960s, cinema attendance in West Germany declined from over 800 million to about 180 million per year. Between 1956 and 1963 television ownership, meanwhile, surged from under one million to over nine million sets.⁶

West German cinema was in decline both economically and artistically. The government's loan guarantees were intended to help the industry, but they were structured so that only major players had a chance at them, since in order to get loans a company had to agree to produce a package of not one or two but eight films. None of the film companies that accepted government loan guarantees from the West German government managed to survive into the 1960s, a fact that clearly demonstrates the failure of the government's attempt to stave off economic and cultural disaster for the film industry.⁷

The filmmaker Helmut Herbst later described postwar West German cinema as politically conservative and aesthetically uninteresting:

The film industry at that time was a “closed shop,” firmly controlled by the old Ufa generation. There never was a cultural rebirth of the West German film industry after the war. After a while, the one-time Ufa collaborators began again to make films in just about the same way as before, as reflected in the films’ aesthetic qualities; and since the Cold War prevailed at the time, very soon the old political viewpoints emerged as well. The only exception was Wolfgang Staudte, who came to West Germany. . . .⁸

⁵ Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), 17.

⁶ Julia Knight, *New German Cinema: Images of a Generation* (London: Wallflower, 2004), 11.

⁷ Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, 18–19.

⁸ Eric Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 227.

Herbst's negative description suggests that many West German filmmakers had not even had to change their political viewpoint very much after the Nazi period. In some ways Herbst was right. Just as the Nazis had despised Communism and declared war on the Soviet Union, so too many West German war films of the 1950s depicted Russians as barbarians and the German soldiers fighting against them as victimized heroes trapped between the Bolsheviks on the one hand and a heartless Nazi government on the other. Typical of such films was Geza von Radvanyi's *Der Arzt von Stalingrad* (The Stalingrad Doctor, 1958), which depicted a kindly doctor in the Wehrmacht (German army) trying to help both wounded German soldiers and desperate Russians. Arrayed against him were the political commissars of Soviet Russia. Other popular war movies included Paul May's *08/15* (1954) and Frank Wisbar's *Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben* (Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever? 1959). In all of these movies, ordinary German soldiers tended to be portrayed as blameless victims of history, ideology, and tyranny. As the protagonist of *Der Arzt von Stalingrad* declares, "We just don't have any luck with world history."⁹ More important and an international success of 1959 was the Austrian-born Bernhard Wicki's *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), about a group of German boys naively trying to defend a bridge against American troops at the end of the war. Even in this movie, however, the chief figures are portrayed essentially as helpless victims of larger forces.

By the mid 1950s distribution and production in West Germany began to be centered in a very few major companies that were extremely conservative economically and unwilling to take financial risks. As part of the loan guarantee program, filmmakers successfully lobbied for tax credits for what they called *Qualitätsfilme* (quality films). This meant that a government board had to decide what films had "quality"; such films could then be made and distributed at a considerable tax discount. As it was government bureaucrats who decided on quality, they tended to avoid the controversial and topical. This system tended to encourage mediocrity and conformity, not quality. By 1961 the situation in the West German film industry had become so bad that not a single film was found worthy of the German Film Prize, and in the same year the Venice film festival declined to include any West German films in its program.¹⁰

The 1950s, however, also saw the emergence of a relatively active film club movement throughout the Federal Republic, as West German

⁹ All quotations from the film are my own transcriptions unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Norbert Grob, "Film der sechziger Jahre: Abschied von den Eltern," in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler, eds. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 207–44; here, 220; and Julia Knight, *New German Cinema*, 12.

cinephiles sought access to quality films that were not part of the regular commercial distribution system. West German film clubs showed major foreign films, particularly films from France and Italy, but also occasionally films from Eastern Europe. Hence, West German cinephiles were aware of the innovative developments in cinema in other European countries. At the same time, thanks to the efforts of young film critics like Enno Patalas, a lively critical film culture began to emerge around the journal *Filmkritik* (Film Criticism). The West German film clubs and the critical activism of people like Patalas began to raise expectations for new accomplishments in West German cinema.¹¹

In 1962 a group of young filmmakers gathered at the Oberhausen film festival, a politically progressive festival for short documentaries. These filmmakers, who had begun to make short works partly because they could not afford to make feature-length films, rebelled against what they saw as their own exclusion from the mainstream West German film industry. This rebellion initiated a period generally known as the “Young German Film.” The twenty-six filmmakers gathered in Oberhausen in Germany’s industrial Ruhr region in February of 1962 issued what became known as the “Oberhausen Manifesto,” a call to arms for the Young German Film:

The collapse of the conventional German film finally removes the economic basis for a mode of filmmaking whose attitude and practice we reject. With it the new film has a chance to come to life.

German short films by young authors, directors, and producers have in recent years received a large number of prizes at international festivals and gained the recognition of international critics. These works and these successes show that the future of the German film lies in the hands of those who have proven that they speak a new film language.

Just as in other countries, the short film has become in Germany a school and experimental basis for the feature film.

We declare our intention to create the new German feature film.

This new film needs new freedoms. Freedom from the conventions of the established industry. Freedom from the outside influence of commercial partners. Freedom from the control of special interest groups.

We have concrete intellectual, formal, and economic conceptions about the production of the new German film. We are as a collective prepared to take economic risks.

The old film is dead. We believe in the new one.¹²

¹¹ Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany*, 192.

¹² Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film*, 2.

This manifesto is a remarkable declaration of war against conventional cinema. One of the most notable aspects of the manifesto is its collective nature, which demonstrated young West German filmmakers' conception of themselves not as isolated individual artists but as a group working together against conformity and political quiescence. Of equal interest is the way that the filmmakers positioned themselves as a younger generation rebelling against the dogmas and strictures — and political conservatism — of their elders. In a nation where the older generation could easily be seen as synonymous with the Nazis, this self-stylization was rhetorically powerful, giving younger filmmakers the moral authority of a supposedly unblemished youth. The young filmmakers also criticized conventional narrative cinema, calling for something radically new; they were using the economic collapse of the West German film industry as an opportunity to call for the making of films positioned outside the conventional economics and aesthetics of filmmaking. In spite of the filmmakers' call for radical newness, however, one aspect of their manifesto is entirely traditional: of the twenty-six signatories of the Oberhausen manifesto, not a single one was a woman. The younger generation criticized what they called "Papas Kino" (daddy's cinema) or "Opas Kino" (grandpa's cinema), but the implication of women's absence from the manifesto was that the Young German Film would be a cinema of sons and grandsons, not of daughters or granddaughters. It was not until the 1970s that West German female filmmakers began to rebel against what they saw as the sexism of even the young West German filmmakers of the 1960s.

The most prominent representatives of the Young German Film that grew out of the Oberhausen manifesto were Alexander Kluge (born in 1932), Edgar Reitz (also born in 1932), and later Volker Schlöndorff (born in 1939). Kluge, one of the signers of the Oberhausen manifesto, was the major theorist of the Young German Film, with a carefully thought-out intellectual critique of conventional cinema and clear conceptions of what a new, politically and aesthetically radical cinema might look like. Reitz often worked with Kluge and later went on to make important television films, especially the *Heimat* (Homeland) series from the 1980s to the 2000s. Schlöndorff, less radical than Kluge politically, aesthetically, and intellectually, was from the very beginning more popular with cinema audiences. He was able to transform the political and artistic energy of the Young German Film and its successors into films that many ordinary West Germans — and also many foreigners — wanted to see. Whereas Kluge's films rarely became popular with larger audiences, some of Schlöndorff's films were not only critical but also popular successes at home and abroad.

In addition to being a filmmaker, a writer, and a theorist, Kluge was trained as a lawyer and used his rhetorical skills to become an effective and eloquent spokesman for the new filmmakers in the public arena. As

a result of his and others' successful lobbying efforts, the year 1965 saw the creation of the Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film (Board of Curators of the Young German Film), which started with capital of five million marks for a three-year period and financed films with an average of three hundred thousand marks per film.¹³ Out of this funding came some of the first artistic successes of the Young German Film, particularly Kluge's *Abschied von gestern* (Yesterday Girl, 1966), a movie about the troubles of a young Jewish girl with West German authorities — it became the first West German movie to win an international film prize at the Venice Biennial — and Schlöndorff's *Der junge Törless* (Young Törless, 1966), an adaptation of the Austrian writer Robert Musil's 1906 novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* (The Confusions of Young Törless). Among other things, Schlöndorff's film was a critique of militarism and military education. Out of Kluge's lobbying efforts also came three new film academies: in Ulm in 1962, in West Berlin in 1966, and in Munich in 1967. Whereas the institute in Ulm became the theoretical center for the study of film, the institutes in Berlin and Munich established themselves as key training grounds for some of the younger filmmakers who were to emerge at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. However, in the late 1960s the West German government changed the financing scheme for cinema by creating a Film Development Board that made it difficult if not impossible for first-time filmmakers or filmmakers whose previous films had not been financial successes. This created major problems for younger filmmakers, who successfully turned to West German television companies for funding of their projects.¹⁴

It is no coincidence that the rise of the Young German Film starting in 1962 coincided with the final crisis of the government of Konrad Adenauer, who had governed West Germany since 1949. The elderly Adenauer, already seventy-three years old when he became chancellor, was a prime example of the conservatism that young West German filmmakers criticized in their culture. In 1962, the year of the Oberhausen manifesto, the popular weekly newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* published a negative article about the West German army (the Bundeswehr). Adenauer's conservative Bavarian defense minister Franz Josef Strauß ordered the offices of *Der Spiegel* searched and its archives confiscated. The publisher of the magazine, Rudolf Augstein, was also briefly incarcerated. Partly as a result of these antidemocratic practices, Adenauer's government fell the following year, in 1963, and Adenauer was succeeded by Ludwig Erhard, the cigar-smoking former economics minister, who governed until 1966, when continuing political problems forced the opening up of the West German

¹³ Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, 22.

¹⁴ Julia Knight, *New German Cinema*, 20–21.

government to what is known as a grand coalition between the progressive Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the two conservative parties — the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Bavaria-based Christian Social Union (CSU) — with Kurt Georg Kiesinger (CDU) as chancellor and Willy Brandt (SPD) as vice chancellor. Brandt ultimately became chancellor in 1969, inaugurating a Social Democratic-Liberal administration, with a coalition formed between the SPD and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), or liberals, a smaller party emphasizing basic human rights and economic freedoms. This coalition governed West Germany until the autumn of 1982. The rise of the Young German Film thus coincided with the rise of the SPD to political power in West Germany and a thorough-going liberalization of West German society characterized, among other things, by the founding of new universities along with the opening up of existing ones to the children of the working-class, and a policy of détente with the Soviet Union and East Germany, known as *Ostpolitik* (eastern policy). Particularly many younger West Germans greeted the beginning of this period, in which Brandt became chancellor, as a breath of fresh air in a political environment that, they believed, had tolerated over two decades of stagnation and conservatism. Many of these young people believed that a true Zero Hour, or new beginning in German society, had never really taken place in 1945, but they hoped that the new government could realize the dreams of a newer, better Germany.

The directors of the Young German Film stressed what they called *Autorenkino* (authors' cinema), in which the director called the shots without control from major studios. Directors, they believed, ought to have primary artistic authority over their films, and studios and producers ought not to be able to exert undue authority over them. Among the models the new cinematographers invoked were the French new wave and Italian neorealism, as well as their own national example of Weimar Expressionism. These directors criticized not only the stagnation of the country's film industry but also Hollywood, which they saw as having too much influence on West German culture.

The young West German filmmakers of the 1960s hoped that their cinema was poised to become an art form in its own right, independent of economic or political considerations. This vision of film as art has a long tradition in Germany; since the 1910s German filmmakers had been struggling to free themselves from the stigma of working in a supposedly inferior art form, fit only for the uneducated masses. In a sense, what was happening in the Young German Film of the 1960s echoed attempts in the second decade of the twentieth century to make cinema intellectually and culturally respectable, so that it could be taken seriously as an art form, not just as entertainment.

Particularly important in the aesthetics of the Young German Film was the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, who had developed a radical theory

of theater in the 1920s and 1930s based on what he called “estrangement effects” (*Verfremdungseffekte* or *V-Effekte*, sometimes also called “alienation effects”) and “anti-Aristotelian theater,” i.e., theater that violated Aristotle’s aesthetic precepts, particularly the three unities of time, place, and action that Aristotle set forth in his *Poetics*. Brecht had also experimented with film in the 1920s and 1930s, and when his own most popular work, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera, 1928), was made into a film directed by G. W. Pabst in 1931, he criticized the result and sued the film’s production studio, asserting his own artistic and moral control as an author over his creation. When Brecht lost, he responded with the “Dreigroschenprozeß” (The Threepenny Lawsuit),¹⁵ his key theoretical text on the sociology of the cinema. Brecht argued that cinema’s domination by major studios gives the lie to bourgeois ideologies of artistic, intellectual, and personal freedom: film, Brecht argued, is a profoundly collective art form embedded in a modern capitalist society that is no longer hospitable to nineteenth-century notions of the lonely but noble artist. The ideological defenders of capitalism and bourgeois values may assert the importance of individual artistic freedom, but such assertions are mere sleight-of-hand, since in reality it is large corporations that control not only the economy but also key elements of the ideological superstructure, such as the film industry. Many filmmakers of the Young German Film, particularly Alexander Kluge, were strongly influenced by Brecht’s ideas, and their notions of *Autorenkino* asserted, as Brecht had done in his lawsuit, the validity of the individual author-director’s attempt to gain independence from the economic constraints of the entertainment industry.

By the beginning of the 1970s, the Young German Film had begun to receive positive international recognition, and an even younger group of directors rose to prominence, among them Rainer Werner Fassbinder (born in 1945), Werner Herzog (born in 1942), and Wim Wenders (born in 1945). In the late 1960s, West Germany, like other western countries such as the United States and France, had been characterized by hopeful idealism, rapid social transformation, and also revolutionary cultural ferment, but by the middle of the 1970s there was a general feeling of exhaustion and disappointment. The SPD government had not gone as far in transforming social relations in West Germany as many progressives had hoped, and in response to this dissatisfaction, leftist terrorists — most notoriously, the Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction, RAF) — began to carry out targeted attacks on key government and industry leaders. In 1974 the charismatic SPD chancellor Willy Brandt, embroiled in political difficulties after the discovery of an East German spy working in his

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, “The Threepenny Lawsuit,” in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, trans. and ed. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), 147–99.

office, was replaced by the technocratic Helmut Schmidt. Schmidt's rise to the chancellorship, along with his crackdown on the RAF and people viewed as RAF sympathizers, exacerbated the feelings of frustration and anger on the radical left of West German society. These feelings of frustration and anger resulted in what was called a *Tendenzwende*, a "change of direction" in West Germany. The *Tendenzwende* took two directions: the most politically radical elements of the left drifted toward terrorism, while the less radical elements began to move away from political involvement and toward an interest in personal and interpersonal life.

The growing interest in private life is reflected in the second generation of directors and in the shift from the Young German Film of the 1960s to what is called the New German Cinema of the 1970s, which witnessed the greatest international acclaim for German cinema since the Weimar Republic. The key figure in this renaissance was Fassbinder, who, in a series of brilliant films produced at great speed throughout the 1970s, amazed critical film audiences in Europe and the United States. Whereas the Young German Film of filmmakers like Kluge was associated with an extremely politicized and intellectual view of things, the New German Cinema tended to believe that "the personal is the political." It did not necessarily shy away from politics, but it showed the personal implications of politics, inscribing it onto the daily lives of individual West Germans. One of New German Cinema's most popular films in West Germany was Volker Schlöndorff's and Margarethe von Trotta's *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, 1975), based on a novel by the writer Heinrich Böll (who had won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1972). It told the story of a young woman whose personal life is suddenly and radically disturbed by a brief encounter with a man who, as it turns out, is a left-wing terrorist. In this film the two directions of the *Tendenzwende* — the move toward left-wing terrorism on the one hand and toward a primary interest in private life on the other — come face to face with each other. Some of the most important films of the New German Cinema addressed the growing problem of left-wing terrorism, usually looking at it from both a political and a private point of view. Key films about terrorism included the multi-authored film *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn, 1978), Fassbinder's *Die dritte Generation* (The Third Generation, 1979), Reinhard Hauff's *Messer im Kopf* (Knife in the Head, 1978), and Margarethe von Trotta's *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* (The Second Awakening of Christa Klages, 1978) and *Die bleierne Zeit* (Marianne and Juliane, 1981).

By the mid-1970s the New German Cinema was being proclaimed internationally as one of the most successful and interesting national cinemas. The pinnacle of this success was reached when Volker Schlöndorff received the Academy Award for best foreign film in 1980 for *Die Blechtrommel* (The Tin Drum, 1979). However, this cinema was not always

well accepted at home. The 1970s witnessed the seemingly inexorable rise of Hollywood films in the Federal Republic, and in spite of the critical successes of the Young German Film of the 1960s and the New German Cinema of the 1970s, West German movie-goers — particularly the young people who made up a large majority of the viewership — generally preferred to go to American blockbusters. Indeed, in the 1970s, during the heyday of the New German Cinema, West German films enjoyed only a 10 percent market share in the Federal Republic.¹⁶ In fact, it was only after the domestic success of Schlöndorff's and von Trotta's *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* and the international success of films like Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (The Marriage of Maria Braun, 1979) and Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel* that moviegoers in West Germany started supporting their own cinema in significant numbers. If filmmakers like Fassbinder and Schlöndorff were enjoying major successes in New York and San Francisco, then West Germans wanted to take a look at their films themselves.¹⁷

Audiences' turn toward Hollywood and away from domestic cinema was part of the same dissatisfaction with German cinema traditions that had provoked the Young German Film's rebellion at the 1962 Oberhausen festival in the first place, but the irony is that just as young West German filmmakers were rejecting the cinema of their elders, even younger West German audiences were rejecting German filmmaking altogether. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a director like Fassbinder may have been a media star in the Federal Republic, and he may even have produced a successful television series (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*, based on Alfred Döblin's classic 1929 novel), but the success of his films could not be compared to that of major American blockbusters of the time like *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981). In spite of its international prestige, the New German Cinema was never really a financial success at home. It remained reliant on subsidies, initially from the Board of Curators of Young German Film in 1965, and subsequently from the Film Development Board, established in the late 1960s. West German television companies also frequently supported the creation of new West German films, especially after the Television Framework Agreement between filmmakers and the major television companies in 1974.¹⁸ The West German cinema's structural problem in attracting audiences led a number of filmmakers to move off in new directions. Alexander Kluge increasingly focused on television in the 1980s,

¹⁶ Knight, *New German Cinema*, 40.

¹⁷ See Eric Rentschler, "American Friends and the New German Cinema: Patterns of Reception," *New German Critique*, no. 24/25 (Fall/Winter 1981): 7–35.

¹⁸ Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, 33.

while Werner Herzog moved toward documentaries, and Wim Wenders and others began making films in the United States.

One of the major challenges facing innovative West German filmmakers was the fact that by the 1970s the distribution of films in West Germany was largely controlled by Hollywood. Even if it was possible for West German filmmakers to create new and interesting films, it was difficult for them to get distribution contracts in West Germany. For this reason a number of the major New German Cinema directors, including Fassbinder and Wenders, established the Filmverlag der Autoren in 1971 as a way of sidestepping the established commercial distribution system. In the United States and other foreign countries, West German films were often shown at branches of the Goethe Institute (an organization promoting German language and culture worldwide) or with actual funding from the Goethe Institute as part of the government's cultural diplomacy. By the 1970s the West German leadership had learned that innovative, and even critical, cinema, far from having a negative impact on the Federal Republic's prestige abroad, actually enhanced it. Whereas West German politicians in the 1950s and 1960s had sought to prevent the showing of films deemed overly critical of the postwar Federal Republic, the Social-Liberal government of the 1970s was more tolerant of self-criticism.

By the late 1970s, therefore, West German film was considered internationally successful and enjoyed considerable prestige both inside and outside West Germany. In 1979 West German filmmakers met in Hamburg, seventeen years after the Oberhausen festival of 1962, and issued another declaration, declaring:

On the occasion of the Hamburg Film Festival, we German filmmakers have come together. Seventeen years after Oberhausen we have taken stock.

The strength of German film is its variety. In three months the eighties will begin.

Imagination does not allow itself to be administered. Committee heads cannot decide what the productive film should do. The German film of the eighties can no longer be governed by outside forces like committees, institutions, and interest groups as it has in the past.

Above all:

We will not allow ourselves to be divided

— the feature film from the documentary film,

— experimental filmmakers from newcomers,

— films that reflect on the medium (in a practical way as experiments) from the narrative and commercial film.

We have proven our professionalism. That does not mean we have to see ourselves as a guild. We have learned that our only allies can be the spectators:

That means the people who work, who have wishes, dreams, and desires, that means the people who go to the movies and who do not, and that also means people who can imagine a totally different kind of film.

We must get on the ball.¹⁹

As Julia Knight has noted, this statement is focused on spectators, whereas the original Oberhausen manifesto had not even mentioned them.²⁰ This shift in emphasis suggests that in the period between 1962 and 1972, West German filmmakers had learned that it was not enough simply to make innovative, aesthetically challenging films; they also had to consider the potential audience for such films.

In contrast to the situation in 1962, by the end of the 1970s there was also a powerful feminist movement in the FRG, and politically active West German women filmmakers were no longer willing to have their concerns ignored by their male counterparts. They believed that although the men had been successful in trying to address previously ignored cultural taboos, particularly about the Nazi past, those same men had ignored a whole aspect of human experience: women's lives. A number of the New German Cinema directors had seldom even featured women in leading roles — a good example being Werner Herzog. West German women filmmakers therefore established their own organization — the Association of Women Film Workers — and put out their own “Manifesto of Women Film Workers.” This document, which was signed by the directors Jutta Brückner, Ulrike Ottinger, Helke Sander, and Helma Sanders, among others, made the following demands for women's film:

1. 50 percent of all film funding, production sites, and documentation projects;
2. 50 percent of jobs and training positions;
3. 50 percent of all committee seats;
4. support for the distribution, rental, and exhibition of films by women.

Their main goals were:

- to support, encourage, and publicize all films made by women that are indebted to feminist, emancipatory and nonsexist content and intent;
- to list, catalogue, and collect old and new films made by women;
- to collaborate with and to support persons publishing information on women film workers and women in film;

¹⁹ Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film*, 4.

²⁰ Knight, *New German Cinema*, 40.

- to support with advice and the ongoing exchange of information women's film projects and applications for subsidies;
- to cooperate with domestic and foreign institutions and groups pursuing related goals.²¹

Just like the cinema of the male directors of the Young German Film of the 1960s and the New German Cinema of the 1970s, the cinema of the radical feminist directors was characterized by a dichotomy between attempts to factor in ordinary public taste, on the one hand, and aesthetic and political radicalism on the other. That split can be illustrated among women film directors by the contrast between a director like Margarethe von Trotta (born in 1942) and Helke Sander (born in 1937). Von Trotta, like her erstwhile husband Volker Schlöndorff (whom von Trotta married in 1971 and divorced in 1991), created movies that were both popular and critical successes. Her films *Die bleierne Zeit* and *Die Geduld der Rosa Luxemburg* (literally: The Patience of Rosa Luxemburg; English title: Rosa Luxemburg, 1986), for instance, were not only well reviewed but also actually made money. On the other side of the popular-elite divide, Helke Sander made intellectually and aesthetically demanding films like *Redupers — Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit* (The All-Around Reduced Personality, 1978) and *Der subjektive Faktor* (The Subjective Factor, 1981) that were admired by some film critics but rarely enjoyed popular success.

The most popular West German film of the 1980s was not by Fassbinder, Wenders, Herzog, Schlöndorff, or von Trotta but rather by Wolfgang Petersen: *Das Boot* (The Boat, 1981), about a group of German submariners in the Second World War. The film was a suspenseful, claustrophobic drama that elicited sympathy for its navy protagonists while at the same time inviting condemnation of the circumstances in which they found themselves. At least in part because of its adherence to the conventions of Hollywood war movies, *Das Boot* became a major hit in the United States — the fifth most successful movie in the United States financially in 1981, and the most popular German movie in the United States ever.²² Partly as a result of his success with *Das Boot*, Petersen ultimately moved to Hollywood, where he made a number of successful thrillers in the 1990s and 2000s. Petersen's move, along with that of Fassbinder's cameraman Michael Ballhaus, was part of a larger trend in which the American film industry benefited from talents originally

²¹ Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film*, 5.

²² Peter Krämer, "Hollywood in Germany/Germany in Hollywood," in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 226–37; here, 233.

developed in the New German Cinema and in West German television of the 1970s and 1980s.

On June 10, 1982, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the great genius of the New German Cinema, was found dead in his Munich apartment at the age of thirty-seven. The exhaustion that led to Fassbinder's early death was brought on by overwork, lack of sleep, and excessive drug use, but in his short career from 1968 to 1982, he had made over forty feature films. Fassbinder's death also marked the death of the golden age of the New German Cinema. Although the other key directors — Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog, as well as some of the most important figures of the Young German Film like Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, and Edgar Reitz — continued to make films, these films did not generally meet with the same kind of critical success that was granted to the films of the 1970s. In the same year that Fassbinder died, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's Social Democratic Party was ousted from the government by a coalition of the conservative CDU/CSU and the free-market FDP. The new chancellor, Helmut Kohl, announced what he called a “geistig-moralische Wende” (spiritual-moral turning point), i.e., an emphasis on conservative values. The advent of the conservative government was accompanied by a more general turn away from radical politics, and indeed away from politics in general, in West German cultural life.

By 1985 a new voice had emerged in West German cinema: Dorris Dörrie (born in 1955), whose film *Männer* (Men, 1985), a contemporary sex comedy, became a surprise popular and critical success. *Männer* retained traces of a feminist critique by focusing initially on a woman whose sexual freedom includes two lovers: a relatively conformist businessman husband and a seemingly nonconformist, more artistic boyfriend. But Dörrie tempered any political or sexual radicalism in her film by transforming the supposedly free-spirited boyfriend into a suit-wearing businessman. *Männer* thus had much less of an edge than the work of Fassbinder and Kluge or the feminist films of Helke Sander or Margarethe von Trotta. It was less a film about a world gone wrong than a film about people trying to fit themselves successfully into a world that is accepted as a given.²³ Dörrie's film remains significant, however, for paving the way for the success of a series of German sex comedies that continued well into the 1990s, beyond the end of the New German Cinema and into the post-reunification period.

²³ See Eric Rentschler, “From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus,” in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 260–77; here, 272–73.



Klaus Hager recognizes that war is not a game. Screen capture.

20: *Die Brücke* (1959): Film and War

Director: Bernhard Wicki

Cinematographer: Gerd von Bonin

Screenplay: Michael Mansfeld, Heinz Pauck, and Bernhard Wicki,
based on the novel by Manfred Gregor

Producer: Fono-Film (Hermann Schwerin)

Editor: Carl Otto Bartning

Production Design: Heinrich Graf Brühl and Peter Scharff

Costume Design: Josef Wanke

Music: Hans-Martin Majewski

Soundtrack: Oskar Sala and Willi Schwadorf

German Release Date: [West Germany] October 22, 1959

Actors: Folker Bohnet (Hans Scholten); Fritz Wepper (Abert Mutz); Michael Hinz (Walter Forst); Frank Glaubrecht (Jürgen Borchert); Karl Michael Balzer (Karl Horber); Volker Lechtenbrink (Klaus Hager); Günther Hoffmann (Sigi Bernhard); Cordula Trantow (Franziska); Wolfgang Stumpf (Stern); Günter Pfitzmann (Heilmann); Heinz Spitzner (Fröhlich); Siegfried Schürenberg (lieutenant colonel); Ruth Hausmeister (Frau Mutz); Eva Vaitl (Frau Borchert); Hans Öttl (policeman)

BERNHARD WICKI MADE his famous antiwar film *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) in 1959, several years after the Federal Republic of Germany reinstated the army, joined the NATO alliance in 1955, and reinstated the military draft for young men in 1956. The film is thus a statement not just about the German past but also about the German present. In showing the senseless destruction of six young German lives at the end of the Second World War, it conjures up a painful recent memory: Nazi Germany's fruitless attempt to turn back the Allied invasion by throwing teenage boys into the fight. Because West Germany had only recently reinstated a military draft for young men, however, the film also implicitly takes a stance against West German remilitarization. The conservative West German government understood this message well. When *Die Brücke* received the Federal Film Prize for best film in 1960 and Bernhard Wicki won the award for best director, CDU Interior Minister Gerhard Schröder (no relation to the Gerhard Schröder who later served as federal chancellor from 1998 to 2005) declined to attend the award ceremony, and his state secretary Georg Anders, who attended the ceremony in his

stead, complained pointedly about the “fatal pathos” of certain films.¹ *Der Spiegel* mockingly commented: “If Gerhard Schröder makes an appearance at the Berlinale, everyone will know from now on that the majority of the prize-winning films . . . respect Christian Democratic values and cause no pain to Nazis. But if instead Dr. Anders shows up, it’s a sign that one should start going to the movies again.”²

Die Brücke became an international sensation, launching the career of its director Bernhard Wicki and winning over fifteen international prizes — more than any other German film in the first decades after the war — including a Golden Globe. The United Nations praised the film for promoting peace, and in the Soviet Union the film was dubbed into fifteen native languages — unheard of for a West German film at the height of the cold war.³ As a result of his critical and financial success with *Die Brücke*, Wicki was invited to Hollywood in 1961–62 to direct the German scenes for the blockbuster war film *The Longest Day* (featuring, among others, John Wayne, Sean Connery, and Henry Fonda), about the Allied landing in Normandy on June 6, 1944 (D-Day). Wicki spent much of the rest of the 1960s in Hollywood working on various projects, including another, much less successful war film, *Morituri* (1965). No other film that Wicki made, in either Germany or the United States, would match the critical acclaim of *Die Brücke*, his first full-length feature film. For this reason, and because Wicki — who had started his career as an actor — subsequently helped to support himself financially by acting in other directors’ films, the critic Peter Zander has called Wicki a kind of German Orson Welles: “Both began as directors with a masterpiece whose quality they never again achieved and then presented themselves in countless cameo appearances.”⁴

In spite of its national and international success, it is a wonder that *Die Brücke* was produced at all. The American army did not want to let Wicki use its tanks after getting a look at the screenplay, in which the film’s boy protagonists do battle against American soldiers, and in 1959 the Bundeswehr (West German army) did not have the right kind of tank; therefore, all the tanks seen in the film are specially made props.⁵ The film is based on an unremarkable novel by Manfred Gregor (also called *Die Brücke*) that had been turned down by numerous publishing companies

¹ Peter Zander, *Bernhard Wicki* (Berlin: Dieter Bertz, 1994), 22.

² Zander, *Bernhard Wicki*, 22–23. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

³ Zander, *Bernhard Wicki*, 23.

⁴ Zander, *Bernhard Wicki*, 12.

⁵ Elisabeth Wicki-Endriss, *Verstörung — und eine Art von Poesie: Die Filmlegende Bernhard Wicki* (Leipzig: Henschel, 2007), 84.

before it was finally accepted for publication in 1958. Wicki later admitted: “At first I didn’t want to do this film, because Manfred Gregor’s novel is a paean of praise to German courage. He experienced the story of the bridge himself, and in his novel he creates a monument for his friends who died back then. I could only do the film as an antiwar film.”⁶ The publisher’s attempts to interest film companies in the novel were initially fruitless, because by the late 1950s Germans had become tired of the war films that were — along with *Heimatfilme* (movies extolling the German land and its people) — such a staple of West German production in that decade. Stefan Grissemann writes that “in the year 1959 Germany had little interest in being reminded of a war that it had only recently managed to forget.”⁷

As Mark Gagnon has observed, *Die Brücke* brought the 1950s wave of war films to a close.⁸ *Die Brücke*, however, was not just a war film but a critical war film, and the few critical war films that were produced in the German-speaking world during the 1950s had tended to fail at the box office: Laszlo Benedek’s *Kinder, Mütter und ein General* (Children, Mothers, and a General, 1954), G. W. Pabst’s *Es geschah am 20. Juli* (It Happened on July 20, 1955), and Falk Harnack’s *Unruhige Nacht* (Sleepless Night, 1958). One critical war film that was financially successful, Helmut Käutner’s *Die letzte Brücke* (The Last Bridge, 1953), had been unable to find a German production company and wound up being produced as an Austrian-Yugoslav coproduction. Bernhard Wicki had acted in all of these films and was well aware of their problems.⁹ Ultimately, the journalist Jochen Severin purchased the film rights for *Die Brücke* and succeeded in convincing Hermann Schwerin to become producer and Deutsche Filmhansa to distribute it. Severin first asked both Helmut Käutner and Wolfgang Staudte to direct the film, but both turned him down. Only then did Severin ask the Austrian-born Wicki — who had only directed one previous film, the 1958 docudrama *Warum sind sie gegen uns?* (Why are They against Us?), about German youth and their problems — to direct the film. The production of *Die Brücke* proved quite difficult, since Wicki went well over his budget and took twice as long to make the film as the producer had planned. In the end, Schwerin refused to give Wicki more money, and the film would likely never have

⁶ Cited in Wicki-Endriss, *Verstörung — und eine Art von Poesie*, 85.

⁷ Stefan Grissemann, “Triumph des Unwillens,” in *Er kann fliegen lassen: Gespräche und Texte über Bernhard Wicki (1919–2000)*, ed. Andreas Weber (St. Pölten: Literaturedition Niederösterreich, 2000), 28–36; here, 33.

⁸ Mark Clement Gagnon, “Celluloid Heroes of the Adenauer Era: Creating New Citizens in the War Films of the 1950s” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2006), 146.

⁹ Zander, *Bernhard Wicki*, 18.

been finished if its international distributor Transocean had not stepped in with additional funding in the final stages of production.¹⁰

A particularly contentious issue between Wicki and the producer Schwerin was the explicit violence of the film's final, dramatic battle sequence, which was unprecedented in German cinema at the time. It was not just that six of the seven boys who are the film's main characters die defending an unimportant bridge that is going to be blown up anyway; it was that Wicki clearly showed the violence that these boys do and have done to them. After the film's release Wicki acknowledged in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, "I wanted to show how one really dies — not quickly and heroically but miserably screaming."¹¹ Critics were quick to comment on the film's explicit violence. Hans-Dieter Roos wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in October of 1959, "In its second half the film shows nothing but the deaths of several people. It shows this, and herein lies its daring, with a drastic openness that is unprecedented. Not as the moving death of a hero: as screaming agony in close-up."¹² Two of the film's sequences were particularly appalling for viewers in 1959. In one, an American soldier, who has just told the boys to go home to "Kindergarten," is shot in the stomach so that his intestines begin to come out of his body as he writhes and screams in agony. Because the boys are unable to screw up their courage to put him out of his misery, he dies a slow and painful death. In another, a German civilian is caught in the backfire of a bazooka that one of the boys is trying to use to take out an American tank; the civilian burns to death in front of the boy. The influential German film critic Enno Patalas, writing in his journal *Filmkritik* in December of 1959, praised these scenes for their relentless realism: "Scenes like the burning of the German civilian or the terrible death of the American have never previously been seen as drastically in German cinema; they unmistakably and in detail disprove the idea of a heroic soldier's death."¹³

¹⁰ Zander, *Bernhard Wicki*, 18. See also Richard Blank, *Jenseits der Brücke: Bernhard Wicki — Ein Leben für den Film* (Munich: Econ, 1999), 114.

¹¹ Cited in Gagnon, *Celluloid Heroes*, 140.

¹² Robert Fischer, *Sanftmut und Gewalt: Der Regisseur und Schauspieler Bernhard Wicki* (Essen: filmwerkstatt/Filmwerkstatt Essen, 1991), 89; from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25 October 1959.

¹³ Cited in Fischer, *Sanftmut und Gewalt*, 91; from *Filmkritik* 12, 1959. This point is worth stressing; even (or especially) Nazi films did not show much explicit violence. Thus, the whole premise of Quentin Tarantino's 2009 hit *Inglourious Basterds* — that Hitler and the top Nazi brass are murdered while watching, and enjoying, a film about hundreds of people being killed one by one by a German sniper — is wrong, not only historically but — more important for Tarantino — at the level of film aesthetics.

Die Brücke ends with a note about the action: “This happened on 27 April 1945. It was so insignificant that it was not mentioned in an army report.”¹⁴ This is an echo of the most famous German antiwar novel, Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929), whose penultimate paragraph is a notice about the main character’s death: “He fell in October 1918, on a day that was so quiet and still on the whole front, that the army report confined itself to the single sentence: All quiet on the Western Front.”¹⁵ Like Remarque, Wicki relates the main action of his work — the lives and deaths of the young soldiers whom viewers get to know over the course of the film — to the larger activity of the war. What for the individual participants is quite literally a matter of life or death is, for the war’s planners, insignificant. The individual is caught up in a web of actions that he cannot control or even understand, and he is fighting for leaders who do not particularly care whether he lives or dies. Whereas Remarque’s novel depicts the last two years of the First World War, however, Wicki’s film shows only a few days at the end of the Second World War. Remarque’s young soldiers, doomed though they are, at least have the chance to become hardened veterans over the course of a few battles; Wicki’s child soldiers have no chance to develop as soldiers, because all but one of them are killed on their first day of action.

The dramatic structure of *Die Brücke* points inexorably to the film’s final battle scene, which takes place at the bridge that the boys are defending. It is a small bridge over a not particularly important, unnamed river in an unspecified part of Germany, probably Bavaria. The geographical location of the town is not specified — in contrast to the novel *Die Brücke* — because the action of the film is intended to have paradigmatic significance: this could be any town in Germany at the end of the Second World War. An initial establishing shot shows water flowing under the bridge, followed by the splash caused by a single Allied bomb that just misses the bridge itself. This first sequence suggests the themes and action of the entire film: just as the Allied attempt to destroy the bridge fails at the beginning of the film, so too will the initial Allied assault on the bridge fail; the entire action of the film will be pointless anyway, because in late April of 1945 it is already clear that the Allies have won the war and the Germans have lost. Whether the boys succeed or fail in defending the bridge (and in fact they succeed, at least initially, at the cost of their lives) is irrelevant because the Americans have already crossed the river at another point. The film’s final shot recalls the opening sequence, as the

¹⁴ Zander, *Bernhard Wicki*, 21.

¹⁵ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A. W. Wheen (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1987), 296. German original: Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2006), 197.

camera pulls away from the film's only surviving boy soldier, Albert Mutz (played by Fritz Wepper), to show the entirety of the bridge, now covered with dead bodies and rubble. At the beginning of the film the boys had looked forward with excitement to their military service; at the end of the film the boys are dead. But the water flowing under the bridge continues to flow, and the bridge is still there; all that has happened is that a number of people have died pointlessly.

Die Brücke can be divided into three acts: a first act in which viewers get to know the seven boys and their social milieu, and which ends with the boys being called to military service; a second, intermediate, act in which the boys receive some military training and viewers get to see a higher-level German commander, a cigar-smoking lieutenant colonel, plan strategy and make a rousing speech to his soldiers; and a final act in which the seven boys, left to their own devices, attempt to defend the bridge against the oncoming Americans. Each act corresponds to a day. In the first two acts the seven boys are a unit, initially in their school and then during military training at the barracks; in the final act this unity gradually disintegrates as, one by one, the boys die, leaving Albert Mutz alone. This general structure again echoes the structure of Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*, whose protagonist Paul Bäumer, still a schoolboy when he enters the army a few years into the war, gradually witnesses the deaths of his close cohort of comrades, many of them former school friends of his. In one of the last scenes of *Im Westen nichts Neues* Paul Bäumer carries his dead comrade, the older and more mature Kat, on his shoulders even after death; at the end of *Die Brücke* Albert Mutz tries to walk with the dead body of his more mature friend Hans Scholten, who has just been killed by friendly fire. Remarque ends *Im Westen nichts Neues* with a notice that Paul Bäumer has died; Wicki ends *Die Brücke* with Albert Mutz walking forward into an uncertain future.

Wicki deftly shows viewers the social milieu from which each of the boys comes. The smallest boy, Sigi Bernhard (played by Günther Hoffmann), comes from a modest background; his mother is a washer-woman who is terribly worried about her only child's future. She wants to send him away to safety, but Sigi refuses because he does not want to look like a coward. Sigi has named his pet rabbits Wotan and Alberich after figures in a Wagner opera, suggesting both social striving and visions of Wagnerian glory. Sigi is the most vulnerable boy and will be the first to die. Jürgen Borchert (played by Frank Glaubrecht) comes from the opposite social milieu: his father is a baron and a fallen military hero, and his mother, the baroness, owns a large estate on which foreign prisoners of war are forced to work. She preserves her composure at all costs but, like Sigi's mother, the woman who does her laundry, is also concerned for her son, who wants to become a hero like his father. Jürgen will be the second to die, killed by an American sharpshooter just as he has killed

an American soldier (and smiled after doing so). Walter Forst (played by Michael Hinz) is the son of a fat and selfish Nazi party official who is more concerned about his cigars than the citizens of the town he lives in — he deserts before the Americans arrive after commanding his son to stop listening to *Negermusik* (negro music, i.e., jazz). Walter has a contentious relationship with his father that is characterized by Oedipal jealousy. He becomes the third boy to die after he fires his bazooka, killing the German civilian; the American tank that he had tried to destroy instead destroys him. Karl Horber is the fourth boy to die. He too has an Oedipal relationship with his father, a successful barber who is having an affair with a female employee in whom Karl is also interested. Karl is eager to get away from home and away from the company of women, whom he claims to despise as *Schlampen* (sluts). Karl dies in a ditch during a firefight with the Americans, leaving his friend Klaus Hager (played by Volker Lechtenbrink), with whom he has fought over the course of the last few days, plagued with guilt. Klaus is a handsome fellow from a large city who has been evacuated for his own safety to the supposedly secure small town where the boys live; he already has a girlfriend (the only girl in the boys' high school class), and his disagreements with Karl involve their differing assessments of the value of women. Klaus dies when he leaves the ditch in which Karl has died and runs directly into American fire.

The last two boys left alive are Hans Scholten (played by Folker Bohnet) and his friend Albert Mutz. Hans, who comes from the dangerous city of Berlin, is also living in the small town for his own safety, and he is staying with the Mutz family. He is the most mature of the seven boys, with no illusions about heroism, and he is the only one who suggests to the boys that they should leave the bridge rather than defend it. His death is particularly senseless, and it is indirectly caused by his friend Albert. After American troops have withdrawn, three German soldiers arrive at the bridge with the order to destroy it. At this point Hans realizes that everything the boys have been doing has been senseless from the very beginning. While he is arguing with one of the soldiers, Albert shoots the soldier in the back; the other two soldiers withdraw but, as they are driving away, one of them shoots Hans. If Albert manages to survive the war, he will be haunted by his friend's death, but because he has shot a German soldier and prevented the destruction of the bridge, his survival is highly uncertain. Both German and American soldiers have reason to want him dead.

Die Brücke is typical of German war films of the 1950s in its depicting its young soldiers, and most of the Germans in the town, as fundamentally blameless. The only real Nazi in the town is Walter Forst's father, who leaves before the Americans arrive; most of the people left after his departure seem to be ordinary, well-intentioned citizens. The boys' teacher Stern is a kindly man who teaches English love poetry rather than

patriotic propaganda, and he tries to save his students by intervening with a former colleague of his, now a captain in the army, to place them out of danger. The conversation between these two men comes roughly midway through the film, and it forms the ideological core of *Die Brücke*. The former teacher Fröhlich, whose son has just died for his fatherland, and who therefore does not want to believe that young soldiers' deaths are pointless, tells his colleague that his seven students are eager to defend the fatherland: "They are idealists. They believe that they are fighting for the realization of ideals. They want to save the fatherland. They believe what you taught them, Herr Stern. Hölderlin: The battle's / Ours! Live, O Fatherland, remain there on high / And don't count the dead! O my beloved, / Not one too many has died for you."¹⁶ This conversation again recalls Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*, in which Paul Bäumer's teacher Kantorek is depicted as a nationalist zealot who brainwashed his students for war. However, in *Die Brücke* the teacher Stern is anything but a Nazi. In the first part of the film he gently chastises his students for wasting time planning war strategy in front of a large battle map in the classroom, and in his conversation with his former colleague Fröhlich he declares that the Nazis have rendered patriotic ideals invalid: "All these ideals have fallen into the hands of counterfeitors. None of it is true any more." Stern even suggests that after the war he will be unable to continue his work as a teacher. Hence, in *Die Brücke* it is not so much the older generation that is responsible for the deaths of the younger generation — as in *Im Westen nichts Neues* — as the boys themselves who, because of their immaturity and idealism, go willingly to their own deaths. Even Fröhlich, who now commands the boys, is trying to save their lives by placing them in a supposedly safe position at the bridge, well behind the front line.

Wicki, however, declared that his intention in making the film had been to show the boys in his film as innocent and the adults as guilty: "I am against war. Everyone is against war. With *Die Brücke* I wanted to show how these boys, who were children like thousands of others, became capable of the worst cruelty because of a bad education. . . . These young people were very innocent; I also wanted to say this. Guilt belongs to the adults, the adults who educated them."¹⁷ In fact, however, the film does not show the "bad education" that the children have purportedly received. The teacher Stern is anything but a warmonger, and most of

¹⁶ Hölderlin, "Der Tod fürs Vaterland." Friedrich Hölderlin, *Odes and Elegies*, trans. Nick Hoff (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008), 55. I have translated the prose.

¹⁷ Cited in Gagnon, *Celluloid Heroes*, 130–31. Originally from Joe Hembus and Christa Bandmann, *Klassiker des deutschen Tonfilms, 1930–1960* (Munich: Goldman, 1980), 189, 191.

the adults in the town seem ready for the war to be over. The boys are by far the most warlike people in the town, and in many ways their fighting spirit can be seen as a rebellion against adult quiescence. In this sense *Die Brücke* is not just a war film but a film about youthful rebellion and generational conflict in the spirit of some other movies of the 1950s, most notably Georg Tressler's *Die Halbstarken* (1956). This aspect of the film caused some younger viewers to see it not as an antiwar film but as a film about youthful heroism. One such viewer proclaimed: "This is our film. One should fight for one's fatherland just like those boys. They are patriots! Where can one find anything like that any more? Now I know what role models are."¹⁸ Another called the film's boy soldiers "amazing guys" and proclaimed that if older German soldiers had been willing to fight like the film's protagonists "the war would not have gone to the dogs."¹⁹ Such reactions show how difficult it is to make a truly antiwar film, even for someone like Wicki who sought to break with some of the conventions of the traditional war film.

The one military commander who is truly depicted as guilty in the film is lieutenant colonel Butov, who gives a patriotic speech when he sends his soldiers, and the boys, into battle. Butov is a chubby, self-satisfied fellow who enjoys his cigars, but when he gives the speech he rises to heights of eloquence that bind the boys to him: "Every square meter that we defend now is a part of the heart of our homeland. And whoever defends even a square meter of German soil to the last, defends Germany itself." Lieutenant Colonel Butov tells his men that soldiers under his command only ever move forwards and never retreat: "Only battle, victory or death. I expect that in its hour of need the fatherland will be able to depend on you." These words have an impact on the boys, and they are a primary reason why the boys refuse to leave the bridge when Hans suggests they do so.

Whereas the Nazis, in films like *Hitlerjunge Quex* (Hitler Youth Quex, 1933), had glorified young martyrs and heroes, *Die Brücke* presents the boys' sacrifice as senseless. Wicki was probably influenced by David Lean's great war film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), which had been well received in Germany, and which also features a pointless struggle over a bridge that ends with allies shooting at each other. Whereas Lean depicts his characters as highly problematic, however, Wicki's boys are purportedly not to blame because they are too young to know better. Only two of the boys are occasionally presented in a negative light: the baron's son Jürgen Borchert, who disrespects the foreign workers on his mother's

¹⁸ Cited in Gagnon, *Celluloid Heroes*, 142. Originally from "Das Killen scheint ein Vergnügen," *Kölner Rundschau*, 5 February 1960.

¹⁹ Cited in Gagnon, *Celluloid Heroes*, 142; from "Das Killen scheint ein Vergnügen," *Kölner Rundschau*, 5 February 1960.

estate, and the Nazi official's son Walter Forst, who is a young nihilist and likes to make fun of people weaker than he is. Otherwise the boys are a likeable bunch. They are mostly being raised without fathers, and the only two who have fathers around clearly have tense relationships with them. The mothers shown in the film are uniformly caring and friendly, no matter what social class they come from, and most of the town's citizens seem to be good people. Even the local policeman is a kindly old gentleman who reacts with compassion and concern when Sigi's mother learns that her son is being called into the army.²⁰ *Die Brücke* paints a picture of ordinary Germans who are basically untouched by Nazism.

This depiction of German civilians is highly problematic but typical of German war films of the 1950s, a period when many Germans clung to the notion that the country itself had been victimized by the Nazis. In its relentless depiction of senseless death and destruction, however, *Die Brücke* goes well beyond other German war films of the 1950s, and in its cautious suggestion that at least some of the boys might be responsible for their own (and other people's) deaths, it implies that older German soldiers certainly should have known better.

Die Brücke is filmed in a simple, linear manner. Whereas the original novel had featured flashbacks from the perspective of the late 1950s, Wicki situated the entire action in three days at the end of the war. He declared in 1962 that for a novel, flashbacks "may be good, but for a picture it is quite impossible to several times destroy the action only to start again."²¹ One of the most remarkable aspects of the film is its soundtrack, which — unusual for films in the 1950s — includes no music but only diegetic sound, from the initial noise of the river flowing under the bridge through the ever-louder sounds of approaching American tanks to the jarring noises of the final battle scenes. Richard Blank writes that Wicki disliked the overblown romanticism of conventional film music: "He can't stand this sappiness anyway. The pictures have to bring it, the sounds, and the language. If viewers . . . are too fogged in by film music, they all too easily stop watching and listening closely."²² A good example of Wicki's use of sound occurs in the middle of the film, when the boys are awakened from their beds and called into battle; the sequence features

²⁰ In a serendipitous bit of film history, the actor who played the policeman, Hans Öttl, was the father of Bernhard Wicki's later wife, the actress Elisabeth Endriss. See Elisabeth Endriss, "Herr Wicki, mein Vater hat bei Ihnen in der *Brücke* gespielt," in *Er kann fliegen lassen: Gespräche und Texte über Bernhard Wicki (1919–2000)*, Andreas Weber (St. Pölten: Literaturedition Niederösterreich, 2000), 21–27; here, 22.

²¹ Zander, *Bernhard Wicki*, 95.

²² Richard Blank, *Jenseits der Brücke: Bernhard Wicki — Ein Leben für den Film* (Munich: Econ, 1999), 110.

electronically distorted sound that both suggests the boys' disorientation and is equally disorientating to the viewers. The film's soundtrack was remarkable for its day and was recognized with a Federal Film Prize in 1960. The film's camera work features numerous close-ups of its young protagonists as well as point-of-view shots taken mostly from their perspective, thus situating viewers firmly on the side of the boys. Occasionally, however, as in one aerial shot of a group of soldiers that includes the young recruits, the camera situates their story as just one part of a larger narrative of dehumanization and decline. By showing the virtually identical recruits from above, the shot emphasizes the loss of their individuality, and recalls similar shots from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*.

As it moved from the 1950s into the 1960s, the German film industry was faced with declining revenues, increasing competition from television, and an incipient rebellion by younger filmmakers who were tired of the aesthetic and political conservatism of the country's mainstream cinema. In some ways *Die Brücke* was an exception to that conservatism, but in other ways — particularly in its depiction of a town basically untouched by Nazism, and of young innocent soldiers — it instantiated it. Only a few years later, the next generation of filmmakers would proclaim the end of "Papas Kino" and the birth of a new, more critical German cinema. Volker Schlöndorff's *Der junge Törless* (Young Törless, 1966), which is the subject of the next chapter, was an important milestone in that movement, and its treatment of young people was radically different.



Thomas Törless recognizes himself. Screen capture.

21: *Der junge Törless* (1966) or Recapturing Tradition

Director: Volker Schlöndorff

Cinematographer: Franz Rath

Screenplay: Herbert Asmodi and Volker Schlöndorff, based on the novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* by Robert Musil

Producers: Louis Malle and Franz Seitz (Franz Seitz Filmproduktion and Nouvelles Éditions de Films S.A.)

Editor: Claus von Boro

Set Decoration: Maleen Pacha

Costume Design: Eva Gall and Maleen Pacha

Music: Hans Werner Henze

Soundtrack: Klaus Eckelt

German Release Date: [West Germany] May 20, 1966

Actors: Mathieu Carrière (Thomas Törless); Marian Seidowsky (Anselm von Basini); Bernd Tischer (Beineberg); Fred Dietz (Reiting); Barbara Steele (Bozena); Jean Launay (math teacher); Lotte Ledl (innkeeper); Herbert Asmodi (Törless's father); Hanna Axmann-Rezzori (Törless's mother); Fritz Gehlen (headmaster)

Awards: Cannes Film Festival, 1966: Prix FIPRESCI to Volker Schlöndorff; German Film Awards, 1966: Outstanding Individual Achievement for Direction to Volker Schlöndorff; Outstanding Individual Achievement for Screenplay to Volker Schlöndorff; Outstanding Feature Film to Franz Seitz

WHEN IT APPEARED IN 1966, Volker Schlöndorff's first feature film *Der junge Törless* (Young Törless), was hailed as one of the first signs of a new, more creative West German cinema emerging from the relative stasis of the 1950s. *Der junge Törless* was released in the same year as Alexander Kluge's first feature film, *Abschied von gestern* (literally: Farewell to Yesterday; English title: Yesterday Girl) and Ulrich Schamoni's *Es* (It), both of which also signaled the arrival of what became known as the Young German Film and, later, the New German Cinema. All three films dealt with young people and their conflicts with each other and the older generation, thus reflecting the generational turmoil that was a pronounced part of western culture in the

1960s. Whereas Kluge and Schamoni set their films in the West German present, however, Schlöndorff chose as his subject matter Robert Musil's novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* (The Confusions of Young Törless, 1906), which dealt with Central European culture and its youthful unrest in the decades prior to the First World War. And whereas Kluge's and Schamoni's protagonists were young women struggling with conflicts between their own sexuality and the demands of a repressive world unwilling to accept that sexuality, Schlöndorff's protagonist was a fifteen-year-old boy whose sexuality is only just beginning to emerge, thus contributing to his "confusions." Kluge's film depicted a society that was in denial about its Nazi past; Schlöndorff's film, in contrast, depicted a pre-Nazi society that bore within it the seeds of its own destruction. Although the film was set well before the Nazi period, *Der junge Törless* was above all an attempt to address the Nazi past; it asked the question how it was psychologically possible for human beings to perpetrate and submit to atrocities. "How could you do that?" asks the protagonist Törless, played by Mathieu Carrière, at one point in the film.¹

Schlöndorff received his film training in France at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s and then worked as an assistant to the great French director Louis Malle before returning to West Germany. He was determined to reinvigorate a cinematic tradition that he believed had been destroyed by twelve years of Nazi misrule and nearly two decades of mediocrity after 1945. His choice of Musil's novel can be seen as an attempt to reach back to the pre-Nazi cultural traditions of Central Europe. As Schlöndorff was to write decades later in his autobiography, "I was tempted by the challenge of making a bridge to the German cinema before 1933. I wanted to show myself and everybody else who was involved in reinventing German cinema how high the bar was. Either we would succeed in reaching that level again, or we should not even bother."² Schlöndorff's most important cinematic lodestar was Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), from which he drew his approach to the character Basini (played by Marian Seidowsky), the weak but puffed-up boy who, in both Schlöndorff's film and the novel, is the victim of the three stronger boys Reiting, Beineberg, and Törless. Schlöndorff used Peter Lorre's bravura performance of the victimized murderer Beckert in *M* to convince the skeptical Seidowsky

¹ All quotations from the film are my own transcriptions unless otherwise noted. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are also my own.

