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# **Race, Gender and Nation: The Cultural Construction of Identity within 1990s German Cinema**

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**PhD Thesis**

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**April, 2004**

## Abstract (674 words)

The literary cultural paradigm, which has dominated German studies throughout its history, has been equally significant in the writing of German film history. Drawing upon an idealist philosophical tradition and based upon apparently objective qualitative judgements which assess film in terms of its intellectual and artistic merits, this high/low cultural paradigm has had substantial impact on the study of popular German cinema within German film studies. Historically, when treated at all, such popular cinematic texts have tended to fall victim to the ‘pessimistic prognostics of the Frankfurt School’ (Bergfelder 1987, 7).

More recently, however, there have been attempts to redress this imbalance and include popular cinematic genres in the critical appraisal of German cinema. This transition is symptomatic of an increasing disciplinary awareness of the contributions to be made by British, French and American cultural and film studies’ traditions. However, hitherto, much of this work has concerned itself with historical film reception.

In line with these developments and in recognition of the redundancy of simplistic high/low cultural binaries, this study offers a cultural studies reading of race, gender and nation as represented in three thematic sub-genres of *contemporary* German film production. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that each of these thematic sub-genres offers a unique insight into the cultural construction of a distinct, yet problematic and porous umbrella identity enjoying a particular cultural currency in post-Wall Germany. It should be noted that, in this respect, this study represents a move away from those traditional diachronic analyses of German film, which attempt a snapshot of an entire history of filmic production, towards a more clearly delineated, synchronic analysis of a single contemporary moment – namely, the 1990s.

The first of these thematic sub-genres concerns the ambiguous romantic narratives of the sexually autonomous yet avowedly post-feminist New German

Comedy women. As a significant sub-genre of the popular New German Comedy film of the early 1990s, these films embody a clear structural reliance on the narrative norms of a classic, mainstream cinema. In contrast, the cinematic representations of East(ern) Germany, past and present, incorporate a myriad of generic forms and registers in their explorations of the meaning of reunification for eastern German populations, from upbeat comic road movies to psycho-allegorical tales of internal disquiet. The third area of this study concerns itself with the representation of Turkish-German populations in 1990s German cinema. As eclectic as the cinematic representations of the East, the work of these Turkish-German filmmakers appears to offer a troubling cinematic trajectory from abused and exploited first generation *Gastarbeiter* to self-assured and recalcitrant street-tough *Kanaksta*.

Clearly, in the reunified Germany of the 1990s, these historically marginalised social voices of West German women, Turkish-German men and East German men and women would all appear to be enjoying a degree of cultural currency. However, unable to fully escape the negative positioning of their stigmatising racial, national and gendered histories, these representational communities often find themselves inhabiting ambiguous, contradictory and combative cultural spaces. This study will argue that such cultural representations of marginal identity – be they at the heart of a cinematic mainstream or on the fringes of an alternative counter-cinema – are intensely politically significant. On the one hand, these representations can contribute to recognition, empowerment and validation for the social groupings that they depict. By the same virtue, however, they can be equally easily co-opted into an exclusive, marginalising and stereotypical cultural discourse.

The central motivation for this politicised preoccupation with the representation of marginalised social groupings across the heterogeneous spectrum of 1990s German film production is to move beyond the aesthetics of value traditionally prescribed to



such film critical binaries as avant-garde versus classical, entertainment versus political, and alternative versus mainstream. In the process, this thesis aims to expose the power dynamics at play within the cinematic representation of these marginal (and often *marginalised*) identities and the contradictory positions of identification which they offer their audiences. In so doing, it is hoped to return a contemporaneous and sociologically engaged analysis of German cinema to the heart of an interdisciplinary and inclusive German film studies tradition.

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## Acknowledgements

To include all the people who have been instrumental and inspirational in the completion of this project would be almost impossible. However, I would like to first thank the Student Awards Agency for Scotland, the Eglinton Fellowship and the CUTG for funding this project and supporting my research abroad. In this context it is important to thank the teaching and library staff of the *Freie Universität Berlin*, and in particular Stephen Lowry. I would also like to thank staff and fellow researchers at the *Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek*, staff and colleagues at the *Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen "Konrad Wolf"* and the *Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie*, as well as Maria Köpf of *X-Filme Creative Pool GmbH*. For their inspirational conversation and suggestions I would like to thank the very talented Maren-Kea Freese, Andreas Dresen and, in particular, Alice Agneskirchner. I would also like to thank the library staff of the *Goethe Institut*, Glasgow.

For their support and challenging contributions to my work I would like to thank Catriona Cunningham, Phillippe Pourhashemi, Katja Riek and Jane Wilkinson, without whom this PhD experience would have been much less enjoyable. For their unwavering support and belief in me I would also like to thank Maya, my daughter, Cori, and my family. Finally, I wish to thank Alison Phipps for her guidance, encouragement and inspirational example and without whom this project would never have taken place.

---Part I---

# *Methodology and Context*

## **Trouble at the Margins**



# Introduction

## From Aesthetics to Commercialism?

“Ende gut, alles gut. Das deutsche Kino ist dahin. Tot, verabschiedet.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 1990s both media and academic film discourses in Germany have been dominated by speculation as to the extent and meaning of a paradigmatic shift from art house *Kunst* to mainstream *Kommerz*<sup>2</sup>. Despite debate as to the actual finality of the decline of the *Autorenfilm* and the New German Cinema product (Elsaesser 1999, 7), 1982 has generally been accepted as a turning point in the fortunes of the post-68 generation of filmmakers and the social and artistic imperatives they broadly adhered to.