² Volker Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung: Mein Leben und meine Filme* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2008), 151.

“that even the role of a victim can be a leading role.”³ More problematic, according to Schlöndorff, was the fact that Seidowsky was a Jew who was, like his character in the film, also frequently picked on by the other boys in his school; “the terrible thing,” Schlöndorff wrote in his memoirs, was his reaction — he “laughed scornfully about the brutal bullying he was often subjected to.”⁴ In addition to its implicit references to Lang’s *M*, *Der junge Törless* also contains less obvious references to other classic Weimar films: Robert Wiene’s *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, F. W. Murnau’s *Der letzte Mann*, and Josef von Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel*.

Der junge Törless depicts life in a military academy in the Austro-Hungarian empire prior to the First World War. The boarding school is its own society, separated from the outside world by thick walls and a gatekeeper — in much the same way that the all-male school in Josef von Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel* had been separated from the town in which it was situated. The student denizens of Schlöndorff’s school are immediately marked as different from the residents of the outside world by the fact that they are young, male, and wear uniforms, in contrast to the people living in the town who are shown as civilian, mostly female, and older. In addition, the cadets in Schlöndorff’s school speak German and come from the upper class of Austrian society (usually from Vienna), whereas the lower-class citizens in the town and surrounding countryside often speak Hungarian. These two worlds are quite separate, although the boys occasionally make forays away from the school for the purposes of consumption or diversion. Within the school itself, there is also more than one world. On the one hand, there is the world of ordinary school life, with its ordered and predictable routines, but on the other hand, there is a secret world in the school’s attic to which privileged students can gain access through a small door that requires them to stoop down and use a large key to enter. One of the film’s early reviewers called the school and its secrets “a realm of shadows that is not as mysterious as Kafka’s world but that is nevertheless governed by equally anonymous laws.”⁵ Only a few students — Reiting, Beineberg, Törless, and their victim Basini — seem to know about the existence of this secret space. Because the school’s teachers know nothing about it, it is outside their authority and eludes their supervision. The other students in the school also generally evade the authority of their teachers, and thus the school is divided into at

³ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 159.

⁴ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 158, 159.

⁵ Herbert Lindner, “Der junge Törless,” *Filmkritik*, 10, no. 6 (June 1966): 323–24; here, 323.

least three separate societies: the official world of the teachers, represented above all by a classics instructor who gets around with a crutch and thus embodies the ineffectiveness of adult authority; the independent world of the cadets; and the secret attic world of the four main characters. Törless can be thought of as forming a group of one, since he does not properly belong to any of the worlds, even though he has access to all of them.

The secret or parallel society in *Der junge Törless* is analogous to the organized criminals in Lang's *M*, who capture and put on trial the child murderer Beckert, and are about to kill him when he is saved by the intervention of proper legal authorities in the form of the police commissioner Karl Lohmann. Schlöndorff emphasizes the similarities between *Der junge Törless* and *M* by focusing an early close-up on the knife that Basini uses to break open the locker of another student, thereby quoting a similar close-up by Lang of Beckert using a knife to get out of the attic storage area in which he has been trapped. The dramatic climax of *Der junge Törless*, which differs from Musil's novel, also resembles the climax of *M*: the thief Basini, whose doughy face makes him look like a young relative of Beckert, is trapped by his classmates in a gymnasium, where he is subjected to psychological and physical torment, hung up by his feet and then swung through the air while being lowered closer and closer to the floor. Here there is also an obvious parallel to the mocking of Christ on the cross. Cinematographer Franz Rath uses Expressionist camera angles, shooting from Basini's point of view as he swings freely among his tormenters, just as Karl Freund's camera had swung wildly in *Der letzte Mann* when the hotel doorman got drunk.

The spectacle of a large group of people getting pleasure out of tormenting and threatening a single individual echoes many of the themes of Lang's film, as does the victim's ultimate rescue by legitimate authorities — in Basini's case the school's teachers. Just as Beckert in *M* had argued that he was acting not of his own volition but rather in response to forces beyond his control, so too Basini, in *Der junge Törless*, denies personal responsibility for his actions. The crucial distinction is that whereas Beckert is controlled by forces that come from within his own tormented brain, Basini surrenders his individual freedom to his human tormenters, Reiting and Beineberg.

In their one-on-one encounter in the boys' secret attic, while Reiting and Beineberg are on vacation, Törless asks Basini why he agrees to do what the stronger boys order him to do. Törless wants to know what goes on in people's minds when they subject themselves and others to abasement. Törless strikes Basini in the face, just as the brutal Reiting had done before, and when Basini does not defend himself Törless says: "Do you see how cowardly you are? You put up with everything?" After Basini has explained to Törless all the humiliating things that Reiting and Beineberg

make him do — implicitly including sexual slavery — Törless asks, “And you put up with that? You *do* what they ask of you?” Basini’s response is matter-of-fact: “What choice do I have? I want to be a respectable person again and have my peace and quiet.”

Schlöndorff thus thematizes both humans’ willingness to turn themselves into slaves, and their eagerness to torture and humiliate others. Basini is the slave, while Reiting and Beineberg are the torturers. Törless, meanwhile, is the seemingly dispassionate observer who studies others’ actions without intervening — his primary goal is to understand the psychology of extreme situations. Törless imagines that there is a vast difference between ordinary human life and a life lived with the perpetration of, or the subjection to, atrocities; he hypothesizes that this difference will be signaled by an unusual mental state. He asks Basini: “What happens in your mind when this happens? The picture that you’ve made of yourself, doesn’t it shatter, doesn’t it shatter?” What Törless learns over the course of the film is that human beings can submit to or commit atrocities almost as easily as they can do anything else. Evil does not exist in a separate world that is clearly demarcated and distinct, but is a natural part of the ordinary, everyday world.

With these ethical concerns, Schlöndorff departs significantly from Musil’s novel, which had shown Törless coming to primarily theoretical conclusions about the difficulty of understanding his own psychology: “There is something dark in me, something among all my thoughts, something that I cannot measure with thoughts, a life that can’t be expressed in words and which is none the less my life.”⁶ In contrast, Schlöndorff’s Törless is able to articulate what he has learned relatively easily: “I was forced to recognize that something like this exists: that human beings are not created once and for all, good or evil, but that we are all constantly changing. That we only determine our behavior . . . and that we can change, that we can become torturers and victims, and then anything is possible . . . then perfectly normal people can do horrible things . . . and that’s why we must be on our guard. That’s what I learned.”⁷ This relatively articulate speech from a fifteen-year-old boy, which has been faulted by some critics for being too glib, suggests the influence of post-1945 discussions about the psychology of Nazi perpetrators, such as Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), which had reflected on the ordinariness of one of the most heinous Nazi

⁶ Robert Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin, 2001), 157. German original: Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törleß* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006), 195–96.

⁷ Cited from Meghan Goder, “Törless as Extrovert: Schlöndorff’s Variations on Musil’s Novella,” *Ars Semiotica* 14, no. 1–2 (1991): 49–63; here, 60.

criminals.⁸ It is probably not a coincidence that the first of the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt, at which a number of major figures at the Auschwitz concentration camp were forced to account for their crimes, had occurred from 1963 to 1965, shortly before the making of Schlöndorff's film. Fritz Bauer, the prosecutor in the trials, even made a brief cameo appearance in Kluge's *Abschied von gestern*. In 1966 Nazi crimes were very much in the air in West Germany, and both Kluge and Schlöndorff wanted to address them. The emergence of Young German Film in the 1960s coincided precisely with a new, more critical discourse about German criminality during the Hitler dictatorship.

Schlöndorff was explicit about his use of Törless as a representative of the passive complicity of the German people during the Nazi period: in a comment about the differences between his film and Musil's novel, he said: "Musil wrote the book before the time of National Socialism. But today it seems like a prophetic parable. Basini is the Jew. Beineberg and Reiting the dictators; Törless embodies the German people, of whom one could say that they were guiltier than the tyrants. Guiltier because they had a chance to understand. In a certain sense this angel Törless is a swine."⁹ Curiously, the character Törless has no predecessor in the Weimar films that influenced Schlöndorff. Reiting is a brutal criminal similar to Lang's Schränker: Beineberg, with his fascination for hypnotism and mind control, is a would-be Dr. Caligari or Dr. Mabuse; Basini is a reincarnation of the somnambulist Cesare or the murderer Beckert; and the school's ineffectual teachers, who know virtually nothing about what is really going on among the students entrusted to their care, are an echo of Immanuel Rath in *Der blaue Engel*. Even the

⁸ For criticisms of this speech, see Hildburg Herbst, "Young *Törless*: Schlöndorff's Film Adaptation of Musil's Novella," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1985): 215–21, who calls Törless's speech "one of the rare instances in the film where the transformation from word into image has not been solved quite satisfactorily" (218–19); and Bruce Fleming, "Thoughts and Their Discontents: Törless — Book to Film," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1992): 109–14, who calls the film "dull for its first half . . . and then strangely articulate in its final scenes," partly because of a speech by Törless that "comes willy-nilly to form [one of] the intellectual high points of the film" (p. 111).

⁹ Rainer Lewandowski, *Die Filme von Volker Schlöndorff* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1981), 54. It should be noted, however, that in the late 1930s Musil himself acknowledged certain similarities between the figures in his first novel and Nazi criminals: "I already depicted the basic drives of the Third Reich in *The Confusions of Young Törless* . . . Reiting, Beineberg: today's dictators in nucleo." Cited in Goder, "Törless as Extrovert," 57. German original: Hans-Peter Franke, *Materialien: Robert Musil "Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß"* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1983), 4.

school's doorkeeper — who does not appear in Musil's novel — is an echo of the doorkeeper in *Der blaue Engel* or of the night watchman in Murnau's *Der letzte Mann*. Törless is different and separate from all of these figures, and his separation is signaled early on in the film by the physical distance he keeps from his peers. He knows most of what is happening in the school, but he does nothing to stop it until it is too late; although he sees himself as separate from Reiting and Beineberg, he winds up abusing Basini in much the same way that they did. Törless is the school intellectual who sees other people's suffering primarily as an opportunity to learn more about human nature.

Schlöndorff's emphasis on humans and the pleasure they take in torturing other living beings is seen in an early segment that features Reiting tormenting a fly that he has trapped on his desk. The camera focuses on a close-up of Reiting capturing and observing the fly, then of Törless observing Reiting, and then of the pen that Reiting uses to torment the fly. The sequence of shots implies that Törless's relationship to other human beings is analogous to Reiting's relationship to the fly. Just as Reiting wants to watch the fly suffer and die, so Törless wants to watch Reiting torturing and killing. The scene's emphasis on silence and ticking clocks suggests that the urge to torture, and to observe torture, comes at least partly from sheer boredom, i.e., to use Arendt's categories, that evil comes from banality: Beineberg carves the words "abgesessene Tage" (days served) into the wood of his desk, and when the school bell rings Törless makes the ironic commentary: "Yet another day gone by that we will tell our grandchildren about." This scene, which does not occur in Musil's novel, suggests a parallel between the world of Schlöndorff's cadets and the schoolboys in Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel*.

Later on in the film, a change in Törless's approach to violence is signaled by another encounter with a tormented creature, this time a mouse that Reiting dangles by its tail above the hot smoke of a pipe that he is smoking — a hint at the fate that awaits Basini, who will soon be subjected by Beineberg to both heat torture and hanging. Here too the camera's focus on the mouse suggests the perspective of Törless, who puts the mouse out of its misery by dashing it against the wall of a monument. The implication is that Törless now cares enough to intervene in a nonchalant, arrogant way, but not enough to actually save the life of the mouse. Later on, when Basini is whipped by Beineberg and Reiting, Törless simply walks away while Basini desperately calls his name. The next day, when Basini begs Törless to help, Törless replies, "I can't help you" and "Do what you want." When Reiting accuses Törless of joining together with Basini, Törless scornfully responds, "I find this whole affair boring." In the climactic group torture scene, Törless's halfhearted efforts to intervene on behalf of Basini are predictably

ineffective, and Basini is threatened with precisely the same fate as the mouse earlier on. Toward the beginning of the film, Törless's attention focuses briefly on a pig suspended in the air and disemboweled by a butcher, its guts spilling into the open. When, later on, Beineberg sticks a needle into Basini's arm and the camera moves in for a close-up of the penetration, the implication is that now Basini has taken on the role of the tortured animal, with Beineberg observing Basini and Törless observing both boys.

In both Musil's novel and Schlöndorff's film, the torture of Basini goes along with sexual abuse. Although Schlöndorff treats the homosexuality in the school more discretely than Musil, he nevertheless makes it clear that both Reiting and Beineberg force Basini to serve them sexually, and that Törless eventually joins suit. In his memoirs Schlöndorff acknowledged regret at not having a scene that explicitly shows the sexual relationship between Basini and Törless: "When the two remain behind alone during the holidays, Basini was supposed to crawl into bed with Törless and seek shelter with him after all his humiliations and torments, Törless was to embrace him, and both boys were to let their adolescent confusions run wild. . . . Between fifteen-year-old boys this sensuality . . . would not have been embarrassing — and it's sorely missing in the film."¹⁰ The reason given by Schlöndorff for never filming such a scene was that the two actors, Mathieu Carrière and Marian Seidowsky, did not get along with each other — and in fact that the entire cast had difficulty getting along with Seidowsky. However, it is also likely that an explicitly homosexual scene between Törless and Basini would still have been unacceptable on a West German screen in 1966. Only a few years later, with the advent of explicit homosexuality in the films of Fassbinder and others, this would change. At any rate, *Der junge Törless* is remarkably daring in showing the relationship between torture and sexual pleasure, and its depiction earned the wrath of at least one West German diplomat, who demonstratively walked out of a screening of the film at the Cannes Film Festival. *Der junge Törless* was also denied screenings at the Goethe Institutes — the Federal Republic's worldwide network of cultural embassies — because authorities saw it, in Schlöndorff's words, as "dirtying our own nest."¹¹ In 1966 West German authorities had not yet come to understand that an open broaching of difficult problems from the German past would actually help rather than hinder the Federal Republic in its public relations efforts.

¹⁰ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 162–63.

¹¹ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 165.

Whereas a film like Bernhard Wicki's *Die Brücke* seven years earlier had shown heroic young people who were primarily victims of circumstance, and who were largely in solidarity with each other, Schlöndorff's *Der junge Törless* depicted young people who took pleasure in tormenting others. Schlöndorff's youths had something in common with the teenage delinquents of 1950s films like Georg Tressler's *Die Halbstarken* (The Hooligans, 1956), and it was partly this similarity between *Der junge Törless* and the 1950s films about adolescent rebellion that enabled the young director to sell his film to its distributor. As Schlöndorff later recalled, "I . . . told them something about terror and violence among adolescent rowdies, something in the style of *Blackboard Jungle*."¹² German films about youth rebellion in the 1950s, however, had suggested the existence of a more-or-less intact adult world; in *Der junge Törless*, on the other hand, the adult world is ineffective and looked on with scorn by the teenage protagonists, who have no reason to revise their opinion at film's end. One of the final scenes in *Der junge Törless* — absent from Musil's novel — shows Reiting, Beineberg, and the other schoolboys deliberating on how to lie to their teachers about what has happened. Thus, evil goes unpunished — neither Reiting nor Beineberg suffers any consequences in the film — the victim Basini is not rehabilitated, and at the end of the film Törless does what he has done throughout most of the film: he leaves. After running away from the school on his own, he is later taken away by his mother, who, as Hildburg Herbst has pointed out, wears the same outfit at the film's end as at the film's beginning.¹³ The film's ending thus implies that the psychological predispositions and social structures that made the torture of Basini possible continue to exist.

Törless has two primary moments of self-recognition in the film, both of them significantly different from corresponding moments in the book, and both signaled by notable visual effects. In the first such instance, Beineberg and Reiting are torturing Basini in the attic at night while Törless looks on, using a lantern that creates a chiaroscuro effect in the attic's darkness, recalling Weimar films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, *Der letzte Mann*, *Metropolis*, *Der blaue Engel*, and *M*. The lantern, which reveals images like a film camera and projects light like a projector, places Törless in a position similar to the film's spectators who watch events without intervening in them. Musil himself uses this metaphor in his novel: "For he always felt as though an image had just flashed across the mysterious surface, and he never managed to catch

¹² Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 152.

¹³ Herbst, "Young Torless: Schlöndorff's Film Adaptation of Musil's Novella," 216.

it as it was actually happening. So he was always filled with a restless unease, such as that which one feels watching a cinematic film when, despite the illusion of the whole, one is unable to shake off a vague perception that behind the image which one receives hundreds of different images are flashing by, each quite different when seen individually.”¹⁴ Musil, who published his novel only eleven years after film was introduced in Germany, was already comparing the working of his protagonist’s mind to the apparatus of the film projector: Törless can observe events, but he is unable to stop the moving pictures in his head or to capture the reality that he suspects lies behind them. In Musil’s novel, the moment when Törless observes the torture of Basini by Reiting and Beineberg is described as one of unwanted and surprising sexual arousal on the part of Törless: “Something made Törless smile. Then the desire grew even stronger. It drew him down from his seat — on to his knees; on to the floor. It drove him to press his body against the boards; he felt his eyes growing large like a fish’s eyes, he felt his heart knocking against the wood through his naked body.” A few paragraphs later Musil makes Törless’s sexual arousal explicit. The sound of Basini’s whimpering excites him: “Törless felt pleasantly touched by those moaning sounds. A shudder ran up and down his back, as though on the feet of spiders; then it settled between his shoulder-blades and, with delicate claws, drew his scalp backwards. To his disgust Törless realized that he was in a state of sexual arousal. He thought back, and without being able to remember when it had started, he knew that it had accompanied that curious desire to press himself against the floor. It made him ashamed; but it had filled his head like a surging wave of blood.”¹⁵ Since Schlöndorff, unlike Musil, cannot describe Törless’s self-recognition in words, he uses a visual image. Musil writes that while watching Basini being tortured by Reiting and Beineberg, Törless was also “observing himself” and that is precisely what Törless does in Schlöndorff’s film.¹⁶ Beineberg and Reiting object to the lantern, warning him that its light

¹⁴ Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, 102. German original: Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törleß*, 128–29. See also the discussion of this passage in Eric Rentschler, “Specularity and Spectacle in Schlöndorff’s *Young Törless* (1966),” in *German Film and Literature*, ed. Rentschler (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 176–92; here, 185; and Peter Horn, “Der exzentrische Blick des Zuschauers und das Spektakel der Macht im Film: Schlöndorffs Verfilmung von Musils Törless,” *Acta Germanica* 24 (1996): 81–89; here, 87–88.

¹⁵ Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, 77–78. German original: Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törleß*, 99.

¹⁶ Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, 77. German original: Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törleß*, 98.

might attract the school's authorities, so Törless sets it down and turns his head toward a mirror in which he sees himself rather than the other boys. Törless's moment of self-recognition is further emphasized visually by the fact that the shadow of the attic window's wooden beams forms a cross directly across his face, centering on his nose, as if marking him in someone's — by implication his own — line of fire. This is an effective visual image for what, in Musil's novel, is an interior monologue describing Törless's recognition of something in himself that he is not proud of.

Törless's second moment of self-recognition comes during his one-on-one interview with Basini, also in the attic. Törless wants to know what makes it possible for Basini to abase himself. Basini's answers are matter-of-fact: he does what he does because he has to, and his actions apparently have no impact on his self-image. In Musil's novel Basini tells Törless: "I don't know what you want; I can't explain anything to you. It happens on the spur of the moment; it can't happen any other way; you would do exactly the same as I do."¹⁷ In the film, Basini's words are similar: "You are torturing me. I don't know what you want. There's nothing to explain. It happens in the moment. Nothing else can happen after that. You'd do the same thing in my place." During this scene, cinematographer Franz Rath's camera has taken in the action from a position roughly level with the boys, focusing in close-up sometimes on Basini and sometimes on Törless. After Basini tells Törless that he would act in precisely the same way if he were in Basini's position, the camera moves from Basini to Törless, catching a moment of recognition on his face. It then, for the first time, rises to a position significantly above Törless and looks down at him, implying that he now no longer necessarily sees himself as inalterably different from Basini but rather as connected to him. Before the scene ends, the camera captures both boys from its raised position, further underscoring this connection. In Musil's novel Törless's moment of self-recognition appears as an extended interior monologue: "Yes, I would have more character than he does, I wouldn't stand for such outrageous demands — but does any of it matter? Does it matter that I would act differently out of firmness, out of respectability, for reasons that are now quite irrelevant to me? No, what matters isn't how I would act, but the fact that if I really did act like Basini, I'd feel it was every bit as normal as he does. That's the important thing: my sense of myself would be just as straightforward, just as unambiguous as his."¹⁸

¹⁷ Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, 118. German original: Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törleß*, 148.

¹⁸ Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, 118. German original: Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törleß*, 148–49.

The unusual music for *Der junge Törless* was created by the renowned German composer Hans Werner Henze, with whom Schlöndorff was subsequently to work on other projects, such as *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (1975). Schlöndorff did not want a typical film soundtrack: “I could already hear the violins.”¹⁹ Henze’s music has something both modern and archaic about it; it is played on old instruments that are no longer in widespread use such as the hurdy-gurdy, the viola da gamba, and the wooden flute, but its structuring and tone system are modern. Henze’s music, which is anything but restful, effectively suggests the turmoil going on in Törless’s head even when Törless appears on the outside to be calm. For Schlöndorff the archaic instruments correspond to the youthful, unfinished character of cadets undergoing puberty: “Because the characters of the cadets are still so unfinished and wooden, the instruments also should not be sophisticated, should not be capable of tremolo, vibrato and other virtuoso effects.”²⁰ Christopher Dietrich has correctly observed that “the spartan musical score . . . accentuates the dreariness of the bleak country surroundings and sadness of village life completely bereft of any gaiety and charm.”²¹ The film’s lighting also suggests this dreariness. As Hubert Linder notes, “in point of fact there is no light in this film, just twilight and darkness and an intense feeling of cold sweat and endless hours in school.”²²

While Schlöndorff was beginning work on *Der junge Törless*, encouraged by what he saw as “the beginning of Young German Film that could be felt everywhere,” his colleague Alexander Kluge suggested that he should meet another aspiring young German director. Schlöndorff went to meet this director and found “a young man, a typical Romantic German youth on whose high brow one could read idealism, ecstasy, humor, or perhaps folly.”²³ This young man was Werner Herzog, who was soon to make his first feature film, *Lebenszeichen* (Signs of Life, 1968). It was Herzog who suggested to Schlöndorff that he should film *Der junge Törless* in the desolate plains of eastern Austria, in a place that seemed to Schlöndorff like the “end of the world.”²⁴ Schlöndorff was to remember his meeting

¹⁹ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 164.

²⁰ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 164.

²¹ Christopher Dietrich, “Germany: A Closet Full of Brutality — Volker Schlöndorff’s *Der junge Törless* (*Young Törless*, 1966),” *kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Film* 2, no. 20 (27 May 2002); accessed electronically at <http://www.kinoeye.org/02/10/dietrich10.php>.

²² Lindner, “Der junge Törless,” 323.

²³ Schlöndorff makes a wordplay on the fact that the German word for “humor” (*Witz*) is connected to the word for “folly” (*Aberwitz*).

²⁴ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 157.

with Herzog as historic. Whereas Schlöndorff spent most of the rest of his career exploring a world that saw itself as civilized, Herzog was to base his career on explorations of life at the “end of the world,” as in his film *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), a documentary about the possibility (or impossibility) of life in Antarctica. Several years after the release of *Der junge Törless*, Herzog was to make a trip to the Andes mountains and the tributaries of the Amazon River in order to create what would become one of the most celebrated films of the New German Cinema: *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (Aguirre, the Wrath of God, 1972).



Klaus Kinski as Don Lope de Aguirre. Screen capture.

22: *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972): Film and the Sublime

Director: Werner Herzog

Cinematographer: Thomas Mauch

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Producers: Werner Herzog and Hans Prescher (Werner Herzog Filmproduktion and Hessischer Rundfunk)

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Music: Popol Vuh

Soundtrack: Herbert Prasch

German Release Date: [West Germany] December 29, 1972

Actors: Klaus Kinski (Don Lope de Aguirre); Helena Rojo (Inez de Atienza); Nicolas Del Negro (Gaspar de Carvajal); Ruy Guerra (Don Pedro de Ursua); Peter Berling (Don Fernando de Guzmann); Cecilia Rivera (Flores); Daniel Ades (Perucho); Edward Roland (Okello); Armando Polanah (Armando); and 270 Indians from the cooperative of Lauramarca

Awards: German Film Award, 1973: Best Cinematography; French Syndicate of Cinema Critics, 1976: Best Foreign Film; National Society of Film Critics Award, 1977: Best Picture

ALTHOUGH GENERALLY CONSIDERED one of the primary representatives of the New German Cinema, Werner Herzog approaches his art in a very different way from his fellow filmmakers. Directors like Kluge, Fassbinder, and Schlöndorff were known for their political activism and commitment, but Herzog has generally tended to steer clear of political involvement. Asked about his ideological commitment, or lack thereof, he responds with a typical lack of modesty: “I do not like to drop names, but what sort of an ideology would you push under the shirt of Conrad or Hemingway or Kafka? Goya or Caspar David Friedrich?”¹ Whereas many of the directors of the New German Cinema dealt with the problems of the German past, particularly Nazism and the postwar reconstruction of West Germany, Herzog has largely avoided explicitly German themes in his films. His fellow filmmakers tended to make historical or social films

¹ Paul Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 66.

dealing with human beings' predicaments in constricting or imperfect social systems; Herzog, in contrast, depicts human beings who are, for various reasons, independent from or separated from such social systems. Herzog has focused his cinematic attention primarily on unique individuals — almost all of them men. His fellow filmmakers made most of their greatest movies in studios, but Herzog has made his most important movies, *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (Aguirre, the Wrath of God, 1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) on location, in the Amazon jungle, and almost all of his other films were also made on location, away from a studio. For most of the other directors of the New German Cinema, the primary fact of human existence is embeddedness in society and history; for Herzog, the primary fact of human existence is confrontation with a beautiful but implacable nature, instantiated in the authentic landscapes of his films.

Herzog has thus declared that landscapes are the starting point of his films; these landscapes, Herzog says, "become the film's soul, and sometimes the characters and the story come afterwards, always very naturally."² Dana Benelli writes, with justification, that in Herzog's films, "before there is character there is landscape."³ Landscape becomes a primary force in Herzog's films, a force that impresses itself on the viewer and the characters. Herzog declares: "In my films landscapes are never just picturesque or scenic backdrops as they often are in Hollywood films. In *Aguirre* the jungle is never some lush, beautiful environment it might be in a television commercial." It is, as Herzog puts it, "not just a location, it is a state of our mind" with "almost human qualities."⁴

Central to the politics of the New German Cinema, particularly as instantiated by Kluge, Fassbinder, and Schlöndorff, was the premise that it is possible to use film to help create a better society, and a better world. For left-leaning filmmakers like Kluge, Fassbinder, and Schlöndorff, human nature is not fixed and unchanging, but rather, human nature is determined by historical circumstances, and therefore different historical circumstances create different conceptions of human nature. For such filmmakers, "nature," whether human or nonhuman, is not really a problem; what is a problem, instead, is "culture," defined as the civilization and life-patterns that human beings have created outside of

² Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 83.

³ Dana Benelli, "The Cosmos and its Discontents," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 89–103; here, 92.

⁴ Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 81.

nature. Left-liberals have tended to view history as a story of progress from one social system to another in a generally positive, goal-oriented way, such as from feudalism to capitalism, from slavery to freedom, or from superstition to enlightenment. For them, history is a more or less straight line pointing onward and upward, not circular or static. It does not repeat the natural cycles of nature but rather emancipates human beings from them.

Herzog's approach to the cinema, and to life, is radically different, and far more conservative in the traditional sense — even though his films themselves can be profoundly, even radically, disturbing.⁵ In Herzog's films nature is an overwhelming, implacable power with which human beings must contend. Human beings themselves are puny, but nature is all-powerful and frequently hostile. The title of one of Herzog's films, *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (literally: Every Man for Himself and God against All; English title: *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, 1974) — a movie about the legendary foundling Kaspar Hauser, a feral child who was discovered in Nuremberg in 1828 and subsequently murdered — succinctly captures Herzog's belief in an implacable nonhuman force who exists in enmity to all human beings; that this force is called God in the film's title does not suggest any necessary connection to established religion. The very title of *Aguirre, Der Zorn Gottes*, Herzog's most important film, suggests yet another struggle between human beings and an implacable divinity. Its title could in essence be the same as the one for the Kaspar Hauser film (*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle*) because in this film, human beings struggle against each other, while an all-powerful nature ultimately defeats everyone. At one point in *Aguirre* the monk Gaspar de Carvajal, praying to God, says: "You cause man to go away like a river, and your years know no end."⁶ This is a variation on a psalm that proclaims: "Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it floresheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth. For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled" (Psalm 90: 5–7). *Aguirre*'s very title refers to an angry God in contrast to whom human beings are small and powerless.

⁵ John E. Davidson writes rather exaggeratedly that Herzog "has always been . . . an embarrassment to Germans, Germany, and German film," and that since the 1970s Herzog "has moved even more disturbingly to the right." Davidson, "As Others Put Plays upon the Stage: *Aguirre*, Neocolonialism, and the New German Cinema," *New German Critique*, no. 60 (Fall 1993): 101–30; here, 128.

⁶ This transcription from the film, and all others, are my own.

Aguirre, which was shot entirely on location in the jungles of South America under difficult conditions, is very loosely based on historical reality: the failed 1560–61 expedition of Pedro de Ursua and Fernando de Guzman to the headwaters of the Amazon River in search of the mythical land of El Dorado — a place believed by the Spanish to be full of gold, as its name implies.⁷ Herzog makes Gonzalo Pizarro, the brother of Francisco Pizarro, into the leader of the expedition, with Ursua second-in-command, and he separates Ursua and Aguirre from the main body of the expedition. In reality Lope de Aguirre, a member of Ursua's expedition, led a rebellion against Ursua and Guzman, both of whom were killed; Aguirre was ultimately captured and put to death by the Spanish government. Typically, Herzog changes the ending of the story: instead of having Aguirre captured and put to death by duly constituted legal authorities, he depicts Aguirre isolated from human company, floating in the middle of a river in a vast jungle on a raft covered with corpses and monkeys. It is not the Spanish government but rather Aguirre himself who has the last word in Herzog's film: Aguirre, played by a demoniacal-looking Klaus Kinski in one of that actor's greatest roles, proclaims that he will establish his own empire in El Dorado and marry his own daughter — who lies dead on the raft. As the raft slowly spins in the water, Aguirre walks around and around in circles, and the camera approaches the raft from a distance and begins to rotate around it and its single surviving human occupant. The three-fold circular motion of this brilliant shot — moving man, moving raft, and moving camera — coupled with Aguirre's megalomaniacal dialogue about his future wealth and power, creates a powerful sensation not of goal-oriented historical progress toward a bright future (the mythical El Dorado) but rather of an insane, disoriented overreaching that is inevitably doomed to failure.⁸ Aguirre captures one of the little monkeys that are running around on the raft and holds it in his hands, only to throw it back down; they are his only living companions, and he appears to be their lord and master. But in Herzog's somber and beautiful vision of human vainglory, it is the seemingly powerless monkeys who are better equipped for survival in the jungle than Aguirre, who the audience knows is doomed to failure. He cannot marry his daughter because she

⁷ For a look at the way that Herzog changes the story, see Gregory A. Waller, "Aguirre, *The Wrath of God*: History, Theater, and the Camera," *South Atlantic Review* 46, no. 2 (May 1981): 55–69.

⁸ Herzog had initially intended to end the film on a raft on which not even Aguirre was still alive. Instead, the only living creature was to be a parrot that screams "El Dorado" as the raft flows into the open sea. Werner Herzog, *Screenplays*, trans. Alan Greenberg and Martje Herzog (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), 7–95;

is dead, and he cannot find El Dorado because it does not exist — as the film states in a written text at the beginning, the idea of El Dorado was always just payback by the Indians whom the Spaniards had violated.⁹ By the end of the film that bears his name, Aguirre is a man lost in a vast world that he can neither really see nor comprehend, and that world will inevitably destroy him. Lutz Koepnick has observed that “within Herzog’s expressionist vocabulary of nature . . . the jungle seems to denote a text that frustrates all hermeneutic efforts from the outset; with coarse brutality, the chaotic diversity of the rain forest exposes the systematic inappropriateness of Western routines of cognition and ordering.”¹⁰ Aguirre is certainly a representative of those Western routines, but because of his rebellion he is also different: he represents the West’s own techniques of domination being turned inward, against themselves. Hence, there is a certain grandeur — what John Davidson calls an “enigmatic nobility” — to Aguirre’s overreaching.¹¹ He may be a villain with a limp, like Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, but he is also a hero. Here the film’s title becomes even more significant. In his final monologue, Aguirre refers to himself for the second time as “der Zorn Gottes” (the wrath of God), and although this is an example of his criminal megalomania, it is also, in a bizarre way, true on the film’s own terms. In essence, Aguirre, as wild and implacable as he is, is only doing to the expedition what nature would have done anyway. From the very beginning this expedition was doomed to failure — it is, after all, an expedition in search of a purely mythical city — and Aguirre, with his madness, can be seen as nature’s — or God’s — revenge. Already in the first ten minutes of the film, Aguirre has warned Pizarro that no one will be able to get down the river alive, and he is right. Aguirre is insane, but there is an authenticity and a truth to his insanity that align him with a nature — or a God, since Herzog does not appear to make a distinction between the two — that has no interest in what supposedly civilized humans call rationality. Herzog has stated that it is not the protagonists of his films who are insane; rather, “it is society that is mad. It is the situations they find themselves in and the people who surround them who are mad.”¹²

⁹ In Herzog’s original screenplay, as in historical reality, Aguirre kills his daughter himself in order to keep her from witnessing his possible capture and defeat.

¹⁰ Luz P. Koepnick, “Colonial Forestry: Sylvan Politics in Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*,” *New German Critique*, no. 60 (Autumn 1993): 133–59; here, 135. I have changed the word “course” in the original text to “coarse,” which was probably intended.

¹¹ Davidson, “As Others Put Plays upon the Stage,” 123.

¹² Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 69.

Again and again the film depicts the vast, relentless beauty of the South American rain forest. *Aguirre* begins with a majestic camera shot depicting the descent of Gonzalo Pizarro's expedition down a mountain toward the river where it will meet its doom. That downward motion will continue throughout the film, providing, as Koepnick suggests, "a prelude to the fall of colonialism that the spectator will witness throughout the rest of the film."¹³ The descent is steep, and members of the expedition look completely out of place in this landscape. In the very opening shot of the film, they are so overwhelmed by their surroundings that they can barely even be seen. Ursua's mistress Inez and Aguirre's daughter Flores wear the elegant clothing of Spanish noblewomen, completely inappropriate for such a descent; Inez is assisted by Ursua, while Flores is helped by her father Aguirre. Both are accompanied by sedan chairs that once again emphasize the inappropriateness of the explorers' gear to their surroundings. Fernando de Guzman is a fat, unathletic man who obviously could not survive very long on his own on the slopes of the mountain or in the jungle. From these very first camera shots, Herzog establishes the terms of his cinematic discourse: the majesty and implacability of nature versus the puny and sometimes insane striving of man. When one of the expedition's cannons crashes down the mountain into the water, it signals the ultimate teleology of the west's technological and military superiority. At the bottom of the mountain, Pizarro tells Aguirre that things will be looking up from now on; Aguirre correctly replies that things will continue to go downhill. While the opening scenes have a voice-over narration by the Spanish monk, Gaspar de Carvajal, telling the film's viewers what is happening, by the end of the film Carvajal has died, and there is no more narrative voice to orient the film's viewers, only the insane voice of Aguirre himself. Aguirre's rebellion against the expedition does not occur until the river itself has already begun to destroy the explorers' rafts, suggesting that he is acting in alignment with a natural force. When, after Ursua's overthrow, Guzman is made "emperor" in order to serve as Aguirre's figurehead, he cuts a pathetic figure; his physical and intellectual incapacity contrast markedly with his supposedly august position in a newly decreed human hierarchy. Guzman delightedly notes that his supposed empire, which consists of everything to his left and right as he moves down the river, is now six times larger than Spain itself, but Aguirre mockingly reminds him that the marsh around him could not even support his fat body, and in the end Guzman dies ignominiously, shot by native Indians with an

¹³ Koepnick, "Colonial Forestry," 144.

arrow just after he has relieved himself in a floating outhouse. Guzman is an emperor who is also a clown. Herzog is suggesting that human societies can call themselves what they want and interpret reality however they like, but that ultimately nature will triumph over any human society. Guzman as “emperor” and ultimately Aguirre himself on his spinning raft represent human society itself in its pitiful helplessness when confronted with an all-powerful, uncaring nature.

Ursua’s mistress Inez ultimately chooses the indifference of nature over the evil of Aguirre’s society. In one of the film’s most dramatic sequences, the explorers have just arrived in a cannibal village and had a brief skirmish with the natives; Inez, wearing a white dress that the film’s viewers have never seen before, walks with measured steps into the primeval jungle, which swallows her up. She has become what Brigitte Peucker calls a “bride of Death.”¹⁴ Herzog has stated that *Aguirre* is “like a Greek tragedy” because the protagonist “is deliberately leading his soldiers to their — and his — destruction.”¹⁵ And indeed, his film does bear some of the characteristics of Greek tragedy: it takes place in a world of unmitigated violence in which, as George Steiner writes, “things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd.”¹⁶ Aguirre deliberately leads his expedition to destruction and Inez deliberately walks into the jungle, both becoming one with nature through their own destruction — Inez part of the jungle world and Aguirre the temporary leader of a band of monkeys. For Nietzsche tragedy is associated with a Dionysian impulse that “seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness” with nature, and it is profoundly associated with music.¹⁷ In Herzog’s world the music of Popol Vuh (the artistic name taken by Herzog’s friend Florian Fricke) invokes and precedes the tragedy; it is an ethereal music that Herzog describes as “both pathetic and surreal,” neither “real singing, nor . . . completely artificial.”¹⁸ This music is very important for creating the mood of *Aguirre*, and it recalls Nietzsche’s dictum that “language can never adequately render the cosmic

¹⁴ Brigitte Peucker, “Werner Herzog: In Quest of the Sublime,” in *New German Filmmakers: From Oberhausen through the 1970s*, ed. Klaus Phillips (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984), 168–94; here, 178.

¹⁵ Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 79.

¹⁶ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996), 9.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 29–144; here, 28.

¹⁸ Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 80. Popol Vuh is the Mayan creation story, and this name once again connects Herzog and his films to primordial myth.

symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity, and therefore symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena.”¹⁹ The goal of the film is for its characters, particularly Aguirre himself, to enter into “the heart of the primal unity,” a oneness with nature achieved only in, and through, death. Herzog stages a confrontation between the Apollonian world of the European settlers — called by the native Indians “sons of the sun,” the celestial object that Nietzsche had invoked to symbolize Greek optimism — and the mythic, Dionysian world of the Amazon jungle and its inhabitants. In the end it is the mythic, Dionysian world that prevails. As a former Indian prince — now reduced to a slave — remarks to Inez: “I know that there is no way out of this jungle.” In the end, Aguirre’s expedition has become the “meat, meat, meat” about which the Indians chant as they see them floating by toward the end of the film. Herzog makes it explicit that at least some members of the expedition fall victim to the cannibals and are eaten. This too connects Herzog’s film to Greek tragedy, which was originally associated with the dismemberment and consumption of raw human flesh.²⁰

Werner Herzog was born Werner Stipetic three years before the end of the Second World War, on September 5, 1942, and he experienced the collapse of a megalomaniacal human society when he was two years old. One of Herzog’s documentaries, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), depicts a German like himself, Dieter Dengler, who witnessed the collapse of the Third Reich in his early childhood; Dengler overcame this childhood trauma by allying himself with the power that had defeated Germany and becoming a U.S. airman in the Vietnam War, during the course of which he was shot down and had to find his way out of the jungle. This documentary — whose story also became the subject of Herzog’s 2007 feature film, *Rescue Dawn* — suggests some of the themes that seem to have motivated Herzog throughout his career: Germany’s defeat and subsequent collapse; a sense that there is an indifferent force that is superior to any human society; and an attempt to understand and ally himself with that force. Herzog studied history, literature, and drama in Munich and, briefly, in Pittsburgh. He chose Pittsburgh, he later claimed, because “I did not want to go somewhere overly fancy,” and Pittsburgh was, he believed, “a place where there were real working people and steel mills. But by the time I arrived in the early 1960s

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 55.

²⁰ William Storm, *After Dionysus: A Theory of the Tragic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998), 19.

the city was already heavily in decline. The steel mills were shutting down and life for many people was falling apart.”²¹ Herzog broke off his studies and taught himself filmmaking. He was awarded the Silver Bear at the 1968 Berlin International Film Festival for his first feature film, *Lebenszeichen* (Signs of Life), also about the rebellion of a military man against human authority. When asked how he learned to be a filmmaker, Herzog has consistently replied that he was almost entirely self-taught, as if he had emerged from nothingness. His answers separate him from any filmmaking community and history and make him almost like a character in one of his own films, isolated from regular human society and fending for himself. The film scholar Thomas Elsaesser has compiled a collage of Herzog’s self-mythologizing descriptions of his own genesis as a filmmaker:

I’d almost say, the news of my birth is nothing but a rumour. My grandfather, who was an archeologist, died mad, and I admired him very much. My mother is Yugoslav. I have a very complicated family. My father lives like a vagabond. He was married twice. I have many brothers and sisters, but some are half- or quarter-brothers. I wasn’t brought up in the system. I am an autodidact and have never been to film school. While I was doing my studies I worked at night in a steel mill in Munich. For two years I was chained from 6 pm to 8 am. I made enough money to shoot my first short in 35 mm. I hired a cameraman, and there was the Munich Institute for Film Research, a precursor of the Munich Film School today, and these bastards had three cameras locked in some kind of safe, and I went and “borrowed” one of them. I think to this day they don’t realize that one of their cameras is missing. Under these circumstances, I think it was right to appropriate the means of production.

What made me a film-maker? — I made myself a film-maker.²²

The camera that Herzog stole in Munich in the early 1960s was also the camera that accompanied him and his cameraman Thomas Mauch to the tributaries of the Amazon in *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, as well as in eight other movies. Herzog’s other major feature films include the aforementioned *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (1974), which, like *Aguirre*, demonstrates Herzog’s fascination with people who are somehow outside of human society. Kaspar Hauser in Herzog’s film is that rarest of human individuals, a person at one with nature. *Stroszek* (1977)

²¹ Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 20.

²² Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), 91. This is a collage from various interviews given by Herzog.

is Herzog's exploration of the United States; it relates the story of a down-on-his-luck and not particularly intelligent Berliner, the eponymous Stroszek, who somehow winds up in Wisconsin surrounded by mobile homes and truckers. Ultimately the failure of Stroszek's American dream destroys him. *Stroszek* ends with circular images that hark back to the ending of *Aguirre*: it, too, features three circular motions: Stroszek's beat-up old truck, without a driver, moving around in circles; a chicken "dancing" on a circular platform in an amusement arcade; and the ski lift in which Stroszek shoots himself. Asked why he made *Stroszek*, Herzog once replied, "in Western Europe . . . there is *such* a strong domination of American culture and American films! And *all* of us who are working in filmmaking have to deal with this sort of domination. For me, it was particularly important to define my position about this country and its culture, and that's one of the major reasons why I made *Stroszek*."²³ Herzog's critique of American culture and American imagery is connected to his choice of authentic locations for a film like *Aguirre*, because it is in such locations that Herzog hopes to find new, fresh images:

I have the impression that the images that surround us today are worn out; they are abused and useless and exhausted. They are limping and dragging themselves behind the rest of our cultural evolution. When I look at the postcards in tourist shops and the images and advertisements that surround us in magazines, or I turn on the television, or if I walk into a travel agency and see those huge posters with that same tedious image of the Grand Canyon on them, I truly feel there is something dangerous emerging here. The biggest danger, in my opinion, is television because to a certain degree it ruins our vision and makes us very sad and lonesome. Our grandchildren will blame us for not having tossed hand-grenades into TV stations because of commercials. Television kills our imagination and what we end up with are worn-out images because of the inability of too many people to seek out fresh ones.²⁴

In 1978 Herzog did a remake of Friedrich Murnau's great vampire film *Nosferatu*, also with Klaus Kinski (in the role of the vampire); that film showed Herzog's allegiance to German expressionist cinema — with its themes of alienation and madness — as well as his continuing focus on main characters who are on the margins of, or even opposed to, mainstream

²³ Roger Ebert, *Images at the Horizon: A Workshop with Werner Herzog Conducted by Roger Ebert*, ed. Gene Walsh (Chicago: Facets Multimedia, 1979), 11.

²⁴ Cronin, ed., *Herzog on Herzog*, 66.

society. Herzog filmed Georg Büchner's classic drama *Woyzeck*, once again with Klaus Kinski, in 1979. In 1980–81 Herzog returned to South America to film *Fitzcarraldo*, yet another film with Klaus Kinski (who died in 1991 at the age of sixty-five).²⁵ This was Herzog's most commercially successful film at the time, but it was also the most difficult to make; it depicted the adventures of an impresario whose goal is to establish an opera company in the middle of the jungle. For this film Herzog actually had an entire ship carried up over the top of a mountain and down the other side. In some ways Herzog as a filmmaker shares the megalomania of his main characters.

After *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog made *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen* (Where the Green Ants Dream, 1984), a feature film about a confrontation between aborigines and whites in Australia, and *Cobra Verde* (1987), his final film with Klaus Kinski, based on a novel by Bruce Chatwin. Since then he has focused mostly on documentaries and now lives and works primarily in the United States. In order to secure his own artistic control of his films, Herzog has his own production company, Werner Herzog Film Production. In 2005 he released another documentary, *Grizzly Man*, about the life and death of Timothy Treadwell, an American nature lover who made it his life goal to protect Alaskan grizzly bears, and who was ultimately devoured by one in 2003. In *Grizzly Man*, Herzog discusses Treadwell's approach to nature and contrasts it with his own. Whereas Treadwell believed that nature was cuddly and cute, Herzog declares, he himself sees nature as hard and cruel. This attitude toward nature comes as no surprise to viewers of *Aguirre*, or of *Burden of Dreams*, Les Blank's 1982 documentary about the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, in which Herzog, looking out at the Amazon jungle around him, declares:

Taking a close look at what's around us, there is some kind of harmony. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. And we in comparison to the articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle. . . . We in comparison to that enormous articulation, we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban novel, a cheap novel. . . . And we have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication, overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order.²⁶

²⁵ Herzog created a fascinating documentary about his work with Kinski in 1999: *Mein liebster Feind* (My Best Fiend).

²⁶ Les Blank and James Bogan, eds., *Burden of Dreams: Screenplay, Journals, Reviews, Photographs* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1984), 57. Ellipses in the original. In the original there is a paragraph break before the last sentence, which I have eliminated.

About *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, Herzog said that the film's attraction and "the advantage it has over Hollywood — is that it is real. The spectacle is real; the danger is real. It is the real life of the jungle, not the botanic gardens of the studio. . . . It is easy enough to make a film in your own living room; but imagine trying to make one with 500 people in the Amazon tributaries. We had a budget of a little over \$300,000; but to look at, *Aguirre* is a 3-million dollar film."²⁷

As different as he is from the other directors of the New German Cinema, Herzog does share some similarities with them. His insistence on authenticity and on-location shooting, as well as his criticism of American kitsch, position him as a powerful critic of Hollywood specifically and American culture more generally. This critique of Hollywood aligns Herzog even with a filmmaker as self-consciously leftist and progressive as Alexander Kluge. Herzog's focus on loneliness and grotesquerie, as well as on power relationships, connects him to Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Whereas Kluge and Fassbinder deal with the problems of the German past, however, Herzog's subject is the battle between man and nature at a fundamental, existential level. History often plays a role in his films, but the story is usually the same one, no matter the historical epoch: the story of human inadequacy in the face of nature.²⁸ And his heroes can rarely be integrated into any kind of social normality. They are either, like Aguirre, almost superhuman megalomaniacs, or, like the dwarfs in Herzog's bizarre feature film *Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen* (Even Dwarves Started Small, 1970), freaks. This is true even of an American-made feature film like *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call — New Orleans* (2009).

In his fascination with nature, Herzog draws on powerful currents from the German Romantic tradition with which he was already familiar as a child; Brigitte Peucker has called Herzog "the profoundest and most authentic heir of the Romantic tradition at work today."²⁹ Frequently in German Romanticism — as in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich — man is a disturbing element in an otherwise pristine and beautiful nature. This is the case in Herzog's films as well. Man comes into nature and disturbs it, but only momentarily. In the end nature will triumph over man, not the other way around. Hence, although Herzog's films are certainly related to the growth of ecological thinking in the 1960s and 1970s, they

²⁷ Vernon Young, "Much Madness: Werner Herzog and Contemporary German Cinema," *The Hudson Review* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 409–14; here, 410.

²⁸ See Benelli, "The Cosmos and its Discontents," 89.

²⁹ Peucker, "Werner Herzog: In Quest of the Sublime," 193. See also the same article, 170 on Herzog's reading of the Romantics in his childhood.

differ from that thinking in their focus on the ultimate invulnerability and power of nature itself.

What is generally missing in Herzog's films — with the notable exception of his film *Invincible* (2001), about a Jewish strongman in 1920s Berlin — is any explicit reference to German history or the German present. And it was to German history and the German present that a group of far more political filmmakers were to turn seven years after Herzog's *Aguirre* when they made *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn, 1979), the topic of the next chapter.



Rainer Werner Fassbinder as himself. Screen capture.

23: *Deutschland im Herbst* (1978) or Film and Politics

Directors: Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Edgar Reitz, Alf Brustellin, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, Maximiliane Mainka, Peter Schubert, Bernhard Sinkel, Hans Peter Cloos, and Katja Rupé

Cinematographers: Michael Ballhaus, Jürgen Jürges, Bodo Kessler, Dietrich Lohmann, Werner Lüring, Colin Mounier, Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein, and Guenter Hoermann

Writing Credits: Heinrich Böll, Alf Brustellin, Hans Peter Cloos, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, Maximiliane Mainka, Edgar Reitz, Katja Rupé, Volker Schlöndorff, Peter Schubert, Bernhard Sinkel, and Peter F. Steinbach

Producers: Theo Hinz and Eberhard Junkersdorf

Editors: Heidi Genée, Mulle Goetz-Dickopp, Juliane Lorenz, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, Tanja Schmidbauer, and Christine Warnck

Sound Editor: Roland Henschke

German Release Date: [West Germany] March 17, 1978

Actors: Rainer Werner Fassbinder (as himself); Armin Meier (as himself); Lilo Pempeit (as herself); Hannelore Hoger (Gabi Teichert); Heinz Bennent (television committee member); Enno Patalas (television committee member); Katja Rupé (Franziska Busch); Angela Winkler (Antigone); Franziska Walser (Ismene); Mario Adorf (television committee member); and a variety of public figures such as Helmut Kohl, Helmut Schmidt, Manfred Rommel, and Horst Mahler as themselves

DEUTSCHLAND IM HERBST (Germany in Autumn) is hard to categorize. In many ways it is a documentary about the profoundly disturbing political events that occurred in West Germany in the fall of 1977, but it also includes extended fictional episodes. As Miriam Hansen has written, it responds to its primary creator Alexander Kluge's proposals for blending "radical observation and radical fiction which would leave neither genre intact."¹ Although Kluge and his editor Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

¹ Miriam Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*," *New German Critique*, no. 24/25 (Fall/Winter 1982): 36–56; here, 50.

were primarily responsible for the final sequencing of the film's many segments, *Deutschland im Herbst* cannot be said to be "by" any single director. Eleven different directors contributed to the making of the movie, of whom the four most important were Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Edgar Reitz, and Volker Schlöndorff. *Deutschland im Herbst* thus violates not only cinematic genre conventions separating feature films from documentaries but also the convention that a film must have one identifiable author. Moreover, *Deutschland im Herbst* is not a unified, structured film that tells a story with a beginning, middle, and end, but rather a series of episodes — some documentary, some fictional — that bear no obvious relationship to each other. *Deutschland im Herbst* leaves its viewers grasping for meaning. It provides no easy answers.

To understand the film, it is necessary to know something about the political events that provoked it. In an unprecedented action, a number of West Germany's most important directors joined forces in the fall of 1977 to use the means at their disposal — film — to address the political situation in their country, and to try to place it into an historical and conceptual framework. Rudolf Augstein, publisher of *Der Spiegel*, West Germany's weekly newsmagazine, put up the funding for the movie, and many of the film's creators went without payment so that the film could remain within budget. Remarkably enough, in spite of its difficult subject matter and style, *Deutschland im Herbst* managed to recoup all of its production costs.²

On September 5, 1977, a group from the Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion, RAF), the German leftist terrorist organization, kidnapped Hanns Martin Schleyer, a former member of the SS, an executive of Daimler-Benz, and president of the German Federation of Employers. The RAF declared that it would be willing to free Schleyer in exchange for the release of eleven imprisoned leaders of their organization, including three of the founding members: Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe. When Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's government did not comply with these demands, the RAF's Palestinian terrorist ally, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) responded to his delaying tactics by hijacking a Lufthansa airplane, the *Landshut*, on October 13. The plane touched down in Aden, Yemen, where the hijackers killed the pilot, Jürgen Schumann, in front of the other passengers; the plane subsequently landed in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. The RAF and the PFLP announced that neither the hijacked plane nor its passengers would be released until the imprisoned members of the RAF were set free by the West German government. Somalia's President Siad Barre then gave the German government permission to storm the plane and try to free the plane's passengers. On October 18, the elite German

² See Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere," 45.

antiterrorist force GSG 9 (Grenzschutzgruppe, or border protection group) — which had been formed after the Palestinian terrorist organization Black September kidnapped and murdered Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics — stormed the *Landshut* in Mogadishu and secured the release of all the hostages on the plane. Only one of the four hijackers survived. In response to the rescue, the RAF murdered Hanns Martin Schleyer and left his body in Mulhouse, France, where it was discovered the following day. Also on October 18, three prominent RAF prisoners — Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe — were found dead or near-dead (Raspe died after being taken to the hospital) in their cells at the Stammheim prison in Stuttgart, the home of Schleyer's Daimler corporation. Gudrun Ensslin appeared to have hanged herself, while Baader and Raspe died from gunshot wounds. Although the West German government and subsequent investigators declared that the deaths in Stammheim were the result of suicide, there have been persistent but unproven rumors ever since that the three terrorists were murdered. A fourth convicted terrorist in Stammheim who almost died that day from knife wounds, Irmgard Möller, denied any personal involvement in her own injuries.³ The events of September-October 1977 immediately became known in Germany as the *deutscher Herbst* (German autumn).

Thus, the title of *Deutschland im Herbst* is a clear response to the German political situation. Kluge responded quickly: as early as October 19 he had called a meeting of Munich's major directors to organize the film. As Schlöndorff later recalled, "Kluge explained that we must create a counter-public sphere and ought not to allow the public stations to have a monopoly on the writing of history. On the spot we made the decision to begin a collective film about the Schleyer kidnapping, about the deaths in Stammheim, and about the climate in the country."⁴ Although the film has no conventional dramatic framework, it is loosely structured around two burials, one which occurs at the beginning and the other at the end of the film. In the film's opening passages, directed by Schlöndorff at the behest of Kluge on October 25, 1977, the murdered Hanns Martin Schleyer is being buried at the Ostfilder cemetery in Stuttgart. Subsequent scenes show Schleyer being commemorated in a state ceremony in Stuttgart's St. Eberhard church, with the country's major political leaders, including Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and the future chancellor and leader of the Christian Democratic Union, Helmut Kohl, in attendance. Stuttgart's mayor Manfred Rommel, the son of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, known as the Desert Fox, is also in attendance. In the film's

³ Volker Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung: Mein Leben und meine Filme* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2008), 224.

⁴ Volker Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 223. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

final passages, also by Schlöndorff at the behest of Kluge, the three dead terrorists — Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe — are being buried not far away, in Stuttgart's Dornhalden cemetery on October 27, 1977.

The two burials stand in stark contrast to one another. Whereas the commemoration of Schleyer is a formal affair, taking place in a church and featuring the country's major political, religious, and economic leaders — Schlöndorff and Kluge's documentary camera focuses on the company flags of the Esso and Daimler-Benz corporations, which seem more prominent than that of the Federal Republic itself — the burial of the three terrorists is a chaotic, unplanned event featuring sloppily dressed young people, some with scarves over their faces to hide their identity. Kluge wrote that “the mourners had disguised their faces with scarves — some of them because they were being sought by the police for revolutionary activities and others in order to express solidarity and to make it harder for the law enforcement agencies, who were recording everything with video cameras and telephoto lenses, to tell the difference.”⁵ Whereas security forces are unobtrusive and respectful at the Schleyer burial, they are prominently in evidence at the burial of the terrorists and move in to arrest or disperse some of the mourners. Some of the young people shout “Sieg Heil” at the police; others shout “Clear the street — The storm troopers are marching!” or “Murderers!.”⁶ In contrast to the well-orchestrated and well-organized funeral service for Schleyer, the burial of the three terrorists seems spontaneous and spur-of-the-moment. Schleyer is honored by wreaths from the country's major political leaders; the three terrorists are commemorated by a banner that reads “Den ermordeten Genossen” (To our murdered comrades). In both of the commemorations, film is present as a means of documentation. Television crews are on hand to respectfully document Schleyer's memorial service and burial, and police cameras are on hand to document the burial of the terrorists. In Schleyer's commemoration, film serves as a medium for display and representation; in the terrorists' burial, it serves as a medium for control and surveillance. Whereas personnel involved in Schleyer's funeral — even a caterer who organizes the funeral reception — are willing to talk openly about their work, many of those involved in the terrorists' burial appear to want to steer clear of publicity. In one sequence of *Deutschland im Herbst* a restaurant owner who has agreed to hold a dinner for the terrorists' families and friends complains about the attitudes of other restaurant owners who had refused to have anything to do with the matter. The public reluctance and disapproval with respect to the terrorists' burial contrasts to the public approval and sympathy connected to Schleyer's

⁵ Alexander Kluge, *Geschichten vom Kino* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 283.

⁶ All transcriptions from the film are my own.

funeral. At the same time, the people associated with the terrorists' burial are obviously risking something by being there, whereas the people associated with Schleyer's commemoration are not.

The rest of the film is structured between these two commemorations, with episodes by each of the major directors involved. Many of these episodes, like the one directed by Volker Schlöndorff toward the movie's end, are fictional but have a direct or indirect relationship to the political events of autumn 1977. These episodes are not connected to each other in any obvious way; they represent different directors' responses to Kluge's invitation to them to respond to the situation of autumn 1977 by putting their professional skills to public political use.

The thirty-minute episode by Fassbinder is by far the longest and arguably also the most radical of these segments. It is certainly the most personal. Because it involves Fassbinder himself interacting with his lover Armin Meier and his mother, it is not strictly speaking fictional, but it is also not in any way a conventional documentary, partly because neither Fassbinder himself nor the people he interacts with are unaware of the film camera. He and the other characters essentially "act" themselves. In this episode Fassbinder lets his camera loose on himself, making his own person and his decidedly unglamorous body a character in a Fassbinder film. Fassbinder defended the spontaneity and intimacy of this self-portrait by arguing, "I don't think it's obscene when I play with my prick in front of the camera, I think it's obscene that some people masturbate who would rather pretend to themselves that they didn't have a prick and also don't have a firm enough grip on their brain so that they could give it a good yank and at least jack off with it."⁷

Like many other Fassbinder characters, Fassbinder himself is not likable in this episode. He is nervous and unable to concentrate. The audience sees him browbeating his mother verbally, accusing her of being a fascist sympathizer; it also sees him physically assaulting his lover. Fassbinder organizes a drug deal, snorts cocaine, and absent-mindedly plays with his penis on camera; he also dictates ideas for his television movie *Berlin Alexanderplatz* into a dictaphone. By training the camera on himself, Fassbinder exposes the power relationships at work in everyday personal life, and demonstrates the generally unexplored connection between the personal and the political — one of the major themes of political activism in the 1970s. In his discussion with his mother, for example, Fassbinder is able to get her to express apparently fascist sentiments — her fear of speaking openly about political events and her longing for a restoration of order under the benign leadership of "an authoritarian ruler who is very

⁷ Eric Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 136.

good, very sweet and friendly" — but at the same time, because of his camera's relentless revelations about the frequently cruel way he treats the people closest to him, Fassbinder also exposes himself and his own life as part of the nexus of private and public power that he is criticizing. This is particularly true of Fassbinder's relationship with Armin Meier, who declares that the *Landshut* should simply be destroyed and the terrorists in Stammheim shot. In response to Meier's advocacy of violence against the terrorists, Fassbinder practices violence against Meier. He treats Meier as an uneducated, stupid man, physically assaults him, and threatens to throw him out of the apartment. Even though Fassbinder criticizes his mother's and his lover's authoritarian tendencies, his camera reveals the same tendencies at work in his own interpersonal relationships. When they saw this sequence for the first time, Volker Schlöndorff reports, he and his colleagues were shocked: "This was truly something that no television station would ever broadcast." At the same time, however, Schlöndorff reports that Fassbinder's segment made him understand "that the paranoia and intolerance of those years could not have been expressed better than through this naked man's fear of a police raid, no matter whether his fear came from drugs, homosexuality, or terrorism. His contribution documented without commentary — just as we did not plaster over the cemetery sequence with explanatory words. Any word would have been too much or not enough. Perhaps the film, precisely because it is so silent, will last longer than a thousand television programs."⁸

In the course of his radical and productive, albeit short, career as a filmmaker, this was Fassbinder's most unrelenting exposure of himself, blemishes and all. It stands in contrast to the more planned or staged episodes of other directors in the film. Fassbinder had hoped that the shooting of *Deutschland im Herbst* would not give directors "time to get their more or less powerful thinking apparatus in gear," and that they "would really have had to react emotionally for a change."⁹ He wanted spontaneity and honesty, and he filmed his episode in the immediate aftermath of the events themselves. The implication of his segment is that only through radical and unflinching honesty and self-examination will Germans be able to work through the political problems that led to the "German autumn." Fassbinder explained his motivation for participating in the film thus:

When we all sat down together back then, one of the reasons why we said we had to make the film was that something had to be done to combat fear. We felt that ordinary people, who don't have

⁸ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 230.

⁹ Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*, trans. Krishna Winston, ed. Michael Töteberg and Leo A. Lensing (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 137.

any means of production and possibly have more fears than we do, shouldn't let themselves be intimidated by the feeling prevailing in Germany at that time, that criticism in any form was unwelcome and had to be crushed. To make sure that didn't happen, and because we had the means of production at our disposal, we wanted to state very clearly: people can and should and must go on talking, no matter what happens.¹⁰

The other filmmakers likewise explained their motivation as a desire to keep the lines of public communication open. In the face of a government news blackout intended to keep the RAF terrorists uninformed, the filmmakers wanted to facilitate discussion. Above all, they argued, it was important not to seek premature closure on the events of autumn 1977 but to acknowledge how difficult it was to comprehend and make sense of them. The filmmakers, in other words, did not want to present a pat moral answer to difficult, indeed apparently insoluble political problems, but rather to invite the film's audience to seek a solution by entering into a larger political dialogue. Explaining their reasons for making the film, the directors declared:

It is something seemingly simple which roused us: the lack of memory. First the news blockade, then the imageless verbal usages of the news media. After the fall of '77 — Kappler, Schleyer, Mogadishu, the Stammheim deaths — followed, like every year, Christmas '77 and New Year. As if nothing had happened. In this traveling express train of history we are pulling the emergency brake. For two hours of film we are trying to hold onto memory in the form of a subjective momentary impression. As best we can. No one can do more than he can. In this regard our film is a document — this too is another weakness that we do not want to hide.

In a certain sense we are counting on the spectator's patience. . . .

We have tried hard, we cannot do any more than we have. We expect from the spectator the following: that he looks calmly and carefully, that he doesn't let himself be confused by the fact that this film has been edited differently than TV films or films that are shown in commercial cinemas, that he confides in the images — despite pressures of time and trouble, that he puts up with confusion and weak passages which truly belong to us, to him, and to the autumn of '77. . . .

A fool, who gives more than he has. Autumn 1977 is the history of confusion. Exactly this must be held on to. Whoever knows the truth lies. Whoever does not know it seeks. Insofar our own bias, even if we have different political views.¹¹

¹⁰ Fassbinder, *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, 137–38.

¹¹ Eric Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 132–33.

This passage, signed by five of the filmmakers responsible for *Deutschland im Herbst*, demonstrates a commitment to uncertainty and openness. The key phrase is “*Whoever knows the truth lies*.” Whereas conventional films — both documentary and feature — tend to provide neat narrative frames and easy answers to political and personal problems, thereby claiming to “know” the truth, Kluge and his colleagues sought to make a radically different work, acknowledging their own uncertainty and the elusive nature of the truth. As Kluge later admitted, “We are not the god over the materials. We do not provide a red thread to lead” people “through the film the way straightforward narratives do.”¹² In the logic of the filmmakers’ critique, conventional cinema “gives more than it has,” i.e., it pretends to have access to a truth that in fact belongs to no one. Such cinema may be easy to watch, since it provides ready answers to superficial questions, but it is also fundamentally a lie. Kluge and his colleagues acknowledge the demands that their approach to cinematography makes on viewers — patience and the willingness to endure confusion and weakness — but suggest that ultimately these demands will bring viewers closer to the — admittedly confusing — truth than conventional cinema. *Deutschland im Herbst* is intended to provide a utopian free space for honest communication among citizens — what Kluge called “a kind of force field” that “requires another way of being involved,” making viewers “think and make distinctions.”¹³ The film’s creation was motivated by a vision of cinema as an open public forum rather than simply a commodity to be bought and sold. In this open forum it is not just the filmmaker but also the film’s viewer who produces meaning. Miriam Hansen observes that for Kluge, “the degree to which a film-maker seeks and stimulates the co-operation of the film in the mind of the spectator” determines the film’s usefulness in creating a more democratic system of communication.¹⁴ For Kluge, cinema functioned, as Stuart Liebman has written, “as a paradigm of operations in a radically open and democratic public sphere” and became a training ground “for enlightenment as well as” an assembly point “for the broadly based, spontaneous coalitions which are the ideal vehicle of progress toward it.”¹⁵

Created and experienced in an unconventional way, film offered, in Kluge’s view, the prospect of a utopian freedom of communication. In

¹² Stuart Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge,” *October* 46 (Autumn 1988): 23–59; here, 55.

¹³ Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere,” 55.

¹⁴ Hansen, “Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge’s Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*,” 39.

¹⁵ Stuart Liebman, “Why Kluge?” in *Perspectives on German Cinema*, ed. Terri Ginsberg and Kirsten Moana Thompson (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), 761–78; here, 768.

order to fulfill its function as an ideal form of communication, Kluge believed, film should not patronize its audience. Confronted with the argument that his films were too demanding for ordinary audiences, and that such films denied the audience what it wanted, Kluge wrote that it was the makers of condescending, easy-to-understand films who despised their audiences. It was he who took cinema audiences seriously by challenging them with difficult material and acknowledging his own uncertainty as a director. Kluge believed that industrial capitalist society placed people into the role of passive spectators; he wanted them to be active, and one of the ways to encourage such activism, he asserted, was to create open works of art that did not present ready-made answers. He wrote:

In order to cheat the spectators on an entrepreneurial scale, the entrepreneurs have to designate the spectators themselves as entrepreneurs. The spectator must sit in the movie house or in front of the TV set like a commodity owner: like a miser grasping every detail and collecting surplus on everything which has any value. Value per se. So uneasy this spectator-consumer, alienated from his own life so completely like the manager of a supermarket or a department store. . . .

In a similarly entrepreneurial fashion the spectator . . . scans films for their spectacle and exhibition values, for complete intelligibility, just as one is taught to gnaw a bone thoroughly, as the saying goes, so that the sun will shine. . . .

Understanding a film completely is conceptual imperialism which colonizes its objects. If I have understood everything then something has been emptied out.

We must make films that thoroughly oppose such imperialism of consciousness. I encounter something in film which still surprises me and which I can perceive without devouring it. . . . Relaxation means that I myself become alive for a moment, allowing my senses to run wild: for once not to be on guard with the police-like intention of letting nothing escape me.¹⁶

Kluge's reflections on film art here recall and are influenced by Bertolt Brecht's insistence on the radical openness of the work of art, as well as Brecht's insistence on motivating spectators to question and be skeptical about the events they see on stage; Kluge's comments are also informed by the criticisms that the German exile intellectuals Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno leveled at the "culture industry" as an agent of "mass deception" in their 1947 book *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (The Dialectic of Enlightenment).

The fifteen-minute segment filmed by Volker Schlöndorff toward the end of *Deutschland im Herbst* was written by the great German postwar writer Heinrich Böll, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1972.

¹⁶ Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film*, 82.

This fictional segment, which at first blush appears to have nothing to do with the difficult events in Germany that provoked the film's making, in fact turns out to be a clever satire on media censorship. It came about through a meeting between Böll and Schlöndorff in October of 1977, when Böll was celebrating his sixtieth birthday, and when Schlöndorff recounted to Böll the difficulties that Gudrun's Ensslin's sister Christiane was having in securing a place for the burial of her sister Gudrun. Schlöndorff later remembered that Böll "understood immediately: *Antigone*. He said he would think about it. A few days later the familiar typewritten pages arrived by mail, pages on which the letters danced around wildly. It was a little satire. . . . Here Böll was in his element."¹⁷ The basic premise of the episode is that in the fall of 1977 a television programming committee is meeting to decide what to do about a planned show featuring Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. Like *Deutschland im Herbst*, *Antigone* is a work about two kinds of burial. Where *Deutschland im Herbst* is structured around the contrast between the burial of Hanns Martin Schleyer at the film's beginning and the burial of the three terrorists Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe at the film's end, Sophocles' *Antigone* is structured around the contrast between the Theban king Creon's state burial of Oedipus's son Eteocles with full military honors and his corresponding refusal to bury Eteocles's brother Polynices as punishment for his rebellion against the Theban state. The play itself follows the eponymous heroine's decision to bury her brother Polynices in spite of Creon's ban, and Creon's decision to condemn her to death as a response, a decision that leads both Antigone and Creon's son Haemon, her lover, to commit suicide. Sophocles' play thus resonates with the events of the German autumn of 1977 on multiple levels: the authoritarian, inflexible Theban king Creon becomes a stand-in for the conservative German state, while the dead Eteocles — with his state funeral with full public honors — can represent Hanns Martin Schleyer. On the other side, Polynices, dishonored in death by being refused public burial, is in the same position as Baader, Raspe, and Ensslin, while the suicides of Haemon and Antigone — who like Ensslin even hung herself in her cell — provide yet another parallel with the RAF terrorists. Political events in Germany in the autumn of 1977 had suddenly transformed a two-thousand-year-old play from a seemingly irrelevant classic, performed more out of duty than desire, into an explosive drama that appeared to comment directly on current events. This is what the bureaucratic television programming committee has to deal with in its deliberations about the made-for-television play: whether to film the play as Sophocles wrote it, to change the play by adding a warning to viewers not to rebel against the state (i.e., to take sides against Polynices and to support Creon explicitly), or to cancel or suspend the broadcast

¹⁷ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 229.

of the play. Ultimately, the committee decides to suspend the broadcast until a more opportune moment; *Antigone* is simply too controversial in Germany in the fall of 1977. The process by which the committee reaches this decision is written and filmed with great irony, as viewers of *Deutschland im Herbst* get to watch various proposals for an “improved” version of Sophocles’ tragedy for a German audience in the fall of 1977. This segment deals with political censorship and with the explosive power of the political situation at that time, when even seemingly remote cultural artifacts came to take on a previously unsuspected political significance.

Alexander Kluge’s own segments are interspersed throughout the film. The protagonist of Kluge’s 1979 film *Die Patriotin* (The Patriot), Gabi Teichert, makes her first appearance here. She is a high school history teacher who searches the German landscape, and the German past, for hidden nuggets that will bring history alive for her students, making a connection between the past and the present. Among her discoveries are various suicides and assassinations, including the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914, which precipitated the First World War, and the forced suicide of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in 1944. The latter becomes significant in the context of 1977 because Rommel’s son Manfred is the mayor of Stuttgart, where the burials of both Hanns Martin Schleyer and the three terrorists take place. It was Manfred Rommel, in fact, who permitted the terrorists to be buried in the city’s Dornhalden cemetery. Kluge’s episodes are interspersed with the hauntingly beautiful music of Haydn’s Emperor Quartet — the music of the German national anthem — directly connecting the visual images captured by his camera to a deeper history of Germany. For Kluge one of the primary problems of contemporary capitalist society is that it destroys historical thinking by placing consumers into a flat present that has been torn from any kind of historical or cultural context. In this endless present, it becomes virtually impossible for consumers to recognize patterns or structures from the past that might help them to understand the current development of events. This is why Kluge sends his protagonist Gabi Teichert in search of hidden history, and why his episodes relate the state burial of Erwin Rommel, sacrificed by the Nazi state in a suicide that was not really a suicide, to both the state funeral for Hanns Martin Schleyer — also, in a sense, sacrificed by a West German state that had refused to negotiate with the RAF for his release — and to the less official but no less public burial of the three terrorists, who may or may not have committed suicide. Kluge later averred that his “point of departure always remains the public sphere of 1933 that could be conquered by the National Socialists,” and hence he tried to fortify the public sphere “in different ways so that it cannot be conquered.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Liebman, “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere,” 42.

Hence, Kluge interlards the film with connections between the German present and the German past. He ends *Deutschland im Herbst* musically, with a song by Joan Baez about the judicial killings of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian-born anarchists, in the United States in 1927, thus connecting the political violence in Germany in 1977 with a longer history of anti-leftist crackdowns by capitalist governments throughout the west and suggesting, in the words of the song, that even a violent death can ultimately produce something positive. In the final moments of the film, the car in which Kluge's camera is located does a kind of slow slalom around various obstacles placed into its path as it leaves the cemetery, ultimately emerging into freedom as the camera focuses on a young woman and her child hitchhiking. This ending suggests that out of pain and suffering hope for a better future can stubbornly emerge.

Edgar Reitz's episode in *Deutschland im Herbst* takes place at a border crossing between Germany and France, where a German border guard, speaking with a pronounced Swabian accent, stops a man and woman on their way to the French border. The border guard compares the face of the woman to a face he finds on a list of wanted terrorists, and he tells the couple that the police are now especially suspicious of women traveling alone. The significance of this episode comes from the fact that the RAF had in fact transported Hanns Martin Schleyer to France, where his body was discovered on October 18, 1977. Like so many other episodes in *Deutschland im Herbst*, this episode shows the power of the state in confrontation with the individual lives of ordinary — or possibly not so ordinary — human beings.

Two other episodes in *Deutschland im Herbst* are worthy of mention. One, by Katja Rupé and Hans Peter Cloos, relates the story of a more-or-less ordinary woman in an apartment house whose doorbell is rung by a man seeking shelter for the night. This man turns out to be a terrorist on the run from the police, and the woman must decide what to do: whether to help the man or call the police. The situation resembles the basic outline of Heinrich Böll's popular 1974 novel *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum), on which Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta based their 1975 film of the same name; this was one of the most popular German films of the 1970s. Finally, *Deutschland im Herbst* also features an in-prison interview conducted by Helmut Griem with Horst Mahler, a lawyer connected with the RAF who had already spent seven years in prison when the interview was conducted. In this interview Mahler — who, ironically enough, was later to join the far-right NPD (German National Party) — explains some of the motivations behind the RAF's actions, especially the certainty of the youthful terrorists that they were fighting against German fascism. It was no coincidence that Schleyer, the automobile executive kidnapped and ultimately murdered by the RAF, had once been a member of Hitler's elite SS. For the RAF, and for many radical-left critics of West German politics

in the 1970s, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was essentially, in both its politics and personnel, a successor state to the Hitler dictatorship. Whereas Germans had failed to resist Hitler sufficiently in the 1930s and 1940s, the RAF was determined to resist what it saw as fascism or proto-fascism in the 1970s. Both Germany and the United States, Mahler declares, have a strong tendency toward authoritarianism, and the RAF is fighting against precisely this authoritarianism, which he says is a legacy of Germany's Nazi past. At the same time, Mahler is highly critical of the terrorists' killings or threatened killings of innocent civilians, particularly in the hijacked airplane *Landshut*. It is noteworthy that *Deutschland im Herbst* does not take the standpoint of either the RAF or the West German government; it remains critically distant from each.

If *Deutschland im Herbst* has one primary message to send its audience, it is the declaration by a Frau Wilde, a mother of five children, from April 8, 1945, that comes at both the beginning and end of the film: "At a certain point of brutality, it is no longer important who committed it: all that matters is for it to stop."¹⁹ This message, which once again connects Germany in the 1970s to Germany in the Nazi period, applies not just to the left-wing terrorists, but also to the West German government. The film is a plea against violence and for dialogue. It is a plea against self-righteous certainty — on the part of both the terrorists and the West German state — and for the admission of uncertainty and vulnerability. Because it was made by so many different directors in so many different styles, the film is not a unified object that can simply be consumed. Rather, it calls for self-reflection, and for questioning the very terms by which audiences typically watch movies. As such, *Deutschland im Herbst* represents the New German Cinema of the 1970s at its most politically and aesthetically radical. Following *Deutschland im Herbst*, some of the directors involved went on to make important movies about the German past. Fassbinder made his masterpiece *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (The Marriage of Maria Braun) in 1978–79, and Volker Schlöndorff released his film *Die Blechtrommel* (The Tin Drum) in 1979; both films dealt with the Nazi period and its immediate aftermath. Six years later, Schlöndorff's colleague Edgar Reitz, one of the signers of the famous Oberhausen manifesto in 1962, created an epic television series about twentieth-century Germany titled *Heimat* (Homeland, 1984). Much of this work responded to the political and creative ferment of the year 1977 and the filmmakers' participation in *Deutschland im Herbst*. This collectively authored film will never become a major popular hit, but it goes a long way toward revealing these directors' utopian belief in the potentially liberating impact of film as a medium for public dialogue even — especially — in a time of national crisis.

¹⁹ This statement comes from a woman who is cited at the end of Kluge's "Der Angriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945," in Kluge, *Neue Geschichten*, vol. 1–18, *Unheimlichkeit der Zeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 33–106; here, 106.



Hanna Schygulla as Maria Braun. Screen capture.

24: *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979) or West Germany Rebuilds

Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Cinematographer: Michael Ballhaus

Screenplay: Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Peter Märthesheimer, Pea Fröhlich, and Kurt Raab

Producers: Wolf-Dietrich Brücker, Volker Canaris, and Michael Fengler

Editors: Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Juliane Lorenz

Production Design: Helga Ballhaus and Norbert Scherer

Costume Design: Barbara Baum

Music: Peer Raben

Soundtrack: Jim Willis

German Release Date: [West Germany] March 23, 1979

(premiere: Berlinale, February 20, 1979)

Actors: Hanna Schygulla (Maria Braun); Klaus Löwitsch (Hermann Braun); Ivan Desny (Karl Oswald); Gisela Uhlen (Maria's mother); Elisabeth Trissenaar (Betti Klenze); Gottfried John (Willi Klenze); Hark Bohm (Senkenberg); George Eagles (Bill); Claus Holm (doctor); Günter Lamprecht (Hans Wetzel); Anton Schiersner (Grandpa Berger); Lilo Pempteit (Frau Ehmke); Sonja Neudorfer (Red Cross nurse); Volker Spengler (train conductor); Rainer Werner Fassbinder (black marketeer); Michael Ballhaus (lawyer at trial); Günther Kaufmann (American on train)

Awards: German Film Awards, 1979: Film Award in Gold — Outstanding Individual Achievement for Direction to Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Actress to Hanna Schygulla, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Actress to Gisela Uhlen, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Production Design to Norbert Scherer and Helga Ballhaus; Film Award in Silver — Outstanding Feature Film; Berlin International Film Festival, 1979: Silver Berlin Bear for Best Actress to Hanna Schygulla, Silver Berlin Bear for Outstanding Individual Achievement to the entire team; Reader Jury of the *Berliner Morgenpost* to Rainer Werner Fassbinder; London Critics Circle Film Awards, 1981: ALFS Award to Rainer Werner Fassbinder for Foreign Language Film of the Year (together with *Angi Vera*, 1979)

WHEN RAINER WERNER FAßBINDER directed *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (The Marriage of Maria Braun) in 1978–79, he was thirty-four years old and had already directed over thirty films. By the time he died three years later at the age of thirty-seven, the total was over forty—more than three films a year during his active life as a director from 1969 to 1982. One of them, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), was actually a fourteen-part made-for-television movie with 900 minutes of playing time. Throughout his brief but extraordinarily productive career, Fassbinder made films at great speed with a close-knit, dedicated group of actors and technicians—one of whom, Fassbinder's brilliant cameraman Michael Ballhaus, ultimately went on to a successful career in Hollywood. Far from betraying the slipshod or slapdash qualities of many movies made rapidly, however, most of Fassbinder's films are also of high aesthetic quality. Fassbinder combined quantity and quality in a way that few other major directors of the world cinema have achieved. Even the productivity of the great Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, who made one movie per year from the 1950s to the 1970s, cannot compare to Fassbinder's output. He left behind a corpus of films larger than that of many directors who work steadily throughout a long and productive career. When Fassbinder died, Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* called him the exemplar of “the extraordinary renaissance of the German cinema in the last decade” and “the most gifted, most original film-making talent since Jean-Luc Goddard.”¹ Some of Fassbinder's films—*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, 1972), *Angst essen Seele auf* (Ali, Fear Eats the Soul, 1974), *Effi Briest*, and *Chinesisches Roulette* (Chinese Roulette, 1976)—belong to the classics of world cinema culture. *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* was Fassbinder's most financially and critically successful film, and it firmly established him as a major presence not only on the German national film scene but in world cinema.

Fassbinder was born a little over three weeks after the official end of the war on May 8, 1945, in a small town in Bavaria on May 31, 1945. His mother was a translator; she was to appear later in many of Fassbinder's films, including *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* and *Deutschland im Herbst*, under the names “Liselotte Eder” or “Lilo Pempeit.” Fassbinder's father was a doctor. His parents divorced when Fassbinder was six years old, and he was raised by his mother. He was a precocious and intelligent boy, but he did not like school and dropped out before graduating. His real love was Hollywood movies, which he watched voraciously throughout his childhood. In 1964 Fassbinder went to Munich and lived in a Bohemian milieu; he also enrolled for classes at an acting studio. In 1967 he and

¹ Vincent Canby, “A Disturbing Talent: Movie Maker Turned Skeptical Eye on Life; Satires Bitter, Witty, Cruel, Funny, Tragic,” *The New York Times*, 11 June 1982, D18.

the actress Hanna Schygulla, his classmate at the studio, left the studio in order to found their own acting company, the Action Theater, based on Julian Beck's controversial, experimental Living Theater. Fassbinder became the dominant member of the Action Theater, which he renamed Antitheater in 1968. In keeping with the spirit of the times, the members of this avant-garde theater company lived together in a house on the outskirts of Munich, and they performed their plays in the back room of a Munich nightclub. Starting in 1969, Fassbinder began making films with his Antitheater group. These early movies were made on a very low budget with actors whom Fassbinder knew well, since he lived and worked with them from movie to movie.

Throughout his active professional life, Fassbinder was controversial in West Germany for several reasons. First, he was politically radical and openly sympathized with left-wing and anarchist critiques of capitalist society. Three months before he died he referred to himself as a "romantic anarchist."² Second, although he occasionally had affairs with women and even was married twice, Fassbinder was openly homosexual, and some of his movies, such as *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*, *Faustrecht der Freiheit* (Fox and His Friends, 1974), *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden* (In a Year With Thirteen Moons, 1979), and *Querelle* (1982), portray homosexuality and homosexual desire quite frankly; such films, if made today, would still be remarkably daring for their subject matter. In 2005 many Americans were shocked by the popular success of a gay-themed Western, *Brokeback Mountain*; three-and-a-half decades earlier, in 1970, Fassbinder had already directed a gay-themed Western, *Whity*, with the added twist that the film's protagonist was black. At the time that Fassbinder made his movies in the 1970s and 1980s, such frank homosexuality was virtually unheard of, especially from a major director of the world cinema. Fassbinder even openly portrayed himself and his lifestyle in a segment of the collectively made film *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn, 1979), where he quite literally lets it all hang out: in a scene that is still profoundly offensive to some viewers, Fassbinder depicts himself playing with his own penis. Fassbinder also featured some of his male lovers in his films: Günther Kaufmann, for instance, the star of *Whity*, who also plays a small role in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*; El Hedi ben Salem, the star of *Ali — Angst essen Seele auf*; and Armin Meier, who plays in *Angst vor der Angst* (Fear of Fear, 1974) and *Mutter Küsters Fahrt zum Himmel* (Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven, 1975). In *Faustrecht der Freiheit* Fassbinder himself played the lead role of a down-on-his-luck young gay man who is sexually and emotionally exploited by his male lover.

² Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*, trans. Krishna Winston, ed. Michael Töteberg and Leo A. Lensing (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 73.

As if his radical politics and his open homosexuality were not enough to make him controversial, Fassbinder was a vocal critic of German racism, with a string of dark-skinned, foreign men as lovers, and he was equally open about his drug use, depicting himself snorting cocaine on camera in *Deutschland im Herbst*. Fassbinder was also by all accounts an extremely difficult man to live and work with — something of a tyrant to those around him, as he also openly depicted himself in *Deutschland im Herbst*, shouting and humiliating persons around him. *Warnung vor einer heiligen Nutte* (Beware of a Holy Whore, 1970), filmed in Spain on the set of Fassbinder's Western *Whity*, cleverly fictionalizes some of the interpersonal tension that existed on his movie sets. Two of his lovers, El Hedi ben Salem and Armin Meier, committed suicide; Fassbinder is reported to have felt guilty about both of these deaths. He dedicated his final film, *Querelle*, to the memory of El Hedi ben Salem, and *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden* (In a Year with Thirteen Moons, 1978), Fassbinder's most radical exploration of same-sex desire, was made in response to Meier's death.

All of these aspects — politics, drugs, sex, race, and temper — made Fassbinder a controversial figure above and beyond his films. When one adds the films themselves into the mix, the explosive nature of Fassbinder's work becomes even more apparent. From the very beginning he made movies of remarkable aesthetic and political radicality. That he called his early acting company the Antitheater suggests a kind of theater against theater, and in many ways his films, particularly his early films, go directly against everything in conventional film culture. As just one example, the early *Warum läuft Herr R. Amok?* (Why Does Herr R. Run Amok, 1969) is deliberately boring as it explores the life of a seemingly ordinary family man for an excruciating ninety minutes. The audience watches as Herr R. (played by Kurt Raab) goes about his everyday activities without any excitement or tension. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, at the end of the movie, Herr. R. kills his entire family and himself — but without special effects, and without a dramatic soundtrack. Herr R. goes about his killing in the same deliberate, unexciting, methodical way he has gone about his other acts. In this movie even murder and suicide are made to seem banal and unexciting.

Such a movie violates conventional movie codes in a number of ways: by featuring actors who neither are glamorous nor make any effort to look glamorous; by depicting ordinary, humdrum life at great length; by refusing to dramatize murder and violence; by excluding nondiegetic music; and by refusing to provide the audience with any characters that it can sympathize with. This last aspect is perhaps the most radical and disturbing of Fassbinder's techniques for ordinary audiences, and it stands in sharp contrast to conventional movies, which inevitably feature heroes or heroines that the viewers can identify with. Fassbinder's refusal recalls Bertolt Brecht's attempts to avoid what he called *Einfühlung* (literally: feeling one's way in) — the state of mind in which a spectator, or even an

actor, completely enters into the psyche of a character on stage or screen. Instead, Brecht sought to achieve an emotional distancing through *Verfremdungseffekte* (estrangement or alienation effects), which can be thought of as theatrical elements that establish an emotional distance and prevent any easy identification between the spectator and the characters. Brecht's plays and Fassbinder's early films, and even many of his later ones, are full of estrangement effects.

As radical as he was politically and aesthetically, however, Fassbinder also loved Hollywood cinema, and part of what makes his movies so fascinating is the tension in his filmmaking between his homage to and his critique of Hollywood. In some of his movies the audience, far from being forced to separate itself from a primary character on screen, is placed into a position of sympathy. *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* is a good example: throughout much of this movie, the audience sympathizes with Maria, even when she behaves abominably. Fassbinder both criticizes and utilizes the emotional effects of Hollywood cinema, particularly melodrama. He once declared:

The best thing I can think of would be to create a union between something as beautiful and powerful and wonderful as Hollywood films and a critique of the status quo. That's my dream, to make such a German film — beautiful and extravagant and fantastic, and nevertheless go against the grain. Besides, there are many Hollywood films which are not at all apologies for the establishment, as is always superficially maintained.³

In many ways *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* is Fassbinder's attempt to make his dream come true — to create a film “as beautiful and powerful and wonderful as Hollywood films” that would simultaneously be “a critique of the status quo.”

At Munich's film museum Fassbinder had met the German exile filmmaker Douglas Sirk (aka Detlev Sierck) in 1971; Sirk/Sierck had directed both Nazi-era movies like the Zarah Leander vehicles *La Habanera* and *Zu neuen Ufern* in 1937 and also postwar American melodramas like *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). Fassbinder was fascinated by these melodramas and their depiction of emotionally troubled but loving and strong women; he even wrote an essay on Sirk.⁴ His own movie *Angst essen Seele auf* is an homage to Sirk's *All that Heaven*

³ Cited in Gerd Gemünden, “Re-fusing Brecht: The Cultural Politics of Fassbinder's German Hollywood,” *New German Critique*, no. 63 (1994): 55–75; here, 55. Gemünden's article is also a good overview of Fassbinder's negotiation of the territory between Brecht and Hollywood.

⁴ Rainer Werner Fassbinder, “Imitation of Life: On the Films of Douglas Sirk,” in Fassbinder, *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, 77–89.

Allows; in Sirk's film, a middle-class woman falls in love with a working-class gardener; in Fassbinder's film, an older petit-bourgeois German woman falls in love with a younger Arab man. And just as another Sirk film, *Imitation of Life*, had dealt with racial tensions and problems in postwar American life, so too many of Fassbinder's films dealt with racial tensions in postwar German life.

At the center of almost all Fassbinder's movies are romantic and erotic relationships between human beings. This should not be surprising for a director who was enthralled with American melodramas. As in so many other melodramas, Fassbinder's movies depict love and romance as existing in a direct relationship and nexus with power. However, Fassbinder both simplifies and radicalizes the love-power nexus, in accordance with his dictum that "love is the best, most insidious, most effective instrument of social repression."⁵ The more one of Fassbinder's characters loves another, the less power he or she has; the more one of Fassbinder's characters is loved by another character, the more power he or she has. *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* shows the love-power nexus at its most extreme. In this film the imperviousness of the heroine Petra von Kant (played by Margit Carstensen) to the love and devotion of another woman, Marlene (played by Irm Hermann), makes her that woman's master, while Marlene's devotion to Petra von Kant makes her Petra von Kant's slave. The film's trajectory, however, follows Petra as she herself moves from master to slave by falling in love with another woman, Karin Thimm (played by Hanna Schygulla). By the end of the movie, Petra von Kant, because of love, has gone from a position of total dominance to total subjugation. Other Fassbinder movies tell a similar story. *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden*, for instance, tells the story of Erwin Weishaupt, a young homosexual who has transformed himself into a woman named Elvira not because of any internal sense of his own innate femininity, but simply because of his desperate, unrequited love for another man — who, to make matters even more complicated, happens to be a Jewish entrepreneur and Holocaust survivor. Erwin/Elvira's desperate need for love makes him vulnerable and powerless; at the beginning of the movie we see him being beaten up by a group of young thugs in a Frankfurt park. The movie ends with his suicide.

Fassbinder tended to criticize the Young German Film for being too dry and intellectual. He said: "films from the brain are all right, but if they don't reach the audience, it's no good."⁶ Fassbinder argued that the Young German Film of the 1960s "tried to be revolutionary and human in an inhuman way."⁷

⁵ Cited in Tom Noonan, review of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 40–45; here, 40.

⁶ Cited in Gerd Gemünden, "Re-fusing Brecht," 69.

⁷ Cited in Gerd Gemünden, "Re-fusing Brecht," 69.

In *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* Fassbinder combined his love of melodrama with a far-reaching critique of postwar West German development, mapping the personal directly onto the political and the political directly onto the personal. Fassbinder turned to postwar German history partly as a result of the dramatic political events in West Germany in autumn of 1977, which represented a highpoint of West German anxiety about left-wing terrorism and also resulted in the creation of the collectively filmed *Deutschland im Herbst*, in which Fassbinder participated. Partly as a result of introspection about terrorism and its relationship to German history, Fassbinder produced his BRD Trilogy — a chronical of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (or Federal Republic of Germany) — dealing with the history of the Federal Republic; *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, with the original working title “The Marriages of Our Parents,” was the first part.⁸ The two other parts of the BRD Trilogy were *Lola* (1981), a movie about a small-time showgirl and prostitute and her relationship to an upstanding small-town bureaucrat, and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (The Longing of Veronika Voss, 1982), about a no-longer-popular former Ufa movie star who commits suicide in the mid-1950s. Through these movies, Fassbinder recounts the history of the West German Federal Republic from the Second World War to the mid-1950s by telling three different stories about three individual women’s lives. Two of these films end with the death of the main female character, while one (*Lola*) allows the heroine to go on living, although by the film’s end she is safely boxed in by a male power structure. Each film individually, and the trilogy taken as a whole, suggests that the Federal Republic in its birth had an opportunity to become a better, more humane society, but that by the mid-1950s this opportunity was lost. Ten years after the end of the Second World War, Fassbinder’s West Germany has once again become an authoritarian, male-dominated, militarist society. Explaining his reason for making the history films, Fassbinder declared:

We didn’t learn much about German history in Germany, so we have to catch up with some basic information, and as a filmmaker I simply used this information to tell a story. That means nothing more than making reality tangible. I see many things today that again arouse fear in me. The call for law and order. I want to use this film to give today’s society something like a supplement to their history. Our democracy was decreed for the Western occupation zone; we didn’t fight for it ourselves. Old ways of thinking have lots of opportunity to seep in through cracks, without a swastika, of course, but with old methods of education. I am astonished how quickly the rearmament came about in this country. The attempts by the younger generation to revolt were quite pitiful. I

⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), 254.

also want to show how the 1950s shaped the people of the 1960s. How the establishment clashed with the engaged youth, which was pushed into the abnormality of terrorism.⁹

The private story of Maria and her marriage to Hermann Braun is embedded from the very beginning in the larger story of postwar West Germany and its development. At the beginning of the movie Maria (played by Hanna Schygulla) and Hermann (played by Klaus Löwitsch) are getting married to each other in a civil ceremony in the midst of an artillery battle toward the end of the Second World War. When a bomb falls on the building they are in, Maria and Hermann have to finish the ceremony by signing their names while lying on the ground. The film's first image is a picture of the German chancellor Adolf Hitler; it is only when that image, together with the wall it is hanging on, is destroyed by the bomb that the movie camera is able to look through a hole in the wall and focus on the couple getting married. The displacement of Hitler's image signifies the end of Hitler's Third Reich. *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* also ends with an explosion, which is followed by a succession of pictures of West German chancellors that relates to the picture of Hitler at the film's beginning. In slow succession, viewers see photographic negatives of Konrad Adenauer, Ludwig Erhard, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, and Helmut Schmidt, though the final negative of Schmidt gradually turns positive at the very end of the movie, signaling that the audience has arrived at the present day and that the continuation of the German story is in its hands. (Schmidt was the West German chancellor in 1979, when Fassbinder made *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*.)

The succession of German chancellors seen at the movie's end again embeds the story of Maria into a larger postwar West German history that literally begins at the Zero Hour, the explosive wedding between Hermann and Maria. This ceremony is accompanied by the pervasive sound of a baby crying, suggesting that a new Germany has been born. This progression from Hitler at the beginning to the chancellors at the end implies that West German history still forms a continuity with Hitler's Third Reich. Far from representing a radical break with Nazism, the Zero Hour and the supposedly successful development of West German democracy are depicted by Fassbinder as a continuation of the structures of power and oppression already prevalent during the Hitler dictatorship. The only chancellor missing from the progression of West German chancellors at the movie's end is Schmidt's predecessor Willy Brandt, whom Fassbinder, along with many other German leftists, had seen as a positive and hopeful figure, and who is therefore excluded from the general

⁹ Cited in Anton Kaes, "The Presence of the Past: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*," in Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 73–103; here, 81.

continuity with Hitler. Brandt is in essence another failed opportunity for progressive change.

Fassbinder relates the individual story of Maria Braun to the collective story of postwar Germany in myriad ways. One of his primary tools is the film's complex and masterful soundtrack. Throughout the film, the radio connects Maria and her fate to the fate of postwar Germany. Toward the beginning of the movie, when Maria herself is searching for her lost husband, the radio broadcasts reports about missing German soldiers. Later on, while both Germany and Maria are struggling to cope with the disaster of the lost war, the radio carries a speech by Konrad Adenauer rejecting the possibility of any rearmament for West Germany; the nation has seen far too many wars, Adenauer declares. A few years later, when both Maria individually and West Germany generally have become rich and successful, the radio reports that West Germany is joining NATO and will therefore have an army and a draft. The movie's final scene features a radio broadcast of the legendary 1954 World Cup soccer finale, in which West Germany achieved a 3–2 surprise victory over Hungary. The final words of the movie come from the radio: "Deutschland ist Weltmeister!" (Germany is World Champion).¹⁰

None of these soundtrack elements is the sole focus of the movie; on the contrary, what makes the movie so rich is that while all of these soundtrack elements play in the background, the movie's plot proceeds in the foreground, with its own soundtrack, and characters rarely focus on what the radio is saying. Frequently characters on screen speak over and above the radio, so that the film's viewers have to focus carefully on at least two different levels of aural meaning, one that carries on Maria's individual story and the other — the radio — carrying on the story of postwar Germany. Another pervasive element in the soundtrack is the noise of construction: as the movie progresses, the film's viewers and its characters can hear Germany literally being rebuilt in the background as destroyed buildings are cleared away and new ones constructed. Occasionally, as in a scene when Maria and her friend Betti Klenze (played by Elisabeth Trissenaar) walk through a building under construction, the rebuilding almost takes center stage, and its grittiness is contrasted with the elegant clothes that the women wear. Usually, however, the noise of Germany's rebuilding remains in the background, part of the soundtrack playing behind what characters say and listen to overtly. Much of the movie's soundtrack is diegetic, but Fassbinder also includes a lush nondiegetic soundtrack. On one occasion he even transforms nondiegetic into diegetic music. A scene that shows Maria's business partner and lover Karl Oswald (played by Ivan Desny) trying to close a deal with an obstreperous American businessman features

¹⁰ Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, ed. Joyce Rheuban (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1986), 161.

the nondiegetic music of a Mozart piano concerto in the background, but suddenly Oswald sits down at the piano and picks up the music diegetically precisely where the nondiegetic music had left off. It is as if the fictional character Oswald, who cannot be aware of the music that the movie's real audience has been listening to, has been forced by an invisible power to continue the music anyway. This soundtrack trick is a filmic estrangement effect: Fassbinder is challenging the movie's viewers/listeners to remain on their guard and alert to the blurred boundary between elements internal and external to the film's plot, and he is suggesting that these characters — perhaps like all postwar Germans — are governed by forces that they themselves do not understand.

Like so many of Fassbinder's other movies, *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* is also a story about love and power relationships. Maria is devoted to her lost husband, the former German soldier Hermann Braun. The movie's first scenes show archetypical scenes from the immediate postwar German world: lines of "rubble women" clearing away the debris from ruined buildings; women carrying signs asking for information about lost soldier-husbands; people bartering for badly needed goods on the black market (Fassbinder himself makes a cameo appearance as one such black marketeer); people craving cigarettes both to smoke and to use as a substitute currency; German women dancing with American soldiers in seedy bars, etc. Believing that her husband is lost, Maria begins a relationship with the black American soldier Bill (played by Greg Eagles), who can help her acquire some food, clothing, and love. When Hermann suddenly returns while Maria and Bill are about to make love, however, Maria hits Bill over the head with a vase to put an end to a struggle that ensues between him and Hermann. Bill dies, and while it is not clear that Maria had intended to kill him, it is clear that she is so happy about her husband's return that she does not care much whether Bill is alive or dead. Hermann then goes to jail for Maria's crime, and Maria sets out to become a successful businesswoman so that he will ultimately be able to return to a wife who is not only beautiful but also rich. Maria, in other words, devotes her life to a love affair that is mostly in her head, since she has never actually been able to live with Hermann.

Die Ehe der Maria Braun tells an archetypical story about a German woman helping to rebuild her country and make it successful. However, unlike the heroines of classic rubble films like Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, Maria is hardly a paragon of virtue. Although at the beginning of the movie she shares the optimism and idealism of Susanne Wallner (played by Hildegard Knef in Wolfgang Staudte's film), by the end of the movie Maria has become just as cynical and jaded as Hans Mertens — Wallner's counterpart — had been at the beginning of *Die Mörder sind unter uns*. As Tom Noonan wrote in an early review of *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, "metaphorically, *Maria Braun* tells the story of postwar Germany:

success at a price — a loss of emotions, a coldness now considered to be characteristic of Germans.”¹¹ Unable to overcome obstacles to create a better world, Maria Braun has been defeated by a world that, although physically different, has remained the same. In Staudte’s film, the optimistic woman transforms the cynical man; in Fassbinder’s movie a cynical male world transforms an optimistic woman into a jaded courtesan. For Fassbinder, Maria Braun’s transformation represents the transformation of postwar West Germany — a country apparently favored by history and successful but at root filled with emptiness and cruelty.

As strong and problematic as she is, Maria is not the master of her own fate. Behind her back, the two men in her life — her imprisoned husband Hermann and her lover Oswald — have made a deal with each other, treating her as chattel. Hermann has agreed to let the dying Oswald continue to live with Maria until his death, at which point she — and also Hermann — will inherit his wealth. Maria has spent the postwar years converting her love into money that she controls, but the two men have converted her and her love into money that Hermann controls. Maria’s discovery of this male-to-male deal behind her back leads to the literally explosive, fatal conclusion of the story, which brings the movie full circle. Just as the movie, and the marriage between Hermann and Maria, had begun with an explosion and the picture of a German chancellor, so to it ends with an explosion and the pictures of German chancellors. *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* — both as a fictional marriage and as a movie — ends with the event that Maria has worked for and looked forward to over the course of ten long years — her reunification with her husband — but ironically it turns out that this reunification does not bring about the happiness that Maria had imagined. On the contrary, it precipitates disaster.

Die Ehe der Maria Braun shows the seamier sides of the West German economic miracle. Maria’s success as a businesswoman is due to a combination of brains and beauty; when necessary, she is willing to sell her body, and by implication also her soul, for economic success. Throughout the movie Maria transforms her good fortune into products that can be bartered for other things; she herself becomes an object of exchange. Maria brings one particularly difficult business negotiation to a successful economic conclusion by simply sleeping with a reluctant American businessman. She has been taught how to speak English by her black lover Bill, and she puts this English, learned over the course of a sexual relationship, to use in further negotiations that involve sex and power. She is able to impress her future lover Oswald by dressing down, in English, a black American soldier (played by Fassbinder’s erstwhile lover Günther Kaufmann) who is being disrespectful to her. Over the course of the

¹¹ Tom Noonan, review of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 40–45; here, 44.

movie, viewers see how Maria is able to transform sex and love into economic power, gradually amassing wealth that separates her from the hungry, desperate woman she was at the movie's beginning.

The clothing that Maria wears reflects her growing wealth; at the beginning of the movie she wears drab, scruffy clothing, but by the movie's end she wears elegant outfits that highlight her beauty. Although Maria's husband Hermann and her lover Oswald have transformed her into an object, it was she herself who first carried out this transformation. And although it was Hermann who was literally in prison, deprived of his freedom, it gradually becomes clear that Maria herself is not free, that she is closed in and trapped. Maria's mother even tells her that her new house has become a prison for her.¹² Throughout the film, Maria and the other characters move about in a claustrophobic, constricting environment with hardly any glimpses of the sky or of broader panoramas. Whereas Staudte had provided glimpses of the sky in *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, as if to suggest a world of possibility and new-found freedoms, Fassbinder gives his characters, and his audience, no glimpse of an open horizon. At movie's end Maria has achieved everything that she thought she wanted, and she finds that it is worthless. She is without love and also without any real emotional or erotic power. Her life has become cold and empty, and the return of her husband signals the end of any power that she may once have had. It is now 1954, and men have taken control in Germany once again. In 1954 the Federal Republic became part of the NATO alliance, and two years later, in 1956, it reinstated the military draft. When Maria hears about Germany's rearmament on the radio, while having dinner in a fancy restaurant, she leaves her table to vomit, while in the foreground a couple make love behind a screen. It is as if the nation were choking on its newfound wealth and power.

Between making *Deutschland im Herbst* in December of 1977 and beginning work on *Maria Braun* in 1978–79, Fassbinder talked about his longing for utopia, declaring that it was his desire for a better world that gave him the strength to go on working at a breakneck pace in the midst of troubled political times, when the West German government was cracking down on terrorists and terrorist sympathizers. His energy, Fassbinder declared, came:

From utopia, the concrete longing for this utopia. If this longing is driven out of me, I will not do anything else; that's why as a creative person I have the feeling of being murdered in Germany, if you would please not mistake that for paranoia. I believe this recent witch-hunt, which, I think, is just the tip of the iceberg, was staged

¹² See Tom Noonan, review of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 40–45; here, 44.

in order to destroy individual utopias. That means also to let my fears and my feelings of guilt become overpowering. If it comes to the point where my fears are greater than my longing for something beautiful, then I'll quit. And not just quit working.¹³

It is possible that when he died of exhaustion and drug abuse in 1982 Fassbinder had finally, consciously or unconsciously — perhaps like Maria Braun herself — given up his hope for a utopian transformation of Germany. When he was found dead in his Munich apartment on June 10, 1982, one French critic wrote:

Rainer Werner Fassbinder represented the passionate rage of the German film, the rage of a young generation that opened its eyes in the 1960s and learned what its elders had left behind: the destruction of German identity through National Socialism.¹⁴

But although Fassbinder himself is no longer around to provoke German and foreign critics, his films remain a continuing challenge and provocation to us all.

¹³ Cited in Kaes, "The Presence of the Past: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*," 101.

¹⁴ Cited in Kaes, "The Presence of the Past: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*," 75.



Oskar Matzerath (David Bennent), Jan Bronski (Daniel Olbrychski), and Agnes Matzerath (Angela Winkler) at the Baltic. Screen capture.