While the continuing film production of various directors associated with the New German Cinema period<sup>3</sup> challenges any flippant location of a radical filmic caesura around the death of the counter-cinema's flag-bearer Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the political repercussions of Herbert Achternbusch's anti-establishment film *Das Gespenst* (1982), a revision of the relationship between public and filmmaker has undoubtedly occurred. This revision is articulated most clearly by the new fraternity of young directors who would appear to reject as indulgent their forbears' 'langatmige Egotrips auf der Leinwand' ('Das Lachen' 1996, 215) in favour of a populist manifesto which embraces the potential of cinema as a mass medium.

In this respect, the critically dubbed New German Comedies (Kilb 1996b) of the early to mid-1990s were a case in point. By the mid-1990s these comedies were spearheading a popular revival in the German film industry which saw the domestic market share rising from 8.4 per cent in 1992 to 21.9 per cent in 1996<sup>4</sup>. Exploring issues

of gender and sexuality, the ambiguous romantic narratives of the woman-centred New German Comedies played a central role in this new German Comedy Wave (Halle 2000). These films featured female leads, such as Katja Riemann, Christiane Paul and Veronica Ferres, now indelibly linked with the German mainstream of the 1990s and the construction therein of a post-New German Cinema *Starkino* (Lowry 2000). In addition to their reaffirmation of the importance of the star-persona, films such as Katja von Garnier's *Abgeschminkt* (1992) and Sönke Wortmann's *Der bewegte Mann* (1994) and *Das Superweib* (1996), set a trend for a revival of the romantic comedy genre within the German film industry.

Another major area of film comedy production in the early to mid-1990s pertained to the political events of the late 1980s and the reunification, thereafter, of East and West Germany. Enjoying most success in the immediate post-Wall period the *Wende* comedies typically traced the humorous geographical and/or ideological displacement narratives of stereotypically portrayed East German identities. While light-hearted in tone, films such as Peter Timm's *Go, Trabi, Go* (1990) and Manfred Stelzer's *Griß Gott, Genosse* (1992) also represented significant exploratory forays into the cinematic representation of East and West German identities in a reunified national context. The essential heterogeneity of mainstream German film production in the 1990s has also been reinforced by the contributions of ethnic minority filmmakers and, in particular, the increasingly visible Turkish-German cinema. Attracting less popular success but much critical and international acclaim, the work of such directors as Fatih Akin (*Kurz und schmerzlos*) and Yüksel Yavuz (*Aprilkinder*) has contributed to the increasing presence of immigrant narratives within mainstream German culture.

Whatever the merits of these mainstream narrative-driven films of the 1990s, they have been cited as symptomatic of a wider trend towards the 'rehabilitation of the story in German cinema' (Coury 1996, 285). As a result of this revitalisation of the



classic, linear narrative *Kommerzfilm*, they have also invited comparison with the *Unterhaltungskino* of the 1950s (Seeßlen 1997, 56) – a period typically defined in opposition to the thematic and aesthetic concerns of the New German Cinema's *Autorenfilmer*. Thomas Elsaesser has argued that this current repositioning of German filmmakers vis-à-vis the demands of a commercial mainstream is concomitant with a reassessment of the public role of the director (1999, 8). In a post-reunification German state the construction of cultural and national identity – not to mention that of gendered, racial, sexual, socioeconomic and geopolitical identities – remains a highly complex and politicised representational practice. However, as recent work within German film criticism has recognised (Bergfelder, Carter and Göktürk 2002; Brady and Hughes 2000; Hake 2002; Halle and McCarthy 2003), engagement with issues of national and cultural identity is not now and has never been the exclusive territory of high cultural cinematic production. Significantly, much of this recent work emphasises the importance of the inclusion of popular cinematic genres within the critical appraisal of German cinema. In this respect, while the films of the New German Cinema remain a seminal reference point for the practice and critical reception of contemporary German film production, their privileged status as windows onto the central problematics of a nation's history, culture and identity is finding itself increasingly brought into question.

In accordance with these recent developments in German film criticism, this thesis remains fundamentally suspicious of any simplistic and ideologically implicated developmental histories, which envisage an unproblematic transition from socially and intellectually valuable art-house cinema to morally vacuous and apolitical entertainment film. Operating within this metadisciplinary context of contemporary cultural studies, this study is concerned with the cultural representation and construction of marginal identity within 1990s German cinema. One such example of marginal identity construction within contemporary German cinema can be found in the woman-centred

New German Comedies mentioned above. Another can be found in the post-Wall comedies and their broader context of post-*Wende* cinema<sup>5</sup>. The final example of marginal social identities as represented and constructed in film shall be the Turkish-German cinema. As already outlined, all three of these examples of marginal identity construction are deeply implicated within the filmmaking practices and codes of a mainstream genre cinema. Therefore, in line with contemporary cultural studies<sup>6</sup> more general revaluation of the popular cinematic text, a major preoccupation of this thesis shall be the questioning of German cinema's traditional "high" cultural proclivities' (Ginsberg and Thompson 1996, 5) and the subsequent reinscription of the apparently populist politics of the popular with a notion of resistance (Fiske 1989; Gledhill 1995).

However, it is the intention of this project to examine the representation of historically marginalised social groupings across the spectrum of contemporary German film production and including popular but also critical successes. Many of the films of this latter category employ narrative forms, stylistic codes and thematic concerns less easily compatible with traditional definitions of classical cinema<sup>7</sup>. Thus, one possible path through this thesis would draw the reader from the formulaic narrative trajectories of the mainstream romantic comedies of Part II, to the comic farces of the post-*Wende* cinema in Part III, and finally on to the prescriptive teleologies of the genre-based Turkish-German gangster drama in Part IV. A different route, however, would demonstrate that, alongside these proven commercial formula-films and of equal significance to this study, there exist experimental narratives of post-reunification angst, allegorical tales of oppressive and exploitative governments and societies, and immigrant stories of social exclusion and disadvantage. While this diverse body of films moves between mainstream and alternative<sup>8</sup> cinematic contexts, and from a focus on women in Part II, to eastern German populations in Part III, and finally on to the Turkish-German communities of Part IV, all of these films are engaged in some way



with the interrogation, construction, or rearticulation of socially and politically marginalised identities.

By drawing on more general Anglo-American film studies' and cultural studies' methodologies and traditions, this study of 1990s German cinema adds to the work of such contemporary German film scholars as Tim Bergfelder, Randal Halle, Margaret McCarthy, Erica Carter, Deniz Göktürk, Sabine Hake, Thomas Elsaesser, Martin Brady, Helen Hughes – just to mention a very few. All of these scholars have been engaged with the project to open up German film studies to theoretical positions inclusive of the full range of German cinematic expression, both past and present. Consequently, while this study focuses primarily upon the category of the popular, it does not do so at the expense of texts which engage with the aforementioned identity positions while neither attracting large cinema audiences nor conforming to the norms of classical, mainstream cinematic representation. Consequently, while this thesis is at pains to point to the academic and sociological value in the analysis of popular cinematic texts and their potential for resistance and oppositional meaning-making, it is not the aim of this project to question the value placed upon the more aesthetically or politically experimental work of extra-mainstream, alternative cinemas.

In line with this politicised, Anglo-American cultural studies approach to film analysis, the three central sections of this study draw upon academic discourses surrounding the identity constructs of gender, race and nation<sup>9</sup>. As Terry Eagleton argues, revolutionary nationalism, feminism and ethnic struggle represent the 'three forms of radical politics which have dominated the global agenda over the past few decades' (2000, 38). As such they represent the three organisational principles around which this project structures its investigation of the symbolic value of marginal identity construction within 1990s German cinema. Thus, from the stylistic norms and economic imperatives of the cinematic mainstream to the fringes of a marginal counter-cinema, all

of these stories impact significantly on the ways in which perceptions of gender, race and nation feed into the national cultural debates of Germany in the 1990s.

To achieve this I shall explore the efficacy of the notions of negotiation and contradiction as theoretical tools capable of exposing the forces of 'resistance' and 'conformity' (Fiske 1989) at work within both mainstream and more marginal cinematic articulations of contemporary German identity. The value of such an investigation lies in its ability to expose the counter-cultural elements intrinsic to all cinematic construction of marginal and marginalised identities. While such oppositional elements have historically been recognised as integral to the peripheral cultural context of alternative cinemas, this study aims to also locate them within the less immediately obvious narrative and generic norms of mainstream popular cinema.

As must be clear from this focus on only three distinct areas of contemporary German film production and only three areas of identity affiliation and discourse, this study in no way attempts a comprehensive survey of 1990s German cinema; neither does it attempt to draw conclusions or make generalisations as to the existence and nature of a German national identity. Instead it seeks to focus upon some key sites of marginal and marginalised identity construction in order to highlight the essential heterogeneity of contemporary German cinema and its engagement with the struggles for recognition of three emergent social groupings; namely, women, eastern German populations, and Turkish-German communities.

Drawing upon a range of British, French, American and German cultural studies traditions such a project necessitates a politics of hegemony, capable of recognising the social and political role of cultural representation within the formation of contemporary civil society. Commenting on the already constituted field within which this hegemonic struggle for power takes place, Lawrence Grossberg points to the shifting allegiances and identity positions of contesting groups, which 'are already being defined but are



never fixed once and for all' (1992, 245). While I shall return to the particularities of the German film studies tradition presently, let us first pursue this fluid notion of identity affiliation put forward by Grossberg and the associated problematics of the contemporary identity debate.

### Author's Note

As previously mentioned, this study does not purport to represent a comprehensive survey of 1990s German cinema. Many films worthy of greater attention receive only a brief mention and many more are missed out entirely. It may surprise the reader, for example, that in a study of mainstream German cinema there is no mention of the domestic and international box office success *Lola rennt*. One could equally argue that the *X-Filme Verlag* responsible for its production and whose directors include Tom Tykwer (*Winterschläfer*, *Die Tödliche Maria*, *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin*), Dani Levy (*Meschugge*, *RobbyKallePaul*, *Stille Nacht*), Wolfgang Becker (*Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, *Kinderspiele*, *Schmetterlinge*), not to mention their team producer, Stefan Arndt, deserves much more attention.

Other directors of undoubted significance in the evolution of a multifaceted German film landscape in the 1990s, include Caroline Link (*Pünktchen und Anton*, *Jenseits der Stille*), Josef Vilsmeier (*Schlafes Bruder*, *Comedian Harmonists*), Peter Lichtefeld (*Zügvogel*), Christian Petzold (*Die innere Sicherheit*), and Detlev Buck (*Wir können auch anders*, *Liebe deine Nächste*), to name but a very, very few. Unfortunately, however, the limiting factors of space, time, and thematic coherence all played a role in restricting the number of texts treated within this study.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Laurens Straub quoted by Eric Rentschler (1993, 285)

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s this debate has been conducted by both general print media and film journals ('Das Lachen' 1996; Seeßlen and Jung, 1997; Kilb 1996c; 'Sieger' 1995), as well as in German studies and German film studies circles (Litschke-McNab and Hanson 1997; Coury 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Key figures traditionally associated with the New German Cinema period have continued to produce work into the 1990s. For example, Margarethe von Trotta (*Zeit des Zorns*, 1993; *Das Versprechen*, 1994), Volker Schlöndorff (*Homo Faber*, 1990; *Der Unhold*, 1996; *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*, 2000) and Ulrike Ottinger (*Countdown*, 1990; *Taiga*, 1991; *Exil Shanghai*, 1997) and Wim Wenders (*Paris Texas*, 1984; *To the End of the World*, 1993; *Lisbon Story*, 1994; *The End of Violence*, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Statistics from *FFA: German Federal Film Board* [online], viewed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2000, <<http://www.ffa.de>>

<sup>5</sup> For ease of reference I shall employ this term 'post-*Wende* cinema' to collectively refer to those films concerned with the portrayal of East German past and *neue Bundesländer* present, released during the 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> While an interdisciplinary contemporary cultural studies is inherently resistant to the application of a single, unitary methodology, my own use of the term denotes a range of theoretical approaches, historically concerned with the political, ideological and/or sociological deconstruction of cultural texts. The history of this transgressive discipline has been most commonly charted (Storey, 1996; 1998; Collins, 1986) as extending out of the "high" cultural, 'Culture and Civilisation' Tradition, into the Marxist-influenced but equally elitist Frankfurt School theory, and including both the psychoanalytically-influenced semiotics of the French School and the Marxist-grounded British Cultural Studies. These last developments were influential in a shift away from the determinist focus on production and the one-way transmission of ideology towards a theoretical approach which allowed for processes of negotiation between consumer and text.