25: *Die Blechtrommel* (1979) or Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past

Director: Volker Schlöndorff

Cinematographer: Igor Luther

Screenplay: Jean-Claude Carrière, Volker Schlöndorff, Franz Seitz, and Günter Grass, based on the novel by Günter Grass

Producers: Eberhard Junkersdorf, Hans Prescher, and Franz Seitz (Argos Film, Artemis Film, Bioskop Film, GGB, Hallelujah Filmproduktion, HR, Seitz Filmproduktion)

Editor: Suzanne Baron

Production Design: Piotr Dudzinski and Zeljko Senecic

Costume Design: Inge Heer, Dagmar Niefind, and Yoshio Yabara

Music: Maurice Jarre

Soundtrack: Peter Beil, Walter Grundauer, and Peter Kellerhals

German Release Date: [West Germany] May 3, 1979

Actors: David Bennent (Oskar Matzerath); Mario Adorf (Alfred Matzerath); Angela Winkler (Agnes Matzerath); Katharina Thalbach (Maria Matzerath); Daniel Olbrychski (Jan Bronski); Tina Engel (the young Anna Koljaiczek); Berta Drews (the old Anna Koljaiczek); Roland Teubner (Joseph Koljaiczek); Tadeusz Kunikowski (Uncle Vinzenz); Andréa Ferréol (Lina Greff); Heinz Bennent (Greff); Ilse Pagé (Gretchen Scheffler); Werner Rehm (Scheffler); Käte Jaenicke (Mother Truczinski); Charles Aznavour (Sigismund Markus); Mariella Oliveri (Roswitha); Fritz Hakl (Bebra); Marek Walczewski (Schugger-Leo); and others

Awards: Academy Awards, 1980: Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film; Cannes Film Festival, 1979: Golden Palm (together with *Apocalypse Now*); Japan Academy, 1982: Best Foreign Language Film; German Film Awards, 1979: Challenge Award “Golden Bowl” for Outstanding Feature Film; and others

VOLKER SCHLÖNDORFF's *Die Blechtrommel* (The Tin Drum) was one of the most commercially successful films of the New German Cinema. Not only did critics praise its artistic excellence, but it also drew relatively large audiences in Germany and elsewhere, and it continues to draw audiences in video and DVD format to this day. *Die Blechtrommel* is based on Günter Grass's famous 1959 novel of the same title, one of the landmarks of postwar West German literature, about the life of a boy born in Danzig in 1924 who decides, at the age of three, to stop growing, and who

therefore experiences the entirety of the Hitler dictatorship as a dwarf. It narrates “world history from below,” as Schlöndorff puts it: “gigantic, spectacular images held together by the tiny Oskar.”¹ Together with Francis Ford Coppola’s antiwar classic *Apocalypse Now*, Schlöndorff’s *Die Blechtrommel* shared the Palme d’Or at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival; in 1980 it became the first German movie ever to win an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Since then, only two other German films have been awarded this honor: Caroline Link’s *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (Nowhere in Africa, 2001) in 2002 and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s *Das Leben der anderen* (The Lives of Others, 2006) in 2007.²

Schlöndorff, who lives in Berlin but spent many years in Munich, spanned the development of West German cinema from the emergence of Young German Film in the 1960s to the international triumphs of the New German Cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s, and he continues to make successful films into the present. He was born before the beginning of the Second World War, on March 31, 1939, in Wiesbaden; hence, he is not, like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a child of the postwar era but rather, like Werner Herzog, a child of the Nazi dictatorship. His father, like Fassbinder’s and Wim Wenders’s fathers, was a doctor. Schlöndorff went to high school in Paris, where he subsequently studied film and worked as an assistant for three important French film directors in the late 1950s and early 1960s: Louis Malle, Jean-Pierre Melville, and Alain Resnais. Although he was not one of the signers of the famous Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962, his first feature film, *Der junge Törless* (Young Törless, 1966), was one of the early successes of the Young German Film.

Schlöndorff’s films tend to combine high production values with specifically German content. They are often based on famous works of German-language literature, such as Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel*, Robert Musil’s *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (The Confusions of Young Törless, 1906), or Heinrich Böll’s *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, 1974): “always literature as information about German history,” as the director puts it.³ Schlöndorff has also created films from major works of non-German literature. In 1990, for instance, he transformed Canadian author Margaret Atwood’s dystopian *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a novel about an authoritarian, sexist Christian

¹ Volker Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung: Mein Leben und meine Filme* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2008), 243. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

² Another German-language film, Austrian director Stefan Ruzowitzky’s *Die Fälscher* (The Counterfeiters, 2007), won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2008.

³ Volker Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 252.

dictatorship in North America in the not-too-distant future, into a film, and his 1996 film *Der Unhold* (The Ogre), based on French author Michel Tournier's novel *Le Roi des aulmes* (The Ogre, 1970), dealt, like *Die Blechtrommel*, with the Nazi dictatorship. In 1971, Schlöndorff married Margarethe von Trotta, with whom he directed the film adaptation of Böll's *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* in 1975; von Trotta was to go on to make important films in her own right in subsequent years. The pair were amicably divorced in 1991.

Schlöndorff has carefully studied the best French and Hollywood filmmaking, as well as German Expressionism, which has enabled him to achieve a high-level balance between market forces and the demand for artistic quality. Of all the directors of the New German Cinema, Schlöndorff comes closest to being a significant success not only in critical but also in financial terms. His films, in other words, often actually make money. In the mid 1960s, shortly after completing his first feature film, *Der junge Törless*, Schlöndorff set out his vision of an artistically and commercially successful German cinema culture able to compete with Hollywood on its own terms:

I recently had a utopian vision: in Germany there was a flourishing film industry with centers in Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich, which, in a tough competitive battle, each outdoing the other qualitywise, were fighting for giant foreign markets. All of these people were proud that they were filmmakers. They loved their profession and expected more of the films they made than of the ones they saw.⁴

Schlöndorff's dream continued:

Projectionists were sober and awake. Critics encouraged instead of asphyxiating. The audience listened without signs of boredom. Authors didn't deem making entertainment films below their dignity. There were stars, starlets, directors, cameramen, and what all.⁵

In spite — or perhaps precisely because — of the popular success of his movies, particularly *Die Blechtrommel*, Schlöndorff is frequently criticized. Some critics see him as more conventional and less daring than other key directors of the New German Cinema, such as Fassbinder or Herzog.⁶

⁴ Volker Schlöndorff, "A Dream," in Eric Rentschler, ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 207–8; here, 207.

⁵ Schlöndorff, "A Dream," 208.

⁶ See, for instance, Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), 170; and Hans Günther Pflaum and Hans Helmut Prinzler, *Film in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der neue deutsche Film — Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1992), 55.

Such criticisms are made for a number of reasons. First, Schlöndorff bases his films on literary models, such as Grass's *Die Blechtrommel*, and therefore they are not completely independent works of art; moreover, rather than taking liberties with his literary models, Schlöndorff tends to follow them fairly closely. For some critics, this procedure makes Schlöndorff less original and daring than a director like Fassbinder, who created many of his works from scratch. Second, rather than flouting some of the key conventions of Hollywood cinema, Schlöndorff tends to adhere to them. His films, for instance, often include lush nondiegetic soundtracks, and they usually avoid Brechtian alienation effects. Unlike Fassbinder, Schlöndorff does not generally play with lighting or framing, and his camera work tends to be fairly conventional. Schlöndorff does not always film on location, the way Herzog insists on, but often in well-equipped film studios. All of these aspects make his films seem relatively conventional to many critics. Finally, even the fact that Schlöndorff has enjoyed considerable popular success is, in the eyes of some critics, a mark against him. After all, if Schlöndorff's films are enjoyed by the same audiences that enjoy conventional Hollywood movies, then they probably aren't any better than Hollywood movies.

Paradoxically, however, *Die Blechtrommel* is also one of the most controversial films of the New German Cinema, and it has caused debates about censorship in the United States, stemming from the accusation by some groups that the film is child pornography. In 1997, when *Die Blechtrommel* was released on video, a group calling itself Oklahomans for Children and Families demanded that the movie be kept from the public, and police in Oklahoma City removed every known copy of it from video stores and at least one private home. Although a federal judge later ruled that such seizures of *Die Blechtrommel* were unconstitutional, it was clear that Schlöndorff had touched a raw nerve among some Americans, who viewed his film as an affront to traditional morality. After Günter Grass won the Nobel Prize for literature two years later, in 1999, Bob Anderson, a member of Oklahomans for Children and Families, opined: "I guess congratulations to him, but I also know that the people that are making these awards are the same liberal people that are pushing our children to have sex anytime, anywhere, with animals, etc."⁷ While Anderson's statement bears no relationship to Grass's, Schlöndorff's, or the Swedish academy's actual views on sexuality or childhood, it indicates how heated the debate about *Die Blechtrommel* became in parts of the United States and elsewhere. Even Schlöndorff's father disliked the film, telling him that it was "terrible! But it's not you

⁷ Chris Vognar, "A Bang-Up Job: Documentary about 'Drum' Ban a Worthy Mate to Masterpiece," *The Dallas Morning News*, 26 May 2004, Entertainment section.

who are responsible for that; it's Günter Grass. I wouldn't look at something like that a second time."⁸

As Bob Anderson's reaction clearly demonstrates, the reason for the controversial reception of *Die Blechtrommel*, particularly in the United States, was the mistaken perception that it depicts a child having sex. One newspaper account from 1997 described the film as including a scene in which "a boy about 6 or 7 has oral sex in a bathhouse with a teen-age girl."⁹ This description, which is wrong in every respect, reveals the difficulty that some viewers of *Die Blechtrommel* seem to have had in understanding the basic plot of the film, and in distinguishing between reality and fiction. David Bennent, the actor who played the role of the protagonist Oskar Matzerath in Schlöndorff's film, was in fact not six or seven when the film was made but rather twelve, although he looked younger because of a physiological disorder. Within the plot of the film, Oskar Matzerath is not six or seven when the offending scene occurs but rather sixteen. Moreover, since the sexual act is not even shown, the scene cannot be described as pornography. As Schlöndorff noted in his diary at the time, "there is more tension and eroticism in Oskar's observing gaze than in a depiction of genitalia."¹⁰ The fictional scene does not even, strictly speaking, take place in a bathhouse, but rather in a changing room at a beach. Finally, Katharina Thalbach, who played the role of Maria, the woman in question, was not a teenager but in her twenties when she made the film, and she insisted on modesty in her depiction, sometimes to the displeasure of Grass himself.¹¹

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss out of hand criticisms of *Die Blechtrommel* as offensive to traditional morality. For one thing, Günter Grass certainly did not write his novel in order to paint a reassuring picture of German family life and childhood under the Nazi dictatorship; on the contrary, he intended the novel to shake up and disturb his readers. The same is true for Schlöndorff's adaptation of the novel. Moreover, the film's unsettling qualities do indeed revolve centrally around the figure of the dwarf Oskar Matzerath, who looks like a child throughout the movie, even though by 1945, when the movie ends, he is twenty-one years old, legally an adult. Oskar is "reluctantly" born in 1924, and one of the movie's most striking scenes depicts him looking skeptically out of his mother's womb into an outside world that

⁸ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 303.

⁹ "OK City Police Round Up Copies of 'Obscene' Movie 'Tin Drum,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 27 June 1997, A16.

¹⁰ Volker Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2008), 256, 279.

¹¹ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 285.

holds few allures for him. In Schlöndorff's film, Oskar declares to his audience: "It was only the promise of the tin drum that tempted me to come into the world."¹² At the age of three, when Oskar finally receives his tin drum, he decides to stop growing, engineering a fall down the basement stairs of his family's home in order to give his parents a convincing reason for his failure to grow.

Whereas conventional movies about children tend to portray them as cute and cuddly tots, Schlöndorff, following Grass's model, takes care to prevent the movie's viewers from ever seeing Oskar as a cute little boy. On the contrary, Oskar is a profoundly disturbing and ornery person who from the beginning frequently behaves selfishly, and who is often at war with the adult world around him. In this respect Oskar is not really an unusual child, but he is out of place in the world of film, which, with some notable exceptions, tends to portray children in an entirely positive, sentimental light. Oskar is indirectly responsible for the deaths of the two father figures in his life, Alfred Matzerath and Jan Bronski; he probably has sex with his stepmother Maria after his biological mother has died, and therefore his stepbrother Kurt may possibly be his own son. Moreover, Oskar apparently tries to provoke a miscarriage by hitting Maria hard in the gut while she is pregnant. Oskar also desecrates a statue of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child in the Danzig cathedral. At key points throughout the film, he produces a high-pitched scream capable of breaking glass; he uses this scream in order to interfere with adults' attempts to control and patronize him. For instance, in a doctor's office he uses the scream to break jars of embalmed biological oddities — including an octopus and a human fetus — stored on wall shelves, bringing the specimens crashing to the floor around him and the adults whom he is punishing. When a teacher in a schoolroom tries to take away his most prized possession, his tin drum, he uses the scream to crack her eyeglasses. And while his mother is having adulterous sex with her lover Jan Bronski not far away, Oskar climbs the tower of the Danzig cathedral and uses his scream to bring window glass shattering to the ground throughout the neighboring area, thus putting an end to his mother's tryst. Oskar is far from a likable tot, and viewers, just like the people around Oskar, are quite right to be disturbed by him. Certainly for cinema audiences used to seeing children depicted as exuding sweetness and light, Oskar is unusual and provocative.

¹² My transcription. Günter Grass's novel has: "It was only the prospect of the drum that prevented me from expressing more forcefully my desire to return to the womb." Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1962), 49. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1981), 37.

However, Oskar's resistance to being locked into the role of a cute and cuddly child has to be seen not as an isolated oddity caused by the purportedly prurient imaginations of Grass and Schlöndorff, but in conjunction with the perversions of the adult world around him. After all, Oskar does not exist in a vacuum. On the contrary, he is surrounded by adults who seek to paper over their own large and small imperfections by forcing him into the role of a cute little boy in a sentimental, dishonest fairy tale. *Die Blechtrommel* is above all a film about the Nazi dictatorship, and many of the supposedly moral and superior adults in Oskar's life — the very ones who view him as a freak — are unabashed Nazis. The only really positive adult figures in the film are Oskar's Kaschubian grandmother and Sigismund Markus, the Jewish toy store owner who is fond of both Oskar and his mother, and who gives Oskar his tin drums. Markus commits suicide during *Kristallnacht* (night of broken glass) — the pogrom against Jews that occurred throughout Germany in November of 1938 — when Nazi thugs destroy his store. This episode provides definitive proof to Oskar and to the movie's viewers that the Nazi world in which Oskar lives has made any kind of normal, happy childhood impossible. It confirms Oskar's cynicism and jadedness.

The other major adult figures in Oskar's life are all moral failures in various ways. His mother is an adulteress, and therefore Oskar does not even know for sure who his biological father is. His mother's Polish lover, Jan Bronski, is a coward who is afraid to defend himself and his comrades against invading Nazis in 1939. Oskar's titular father, Alfred Matzerath, is a Nazi who proudly wears an SA uniform and hangs a picture of Adolf Hitler in his living room; at the end of the war, when Soviet troops occupy Danzig, Alfred tries to hide the evidence of his Nazi past by taking down the picture of Hitler. He replaces it with the picture of Beethoven that had hung there before the Nazi dictatorship, demonstrating to the film's viewers succinctly how so many Germans in the postwar period used Germany's great cultural achievements as a kind of counterweight for Hitler — what the Swiss writer Max Frisch, in 1949, called "culture as an alibi."¹³ While Oskar and his family cower in the basement of their Danzig home upon the arrival of Soviet troops, Oskar places Alfred's Nazi lapel pin, which he has tried to dispose of, back into his hands. In order to hide it from the Soviet troops, Alfred puts it into his mouth and ultimately swallows it; when his body goes into convulsions as a result of swallowing the sharp pin, Alfred Matzerath is shot by the Soviet troops. In essence, Oskar has forced his father literally to swallow the Nazi ideology that he once so proudly espoused. It is true that Oskar's actions lead to his father's death, but it is also true that Oskar is simply returning to

¹³ Max Frisch, "Kultur als Alibi," *Der Monat* 1, no. 7 (April 1949): 83–85.

his father what was once his. He is not allowing the adults around him simply to pretend that they were never Nazis.

In this and many other instances, Oskar does not bring pain and suffering into an otherwise pristine adult world. Rather, he reveals the adult world for what it really is: full of brutality and cruelty covered over by a self-serving, hypocritical veneer of morality and uprightness. It is for this reason that Oskar cannot simply be an innocent child like the ones who populate so many other movies; if he were, he would not be able to reveal the reality of the Nazi world in which he lives. A happy, well-adjusted Oskar, far from revealing the Nazi world's cruelty, would demonstrate that it cannot have been that bad. Both Grass in his novel and Schlöndorff in his film distance themselves from conventional images of saccharine childhood — images that were highly popular in the Nazi period, and that continue to be popular today. After all, the Nazis portrayed themselves as a movement of youth, not of old age, and they created youth organizations like the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth, or HJ) for boys and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (Federation of German Maidens, or BDM) for girls in order to ideologically and politically control and supervise even young children. "Youth is always right in any conflict with old age," declared the eponymous young hero of the 1929 novel *Michael* by Joseph Goebbels, who went on to become Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, in charge, among other things, of the Nazi film industry.¹⁴ One of the first Nazi feature films, *Hitlerjunge Quex* (Hitler Youth Quex, 1933), dealt with the heroic life and death of a young Hitler Youth boy-martyr fighting against immoral, dissolute communists; it is likely that both the real Günter Grass and Grass's fictional character Oskar Matzerath would have seen *Hitlerjunge Quex*, which is referred to in the novel itself. Grass's novel and Schlöndorff's film must therefore be seen as a powerful, albeit controversial attempt to extricate youth from the ideological role it played in Nazi culture: to use Oskar not as a cute or heroic boy who distracts from and compensates for a horrible reality but rather as a grotesque dwarf who refracts and reflects that reality.

Nevertheless, Oskar does look like a child, and his looks initially fool both the characters in the film and the audience watching it. Schlöndorff intentionally decided to have the role played not by a midget but by a real child because he wanted audiences to identify with Oskar at least partially: "We can all identify with a child, but few people can identify with a midget."¹⁵ In order to find the right child for the part, Schlöndorff talked to a doctor in Munich who recommended the son of the actor Heinz

¹⁴ Joseph Goebbels, *Michael*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Amok, 1987), 3.

¹⁵ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 246.

Bennent, with whom Schlöndorff had worked before. Schlöndorff later recalled that when he saw David Bennent for the first time on a street in Munich, “I already know from afar that I’ve found Oskar Matzerath.”¹⁶ For Schlöndorff, Bennent was not simply *acting* the role of Oskar Matzerath; he actually *became* Oskar Matzerath: “he is a medium.”¹⁷ Discussing David Bennent’s remarkable and disturbing performance as Oskar in the film, Schlöndorff has noted that Bennent’s

lack of shame before the camera . . . is much like the lack of shame Oskar Mazerath has toward his environment. And for that reason David is equally shocking. He is the opposite of a child actor who everyone thinks is touching. He has no pity, no tact at all, no sentimentality. He can catapult himself instantly out of the role, beating on his drum not as Oskar Mazerath, but as David Bennent, waking the whole team up; suddenly everyone is again sober and attentive. He literally uses the drum to establish a distance between himself, David Bennent, and Oskar Mazerath and us — spectators and film team. The drum is for him a common bond between Oskar Mazerath and himself. He uses it as Grass uses his typewriter or as Oskar does his own drum. It is a common bond and at the same time a protective shield.¹⁸

The way Schlöndorff describes it, Oskar’s/David Bennent’s tin drum is a kind of Brechtian alienation effect after all, an instrument by means of which both actor and fictional character create emotional distance between themselves and those around them, as well as between them and the film’s audience.

Like his fictional character Oskar Matzerath, Günter Grass was born in Danzig and wound up in West Germany after the end of the Second World War, when Germany lost its eastern territories to Poland and the Soviet Union and Danzig became the Polish city of Gdansk. The final third of Grass’s novel takes place after Oskar Matzerath’s resumption of growth in 1945. That section of Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* is a bitingly critical satire of West German reconstruction, along with West German attempts to obfuscate the real history of the Nazi past. Grass’s novel is narrated not by the young Oskar Matzerath but by a much older Oskar in his thirties. Because Schlöndorff ends his film in 1945 — the film’s

¹⁶ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 247.

¹⁷ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 288.

¹⁸ Volker Schlöndorff, “David Bennent and Oskar Mazerath,” in *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices*, Eric Rentschler (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 176–78; here, 177. I have kept the Americanized spelling of Oskar Matzerath’s name here.

last image shows the train in which Oskar and his family are heading west receding into the distance — he cannot have the older Oskar narrate his tale; rather, his narrator is the child Oskar Matzerath. This is probably one further reason why the film's portrayal of a grotesque Nazi childhood is so offensive to some viewers: because of its narrative voice, the film is far closer to the events and characters being narrated than Grass's book.

Both Grass's novel and Schlöndorff's film have significant implications for the analysis of not just the Nazi past but also the development of postwar German society. One of the key myths of postwar German history is the myth of a Zero Hour, a supposedly clean new slate upon which postwar culture was built. Grass is devastatingly critical of this myth in his novel, having his narrator Oskar declare: "And then when the end came, they quickly turned it into a hopeful beginning; for in our country the end is always the beginning and there is hope in every, even the most final, end."¹⁹ During the 1980s, former Chancellor Helmut Kohl used to speak of what he called "the grace of late birth," i.e., the idea that people like him — and also, for that matter, like Günter Grass, or like the German Pope Benedict XVI — who were born in the late 1920s or 1930s cannot be held responsible or implicated in Nazi crimes in any way. It was the generation of people born in this period that became centrally involved in the rebuilding of West Germany after the war. Both the novel and the film are, among other things, intended to demolish the myth of an unblemished, guilt-free beginning to postwar West German history.

In 1990, at the moment of German reunification, the influential critic Frank Schirrmacher called Oskar Matzerath "the representative of [West German] consciousness."²⁰ If — as Schirrmacher and others have argued — Oskar Matzerath is a representative figure of the West German Federal Republic and its development into a democracy, then he embodies not a clean new slate but rather a development necessarily warped and twisted by what went before. This is yet another reason why Grass's and Schlöndorff's protagonist cannot simply be an unblemished, innocent child but rather has to be implicated in the guilt of the society around him. Oskar tells his audience that Germany has destroyed the very preconditions for innocence, and as a result it — and perhaps even western culture generally — has lost any claim to purity and goodness. It is no wonder that this message is not universally popular, since it suggests that by now all Germans and perhaps even all westerners are wrapped up in a nexus of shame and guilt from which they cannot extricate themselves. As Richard Weisberg has persuasively argued, *Die Blechtrommel* "has to be either censored or fully grasped" in

¹⁹ Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1962), 204.

²⁰ Frank Schirrmacher, "Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 October 1990, L1–2; here, L2.

its devastating implications.²¹ There is no middle ground. It is possible that the would-be American censors of *Die Blechtrommel* have therefore in the last analysis helped readers and viewers to understand the uncompromising radicality of the message of the film and novel.



Hitler Youth drummer boy. From Leni Riefenstahl's book Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitag-Filmes.

²¹ Richard Weisberg, "Why They're Censoring 'The Tin Drum': Kristallnacht — Reflections on the End of the Epic," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 161–81; here, 162.



Marianne and Juliane with their family at prayer in the 1950s. Screen capture.

26: *Die bleierne Zeit* (1981): Film and Terrorism

Director: Margarethe von Trotta

Cinematographer: Franz Rath

Screenplay: Margarethe von Trotta

Producer: Eberhard Junkersdorf (Bioskop Film, SFB)

Editor: Dagmar Hirtz

Production Design: Barbara Kloth and Georg von Kieseritzky

Costume Design: Monika Hasse and Jorge Jara

Music: Nicolas Economou

Soundtrack: Vladimir Vizner

German Release Date: [West Germany] September 25, 1981

Actors: Jutta Lampe (Juliane); Barbara Sukowa (Marianne); Rüdiger

Vogler (Wolfgang); Doris Schade (mother); Franz Rudnick

(father); Luc Bondy (Werner); Vérénice Rudolph (Sabine)

Awards: German Film Awards, 1982: Film Award in Gold —

Outstanding Feature Film, Outstanding Individual Achievement

for Actress to Barbara Sukowa (also for her role in Fassbinder's

Lola, 1981); David di Donatello Awards, 1982: David Award for

Best Director of a Foreign Film to Margarethe von Trotta;

Venice Film Festival, 1981: Golden Lion, Prix FIPRESCI to

Margarethe von Trotta, for Best Actress to Jutta Lampe and

Barbara Sukowa (shared award)

FOR OVER THREE DECADES, Margarethe von Trotta has been the most famous woman filmmaker in Germany, a country that enjoys one of the most active feminist film scenes in the world. As Susan E. Linville puts it, von Trotta is “the best known of several extraordinary German women filmmakers.”¹ In accordance with the 1970s feminist slogan “The personal is the political,” von Trotta typically addresses the intersection of personal and political life. Her first feature film, *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (1975), which she codirected with her then-husband Volker Schlöndorff, confronted precisely that intersection: a chance encounter between a single woman and a terrorist man in which the female protagonist, against her will, is sucked up into political life. After working

¹ Susan E. Linville, “Retrieving History: Margarethe von Trotta’s *Marianne and Juliane*,” *PMLA* 106, no. 3 (May 1991): 446–58; here, 446.

on that film, von Trotta decided to set off on her own as a filmmaker. As she described her work with Schlöndorff, “You can’t codirect. It’s a hypocritical term. All I did was work with actors. Volker was in charge of the technique, the artistry, the way the film finally looked. As a director I make decisions myself. I’ve watched and collaborated enough.”² Nevertheless, as a woman filmmaker, in spite of the relative popularity of some of her films, von Trotta has sometimes been seen, in Linville’s words, “as ancillary to her” erstwhile husband.³

Von Trotta’s second film, *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* (The Second Awakening of Christa Klages, 1978), the first film that she directed on her own, told the story of a nursery school teacher who turns into a bank robber in order to save her nursery school, and of a female bank clerk who gets caught up and politicized by an encounter with the female bank robber. *Schwestern oder Die Balance des Glücks* (Sisters or The Balance of Happiness, 1979), von Trotta’s next film, seemingly abandoned the political to focus exclusively on the dysfunctional power relationship between two sisters. *Die bleierne Zeit* (literally: The Leaden Time; U.S. title: Marianne and Julianne, British title: The German Sisters, 1981) was von Trotta’s fourth feature film, and in it she returned to politics with a vengeance. *Die bleierne Zeit*, a relentless exploration of the intersection of terrorism and personal life released only a few years after the German Autumn that had given rise to the omnibus film *Deutschland im Herbst* in 1978 (for which von Trotta had worked with Schlöndorff on the *Antigone* segment), became one of the most important and controversial German films of the 1980s. It can, as Paul Coates argues, “be read as her separate female contribution to *Germany in Autumn*.⁴ Von Trotta won the Golden Lion for *Die bleierne Zeit* at the Venice Biennale in 1981, becoming the only German woman to receive this award after Leni Riefenstahl in 1938 (for *Olympia*).

Two decades later, in the wake of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in September, 2001, *Die bleierne Zeit* has commanded renewed interest among film scholars such as B. Ruby Rich, who, in 2004, made a plea for “new methodological tools and significant critical reinvention from any who claim to be cultural theorists of the post-9/11 image universe.”⁵ For Rich, von Trotta’s film, as a central part of the

² Cited in Linville, “Retrieving History: Margarethe von Trotta’s *Marianne and Julianne*,” 456, note. 2; from Joseph Treen, with Zofia Smardz and Joan Westreich, “The Lady behind the Lens,” *Newsweek*, international edition, 3 May 1982.

³ Linville, “Retrieving History: Margarethe von Trotta’s *Marianne and Julianne*,” 446.

⁴ Paul Coates, *The Gorgon’s Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 221.

⁵ B. Ruby Rich, “After the Fall: Cinema Studies Post-9/11,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 109–15; here, 110.

history of “Western democracies’ home-grown oppositional groups,” is crucial for an understanding of the history of terrorism in the west. Karen Beckman, meanwhile, has argued that von Trotta’s complex treatment of terrorism and feminism, and of terrorism’s relationship to the nonterrorist world, is a necessary corrective to black-vs.-white or us-vs.-them simplifications of the terrorist threat.⁶

Like Schlöndorff, von Trotta has come in for occasionally severe criticism, primarily because of the relative accessibility and popularity of her films. Barton Byg, for instance, acknowledges that *Die bleierne Zeit* “constructs a powerful cinematic evocation of a land burdened by its past,” but he claims that the film’s power comes from “the acceptance of mass culture as a language or sign-system into which neither the critic nor the artist can intervene from the outside. They accept the film industry as it is rather than propose a radical alternative.”⁷ What Byg means by “the acceptance of mass culture as a language or sign-system” is that viewers of *Die bleierne Zeit* are invited, he believes, to sympathize with the film’s nonterrorist sister Juliane (played by Jutta Lampe) and to withdraw sympathy from the terrorist sister Marianne (played by Barbara Sukowa). This mobilization of sympathy toward the more law-abiding sister and away from the law-breaker, Byg argues, “manipulates the audience according to conventions long under assault by feminist film theory.”⁸ Although more positive in his assessment of *Die bleierne Zeit*, Marc Silberman agrees that von Trotta, in contrast to some other feminist filmmakers, prefers “a more traditional psychological and visual realism that tends to strike some critics as artless and modest.”⁹ Indeed, Silberman contends, part of von Trotta’s accomplishment is precisely the combination of “conventional melodramatic coding with radical political issues, translating ideological dilemmas into private predicaments.”¹⁰

It is true that von Trotta’s films are not the radical aesthetic experiments of some other women filmmakers, such as Ulrike Ottinger and Valie Export in Germany or Lizzie Borden and Yvonne Rainer in the United

⁶ Karen Beckman, “Terrorism, Feminism, Sisters, and Twins: Building Relations in the Wake of the World Trade Center Attacks,” *Grey Room* 7 (Spring 2002): 254–39.

⁷ Barton Byg, “German History and Cinematic Convention Harmonized in Margarethe von Trotta’s *Marianne and Juliane*,” in *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions*, vol. 2, *German Film History/German History on Film*, ed. Sandra Frieden, Richard W. McCormick, and Vibeke R. Petersen (Providence and Oxford: Berg, 1993), 259–71; here, 266, 264.

⁸ Byg, “German History and Cinematic Convention,” 260.

⁹ Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1995), 201.

¹⁰ Silberman, *German Cinema*, 202.

States. Von Trotta explores the psychology of her characters and tells a tight-knit story. She does not, like some of her more radical colleagues, reject narration and psychology, but this does not necessarily make von Trotta's films "conventional" in the usual sense of the word, any more than Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films, many of which also address the intersection of the personal and the political and use "melodramatic coding," could be described as "conventional." Particularly in von Trotta's early films, of which *Die bleierne Zeit* is a prime example, von Trotta uses various distancing techniques that tend to prevent spectators from identifying completely with the protagonists of her films, and that sometimes keep them off-balance even with respect to the film's plot. In *Die bleierne Zeit* these distancing techniques include: (1) the frequent lack of nondiegetic music, including long and (for viewers used to conventional Hollywood films) uncomfortable moments of virtual silence; (2) a sometimes choppy editing style that includes occasional abrupt shifts from one cut to another and tends to disrupt the film's continuity and make it difficult for viewers to know exactly where they are in the story; (3) sometimes long, static shots with a motionless camera or a camera that moves very little; (4) the absence of establishing shots, particularly long shots, that might situate the film's characters in a larger context; (5) an absence of clearly glamorous or admirable main characters with whom viewers might expect to identify in a conventional film; (6) the film's refusal to depict explicit violence, such as Marianne's terrorism or her husband Werner's suicide; (7) frequent self-referential elements that point to the film's status as a fiction commenting on itself; (8) the inclusion of documentary elements within a feature film; and (9) an ambiguous ending that refuses narrative closure.

To these elements must be added, above all, the fact that in *Die bleierne Zeit*, as in almost all of her other films, von Trotta consistently focuses on the importance and dignity of female protagonists and their lives. As Renate Hehr argues, von Trotta "makes a conscious effort to represent women in her films in a way that has nothing to do with the habitual way Hollywood views them."¹¹ The female figures in von Trotta's films are not afterthoughts or ancillaries to their male counterparts, as they are in many conventional Hollywood narratives, even so-called chick flicks; on the contrary, the males in von Trotta's films achieve significance only to the extent that von Trotta's female characters allow them to do so. Hehr notes that von Trotta views "men from a woman's perspective, and that perspective is merciless, reserved, disillusioned, and sometimes ironic."¹² The women protagonists in von Trotta's films always have significance and value, whether or not they are valued, or even noticed, by men. E. Ann

¹¹ Renate Hehr, *Margarethe von Trotta: Filmmaking as Liberation* (Stuttgart/London: Axel Menges, 2000), 86.

¹² Hehr, *Margarethe von Trotta*, 87.

Kaplan writes that von Trotta's "female characters are seen as actively engaged in a struggle to define their lives, their identitites, and their feminist politics in a situation where the dominant discourse constantly undermines their efforts."¹³ One of von Trotta's more conventional recent films, *Rosenstrasse* (2003), a story about German women during the Nazi dictatorship who managed to save their Jewish husbands from the Holocaust by publicly protesting against their deportation, became successful in the United States as well as Germany; although *Rosenstrasse* did not include most of the distancing devices mentioned above, it nevertheless continued the director's primary focus on women's lives and agency in history. The same is true of von Trotta's most recent film, *Vision — Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* (Vision, 2009), which, in powerful images of prayer, addressed the life of the medieval saint Hildegard von Bingen. In all of these films, von Trotta insists on uncovering sometimes forgotten aspects of women's history, and on showing the ways in which women actively create and do not just passively suffer what we call history. Von Trotta may shy away from the designation "feminist," but nevertheless her films participate in one of the key intellectual and cultural projects of feminism from the 1970s onward: the recovery of women's history and the demonstration of women's agency. For von Trotta it is this theme, and not any avant-garde aesthetic approach, that truly distinguishes women's films: "If there is anything at all like a female aesthetic form as far as films are concerned, then for me it lies in the choice of themes, also in the attention, the respect, the sensitivity, the care with which we approach the people whom we show."¹⁴

One of the controversies about *Die bleierne Zeit* involves the accuracy or inaccuracy of its depiction of German terrorism in the 1970s. The film is dedicated to Christiane Ensslin, the sister of the terrorist Gudrun Ensslin, who was found hanged in her prison cell at Stuttgart-Stammheim in October, 1977. Christiane Ensslin, whom von Trotta had befriended during her work on *Deutschland im Herbst* — when Christiane had argued, against the wishes of the cemetery administration, that her sister Gudrun should be buried together with her lover Andreas Baader, in spite of the fact that the two had not been married — was a consultant to von Trotta while the filmmaker was working on *Die bleierne Zeit*.¹⁵ Gudrun Ensslin's death — which occurred on the very day that the hijacked Lufthansa plane *Landshut* was successfully stormed by an elite German

¹³ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York and London: Methuen, 1983), 104–5.

¹⁴ Silberman, *German Cinema*, 283n23.

¹⁵ Volker Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung: Mein Leben und meine Filme* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2008), 227. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

commando in Mogadishu — was officially determined to be a suicide, but, particularly in left-wing circles, persistent rumors circulated throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s that Gudrun Ensslin and her fellow terrorists Andreas Baader and Jan-Carl Raspe — who died in their prison cells of gunshot wounds — had been murdered by the German state. *Die bleierne Zeit* is loosely based on these events. Marianne, the terrorist sister, resembles Gudrun Ensslin, while Juliane, the nonterrorist sister, resembles Christiane Ensslin. The last part of the film depicts Juliane's desperate attempt to prove that her sister's death could not have been a suicide — Juliane, for instance, is seen creating a model of her sister and hanging it from the ceiling, from which it drops, thus presumably showing that the official version of the suicide is implausible — and this part of the plot needs to be understood against the background of widespread disbelief on the German left in the official verdict about the deaths in Stammheim. Gudrun and Christiane Ensslin were the daughters of a prominent Protestant pastor, Helmut Ensslin, and in *Die bleierne Zeit* the two sisters Marianne and Juliane are likewise depicted as having a stern Protestant pastor as a father who has a powerful impact on their lives. In the house where Marianne and Juliane grow up, von Trotta shows a gruesome image of the crucified Christ hanging in the stairway; this item, according to Volker Schlöndorff, came directly from von Trotta's meeting with Gudrun and Christiane's mother at the family's home, where such a painting hung in reality, and where Christiane's mother reportedly declared: "When little children have to look at something like that, one can't be surprised by anything. . . You see, the drops of blood on the rusty nails at exactly the eye-level of six-year-olds!"¹⁶

In spite of its resemblance to historical events and people, however, *Die bleierne Zeit* is a fiction film and not a documentary. As Hehr argues, "the portrayal of what happens lays no claim to authenticity."¹⁷ The film's structure, which features a woman's search for understanding of herself, her sister, and the society in which they developed, is that of a fiction film, with flashbacks and a narrative arc that leads to both understanding and an acceptance of responsibility on the part of the protagonist. This structure recalls the typically German genre of the *Bildungsroman* or novel of development, which also features the protagonist's search for understanding of the self and society. *Die bleierne Zeit* is inspired by the events of autumn, 1977, but it does not accurately depict them, and an accurate depiction was not von Trotta's aim. Instead, von Trotta attempts to get at the psychological and developmental roots of terrorism in Germany in the 1970s: to go beyond newspaper headlines about terrorist women and to show how it was possible for some West Germans who had grown up

¹⁶ Schlöndorff, *Licht, Schatten und Bewegung*, 227.

¹⁷ Hehr, *Margarethe von Trotta*, 28.

in the prosperous and successful postwar years to turn against their society and become violent revolutionaries.

It is true that Juliane, the nonterrorist sister, is the film's primary protagonist and also the center of consciousness in the film: the film's audience experiences events and people, especially the other sister Marianne, through her. But this does not mean that the film mobilizes all sympathy for Juliane and denies it to Marianne. Quite the contrary: the emotional arc of the film goes from conflict between the sisters to solidarity. Partly because of her death Marianne becomes a powerful presence in Juliane's psyche. "I have to keep on going for her," stammers Juliane during her nervous breakdown after seeing the corpse of her sister.¹⁸ Ultimately the ghost of Marianne displaces Juliane's lover Wolfgang, who finds it impossible to compete: "A life with corpses. I can't do this any more."¹⁹ Although Juliane initially disliked the idea of saddling herself with responsibility for children, she ultimately agrees to become a surrogate mother to Marianne's son Jan, and when, at the end of the film, Jan tears up a photograph of his mother and throws it into a trash can, she takes it upon herself to explain to him what a remarkable person his mother was: "You're wrong, Jan. Your mother was an extraordinary woman."²⁰ This final scene takes viewers back to the beginning of the film, when Juliane is shown alone in her study surrounded by notebooks that, as it subsequently turns out, are filled with information about her sister's life and death. Jan's demand at the end of the film — "I have to know everything" and "Begin. Begin." — again points back to the beginning and suggests that the story is about to be told again, perhaps with slightly different emphasis, but in a necessarily incomplete and imperfect way because, as Juliane admits, she does not know everything about her sister: "What *I* know about her. That's certainly not everything."²¹ This open ending, self-referentiality, and emphasis on the necessarily imperfect search for knowledge and on an individual perspective — "What *I* know about her" — are anything but an "acceptance of mass culture," as Byg calls it. On the contrary, each of these elements runs counter to mass culture, with its sensationalism, lack of self-doubt, and constant insistence on closure. If one compares *Die bleierne Zeit*, with its slow, reflective pacing and relative lack of on-screen violence, to subsequent, more sensational German attempts to depict 1970s terrorism, such as Uli Edel's fast-paced, violent *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (The Baader Meinhof Complex, 2008), one can see a stark difference.

¹⁸ Margarethe von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1988), 180.

¹⁹ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 183.

²⁰ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 190.

²¹ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 190.

In addition to plot elements that show the gradually closer relationship between the two sisters, von Trotta also uses a number of visual devices. In one scene, which takes place in a prison, the sisters exchange sweaters, so that at the end of the scene each sister is wearing what the other sister had been wearing at the beginning of the scene; since Marianne's sweater is black and Juliane's is white, the sisters seem to switch moral coding. The most famous visual device suggesting a closer relationship between the sisters occurs during a meeting between Marianne and Juliane at a high-security prison (by implication Stuttgart-Stammheim), where the sisters have to speak to each other through microphones while separated by a glass panel. Although Juliane does not know it at the time, this is her last meeting with her sister. Cinematographer Franz Rath's camera focuses on the glass itself, where the mirror image of Juliane is superimposed onto the face of Marianne and the two images blend together into a ghostly image. "Your face is getting blurry to me . . . I can't see it clearly any more," complains Juliane.²² Juliane's trouble comes from the fact that in effect she has been looking into her own face. In the same scene Juliane tells Marianne, "I dreamed that I freed you," and in a sense, at least psychologically, this is what she does.²³ Marianne has become a part of Juliane, and as such she is now liberated.

This visual trick, as Byg suggests, "carries on a long German tradition which was prominent in Romantic literature as well as in Expressionist film: the image of the *Doppelgänger*."²⁴ It suggests that the sisters have become intertwined with each other in such a way that it is impossible to separate them completely. They are, as James M. Skidmore has suggested, "two parts of a single whole."²⁵ However, in the Romantic and Expressionist traditions the *Doppelgänger* is always male, and the relationship between self and *Doppelgänger* is antagonistic and ultimately self-destructive. The *Doppelgänger* is generally, as E. Ann Kaplan argues, an "externalization of an inner split."²⁶ Von Trotta's use of a female *Doppelgänger* changes the meaning and the gender politics of the traditional motif. Like Balduin's *Doppelgänger* in *Der Student von Prag*, Marianne goes out into the world and does things that make Juliane's life more complicated and dangerous. However, unlike Balduin, Juliane engages in the arduous work of trying to understand Marianne's actions. As complicated as her relationship with her sister may be, she does not seek to get rid of her (as

²² Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 177.

²³ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 177.

²⁴ Byg, "German History and Cinematic Convention," 267.

²⁵ James M. Skidmore, "Intellectualism and Emotionalism in Margarethe von Trotta's *Die bleierne Zeit*," *German Studies Review* 25, no. 3 (October 2002): 551–67; here, 562.

²⁶ Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, 107.

Balduin seeks to eliminate his *Doppelgänger*) but rather assists and defends her. And she also comes to understand how her sister's development has always, from earliest childhood, been intertwined with her own. In other words Juliane knows what Balduin does not: that she herself is implicated in her *Doppelgänger*'s words and deeds. As Marianne's husband Werner, who is about to commit suicide, tells Juliane toward the beginning of the film, "As if her damn ideas were not . . . inside us as well, inside both of us . . . But we're too . . . cowardly . . . or too reasonable."²⁷ During one prison meeting between the two sisters, Marianne tells Juliane: "Just wait, Jule. In ten years, twenty . . . not until then will you be able to judge which of us was right."²⁸ The film's ending, in which Juliane tells Marianne's son Jan what a remarkable woman his mother was, suggests that Marianne is right, and that Juliane, who had initially condemned Marianne's terrorism, has come to understand and perhaps even accept it.

Von Trotta thus does not simply show an antagonistic relationship between the two sisters in which one sister wins out over the other one, as Byg suggests. Rather, she shows a relationship of interconnectedness in which the thoughts and actions of the two sisters are powerfully interactive. During their early childhoods it is Juliane who is the more rebellious sister, whereas Marianne is her stern father's obedient darling. But this difference between the two sisters is also based on the sisters' relationship to each other: Marianne is particularly obedient precisely because her sister is rebellious, while Juliane's rebelliousness is thrown into sharper contrast by her sister's obedience. The relationship of each sister to her father is thus not just a bilateral relationship; it is always a three-way relationship in which the other sister also plays a role. The same is true later in life, when the authority of the Protestant father, with his fire-and-brimstone sermons, is replaced by the authority of the West German state, which places Marianne in prison and spies on Juliane. In this triangular relationship it is Marianne who is the rebel, while Juliane is the law-abiding citizen. Renate Hehr argues that Juliane "learns to conform."²⁹ And yet Juliane appears to be conformist only against the backdrop of her terrorist sister. In reality, she is a radical feminist activist who campaigns against West Germany's restrictive abortion law (paragraph 218), publicly reflects on the history of Nazi Germany's attempts to encourage a high fertility rate among German women, declines to have biological children of her own, criticizes the institution of marriage as bourgeois, and declines to marry her lover Wolfgang. By the end of the film Juliane has dedicated her life to her sister's legacy, symbolized by Marianne's son Jan. Toward the beginning of the film, when Marianne had asked Juliane to take care

²⁷ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 138.

²⁸ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 171.

²⁹ Hehr, *Margarethe von Trotta*, 98.

of her son and Juliane had refused, Juliane had proclaimed her resistance to taking up a life “that you don’t want to lead any more.”³⁰ At the film’s end it appears that this is precisely what Juliane does: take up a life that her sister was no longer able, or willing, to continue.³¹

Von Trottas goes beyond the traditional *Doppelgänger* motif in yet another way by criticizing the social milieu in which the interdependence between the two sisters emerged. Whereas the traditional *Doppelgänger* motif is an analysis of the psychology of one individual — for instance, Balduin’s *Doppelgänger* can be seen as embodying those aspects of himself that Balduin rejects — von Trottas uses the motif in order to explore and criticize German society more generally. Balduin attempts to integrate himself into a social system whose basic existence he does not question, but both Marianne and Juliane, in different ways, radically question German society. Marianne’s questioning is most obvious: she becomes a terrorist working for a radically different kind of society. Meanwhile Juliane, seemingly more conservative, nevertheless proclaims to the terrorists: “I agree with some of what you think.”³² The basic disagreement between the two sisters is thus not about fundamental goals but about tactics: whether a better society can be achieved through slow, law-abiding, evolutionary means or rather has to be achieved by violent revolution. “Thoughts change nothing,” Marianne proclaims, to which Juliane responds: “Yes they do, but more slowly.”³³

The central historical trauma to which the two sisters are responding is the Holocaust, which features prominently in the film in the form of a gruesome segment from Alain Resnais’s film *Night and Fog* (1955), which the sisters watch together in their Protestant youth group shortly after its release, with their father controlling the projection apparatus. The film features mounds of disfigured human corpses being bulldozed into pits and contains the words: “I’m not guilty, says the Kapo. I’m not guilty, says the officer. I’m not guilty. Who, then, is guilty?”³⁴ The implied answer comes from Marianne’s and Juliane’s father, who, in a family prayer from the year 1947, had intoned: “Lord, we thank you, for you have done great things for us. You have saved us from long, self-imposed servitude. Give us understanding of our mistakes and remorse

³⁰ Von Trottas, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 143.

³¹ Paul Coates quotes one German reviewer as noting: “Ismene becomes Antigone.” Coates, *The Gorgon’s Gaze*, 221. For more on the political significance of *Antigone*, see the chapter on *Germany in Autumn*.

³² Von Trottas, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 144.

³³ Von Trottas, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 144.

³⁴ Von Trottas, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 162.

for our crimes.”³⁵ The implication is that Juliane’s and Marianne’s rebellion, far from being directed against their father’s moral rigor, is in fact the direct result of that moral rigor. As Marianne admits to her sister during one of their prison encounters, “those damn sayings from the Bible are always the first ones” that she remembers: “they come of their own accord.”³⁶ Both sisters have accepted German responsibility for the Holocaust, and both have taken upon themselves the goal of transforming Germany into a better society. Marianne writes to Juliane from prison that she understands her position, but that “you might, of course, in ten or thirty years remain on the side of those who are, to put it harshly, guilty.”³⁷ And Juliane declares to Marianne: “A generation earlier . . . and you would have been in the BDM.”³⁸ The parallel that the two sisters see between the Holocaust and contemporary events comes in a number of different visual forms, including a film that the sisters see about Vietnam in 1968, after which Marianne says: “I’ll never be reconciled to not doing anything against it.”³⁹ This film shows dead and disfigured people, including children, and it recalls both the scenes from *Night and Fog* and previous photographs examined by Juliane showing the corpses of German children toward the end of the Second World War. Since the Vietnam film and *Night and Fog* are the only two films that the sisters are depicted as watching over the course of *Die bleierne Zeit*, it is clear that for the two sisters there is a connection. If most Germans during the Nazi dictatorship did nothing to prevent the Holocaust, then Marianne is determined, at least in the present, to do what she can to prevent more crimes against humanity.

The emphasis on children and motherhood is notable throughout the film. The film’s action begins with Marianne’s husband Werner delivering his unwanted son Jan to Juliane, who does not want Jan any more than his parents do, and it ends with Juliane accepting responsibility for Jan. Toward the end of the film Jan becomes the victim of arson while sleeping in a cave he has built for himself, just as Vietnamese children are the victims of American napalm, and just as Marianne and Juliane themselves, in their air raid shelters, were subjected to Allied bombing raids as children during the Second World War. The

³⁵ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 145.

³⁶ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 164.

³⁷ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 175.

³⁸ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 174. The BDM, or Bund deutscher Mädel, was the Nazi girls’ organization, the female equivalent of the Hitler Youth.

³⁹ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 173.

thrust of Juliane's campaign against Germany's restrictive abortion law is that there are too many unwanted and abused children in Germany, and that it is primarily these children who need to be taken care of, not the unborn: "Every year there are thirty thousand cases of serious and horrific child abuse, seventy-eight thousand West German children are living in institutions where they are badly cared for, and there are three hundred thousand children and youths living in homeless shelters. But that doesn't bother the men of the church, the politicians, and the doctors, they're fighting for the rights of the unborn."⁴⁰ Juliane's friend Sabine reveals that she is two months pregnant toward the beginning of the film, and she tells Juliane: "You two are strange women. You don't want any children, and Marianne is giving up her child in order to save so-called humanity."⁴¹ The implication of all of these scenes and images is that adults have a responsibility for the children they put into the world, and that the concrete responsibility for a real child trumps the abstract responsibility for humanity. Marianne's son Jan can also be seen as representing the German future. As Marc Silberman observes, "the mutilated or abandoned child is a popular *topos* in the New German Cinema and is easy to recognize as a metaphor for postwar Germany."⁴²

For Margarethe von Trotta, domestic terrorism in Germany arose during the late 1960s and 1970s out of a desire on the part of German young people like Marianne and Juliane to avoid the mistakes that their parents made during the Nazi period. The willingness that German terrorists showed to commit violence came out of a belief that there should have been more violent, direct opposition to Hitler. Even Juliane's non-violent course, however, is influenced by her desire to avoid the mistakes Germans made during the Nazi period. Her decision not to have children comes not just from having had to take care of her younger brothers and sisters during her childhood, but also from her recognition of the role that motherhood played for the Nazis. In one scene she is heard quoting Hitler's proclamation: "The sacrifice that the man makes in fighting for his people is made by the woman in the struggle to preserve her people. Every child that she brings into the world is a battle that she wins for the existence or nonexistence of her people."⁴³ These words are accompanied by images of dead German children killed during the war. Even though

⁴⁰ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 140.

⁴¹ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 139–40.

⁴² Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1995), 211.

⁴³ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 146.

Juliane does ultimately adopt Jan as her own son at the end of the film, she remains true to her determination not to have any biological children of her own. She takes care of a child who is already in the world, and who needs her help, but she does not put any new children into the world. And in taking her sister's son, she is also passing along her sister's legacy.

The leaden times of the film's title refer to the authoritarian 1950s, when Marianne and Juliane grew up. Von Trotta suggests that the sisters' rebelliousness ultimately stems from this period. It is partly a reaction against the authoritarianism of this period, represented by the authoritarianism of their father, but it is also partly an incorporation of the very moral rigorousness against which they are rebelling. Von Trotta suggests that the German 1970s, so strongly characterized by terrorism, are influenced by the 1950s, characterized by a seemingly static society and authoritarian structures. Under the surface, however, the 1950s already produced the rebellion that would emerge at the end of the 1960s and come to fruition in the 1970s. Von Trotta suggests that the authoritarian structures at work in the 1950s are still at work in the state's response to the terrorists in the 1970s — and, by implication, that this response may produce further rebellions in the future.

One of the key scenes in *Die bleierne Zeit* occurs about a third of the way through the film, shortly before Marianne is arrested, when Juliane and Wolfgang are woken up in the middle of the night by Marianne and two male terrorists, who demand to be let into the apartment so that they can have some coffee. In this scene Marianne, for all of her terrorist bravado, takes on the traditional female role of waiting on and serving her male companions. The scene is not without a certain dark humor. Although Marianne presumably believes she is fighting for a society free of domination and exploitation, in this scene she dominates and exploits her sister, ultimately bringing her to tears, and she allows herself to be dominated and exploited by her male companions. Marianne's actions, in other words, conflict with her words and stated beliefs. Another scene, later in the film, likewise shows the difference between people's stated beliefs and actions. Wolfgang, a relatively enlightened lover who seems to accept Juliane's liberation, nevertheless winds up striking her shortly before the two break up.

Von Trotta has been accused of belittling the political motivations of her female characters by showing the way that those political motivations are embedded in personal life. Thomas Elsaesser writes, "Personalizing conflicts as von Trotta does always entails a reduction of the political and social to psychological categories."⁴⁴ And the German

⁴⁴ Cited in Linville, "Retrieving History: Margarethe von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*," 453.

critic Charlotte Delorme has condemned von Trotta for her supposed “reduction of politically motivated actions to matters of family history.”⁴⁵ Von Trotta even embeds such a critique in the film itself by having Marianne chastise her sister for writing about her personal life for the feminist magazine at which she is a journalist: “You can’t explain me through our personal history. My history doesn’t begin until I’m with the others,” i.e., with her fellow terrorists.⁴⁶ Juliane’s response to her sister’s zero-hour claim insists on the importance of the personal: “As if our childhood were not a reality. Anyway, I don’t believe that we can liberate ourselves from our personal history.”⁴⁷ The interrelationship of the personal and the political is precisely the point, as Chris Homewood has argued: the goal is not to minimize the one or the other side of the equation but rather to show how the personal and the political are inextricably intertwined.⁴⁸ The most seemingly personal of motivations — such as the desire to have a child — can in fact be political, while the apparently purely political — such as the desire to overthrow the state — can be motivated by personal history, such as one’s relationship to an overbearing authoritarian father. Von Trotta’s depiction here is very much in line with German and international feminism of the 1970s and 1980s.