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<sup>7</sup> For the moment let it suffice to define classical cinema as a style of filmmaking that privileges clear, linear narratives, continuing editing to ensure the seamless progression of events and a strong focus on characters as the primary motivation for plots.

<sup>8</sup> In line with the general definition of avant-garde cinema, alternative cinema should be read as a negation of classical filmmaking styles and defined by an emphasis on technique and stylistic autograph over above narrative and subject content. Alternative cinemas may or may not also articulate a strong political engagement.

<sup>9</sup> The tripartite structure of this thesis is designed to maintain a clear argument and progressive narrative. Consequently the issues of race, gender and nation are treated in separate sections. However, it should be noted that their thematic and theoretical relevancies extend across the entire spectrum of films covered.

## Chapter 1

# *Marginal(ised) Identities within Contemporary German Cinema: Where the Margins meet the Mainstream*

### **Identity at a Crossroads: From the Margins to the Mainstream**

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.

(Hall 1996, 4)

In more recent years the rejection of essentialist, naturalising theories of identity construction has been central to the projects grouped under the umbrella heading of cultural studies. Equally significant to the theoretical understanding of identity formation has been the recognition that all identities are constituted *within* and not *outside* the realm of 'discursive formations and practices' (Hall 1996, 4). Highlighting one of the founding principles of British cultural studies, John Fiske defines culture as 'neither aesthetic nor humanist in emphasis, but political' (Fiske 1996, 115). In other words, culture should be viewed as a major site of ideological struggle, a site of 'consent' and 'resistance' (Hall 1981). This recognition of the sociological, and depending on the specific historical conditions, political importance of culture and

representational practice remains the starting point for this investigation of contemporary German cinema.

In this respect, my own film analysis draws upon Raymond Williams' sociological reading of the cultural text as a reflection of the various institutions, structures and social discourses which govern social relationships (Williams 1961)<sup>1</sup>. In particular, this study will focus upon those identities that have historically enjoyed a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the normalising hegemonies of a white, western, patriarchal society and cultural mainstream; namely, the women, ethnic minorities and former East German populations of Parts II, III and IV. In line with William's sociological reading of the cultural text, it is the contention of this thesis that the cultural representation of these groups feeds into the broader social and political debates surrounding the representation of gender, race and nation within contemporary German cinema and culture but also, I shall argue, within German society at large.

To fully appreciate the political significance of these representations of historically marginalised social groupings, however, requires an understanding of the complex system of power relations which their articulation within a variety of cinematic contexts brings into play. This in turn necessitates the theorisation of the relationship between the forces that attempt to suture<sup>2</sup> the subject into place and those potentially oppositional forces which then accommodate, negotiate and resist the normative rules and identity positions with which they find themselves confronted. John Davidson makes exactly this point in reference to recent German cinema, pointing to the need for an 'understanding of opposition in cultural production as a process in late capitalism'<sup>3</sup> that is marked by progressive and conservative, challenging and legitimating elements' (Davidson 1997, 309).

This understanding of contemporary culture as defined by both politically resistant and reactionary elements reflects the historical engagement of Anglo-American



cultural studies with the question of the politics of representation. This largely textually based cultural analysis has paid particular attention to the political value of the popular cultural text and the representation therein of marginal and marginalised identities, such as those defined by gender and race. This attempt to reinscribe the politics of the popular and the potential for oppositional meaning-making at the heart of the cultural mainstreams has been central to developments in contemporary cultural studies. In particular, it has led to the revision of cultural criticism's traditional reading of cultural politics solely within the context of the avant-garde and explicitly socially and politically engaged cultural text. These largely Anglo-American theoretical developments have in turn facilitated the theorisation of a less exclusive model of relations between the margins of cultural production and the mainstreams<sup>4</sup>. This theorisation of a dialectical system of relations between the marginal and mainstream cultural text has significant implications for this study's sociological reading of racial, gendered and national identities within the context of both classical and non-classical cinematic forms.

To return to the ambiguous political potential of the popular cultural text, John Fiske argues that 'popular culture is made by subordinate peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant' (1989, 2). Clearly, this should not be read as a claim that all popular culture is inherently oppositional or resistant. However, it does significantly problematise the trivialisation of the cultural mainstream historically enacted by critical traditions which value aesthetic experimentation and political radicalism above all else and eschew engagement with the commodified popular cultural text. As shall be demonstrated presently, German filmic traditions have a particular pertinence in this respect. However, taking as its starting point the thematic preoccupation with race, gender and nation and not the application of film-critical categorisation, this study will extend beyond the boundaries of the



mainstream and popular to include a diverse range of generic and stylistic forms. It is only by encompassing this broad cross-section of contemporary cinematic texts that we can hope to move beyond the narrow confines of the century-old 'film as art' or 'film as entertainment' debate and expose the true diversity and complexity of identity construction within 1990s German cinema.

### **Gender, Race and Nation: Identity and 1990s German Cinema**

At the heart of cultural studies poststructural interrogation of identity has been the recognition of multiple loci of identification and affiliation. These loci might include constructs as varied as gender, race, class or nation. For many this recognition represents the fundamental dilemma of identity studies, for if we recognise that identity formation is in a constant state of flux and renegotiation, then we must also accept the consequent impossibility of fixed, stable and coherent identities. Indeed, as Andrew Higson points out in his essay 'The Concept of National Cinema', the stable and coherent identity can only be found 'at the expense of repressing internal differences, tensions, and contradictions' (1989, 36-46). It is in the context of the ensuing struggle for identity affiliation and an increasingly politicised and fractious identity politics that the cultural representation of identity comes to take on an increased significance.

One area in which this interrogation of essentialist notions of identity took on an early relevance was within feminist studies. Challenging the political and ideological implications of all universalising categories of 'woman', feminism set out to expose the fundamental inequalities of a patriarchal western society. This debate took on a particular intensity in the area of media studies and the critique of the representation of women within the cultural mainstream.

Taking as its starting point this debate as to the nature and extent of women's representation within the visual media and the particularly strong feminist filmmaking tradition which exists in Germany<sup>5</sup>, Part II opens with an investigation of the woman-centred *Beziehungskomödien* which dominated the domestic German mainstream in the early 1990s. Celebrated by film industry officials and journalists alike, these films have been credited variously with the rehabilitation of the story in German cinema (Coury 1996), and the revitalisation of a domestic German film industry (Amend and Bütow 1997). Focusing on issues of gender and sexuality these films have also been responsible for foregrounding women, both as subject of representation and consumption. Drawing on Claire Johnston's (1971) call for a filmic response to the perceived over-politicisation of the feminist-centred film on the one hand, and the equally extreme ideological positioning of mainstream cinematic representations of women on the other, Part II sets out to explore the possibility of a discourse of resistance within the conformity of this classically normative cinematic genre. Ultimately, it shall be argued by this thesis that these woman-centred New German Comedies offer a revisionary approach to the romantic comedy genre and thus a more complex and problematic understanding of contemporary womanhood than that traditionally represented within the cultural mainstream.

Another more recent social and economic development which has brought questions of identity to the fore was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two Germanys. Undermining received notions of identity just as it undermined political and geographical borders, this event has had particular impact on the representation of national identity within the German cultural sphere. Consequently, and despite the commercial dominance of the relationship comedies in the mid-1990s, considerable effort is also being expended by German filmmakers to investigate and position East German history, and to a lesser extent, the post-reunification present,



within a reinvigorated and widened national context. While the treatment of the Nazi past remains of paramount interest in the international reception of German film treatments of history, there appears to be an increasing willingness to deal with the post-war history of East Germany and, in so doing, to transpose the problematics of national history eastwards (Davidson 1996).

In dialogue with film theory's traditional sociological interpretation of the historical film (Landy 2001), Part III explores the dominance of a historical focus in post-*Wende* representations of the East. As Marcia Landy argues, historicising – essentially the narrativisation of the past – has always 'played a key role in consolidating notions of national, gendered, ethnic and racial identities' (2001, 1). Thus, drawing on work relating to the deconstruction of notions of national cinemas and national identities, this aspect of my study will assess the potential for revisionary histories within 1990s German cinema. Alongside these historical reflections on East Germany's place in the reunified Germany there also exist narratives which engage with the portrayal of the post-Wall, *neue Bundesländer* present. It shall be argued in Part III that these historical and contemporaneous narratives, which transcend boundaries between classical and non-classical cinematic forms, may well be implicated in the reinscription of an East German imaginary<sup>6</sup> within the national consciousness and thus an unsettling of received notions of national identity.

Globalisation and the increasing transnational movement of peoples has been another late twentieth-century social phenomenon of considerable relevance to the representation of cultural identity within Western Europe. These migrations have increased interactions between Western and non-western cultures and revived interest in the notion of hybrid, diasporic identities. In this context, Part IV focuses upon the increasingly visible and eclectic Turkish-German cinema. In so doing, it attempts to explore the story told by the post-war influx of migrants and refugees into the western



European nation as, in Homi K. Bhabha's words, 'an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity' (1997, 6). As an exploration of race and cinema this area of my research is concerned with the transposition of a post-postcolonial revaluation of 'ethnic otherness' into a third space of *cinéma du métissage*.

In this respect, Part IV completes the work of Parts II and III in demonstrating the value of a revisionary approach to the construction of marginal identity within contemporary German cinema. This study will argue that the focus upon marginal identity blurs the boundaries between mainstream and alternative texts by highlighting the forces of negotiation and contradiction at the heart of their cinematic representation and their shared ambivalent interactions with dominant social mores and values.

One reason for this focus upon both mainstream and less straightforwardly classical filmic texts is to contest the simplistic co-option or appropriation of difference reading, which describes the one-sided incorporation of subcultural discourse into the cultural mainstream<sup>7</sup>. Spaces for contradictory, contestual and oppositional meanings remain in all of the films which are featured in this study. Equally marked, however, is the presence of reactionary, conformist and stereotypical discourses which are by no means restricted to mainstream representations of marginal identity. As this study will demonstrate, the battle lines of this increasingly violent struggle for identity affiliation and domination are no more marked within the texts themselves than they are within the socially and historically specific context of post-reunification Germany. As a western nation itself implicated in the more general hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles of late capitalist society, the Germany of today continues to experience a radical pluralisation and diversification of national, racial and sexual identities. However, alongside this diversification and pluralisation of identity, the reactionary forces which seek to exclude, ostracise and eliminate these differences – either symbolically or physically – would appear to be becoming increasingly widespread. Indeed, in the light

of the racist attacks in Solingen, Mölln, Rostock and Hoyerswerda and a more general European climate of right-wing extremist visibility, the importance of understanding the processes and systems through which identities can be constructed and promoted, just as easily as they can be excluded and demonised, is clear.