What, ultimately, is von Trotta’s view of terrorism? Clearly, by depicting terrorism within one German family, von Trotta seeks to show that terrorism, far from being radically different from mainstream society, emerges from it. Marianne was the daughter who used to sit on her authoritarian father’s lap, and after she is dead, he, like Juliane, believes that her death was not a suicide. Karen Beckman is right when she argues that *Die bleierne Zeit* refutes “the logic of ‘us’/‘them’” that is usually applied to terrorism.⁴⁹ Defeating terrorism, by implication, is not just a question of an outward victory but rather a question of seeking within oneself and one’s own history the origin of the terrorist threat. For

⁴⁵ Cited in Chris Homewood, “Von Trotta’s *The German Sisters* and Petzold’s *The State I Am In*: Discursive Boundaries in the Films of the New German Cinema to the Present Day,” *Studies in European Cinema* 2, no. 2 (2005): 93–102; here, 95. From Charlotte Delorme, “On the Film *Marianne and Juliane* by Margarethe von Trotta,” trans. Ellen Seiter, *Journal of Film and Video* 37 (Spring 1985): 47–51; here, 48.

⁴⁶ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 174.

⁴⁷ Von Trotta, *Die bleierne Zeit und andere Filmtexte*, 174.

⁴⁸ Homewood, “Von Trotta’s *The German Sisters* and Petzold’s *The State I Am*,” 95.

⁴⁹ Beckman, “Terrorism, Feminism, Sisters, and Twins,” 36.

Marianne and Juliane's father guilt is never simply "out there," separate from individual responsibility; rather, it is a part of one's own identity. This is true of the difficult German past, particularly the Holocaust, but it is also true of terrorism and the German 1970s and 1980s. Whether such a view of German home-grown terrorism in previous decades is also applicable to a very different terrorist threat more than a generation later is an open question, but one that, as Beckman suggests, can not easily be answered in the negative.



Curt Bois as Homer and Otto Sander as Cassiel at the Berlin Wall. Screen capture.

27: *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987): Berlin, City of Angels

Director: Wim Wenders

Cinematographer: Henri Alekan

Screenplay: Wim Wenders, Peter Handke, and Richard Reitinger

Producers: Ingrid Windisch, Wim Wenders, Anatole Dauman,

Pascale Dauman, and Joachim von Mengershausen (Road
Movies, Argos Film, WDR)

Editor: Peter Przygodda

Production Design: Heidi Lüdi

Costume Design: Monika Jakobs

Music: Jürgen Knieper, with appearances by Crime and the City
Solution and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Soundtrack: Axel Arft and Jean-Paul Mugel

German Release Date: [West Germany] October 29, 1987

Actors: Bruno Ganz (Damiel); Otto Sander (Cassiel); Solveig

Dommartin (Marion); Curt Bois (Homer); Peter Falk (as
himself); Simon Bonney (as himself); Nick Cave (as himself);
and others

Awards: Cannes Film Festival, 1987: Best Director to Wim
Wenders; European Film Award, 1988: Best Director to Wim
Wenders; French Syndicate of Cinema Critics, 1988: Critics
Award for Best Foreign Film to Wim Wenders; NSFC Award for
Best Cinematographer to Henri Alekan, 1989; New York Film
Critics Circle Award for Best Cinematographer to Henri Alekan,
1988; and others

WIM WENDERS'S *DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN* (literally: The Sky over Berlin; English title: *Wings of Desire*) was made on the cusp of a transition in German cinema from the political to the private, from the socially rigorous to the self-indulgently personal, and in some ways the film itself thematizes the large-scale transition. Its main character is the angel Damiel, played by Bruno Ganz, who ultimately decides that he has had enough of being an angel with access to but no involvement in all the stories that make up society and wants to become a human being with an ordinary life and his own personal story. At the beginning of the film Damiel is a wise but dissatisfied angel able to survey all of Berlin, on both sides of the Wall, as well as all of Berlin's history; by the end of the film

he has transformed himself into just another West Berliner surrounded and enclosed by the Berlin Wall, and by the demands of his own private life. At the beginning of the film Damiel's job is to observe and record a multiplicity of human events that together make up German, and Berlin, history; at the end of the film Damiel is nothing more than the protagonist of his own story. Damiel's transition from an angelic to a human existence is represented cinematographically by a transition from black-and-white to color images: the angels view the world in black-and-white, whereas human beings see the world in color. Damiel's inevitable human love interest, the French trapeze artist Marion, played by Solveig Dommartin — who was Wenders's girlfriend at the time — tells him at the movie's end that theirs will be “a story of giants,” and that “there is no greater story than ours, of man and woman.”¹ By the end of *Der Himmel über Berlin* the former angel Damiel has left the skies above Berlin and landed in an everyday world where the romantic relationship between a man and a woman is presented as the most interesting, and most important story that can possibly be told, far more important than the angelic recording of human history with all its unpleasantness. This essentially uncritical message, which celebrates the joys of private life and the supposedly elegant simplicity of romantic relationships, can be contrasted to the devastating critiques of relationships between and among the sexes by directors like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Margarethe von Trotta, and Helke Sander.² Damiel's ultimate goal in *Der Himmel über Berlin* is a naïveté about human relationships that is invoked at movie's end as something that “no angel knows.”³ Thus ignorance is celebrated as bliss.

Yet *Der Himmel über Berlin* also has a guilty conscience about its transition to the joys of the purely private, and therefore it cannot be described as unambiguously rejecting critical knowledge of history and guilt. Damiel has an angelic colleague, Cassiel (played by Otto Sander), who resists the temptation to wallow around in an ordinary human life, and who vehemently insists on remaining, as he puts it, *im Wort* (in the word) by observing and keeping a critical distance from the problems of human existence.⁴ Cassiel warns Damiel that although his life as a human

¹ Wim Wenders and Peter Handke, *Der Himmel über Berlin: Ein Filmbuch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), 163. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

² See, for instance, Barbara Mennel, “Shifting Margins and Contested Centers: Changing Cinematic Visions of (West) Berlin,” in *Berlin: The Symphony Continues: Orchestrating Architectural, Social, and Artistic Change in Germany's New Capital*, ed. Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, and Kristie A. Foell (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 41–58; especially 41–47.

³ Wenders and Handke, *Der Himmel über Berlin: Ein Filmbuch*, 168.

⁴ Wenders and Handke, *Der Himmel über Berlin: Ein Filmbuch*, 21.

being will possibly be exciting and stimulating, it will not be real: "But not a bit of it will be true."⁵ Cassiel's warning to Damiel resonates with the New Testament message that "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1), i.e., that divine language is a primary truth that precedes physical reality, as well as with the German philosopher Hegel's declaration that the only reality is one that has been comprehended and understood by means of critical thinking: "Everything other than this actuality which is posited by the concept itself is transitory *existence* [*Dasein*], external contingency, opinion, appearance without essence, untruth, deception, etc."⁶ In Wenders's 1993 sequel to *Der Himmel über Berlin*, *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* (Far Away, So Close!), which recounts the story of Damiel and Cassiel after Berlin and Germany's reunification, Cassiel ultimately decides to join Damiel in a human, nonangelic existence. But in *Der Himmel über Berlin* Cassiel voices an angelic critique of the everyday and the supposedly ordinary.⁷ Ironically, *Der Himmel über Berlin* ends with Damiel on the ground while his lover Marion swings through the air on a trapeze: the angel has become a human being with his feet planted on the ground, but the human being continues to strive for angelic status.⁸

The first half hour or so of *Der Himmel über Berlin*, which is filmed entirely in black and white, connects the angelic freedom of Cassiel and Damiel to the freedom of cinematography itself. Just like Wenders's camera, wielded by the great French cinematographer Henri Alekan — responsible, among others, for Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (Beauty and the Beast, 1946) — so too Cassiel and Damiel are able to fly through the air and move through walls — even through the Berlin Wall. The camera's job, like that of the angels, is to record

⁵ Wenders and Handke, *Der Himmel über Berlin: Ein Filmbuch*, 125.

⁶ Wenders himself cites the New Testament invocation of the primacy of the word in a speech that he made in Munich in November of 1991, and he proclaims his belief that "the word will remain": Wim Wenders, "Talking about Germany," in *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*, ed. Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemünden (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1997), 51–59; here, 59. Original German: Wim Wenders, "Reden über Deutschland," in Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Texte und Gespräche* (Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1992), 187–98. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 25. Emphasis in the original.

⁷ Wenders had originally planned to have Cassiel convert to human form in *Der Himmel über Berlin*, but changed his mind and therefore ultimately made the sequel *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*

⁸ See David Caldwell and Paul W. Rea, "Handke's and Wenders's *Wings of Desire*: Transcending Postmodernism," *The German Quarterly* 64.1 (Winter, 1991), 46–54; here, 48.

human existence in all its complexity. It travels through the city of Berlin, focusing on segments of various human stories but never becoming fundamentally involved with any of them. Wenders's decision to transform his camera into what Roger Cook calls "the eye of an angel" enabled, in Cook's words, "innovative solutions, particularly in terms of the camera movement, which was to give the illusion of unlimited movement through space and time."⁹ Cook justifiably calls Wenders's cinematic accomplishment "a modern version of 'the unchained camera' . . . introduced by F. W. Murnau" in the 1920s.¹⁰

Wenders, who began filmmaking as a twelve-year-old child when his father gave him a hand-held movie camera, once defined film as the preservation of "the existence of things," a definition which resonates with Siegfried Kracauer's invocation of film as "the redemption of physical reality."¹¹ These definitions suggest that the angels' perspective, and the cinematographer's, is above self-interest and purely devoted to the recording of reality. The angel, and the camera, look upon the world benevolently, trying to preserve a record of an existence that recedes all too quickly into the past, into nothingness. For Wenders the camera becomes a weapon "against the misery of things, namely against their disappearance."¹² The soundtrack for *Der Himmel über Berlin* performs a similar function: it features a number of people speaking in various languages that together create a kind of humming that only the angels can understand and record. In the first part of *Der Himmel über Berlin* no human story is privileged over any other in either the soundtrack or the images. As Cook notes, the simultaneous presence of many parts of stories coupled with the absence of any controlling narrative leads the film's viewer to long for one complete story, thus in a sense placing the viewer into the position of Damiel, who longs for his own story.¹³ At the same time, however, the movement toward narrative at the end of the movie begins to restrict the freedom that the film's viewer has in the first part of the movie. The film's viewer has, in a sense, gone through the same transformation as Damiel, but

⁹ Roger Cook, "Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," *Germanic Review* 66, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 34–47; here, 36.

¹⁰ Cook, "Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," 37.

¹¹ See Robert Phillip Kolker and Peter Beicken, *The Films of Wim Wenders: Cinema as Vision and Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 1, 3, and 14. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1960).

¹² Kolker and Beicken, *The Films of Wim Wenders*, 4.

¹³ Cook, "Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," 38.

comes to understand that this transformation, while possibly gratifying, also involves a loss of freedom.

The angels' association with language, with history, and with objective, disinterested recording, is made even more obvious by their chosen meeting place: the state library (*Staatsbibliothek*) designed by architect Hans Scharoun in 1964 not far from Potsdamer Platz, formerly (and once again today) one of Berlin's busiest intersections but in the film's narrative present of 1986, part of the no-man's-land in and around the Berlin Wall. The *Staatsbibliothek*, of course, is filled with books that make up the recorded history of Berlin and of Germany, and the people in it are studying and seeking to understand that history. Its wide open spaces offer the angels a broad perspective on human attempts to achieve divine understanding, and it is the place where human individuals and angels come closest to each other. Jürgen Knieper's music for the library scenes suggests that the angels can hear what all the readers in the library are reading and perhaps even have access to everything that has ever been read in the library. One of the humans who spends time in the *Staatsbibliothek* is an old storyteller named Homer, played by the German-Jewish actor Curt Bois, who had fled the Nazis in 1933 and thus himself represented a link to the pre-Nazi cultural past; he had even played a small role in Ernst Lubitsch's 1919 comedy *Die Austernprinzessin* (The Oyster Princess), and he had been attacked in Fritz Hippler's antisemitic documentary *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew, 1941) as a representative of the supposedly nefarious Jewish influence on Weimar film culture.

Homer is a contemporary incarnation of a figure from a famous 1936 essay by the German-Jewish literary critic Walter Benjamin — the storyteller whose presence is so important for human beings to make sense of their experience. The art of telling stories, Benjamin had written, is “the epic side of truth, wisdom.”¹⁴ In Benjamin's account, the slowness of narration, which conserves human experience, is opposed by the increasing speed of “information” in the modern age, which consumes and thereby destroys wisdom: “Information . . . lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear ‘understandable in itself.’”¹⁵ Information, in other words, is impatient for self-evident meaning and explanation; it is ahistorical, part of a present that is blind to the past and the future. Storytelling, in contrast, is open to the past and the future, and to the uncertainty that, paradoxically, allows human beings to create meaning for themselves. For Benjamin the art of storytelling is coming to an end because the proliferation of information prevents both the slow accretion

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 83–109; here, 87.

¹⁵ Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” 89.

of narrative detail and the openness to past and future that are central to the storyteller's art. Storytelling "requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer" in the modern world, Benjamin believes.¹⁶ Part of the art of storytelling is "to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it"; in contrast, the contemporary world of information serves up tidbits that are "already . . . shot through with explanation," thus inhibiting the creative work of individual meaning-making.¹⁷ In *Der Himmel über Berlin* the aged Homer seems to be the last living storyteller, an ally of the angels who, together with Homer, try to preserve precisely the "epic side of truth" against the onslaught of a postmodern age in which "information" is now even more powerful in the form of newer, faster media that have replaced the outdated storyteller, including television, computers, film, and advertising images. It is not through the seeming immediacy of visual images — themselves mediated but allowing the illusion of direct confrontation with reality — but, rather, through the slow mediation of word and story, that something like meaning and sense can emerge in human affairs for Wenders. The filmmaker allows his camera to proceed through Berlin at an unhurried pace, does not offer viewers ready-made explanations for what they see, and produces a gradual accretion of detail out of which, ultimately, a story emerges.

Der Himmel über Berlin resonates with another figure from Benjamin's writing, the angel of history whom Benjamin, in his last work, describes as wanting to intervene in humanity's catastrophic history but being unable to do so: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed."¹⁸ One of the readers in the *Staatsbibliothek* actually encounters a text that explains the art-historical origins of Benjamin's thesis, which was a reflection on a painting of an angel by Paul Klee.¹⁹ Wenders's film is full of references to Germany's problematic twentieth-century history, and its difficult present as a divided nation; its angels, like Benjamin's angel of history, want to help and comfort human beings who are in trouble, but they do not always succeed. In one scene, for instance, Cassiel fails to prevent a man from committing suicide. As Cook notes, "Benjamin's interpretation . . . describes precisely the perspective granted the angels in *Wings of Desire*."²⁰

¹⁶ Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 91.

¹⁷ Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 91.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–64; here, 257.

¹⁹ Wenders and Handke, *Der Himmel über Berlin: Ein Filmbuch*, 23.

²⁰ Cook, "Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," 44.

Der Himmel über Berlin begins with a reflection on childhood, and it contains numerous references to the special status of children in contrast to adults.²¹ Whereas adults cannot see the angels, children can, suggesting that they have more direct access to fundamental truths. The circus where Marion works has an audience of primarily children, whose capacity for simple joy is contrasted to the often drab and unhappy world of adults. The angels and Marion are connected by their aerial existence and special relationship with children, and it is therefore appropriate that the human being for whom Damiel decides to give up his angelic existence is Marion, whose own existence is somehow angelic.

Der Himmel über Berlin is self-reflexive about its status as a cinematic text in a number of ways. The circus where Marion works is named after Wenders's cinematographer Alekan, suggesting that Wenders sees cinema itself as a kind of circus, taking sheer pleasure in the visual for its own sake. The angels gaze upon Berlin with the eyes of the camera, and their freedom of movement is also that of the camera. Just as cinematic images are purely visual and cannot be touched, so too the angels cannot be touched by human beings; they can only be seen by those with a special gift. When the angels pick something up, what they pick up is not an actual object but rather an image of the object — just as a cinematic picture is not an object but rather an image of an object. *Der Himmel über Berlin* increases its self-reflexivity by focusing on the creation of a movie in Berlin: the American actor Peter Falk, already well-known in Germany for his portrayal of the television detective Columbo, comes to Berlin to act in a movie set in the Nazi period. As it happens, Falk is himself a former angel, and he has already gone through the process of becoming human that Damiel will go through by movie's end. Images of actors dressed up in the outfits of the Nazis and their victims remind viewers of the distinction between cinema and reality, since "Nazis" and "Jews" sit around amiably with each other; such images are contrasted with historical footage of the Nazi and post-Nazi period that are available to the angels, who have access not just to the present but also to the past.

Wenders created *Der Himmel über Berlin* after a long stay in the United States, during which he had made the critically and popularly acclaimed *Paris, Texas* in 1984 and clashed with Francis Ford Coppola on the 1982 film *Hammett*. *Der Himmel über Berlin* thus represented Wenders's homecoming to Germany, and in many ways it is an homage to Germany's divided capital Berlin, as well as a reflection on German history. Wenders declared that it was "only in Berlin that I could recognize what it means to be German . . . for history is both physically and emotionally

²¹ See Caldwell and Rea, "Handke's and Wenders's *Wings of Desire*: Transcending Postmodernism," 47.

present. . . No other city is to such an extent a symbol, a place of survival.”²² The film includes numerous segments of historical footage about the bombing of Germany, rubble women, and the death and destruction of the Second World War, to all of which the angels apparently have access. The film’s invocation of innocence, expressed in the words “everything was full of soul for him, and all souls were one,” contrasts with these images of historical destruction and suggests a longing on Wenders’s part for some kind of German national innocence in which it might be possible to ask, as the angel Damiel, speaking in the voice of a child, asks in the film’s opening poem (written by Wenders’s friend Peter Handke): “Does evil really exist, and people who are truly the evil ones?”²³ In a sense *Der Himmel über Berlin* also asks this question, since the only Nazis that the movie shows are merely actors playing Nazis and not Nazis themselves. The film’s focus on children, angels, Peter Falk, a French trapeze artist, and Curt Bois suggests a desire for protagonists who are unblemished by the problem of guilt for Nazism. The “knowledge” that the protagonist Damiel seeks is thus a knowledge that goes beyond the bleak unpleasantness of twentieth-century German history and creates a space for private joy. Strikingly, Damiel’s final decision to become human occurs in the no-man’s-land behind the Berlin Wall, on the border between East and West Berlin, and when he wakes up as a human being he is located just to the west of the Wall itself. The film’s images of the Wall, and the angels’ ability to move through it, also imply a desire to overcome the Wall, the most visible symbol of Germany’s division and its historical guilt. Neither Wenders nor anyone else could have expected the Wall to collapse only three years after he made the film; nevertheless, the film expresses a longing for an overcoming of German division — and for this reason Wenders was not given permission to film in East Berlin, let alone in the real no-man’s-land; he therefore had to recreate no-man’s-land as a movie set — and *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, the sequel to *Der Himmel über Berlin*, addresses the consequences of the Wall’s demise, featuring as one of its players none other than Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader who helped make the Wall’s destruction possible.

Wenders wrote *Der Himmel über Berlin* with the help of his friend, the Austrian writer Peter Handke, who created a number of monologues around which the film was loosely structured. Much of the rest of the film is improvised, created more or less on the spur of the moment — usually planned out the night before a particular shooting — by Wenders and his crew. This structure gives the film a free-flowing, uncontrived feel that works well with the basic concept of the angels as uninvolved but

²² Ira Paneth, “Wim and His Wings,” *Film Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 2–8; here, 2.

²³ Wenders and Handke, *Der Himmel über Berlin: Ein Filmbuch*, 4, 15.

benevolent observers of human life. Ian Garwood has pointed out that in Wenders's oeuvre, black-and-white tends to represent unscripted films, whereas color tends to represent scripted films planned in advance.²⁴ *Der Himmel über Berlin* constitutes a successful fusion of scripted with unscripted elements — black and white representing the absolute freedom of the angels and of cinematography, and color representing human interests and human lack of objectivity. Wenders himself, in agreement with Benjamin's ideas about storytelling, seems to favor unstructured filmmaking that gives its audience freedom: "I clearly favor movies that let me discover them. There is that sort of movie where you feel excited from the beginning because you realize that it is because you look at it that the movie really exists, and because you can put some strings together, and it is open to a lot of interpretation, and you have to sort of put in your own experiences or associations in order to make it work."²⁵ Wenders shares this emphasis on the work of the spectator with many of the other important directors of the New German Cinema, from Alexander Kluge to Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Der Himmel über Berlin features two concerts by rock groups that were popular in Berlin in the 1980s: Crime and the City Solution, and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. These bands play in an old Berlin hotel, the Esplanade, located at the time in an empty space near the Potsdamer Platz and the Berlin Wall. It is here that Marion and Damiel finally meet and begin their relationship with each other. Wenders was a fan of rock music even as a child because it represented for him a rebellion against German traditions. As Wenders put it, rock was for him "the only alternative to Beethoven . . . because I was very insecure then about all culture that was offered to me, because I thought it was all fascism, pure fascism; and the only thing I was secure with from the beginning and felt had nothing to do with fascism was rock music."²⁶ The two bands, whose Australian leaders Simon Bonney and Nick Cave sing in English, thus represent for Wenders part of an ongoing attempt to escape from the burden of the German past. The meeting between Damiel and Marion takes place in an old Berlin hotel partially destroyed in the Second World War and located at the border between the two Germanys; its soundtrack, however, is anything but German.

Although *Der Himmel über Berlin* seems ultimately to favor the existence of human beings over that of angels, preferring color to black and white, the figure of Cassiel and the long segments of black and white,

²⁴ Ian Garwood, "The *Autorenfilm* in Contemporary German Cinema," in *The German Cinema Book*, Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 202–10; here, 209.

²⁵ Paneth, "Wim and His Wings," 7.

²⁶ Kolker and Beicken, *The Films of Wim Wenders*, 12.

which make up the majority of the film, suggest a somewhat different message. The explicit, scripted text of the film does indeed privilege color and human existence, but the film's visual imagery is dominated by angelic black and white. Moreover, from the very beginning of the film, the camera's, and therefore the viewer's, perspective, is that of the angels; this perspective persists even into the final minutes of the movie, when Cassiel becomes an observer — both explicitly and implicitly — of Damiel's and Marion's story. The film's viewer is thus in many ways aligned not with any particular human figure but rather with Cassiel, the angel who (at least in this film) declines to become human. The visual predominance of black and white, and Cassiel's doubts about human existence, evoke a mistrust on Wenders's part in images themselves, a mistrust that he was later to make explicit. He declared that he had left America "because I could no longer stand Disneyland; the breath of 'true images' no longer exists, only the bad odor of lying images."²⁷ In Germany, on the other hand, because of its Nazi past, Wenders declared, "images have been discredited once and for all. Only storytelling can have an impact here."²⁸ As Wenders puts it, "Our *Heil* — some words such as this one have to be unearthed from under the rubble — our balm in this land of lost souls, is our German language."²⁹ Indeed, for Wenders the German language "is the only wealth that we have in a country that believes itself to be rich when it is not. The German language is everything that our country no longer is, what it is not yet, and what it may never be."³⁰ Wenders created *Der Himmel über Berlin* during a period in which he was reading the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, which frequently feature angels. The salvation — Wenders's use of the word *Heil* resonates with both the biblical message of salvation (*Heil*) and Adolf Hitler's misuse of the word — of Germany lies not in an out-of-control image world largely dominated by Hollywood but rather in the German language. For Wenders, who seems to disapprove of pictures almost as much as his angel Cassiel mistrusts human life, "images have distanced themselves more and more from reality and have hardly anything to do with it anymore."³¹ It is words, not images, that come closest to a "reality" that must be mediated. The director does not press the point, but his vision of an out-of-control image-world implies a contemporary global continuity with German fascism, which he also defines as precisely such a world of unholy images. Wenders's critique of conventional media images suggests that Cassiel's critique of ordinary human

²⁷ Wenders, "Talking about Germany," 57.

²⁸ Ibid., 59.

²⁹ Ibid., 59.

³⁰ Ibid., 59.

³¹ Wenders, "Talking about Germany," 58.

life is not entirely foreign to him. He begins *Der Himmel über Berlin* precisely with writing, not with conventional movie images: the movie's viewers see a hand writing out words on a piece of paper. Wenders's criticism of the world of images is an unusual one for a film director to make, but it is in line with the New German Cinema's more overarching criticism of conventional movie-making. Wenders was to continue his criticism of conventional media imagery in other films, including especially *Lisbon Story* (1994). Such criticism is entirely lacking in Brad Silberling's 1998 Hollywood film *City of Angels*, a retelling of *Der Himmel über Berlin* set in Los Angeles (literally: the angels) and featuring Nicholas Cage as an angel and Meg Ryan as the human being with whom he falls in love.

Part Seven: German Film after Reunification 1990–2010



*Surrealist Stalinism in Herwig Kipping's *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (1992). Courtesy of the DEFA Film Library. © Medien Bildungsgesellschaft/DEFA Film Library.*



*Thorsten Merten and Jeannette Arndt in Andreas Dresen's *Stilles Land* (1992). © DEFA Film Library.*

28: German Film after Reunification 1990–2010: Historical Overview

POLITICALLY, THE TWO DECADES after German reunification have been dominated by a union of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Bavaria-based Christian Social Union (CSU), which has been the Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG) primary governing constellation since the country's foundation. Helmut Kohl, who had become chancellor in 1982, remained in that post for sixteen years, becoming the country's longest-governing leader. In 1998 he was defeated by a coalition between the SPD and the environmentalist Green Party under Gerhard Schröder, who was chancellor from 1998 to 2005. In 2005 Schröder was defeated by Angela Merkel of the CDU, who formed a grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) until 2009, when the SPD was again defeated and Merkel was able to form a conservative-liberal coalition with the smaller, free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP). Over the years of her dominance within the CDU, Merkel has moved German conservatism away from ideological dogmatism and toward a pragmatic liberalism. She is the first woman chancellor in German history and also the first East German to lead the Federal Republic. The two decades after German reunification have witnessed a sometimes painful process of rapprochement between the two parts of Germany — East and West — as well as a not-always-smooth adjustment on the part of the Federal Republic to its new power and status on the European and world stage. Nevertheless, on the whole, the Federal Republic enjoys respect abroad and prosperity at home. Many observers now see the FRG as a fundamentally “normal” country that has parted with, but not forgotten, some of the more problematic aspects of German history.

For many inside and outside Germany, the 1990s were a decade of resurgence in German cinema. Particularly in the middle of the decade, observers noted the remarkable popularity of contemporary German cinema in Germany and the emergence of a string of box office hits, mostly comedies, as well as of new directors and stars. *Der Spiegel*, Germany's most important weekly newsmagazine, trumpeted “das neue deutsche Filmwunder” (the new German film miracle) in 1996, a year in which German films drew about 16 percent of the domestic market.¹ The high

¹ “Das Lachen macht's,” *Der Spiegel* 38, 16 September 1996, 214–30; here, 214. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

point of the popularity of German cinema inside Germany itself was reached in the first quarter of 1997, when German films enjoyed a 31.5 percent market share domestically, led primarily by box office hits like Helmut Dietl's sex comedy *Rossini oder die mörderische Frage, wer mit wem schlief* (Rossini or the Lethal Question Who Slept with Whom, 1997) and Thomas Jahn's *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* (1997), a road movie about two young men facing death by cancer. Although German cinema's domestic market share for the entire year 1997 was considerably under the figure for the first quarter, it still reached 17 percent, well above the figures for most of the 1970s and 1980s. Even though this popularity was not matched in most subsequent years, German cinema throughout most of the 1990s and in the first decade of the twenty-first century remained consistently above a 10 percent market share. Another high point was marked in 2001, with an 18.4 percent market share, and in 2003 German cinema enjoyed a 17.5 percent of the domestic market share.² In 2009 German films, remarkably, achieved a 25.9 percent share of the German market, the highest since the 1960s. The newfound popularity of German cinema in the post-reunification period stands in stark contrast to the relative unpopularity of German films in Germany during the heyday of the New German Cinema, when the domestic market share had generally remained at or below 10 percent. The rise in the popularity of German cinema is part of a general increase in cinema's popularity in Germany, with both ticket sales and attendance at movie theaters trending upward over most of the 1990s and 2000s. Throughout Germany, the 1990s witnessed the construction of large cinemaxes and cineplexes in response to the growth in demand, and to new consumer preferences. Moreover, since the German film market is regularly Europe's second largest — after France — economic success on the German film market has significant implications for economic success elsewhere as well. At the high point of the comedy boom, one observer, responding to Germany's "cinematic ecstasy," declared, "There's gold rush fever."³

Of course, even at its highest point of popularity in the post-reunification period, German cinema's share of the domestic market still fell considerably below both historical highs in the 1930s and 1940s — when it had dominated the domestic market with well over half of all ticket sales — and also below that of the contemporary American film industry, which generally controls well over 70 percent of the German market. Nevertheless, the 1990s and 2000s did witness a distinct rise in the domestic

² Norbert P. Flechsig et al., ed., *Filmstatistisches Jahrbuch 2004* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2004), 44.

³ Michael Bülow, "Großer Bruder Fernsehen," in Heike Amend and Michael Bülow, eds., *Der bewegte Film: Aufbruch zu neuen deutschen Erfolgen* (Berlin: VISTAS, 1997), 49–56; here, 49.

popularity of German cinema, often seen to be the result of a conscious decision on the part of younger directors to distance themselves from the aesthetics and politics of the New German Cinema of the 1970s, and to produce movies aimed primarily at entertainment rather than political, intellectual, or aesthetic enlightenment. Alfred Holighaus, an official at the German film company Senator Film, noted approvingly that German directors of the 1990s were no longer governed by the dreams of 1960s and 1970s *Autorenfilm* (i.e., auteur film, a cinema controlled by great directors), and that they were far more willing than the directors of earlier decades to work together in teams to produce commercially successful movies. As Holighaus explained, “*The filmmaker as the measure of all things, that’s the crux of the classic German Autorenfilm and by no means a signpost on the way to a successful future.*”⁴ In general, Holighaus saw a trend toward increasing professionalization in the German film industry, and declared that the future of German cinema would look very much like German cinema’s past, “only better.”⁵ In the midst of the domestic boom, *Der Spiegel* proclaimed: “Germans are daring to go to German movies again,” and trumpeted the arrival of a younger, cooler generation that had come to bury the earnestness of New German Cinema, an earnestness purportedly represented by directors like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, Margarethe von Trotta, and Werner Herzog.⁶ Andreas Kilb of *Die Zeit*, Germany’s major weekly newspaper, proclaimed that contemporary German filmmakers had concocted a generational contract with cinema viewers, “whose rules have put a final end to the honorable ‘Oberhausen manifesto’ of 1962.” In a play on the Oberhausen manifesto’s declaration that “Papa’s movies are dead,” Kilb suggested that contemporary German filmmakers were declaring: “Papa’s movies are alive . . . and we’re bringing them back to the silver screen for you.”⁷ The new, more popular German cinema of the post-reunification period, in other words, would return precisely to the apolitical, visually unchallenging themes and aesthetics rejected by the radical filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s. Director Hark Bohm, who had been part of the New German Cinema himself two decades earlier, proclaimed in the mid-1990s: “Back then moviegoers wallowed masochistically in oppressive art films. Today they’re laughing themselves to death in idiotic comedies.”⁸

⁴ Alfred Holighaus, “Aufbruchstimmung,” in *Der bewegte Film*, ed. Amend and Bütow, 209–13; here, 211.

⁵ Holighaus, “Aufbruchstimmung,” 209.

⁶ “Das Lachen macht’s,” 215.

⁷ Andreas Kilb, “Wir können nicht anders . . . Über den Erfolg der jüngeren deutschen Filmkomödie,” in Amend and Bütow, eds., *Der bewegte Film*, 25–34; here, 30.

⁸ “Gepäck abgeworfen,” *Der Spiegel* 8, 19 February 1996, 182.

Far more positively, Michael Töteberg suggested at the end of the 1990s that “German cinema has gotten a fresh start,” and that a new generation of film artists was productively changing the face of German cinema.⁹

Whereas *Der Spiegel* celebrated the 1990s trend toward popular German comedies, other observers condemned it. The lesbian feminist filmmaker Monika Treut, for instance, proclaimed her disinterest in the new crop of German comedies, declaring them to be derivative and aesthetically inferior. In her opinion, Hollywood cinema had “taken over the world,” and the popular German cinema of the 1990s was merely providing a second-rate imitation of it. “Seen through my eyes,” she declared, “the situation of the German cinema in the 1990s is miserable when compared with more productive decades of the history of German film.”¹⁰ Treut pointed out that in 1997, German cinema’s best year economically for several decades, “not a single German film” was “invited to screen in Cannes,” at the world’s most important showcase for new films; in 1970, on the other hand, in the heyday of the New German Cinema, no fewer than ten German films had been screened at Cannes.¹¹ Treut was suggesting that the relative box office success of contemporary German cinema in the 1990s masked a far more important artistic failure. And even *Der Spiegel*, although enthusiastic about the newfound popularity of German film in Germany, admitted that “foreign countries are showing little interest in the new German hilarity.”¹² Academic critics like John Davidson and Eric Rentschler concurred, criticizing the German cinema of the 1990s as essentially bland and conservative. Davidson charged that “German cinema since 1989 has clearly moved into a new phase of legitimization, one in which the political tendencies are much more directly conservative than they were in the previous two decades,” while Rentschler complained that the “purveyors” of 1990s German cinema “at no price . . . wish to come off as rarefied or esoteric, to challenge or disconcert their public in the manner of the” New German Cinema.¹³

⁹ Michael Töteberg, “Vorwort,” in *Szenenwechsel: Momentaufnahmen des jungen deutschen Films*, ed. Michael Töteberg (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1999), 7–8; here, 7.

¹⁰ Monika Treut, “Between National Television and International Oblivion: German Cinema in the 1990s,” in *A New Germany in a New Europe*, ed. Todd Herzog and Sander Gilman (New York: Routledge, 2001), 117–30; here, 118.

¹¹ Treut, “Between National Television and International Oblivion,” 124.

¹² “Das Lachen macht’s,” 225.

¹³ John Davidson, “Overcoming Germany’s Past(s) in Film since the Wende,” *Seminar* 33, no. 4 (1997): 307–21; here, 319. Eric Rentschler, “From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus,” in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 260–77; here, 264.

What all critics agreed on was that the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German reunification in 1990 had ushered in a new era, bringing a definitive end to the kind of cinema culture that had won Germany international acclaim in the 1970s and 1980s but generated relatively little audience support at home. The German cinema of the 1990s was more popular domestically and also more imitative of Hollywood standards, but at the same time, paradoxically, it had less of an impact on the outside world. Perhaps precisely because of its insistence on German themes and its difference from conventional Hollywood cinema, the intellectually ambitious New German Cinema of the 1970s had won international attention and critical acclaim; by the same token, it was German cinema's imitation of Hollywood models in the 1990s that rendered it relatively irrelevant internationally, albeit more popular domestically. What this suggested was that the movie-going German public wanted conventional cinema, not intellectual and aesthetic challenges, and that if conventional cinema was written and filmed in German, it had a reasonable chance to outdo in popularity even some American blockbusters. With this development, the German film industry of the 1990s came to resemble the German television industry, which, by the 1990s, had become skilled at producing slick, conventional television shows — from crime and detective thrillers through soap operas and comedies to romantic made-for-television movies geared primarily toward female audiences — that drew large numbers of viewers. In fact, as Marc Silberman has pointed out, the German television industry “leads Europe in the production and screening of domestic television fare,” and polls consistently show that “German audiences . . . prefer domestic products over imports.”¹⁴ On the whole, when given the choice between slick, conventional productions made in Germany and in German, and slick, conventional productions made in the United States in English but then dubbed into German, German audiences preferred productions made in their own linguistic and cultural milieu. In her criticism of contemporary German film, therefore, Treut called the German film industry of the 1990s less a film industry than “a television industry,” and she declared that if the economically “successful German films of the 1990s . . . had not been screened in the cinemas, one would think they had been made for television.”¹⁵ Such films, Treut proclaimed, were “biodegradable soap operas,”¹⁶ and she was not alone in noting the importance of television for the German film industry.

¹⁴ Marc Silberman, “European Cinema in the 90s: Whither Germany?” in *Schreiben nach der Wende: Ein Jahrzehnt deutscher Literatur 1989–1990*, ed. Gerhard Fischer and David Roberts (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2001), 317–30; here, 326.

¹⁵ Treut, “Between National Television and International Oblivion,” 125, 124.

¹⁶ Treut, “Between National Television and International Oblivion,” 124.

Even a well-meaning observer, Michael Bütow, director of film production for the private German television network ProSieben, called German television the benevolent “big brother” of German film. With the help of television, Bütow proclaimed, “our pimply, pubescent little brother the cinema film may someday become a big, strong man.”¹⁷

The turn toward lighter, comedic fare and away from serious aesthetic and political challenges to the status quo significantly predated the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990. The key film ushering in the shift toward light comedic entertainment had been Dorris Dörrie’s romantic comedy *Männer* (Men), which easily became the most commercially successful German movie of 1985. Its exploration of a love triangle that featured a woman, her businessman husband, and her more carefree, artistic lover, caught some of the erotic tension of the 1980s, poised between romantic longings for freedom and the reality of contemporary capitalism. The film pointed forward to some of the movies of the 1990s by focusing primarily on its male protagonists and transforming itself into a quirky “buddy” movie. Percy Adlon’s 1987 comedy *Out of Rosenheim* (Bagdad Café) had also been part of this comedic trend. Such films had shown that there was a market in Germany for German-language comedies, especially ones based on sexual relationships, romantic triangles, and unusual personal situations, but it was not until after reunification that such comedies became a widespread phenomenon on the German film market. Dörrie’s *Männer* had been an unusual, individual success, but as Andreas Kilb of *Die Zeit* suggested, what made the 1990s film comedies different was that “now they’re not appearing individually and by chance but rather bunched together, in a pack, as a loose and breezy confederation of cinematic jollity.”¹⁸ A key film in the development of the 1990s comedies was Katja von Garnier’s 1993 film *Abgeschminkt!* (Making Up). Born in 1966, von Garnier originally created this film as a project at Munich’s film and television academy, where she was a student from 1989 to 1994. *Abgeschminkt!*, a short (one-hour) “chick flick” about the romantic lives of two hip young Munich women, ultimately reached an audience of about a million viewers. Among other things, it represented actress Katja Riemann’s breakthrough film, making her one of the top female stars of the 1990s. The most popular German film comedy of the 1990s, Sönke Wortmann’s *Der bewegte Mann* (Maybe, Maybe Not, 1994), a comedy about a straight man’s relationship with his female lover and a gay male friend, “came out” the following year. *Der bewegte Mann*, based on the popular underground gay comic books of Ralf König, reached a German

¹⁷ Michael Bütow, “Großer Bruder Fernsehen,” in *Der bewegte Film*, ed. Amend and Bütow 49–56; here, 56.

¹⁸ Andreas Kilb, “Wir können nicht anders,” 28.

film audience of 6.5 million viewers, making it the most economically successful German movie of the 1990s and also the most popular post-war German film comedy until that time. *Der bewegte Mann* also confirmed Riemann as one of Germany's female stars, and it ushered in the triumph of its male lead, Til Schweiger — formerly a television star on the popular soap opera *Lindenstraße* (Linden Street) — who became one of the hottest male stars in German cinema during the 1990s. Two Danish critics called him “Germany's answer to Brad Pitt.”¹⁹ *Die Zeit's* Andreas Kilb sarcastically noted: “Films with Til Schweiger — according to the first rule of the new German film comedy — can not flop.”²⁰ Subsequent romantic comedies confirmed the trend toward the domestic popularity of German cinema. In 1995 Detlev Buck's film *Männerpension* (Jailbirds), a jailhouse buddy comedy that also starred Til Schweiger, achieved 3.5 million admissions, while Rolf Silber's *Echte Kerle* (Real Men) had 1.1 million viewers in 1996, and Sönke Wortmann's *Das Superweib* (1996) had 2.3 million. Dorris Dörrie, the originator of the trend back in the 1980s, enjoyed further success with *Keiner liebt mich* (Nobody Loves Me) in 1994, which sold 1.3 million tickets. This film also introduced the dark-haired beauty Maria Schrader to German audiences. Schrader was to go on to further success in subsequent productions of the 1990s, particularly Max Färberböck's popular *Aimée & Jaguar* (1999), based on the historical relationship between two lesbians in Nazi Germany, one a Jew and the other a non-Jew married to a German soldier.

Aimée & Jaguar, which achieved a modicum of international success based at least partly on its unusual but fact-based love story, represented a category of film that became increasingly popular as the 1990s went on: dramatic and/or romantic films about the Nazi past. When the German comedy wave of the mid-1990s began to ebb after 1996, it was these historical films that largely took up the slack and continued to draw German audiences to German movies. Here too the path had been paved in the first half of the 1980s, particularly by Wolfgang Petersen's historical action drama *Das Boot* (The Boat, 1981), a movie about German submarine warfare in the Second World War that became remarkably popular in the United States, and that ultimately led to Petersen's emergence as one of the top Hollywood directors in the 1990s. Joseph Vilsmaier's *Comedian Harmonists* (1997), based on the true story of a popular male vocal group of the 1920s and 1930s, was a key success of the 1990s, selling 2.63 million tickets in 1997. Vilsmaier's earlier film *Stalingrad* (1993),

¹⁹ Lisbeth Richter Larsen and Iben Laursen, “Ein Filmwunder? New German Cinema,” http://zakka.dk/euroscreenwriters/articles/contemporary_german_film_543.htm. Accessed on January 5, 2010. From the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, 4 December 1998.

²⁰ Andreas Kilb, “Wir können nicht anders,” 28.

which told the dramatic story of the Sixth German Army's collapse and defeat at the hands of the Soviet Red Army in the winter of 1942–43 — the key turning point of the Second World War — had been a precursor to the new wave of history movies in the 1990s and a significant financial success, selling 1.33 million tickets in 1993.²¹

The trend toward the production of movies about Nazi history continued well into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Caroline Link's *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (Nowhere in Africa, 2001), about a German-Jewish family that escapes Nazi Germany by moving to Africa, achieved not only popular but critical acclaim and became only the second German film to win an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2003. A major financial success of 2004 was Oliver Hirschbiegel's film *Der Untergang* (Downfall), about the final days of Adolf Hitler in Berlin in April of 1945. In this film, Bruno Ganz, who had played the angel Damiel in Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin* almost two decades earlier, played a raving, fanatical Hitler. Three years prior to *Der Untergang*, Hirschbiegel had achieved success with his film *Das Experiment* (2001), which placed fascism and the willingness to torture other people in a more contemporary setting by exploring what happens when the subjects of a psychological experiment are given power over other people. Stefan Ruzowitzky's thriller *Anatomie* (2000) also updated the story of fascism in the contemporary world, featuring a criminally insane medical student adept at plastinating (i.e., making plastic corpses) out of living human beings. The film was in part based on the controversial anatomist Gunther von Hagens's popular traveling exhibit *Body Worlds*. A year after *Der Untergang*, Marc Rothermund's film *Sophie Scholl — Die letzten Tage* (Sophie Scholl — The Final Days, 2005) was a financial and critical success in Germany and abroad. The international attention to these films about the Nazi dictatorship suggested that, while German comedy may have been highly popular at home, it was more serious, and more historically focused films that found favor abroad. The rest of the world was not terribly amused by German comedy, but it continued to be interested in German tragedy, particularly the tragedy of the Nazi period. As Peter Bradshaw, a critic for Britain's *Guardian*, observed resignedly in the spring of 2006, "I have the awkward feeling that this is, in the language of marketing, still the unique selling point of German cinema in Great Britain. It appears that nothing can outstrip the great tragedy of the Second World War."²² Of course, this should not be terribly surprising: tragedy generally travels more easily than comedy, which tends to be far more language- and

²¹ Audience statistics for films since the late 1960s can be found at: http://www.insidekino.com/DBO.htm#JAHRES_&_ALL-TIME_CHARTS_.

²² Peter Bradshaw, "Komisch geht auch," *Die Zeit*, 11 May 2006, 51–52; here, 52.

culture-specific. However, comedies cost less money to make than action or adventure films, as the producer Bernd Eichinger admitted in 2002: “Epic material, history films, and films with special effects can’t be financed in Germany right now. They cost twenty to twenty-five million marks. The result: there are some stories that are important for the history and consciousness of our nation that I just can’t tell in German cinema now. *Die Blechtrommel* would cost thirty million marks today; *Das Boot* already cost thirty million marks even back then. Why are there so many comedies in this country? Because it’s the cheapest competitive genre.”²³

In spite of Eichinger’s economic calculations, a good many German history films did in fact get made in the two decades following reunification. However, the films about Nazism made in this period were far removed from the radical aesthetic and political questioning of the New German Cinema as instantiated in such works as Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s *Hitler, Ein Film aus Deutschland* (Hitler, A Film from Germany, 1977), Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Lili Marleen* (1981), or Alexander Kluge’s *Die Patriotin* (The Patriot, 1979). Instead of exploring the political, psychological, and economic structures that had enabled Nazism to happen — as well as the continuities of those structures in the present — the more recent films tended to feature individual heroes or antiheroes and their exciting or disturbing adventures. Whereas the best films of the 1970s had attempted to criticize broader structures in German psychology and society, the history films of the post-unification period isolated their main characters from larger social questioning, tending to portray them as bizarre freaks, interesting oddities, or, conversely, praiseworthy but highly unusual heroes. Syberberg’s Hitler, for instance, is fundamentally an emanation coming from German history and culture, deeply implicating them in Nazism; in stark contrast, Hirschbiegel’s Hitler, as played by Ganz, is a bizarre and unpredictable psychopath whose relative insanity plays up the comparative sanity of those around him, particularly his secretary Traudl Junge (played by Alexandra Maria Lara), through whose eyes much of *Der Untergang* is seen. It is characteristic of *Der Untergang* that Junge remains normal and essentially likeable in spite of her exposure and even devotion to Hitler. She serves, in a sense, as a foil to protect the cinematic audience from full exposure to the tyrant. Likewise, *Aimée & Jaguar* focuses not on broader structures in German society but on a an unusual love story between two women, featuring not one but two oddities: the fact of a lesbian relationship, and the fact that one of the lovers is Jewish and the other “Aryan.” While such movies told interesting and even potentially important stories, they did not attempt to unsettle their audiences or jar them from received and

²³ Cited in Katja Nicodemus, “Film der Neunziger Jahre: Neues Sein und altes Bewußtsein,” in Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler, eds., *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 319–56; here, 326.

conventional ways of viewing motion pictures, and they did not seek, as Fassbinder and Syberberg had done, to analyze, let alone criticize structures of sexual desire at work in the psychic economy of fascism.²⁴ Sabine Hake suggests that these films reduce history “to a consumable good” by virtue of which “the Nazi past can finally be explored, experienced, and enjoyed without guilt, qualities that have played a key role in the domestic reception of recent German films about the Nazi past.”²⁵ Nevertheless — or perhaps precisely for this reason — it was these films that found particular favor abroad. For instance, Miritto Torreiro, a critic for Spain’s leading newspaper *El País*, praised German filmmakers for what he described as their remarkable ability to wrest “ever new aspects from their own past,” contrasting it favorably to the historical impotence he claimed to see in much of contemporary Spanish cinema.²⁶ And yet even Torreiro, as positive as he was in his assessment of contemporary German cinema, confessed that the real star of German film among Spain’s cineastes continued to be the long-gone Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

A telling example of the difference between New German Cinema and post-reunification cinema can be found in Sönke Wortmann’s popular 2003 drama *Das Wunder von Bern* (The Miracle of Bern), a movie about West Germany’s legendary 3–2 victory over Hungary in the 1954 World Cup at Bern, Switzerland. This soccer victory is one of the great popular legends of postwar West Germany, and for many in the Federal Republic, it signaled Germany’s reemergence as a great nation on the world stage. Observers have even claimed that this victory constituted “the foundation of the Federal Republic in Bern’s Wankdorf stadium,” allowing postwar West Germany “to overcome the shadows of the Nazi past.”²⁷ Germany’s legendary soccer star and coach Franz Beckenbauer categorically stated that after the 1954 World Cup “Germany was somebody again. We regained our sense of self-worth.”²⁸ Wortmann’s film is

²⁴ Randall Halle argues that such films “make no real demands on their audience.” See Halle, *German Film after Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2008), 128.

²⁵ Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema*, second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 213.

²⁶ Miritto Torreiro, “Kino der Debatten,” *Die Zeit*, 11 May 2006, 52.

²⁷ Jan Distelmeyer, “Das Runde muss ins Eckige: Sönke Wortmanns *Das Wunder von Bern* und die unglückliche Liebe zwischen Kino und Fussball,” *epd Film: Das Kino-Magazin* 10 (2003): 22–25; here, 22.

²⁸ Distelmeyer, “Das Runde muss ins Eckige,” 22. On the historical significance of the 1954 World Cup, see Rudolf Oswald, “‘Das Wunder von Bern’ und die deutsche Fußball-Volksgemeinschaft 1954,” in *Auswärtige Repräsentationen: Deutsche Kulturdiplomatie nach 1945*, ed. Johannes Paulmann (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005), 87–103.

a conventional tale about heroism and hero-worship. It follows the life of the star of the soccer team, Helmut Rahn, played by Sascha Göpel, and his eleven-year-old admirer Matthias Lubanski, played by Louis Klamroth, as they travel to Bern and participate in the international rebirth of their nation through sports. Wortmann's film features no ambiguity and no second thoughts; it is a straightforward tale of triumph over adversity, allowing its eleven-year-old protagonist to identify not only with the soccer hero Rahn, but also with his father, a Second World War veteran who has returned home to his family in initially uncomfortable circumstances. In the end, the soccer hero tells the veteran father: "It looks as if we owe our victory to you!" When the latter ventures to doubt his own heroism, telling his son that no one can compare with Helmut Rahn, his son replies: "Yes, father, you can compete with him."²⁹ The German soccer victory in Bern, in other words, provides compensation for the military defeats at Stalingrad and elsewhere, especially for the wounded ego of the German soldier. *Das Wunder von Bern* can be contrasted with the ending of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's classic *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (The Marriage of Maria Braun) twenty-five years earlier, which features precisely the same "miracle of Bern" on its background soundtrack. In Fassbinder's film, which also thematizes the return of a German Second World War veteran, Germany's soccer triumph is merely the happy public background to the horrific ending of a private drama: as viewers watch Maria Braun's house explode, they can simultaneously hear Germany being proclaimed the world's soccer champion in the background. Whereas Fassbinder's film urges viewers to question the West German state's postwar success and its attendant erasure of historical memory, Wortmann's film simply celebrates German success and German identity. *Das Wunder von Bern* was the second most popular German movie of 2003, achieving a domestic viewership of well over three million people.

Of course, the comedy craze did not really end in 1997, and in fact, some of the most successful movies of the following decade were comedies. In 2007 Til Schweiger directed and produced the popular romantic comedy *Keinohrhasen* (Rabbit without Ears), which he followed up in 2009 with the even more popular *Zweiohrküiken* (Two-Eyed Chicks; English title: Rabbit without Ears 2). The most popular movie of the post-unification period was Michael Herbig's *Der Schuh des Manitu* (2001), a spoof on Karl May's ever-popular thrillers about Germans and Indians in the American West in the nineteenth century. These books continue to be read by large numbers of German boys, and plays and films based on May's books have consistently been popular with German audiences. *Der Schuh des Manitu* sold eleven million tickets, well exceeding the domestic success of even such hits as *Der bewegte Mann* and *Der Untergang*. Other

²⁹ Distelmeyer, "Das Runde muss ins Eckige," 23.

silly comedy hits of the 1990s and 2000s included Martin Walz's *Kondom des Grauens* (Killer Condom, 1996) — based, like *Der bewegte Mann*, on Ralf König's gay comic books — Michael Schaak's and Udo Beissel's *Werner — Das muß kesseln* (Werner — Eat My Dust, 1996), which enjoyed five million viewers, and Michael Schaak's and Veit Vollmer's *Das kleine Arschloch* (The Little Asshole, 1997). Michael Herbig repeated his success in 2004 with *T(r)äumschiff Surprise* (Space/Dream Ship Surprise), a spoof on the ever-popular American *Star Trek* series that, with gay astronauts drinking tea on the spaceship's bridge, attracted over nine million viewers. In 2009 Herbig's children's film *Wickie und die starken Männer* (Vicky the Viking), based on a television cartoon series from the 1970s, became the most popular German movie of the year, with well over a million views. Such movies were intended purely for entertainment value and commercial appeal, and while they were extremely popular in Germany, they had virtually no resonance outside the country. Just as American comedies like Mel Brooks's *The Producers* did not sell well in Germany, so too German comedies like *Der Schuh des Manitu* and *T(r)äumschiff Surprise* did not sell well in America.³⁰

There were several institutional changes that resulted in a transformation of the German film industry in the 1990s. Following the change from a Social Democratic-Liberal to a conservative government in the fall of 1982, Germany's regulations concerning the subsidization of cinema were changed to favor not artistic or political merit but rather commercial success. This resulted in a drying up of funding for aesthetically or politically daring material, and a rise in funding for material likely to be a commercial success in Germany. Also in the mid-1980s, Germany's previously restricted television landscape, which had until then been publicly owned and dominated by the two major networks ARD (Allgemeiner Rundfunk Deutschland) and ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen), was liberalized, resulting in the proliferation of private networks over the course of the next two decades. Since German television networks provide some of the major funding for the German film industry, these changes have had an impact not just on television but also on film production as well. Prior to the growth of competition from private television networks, ZDF and ARD had occasionally been willing to sponsor even politically and aesthetically daring films: many of Fassbinder's films, for instance, had been

³⁰ In the summer of 2009, a stage production of *The Producers* in Berlin closed after only two months, in spite of relatively positive reviews. The *Berliner Zeitung* noted: "Of course the whole subject is very American, and perhaps Americans can laugh more easily about a gay Hitler than Berliners or Viennese." Birgit Walter, "Ein Jahr lang stehende Ovationen: Dennoch schreiben Stücke wie 'The Producers' Verluste: Das liegt auch an subventionierten Theatern," *Berliner Zeitung*, 18.–19. July 2009, 29.

produced with television funding, and his epic series *Berlin Alexanderplatz* had been created especially for television. With growing competition from profit-oriented private networks, however, even the publicly owned networks grew more cautious and conservative, focusing ever more intently on the financial bottom line. Some new publicly owned networks have challenged this trend by focusing on serious art and international dialogue. For instance, the ARTE network (Association Relative à la Télévision Européenne), jointly operated by the German and French states, was created in 1993 as a response by France and other European Union governments to perceived American cultural imperialism in the film and television industries. Similarly, the 3Sat network is operated collectively by public television networks in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. However, such networks have to date failed to garner significant numbers of viewers compared to ZDF and ARD,³¹ being small networks aimed at cultural and intellectual cognoscenti, with great importance only for these elite groups. ARTE's goal, enshrined in its constitution, is to create television broadcasts that, "in a comprehensive sense, have a cultural and international character, and that are suited to enhancing the understanding and the friendship of the peoples of Europe."³² While this is a noble goal, it is not one that, at least for the foreseeable future, is likely to attract large numbers of viewers. Networks like ARTE represent both funding opportunities for new productions and screening possibilities once a movie is ready to be shown on television. The great mass of German television viewers, however, watch either popular private networks like Sat.1, ProSieben, or RTL, or they watch ARD and ZDF, which, in seeking to compete with the private networks, are — at least according to their critics — becoming ever more like them.

Meanwhile more of Germany's individual regions have begun to offer their own funding for the making of films. Such funding is generally accompanied by certain restrictions and regulations regarding film production: the city of Hamburg, for instance, might provide funding for a film if some or all of the film is made in Hamburg. Germany's regions are thus sometimes in competition with each other, while other times cooperating with each other in attracting filmmakers to their area.³³ A similar phenomenon is also occurring at the European level, since the European Union provides support to international coproductions featuring participants from different countries. A prime example is the First World War film *Joyeux Noël* (2005), a French-German-British-Romanian coproduction directed by the French

³¹ On ARTE and 3Sat, see Halle, *German Film after Germany*, 181–87.

³² See <http://www.arte-tv.com/de/service/alles-ueber-ARTE/der-sender/38976.html> (accessed June 5, 2006).

³³ On such funding, see Halle, *German Film after Germany*, 31–32.

director Christian Carion, featuring German, French, and British actors, and filmed in four different countries: Germany, Britain, France, and Romania. While *Joyeux Noël*, due to its historical theme of the fraternization among German, French, and British troops in the trenches at Christmas 1914, was an example of European success in coproduction and co-funding, many such European-funded films have been both aesthetic and economic failures. It appears that, for the most part, European audiences — including German ones — want either American or domestic films, but not European coproductions. Of course, this situation could change as the European film industry grows together more closely, but at least for the time being a truly unified European cinema is still more of a dream than a reality. As the Dutch scholar Mel van Elteren observes, in general “French and Germans” and other Europeans “remain particularistic with regard to each other’s cultural products. They reject European media cosmopolitanism” and usually prefer clearly American products to indistinct European ones.³⁴ In the midst of the drive to create a new European cinema, the European Union has also struggled with the dominance of American cinema on the European market: it is not just in Germany, but in most of Europe that American products control over 70 percent of the market. The early 1990s witnessed embittered debates about American cultural domination and European cultural integrity, especially during the negotiations on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1993. Whereas European representatives argued that cinema was crucial to both national and European cultural identity and ought therefore to be subsidized by government entities and protected from competition, American representatives argued that cinema was a business like any other and ought to be subject only to the law of supply and demand. In the end, the European Union succeeded in excluding film and other audiovisual media from full market liberalization.³⁵ Another effort to strengthen European cinema was the creation of the European Film Academy in 1988, an organization with headquarters in Berlin that runs the annual European Film Awards, and which has been presided over by Wim Wenders since 1996.

The collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the reunification of Germany also signaled the final demise of DEFA, the East German film production company, which was sold by the Treuhandanstalt (the trustee agency responsible for privatizing the GDR’s state-owned industries) in 1992. Although a number of DEFA films continued to be released after 1990, by 1992 DEFA no longer existed as an entity, and

³⁴ Mel van Elteren, “GATT and Beyond: World Trade, the Arts and American Popular Culture in Western Europe,” *Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 59–73; here, 62.

³⁵ See van Elteren, “GATT and Beyond: World Trade, the Arts and American Popular Culture in Western Europe.”

its assets, particularly the film production studios in Potsdam-Babelsberg, were sold off to other owners. Throughout much of the 1990s, the experience of East Germans going through a radical historical change found virtually no voice in the established German cinema. Andreas Dresen, a young filmmaker trained at the East German film academy in Potsdam-Babelsberg in the late 1980s and early 1990s, created *Stilles Land* (Silent Country) in 1992, a feature film that addressed changes in a small East German town during the period of the East German revolution. However, very few Germans actually saw this movie. Herwig Kipping's remarkable surrealist fantasy on socialist authoritarianism and sexual terror, *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (The Land beyond the Rainbow, 1991), dealt with life in the GDR in a creative way that would have been impossible prior to 1989 for political reasons and after 1992 for economic reasons. It emerged in the brief period between the collapse of the GDR and the demise of the DEFA studio, but few people got a chance to see it, and it remains largely unknown even today. Helmut Dziuba's *Jana und Jan* (1992) addressed the revolution in the GDR and its impact on teenagers unprepared for freedom, but it too found only a small audience. A small number of documentaries, such as Sibylle Schönemann's *Verriegelte Zeit* (Locked Up Time, 1990) — a late DEFA film — and the post-1990 episodes of Barbara and Winfried Junge's long-term project *Die Kinder von Golzow* (The Children of Golzow, 1961–2006) dealt with changes in eastern Germany, while short-lived but popular comedies like Peter Timm's *Go Trabi Go* (1991) and Detlev Buck's road movie *Wir können auch anders* (No More Mr. Nice Guy, 1993) touched on German reunification and its attendant social changes. DEFA veteran Frank Beyer's made-for-television movie *Nikolaikirche* (Nikolai Church, 1995), based on Erich Loest's novel about the 1989 demonstrations in Leipzig that ultimately led to the GDR's collapse, met with modest critical success. However, the mainstream German cinema of the mid-1990s, with its upbeat sex comedies, looked as if it had been produced in a historical vacuum, as if neither East Germany nor the reunification of East with West had ever occurred. Although veteran filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta attempted to deal with German division and reunification in *Das Versprechen* (The Promise, 1995), the film was perceived to be melodramatic and was panned by critics and ignored by German audiences. Volker Schlöndorff was significantly more successful with his film *Die Stille nach dem Schuß* (The Legends of Rita, 2000), which dealt with the life of a former West German terrorist hiding out in the GDR. These films were more the exception than the rule, however, and both von Trotta and Schlöndorff, not coincidentally, belonged to the older generation of German filmmakers, the very generation whose purported over-seriousness and moralism was being attacked by successful younger filmmakers like Sönke Wortmann and Detlev Buck. Probably the most important visual exploration of German reunification

and its attendant social transformation in the early to mid-1990s was not a film but rather a television show: Werner Masten's *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk* (1994–95), based on scripts by the distinguished former East German writer Jurek Becker and featuring Becker's good friend Manfred Krug — the star of Frank Beyer's banned 1966 DEFA film *Spur der Steine* — as a bewildered paterfamilias from East Berlin trying to come to terms with the transformations of the German-German present.

It was not until the surprise success of former East German director Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999), based on a script by the hit young writer Thomas Brussig, that East Germany and German reunification entered mainstream cinema in a big way. *Sonnenallee* became a cult hit in 1999, particularly in eastern Germany, and sold 1.8 million tickets in its first year.³⁶ Its humorous approach to life in the East German dictatorship and its sexual comedy — it is essentially an adolescent love story featuring a young man's attempt to win the attention of the girl he loves, replete with nostalgic period music — connected East German history to the comedy craze of the 1990s. Moreover, its loving attention to East German material culture made it a prime example of what Germans called *Ostalgie* — nostalgia for the now-vanished East Germany or German Democratic Republic, including its entire panoply of drab consumer products, like Spee laundry detergent, Trabant automobiles, and Prick cola. The trend toward *Ostalgie* films starting in 1999 was an instance of the film industry following models that had originally begun in the literary sphere, since Haussmann's *Sonnenallee* had been preceded by Thomas Brussig's popular novel *Helden wie wir* (Heroes Like Us), a Rabelaisian farce about German reunification, in 1995. Filmmaker Sebastian Peterson tried to turn Brussig's outrageous novel about the fall of the Berlin Wall into a popular film in 1999 — a film carefully marketed to premiere on November 9, 1999, the tenth anniversary of the Wall's opening — but his effort was both an aesthetic and a commercial failure, suggesting that outrageous dark political comedy, at least for the time being, was more at home in literature than in cinema. Far more successful were gentle comedies like Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) and, albeit to a lesser extent, Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin Is in Germany* (2001), comedies that gently poked fun at life in the former German Democratic Republic and at East Germans' attempts to come to terms with the new situation in their country. Leander Haussmann declared in 2000, after the release of *Sonnenallee*: "We wanted to create a movie that would make people envious that they hadn't lived there [in the GDR]. Since politicians like to compare the GDR to a concentration camp in order to preen themselves

³⁶ Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 111.

with their historical mission. And that's what GDR citizens can't stand: they are always supposed to have been either camp commanders or camp inmates — but what was in between was people's daily life.”³⁷ The formula for addressing the GDR in film seemed to be nostalgia for one's youth coupled with irreverent but not destructive humor, especially at the expense of East German authorities who took themselves too seriously. In the words of Brussig's novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (At the Shorter End of Sun Avenue), whose release was timed to coincide with Haussmann's *Sonnenallee* film, “*It made you want to barf from beginning to end, but we had great fun.*”³⁸ Of course, not everyone was happy with *Ostalgie* generally, or with Haussmann's and Brussig's conciliatory approach to the history of the German Democratic Republic. In fact, one group sued Haussmann for purportedly trivializing the East German dictatorship.³⁹ However, such criticisms went nowhere with legal authorities or the public. In 2005 Haussmann and Brussig tried to repeat their *Sonnenallee* success with *NVA — Der Film*, a humorous movie based on life in the East German National People's Army (Nationale Volksarmee or NVA). However, this film was not as much of a success with the general public, and it seemed that by the middle of the second decade after reunification the trend toward *Ostalgie* had abated somewhat. Instead, more serious fiction films dealing with the problems of life in the former German Democratic Republic began to make an impact. Particularly important was Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's moving film *Das Leben der anderen* (The Lives of Others, 2006), which dealt with East German citizens' oppression by, and cooperation with the Stasi, the East German secret police. *Das Leben der anderen* won seven prizes at the 2006 German Film awards, including the prizes for best film and best director. It also won the European Film Award for best film in 2006, and in 2007 it became only the third German film to be awarded an Oscar for best foreign language film. With the critical and popular success of *Das Leben der anderen*, it appeared that mainstream German cinema might be beginning to confront the issues posed by Germany's status as a country that had experienced not just one but two dictatorships in the twentieth century. Von Donnersmarck's Oscar win also suggested that the American film industry was now finally willing to reward a German film that

³⁷ Cited in Nicodemus, “Film der Neunziger Jahre,” 325.

³⁸ Thomas Brussig, *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1999), 153.

³⁹ See Helen Cafferty, “*Sonnenallee*: Taking Comedy Seriously in Unified Germany,” in *Textual Responses to German Unification*, ed. Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, and Kristie A. Foell (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 253–71; here, 255.

dealt with something other than the Nazi dictatorship. As the critic Katja Nicodemus wryly noted in *Die Zeit*, “at least it seems to be slowly sinking in on the average sixty-year-old Oscar voter that German cinema is also good for newer forms of totalitarianism.”⁴⁰

Films like *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Das Leben der anderen* showed that there was a significant audience in Germany and elsewhere for realistic, moving stories about contemporary or recent German reality, and not just about the Third Reich. Thus, a number of important films of the 1990s and 2000s dealt successfully with more contemporary aspects of German life. Andreas Dresen’s *Nachtgestalten* (Night Shapes, 1999), for instance, told a hard-boiled story about contemporary Berlin, following the frequently unpleasant fates of various characters, much in the way that Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993) had done for Los Angeles. Dresen continued this success with *Halbe Treppe* (Grill Point, 2002), a film about life and love in small-town East Germany, which was acclaimed in both Germany and abroad, and *Wolke Neun* (Cloud Nine, 2008), a realistic film about love and sexuality among senior citizens. Wolfgang Becker’s *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (Life is a Construction Site, aka Life is All You Get, 1997) explored the contemporary reality of a Berlin undergoing rapid physical and sociological change. Hans-Christian Schmid, whose gentle coming-of-age story *Nach 5 im Urwald* (After 5:00 in the Jungle, 1995) had dealt realistically with the problems of contemporary German adolescence and introduced the actress Franka Potente to the German screen, followed this up with his critical and popular success *23*, based on the mysterious life and death of the computer hacker Karl Koch in the 1980s. This latter film was an important statement about the emergence of hacker culture in Germany in the 1980s, as well as a fascinating exploration of the final years of the cold war. For Katja Nicodemus, *23* was the best German filmic exploration of the 1980s, “the living summation of an entire decade.”⁴¹ Caroline Link’s critically acclaimed *Jenseits der Stille* (Beyond Silence, 1996) told the moving story of two deaf parents and their relationship with their hearing daughter. Oskar Roehler’s *Die Unberührbare* (Untouchable, aka No Place to Go, 2000) fictionalized the story of Roehler’s own mother, the West German socialist writer Gisela Elsner, who, unable to cope with the collapse of socialism in the GDR, had committed suicide in Munich in 1992. Christian Petzold’s *Die innere Sicherheit* (English title: The State I Am In, 2000), a movie about two former left-wing terrorists and their relationship with their teenage daughter, met with both popular and critical success. Other films by Petzold

⁴⁰ Katja Nicodemus, “Hollywood fast emissionsfrei,” *Die Zeit*, 1 March 2007, 44.

⁴¹ Nicodemus, “Film der Neunziger Jahre,” 338.

continued to garner critical acclaim: *Gespenster* (Ghosts, 2005), which dealt with psychologically and economically down-and-out characters struggling to cope with life in Berlin; *Yella* (2007), a contemporary ghost story about human relations in the globalizing German economy; and *Jerichow* (2009), a brooding drama dealing with the troubled return of a soldier from Afghanistan to his home in northern Germany. Meanwhile, Hans Weingartner's *Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei* (literally: Your Years of Plenty are Numbered; English title: *The Edukators*, 2004) dealt with contemporary German economic and social reality, including the transformation of some of the former student revolutionaries of the 1960s into pillars of the capitalist system in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2006 Detlev Buck's hardboiled social drama *Knallhart* (Tough Enough, 2006) about gang life and interracial violence in Berlin, became a surprise hit in Germany and elsewhere. Maren Ade's *Alle anderen* (Everyone Else, 2009), a film about the relationship between the sexes in contemporary Germany, became a hit at the Berlin International Film Festival in February of 2009. The success of these and other films clearly demonstrated that both Germans and the rest of the world were interested in movies that dealt with contemporary German life. If the film comedies of the mid-1990s had more or less ignored such contemporary issues, Dresen's, Schmid's, Weingartner's, Petzold's, and Buck's films clearly addressed them, satisfying what Jochen Brunow, in 1999, had called the "continuing curiosity among other nations about filmic descriptions from the interior of this country."⁴²

Of course, the emergence of a new generation of German filmmakers in the 1990s did not cause the older generation of German filmmakers — the one associated with New German Cinema — to disappear. Some of the most popular and critically acclaimed movies of the two decades following reunification continued to be made by this generation. Volker Schlöndorff, for instance, achieved key successes with *Die Stille nach dem Schuß* and *Der neunte Tag* (The Ninth Day, 2004). Margarethe von Trotta made an impact nationally and internationally with her film *Rosenstraße* (2003), based on the true story of non-Jewish women protesting the arrests of their Jewish husbands during the Nazi period. Wim Wenders, meanwhile, proved consistently productive and frequently popular: his film *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* (Far Away, So Close!), for instance, a sequel to *Der Himmel über Berlin*, was one of the most popular German movies of 1993 both domestically and internationally. Wenders went on to make the remarkably successful documentary *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), about a group of old Cuban musicians in Havana, as well as *The Million Dollar Hotel* (2000), *Land of Plenty* (2004), *Don't Come Knocking* (2005), and *Palermo Shooting* (2008). In addition, Werner Herzog, now working primarily in the United States, achieved international

⁴² Jochen Brunow, "Bündnis für Film," in *Szenenwechsel*, 9–16; here, 12.

acclaim with documentaries like *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), *Grizzly Man* (2005), and *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007); his American feature film *Rescue Dawn* (2007) was his most successful commercial venture ever, and *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call — New Orleans* (2009) was a cleverly ironic take on the American cop movie and an exploration of New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Of course, some of the most popular German filmmakers of the 1990s were in fact, like Herzog, working not in Germany, but in the United States. After his triumph with *Das Boot* in 1981, Wolfgang Petersen went on to make a string of hits or near-hits in the United States, including *In the Line of Fire* (1993), *Outbreak* (1995), *Air Force One* (1997), *The Perfect Storm* (2000), *Troy* (2004), and *Poseidon* (2006). As successful as Petersen was Roland Emmerich, who, after German successes like the science fiction film *Das Arche Noah Prinzip* (The Noah's Ark Principle, 1984) went on to make Hollywood movies like *Universal Soldier* (1992), *Stargate* (1994), *Independence Day* (1996), *Godzilla* (1998), *The Patriot* (2000), *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009), all with considerable economic success. The German film critic Georg Seeßlen called Emmerich's films "ideal global popcorn cinema."⁴³ One of the world's most talented cameramen, Michael Ballhaus, who frequently works with the American director Martin Scorsese, had become internationally famous through his work with Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the 1970s. Ballhaus worked not only on Fassbinder movies like *Wiby* (1971), *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, 1972), and *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979), but also on Scorsese films like *Goodfellas* (1990), *The Age of Innocence* (1993), and *Gangs of New York* (2002). The trajectories of Petersen, Emmerich, Herzog, and Ballhaus from Germany to California in some ways repeated the pattern of the 1920s and the 1930s, in which some of the most successful German and Austrian directors and stars — Fritz Lang, Marlene Dietrich, Billy Wilder, etc. — moved to California and worked for Hollywood. The most famous example of a German-speaking star making it big on the American market remains, of course, the Austrian-born Arnold Schwarzenegger, who, after a string of box-office hits in the 1980s and 1990s, became governor of California in 2003.

Two further developments are worthy of note. The first is the creation, in 1994, of the film company X-Filme Creative Pool by three young German filmmakers: Wolfgang Becker, Tom Tykwer, and Dani Levy, together with the producer Stefan Arndt. The goals of these partners were to free filmmakers from complete dependence on production studios interested

⁴³ Georg Seeßlen, "Der Kaputtmacher: Einstürzende Neubauten, Patriotismus und Opferbereitschaft: Roland Emmerich lässt in seinem neuen Film '2010' mal wieder die Welt untergehen," *Die Zeit*, 12 November 2009, 50.

primarily in profit and not in art, to overcome the isolation typically experienced by German filmmakers, and to share risks and profits with each other. As Wolfgang Becker put it, “together we are stronger.”⁴⁴ Stefan Arndt described the company’s goals thus: “We are looking for authentic material set in Germany or having to do with Germany but that works internationally. Our goal is a high-quality independent art cinema more in the tradition of the American independents.”⁴⁵ Arndt’s words suggest a company quite consciously trying to influence the course of contemporary German cinema by combining the national and the internationally accessible in a new way. This production company was responsible for a number of major successes in the decade after its founding, particularly Tom Tykwer’s international hit *Lola rennt* (Run Lola Run, 1998) and Wolfgang Becker’s *Good Bye Lenin!*.⁴⁶

Secondly, the two decades following reunification witnessed a remarkable flowering of Turkish-German cinema, as young Turkish-Germans living in Germany began to make popular and critically acclaimed movies. The most notable of these young filmmakers was the Hamburg-born-and-based director Fatih Akin, whose road movie *Im Juli* (In July, 2000) was a major success both at home and abroad. *Im Juli* features a trip made by two young Germans from Hamburg to Istanbul, showing how Germans and Turks come together in the new Europe. The journey transforms the film’s main character, a young German teacher played by the popular star Moritz Bleibtreu, from an uptight prig into a relaxed, fun-loving man. Since Bleibtreu’s character stands for Germany itself, the film implies that, via its encounters with other cultures, the new Germany is being transformed in a positive way. In 1998, at Akin’s first feature film premiere, the gangster movie *Kurz und schmerzlos* (Short Sharp Shock), the director had proclaimed that Turkish-German cinema would be quicker to take hold in Germany than minority cinemas had been in other countries: “Scorsese and the other Italian Americans needed seventy years before they began to make their movies. The Algerian French needed thirty years for their *cinéma beur*. We’re faster. We’re already starting.”⁴⁷ In 2004, with his film *Gegen die Wand* (Head-On), Akin achieved his greatest triumph to date, becoming the first Turkish-German filmmaker ever to win the Golden Bear, the main film prize at Germany’s

⁴⁴ “Eins, zwei, drei . . . x Filme,” in *Szenenwechsel*, 40–43; here, 41.

⁴⁵ “Eins, zwei, drei . . . x Filme,” in *Szenenwechsel*, 41.

⁴⁶ For more on this company, see David Clarke, “Introduction: German Cinema since Unification,” in *German Cinema since Unification*, ed. Clarke (London: Continuum, 2006), 1–9; here, 4–5; Hake, *German National Cinema*, 195; and Nicodemus, “Film der Neunziger Jahre,” 334–35.

⁴⁷ Katja Nicodemus, “Ankunft in der Wirklichkeit,” *Die Zeit*, 19 February 2004, 49.

most important film festival, the Berlin International Film Festival. *Gegen die Wand* was also the first German film to win the Golden Bear in almost two decades: the previous German winner had been *Stammheim* (1986) by Reinhard Hauff, a movie about the trial and deaths of the terrorists Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof in the 1970s. Other key Turkish-German films of the post-reunification period included Akin's *Auf der anderen Seite* (The Edge of Heaven, 2007) and Thomas Arslan's Berlin trilogy *Geschwister-Kardesler* (Brothers and Sisters, 1997), *Dealer* (1999), and *Der schöne Tag* (A Fine Day, 2001), as well as American-based video artist Kutlug Ataman's gay-themed Berlin film *Lola und Bilidikid* (Lola and Billy the Kid, 1999). The success of such movies led Tuncay Kulaoğlu to ask whether “the New German Cinema is Turkish,” and caused the American-based scholar Deniz Göktürk to suggest that Turkish-German cinema was moving away from a “cinema of duty” and toward what she called “the pleasures of hybridity,” as ethnic and national categories became mixed.⁴⁸ The French critic Gérard Lefort went so far as to suggest that with the appearance of these films, German cinema had achieved “a little cultural revolution.” The most interesting social movies being made in Germany, Lefort believed, are by “directors from the second or third generation of Turkish immigrants.”⁴⁹

Such movies demonstrated that by the first decade of the twenty-first century the German film industry was becoming multiethnic and multicultural, and that conventional ethnic definitions of what it meant to be German were increasingly hard to sustain. This phenomenon was not limited to Turkish-German cinema, as was proved by Ali Samadi Ahadi's clever comedy *Salami Aleikum* (2009), a film about an Iranian immigrant family living in Cologne and exploring East Germany. The film scholar Jaimey Fisher even claimed that by the beginning of the new millennium “the appellation ‘German’ no longer signifies a singular, coherent nation, as it has been normatively deployed since the early nineteenth century to designate the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic community of ‘Germans,’” and that instead film culture in Germany has moved into a postnational era.⁵⁰ Marc Silberman argued that this state of affairs was true of cinema culture not just in Germany but in the entire world, since “neither in the sense of high cultural art nor popularistic folklore, does the concept of the ‘national’ seem applicable to the cinema medium, which involves access to a complex and expensive apparatus, one in which success is measured in

⁴⁸ Both cited in Barbara Mennel, “Local Funding and Global Movement: Minority Women’s Filmmaking and the German Film Landscape of the Late 1990s,” *Women in German Yearbook* 18 (2002): 45–66; here, 53.

⁴⁹ Gérard Lefort, “Ohne Komplexe, aber kritisch,” *Die Zeit*, 11 May 2006, 51.

⁵⁰ Jaimey Fisher, “Globalisierungsbewältigung [Coming to Terms with Globalization]: Global Flows and Local Loyalties in Contemporary German Cinema,” *Genre* 36 (Fall/Winter 2003): 405–28; here, 407.

terms set by the industry's structures, that is, by profit.”⁵¹ Mel van Elteren argues that “faced with culture industries . . . which are increasingly globalizing and able to avoid national regulations in various ways, it becomes ever more problematic to analyze the production, distribution, and reception of culture from a national or other place-bound (geopolitical) perspective.”⁵² Such arguments point out the ways in which, now more than ever, cinema culture is not just national but international, even global, and yet they underestimate the continued staying power of local, regional, national, and linguistic identities, even and especially within the medium of film. They also underestimate the way in which the international as much as the domestic markets demand from the German film industry products seen as distinctly German — a demand evidenced, for instance, by the international popularity of German history movies from *Comedian Harmonists* through *Aimée & Jaguar*, *Nirgendwo in Afrika*, and *Der Untergang* to *Sophie Scholl* and *Das Leben der anderen*. The commercial success of these and other movies suggests that the distinctively “German” is very much a commodity on the global market. As Sabine Hake perceptively notes, “the new conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition have contributed to the reaffirmation and commodification of national identities that, in the German context, is most apparent in the international marketing of films about modern German history.”⁵³ Likewise, Randall Halle argues that in the contemporary world of transnational film, the nation itself “becomes a commodity,” and that in fact, “the transnational aesthetic does not undo national differences but rather highlights them and heightens sensitivity to cultural specificity.”⁵⁴ The German automobile industry clearly understands this mechanism, and it sells its cars not as indistinct hybrids but as distinctively German; a similar mechanism is at work in the German film industry at home and abroad. The turn of the millennium, after all, witnessed not just a growing globalization and homogenization process that the American political scientist Benjamin Barber labeled as the “McWorld” phenomenon, but also a growing insistence on regional, local, and national identities capable of co-existing with, and providing shelter from, that phenomenon.⁵⁵ The process of globalization is not simply a uni-directional move toward Americanization or uniformity; it is, rather, a complex process of interpenetration and encounter that also engenders the resistance of, and affection for, particular and distinct local, regional, and national identities.

⁵¹ Silberman, “European Cinema in the 90s: Whither Germany?” 322.

⁵² Van Elteren, “GATT and Beyond: World Trade, the Arts and American Popular Culture in Western Europe,” 65. Van Elteren considers this point so important that he repeats it word for word on 67.

⁵³ Hake, *German National Cinema*, 194.

⁵⁴ Halle, *German Film after Germany*, 52, 86.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).



Axel Feldheim puts Norbert Brommer in the closet.
Courtesy of the Kobal Collection.

29: *Der bewegte Mann* (1994) or West German Self-Absorption

Director: Sönke Wortmann

Cinematographer: Gernot Roll

Screenplay: Sönke Wortmann, based on the comic books *Der bewegte Mann* and *Pretty Baby* by Ralf König

Producers: Bernd Eichinger, Harald Kügler, Martin Moszkowicz, Elvira Senft, and Molly von Fürstenberg (Constantin Film Produktion)

Editor: Ueli Christen

Production Design: Monika Bauert

Costume Design: Katharina von Martius

Music: Torsten Breuer

Soundtrack: Claudia Enzmann, Stephan Fandrych, Jo Fürst, Simon Happ, Jörn Poetzl, and Martin Steyer

German Release Date: October 6, 1994

Actors: Til Schweiger (Axel Feldheim), Joachim Król (Norbert Brommer), Katja Riemann (Doro Feldheim), Rufus Beck (Walter/Waltraud), Armin Rohde (the butcher), Nico van der Knaap (Fränzchen), Antonia Lang (Elke Schmitt), Martina Gedeck (Jutta), Ralf König (drag queen), Monty Arnold (as himself); and others

Awards: German Film Awards, 1995: Outstanding Feature Film, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Actor to Joachim Król, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Direction to Sönke Wortmann; Ernst Lubitsch Award, 1995: Sönke Wortmann

SÖNKE WORTMANN'S *DER BEWEGTE MANN* (literally: The Moved Man; English title: Maybe, Maybe Not), based on Ralf König's popular underground gay comic books, was one of the most commercially successful movies of the 1990s. It won the Federal Film Prize for best film in 1995, and Sönke Wortmann was named the best director of the year. At the time of its release, *Der bewegte Mann* captured about 30 percent of the German market. It was eventually seen by well over six million viewers in Germany, making it easily competitive, at least on the German market, even compared to some major American blockbusters of the mid-1990s, such as Jan de Bont's *Speed* (1994), which had a little over three million viewers in Germany. *Der bewegte Mann* is representative

of a whole series of sexual comedies, often featuring interrelationships between heterosexual men, their female lovers, and various gay friends, that proliferated in Germany during the 1990s. Katja Nicodemus has called this genre “exactly the cinema” that a wealthy and self-satisfied West Germany deserved.¹

Wortmann himself had helped start the trend toward sex comedies with his made-for-television film *Allein unter Frauen* (Alone Among Women, 1991), portraying a “macho” man who loses his job, is thrown out by his girlfriend, and ultimately winds up living with a group of women in a feminist commune. These women, although obviously attracted to the protagonist and his macho ways, make an effort to move him toward feminist consciousness. The conceit of the macho man thrown out of his apartment by his girlfriend was to play a role in a number of subsequent sex comedies, including *Der bewegte Mann* and Rolf Silber’s *Echte Kerle* (Real Men, 1996). After Wortmann’s *Allein unter Frauen*, the sex-comedy trend continued with Katja von Garnier’s surprise hit *Abgeschminkt!* (Making Up, 1993), a “chick flick” dealing with the relationships and romantic longings of two young women in Munich, where von Garnier was attending film school when she made the movie. This low-budget film got over a million viewers in Germany. Also in 1993, Peter Timm’s romantic comedy *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* (A Man for Every Key) had almost half a million viewers. Although the romantic comedies peaked with *Der bewegte Mann*, the trend continued for several more years with such hits as Dorris Dörrie’s *Keiner liebt mich* (Nobody Loves Me, 1994), Rainer Kaufmann’s *Stadtgespräch* (Talk of the Town, 1995), Sönke Wortmann’s *Das Superweib* (The Superwoman, 1996), Rolf Silber’s *Echte Kerle*, Detlev Buck’s *Männerpension* (Jailbirds, 1996), Sherry Hormann’s *Irren ist männlich* (To Err is Male, aka Father’s Day, 1996), Peter Timm’s *Die Putzfraueninsel* (The Island of the Cleaning Women, 1996), and Helmut Dietl’s *Rossini oder die mörderische Frage, wer mit wem schlief* (Rossini or the Lethal Question Who Slept With Whom, 1997). A central feature of several of these films — especially *Der bewegte Mann* and *Echte Kerle* — is the relationship between a straight and a gay man. As Randall Halle has noted, in these films “gay men take up a role that they have never had before in film history: they serve as facilitators of heterosexuality.”² One

¹ Katja Nicodemus, “Film der Neunziger Jahre: Neues Sein und altes Bewußtsein,” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, second edition, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2004), 319–56; here, 319. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

² Randall Halle, “‘Happy Ends’ to Crises of Heterosexual Desire: Toward a Social Psychology of Recent German Comedies,” *Camera Obscura* 44, vol. 15, no. 2 (2000): 1–39; here, 2.

of the interesting questions about the social psychology of these comedies is exactly why it was that gay men, at least in the cinema, played such a central role in the socialization of their straight male friends.

Gay men also played a significant role in a number of Hollywood romantic comedies produced during the second half of the 1990s, particularly P. J. Hogan's *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) and Nicholas Hytner's *The Object of My Affection* (1998). However, these American comedies tended to feature a straight woman involved in an erotic relationship with a sometimes unfeeling and boorish straight man, while at the same time receiving emotional support from a gay male friend. Because of his purported sensitivity, this gay friend is able to help the straight woman get through crises brought about by the less sensitive straight man in her life. In these American romantic comedies, the gay male provides sexually unthreatening emotional support for his straight female friend, but his own sexual desire never becomes a narrative problem, since it is never directed toward the leading characters in the movie — both the straight woman and the straight man are "safe" from him.

In the German sex comedies the role of the gay man is significantly different. Here the gay man befriends not the woman, but the handsome, boorish straight man, to whom he also becomes sexually attracted, and much of the film's dynamic tension comes from his unfulfilled longing. This is true in both *Echte Kerle* and *Der bewegte Mann*. In the latter, the hapless gay man Norbert, played by Joachim Król — who won a Federal Film Prize for his acting in the movie — falls hopelessly in love with the handsome straight macho Axel, played by Til Schweiger, much to the annoyance of Axel's girlfriend Doro, played by Katja Riemann. Axel's encounter with Norbert is precipitated by Doro's kicking Axel out of their apartment, after she has caught him having sex with another woman in a bathroom stall.

The Cologne restaurant in which this episode takes place — where both Axel and Doro work — suggests a materially comfortable West German milieu bent on consumption and pleasure, not on political change or social consciousness. The film starts with a shot, taken from directly overhead, of customers dancing to live music, suggesting that these people live in a completely self-contained world. When the camera begins to move in an impressive traveling shot, it does not take viewers outside the restaurant but rather focuses on the male singer. The retro music from the 1920s and 1930s evokes nostalgia for earlier times, and also for the romantic comedies of the prewar era. No one in this milieu seems to have real economic or political problems, and life is primarily oriented toward the consumption of food, the enjoyment of music, and the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Watching *Der bewegte Mann*, a viewer would never know that West and East Germany had been reunited only a few years earlier, and that at the time the film was made there was a war going on in the

former Yugoslavia that was bringing tens of thousands of refugees to Germany. The only vaguely political statement made in the film comes from the gay man Norbert, who tells Axel: “In my opinion hetero men ought to become gay and straight women should go into world politics. That’s the only way to save this planet.”³ This remark, coming over a decade before Angela Merkel became the first woman chancellor of Germany, suggests that in spite of its turn away from politics *Der bewegte Mann* captured something of the German *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s and beyond.

One of the most famous scenes in *Der bewegte Mann* features Axel and Norbert in bed with each other in Axel’s apartment — after a rather contrived set-up to justify a straight man’s winding up in bed with a gay man — watching slides of Axel and Doro on vacation. While Axel’s attention is focused on the beautiful Doro, whom he desperately misses, Norbert’s attention is directed at a slide taken by Doro that shows the impressively muscled Axel naked and posing for her camera. The sight of the naked Axel arouses Norbert, but at this moment, inevitably, Doro shows up, forcing Norbert to hide in a closet, as if he were one of the many lovers with whom Axel had cheated on her in the past. Doro, also inevitably, finds Norbert in the closet — a clever visual joke, since in reality the openly gay Norbert is not “in the closet” — and she assumes that Axel is having a homosexual relationship with him. Whereas the gay man in American romantic comedies is seen by the straight female as an aid and comfort in her struggle with and for the straight man, in German romantic comedies the gay male is seen by the straight female as a sexual threat — potentially capable of transforming the straight man into a gay man. Whereas American romantic comedies emphasize the friendship between gay men and straight women, German romantic comedies emphasize the friendship between gay and straight men, thus fostering an implicit or explicit uncertainty, at least on the part of the straight woman, about the stability of the straight man’s heterosexual orientation. Halle calls the straight-gay male relationships in these movies, with their attendant sexual tensions, “a temporary-gay narrative,” suggesting that the straight male comes to see the world at least partially, and temporarily, through the eyes of a gay male.⁴ Although this experience does not radically alter the straight male’s fundamental nature — which is assumed to be promiscuous and selfish — it does make him more conscious and aware of the world around him. It “moves” him in the sense of the film’s title: *Der bewegte Mann* literally means “the moved man,” with the word

³ All transcriptions from the film are my own, and all translations from German-language sources are also my own.

⁴ Halle, “‘Happy Ends’ to Crises of Heterosexual Desire: Toward a Social Psychology of Recent German Comedies,” 12.

bewegt or “moved” being connected to the word *Bewegung* or “movement.” The straight male, in other words, could also learn something from political “movements” such as the women’s movement and the gay movement. Axel declares in Ralf König’s original comic book, “Well . . . I thought maybe something inside of me would move.”⁵

Ultimately the gay male character succeeds in tempering the straight male’s stereotypically masculine qualities, making him more attuned to the needs of his female sexual partner. The straight male remains attractively macho, and he is never really sexually tempted — although he may be flattered — by the attention of the gay man, who typically remains unattached and sexually unfulfilled. However, by means of his friendship with the gay male, the straight male acquires some of the stereotypical attributes of gay men: increased sensitivity and refinement, and the like (the same attributes, for instance, that enabled gay men to council straight men on interior decoration and other matters in the American television “reality” show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which enjoyed considerable popularity early in the twenty-first century). Ultimately, they are all reconciled with one another. In *Der bewegte Mann* the gay male Norbert is finally able to bond with the homophobic Doro thanks to his concern and appreciation for Doro and Axel’s child, whose birth Norbert helps facilitate as a kind of midwife. The gay male, then, helps to make the straight male appreciate and understand straight women better, and he is able to provide the straight woman with comfort and nurture when the straight man, perhaps precisely because of his heterosexuality, cannot. He even facilitates heterosexual reproduction.

Ralf König’s original comic book, created in 1987, differed significantly from the film, primarily in its sexual explicitness and suggestion that some sort of sexual encounter occurs between the straight and the gay males.⁶ In other words, in the underground gay comic of the 1980s, the sexual threat posed by the gay man is real, and he ultimately succeeds in having sex with the straight man; hence, the woman is right to

⁵ Ralf König, *Der bewegte Mann: Comic* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1995; originally 1987), 22. By the end of König’s comic book, the straight male has in fact not “moved” at all. He remains precisely the same. This is one of the primary differences between the comic book and the movie.

⁶ See König, *Der bewegte Mann: Comic*, 101, where it is clear that Norbert gives Axel a blow job. See also Ralf König, *Pretty Baby: Der bewegte Mann 2* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2001; originally 1988), 91, where Norbert says: “I slipped under the covers and sucked on his dick. . . . So what?” Wortmann changes the story in other ways, as well. At the beginning of König’s original story, Axel feigns a suicide attempt in order to get Doro’s sympathy, and at the end of *Pretty Baby*, Norbert declares he wants nothing more to do with heterosexuals, and Axel and Doro seem uninterested in Norbert.

distrust him. Sönke Wortmann changed this story by rendering Norbert sexually harmless.

Wortmann, the son of a miner, was born on August 25, 1959, in Marl in the Ruhr region, Germany's industrial heartland and the traditional home of the German coal and steel industries. This background was to play a prominent role in his popular 2003 movie *Das Wunder von Bern*, one of whose main characters is a young boy growing up in the Ruhr in the 1950s. From the ages of seventeen to nineteen, Wortmann played soccer professionally. His interest in the sport expresses itself in *Das Wunder von Bern*, as well as in *Deutschland — Ein Sommermärchen* (Germany — A Summer Fairy Tale, 2006), a documentary about the 2006 World Cup in Germany. After receiving his high school diploma, Wortmann worked at odd jobs for a few years, among other things as a taxi driver, a period subsequently memorialized in his short film *Nachtfahrer* (Night Drivers, 1981), which the young director made even before his formal study of film began. From 1984 to 1988 Wortmann, like many of his most successful predecessors — such as Wim Wenders and Margarethe von Trotta — studied at the Munich School for Television and Film; he also studied at the Royal College of Art in London for one year. In 1985, together with some friends, Wortmann started his own production company, which ceased operation in 1990.

The short films he directed before and during film school show an ironic and self-reflexive approach to movie-making. *Nachtfahrer* tells the story of two taxi drivers who, during their nightly drives, dream their private dreams. In *Fotofinish*, a despairing man wants to put an end to his money problems by blowing up Munich's television tower and taking a sensational picture of the explosion. Wortmann's final film for his diploma, *Drei D* (Three D), which made reference to Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam*, deals with a film student who is making a film about a film student who is making a film about a film student — i.e., it has three self-reflexive levels of reality. This is also a highly autobiographical picture, making reference to Wortmann's modest beginnings as the son of a miner. The director's big breakthrough came with *Allein unter Frauen*, originally made for television but so successful that it became a hit in movie theaters in 1991. This film was followed by *Kleine Haie* (Little Sharks) in 1992. Wortmann's progression from television to film is typical of some of the most important German directors of the 1980s and 1990s, including Helmut Dietl — who moved from television to film after the tremendous success of his 1992 comedy *Schtonk!* — and Andreas Dresen, who primarily directed television shows until the success of *Nachtgestalten* (Figures of the Night, 1999) catapulted him into film.

At one level *Der bewegte Mann* is the product of a Germany that, over the course of the 1990s, came to view tolerance of homosexuality as a key element in civilized discourse. The year of the film's success was also

the same year in which the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) eliminated traditional legal penalties against homosexuality. These penalties had been enshrined in the notorious paragraph 175 of the German legal code, a leftover from the *Kaiserreich*. Seven years after the success of *Der bewegte Mann*, in 2001, the government legalized same-sex unions called *eingetragene Partnerschaften* (registered partnerships). Since then, homosexual couples have been able to live together with official sanction and legal benefits in Germany. By 2005 homosexuality was so widely accepted that it was even proposed in the state of Baden-Württemberg that immigrants' attitudes towards it should be one of the criteria for their eligibility for German citizenship: potential citizens, for instance, might be asked how they felt about the fact that a number of prominent German politicians were openly gay — such as Guido Westerwelle, the head of the Free Democratic Party, who was to become Germany's foreign minister in 2009 — or how they might react if their son informed them that he was gay and intended to move in with his male lover. Homophobic answers would be presumably seen as grounds for denial of German citizenship.⁷ *Der bewegte Mann*, which appeared well before the official sanctioning of same-sex partnerships, was thus clearly part of a broader trend in Germany toward tolerance and acceptance of, and even appreciation for, the gay minority. It represents not just an individual straight man who has "moved" his approach but rather an entire nation.

As tolerant as the film's approach to homosexuality is, however, its gay male figure — whom Andreas Kilb calls "der freundliche Schwule" (the friendly fag) — must pay a high price for his relative integration into German society. He must remain sexually unfulfilled, and the erotic energy that might otherwise go into a sexual relationship with another man is instead sublimated and channeled into helpfulness vis-à-vis the straight couple. The gay man's role, as Kilb writes, is "to mend the heterosexual subtenant's kaput relationship," and because of his ultimate renunciation of sexual fulfillment, "he promotes reconciliation in the battle of the sexes."⁸ Randall Halle has suggested that ultimately the crisis in the heterosexual couple's relationship can only be solved via the learning experience that the heterosexual man undergoes thanks to his relationship with his gay male friend: "the distance between him and her, can only be bridged through a bridging of the distance between him and him."⁹

⁷ See <http://www.gay.ch/family/muslim.html> (accessed June 6, 2006).

⁸ Andreas Kilb, "Wir können nicht anders . . . Über den Erfolg der jüngeren deutschen Filmkomödie," in *Der bewegte Film: Aufbruch zu neuen deutschen Erfolgen*, ed. Heike Amend and Michael Bülow (Berlin: VISTAS, 1997), 25–34; here, 32.

⁹ Halle, "'Happy Ends' to Crises of Heterosexual Desire: Toward a Social Psychology of Recent German Comedies," 23.

Halle also points out that homosexuality as depicted in the film — and not just in the film — is just as restrictive and prohibitive as heterosexuality. Although entirely positive in her view of *Der bewegte Mann*, Ute Lischke-McNab concurs, suggesting that the film demonstrates “that queer politics has, much like its heterosexual counterpart, similarly complex social and political hierarchies.”¹⁰

To recapitulate the contrasts between German and American comedies involving gay males: in the former, the straight male consistently remains the primary focus of attention and an object of sexual attraction for both the gay man and the straight woman. In the latter, the straight man is decentered and marginalized by the straight woman’s friendship with the gay man, which helps to make her emotionally independent of the straight man. However, even though the German comedies foreground the gay males’ capacity to have a civilizing, sensitizing influence on straight males, they do not break with the convention of the straight male as the central protagonist: both the straight woman and the gay man are defined primarily through their relationship to the straight man. In contrast, in the American romantic comedies it is the straight woman who is the central protagonist of the film, and who gives both the gay and the straight males their function and definition. The German romantic comedies are thus, by implication, aimed at a straight male audience that can identify with the straight male protagonist, whereas the American romantic comedies are aimed at a straight female audience that can identify with the straight female protagonist. “Buddy movies” rather than “chick flicks,” these German films may temper the nature of straight male dominance — making it kinder and gentler — but they do not ultimately challenge that dominance; rather, they reinforce it. The central role of heterosexual masculinity in these movies suggests a Germany in which feminism, and the equalization of gender roles that feminism had once espoused, remains a distant, perhaps unreachable goal.

The Cologne that Axel, Doro, and Norbert inhabit is full of self-absorbed, comfortable people unconcerned with larger political or social issues that go beyond their own private lives. These are quintessentially cool, narcissistic West Germans who are not interested in the reunification of the German west and east. As Katja Nicodemus writes, “the collapse of the GDR and the dissolution of the Soviet Union may have marked the final end of the Cold War, a historical caesura and the beginning of a new era,” but, at least in mainstream German cinema, the Wall’s collapse left

¹⁰ Ute Lischke-McNab, “Gender, Sex, and Sexuality: The Use of Music as a Collateral Marketing Device in *Maybe . . . Maybe Not*,” in *Queering the Canon: Defying Sights in German Literature and Culture*, ed. Christoph Lorey and John L. Plews (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 403–19; here, 416.

hardly a trace.¹¹ The only implicit reference in *Der bewegte Mann* to the end of East Germany comes when a pianist at a party for gays is jokingly introduced as coming from the dissolved former GDR television ballet. It is likely that for Germans of the early to mid-1990s experiencing the tremendous changes that accompanied reunification, this movie is as significant for what it does not show as for what it does. *Der bewegte Mann* invited West Germans of this period to focus not on the real political and economic problems their country was then facing, but rather on the personal lives and concerns of self-absorbed yuppies. Nicodemus observes that these films were fundamentally “legitimations of a prosperous society concerned primarily with itself,” transforming cinema into the “expression of a jaded lethargy” entirely representative of the Helmut Kohl era.¹² These films give voice to a West Germany focused on the continuation of normal, everyday life. “Normal” may now be defined slightly differently from the way it was before — i.e., by an acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality — but it is still the dominant paradigm.¹³ And it is very much a West German, not an East German paradigm.

¹¹ Nicodemus, “Film der Neunziger Jahre: Neues Sein und altes Bewußtsein,” 320.

¹² Nicodemus, “Film der Neunziger Jahre: Neues Sein und altes Bewußtsein,” 326.

¹³ For an alternative reading of the new German sex comedies of the 1990s, one that views them as far more significant, see Dickon Copsey, “Women amongst Women: The New German Comedy and the Failed Romance,” in *German Cinema since Unification*, ed. David Clarke (London: Continuum, 2006), 180–206.



Veronica Ferres as Schneewitchen. Courtesy of the Deutsche Kinemathek.

30: *Rossini* (1997) or West German Self-Absorption Criticized

Director: Helmut Dietl

Cinematographer: Gernot Roll

Screenplay: Patrick Süskind and Helmut Dietl

Producers: Helmut Dietl and Norbert Preuss (Diana Film, B. A. Produktion, Bavaria Film, Fanes Film)

Editor: Inez Regnier

Production Design: Albrecht Konrad

Costume Design: Bernd Stockinger

Music: Dario Farina

Soundtrack: Chris Price, Christof Ebhardt, Julian Müller-Scherz, and Günther Ruckdeschel

German Release Date: January 23, 1997

Actors: Götz George (Uhu Zigeuner); Heiner Lauterbach (Oskar Reiter); Mario Adorf (Paolo Rossini); Gudrun Landgrebe (Valerie); Veronica Ferres (Schneewitchen); Joachim Król (Jakob Windisch); Hannelore Hoger (Charlotte Sanders); Armin Rohde (Dr. Sigi Gelber); Jan Josef Liefers (Bodo Kriegnitz); Martina Gedeck (Serafina); Meret Becker (Zillie Watussnik); and others

Awards: German Film Awards, 1997: Outstanding Feature Film, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Direction to Helmut Dietl, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Editing to Inez Regnier (also for *Echte Kerle*), Outstanding Individual Achievement for Supporting Actress to Martina Gedeck (also for *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*), German Screenplay Award to Patrick Süskind and Helmut Dietl; Ernst Lubitsch Award, 1997: Helmut Dietl; and others

ROSSI NI ODER DIE MÖRDERISCHE FRAGE, WER MIT WEM SCHLIEF was one of the most popular German movies of 1997, and in many ways it marked the culmination of the wave of film comedies that swept through German cinema in the post-reunification period. Unlike most of those comedies, however, which had been directed by younger filmmakers like Sönke Wortmann and Detlev Buck, who emerged on the scene over the course of the 1990s, *Rossini* was directed by veteran filmmaker Helmut Dietl. Born in 1944, Dietl was already well known for his 1980s television comedy series *Kir Royal*, a show named after a cocktail made with

champagne and crème de cassis, and focusing rather self-mockingly around the lives of the rich and famous in Munich. Dietl's comedy hit *Schtonk*, about the notorious 1983 forging of Hitler diaries, had successfully propelled him from television into film in 1992. For *Rossini*, Dietl again teamed up with his collaborator on *Kir Royal*, the respected writer Patrick Süskind, author of one of the most popular and internationally successful German novels of the 1980s, *Das Parfum* (Perfume, 1985). Like many of Dietl's works, *Rossini* is both a melodrama and a comedy, combining humorous and sad elements in a seamless web. Dietl himself refers to this kind of concoction as a "Melodramödie" (a melodramedy), adding that it is simultaneously "beautiful and terrible."¹

Rossini is a profoundly self-absorbed, even narcissistic film, since much of its plot and many of its jokes reflect or recall the real lives of its creators, even if those creators have been given different names for the movie. In many ways this is a *film à clef*, because many of its characters represent people who exist or once existed in real life. In order to fully understand and appreciate *Rossini* and its "in" jokes, it helps to know something about the Munich jet set that the film humorously and mockingly depicts. The restaurant for which the movie is named, *Rossini*, is based on an actual Munich restaurant named Romagna Antica, where Dietl and many of his friends liked to hang out in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, it still exists and continues to be frequented by many of the members of Munich's film and television world. Moreover, some of the restaurant's décor now comes from the set of Dietl's film *Rossini*, suggesting that the restaurant is proud to display its connection to the entertainment industry. During the 1980s and 1990s many wealthy, successful West Germans who loved Italy and traveled there on their vacations liked to make fun of themselves and their supposedly carefree, privileged lives. One group within the Social Democratic Party, for instance, became known as the "Toskana-Fraktion" (the Tuscany faction) named after the region where many of them (including Gerhard Schröder, who was German chancellor from 1998 to 2005) spent their vacations or had vacation homes. It is this milieu of cosmopolitan privilege coupled with narcissistic self-centeredness that Dietl satirizes in *Rossini*; in satirizing it, he is also, of course, satirizing himself.

Rossini is a movie about people who live to make movies — and who make movies as a living — and most of the major figures in the film are loosely based on actual figures from the Munich scene, including Helmut Dietl himself, who, in the film, becomes the director Uhu

¹ Helmut Dietl and Patrick Süskind, *Rossini oder die mörderische Frage, wer mit wem schlief* (Zurich: Diogenes, 1997), 280, 278. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

Zigeuner (played by veteran actor Götz George, the son of the Weimar- and Nazi-era actor Heinrich George). Dietl's friend and collaborator Patrick Süskind also writes himself into the script of the movie, becoming the famously reclusive writer Jakob Windisch (played by Joachim Król, who played the gay Norbert in Sönke Wortmann's *Der bewegte Mann*). Windisch is the author of an international bestseller named *Loreley*. The action of the film, most of which takes place on one night at the restaurant Rossini, follows three plot lines — one that might be termed male and two that might be termed female — that ultimately come together at the restaurant.² The first — male — plot line follows the director Uhu Zigeuner and his colleague, the producer Oskar Reiter, as they both try to convince their friend Jakob Windisch to allow them to make a film based on his bestselling novel. Reiter's character is based on Bernd Eichinger, who produced among other films Wortmann's *Der bewegte Mann*, and he is played by Heiner Lauterbach, whom many viewers would have remembered as the protagonist of Dorris Dörrie's hit film comedy *Männer* in 1985. The plot line allows for humorous reflections on the relationship between film and literature, and between German and American popular and high culture, since *Loreley* is purportedly a German novel based on a profoundly German theme: Clemens Brentano's and Heinrich Heine's nineteenth-century poems about a Rhine maiden who lures sailors to their deaths. Heine's famous poem, titled "Die Lorelei," contains the words:

I do not know what it means that
I am so sadly inclined;
There is an old tale and its scenes that
Will not depart from my mind.³

This is a Romantic poem about love, longing, and death, and the title of Windisch's novel indicates that it too is about love, longing, and death, and that any film based on it will likewise deal with the same weighty and very Germanic topics.

Whether Zigeuner's and Reiter's fictional film actually gets made or not — it probably does not, since the characters in *Rossini* seem to spend more time talking about making films than actually making

² See also Colin Riordan, "Den Amis in Hollywood ein für alle mal das Lebenslichtlein ausblasen!" Aspects of Text and Film in the Late 1990s," in *German Language Literature Today: International and Popular?*, ed. Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes, and Julian Preece (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000) 269–80; especially, 275–76.