### **Cultural Populism and the ‘Cinema of Consensus’ (Rentschler 2000)**

Contemporary German cinema, writers like Georg Seeßlen, Andreas Kilb and Kraft Wetzel have been saying for more than a decade, is vapid and anaemic, devoid of substance, conviction and deeper meaning. (Rentschler 2000, 262)

Commenting on a contemporary absence of critical cultural engagement, Jürgen Habermas famously referred to the German cultural scene of the 1980s as a ‘desert of banality’ (1985). Citing this particular take on contemporary cultural expression, Eric Rentschler’s essay on the situation – or perhaps, more aptly stated, ‘predicament’ – of 1990s German cinema, constructs a decline-and-fall narrative from an aesthetically and sociologically committed practice of *Autorenfilmemachen* to the ‘mindless escapism and crude commercialism’ (2000, 263) of the contemporary ‘Cinema of Consensus’. While Rentschler does not preclude the existence of contemporary ‘oppositional’ filmmaking, he makes it clear that such cinema ‘remains for the most a minority opinion and a marginal perspective, existing in the shadows of the more prominent Cinema of Consensus’ (Rentschler 2000, 275).

In terms of the unfavourable opposition Rentschler sets up between the work of the New German Cinema directors and that of contemporary German filmmakers, his essay draws upon, and reinforces, traditional film studies binaries of mainstream and



alternative filmmaking practice. In this respect, his essay is symptomatic of a wider tradition within contemporary German film studies to focus upon the last 'canonical' moment of German film production and to equate the death of Rainer Werner Fassbinder with the death of the German cinema in general (Knight 1996; Jacobsen, Kaes and Prinzler 1993).

Deeply rooted within high cultural German traditions, such film critical discourses have remained preoccupied with definitions of art, culture and history affirmative of only those articulations of cinema which aspire to aesthetic experimentation and explicit political engagement. As a consequence these discourses have precluded any approach to film which allows for the detailed analysis of the popular cinematic text, particularly when viewed alongside the more explicitly aesthetically and politically engaged of low-budget alternative cinemas. This particular hierarchy of 'C'ulture parallels Lyotard's binary opposition of modernist and postmodernist cultural practices. For Lyotard, postmodern culture avoids the challenge posed by modernist art to expose the boundaries, rules and regulations which operate within the realm of artistic production. In contrast, postmodern culture is content to sell instead the 'myth of truth' and a 'cynical eclecticism' (1984, 73). Rentschler's derogatory reading of a contemporary German 'cinema of consensus' draws upon Lyotard's definition of the avant-garde as an autonomous realm of cultural production operating outside of and often in opposition to social and cultural consensus (1985). In this respect, Rentschler's 'cinema of consensus' is echoed in Lyotard's culture of 'mass conformism' (1984, 75).

Rentschler's own modernist academic heritage and preferred cinematic *métier* is hinted at in his reference to the impossibility of ascribing boundaries to a contemporary national German cinema:



How does one speak of national cinema in Germany today and how does this discourse relate to the ways in which people once spoke of a previous epoch's national cinema? (Rentschler 2000, 260)

It is unclear from the immediate context whether this is a direct reference to the politically engaged cinema of the 1970s or a more general allusion to bygone eras of "great" German cinema. However, he subsequently qualifies it by attributing a temporal specificity to the problem of defining national cinemas. It soon becomes apparent that the earlier cinema he is referring to is the New German Cinema – a period and filmic school preoccupied with the problematisation of national identity and the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*:

Repeatedly the Cinema of Consensus presents characters whose primary sense of person and place is rarely an overt function of their national identity or directly impacted by Germany's difficult past. (Rentschler 2000, 272)

The subtext of Rentschler's unfavourable comparison of past and present cinematic landscapes would appear to suggest a rather different question than that initially stated. This question is not, therefore, how does one speak of national cinema in Germany today but rather how is it possible to speak of a national German cinema in a post-New German Cinema age in which the norms of a mainstream *Kommerzkino* reign apparently unchecked and critical engagement has been replaced by the demands of popular consensus?

## High/Low Paradigms: German Film Studies and Popular German Culture

Clearly, the difficulties of defining a national cinema today are by no means exclusive to Germany. Indeed, in the face of the ever more effective hegemonic forces of Hollywood and the increasing economic strictures affecting film production, the struggle for the redefinition of national cinema paradigms is an issue of growing global relevance. As Ginsberg and Thompson point out in their discussion of the place of German Film Studies within the wider postmodern debate, German cinema has historically enjoyed a particularly marked relationship to the questions of nation and nationality that this debate throws up. Even today the ‘German’ in German cinema ensures that German Film Studies remains a highly politicised field of study (Ginsberg and Thompson 1996, 5). Indeed, unlike other areas of cinematic enquiry concerned with the investigation of postidentitarian aspects of global social reality, German cinema studies has long remained a discipline ‘obsessed with the logics of its own conceptual identity – the “German”’ (5). In this respect, German cinema’s position within the wider postnational cinema debate has been and still remains markedly ambiguous, reflecting a more general Anglo-American German studies preoccupation with only those non-economic aspects of the ‘German’ related to the ‘ahistorical, apolitical, “high” cultural articulations’ (1996, 6).

In the field of cinema studies the dominance of this high/low cultural paradigm has been deeply implicated in the attribution of an aesthetics of value to film, which juxtaposes such film critical binaries as Hollywood versus independent, classical versus avant-garde, entertainment versus political, and mainstream versus alternative. Forged in the fierce cultural contestations of the early twentieth-century *Kinodebatte*, German cinema studies’ own qualitative assessment of film as either *Kunst* or *Schund* has retained a cultural currency right up to the present day.