³ Heinrich Heine, "The Homecoming 1823–1824," in *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, trans. and ed. Hal Draper (Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1982), 76–122; here, 76.

them — the film about it, *Rossini*, was actually made. And *Rossini* does indeed deal with heavy topics like love, longing, death, and Germanness, but in this movie they have lost the heavy weight of tragedy and turned into comedy. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Karl Marx had written that history happens first as tragedy and then repeats itself as farce.⁴ In essence, Marx's dictum describes the structural principle of *Rossini*: it turns a first-order tragedy, a purportedly serious and deeply Germanic novel named *Loreley*, into a second-order farce, a no-longer-quite-so-Germanic German film named after an Italian restaurant frequented by purveyors of German culture. At the same time, the plot line about a famously reclusive novelist reluctant to allow his novel to be filmed permits Süskind, the real writer, to ironize himself, since he too avoided the public and refused for many years the filming of his international bestseller *Das Parfum*. (*Das Parfum* was finally made into a commercially successful movie by Tom Tykwer in 2006, over two decades after the appearance of the novel.) One of the lines of the contract that Reiter makes with Windisch reads: "The screenplay can really not be made into a film at all, and if it *is* made into a film, then only with Uhu Zigeuner as director."⁵ Much of the audience of *Rossini* in Munich and elsewhere could have been expected to recognize and laugh at Süskind's mocking self-portrayal of a shy and rather weak representative of German high literary culture. In one scene Windisch is literally raped by a sex-starved middle-aged female gossip columnist (Charlotte Sanders, played by Hannelore Hoger), suggesting that the high seriousness attributed to German literary culture has literally been ravished by the demands of the new entertainment industry. Germany the *Kulturnation* has been transformed into the Germany of *Spaßkultur* (fun culture).

Rossini's two other — female — plot lines revolve around two female figures, who serve as love interests for the film's male protagonists. One of these women is the beautiful but ageing Valerie (played by Gudrun Landgrebe), who is turning forty, and who is involved in romantic relationships with both the producer Oskar Reiter and the pornographic love poet Bodo Kriegnitz (played by Jan Josef Liefers). The figure of Kriegnitz is also based on a real member of Munich's high society, the poet Wolf Wondratschek, who wrote the movie's poetic texts, including words spoken at the film's end and used in its subtitle:

It's the same old tune.
Everything's ruined.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 320.

⁵ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 92.

And the lethal question of who slept with whom, dissolves into self-satisfaction.⁶

Valerie longs for passion and absolute commitment in love. She is tired of cynicism and pretense, and her unhappiness is represented in the film by chronic constipation. One shot in the first half of the film shows Valerie sitting on the toilet unsuccessfully trying to have a bowel movement. As she tells her lovers in a fit of exasperation, “I want to be able to shit again just like before.”⁷ Symbolically, Valerie represents a German culture that is sated and stuffed with its own hedonistic privileges — the privileges of the *Toskana-Fraktion* — but that longs for something different, for a primitive, passionate romanticism that is long gone. “I want lust . . . unto unconsciousness . . . and quietness . . . and I want passion . . . unto insanity . . . and peace of mind . . . and friendship . . . harmonious friendship and . . . devouring love,” she declares.⁸ Valerie longs for an operatic *Liebestod*; she implores Kriegnitz: “Yes, kill me and . . . love me . . . love me to death! — You are the only one I love.”⁹ Whereas in Heine’s famous poem it is the male sailors who wreck their ships and lives out of desire for a woman, in *Rossini* it is the Loreley herself, the beautiful but no longer young Valerie, who ultimately commits suicide, and not her male admirers. Indeed, desperate at her failure to find true love in the arms of the various men who vie for her attention, Valerie kills herself in a bathtub, thus also mockingly preserving the aquatic motif of the German Romantic poem. No matter how hard she looks for someone who will play Tristan to her Isolde, all she can find are mendacious Philistines (“Spießer”) who, while they talk about absolute passion and beautiful pain, shy away from any attempt to make such words correspond to reality.¹⁰ Because Valerie’s two male admirers are unwilling to kill each other for her, she decides to kill herself. Valerie is represented by the color red, which recurs in a carriage filled with roses that picks her up on her birthday, in the stunning evening dress she wears for the occasion, and also in the bloody bathwater near the end of the film.

Contrasted with Valerie is the younger, more vigorous aspiring actress Schneewittchen (Snow White, played by Veronica Ferres), who learns to break the hearts of men (and women), using her sexuality to achieve professional success. Whereas Valerie is on a downward path to suicide, Schneewittchen is on an upward path to professional and sexual success.

⁶ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 129.

⁷ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 113.

⁸ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 83.

⁹ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 90.

¹⁰ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 112.

Schneewittchen first charms Rossini, the owner of the eponymous restaurant (played by Mario Adorf, a veteran of the New German Cinema who had played Alfred Matzerath, Oskar's father, in Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel*), who allows her to have access to his customers, and she then proceeds to charm all of the powerful males she needs in order to become a successful German movie star. The irony is that she actually is a remarkably good actress, if not on the screen, then at least in real life, since she ends up convincing all her men that they are the most important thing in the world to her. Schneewittchen's color, unsurprisingly, is white, represented particularly by the dress she wears to the restaurant on the night of her triumph. In the final scenes of the movie all three plot lines come together: Schneewittchen manages to get herself cast as the lead actress in the proposed film *Loreley*, and all of her rivals, including Valerie, are rendered harmless. Whether or not the film *Loreley* will actually be made is beside the point: *Rossini*'s real story is not about authentic art but about the way that the rich and beautiful are able to parlay discussions about art into money, power, fame, and sex. Schneewittchen's name may come from a Grimm Brothers fairy tale and suggest childlike innocence, but unlike the Grimms' Snow White, the film star is neither innocent nor kind. In *Rossini*, Schneewittchen is more like a wicked witch, recalling the subtitle of Windisch's fictional novel: "Geschichte einer Hexe" (the story of a witch).¹¹ Schneewittchen is, however, able to manipulate others' perception of her innocence and kindness for her own ends; she is a wicked witch posing as Snow White. The film's real tragic heroine is not Schneewittchen, who survives, but Valerie. The irony — and part of what makes the film neither a comedy nor a tragedy but a "Melodramödie" — is that the tragic heroine, in any future film, will be played not by the real-life tragedienne Valerie, but by the cynical comedienne Schneewittchen.

Rossini is a movie by and about film people, showing Munich's elites as living in a kind of self-enclosed bubble more or less impermeable to the outside world. Just like *Der bewegte Mann*, *Rossini* begins with a shot of a restaurant, but whereas Sönke Wortmann's camera had never left the confines of the establishment during his film's opening scene, *Rossini*'s opening shot is taken from outside the restaurant, placing it in a larger context. Within the walls of the restaurant Rossini, however, other aspects of contemporary German or world culture are shut out and cease to exist. In this comfortable Munich society, the problems of German reunification, the war in Yugoslavia that was raging when the film was made, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, etc., do not exist. This is a culture comfortable with itself and not interested in broader or deeper questions about itself or the rest of the world. Having been caught completely unaware and unprepared for reunification, it more or less ignored the upheaval in German life

¹¹ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 72.

even after it had happened. At the time of reunification in 1990, Süskind himself had acknowledged his own lack of interest in the great problems of the German present, admitting that “the unity of the nation, [and even] the national itself, simply wasn’t our topic. . . . Whether the Germans lived in two, three, four, or a dozen states was completely irrelevant to us.”¹² In *Rossini*, Süskind and Dietl depict their own milieu of self-absorbed, privileged West Germans who, although they profit from the marketing of German high culture, are untouched by traditional German political and aesthetic problems. Instead, they prefer to consume Italian food and pursue attractive sexual partners.

Precisely because of its insistent self-reflexivity, however, *Rossini* is also tremendously revealing in what it has to say about the rise of the German film comedy in the 1990s and the purported post-reunification “normalization” of Germany. In the eyes of the outside world and also in its own eyes, Germany is generally seen not as a land of comedy but as a land of tragedy, not as a land of humor but as a land of seriousness.¹³ To use the language of the film *Rossini*, it is the land of the Loreley — of suicide and destruction. The nineteenth-century writer Ferdinand Freiligrath once called Germany Hamlet: a melancholy national subject lost in reflection on the world’s, and its own, inadequacies.¹⁴ This is the kind of cultural stereotype that the film’s characters, involved in producing a deeply German film called *Loreley*, are trying to market to both Germans and the rest of the world. The suicidal figure of Valerie represents this kind of German culture and its failure. The reclusive author Jakob Windisch also exemplifies German literary culture and its purportedly great achievements. The bankers and producers in the film wish to use the prestige of this kind of culture to beat American movie culture at its own game. Two of the film’s prospective financial backers believe it is “high time for us Germans to finally show the Amis what’s what!”¹⁵ In order to do this, however, they must transform the supposedly unique heritage of German high culture into an interchangeable market commodity, something that can be consumed as easily as the Italian food bought and sold at the *Rossini* restaurant. In order to triumph internationally, German culture’s proponents have to de-Germanize and normalize it. *Rossini* represents a Germany struggling mightily to overcome its *Sonderweg*, its special historical

¹² Patrick Süskind, “Deutschland, eine Midlife-crisis,” in *Angst vor Deutschland*, ed. Ulrich Wickert (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1990), 111–22; here, 118.

¹³ See my article “The Politics of German Comedy,” *German Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (February 2000): 33–51.

¹⁴ Ferdinand Freiligrath, “Hamlet,” in *Freiligraths Werke in Einem Band*, ed. Werner Ilberg (Berlin: Aufbau, 1980), 74–76.

¹⁵ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 95.

path, partly by marketing its own purportedly special culture as a kind of trademark. This Germany wants to become normal like other nations. This had been Chancellor Helmut Kohl's great desire at the moment of the economic unification of East and West Germany in the summer of 1990. Asked what he most wanted for his nation, he replied: "That things will normalize. That's the most important thing for us, that we become a wholly normal country, not 'singularized' in any question . . . that we simply don't stick out. That's the important thing."¹⁶

The movie depicts the defeat of the two serious/tragic figures in the film — Valerie and Jakob Windisch — and the triumph or survival of the more cynical figures. This tragic principle, itself a part of serious German literary culture, is associated with femaleness: Valerie is quite literally a woman who commits suicide because of two men, while Jakob Windisch is a bumbling and unmanly man — German film viewers would not have forgotten him as the gay Norbert in *Der bewegte Mann* — whose novel *Loreley* implies both a female heroine and a female readership. That the celebrated novel appeals largely to women becomes clear during a scene in which Reiter's banker colleagues discuss the money-making possibilities of transforming the book into a film:

Melk (thoughtfully): Well . . . for women this *Loreley* seems to have positively mystical dimensions . . .

Weich: . . . three hundred million reading women . . . uh . . . women readers throughout the world . . . more than the Bible!¹⁷

What the film depicts as coming to an end is both a reality — Valerie and her life — and the literary depiction of that reality in Windisch's novel, which is to be co-opted into a film. It is this self-reflexive playing with reality and fiction, with fiction and film, and with the terms of its own creation that makes the film a remarkably productive reflection on post-reunification German culture. It is as if the proponents of Germany's normalization and of the new German comedy had decided to make a film about their own lives and ideas. Henryk Goldberg's suggestion that "this comedy . . . is a melancholy film about the new Germany" conveys the extent to which the restaurant Rossini and Germany are identical.¹⁸ And yet the film functions more as a triumph over melancholy through humor.

¹⁶ Serge Schmemann, "Kohl, the Man for the German Moment," *The New York Times*, 1 July 1990, 1 and 4.

¹⁷ Dietl and Süskind, *Rossini*, 77.

¹⁸ Cited in Stephen Brockmann, "The Politics of German Comedy," *German Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (February 2000): 33–51; here, 46. From Henryk Goldberg, "Als die Bilder tänzeln lernten," <http://sunsuite.informatik.rwth-aachen.de/Filme/1997/rossini.html>.

Rossini is thus at one and the same time part of the comedy wave that occurred in Germany after reunification and also a critique of it. In spite of its humor, it is far more melancholy and cynical than a film like *Der bewegte Mann*, and its ending cannot exactly be described as happy. And although tragedy and German seriousness meet a bad end in this film, their demise leaves viewers wondering whether the triumph of narcissistic comedy and German “normalization” is entirely a good thing.

At the German film awards of 1997, *Rossini* was named the best German film of the year, Helmut Dietl was named best director, and along with Süskind, they also won the German screenplay award. The film attracted 3.2 million domestic viewers. Although it was a huge hit in Germany, *Rossini* remained virtually unknown outside the country. Its title led briefly to one critic’s designation of some Germans as *Rossini-Deutsche* (Rossini Germans), but precisely because of its knowing send-up of contemporary German narcissism it remained fundamentally inaccessible to foreigners who were not a part of that culture.¹⁹ *Rossini* thus also reflected an ironic imbalance between Germany’s own perception of itself and the world’s perception of it. Whereas many Germans by the mid 1990s saw themselves as a normalized, hedonistic part of the western consumer world, full of humor and self-irony, much of the rest of the world continued to see Germany as a purveyor of serious or profound culture of the sort satirized but also mourned in *Rossini*.

¹⁹ Thomas Assheuer, “Die Rossini-Deutschen: Nachwort auf die alte Bundesrepublik,” *Die Zeit* 14, 1997, <http://www.zeit.de/1997/14/titel.txt.19970328.xml> (accessed January 5, 2010).



Franka Potente as Lola. Courtesy of the Kobal Collection.

31: *Lola rennt* (1998) or Cool Germania

Director: Tom Tykwer

Cinematographer: Frank Griebe

Screenplay: Tom Tykwer

Producers: Stefan Arndt, Gebhard Henke, Maria Köpf, and Andreas Schreitmüller (X-Filme Creative Pool, WDR, ARTE)

Editor: Mathilde Bonnefoy

Production Design: Alexander Manasse

Costume Design: Monika Jakobs

Music: Tom Tykwer, Reinhold Heil, and Johnny Klimek

Sound: Frank Behnke and others

German Release Date: August 20, 1998

Actors: Franka Potente (Lola); Moritz Bleibtreu (Manni); Herbert Knaup (Lola's father); Nina Petri (Jutta Hansen); Armin Rohde (Herr Schuster); Joachim Król (subway beggar); Hans Paetsch (voice of the narrator); and others

Awards: German Film Awards 1999: Film Award in Gold — Outstanding Feature Film; Outstanding Individual Achievement for Cinematography to Frank Griebe, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Direction to Tom Tykwer, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Editing to Mathilde Bonnefoy; German Film Critics Award, 1999: Best Film; Ernst Lubitsch Award, 1999: Tom Tykwer; and others

WITH *LOLA RENNT* (Run Lola Run), his third feature film, Tom Tykwer catapulted himself to fame and fortune. The movie, whose fast-paced plot takes place on the streets of Berlin, was the biggest German-made hit of 1998–99 both nationally and internationally. In addition to attracting well over two million German viewers in 1998, it won the 1999 German Film Awards for best director and best picture. At the dawn of the new millennium, this film seemed to announce to the world the arrival of a dynamic young Germany synonymous with what many observers had begun to call the post-reunification “Berlin Republic,” differentiating it from the “old,” pre-unification Federal Republic, whose capital had been located in the sleepy provincial town of Bonn. The writer Helmut Krausser declared that the summer of 1998, when the movie was

released, would go down in history as the summer “in which Lola ran,” and in which, “finally, in Germany, something happened.”¹

In 1999, the year of Tykwer’s international success, German politicians pulled up stakes in Bonn after half a century there and moved the center of the German government to Berlin. Earlier, in the second half of 1998 as the film was screening in German cinemas, the Federal Republic’s long-serving conservative chancellor, Helmut Kohl, was defeated in federal elections by the younger Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder. Upon moving to Berlin, Schröder proclaimed that he did not miss Bonn at all. Kohl, a famously overweight politician who looked incapable of fast movement, was replaced by the fit, trim Schröder; Germany’s new foreign minister, the youthful-looking Green politician Joschka Fischer, could regularly be seen jogging through the streets of Berlin. If the old Germany, represented by Kohl and dubbed the “Bonn Republic,” embodied — at least to its critics — stasis, age, and hesitation, the new Germany represented by Schröder and Fischer transformed — at least for its proponents — matter into energy, emphasizing dynamic movement, youth, and action.

Several years after Tykwer’s film heralded the coming of the new Germany cinematographically, the sociologist Heinz Bude published a study entitled *Generation Berlin* about a new generation of German youth who were far more flexible and dynamic than previous German generations.² Lola, the beautiful and powerful protagonist of Tykwer’s film, with her tattoos and her hair dyed bright red, seemed a perfect embodiment of Germany’s new self-image, as the political torch passed from the old to the new government and the capital moved from Bonn to Berlin. Without stopping long to think or reflect, Lola (played by Franka Potente) ran through the streets of Berlin, trying to save her clumsy but cute lover Manni (played by Moritz Bleibtreu). With a name already famous in German film history — the name of the character played by Marlene Dietrich in Josef von Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel* (1930) and by Barbara Sukowa in Fassbinder’s *Lola* (1982) — the protagonist of Tykwer’s film acquired iconic status. Even German politicians tried to profit from that status. Running for reelection in 1998–99, Berlin’s Christian Democratic mayor Eberhard Diepgen sought to capitalize on the dynamic, youthful iconography of Tykwer’s film by featuring himself on campaign posters placed throughout Berlin emblazoned with the words “Diepgen rennt” (Diepgen runs). The picture on the poster showed Diepgen, like Lola, running

¹ Helmut Krausser, “Lola: Ein Nachwort, viel zu früh,” in Michael Töteberg, ed., *Szenenwechsel: Momentaufnahmen des jungen deutschen Films* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1999), 35–39; here, 39. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

² Heinz Bude, *Generation Berlin* (Berlin: Merve, 2001).

through the streets of the new German capital. In the middle of 1999, Germany's minister of culture Michael Naumann also cribbed from Tykwer's movie, appearing in an advertisement in Berlin's *Morgenpost* running through the streets of the city and through a group of women in black nuns' habits, just as Lola had in Tykwer's film.³ Not coincidentally, this advertisement announced the coming of that year's German Film Prize, in which *Lola rennt* was named best film of the year.

Lola rennt was one of those rare German movies that had both critics and film audiences raving about it. Its success can be attributed to a number of factors: Franka Potente's dynamic portrayal of the running Lola; a hip and fast-paced techno sound track, with music partly written by Tom Tykwer himself and featuring lyrics often sung or chanted by Franka Potente; fast editing that enhanced the film's dynamism and that, combined with the throbbing techno soundtrack, gave the movie the feel of a contemporary music video; a clever mix of different visual media, from conventional film and video to still shots and even animation; a philosophical framework that easily combined seeming profundity with the slick surfaces of popular culture; and an innovative plot that allowed its main characters, and its viewers, to experience both repetition and newness, as the film's main story is played out three times, each time with key differences. Helmut Krausser called the film more than just a movie; it was, for him, "an opera, in which the music, in contrast to other cinematic productions, is a necessary part of the sight-and-sound synthesis."⁴ The importance of the film's music and its relative lack of dialogue also gave *Lola rennt* something of the feel of a 1920s silent film. The entire film lasted for about eighty minutes, making it slightly shorter than a soccer game — a context invoked in the movie's prologue by a uniformed bank guard who cites from the legendary German soccer coach Sepp Herberger, the man who won the 1954 World Cup for Germany in Bern: "The ball is round, the game lasts 90 minutes. That's clear enough. Everything else is theory."⁵ That quote, together with another one from Herberger that appears as an epigraph at the movie's beginning ("After the game is before the game"), set the terms of the movie itself: it will be short, it will be fast-paced, it will take the form of a game, and it will transform endings into beginnings. Of course, ninety minutes is also the duration of an average movie, and movies can be thought of as a kind of

³ Margit Sinka, "Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt*: A Blueprint of Millennial Berlin," *Glossen* 11, <http://www.dickinson.edu/glossen/heft11/lola.html> (accessed January 5, 2010).

⁴ Krausser, "Lola: Ein Nachwort, viel zu früh," 35.

⁵ Tom Tykwer, *Lola rennt*, ed. Michael Töteberg (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1998), 7.

game. As Lutz Koepnick has pointed out, “Lola’s run, in the final analysis, is a run up, against, and down the hallways of cinema itself — including the convention that films ought to last ninety minutes and, in the end, leave no questions, and hence no temporal uncertainties, open.”⁶

Lola rennt is by no means the only movie to feature repetition and circularity, or in which a similar plot is played out with slight differences a number of times. Harold Ramis’s American hit comedy *Groundhog Day* (1993) contains this feature, as does Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek*, 1981), and a number of British and American movies from the 1990s and 2000s, including Peter Howitt’s *Sliding Doors* (1998), which appeared in the same year as Tykwer’s *Lola rennt*, and Eric Bress’s and J. Mackye Gruber’s *The Butterfly Effect* (2004). Perhaps the most celebrated example of a film that presents a series of variations on the same basic plot is the great Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950). In Kurosawa’s film, however, the plot does not literally repeat itself; instead, each of the characters narrates the same event in a different way. Thus, Kurosawa suggests that there is an ultimate truth, but that the truth is very hard, if not impossible, for human beings to achieve. What is left at the end of *Rashomon* is the devotion to love and charity, represented by one character’s decision to take care of a baby he has found abandoned at a ruined gate. Other films with repetitive plots also feature the search for ultimate truth, goodness, or love. In Ramis’s *Groundhog Day*, the cynical protagonist Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray), must repeat the same day over and over again until he has finally gotten his attitude right and transformed himself into a good person. In *The Butterfly Effect*, the protagonist Evan Treborn (played by Ashton Kutcher), ultimately comes to realize that his existence is harmful to the world, and at the end of the movie he wills himself out of existence. Tykwer’s film also begins with a series of philosophical questions as viewers see large numbers of people, some of whom will subsequently appear in the film’s plot, moving — apparently without any goal — around the screen: “Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going to? How do we know what we believe we know? Why do we believe anything at all? Countless questions in search of an answer. . . .”⁷ Gradually, the camera begins to pull away from these people, moving up to show them forming themselves into the letters of the film’s title: *Lola rennt*. This opening suggests that what viewers will be seeing is merely some of endless combinations that might be possible with these people, but that in the end, the “countless questions” are always also, as the prologue’s commentary tells us,

⁶ Lutz Koepnick, “Free Fallin’: Tom Tykwer and the Aesthetics of Deceleration and Dislocation,” *The Germanic Review* 82, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 7–30; here, 15.

⁷ Tykwer, *Lola rennt*, 6.

“the same question.”⁸ It also suggests that although individuals may not understand the larger patterns of which their motions are a part, such patterns nevertheless exist. Still, although it has similar philosophical elements to some of the other movies that feature circularity and repetition, Tykwer’s *Lola rennt* does not place its main character on a path to introspection, reflection, or enlightenment, except in two brief but important interludes over the course of the film. Quite the contrary, the film places Lola in motion, and the point of the movie’s repetitions is not so much to come to some sort of ultimate enlightenment as it is the pleasure of the game itself. “Everything else,” as the uniformed bank guard in the movie’s prologue had declared, “is theory.”

The basic plot of *Lola rennt* gives Lola precisely twenty minutes to come up with one hundred thousand Deutschmarks for her lover Manni — a sum that he owes to his underworld crime boss but that he has lost to a bum in a subway car — or Manni will face death. If Lola does not appear at a designated location — a telephone booth near a supermarket somewhere in the middle of Berlin — by twelve noon, Manni declares that he will rob the supermarket. The three repetitions of the plot feature possible outcomes of Lola’s, Manni’s, and other people’s actions based on slight variations in the characters’ behavior. In the plot’s first iteration, Lola fails to come up with the money, and she also fails to get to Manni in time to stop him from robbing the supermarket. In the ensuing confrontation between the couple and the police, Lola is killed by an accidentally fired bullet. Grant P. McAllister has argued that this first “running” features the defeat of the female principle (Lola) by the principle of patriarchy.⁹ In the second version, Lola does manage to acquire the needed money (she steals it from the bank where her father works as a manager), and she even gets to Manni in time. This time, however, Manni is run over by an ambulance that had also appeared, but missed him, in the plot’s first iteration. For McAllister this “running” represents the triumph of the female principle over the patriarchal principle, but it is a useless triumph, since Lola loses her lover.¹⁰ Thus both these versions have unhappy endings, conforming to the stereotype of German national cinema’s purported negativity. The plot’s final variation features a perhaps tongue-in-cheek Hollywood happy ending, as Lola not only wins one hundred thousand Deutschmarks at a casino, but Manni also retrieves the hundred thousand marks that he had previously lost to the subway bum (played by a well-disguised Joachim Król, who had portrayed the

⁸ Tykwer, *Lola rennt*, 6.

⁹ Grant P. McAllister, “Romantic Imagery in Tykwer’s *Lola rennt*,” *German Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (May 2007): 331–48; here, 337–39.

¹⁰ McAllister, “Romantic Imagery in Tykwer’s *Lola rennt*,” 339–42.

gay Norbert in *Der bewegte Mann* and Jakob Windisch in *Rossini*).¹¹ At the end of the plot's third and final iteration, both lovers not only survive, but they are, at least temporarily, rich. For McAllister, Lola's third "running" represents a Hegelian synthesis of the first and the second runnings, with female and male principle conjoined.¹²

Interspersed throughout these three plot variations, which A. Robert Lauer has identified as "macro-sequences," are brief subplots that refer to the possible fates of various characters whom Lola encounters along the way. Lauer calls these subplots "mini-sequences."¹³ In essence, these characters represent obstacles that Lola must confront or overcome on her path to save Manni. In the three main plot iterations, not only the macro-sequences but also the mini-sequences are different, and some of these mini-sequences are actually played out at high speed. While in some of these sequences the characters end happily, in others they end unhappily. For instance, in one mini-sequence included in the first macro-sequence, Frau Jäger, who works at Lola's father's bank, has an auto accident, becomes a drug addict, and kills herself. But in the second macro-sequence, Frau Jäger enters into a relationship with Herr Kruse, a cashier at the bank, who likes to be whipped by her, and the two appear to live happily ever after.¹⁴ The implication is that seemingly minor changes in cause can produce major changes in effect (the so-called butterfly effect). In *Lola rennt*, everything seems to be connected with everything else, but in a highly complicated and unpredictable way. The ambulance that runs over Manni in the second macro-sequence carries a bank guard who seems to have suffered a life-threatening heart attack; in the third macro-sequence, the guard is saved via a miraculous intervention from Lola. Thus, although the various sequences are separate and distinct, they also appear to be interconnected in mysterious ways. This

¹¹ See Christine Haase, "You Can Run, But You Can't Hide: Transcultural Filmmaking in *Run Lola Run* (1998)," in *Light Motives: German Popular Film in Perspective*, ed. Randall Halle and Margaret McCarthy (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2003), 395–415; here, 411. See also Haase, "From *Lola* to *Heaven*: Tom Tykwer Goes Global," 40.

¹² McAllister, "Romantic Imagery in Tykwer's *Lola rennt*," 345.

¹³ A. Robert Lauer, "Run Lola Run at the Dawn of Postmodernity," *Simile: Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 3, no. 1 (February 2003): 1–9; accessed electronically: <http://utpjournals.metapress.com/content/v7462472k15n873l/>.

¹⁴ McAllister points out that the differences in these mini-sequences are aligned with the overall thrust of the macro-sequences: in the first "running," female protagonists fail even in the mini-sequences, while in the second "running" female protagonists triumph. See McAllister, "Romantic Imagery in Tykwer's *Lola rennt*," 340.

same guard had appeared in the movie's prologue, intoning Sepp Herberger's words about the soccer ball being round and kicking it into the air, beginning the main part of the movie. Lola herself seems to learn things from sequence to sequence, because her behavior in the second and third sequences appears to be influenced by what she has experienced in the previous sequences: toward the beginning of the third sequence, for instance, she manages to avoid a dog and its owner who had caused her problems previously.¹⁵

If one thinks of the three macro-sequences as the acts of a play, then one can also think of the pauses between acts as interludes in which the film's viewers, and also its protagonists, have a chance to rest and regroup from the fast action of the plot.¹⁶ The film's two interludes feature Lola and Manni in bed in a post- and/or pre-coital situation ("After the game is before the game"), smoking cigarettes and talking to each other about their lives and the various plot twists they have encountered or imagined. These interludes, which are filmed in red to suggest passion and languor, place Lola and Manni outside the main plot line of the macro-sequences, as if this plot line no longer or never had a fundamental impact on them in the first place. Whereas inside the macro-sequences Lola and Manni usually appear to be at the mercy of fate and spurred on by events outside of their control, in these interludes the lovers appear to be enjoying themselves and each other, as well as their own stories. They are, in a sense, consumers of their own fate. As Lola lies dying at the end of the first macro-sequence, the camera moves in for a close-up of her eyes, and viewers then see Lola and Manni lying in bed together, bathed in red light, as Lola begins to ask Manni a series of questions about whether or not he truly loves her and would really miss her if she were gone: "I want to know what you feel."¹⁷ At the end of this interlude, the camera once more zooms in on Lola's eyes, and viewers again see her dying on the street, but this time she says: "But I don't want to. I don't want to go away." At this point, the camera focuses on the red bag full of money that Lola had tossed into the air a second before, and which, after she voices the command "Stop," morphs into the red telephone she had thrown into the air at the beginning of the second macro-sequence.¹⁸ In other words, Lola has given herself a chance to work through the plot again and survive. After Manni has died at the end of the second macro-sequence,

¹⁵ See Owen Evans, "Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*: Postmodern, Posthuman, or 'Post-Theory'?" *Studies in European Cinema* 1 (2): 105–15; here, 109.

¹⁶ Haase contends that "the script approximates a classical three-act structure," "From *Lola* to *Heaven*: Tom Tykwer Goes Global," 38.

¹⁷ Tykwer, *Lola rennt*, 59.

¹⁸ Tykwer, *Lola rennt*, 61.

the camera zooms in on his eyes and then pulls away to reveal Lola and Manni again (or still) lying in bed together, bathed in red light, during the second interlude. This interlude reverses the terms of the first, since it is Manni who asks Lola whether she would truly miss him if he were to die: "Lola? If I were to die now, what would you do?"¹⁹ Lola answers that he isn't dead yet. The camera then zooms in on Manni's eyes, and we see him on the street, where he has been run over by the ambulance, but is still alive. Again, the camera focuses on a bag of money thrown into the air (this time a green bag from the bank), and again, the money bag morphs into the red telephone that Lola has thrown up into the air, this time at the beginning of the third macro-sequence. Neither Lola nor Manni likes the outcome of the first and second macro-sequences (since these outcomes destroy their existence as a couple), and therefore, the two lovers will the final macro-sequence to come into being with its happy ending. As Lola says to Manni in answer to his question about what she would do if he were to die: "I wouldn't let you die."²⁰

The interludes in which Lola and Manni lie in bed, smoke cigarettes, and ask each other questions, endow the two lovers with a certain power over their fate, as if they were some eternal and indestructible beings watching the unfolding of their possibilities in various realities, but are not completely absorbed by or beholden to any one reality. Tykwer says that these interludes represent for him "the secret heart of the movie," because they feature "absolutely no special effects . . . , no camera features and no fast-paced panting but rather two people who are simply talking to each other. These scenes have a credible intimacy."²¹ If there is a philosophical import to this film, it is that human beings and their fates are fundamentally random, chaotic, and destined to endless repetition, reiteration, and transformation, but that certain essences or forces remain constant and unchanged in the midst of this flux and motion. All soccer games, after all, are different, but they all also feature the same fundamental number of players (eleven) and the same amount of time (ninety minutes). In *Lola rennt*, Lola and Manni and all the other characters remain essentially the same, even as their fates differ tremendously. What remains of fundamental importance for Lola and Manni, in spite of the different outcomes of their stories in the different macro-sequences, is their love for each other. In this sense, *Lola rennt*, like Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, does suggest an ultimate truth: the importance of love. As Lutz Koepnick has argued, the experience of love

¹⁹ Tykwer, *Lola rennt*, 92.

²⁰ Tykwer, *Lola rennt*, 92.

²¹ "Generalschlüssel fürs Kino: Tom Tykwer im Literarischen Salon Hannover, moderiert von Michael Althen," in Töteberg, ed., *Szenenwechsel: Momentaufnahmen des jungen deutschen Films*, 17–33; here, 22.

for Tykwer's characters "suspends the ordinary templates of space and time and ushers them into a parallel universe in which their desires are hampered neither by the gravity of place nor by the finitude of time."²² But while *Rashomon* implies that charity and love are universally valid, Tykwer's *Lola rennt* does not suggest that there is any universal validity for Manni's and Lola's love, which exists only between the two of them, and in which other figures are primarily obstacles.

Many commentators have noted that, although *Lola rennt* is very much a Berlin film and takes place in some of Berlin's well-known venues, it also creates an imaginary, unreal geography. Lola's route through the city, more or less recognizable to viewers familiar with Berlin in the second half of the 1990s, is literally impossible for one person to traverse in the space of twenty minutes, and it makes no sense geographically. Margit Sinka has even suggested that because Tykwer seamlessly connects locations in East and West Berlin, his movie is the first post-reunification film to show Berlin as a unified, whole city, and that Lola is the first German film "protagonist equally at home in all of Berlin's disparate parts."²³ There may be some truth to this. However, it would probably be a mistake to take the film's fusion of east and west too literally, since the Berlin that Tykwer creates in *Lola rennt* is more virtual than real. Just as the fates of its characters are more or less random, chance manifestations of larger forces conceived as eternal and unchanging, so too the Berlin of this movie, with its impossible routes and geographical juxtapositions, is a fundamentally imaginary, random construction based on certain essential principles — principles that include the people who inhabit it and its various locations, however impossibly jumbled together.

This is a Berlin, and a Germany, that exists in a hyperreality much akin to the hyperreality of American cyber hits like Andy and Larry Wachowski's *Matrix* series (1999, 2003). The Berlin of *Lola rennt* is the Berlin of a video game, not the Berlin of social reality — although elements of social reality enter into it, such as the bum who steals Manni's bag at the beginning of the film. This Berlin is unified not so much because east and west have come together as because they were never divided (because the actual historical past of Berlin plays no role in the movie), and all directions are relative anyway. It does not matter whether Lola and Manni, or any of the people Lola encounters along her path, are from the east or west. It is also beside the point to ask why Lola does not just get into a taxi to go

²² Koepnick, "Free Fallin': Tom Tykwer and the Aesthetics of Deceleration and Dislocation," 22–23. Koepnick is referring to Tykwer's film *Heaven* here, but his point holds true as well for *Lola rennt*.

²³ Margit Sinka, "Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt*: A Blueprint of Millennial Berlin," *Glossen* 11, accessed electronically.

where she needs to go.²⁴ The film does provide an explanation for Lola's running, but it cannot be taken too literally: her moped has been stolen, and she had failed to meet Manni at an appointed designation because a taxi driver had taken her to the wrong spot (although Lola's explanations make no sense when compared to a real map of Berlin). Therefore she does not trust taxis. However, the real reason Lola does not take a taxi to her destination — or move time back to a point before Manni lost the one hundred thousand Deutschmarks — is the same reason that a participant in a sailing regatta does not get into a motor boat to get to his, or that a soccer player does not throw the ball into the goal with hands and arms: it would not be part of the game. In the Berlin of this particular game, the only way to get from beginning to end is to run, not to ride. Moreover, Lola is an active principle, not a passive spectator, and she is not going to wait for anyone, let alone a taxi driver, to take her where she needs to go.

Lola's Berlin has no divided past and appears to be missing most of its historical markers. It is a hip young Berlin far removed from the Berlin of Wim Wenders's angels in *Der Himmel über Berlin*, angels who can watch but not intervene or take action.²⁵ Tykwer's Lola is also quite different from her two famous predecessors, von Sternberg's and Fassbinder's Lola characters, both of whom had moved slowly or remained stationary, and who had exerted a destructive effect on their men. This Lola moves quickly, and her intervention is intended to save the life of her man.²⁶ Lola can also scream and break glass like Oskar Matzerath in Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel*, and her scream endows her, as it had Oskar, with elemental power: in the film's third macro-sequence, her scream seems to force the ball on a roulette wheel to stop at the number 20 (a figure that represents the twenty minutes that Lola has to achieve her goal), the bet that enables her to win the needed sum of one hundred thousand marks. In some ways, Lola is a contemporary German female embodiment of Gary Cooper's Will Kane in the German emigrant Fred Zinnemann's classic American Western *High Noon* (1952). Like Kane, Lola must confront her destiny at noon. And when she arrives for her rendezvous with destiny in the last macro-sequence, the streets of Berlin are miraculously empty, as if Berlin were now the reincarnation of an empty Western cinematicscape.

Like Helmut Dietl's *Rossini oder die mörderische Frage, wer mit wem schließt*, Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt* presents an image of contemporary

²⁴ Margit Sinka, "Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt*: A Blueprint of Millennial Berlin," *Glossen* 11, accessed electronically. Lutz Koepnick underscores that it would be equally pointless for Lola to use a cell phone. See Koepnick, "Free Fallin': Tom Tykwer and the Aesthetics of Deceleration and Dislocation," 16.

²⁵ McAllister convincingly points out the film's adherence to certain Romantic aesthetic principles, however.

²⁶ See Caryl Flinn, "The Music that Lola Ran To," in *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of Modern German Culture*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick (New York: Berghahn, 2004), 197–213; here, 207.

Germany fundamentally different from, and at odds with, conventional German and non-German imaginings of German national identity. The characters in both of these films are absorbed in their own lives and have little time to ponder the complexities of German history and culture. Tykwer's *Lola* is even less touched by the problems of that culture than Dietl's *Schneewittchen*. *Lola* represents a dynamic, young, intelligent, and physically beautiful Germany, but via Tykwer's implied references to the Nietzschean philosophy of eternal recurrence, she also suggests a certain continuity between hyperreality and postmodernity on the one hand and nineteenth-century German philosophy on the other.²⁷ Moreover, as Christine Haase has pointed out, Tykwer turns the tables on American pop culture: through musical citations of American classical composer Charles Ives and a T. S. Eliot quote about "the end of all our exploring" being the place "where we started" — a quote that echoes Sepp Herberger's "After the game is before the game" — Tykwer constructs America as the country of serious, staid high culture. In contrast, his Germany emerges as a hip, cool, young, and sexy country via Herberger's quotes and the film's incessant techno rhythms. The German psychoanalyst Annegret Mahler-Bungers suggests that *Lola rennt* offers disoriented contemporary youth in the western world a narrative in which they can imagine overcoming "their passive role as mere objects of social forces and, at least partially, develop into self-determined subjects."²⁸ The figure of *Lola* represents for Mahler-Bungers precisely this youthful rebellion against the destabilizing world of adult hypocrisy, and by identifying with her, the film's youthful viewers can begin to imagine the creation of order out of chaos. In the 1990s, Berlin was the capital of world techno culture, with its annual Love Parade, which regularly drew hundreds of thousands of young people to the German capital each July. *Lola rennt* marked Berlin as a virtual territory for this generation of youth around the world. With its English-language lyrics and paucity of dialogue, it was accessible globally, not just to German speakers. This separated *Lola rennt* from Dietl's *Rossini*, which had been a hit in Germany but remained unknown abroad. With *Lola rennt*, Tom Tykwer was cleverly able to combine the specifically German with international youth culture, and to lay a claim for Germany's active agency within that culture. He had made Germany cool.

²⁷ See Alexandra Ludewig and Mathias Keller, "Nietsche ist nicht tot: Zumindest nicht in *Lola rennt*," *Germanic Notes and Reviews* 32/2 (2001): 130–48.

²⁸ Annegret Mahler-Bungers, "A Post-Postmodern Valkyrie: Psychoanalytic Considerations on Tom Tykwer's *Run, Lola, Run* (1998)," in *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema*, ed. Andrea Sabbadini (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 82–93; here, 87. In a structurally similar way, Koepnick suggests that Tykwer's films help their audiences to imagine "a profound emancipation of identity and meaning from the strictures of time and space." See Koepnick, "Free Fallin': Tom Tykwer and the Aesthetics of Deceleration and Dislocation," 10.



Christiane Kerner and her son Alex. Courtesy of the Kobal Collection.

32: *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) or Farewell to the Socialist Motherland

Director: Wolfgang Becker

Cinematographer: Martin Kukula

Screenplay: Wolfgang Becker and Bernd Lichtenberg

Producers: Stefan Arndt, Katja De Bock, and Andreas

Schreitmüller (X-Filme Creative Pool, ARTE, WDR)

Editor: Peter R. Adam

Production Design: Lothar Holler

Costume Design: Aenne Plaumann

Music: Yann Tiersen

Soundtrack: Christoph Dudek and others

German Release Date: February 13, 2003 (premiere: Berlinale, February 9, 2003)

Actors: Daniel Brühl (Alex Kerner); Katrin Saß (Christiane Kerner); Florian Lukas (Denis); Maria Simon (Ariane Kerner); Chulpan Khamatova (Lara); Alexander Beyer (Rainer); Burghart Klaußner (Robert Kerner); Michael Gwisdek (Klapprath); and others

Awards: Berlin International Film Festival, 2003: Blue Angel to Wolfgang Becker; European Film Awards, 2003: Best Actor to Daniel Brühl, Best Film to Stefan Arndt, Best Screenplay to Bernd Lichtenberg; German Film Awards, 2003: Film Award in Gold — Outstanding Feature Film, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Actor to Daniel Brühl, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Direction to Wolfgang Becker, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Editing to Peter R. Adam, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Music to Yann Tiersen, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Production Design to Lothar Holler, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Supporting Actor to Florian Lukas; German Screenplay Award, 2002: Wolfgang Becker and Bernd Lichtenberg; and others

WOLFGANG BECKER'S *GOOD Bye LENIN!* was, financially, the most successful of the wave of *Ostalgia* films released in Germany around the turn of the millennium. Unlike Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999), which had initiated the cinematic *Ostalgia* trend four years earlier, *Good Bye Lenin!* was actually directed by a West German, not an East German. Becker was one of three directors, including Tom Tykwer of

Lola rennt, who, in 1994, joined together to create the successful production company X-Filme Creative Pool, a director-driven ensemble that gave directors access to financial backing while helping them to preserve creative control over their work, somewhat in the way that the Filmverlag der Autoren had functioned in the 1970s and 1980s. Becker's most notable critical success previously had been *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (literally: Life is a Construction Site; English title: Life is All You Get, 1997), a humorous exploration of life in Berlin during the 1990s. Made for only a few million euros, *Good Bye Lenin!* was easily the most successful German film of 2003, attracting nearly six and a half million people to movie theaters in Germany, almost twice as many as its nearest German rival, Wortmann's *Das Wunder von Bern*. *Good Bye Lenin!* was almost as popular in Germany as *Lord of the Rings 3: The Return of the King*, and it easily beat two of the most popular American movies on the German market that year: *The Matrix — Reloaded* and *The Matrix — Revolutions*.¹

Like its nostalgic predecessor, Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin Is in Germany* (2001), *Good Bye Lenin!* is essentially a Rip Van Winkle story. It explores the tremendous changes experienced by the inhabitants of Berlin and Germany over the course of reunification, by telling the fate of a character who knew the East Berlin of the 1980s, but who was out of commission during the crucial months surrounding November, 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell. The Rip Van Winkle character therefore ultimately reenters and must adjust to a once familiar but now radically changed environment.² *Berlin Is in Germany* had placed its main character, Martin Schulz (played by Jörg Schüttauf), out of commission by having him sent to prison prior to the opening of the Berlin Wall; when Martin gets out of prison years later he is no longer in a country called the German Democratic Republic, and Berlin is the capital of a country called the Federal Republic that used to be foreign territory to him. This new foreignness is represented by the English-language title of the film, which suggests that Martin must learn a new geography and language even though he is returning home.

Various novels over the course of the 1990s had featured similar constructions, including Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (1995 — in this novel the protagonist is in a hospital for several weeks prior to November 9, 1989, and therefore unaware of what is happening in the outside world until he is released), and Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr* (Eduard's

¹ See Norbert P. Flechsig et al., eds., *Filmstatistisches Jahrbuch 2004* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2004), 48, 50.

² For considerations of both films, see Nick Hodgin, "Berlin is in Germany and *Good Bye Lenin!*" *Debatte* 12, no. 1 (2004): 25–45; and Jennifer M. Kapczynski, "Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in *Berlin Is in Germany* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*" *The Germanic Review* 82, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 79–100.

Homecoming, 1999), a novel about a former inhabitant of West Berlin who returns to the city in the 1990s after having spent many years in the United States. *Good Bye Lenin!* adds an interesting twist to the basic concept of confronting a figure with changes he or she never experienced while they were happening: in this movie, it is not the protagonist Alex, but rather his mother Christiane Kerner (played by Katrin Saß, herself an East German with experience in the GDR's film industry before reunification) who is placed out of commission at the moment of the GDR's collapse. A committed socialist loyal to the GDR state, Christiane Kerner has a heart attack and falls into a shock-induced coma when she sees Alex participating in protest rallies on the occasion of the GDR's fortieth anniversary in October, 1989. By the time she has come out of her coma in the middle of 1990, the former GDR's socialist dictatorship had collapsed, and capitalism had replaced socialism as the West German mark superseded East Germany's currency. Alex's mother, however, has no idea what has just happened. Moreover, Christiane's doctors explain to Alex that any further shock to her system caused by undue excitement could kill her. Alex therefore sets himself the task of shielding his mother from any further surprises, and this means keeping her in the dark about the changes that have occurred. He creates for his mother, who is mostly bedridden in her East Berlin apartment, an entire alternate reality that becomes increasingly complex and difficult for him to maintain: In essence, Alex recreates the GDR in his mother's bedroom, making it into the kind of successful socialist state that it never was in reality, but that his mother perhaps thinks it was, and that he probably wishes it had been.

This situation is complicated and made even more poignant by the fact that Alex's father had left the GDR in 1978, when Alex was only about eight years old, and now lives in West Berlin, a successful citizen of the Federal Republic with a new wife and new children on the other side of the former Wall. Throughout his childhood, Alex and his sister Ariane (played by Maria Simon) believed that their father had deserted them. It is only toward the end of the film, when his mother is about to die, that she tells her children the truth — namely, that her husband had expected her to leave the GDR after him, but that she had failed to do so: "I was terribly afraid," she tells her children, especially because the GDR authorities could have taken her children away.³

Because Alex grew up as the only son of a woman whose husband had left her, he has become her primary male companion, and their relationship is extremely close. When his mother had gone into severe depression after her husband's departure, Alex had comforted her and helped to

³ Michael Töteberg, ed., *Good Bye Lenin!* (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 2003), 110. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

bring her back to health. Thus, Alex's nurturing, supporting role for his mother after German reunification plays out some of the same patterns already evident over a decade earlier. Because he has a father and two half-siblings in West Berlin, Alex also has two homelands, one female and one male: the GDR is his motherland, whereas the FRG is his fatherland. The two homelands are not emotionally or intellectually contiguous. Alex's relationship to the GDR is fundamentally based on his relationship to his mother who, for him, embodies the best of the GDR's ideals. The GDR is also the land of Alex's childhood, a childhood that he remembers nostalgically, and during which he had been a rocket enthusiast and idolized the East German astronaut Sigmund Jähn, the first German in space. All of this defines the GDR as Alex's true *Heimat*, since, as Anton Kaes has written, the figure of the mother is inextricably linked to the concept of *Heimat*, a concept with a long history in German cinematic culture.⁴

Alex had dreamed of ultimately becoming the second German in space, and that he would fly "deeper and farther than anyone before."⁵ Alex's childhood memories of the GDR, which the film's viewers see in grainy film footage indicating past time, are full of his mother directing choirs of school children, wearing the uniform of the Junge Pioniere (young pioneers, a kind of Communist combination of the Cub Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls), and singing songs about the beauty of their socialist homeland. Although Alex understands that the GDR was not a democracy, and although he participated in demonstrations against the GDR's leadership in 1989, he is nevertheless unwilling to surrender his childhood dream of what the GDR might have been, because this dream connects him emotionally to his ailing mother, and also to his own innocence. *Good Bye Lenin!* was in part a remarkable accomplishment because, coming from a West German director, it allowed even non-East Germans to understand the former GDR as something like a *Heimat*.

The discrepancy between the reality outside Alex's mother's bedroom and the fiction inside it provides ample room for comedy. For instance, on his mother's birthday, Alex pays local children to get dressed in the uniform of the Junge Pioniere and sing a song by her bedside, and he pays a former East German party hack from her old school — now a down-on-his-luck alcoholic — to give a speech in his mother's honor. Alex's friend Denis (played by Florian Lukas) is an aspiring young filmmaker with a keen knowledge of American film classics like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and since the two of them work for a satellite television company, they have access to some of the tools they need to make their own videos. Alex and Denis create their own fictional version of

⁴ Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 168–69.

⁵ Töteberg, ed., *Good Bye Lenin!* 15.

East Germany's television news show *Aktuelle Camera*, which they feed into the mother's television monitor. The news show explains the growing presence of westerners and western products in East Berlin, which cannot be concealed even from Alex's bedridden mother, by claiming that more and more West Germans are taking refuge in East German embassies in search of a better, happier society than the one provided by western capitalism (exactly the reverse of what actually happened in 1989, when it was East German citizens who stormed West German embassies in search of refuge in the west). When a large red Coca-Cola sign is unfurled from the top of a nearby high-rise — the very high-rise onto which, near the beginning of the film, red banners celebrating the GDR's fortieth anniversary had been hung — Alex and Denis rush to the scene and do an impromptu television show about the Coca-Cola company's supposedly having admitted that the formula for its famous soft drink was actually invented in East Germany early in the postwar period. Since East German consumer products are disappearing from supermarket shelves in East Berlin, Alex goes to the trouble of repackaging West German and foreign products so that they will look like the East German brands his mother has come to expect, even devoting considerable energy to finding an old jar for Spreewald gherkins, his mother's favorite kind.

All these episodes, as humorous as they are, convey to viewers the tremendous emotional impact experienced by East Germans undergoing the change from the socialist GDR to the capitalist FRG. This is a change that occurs not just at the level of government and employment, but also at the level of everyday consumer products and interior decoration. Alex's formerly ambitious sister Ariane, who had once studied economics, now works at the drive-through window of a Burger King and dates the franchise's West German manager; she wears a silly-looking uniform and, according to corporate etiquette, never forgets to thank her customers for choosing the American hamburger chain. An emotional low point for her occurs when her West Berlin father appears at the drive-through window as a customer with his new family. These and other scenes deftly demonstrate to viewers how the transformation from socialism to capitalism has radically changed people's lives, their work, and their relationships.

One of the film's most impressive images features a helicopter flying a massive statue of Lenin into the distance. It is this image that gives the film its name. This segment of *Good Bye Lenin!* is in part an homage to Federico Fellini's classic film about postwar Italy, *La dolce Vita* (The Good Life, 1960), which begins with camera shots of a helicopter moving a large statue of Jesus Christ. In Fellini's film the implication is that postwar Italy has lost the religiosity that once permeated it. Fellini's Italy is a country in which Jesus Christ, apparently incapable of miracles himself, must fly by means of mechanical contraptions. The message in Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* is similar, but it is the religion of socialism being dispatched, with

Lenin, not Jesus, as its major icon. Whereas Fellini's image was primarily symbolic, Becker's image refers to something that actually took place throughout eastern Germany in the years following the Wall's collapse: the removal of many of the statues of Lenin and other prominent Communists from streets, squares, and parks. One of the most famous and massive of these statues, located in the heart of East Berlin, had occasioned a major debate in the early 1990s.⁶ Alex's mother Christiane, who has escaped her bedroom sanctuary and ventured onto the streets of East Berlin, watches the statue of Lenin as it comes close to her and seems to turn and bless her before disappearing into the sunset.

A man who resembles Alex's childhood hero Sigmund Jähn, makes two key appearances in the movie. When Alex first encounters him, he is driving a taxi cab, an indication of the depths to which even formerly famous and successful East Germans have apparently fallen in the wake of the GDR's collapse. If the real Sigmund Jähn once piloted vehicles into outer space, his double is now driving customers around the reunified Berlin. The man's second appearance comes in a fictional telecast he makes, at Alex's request, at the movie's end, when Christiane is about to die, and Alex decides to tell her the story of German reunification, albeit with a twist. Pretending to be the new leader of the German Democratic Republic, "Jähn" announces that he is opening the Wall and allowing West Germans to come to East Germany. In effect, "Jähn" announces the peaceful reunification of West and East Germany, with East Germany as the triumphant, stronger partner:

Our country has its birthday today. Viewed from space, it is a very small country, and yet in the last year thousands of people have come to us. People whom we once viewed as enemies and who now want to live with us. We know that our country is not perfect. But what we believe in has inspired many people throughout the world again and again. Perhaps we have lost sight of our goals occasionally, but we have come back to them. Socialism doesn't mean walling oneself off. Socialism means taking a step towards one another and living with one another. Not just to dream of a better world but to make it a reality. I have therefore decided to open the borders of the GDR.⁷

This speech is accompanied by a triumphant instrumental version of the GDR's national anthem, written by Hanns Eisler, a tune immediately recognizable to former citizens of the GDR, and also to many older West Germans. Johannes R. Becher's text to this music invokes the pathos of rebuilding a ruined Germany after the war: "Auferstanden aus Ruinen"

⁶ See Roger Hillman, "Goodbye Lenin (2003): History in the Subjunctive," *Rethinking History* 10, no. 2 (June 2006): 221–37; especially 232.

⁷ Töteberg, ed., *Good Bye Lenin!* 127.

(Resurrected from the Ruins).⁸ The speech by the Jähn figure suggests the possibility of a better, more open socialism than the one actually practiced in the historical GDR. It is followed, in the fictional news broadcast, by actual historical footage of Germans streaming through the Wall, but in this fictional context it looks as if it is West Germans and West Berliners coming triumphantly to East Germany in search of a better, socialist way of life. Alex's friend Denis, dressed up as an East German news broadcaster, comments on the pictures of Berliners celebrating together around the Wall: "Not everyone wants to participate in careerism and consumer terror. Not everyone is made for the me-first mentality."⁹ This "news story" becomes all the more poignant precisely because the viewers of *Good Bye Lenin!* — and, it turns out, even Christiane Kerner herself — know that it is fictional, that in fact East Germans are struggling with precisely the problems that, the broadcast claims, West Germans are trying to escape — "careerism," "consumer terror," and the "me-first mentality." Hence, the broadcast invites reflection on the possibility of a different history and a kinder Germany: the possibility of a Germany that would truly be a "motherland," a refuge for all of its children seeking protection and comfort. Roger Hillman sees "the film not as *Ostalgie*, but as the director's (Western) projection of a version of the GDR that might have been worth preserving, one whose claims to contributing something to the new Germany could not have been ignored."¹⁰

Alex's mother dies only a few days after the end of the GDR, once again confirming, at least in Alex's mind, that she and the East German state are coterminous. In honor of Christiane's wishes, and of his own childhood, Alex has her body cremated, and sends her ashes up into the sky above East Berlin in a small rocket painted in the colors of the GDR flag. This rocket looks precisely like the rocket that a much younger Alex had sent into the sky a decade earlier. As Alex reflects in his voice-over commentary: "The country that my mother left was a country that she had believed in. And that we kept alive up to her last dying breath. A country that never existed in this way in reality. A country that, in my remembrance, will always be connected to my mother."¹¹ Alex speaks these words against a background of pictures of the sandman, the GDR's classic children's television character, who, in an earlier sequence, had gone up into outer space in Alex's childhood rocket, just like the astronaut Sigmund Jähn. This is the same figure that Alex had watched together with his half-brother and

⁸ Johannes R. Becher, "Auferstanden aus Ruinen," in Becher, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 6, *Gedichte 1949–1958* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1973), 61.