Undoubtedly, the literary cultural paradigm, which has historically dominated German studies has been equally significant in the writing of German film history. Drawing upon the idealist philosophical tradition and based upon apparently objective qualitative judgements, which assess film in terms of its intellectual and artistic merits, the canon of German film theory has constructed itself around a body of work which eulogises the creative genius of the director. Simultaneously, it seeks relationships to literary, artistic and theatrical sources: from the sinister Expressionism and mosaic 'new realism' of the Weimar Republic, to the *Autorenfilm* of the 60s and 70s.

According to Jan-Christopher Horak the exclusions and omissions of German film history demonstrate clearly the political nature of the canonisation process:

Diese Beispiele stellen anschaulich dar, wie wenig sich die Filmgeschichtschreibung in Deutschland mit der Realität des deutschen Kinos auseinandergesetzt hat. Die für das Bildungsbürgertum verfaßte Filmhistorie fällt stets normative Werturteile, die den Film als 'siebente Kunst' in den Vordergrund stellen und Künstler entdecken sollte. (1997, 13)

This fact is also recognised by Erica Carter in her essay on the place and nature of German cinema in the classroom. Referring to the German Expressionist cinema, the Nazi propaganda film and the New German Cinema product as moments representative of traditionally received German film history, she writes the following:

But the canonical status in German Film Studies of a small handful of films from these three periods is not attributable solely to the critical reception at the time of their release. It is the result also of historiographical procedures that, at any given moment, bring into focus a particular and limited selection of films, while



consigning others to mere background – a set of footnotes to a larger film history. (2000, 82)

As Raymond Williams explains, the processes through which texts are lifted high and canonised are equally effective at bringing low and excluding<sup>8</sup>(1961). In this case, the films which are excluded are clearly implicated within a popular, commercial, and thus tainted and ‘low’, mainstream:

Als Schund oder Konfektionsware werden die populären Formen des deutschen Kinos entweder ganz aus dieser Geschichte ausgeklammert oder mit einem vernichtenden Urteil abgekanzelt. (Horak 1997, 13-14)

Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau reiterate this point by drawing attention to the category that has historically been omitted from the Hollywood versus Europe film studies’ debate; namely, the category of popular European cinema which is made by Europeans for Europeans (1992). For Tim Bergfelder, the suspicion with which indigenous popular cultural forms have been historically viewed in Germany may well issue from the country’s ‘uneasy relation to the concept of ‘nationhood’”(1998, 7). Such a relationship would then explain the tendency of analytical approaches to popular German cinema to tend towards ‘the pessimistic prognostics of the Frankfurt School’ (7).

In recent years, the recognition of a hitherto excluded 'German Film History X' has prompted a reassessment of the historical reception of German cinema. This reassessment can be seen in the work of such authors as Karsten Witte, who returns to the mainstream comedies of the Nazi period (1995), and Patrice Petro, who sets out to reevaluate the place of women as cinematic subject and audience in the Weimar era by focusing upon a hitherto under researched body of popular Weimar cinema (1989). In a similar vein, Heide Schlüpmann (1990), Sabine Hake (1993), Thomas Elsaesser (2000) and Marc Silberman (1995) have all returned to their chosen periods of German film history to revisit the historiographical practices which have been instrumental in the construction of the German Film Studies canons. Clearly, such revisions are underpinned by a mandate to broaden the historical 'Film als Kunstobjekt' reading of German cinema and allow for the inclusion of popular cinematic genres (eg. Fehrenbach 1995). Equally, their work is symptomatic of a growing awareness of the contributions to be made by developments in contemporary cultural and film studies disciplines.

As a result of the post-1968 repoliticisation of the cultural text and the inception of a French cultural theory of semiotics and culturally applied psychoanalysis, a shift began to take place towards a framework which allowed for the theorisation of cultural consumption as well as production. Critical of the Frankfurt School's overdeterminatory cultural studies, which tended towards a production-centred analysis of cultural signification, a Marxist-based British Cultural Studies has continued to theorise the relationship between cultural production and consumption, and the potential for negotiation and resistance within the process of cultural meaning making.

Influenced as much by developments in anthropology and psychoanalysis, as semiotics, these British developments signalled a more general shift of focus within cultural and literary studies from the producer or author of the cultural text to the consumer or reader. Initially restricted to the spheres of advertising and the print media,



this broader critique of modern cultural systems was quickly adopted by Film Studies. As Carter points out, this move away from the 'authored', aesthetic reading of the cinematic text then facilitated a recognition of the importance of the relationship between text and spectator in the production and interpretation of a semiotics of film.

However, according to Carter such a theoretical transition must ultimately lead to a 'fundamental rethinking of the cultural status of the film medium itself' (Carter 2000):

If a film's meaning is the result of historically specific interactions between the text and spectator, then it follows that analysis must start, not with the search for some intrinsic textual meaning, but with an examination of the practice or process by which, in particular historical contexts, film texts gain meaning and value for given groups of spectators. (Carter 2000, 87)

Ultimately, Carter's study is concerned with highlighting the methodological shift that such theoretical revisions have induced within German Film Studies, from purely aesthetic, socio-political or historical readings of German cinema, to a critical analysis which takes into account 'modes of address and spectatorial engagement' (2000, 87). In this respect, my analysis of German cinema parallels Carter's work. However, whereas Carter is concerned with the incorporation of the popular cinematic text into a new German film *history*, my intention here is to explore the possibility of a challenge to the continued dominance of the high-low cultural paradigms of Frankfurt School discourse within the context of *contemporary* German cinema.