⁹ Töteberg, ed., *Good Bye Lenin!* 128.

¹⁰ Hillman, "Goodbye Lenin (2003): History in the Subjunctive," 226.

¹¹ Töteberg, ed., *Good Bye Lenin!* 131.

half-sister on television in their father's West Berlin house. What is going up into outer space along with the ashes of Alex's mother is Alex's childhood with all the dreams that used to make him who he was. Alex is now a grown man, with a girlfriend of his own. He is the primary male figure not for his mother, but for his Russian girlfriend. He may have lost his mother and his motherland, but he knows that somewhere up there in space she is looking down at him: "She's floating around now somewhere up there, and maybe she's looking down at us. And sees us as tiny dots on our tiny earth. Just like Sigmund Jähn back then."¹²

Good Bye Lenin! was not just a popular movie but also a culturally important one; in it, Wolfgang Becker, although himself a West German, was able to capture much of the sense of historical disenfranchisement, personal loss, and displacement experienced by many East Germans in the process of German reunification. As Roger Hillman has noted, "film in general, and this film in particular, are capable of a suggestiveness that is not a postmodern capitulation before history, but rather bears an ambiguity capable of conveying some of history's complexities."¹³ During the months of the GDR's collapse and in the lead-up to economic and political reunification, many observers had imagined the joining of east and west as a kind of wedding, with the Federal Republic in the groom's role and the GDR in the bride's. The GDR was conceived of as the weaker and insufficient part of Germany, the part that needed assistance from a stronger male.¹⁴ Thomas Brussig's reunification novel *Helden wie wir* (Heroes Like Us, 1995) had made the GDR's feminized status explicit: In that novel, socialism is referred to as a primarily female phenomenon — "these mothers and figure-skating coaches are genuinely attached to socialism" — while the GDR's effeminacy is represented by East Germany's most famous living writer, the novelist Christa Wolf, about whom there had been a major literary debate in 1990, the year of reunification.¹⁵ Brussig's protagonist, angry at the GDR and what he sees as the GDR's clammy, incestuous version of socialism, proclaims: "even today they still rhapsodize about 'true socialism' when what they really mean is their campfire emotions."¹⁶ Brussig's protagonist particularly criticizes Christa Wolf as a kind of GDR mother-figure responsible for infantilizing

¹² Töteberg, ed., *Good Bye Lenin!* 130.

¹³ Hillman, "Goodbye Lenin (2003): History in the Subjunctive," 233.

¹⁴ See Susan S. Morrison, "The Feminization of the German Democratic Republic in Political Cartoons 1989–90," *Journal of Popular Culture* 25, no. 4 (1992): 35–52.

¹⁵ Thomas Brussig, *Heroes Like Us*, trans. John Brownjohn (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 233. German original: Thomas Brussig, *Helden wie wir* (Berlin: Volk & Welt, 1996; original edition 1995), 288.

¹⁶ Brussig, *Heroes Like Us*, 234. German original: Brussig, *Helden wie wir*, 288.

him and other males like him. In reality, Christa Wolf had come under criticism from Frank Schirrmacher, the critic for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for maintaining a “familiar, almost intimate relationship with the state and its institutions.”¹⁷ However, when Alex, the narrator of *Good Bye Lenin!*, declares toward the beginning of the movie that his mother had been “married to our socialist fatherland,” he does not mean it negatively, because he understands and sympathizes with the psychological mechanisms that led his mother to identify with the GDR state.¹⁸

Given the history of western and eastern attacks on the particular kinds of close social and family bonds made possible and perhaps even necessary in the German Democratic Republic, Wolfgang Becker’s gentle, loving portrait of a committed GDR socialist woman and her son’s mourning for her, as well as for the state that she represented, stands out for its warmth and lack of rancor. As Paul Cooke rightly notes, the film is “unambiguous in its recuperation of the utopian impulse behind the GDR’s socialist project,” taking seriously and even respecting the socialist idealism that had been so harshly criticized by Brüssig and others.¹⁹ At the same time, the film is also implicitly critical of the west’s failure to live up to the ideal of a truly humanistic society. Although directed by a West German, *Good Bye Lenin!* became the quintessential *Ostalgie* film because it publicly allowed East Germans to remember not only the negative but also the positive aspects of their childhoods, and it allowed them to mourn the loss of a dream that had once, however tentatively and imperfectly, been embodied in the GDR state. The American critic Eddie Cockrell, a specialist in German film for the Hollywood magazine *Variety*, acknowledged that *Good Bye Lenin!* was “a costume film deeply anchored in its era,” but in the end, he asked, “what story does this film tell other than one about a nice young man who loves his mother?”²⁰ This question overlooks the way in which Alex’s relationship to his mother embodies the relationship between many East Germans and their former state. The film is not “just” about a young man’s conflicted love for his ailing mother, but about several generations’ conflicted feelings about a socialist homeland that has disappeared into history.

¹⁷ Frank Schirrmacher, “Dem Druck des härteren, strenger Lebens standhalten?: Auch eine Studie über den autoritären Charakter: Christa Wolfs Aufsätze, Reden und ihre jüngste Erzählung *Was bleibt*,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 June 1990, in the unpaginated glossy insert *Bilder und Zeiten*. Reprinted in Thomas Anz, ed., *Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf: Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland* (Munich: Spangenbergs, 1991), 77–89.

¹⁸ Töteberg, ed., *Good Bye Lenin!* 13.

¹⁹ Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 132.

²⁰ Eddie Cockrell, “Die ganze Reife,” *Die Zeit*, 11 May 2006, 52. Cockrell’s comments came in response to a request from *Die Zeit* to a number of foreign film experts to comment on contemporary German cinema.



Cahit and Sibel. Courtesy of the Kobal Collection.

33: *Gegen die Wand* (2004) or Germany Goes Multicultural

Director: Fatih Akin

Cinematographer: Rainer Klausmann

Screenplay: Fatih Akin

Producers: Stefan Schubert, Ralph Schwingel, and others (Wueste Film, Corazón International, ARTE, NDR)

Editor: Andrew Bird

Production Design: Tamo Kunz

Costume Design: Katrin Aschendorf

Music: Alexander Hacke and Maceo Parker

Sound: Kai Lüde and others

German Release Date: March 11, 2004 (premiere: Berlinale, February 12, 2004)

Actors: Birol Ünel (Cahit Tomruk); Sibel Kekilli (Sibel); Catrin Striebeck (Maren); Meltem Cumbul (Selma); Stefan Gabelhoff (Nico); Demir Gökgöl (Yunus Güner); Cem Akin (Yilmaz Güner); and others

Awards: Berlin International Film Festival, 2004: Golden Bear, Prix FIPRESCI to Fatih Akin; European Film Award for Best Film to Stefan Schubert and Ralph Schwingel; German Film Awards, 2004: Film Award in Gold — Outstanding Feature Film to Stefan Schubert and Ralph Schwingel, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Actor to Birol Ünel, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Actress to Sibel Kekilli, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Cinematography to Rainer Klausmann, Outstanding Individual Achievement for Direction to Fatih Akin; National Society of Film Critics, 2006: Best Foreign Language Film; and others

FATIH AKIN, BORN IN HAMBURG IN 1973 to Turkish immigrants, achieved a sensation in Germany and internationally with *Gegen die Wand* (literally: Against the Wall; English title: Head On). Not only did the film win the Golden Bear for best film at the 2004 Berlin International Film Festival — the first German-made film to do so in almost two decades — it also won the same year's European film award for best film, as well as garnering Akin the audience award for best director. For many, *Gegen die Wand* announced that Turkish-German filmmaking had come into its own.

And yet Turkish-German filmmaking had been around for almost two decades before *Gegen die Wand* achieved its success. In 1986 Tevfik Baser's film *40 m² Deutschland*, a movie about a Turkish woman imprisoned in her own home, had achieved modest critical and commercial success. Over the course of the 1990s, a number of other Turkish-German filmmakers, including Sinan Çetin and Yüksel Yavuz (a Kurd), had produced works that elicited critical acclaim. What differentiated Akin's *Gegen die Wand* from the films of these other directors was not only its innovative subject matter, but also — perhaps even more importantly — the way that Germans reacted to it. The German mainstream press greeted it not just as a Turkish film, but as a specifically German film, and they treated its triumph as their own triumph. *Bild*, Germany's most popular tabloid newspaper, described Fatih Akin as someone with exotically “wavy, wiry black hair and wonderful olive-colored skin,” who could, nevertheless, speak German with a Hamburg accent “like Hans Albers.” *Bild* gratefully thanked Fatih Akin for making Germans and Turks “into one nation.”¹ Akin, together with Thomas Arslan and a few others, became part of a cohort of young Turkish-German filmmakers redefining German cinema itself.

Such reactions suggested that, for German critics, *Gegen die Wand* signaled the integration of Turkish-Germans into mainstream culture. Whereas previous films by filmmakers of Turkish descent had been viewed as dealing primarily with issues in their own community, and of only marginal interest to people outside that demographic, *Gegen die Wand* was seen by many critics — albeit not all — as a German movie dealing with problems that touch ordinary German people. Furthermore, in contrast to previous films that had tended to treat Turkish-Germans as victims of traditional Turkish culture or the larger German environment — what Rob Burns has called the “cinema of the affected” — *Gegen die Wand* treated its protagonists as self-directed individuals trying to negotiate their own personal and social problems.² The younger generation of Turkish-German filmmakers, of which Akin was the most prominent member, shared, as Burns has written, “a common motivation in their desire to break with the dominant image sustained by earlier portrayals of migrants in Germany, that of the Turk as victim.”³ They eschewed what Burns has called “a miserabilist naturalism

¹ Katja Nicodemus, “Ankunft in der Wirklichkeit: Mit Fatih Akins ‘Gegen die Wand’ siegt das deutsche Kino über die deutschen Träume von einer Leitkultur,” *Die Zeit*, 19 February 2004, 41. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

² Rob Burns, “Turkish-German Cinema: From Cultural Resistance to Transnational Cinema?” in *German Cinema Since Unification*, ed. David Clarke (London: Continuum, 2006), 127–49; here, 133.

³ Rob Burns, “Towards a Cinema of Cultural Hybridity: Turkish-German Filmmakers and the Representation of Alterity,” *Debatte* 15, no. 1 (April 2007): 3–24; here, 11.

in which characters are denied agency and configured as merely passive victims of their social circumstances.”⁴ The reaction in Germany to *Gegen die Wand* suggested that at least some Germans had begun to view Germanness as pluralistic and hybrid rather than monolithic or exclusive. Not just ethnic Germans could contribute to the cultural construction of Germanness, but ethnic Turks living in Germany could do so as well. Akin himself celebrated his hybrid cinematic identity, proclaiming: “I see having grown up in two cultures as an advantage. That gives me security. I do not have to transmit a message of tolerance or deny one of my cultures. I simply link them — in my person and in my films.”⁵

The change in perception might seem insignificant in a country like the United States, where notions of an ethnic and cultural “melting pot” have long held sway, but it is quite important in a nation like Germany, which has traditionally seen itself as ethnically and culturally homogeneous. Whereas the United States has always defined itself as a country built by immigrants, Germany — in spite of postwar immigration by millions of ethnic Turks, Italians, and Greeks, among others, initially for the purpose of filling a severe labor shortage — has not seen itself as an *Einwanderungsland* (country of immigration). The success of *Gegen die Wand* showed that rigid concepts of German cultural identity were loosening, and that Germany was beginning to see itself as both a country of immigration and a site for intercultural hybridization. Katja Nicodemus proclaimed in the pages of *Die Zeit* that *Gegen die Wand* marked the triumph “of German cinema” over the monocultural dreams of German nationalists.⁶ This purported victory also contributed to the German state’s own efforts to depict itself as tolerant and supportive of multicultural understanding. Ironically, however, Fatih Akin had actually turned to directing in part because, in his work as an actor, he was tired of playing stereotypical Turkish roles in which, as he later remembered, “migrants could only appear in one guise: as a problem.”⁷

In some ways the characters and plot of *Gegen die Wand* prefigured the positive reactions of German film reviewers. The film’s two protagonists — Cahit Tumruk (played by Birol Ünel) and Sibel Güner, his second wife (played by Sibel Kekilli) — are both ethnic Turks who are more at home in Hamburg than in Istanbul and more comfortable with German than Turkish. As Daniela Berghahn points out, these characters

⁴ Burns, “Towards a Cinema of Cultural Hybridity: Turkish-German Filmmakers and the Representation of Alterity,” 17.

⁵ Cited in Burns, “Towards a Cinema of Cultural Hybridity: Turkish-German Filmmakers and the Representation of Alterity,” 11.

⁶ Nicodemus, “Ankunft in der Wirklichkeit,” 41.

⁷ Cited in Burns, “Turkish-German Cinema: From Cultural Resistance to Transnational Cinema?” 142.

are “post-migrants,” who feel relatively comfortable in contemporary Germany and who harbor no romantic notions about the superiority of traditional Turkish culture.⁸ Unlike many earlier immigrants from Turkey, they do not wish to return to the land of their ancestors. Cahit’s Turkish is broken, and when he is asked by his prospective brother-in-law Yilmaz Güner why he does not speak better Turkish, he replies that he has thrown the Turkish language, and presumably also Turkish culture, away. Cahit lives an essentially German urban lifestyle. He is a forty-something rock-and-roll and punk fan with a fondness for illegal drugs and alcohol, and he lives alone in an excruciatingly messy apartment. For a living he collects cans and bottles at a grungy music-and-dance establishment called “Die Fabrik” (The Factory). Once married to a German woman named Katharina, who is dead now, he staves off loneliness with drugs and alcohol, as well as with occasional sexual romps with a German hairdresser named Maren (played by Catrin Striebeck). Cahit is so estranged from Turkish culture that he refers to other Turks as “Kanaken,” an epithet originally used by racist Germans about the Turks, but subsequently appropriated by hip Turks about themselves. Cahit, however, uses the word not for himself, but rather for other, more “Turkish” Turks whom he dislikes.⁹ Obviously more at home in contemporary Germany, Cahit is severely critical of traditional Turkish culture. In one scene, sitting at a table with his brother-in-law Yilmaz and two of Yilmaz’s friends, he is openly bored and disgusted with their talk about sex with prostitutes. While they are chatting in Turkish, Cahit asks them in German, “Why don’t you fuck your own wives?”¹⁰ This question elicits an angry response from one of the men, who warns him never to use the word “fuck” in connection with his and his friends’ wives. Cahit’s question and his use of German swearwords suggest not only his level of comfort with contemporary German culture, but also his deep estrangement from traditional Turkish values, whose notions of female virtue and family honor are foreign to him. Later in the film, after his second wife Sibel’s family has disowned her for “dishonoring” the family by engaging in adultery, and after Yilmaz has told him of the need to “save” the family’s “honor,” he asks skeptically, “And did

⁸ Daniela Berghahn, “No Place Like Home? Or Impossible Homecomings in the Films of Fatih Akin,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 4, no. 3 (2006): 141–57; here, 150.

⁹ See Feridun Zaimoglu, ed., *Kanak Sprak: 24 Misstöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1995).

¹⁰ This is my own transcription; the published screenplay has “Don’t you all fuck your own wives?” Fatih Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2004), 101.

you save it, your honor?”¹¹ Like many other Turkish-German characters in Akin’s films, Cahit displays, in the words of Rob Burns, confident ownership of German “urban spaces.”¹² Cahit’s identification with German culture even extends to the regional patriotism that is so prominent throughout Germany. When Cahit arrives in Istanbul in the final part of the movie, the cabdriver who takes him to his hotel turns out to be a Turk who grew up in Bavaria, and the two start happily speaking German to each other, but in his Hamburg-accented German, Cahit speaks derisively of this Turkish “Bavarian” and his accent.

The other protagonist of *Gegen die Wand*, Sibel Güner, the woman who ultimately becomes Cahit’s second wife, has not severed her ties with Turkish culture as successfully as Cahit has. In fact, the whole trajectory of the film shows Sibel’s failed attempt to end her connection to Turkish culture. She is a beautiful young woman who does not want to knuckle under to traditional Turkish strictures about female virtue and honor. As she defiantly proclaims to Cahit, using German swearwords with the same facility that he has, “I want to live, I want to dance, I want to fuck! And not just with one guy. Do you understand?”¹³ Jana Burgerová has suggested that in behaving like this, Sibel “acts like a man . . . and thus dissolves the Islamic conception of sexuality.”¹⁴ Sibel also wants to drink and do drugs just like Cahit. However, she has a conservative father and brother who want her to get married and have children. She, therefore, tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide by slitting her wrists. As a result, she lands in a psychiatric clinic, where she meets Cahit, who also tried to kill himself by driving his car head-on into a wall (hence the movie’s title). The two suicide attempts demonstrate how difficult it is to negotiate the demands of individualism on the one hand, and family and group identity on the other. Although Cahit has more or less achieved the individual freedom that Sibel desires, he still runs head on into a literal and metaphorical wall, while Sibel sees no way to sever her ties from traditional Turkish culture without quite literally slitting her wrists. Neither individual freedom (Cahit) nor family and cultural pressure (in Sibel’s case) seems to work.

¹¹ My own transcription. The published screenplay has “And did you save it? The honor?” Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 159.

¹² Burns, “Turkish-German Cinema: From Cultural Resistance to Transnational Cinema?” 144.

¹³ Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 39.

¹⁴ Jana Burgerová, “*Gegen die Wand: Migration im Film*,” *Forum der Psychoanalyse* 24, no. 1 (March 2008): 96–103; here, 97.

Ironically, Sibel becomes interested in Cahit only because, as German as his lifestyle may be, he is ethnically Turkish. Sitting around bored at a group therapy session with other mental patients, she perks up when she hears Cahit's Turkish name, and when she runs after him in the hall, her first question to him is: "Are you a Turk?"¹⁵ She then asks him if he would be willing to marry her. She sees him as the solution to all of her problems. Her family will accept him as a husband, she believes, precisely because he is Turkish. By marrying him, she hopes to escape from her conservative family, but since theirs will be a marriage of convenience, and since Cahit's approach to sex, drugs, and alcohol is similar to hers, she believes that he will give her all the freedom that her family has denied her: she will be able to have sex with whomever she wants whenever she wants, and she will be able to drink alcohol and take drugs without having a male authority figure threatening or punishing her. Cahit is initially quite negative about Sibel's proposal ("fuck off!" he tells her), but when he sees and hears her interacting with her conservative family in the cafeteria of the psychiatric ward, he begins to sympathize with her plight.¹⁶ He becomes even more sympathetic when she promises to smuggle in a bottle of beer for him at the clinic. Nevertheless, the couple's marriage pact will be sealed only after yet another suicide attempt on Sibel's part, and a long argument. After declining to marry her once again, she slashes her wrists with a broken beer bottle at a pub. Subsequently, in a nighttime bus ride through Hamburg, where they are the only passengers, Sibel and Cahit argue in German about the pros and cons of getting married to each other. Suddenly the bus stops, and the Turkish driver orders them in Turkish to get off the bus as "godless dogs."¹⁷ Cahit responds in German that the bus belongs to the city of Hamburg, not to him. Ironically, the Turkish-German punk rebel defends the principles of German law, while the Hamburg city employee defends the principles of traditional Turkish culture.

The film contains elements of both comedy and tragedy. The scenes in which Cahit visits Sibel's family to ask her father for her hand in marriage (although Cahit can hardly speak Turkish), as well as the scenes of the wedding celebration, are quite funny. Just before the newlywed couple takes the dance floor, Cahit calls Sibel a "falsche Votze" (lying cunt), and after the two have been escorted up to their private hotel chamber to

¹⁵ Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 30.

¹⁶ Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 31.

¹⁷ Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 43.

spend their wedding night, they proceed to snort cocaine.¹⁸ When Sibel moves into Cahit's catastrophic bachelor pad, she immediately begins to create order, so that when Cahit sees it, he proclaims that it looks as if a "chick bomb" had exploded.¹⁹ The reluctant bridegroom and the confirmed, messy bachelor are stock elements of cinematic romantic comedy and help to highlight the way in which, as Daniela Berghahn argues, Akin uses "narrative and generic templates of mainstream cinema, thus conveying ethnic identity themes in an accessible and popular format."²⁰ "Akin's aesthetic allegiance . . . to popular narrative cinema," writes Burns, also connects him to other younger-generation directors of post-1989 German cinema, such as Sönke Wortmann or Detlev Buck, who tended to eschew the demanding and often intellectual aesthetics of the New German Cinema in favor of traditional genre cinema.²¹

Gegen die Wand is not just a romantic comedy, however, and it does not end happily. It is, in a sense, a tragedy with deeply comic undertones, because Sibel's attempt to escape the strictures of her culture is doomed to fail. As Akin admits, "all of my characters are searching for something. They are searching for a better life. However . . . [almost] all of them fail."²² Sibel and Cahit enjoy brief weeks of happiness together, but ironically, Cahit, who had agreed to marry Sibel for the sake of convenience, begins to fall in love with her. Although the two had agreed not to have a sexual relationship, Cahit now wants to have sex with her; he even suggests that the two of them should have children together. Sibel wants none of this; her goal is pure sexual freedom. She goes to a dance club with Cahit, meets another man, and then tells Cahit quite frankly, "Cahit, ich geh jetzt ficken" (Cahit, I'm gonna go fuck now).²³ Sibel's sexual promiscuity and apparent lack of sexual interest in Cahit understandably depress him and make him jealous. At the same time, however, Sibel is not above warning off one of her German sexual partners by telling him

¹⁸ This is my own transcription; the published screenplay has: "You stupid cunt!" Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 66.

¹⁹ This is my own transcription; the published screenplay has: "This looks like shit. Somehow Turkish . . ." Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 78.

²⁰ Berghahn, "No Place Like Home? Or Impossible Homecomings in the Films of Fatih Akin," 144.

²¹ Burns, "Turkish-German Cinema: From Cultural Resistance to Transnational Cinema?" 145.

²² Cited in Berghahn, "No Place Like Home? Or Impossible Homecomings in the Films of Fatih Akin," 150.

²³ Akin, *Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film — Drehbuch/Materialien/Interviews*, 95.

that she is a Turkish wife, and that her husband will kill him if he continues to harass her. The tragic irony of the film is that this is precisely what happens: Cahit unintentionally kills a spurned lover by hitting him on the head with an ashtray after the lover calls him Sibel's pimp. Ultimately, then, Cahit becomes, at least in the eyes of the general public, precisely the stereotypical Turkish husband jealous of his wife's sexual honor — the kind of figure that he has previously criticized. Sibel is expelled from her family and ultimately finds refuge in Turkey, where, after further unsuccessful struggles, she becomes precisely what she had sought to avoid: a Turkish housewife and mother. Cahit's journey to Istanbul to find Sibel at the end of the movie ends in failure and confronts him with his own estrangement from the land of his birth.

This Turkish-German plot of jealousy bears more than a passing resemblance to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's classic *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1978), which had mapped postwar West German rebuilding against a marital relationship interrupted by war and a German wife's affair with an American soldier. Petra Fachinger has suggested that in many ways, "Akin rewrites the strategies and objectives of the New German Cinema, particularly those of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, for whom Akin admits to having great admiration, into transnational practices," and this holds true for *Gegen die Wand*.²⁴ In Fassbinder's film the German husband goes to jail for a crime his wife has committed; in Akin's film, the Turkish-German husband goes to jail for a crime that he really committed, out of passion. Both films end with failed attempts to come together again. Fassbinder's film ends quite literally with an explosion in Germany, whereas Akin's film ends with the couple drifting apart in Turkey, as Cahit sets off in search of his birthplace. The similarities between *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* and *Gegen die Wand* suggest that, just as Fassbinder had tried to give film viewers a critical history of postwar Germany and its rebirth, so too Akin is trying to give his audience a critical account of the birth of a post-Wall, post-unification German republic in which traditional ethnic, religious, and cultural ties, although weakened, are still a powerful force. In Fassbinder's film Maria had tried, unsuccessfully, to emancipate herself from German patriarchal power. In Akin's film, Sibel tries, also unsuccessfully, to emancipate herself from the patriarchal power of Turkish traditionalism. Although for both Sibel and Cahit contemporary German culture represents a measure of freedom and individualism, both wind up, at the end of the film, in Turkey, which is itself no longer what it once was, and which is to a large extent foreign to both of them.

While most of *Gegen die Wand* is set in Fatih Akin's hometown of Hamburg, the film begins and ends with shots of the Golden Horn in

²⁴ Petra Fachinger, "A New Kind of Creative Energy: Yadé Kara's *Selam Berlin* and Fatih Akin's *Kurz und Schmerzlos* and *Gegen die Wand*," *German Life and Letters* 60, no. 2 (April 2007): 243–60; here, 254.

Istanbul, where the musician Selim Sesler and his band play distinctly non-German music on sumptuous carpets laid out beside the water. The panorama includes, in the background, the magnificent Hagia Sophia with its four powerful minarets — itself a symbol of cultural hybridity, since it represents a merging of Byzantine Christianity with the Islam of the Ottoman Empire. Sesler's band features a female singer — Idil Üner, who had played a key role in Akin's 2000 film *Im Juli* — wearing a long red dress, who sings tragic songs about unhappy love from both male and female perspectives. The band plays six times throughout the movie: at the beginning and at the end, and four times in the middle, separating the film, in a sense, into five separate acts, four of which take place in Hamburg and one of which takes place in Istanbul. Fatih Akin has called the appearance of this band both a Brechtian distancing device and an attempt to structure his film along the lines of a classical tragedy with five acts.²⁵ The band functions as a reminder of the fact that, although Cahit and Sibel have tried to break free from traditional Turkish or “Asian” culture, their story is nevertheless part of it; it is, in essence, yet another tragic “oriental” love story of the sort being sung about by the woman in the long red dress. Cahit and Sibel’s story, as Asuman Suner has argued, is ultimately about the very *kara sevda* (dark passion) that is at the root of many traditional “oriental” love stories: “an overwhelming condition experienced almost like an incurable illness.”²⁶ Akin has stated that the introduction of the “oriental” band “was a way to break the Western, realistic look of the film with a kitschy postcard element.”²⁷ It is a melding of east and west even at the level of style.

Gegen die Wand leaves Cahit stranded in Turkey and jilted by Sibel, who has opted to remain with her new Turkish family. Cahit is an ethnic Turk and cultural German out of place in these surroundings. As he sets off by bus to the village of his birth, the film’s viewers have to wonder how comfortable he will be there.²⁸ Akin’s film does not simplistically celebrate the birth of a new, hybrid German culture; rather, it shows how the emergence of this new culture is fraught with problems, including the persistence of old structures of society and thinking. The film’s ending is as open as is the future of Germany’s own experiment with multiculturalism and hybridity.

²⁵ Wendy Mitchell, “Going to Extremes: Fatih Akin on His Turkish-German Love Story ‘Head-On’” (January 19, 2005), accessed electronically: http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_050119akin.html. It should be noted in passing that Akin’s notion of a Brechtian tragedy is in itself paradoxical, since Brecht disliked tragedy and did not structure his plays in a similar way.

²⁶ Asuman Suner, “Dark Passion,” *Sight and Sound* 12, no. 3 (March 2005): 18–21; here, 20.

²⁷ Suner, “Dark Passion,” 20.

²⁸ See Fachinger, “A New Kind of Creative Energy: Yadé Kara’s *Selam Berlin* and Fatih Akin’s *Kurz und Schmerzlos* and *Gegen die Wand*,” 257.



*Georg Dreyman with Christa-Maria Sieland in the background.
Courtesy of the Kobal Collection.*

34: *Das Leben der anderen* (2006) or the Power of Art

Director: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Cinematographer: Hagen Bogdanski

Screenplay: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Producer: Quirin Berg, Max Wiedemann (Wiedemann & Berg Film, BR, ARTE, Creado Film)

Editor: Patricia Rommel

Production Design: Silke Buhr

Costume Design: Gabriele Binder

Music: Stéphane Moucha and Gabriel Yared

Sound: Christoph von Schönburg and others

German Release Date: March 15, 2006

Actors: Ulrich Mühe (Gerd Wiesler); Sebastian Koch (Georg Dreyman); Martina Gedeck (Christa-Maria Sieland); Ulrich Tukur (Anton Grubitz); Thomas Thieme (Bruno Hempf); Hans-Uwe Bauer (Paul Hauser); Volkmar Kleinert (Albert Jerka); and others

Awards: Academy Awards, 2007: Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film; David di Donatello Awards, 2007: David for Best European Film to Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; European Film Awards, 2006: Best Actor to Ulrich Mühe, Best Film to Max Wiedemann and Quirin Berg, Best Screenwriter for Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; French Syndicate of Cinema Critics, 2008: Critics Award for Best Foreign Film to Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; German Film Awards, 2006: Film Award in Gold for Best Cinematography to Hagen Bogdanski, for Best Direction to Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, for Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role to Ulrich Mühe, for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role to Ulrich Tukur, for Best Production Design to Silke Buhr, for Best Screenplay to Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, for Outstanding Feature Film to Quirin Berg and Max Wiedemann; and others

FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK's first feature film *Das Leben der Anderen* (The Lives of Others) was greeted by critics on both the left and the right as the first important cinematic look at the East German

dictatorship after the spate of historical comedies about the GDR that culminated with *Good Bye Lenin!* in 2003. Anna Funder, writing in the left-liberal British newspaper *Guardian*, proclaimed that the film “may well be the first realistic portrayal of the GDR” ever made.¹ John Podhoretz, film reviewer for the right-wing American magazine *Weekly Standard*, praised *Das Leben der anderen* for being one of the few films to take a hard look at the socialist world since the collapse of Communism in the East bloc: “You can count on two hands and a foot the number of major motion pictures made since the dissolution of the Soviet Union that have attempted any kind of reckoning of the human cost of communism in the 20th century.”²

Ironically, however, the left-wing cultural critic Slavoj Zizek argued in the pages of the left-liberal American publication *In These Times* that *Das Leben der anderen* underplayed the true repressiveness of the East German regime. Similarly, the left-liberal German historian Hubertus Knabe, who ran the memorial museum in Berlin’s former Stasi prison at Hohenschönhausen, where the film’s first scene is set, criticized von Donnersmarck for whitewashing the SED dictatorship and refused to let him do camera work in Hohenschönhausen.³

Whereas films like Leander Haussmann’s *Sonnenallee* had treated the GDR as essentially ridiculous, *Das Leben der anderen* restored the seriousness that had accrued to it during the years of the cold war. For the East German psychoanalyst Annette Simon, daughter of the celebrated writer Christa Wolf, this was the real accomplishment of von Donnersmarck’s film: “He attempts to show the repression of surveillance, which was so inhospitable to human beings, in a way that is effective for the masses.”⁴ The film takes place largely within the confinement of urban apartments or in the work space of the East German state security police, the Stasi (short for *Staatsicherheit*, or state security). It is a claustrophobic thriller/melodrama about life in a socialist dictatorship that drives

¹ Anna Funder, “Tyranny of Terror,” *The Guardian*, 5 May 2007, *Features and Reviews* section, 14; accessed at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview12>. This statement, of course, ignores the many portrayals of the GDR made in films created in the GDR itself, films like *Sonnensucher* or *Spur der Steine*.

² John Podhoretz, “Nightmare Come True: Love and Distrust in the East German Police State,” *The Weekly Standard* 12, no. 25 (12 March 2007): 36–38; here, 38.

³ Slavoj Zizek, “The Dreams of Others,” *In These Times*, June 2007, 48. Also available at <http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3183/>. Anna Funder, “Tyranny of Terror.”

⁴ Annette Simon, “Das Leben und die anderen: Eine Polemik,” *Forum der Psychoanalyse* 23, no. 2 (June 2007): 174–80; here, 175. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

some of its most talented citizens to suicide. At the same time, however, the film is an optimistic tale about the transformative power of art and empathy. As Diana Diamond has written, the film's protagonist "comes for the first time to experience art, poetry, and music, and this newfound aesthetic dimension in turn expands his capacity for and comprehension of human experience."⁵ Von Donnersmarck himself stated that, "More than anything else, *The Lives of Others* is a human drama about the ability of human beings to do the right thing, no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path."⁶ *Das Leben der anderen* became an international sensation, winning the prize for best German film at the German Film Awards of 2006, for best European film at the European Film Awards of the same year, and for best foreign-language film at the 2007 Academy Awards.

Set in East Berlin in the early spring of 1984, the film is primarily about the transformation of a Stasi officer, Gerd Wiesler — played brilliantly by the veteran East German actor Ulrich Mühe, who had himself been a victim of the Stasi in the 1980s.⁷ Wiesler, a true believer in socialism, takes his job as defender of the state seriously. The viewers are put into Wiesler's position as he eavesdrops on the writer Georg Dreyman (played by Sebastian Koch), who is being pursued by the Stasi not for political reasons, but because the culture minister Bruno Hempf (played by Thomas Thieme) wants access to Dreyman's beautiful girlfriend, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (played by Martina Gedeck). Wiesler is

⁵ Diana Diamond, "Empathy and Identification in Von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 56, no. 3 (2008): 811–32; here, 816.

⁶ Anna Funder, "Tyranny of Terror."

⁷ Mühe claimed that his former wife, the actress Jenny Gröllmann, had spied on him for the Stasi. Gröllmann, who was dying of cancer at the time, sued Mühe for libel and won. Gröllmann's Stasi boss, meanwhile, claimed that he had made up most of Gröllmann's alleged reports to the Stasi. This real-life story uncannily paralleled the plot of *Das Leben der anderen*, in which the actress Christa-Maria Sieland spies on her lover Georg Dreyman and the Stasi officer Gerd Wiesler makes up reports. As a result of the court case between Mühe and Gröllmann, the parts of Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch* that contained Mühe's allegations were blacked out prior to further sales in Germany, and sales of the DVD of the film were temporarily stopped in Germany. See Hubertus Knabe, *Die Täter sind unter uns: Über das Schönreden der SED-Diktatur* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2007), 180–81; and the obituary for Ulrich Mühe, *Daily Telegraph*, 27 July 2007, 29. Also available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1558608/Ulrich-Muhe.html>. See also "Es hat ja schon viele Versuche gegeben, die DDR-Realität einzufangen": Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck und Christoph Hochhäusler im Gespräch mit Ulrich Mühe," in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), 182–204, especially 200–204.

initially suspicious of the writer Dreyman, but as he learns more about Dreyman's life, he gradually becomes sympathetic. The film's focus on surveillance and eavesdropping also evokes, as Diana Diamond has suggested, "the experience of film viewing itself, particularly the film apparatus and our relationship to it as spectators." Diamond further notes that the film's spectators "are to Wiesler what Wiesler is to Dreyman, and this makes our identification with Wiesler's transformation more palpable."⁸

A key moment in Wiesler's development from relentless Stasi officer to secret sympathizer occurs when Wiesler learns that the surveillance operation against Dreyman is happening for personal, not political reasons. "So we're helping a member of the Central Committee to get his rival out of the way," Wiesler is told by his superior officer, Stasi lieutenant colonel Anton Grubitz (played by Ulrich Tukur). "Is that why we joined up?" Wiesler asks in response. "Do you remember the oath we swore to be the shield and sword of the Party?"⁹ For Grubitz the observation of Dreyman is a chance to advance his career; for Wiesler it is a violation of an oath he swore to uphold the socialist party and its purported ideals. It quickly becomes clear to Wiesler that his victim Dreyman is actually more honorable and more concerned with the future of socialism than his own superiors, who are supposedly the "shield and sword of the Party."

Von Donnersmarck configures Wiesler's transformation as largely a response to the beauty of art, which introduces him to the world of sensuality and eroticism more generally. In an interview with *The New York Times*, and in a brief essay published in Germany, the director stated that his idea for *Das Leben der anderen* came to him when he was a first-semester film student in Munich, and was required by a professor to write multiple film scenarios during a single term: "I was lying on the floor feeling miserable and thinking, 'Oh, I've picked the wrong profession,' he said. "Then I started listening to music and remembered Maxim Gorky, who quoted Lenin as saying that Beethoven's 'Appassionata' was his favorite piece of music. But Lenin said, 'I don't want to listen to it because it makes me want to stroke people's heads, and I have to smash those heads to bring the revolution to them.'"¹⁰

⁸ Diamond, "Empathy and Identification in Von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*," 815.

⁹ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), 60. I have slightly changed the last sentence to correspond to the words heard in the film itself.

¹⁰ Alan Riding, "Behind the Berlin Wall, Listening to Life," *The New York Times*, 7 January 2007, Section 2A, 8, 20; here, 8, 20. See also Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, "'Appassionata': Die Filmidee," in Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch*, 169–70.

In the film, Dreyman tells the anecdote about Lenin to his girlfriend just after he has learned that his close friend, the theater director Albert Jerska (played by Volkmar Kleinert), has committed suicide after seven years of being banned from his profession. Dreyman sits down at his piano and plays a piece of modern music — created for the film by Gabriel Yared — entitled *Die Sonate vom guten Menschen* (The Sonata of the Good Person) that Jerska had given to him on his birthday. After finishing the piece, Dreyman tells his girlfriend sadly: “I always have to think about what Lenin said about the Appassionata. ‘I can’t listen to it, otherwise I won’t finish the revolution.’ . . . Can someone who has listened to this music, I mean really listened to it, still be a bad human being?”¹¹

This rhetorical question expresses Dreyman’s, and von Donnersmarck’s, belief in the transformative power of great art, especially music. As von Donnersmarck told *The New York Times*, music “can bring feelings into your life whether you want it to or not. . . . There is no way you can defend yourself against it. You can’t build a wall of principle or ideology against it. It will go through it like an X-ray. It just has that power.”¹²

The person who does not believe in the transformative power of art is, ironically enough, the GDR’s culture minister Bruno Hempf, a purported believer in Stalin’s description of writers as “engineers of the human soul.” After an argument with Dreyman in one of the film’s first scenes, Hempf smugly declares: “But that’s what we all love about your plays: the love of human beings, of *good* human beings; the belief that people can change. Dreyman, no matter how often you write it in your plays, human beings don’t change.”¹³

This conversation between Hempf and Dreyman makes *Das Leben der anderen* into a kind of reverse Faustian tale. In Goethe’s *Faust*, as in the Biblical Book of Job, God and the devil make a bet about the soul of a good human being. God bets that the devil will be unable to corrupt the soul of a good human being, while the devil proclaims that he can do so easily. In Goethe’s *Faust*, God proclaims to Mephistopheles:

Let it be so: to you is given the power
 That may seduce this soul from his true source,
 And drag him down with you, in fatal hour,
 If you can wholly bend him to your force.
 But stand ashamed when called on to confess:

¹¹ Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch*, 77. I have added the words “I mean” to correspond to what is actually said in the film.

¹² Alan Riding, “Behind the Berlin Wall, Listening to Life,” 20.

¹³ Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch*, 34. For Stalin’s view on writers, see Manfred Jäger, *Kultur und Politik in der DDR: Ein historischer Abriss* (Cologne: Wissenschaft und Politik, 1982), 34.

A good man in his dark, bewildered course
Will not forget the way of righteousness.¹⁴

In most versions of the Faust legend — although not in Goethe's version — Mephistopheles succeeds in dragging Faust down to hell with him.¹⁵

Das Leben der anderen features a different kind of struggle, made over the soul of a bad man, not a good one. The culture minister believes that it is impossible to transform an evil man into a good one, but the idealist writer believes in human beings' potential for positive change. Neither Dreyman nor Hempf knows it at the time, but the true subject of their struggle will not be the director Jerska, who commits suicide, but the consummate Stasi officer Gerd Wiesler. At the end of the film, Wiesler will have been transformed into a good man through the power of art and empathy, and Dreyman will write a book about Wiesler entitled *Die Sonate vom guten Menschen*, which he will also dedicate to Wiesler. The film ends with Wiesler purchasing the book, and responding to a cashier's question as to whether he wants his purchase gift-wrapped: "No . . . it's for me."¹⁶ This statement, which the historian Timothy Garton Ash has aptly called "a cinematic haiku," is true in a sense that goes far beyond what the cashier can imagine.¹⁷

Das Leben der anderen is thus explicitly about the question of whether or not it is possible for human beings to change their nature. In the Faust legend and in the Book of Job it is the devil who believes in (negative) change, while God insists on the steadfastness of the virtuous soul. In *Das Leben der anderen* it is Dreyman who believes in (positive) change, while Hempf believes that human beings are fundamentally unchangeable. This constellation is paradoxical, since historically speaking, it was socialist ideology that proclaimed the mutability of human nature, whereas conservatism has tended to see it as unchanging.

¹⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Part One, trans. Philip Wayne, Great Books of the Western World 45 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1996), xiii–57; here, xxii. Original German: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie erster Teil* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1971), 11–12 (lines 323–29).

¹⁵ In Goethe's *Faust* the female love interest, Gretchen, of course also commits suicide. This also happens toward the end of *Das Leben der anderen*, when Christa-Maria Sieland runs in front of an oncoming vehicle. In both Goethe's *Faust* and *Das Leben der anderen* the female love interest causes her own death, leaving the relationship between the two male protagonists — tempter and tempted — as the central pivot of the dramatic action.

¹⁶ Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch*, 158.

¹⁷ Cited in Diamond, "Empathy and Identification in Von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*," 825. From Timothy Garton Ash, "The Stasi on Our Minds," *New York Review of Books* 54, no. 9 (31 May 2007): 4–8.

Das Leben der anderen does not just echo an old German legend with a twist, however; it also restates a belief in the transformative power of great art that has deep roots in German Idealism but that, since the end of the Second World War, has largely disappeared from the German intelligentsia. In his *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, 1795), Friedrich Schiller had proclaimed that “there is no other way to make the sensuous man rational than by first making him aesthetic,” i.e., that ordinary human beings can be elevated into extraordinary ones only by confrontation with great art.¹⁸

The Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust greatly shook German-speaking intellectuals’ belief in the power of art to transform human beings for the better. As the Swiss playwright Max Frisch noted in 1946, Reinhard Heydrich, one of the most brutal Nazi murderers, had been a man of cultural refinement and an excellent musician:

In my opinion one of the decisive lessons . . . which our generation has had to learn is the frequently revealed fact that — to express it with a concrete example — a man like Heydrich, the murderer of Bohemia, was a distinguished and very sensitive musician, who could hold forth with spirit and true connoisseurship, even with love, on Bach, Händel, Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner.¹⁹

In other words, for Max Frisch the unity between beauty, truth, and goodness that formed the core of German Idealism had become questionable in the wake of crimes committed by what was supposedly one of the most advanced and cultivated nations in Europe. Had the fictional character Dreyman posed his rhetorical question “Can someone who has listened to this music, I mean really listened to it, still be a bad human being?” to Frisch, Frisch’s answer would probably have been: yes. Since Frisch’s intervention, it has become relatively uncommon for major German cultural figures to proclaim a belief in the automatically positive transformative power of art. A more typical approach is to cast suspicion on art and any purported positive powers that it may have. One of the most famous German aesthetic statements of the postwar years was the

¹⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 108. Original German: Friedrich Schiller, *Ueber die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, in *Schillers Werke* (Nationalausgabe), vol. 20, part 1, *Philosophische Schriften*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1962), 309–412; here, 383.

¹⁹ Max Frisch, “Kultur als Alibi,” *Der Monat* 1, no. 7 (April 1949): 83–85; here, 84.

philosopher Theodor W. Adorno's proclamation that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric."²⁰

Von Donnersmarck rejects such skepticism. His own and his protagonist Dreyman's belief in the positive power of art returns to Schiller's idealism as if neither Frisch nor Adorno had ever called such idealism into question. Tellingly, von Donnersmarck uses an imaginary experience of the socialist dictatorship — one Stasi man's transformation into a good person — to overturn an aesthetic-philosophical skepticism prevalent since the real experience of the Nazi dictatorship. It is particularly ironic that von Donnersmarck uses Wiesler's experience of a work by the socialist writer Bertolt Brecht — the famous love poem "Remembering Marie A." — to illustrate Wiesler's transformation into a good human being. In one scene, Wiesler is lying alone on a sofa in his high-rise apartment, reading a book by Brecht that he has stolen from Dreyman; previously, it was Dreyman's friend Jerska who was reading it alone on a sofa in Dreyman's apartment during the latter's birthday party, and defending himself with the comment: "After all it's Brecht."²¹ The key part of the poem runs:

It was a day in that blue month September
Silent beneath a plum tree's slender shade
I held her there, my love so pale and silent
As if she were a dream that must not fade.²²

The image of Wiesler reading a lyrically beautiful poem by Brecht about eroticism and evanescence suggests that the experience of great art — whether poetry or music — is capable of converting a bad, insensitive man into a good, sensitive one. This is an ideology that would have been anathema to Brecht himself, who believed in the mutability of human society, but whose view of human nature itself was notably pessimistic, as his character Herr Keuner declares in one anecdote: "Everything can be better,"

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," in Adorno, *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 7–31; here, 31. This essay was written in 1949 and first published in *Soziologische Forschung in unserer Zeit*, ed. Karl Gustav Specht (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1951), 228–40.

²¹ Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch*, 53. "Immerhin ist es Brecht."

²² Bertolt Brecht, "Remembering Marie A.," trans. John Willett, in Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (New York: Routledge, 1987), 35–36; here, 35. Brecht, "Erinnerung an die Marie A.," in Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 11, *Gedichte 1*, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, and Klaus-Detlef Müller (Berlin, Weimar, and Frankfurt: Aufbau and Suhrkamp, 1988), 92–93.

said Mr. Keuner, ‘except man.’”²³ For Brecht, one of whose most important plays is entitled *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (The Good Person of Setzuan), human beings are fundamentally a product of the social structures in which they are embedded, and true goodness is impossible in the context of a bad society. As Brecht’s character Shen Te, the protagonist of *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, tells the gods who have commanded her to be good, “Something must be wrong with your world.”²⁴ Von Donnersmarck’s message in *Das Leben der anderen* is precisely the opposite: that it *is* possible to be a good person in the context of a bad society. For critics like Hubertus Knabe, this was intolerable, because it seemed to minimize the true horror of the East German dictatorship. In *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!* young people had managed to lead decent, happy lives even in the context of a totalitarian state. Although its tone was more mournful and serious, *Das Leben der anderen* contained a substantially similar message about true humanity overcoming all obstacles. Hence, *Das Leben der anderen* was not as different from the previous films as some of its supporters claimed.

In addition, *Das Leben der anderen* presented the world of art as completely separate from the world of power, a situation that might hold true of most western countries, such as the United States, but that was not true in the GDR, where the worlds of power and art intersected in multiple ways. Although many artists were indeed critical of the East German regime, others defended it staunchly, and many enjoyed privileged positions that placed them well beyond the kind of chicanery endured by Dreyman and Sieland in the film. Indeed, half a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the literary critic Frank Schirrmacher prominently accused the East German writer Christa Wolf and others of having “a familiar, almost intimate relationship with the state and its institutions.”²⁵ As

²³ Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, trans. Martin Chalmers (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), 65. Brecht, *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner*, in Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 18, *Prosa 3*, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, and Klaus-Detlef Müller (Berlin, Weimar, and Frankfurt: Aufbau and Suhrkamp, 1995), 11–43; here, 31.

²⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, in Brecht, *Parables for the Theatre: Two Plays by Bertolt Brecht (The Good Woman of Setzuan and The Caucasian Chalk Circle)*, trans. Eric and Maja Bentley (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1948), 1–106; here, 103. I have changed the name of the play to correspond to the German title *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, since *Mensch* means person, not woman.

²⁵ Frank Schirrmacher, “‘Dem Druck des härteren, strengerer Lebens standhalten’: Auch eine Studie über den autoritären Charakter: Christa Wolfs Aufsätze, Reden und ihre jüngste Erzählung *Was bleibt*,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 June 1990, in the unpaginated glossy insert *Bilder und Zeiten*. Reprinted in *‘Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf: Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*, ed. Thomas Anz (Munich: Spangenberg, 1991), 77–89.

Wolf's daughter Annette Simon has argued, "the more threatened and real victims of the Stasi machinery were unknown people . . . they were often powerless and at the mercy of the state."²⁶ A prominent writer like Dreyman or actress like Sieland might have been spied on by the Stasi, but it would have been highly unlikely for them to be thrown into prison or even taken in for extensive questioning, as happens to Sieland.

Inaccuracies like this did not detract from the quality of the film itself, of course, just from its historical validity as a statement about the relationship between art and dictatorship. As a film, *Das Leben der anderen* told a gripping story. It featured top-notch acting and a clever plot with a classic *peripeteia* — turning point — that transforms its main character. Its lush musical score fit well with a tale about art and its importance, and its cinematography — which often featured a camera moving slowly around the figure of an unmoving Gerd Wiesler — suggested the subtle changes occurring in an apparently unmoving protagonist's mind. The primary sets for *Das Leben der anderen* — Dreyman's apartment on the one hand, and the abodes of the Stasi on the other — reflect the dichotomy that governs the film: on the one hand life, love, art, and music represented by colorful paintings, beautiful people, fullness, and noise; on the other hand stasis, hatred, and distrust of art represented by the silence of Wiesler's drab, barren apartment and the Stasi prison at Hohenschönhausen. The actors Sebastian Koch and Ulrich Mühe deftly capture this dichotomy as well. Koch moves his body flexibly and wears loose, comfortable clothes; Mühe moves stiffly if at all, and often even his face reveals little. The film's relatively few sex scenes reflect the same split: Dreyman and Sieland make slow love while naked in bed, whereas the fully clothed Wiesler hires a prostitute who comes to his apartment and sits on his lap in an armchair, careful not to exceed her time limit. All of these details reinforce the gap between the two worlds that Wiesler faces, and they make it clear that the world of art, beauty, and goodness is truly tempting. As Brecht wrote in another context, "Terrible is the temptation to do good!"²⁷

For Germans born after the early 1980s, films like *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Das Leben der anderen* necessarily became key ways of understanding the German Democratic Republic. Andreas Dresen (born in 1963), one of the most successful mid-generation filmmakers from East Germany, noted in 2009 that, "In the meantime a generation of young people has grown up who know the GDR only from the stories of others."²⁸ Both

²⁶ Simon, "Das Leben und die anderen: Eine Polemik," 178.

²⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, trans. James and Tania Stern with W. H. Auden (New York: Arcade, 1994), 25.

²⁸ Andreas Dresen, "Vom Zoo in den Dschungel: Ostdeutsche Filmkultur 20 Jahre nach dem Mauerfall," *German Studies Association Newsletter* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2009–10): 37–43; here, 37.

Good Bye Lenin! and *Das Leben der anderen*, however, were created by West Germans with relatively little experience of the historical reality of the German Democratic Republic. As Dresen observed, “today the cinematic working-through of GDR history is done mostly by artists from the former west.” While acknowledging that *Das Leben der anderen* was a powerful film, Dresen argued that, “in fact this film has about as much to do with the GDR as Hollywood with Hoyerswerda,” adding that, “the film tells, quite effectively, the fairy tale of the good person who resides in each of us, even in the worst Stasi denouncer. This kind of thing is popular, not least because it is so wonderfully reassuring. But it does not help us to get at the truth.”²⁹

Dresen’s criticism was exaggerated, but in its core justified. *Das Leben der anderen* did not tell an authentic tale about real life in the GDR; rather, it told a German Idealist story of aesthetic transformation that revealed little about the historical specificity of the GDR. In a sense, von Donnersmarck’s film told a story about the East as West Germans might have wanted it to be. This was a GDR that West Germans and Americans could understand without too much discomfort and without leaving behind received notions about the value of the individual and of art. The popularity of films like *Das Leben der anderen* and *Good Bye Lenin!* suggested that other, more authentic, or more GDR-specific stories were difficult, if not impossible, to understand in reunified Germany. Annette Simon complained: “This film is an example of how the power of interpretation of East German life has been taken over by West Germans, a fact that is also not sufficiently recognized by East Germans. Why,” she asked, “has no East German director turned to this theme in a more serious or even more melodramatic way?”³⁰ As if partly trying to answer Simon’s question, Dresen acknowledged that his own attempts to portray the GDR in films like *Stilles Land*, while artistically successful, had been box-office failures: “Until 1997 I made three cinematic attempts to deal with the GDR. Two of these were at least artistically acceptable, but none of them was successful. The general public did not want to look at my view of things.”³¹ What the public wanted, instead, Dresen suggested, were relatively simple stories about the triumph of good over evil: stories that did not really challenge either East or West Germans.

Dresen’s intervention, and the popularity of West German films about the former GDR, suggest that two decades after the end of the socialist

²⁹ Dresen, “Vom Zoo in den Dschungel: Ostdeutsche Filmkultur 20 Jahre nach dem Mauerfall,” 39.

³⁰ Simon, “Das Leben und die anderen: Eine Polemik,” 179.

³¹ Dresen, “Vom Zoo in den Dschungel: Ostdeutsche Filmkultur 20 Jahre nach dem Mauerfall,” 40.

Germany, it remains difficult to communicate that historical reality to the larger populace to which the art of film directs itself. This is not in the first instance a problem of film aesthetics, but rather a question of the ability of large numbers of people to understand or even confront a reality radically at odds with their preconceptions and prejudices: to understand, as it were, the lives of people who were truly “other.” Film as an art form had always, at least theoretically, suggested the possibility of creating images of an alternate, radically different reality. But people’s willingness to confront such images was and is limited. The future of German cinema will depend to a significant extent on whether German filmmakers are able to create such images, and on whether Germans and others are willing to receive them.

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Cover image: Emil Jannings, as the doorman, being filmed on the set of Friedrich Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (Ufa, 1924). Photograph courtesy of the Filmmuseum Potsdam.



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