The significance of this move away from theories of production to those of consumption for the study of the popular cultural text is made clear by Christine Gledhill. Significantly, this Marxist critique of late-capitalist cultural consumption sits



extremely comfortably with my own ideological deconstruction of the popular cinematic text and its sociological function:

...the search for new markets requires new products, exchanged for a range of ever extending use values. But these values vary according to particular groups of users and contexts of use [...] If this is true of consumer products, then the use-value of media texts (which lie in a complex of pleasures and meanings operating at different levels – aesthetic, emotional, ideological, intellectual) are far less easily predicted or controlled. Thus the use-value to a particular group of a profitable (in the short term) media product may be in contradiction with the ideologies which in the long term maintain capitalism. (1995, 196)

This reassessment of the cultural significance of the popular – a reassessment at the heart of the cultural studies project to politicise the popular cultural text, and thus resist all narrow definitions of culture as objects of supposed aesthetic excellence – is of particular relevance to contemporary developments in the German film industry. In this highly competitive and highly capital intensive sector the spaces for aesthetic experimentation provided by the high inflation of the early 1920s and the foundation of the national film funding bodies in the late 60s would appear to be becoming rarer and rarer. In contrast to these two central periods of German filmmaking upon which much of the international critical acclaim of German cinema rests, contemporary German cinema is increasingly defining itself in terms of domestic popularity and commercial success (Amend and Bütow 1997).

This is evidenced most clearly in the shifting emphasis placed upon the importance of market by both *Filmförderungsgremien* (Schaefer 1997) and *Filmhochschulen* ('Geh doch' 1996). While the actual gross budgets of the regional film

funding bodies have increased fourfold in the last thirty years (Elsaesser 1999, 12), today's young directors do not necessarily enjoy the ease of access to state funding which their New German Cinema forbears enjoyed. Target audiences, marketing strategies and advertising campaigns – alien concepts to these original recipients of film subsidies – are increasingly central to any filmmaker's successful bid for sponsorship.

As recognised by the older generation of filmmakers themselves<sup>9</sup>, in the economically conservative climate of the 1990s the experimentation and spontaneity of the 60s and 70s is less possible to achieve. In media and political circles a growing tendency towards the celebration of popular film is equally apparent. While politicians may still talk of film as a cultural legacy, national film policy would indicate that economic imperatives are increasingly dominant (Kilb 1997; Prumm 1996). This is reflected not least in the increasing dominance of 'economic' – as opposed to 'cultural' – funding bodies committed to the *Standortpolitik* of regional regeneration (Blaney 2000, 20).

Clearly, a politically engaged cultural studies must allow for the analysis of all cinematic narratives, whether implicated in the ideological imperatives and critical discourses of a commercial mainstream or an oppositional alternative. As we have seen, in the context of German film studies and in the contemporary climate of German film production such an approach is of particular significance. Consequently, in pursuing this investigation of gendered, national and racial identities in 1990s German cinema, my focus will remain on the nature of the identity representation and will, therefore, include examples of both popular, mainstream cinema and more minority interest, low budget fare. However, due to this primary focus on the construction of marginal identity, it is not my aim to discuss in depth the respective mainstream and popular or art-house and avant-garde characteristics of each individual film. By including this broad range of styles, genres and tones, I hope to open up this latest reincarnation of *junger deutscher*



*Film* to new and critically attentive practices of reading. It is the central contention of this thesis that it is only when we transcend simplistic demarcations of aesthetic boundaries that we can begin to move towards an understanding of cinematic image and narration as central to the construction of cultural identity.

## Identity and Difference

While the thematic focus of this work shifts as it progresses, moving from a focus on sexuality and gender (Part II), to the implication of the national in the social (Part III), and finally to notions of racial and cultural identity (Part IV), its fundamental concern remains the cultural processes of identity formation and affiliation which these cinematic texts enact. In line with the politicised sociological reading of the cultural text forwarded at the start of this chapter, I shall argue that in the wider social and cultural arena these representations of marginal social groupings are central to capacities for social change. As Wendy Everett points out in the preface to *European Identity in Cinema*, '[f]ilm is a fundamental part of the change that constitutes identity' (1996, 5). However, as already outlined, cultural engagement with such emergent social groupings and identities can represent both a positive and a negative cultural force. For example, the project of nationalism in all its traditional and evolving forms remains fundamentally reliant upon the identification and exclusion of others and of difference. This cooption and expropriation of identity and difference can be equally instrumental in the construction of neonationalist identities, a point of clear relevance to the cultural representation of eastern German and Turkish-German populations as investigated by this study in Parts III and IV.

The fluid, conceptual identities of nations, discursively constructed and



continually reformed and revised, however, have much in common with the identities of smaller communities and, indeed, of individuals themselves. In a constant state of flux and change these identities must continually redefine themselves and do so most commonly not in relation to that which they are but rather to that which they are not. Homi K. Bhabha picks up on this idea, stating that ‘what is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences’ (1997, 1). In a comment that is equally true of contemporary German cinema, Wendy Everett denies the existence of a unified, homogenous European cinema preferring instead to visualise it as a ‘series of expressions of different ways of questioning and portraying itself and the world’ (1996, 5). As a consequence it is the differences themselves that must form the basis of any analysis of a European identity. Consequently, my own exploration of the representation and performance of identity formations in contemporary German cinema seeks out precisely these articulations of cultural difference and attempts to highlight their potential implication ‘in the act of defining the idea of society itself’ (Bhabha 1997, 2).

In the woman-centred comedies of Part II the essential adequacy of the sexually autonomous, independent female self only takes on full significance in relation to their difference from the comically inadequate, reactionary and invariably rejected heterosexual male. In Part III the relationship between the inhabitants of the old and the new *Bundesländer* is signified primarily in terms of socio-economic inequality – in other words, in terms of that which they do not have and that others (western Germans) do. This material disadvantage is then further augmented by the cultural schizophrenia induced by the overlaying of a different, entirely alien system of values and mores on to their own. As in the post-*Wende* cinema of Part III, the white, middle class, majority society represents an unspoken and often invisible other against which the marginalised

Turkish-German communities of Part IV struggle to find a new and autonomous social identity.

At the start of the 21st Century and in the particular context of a late-capitalist, media-saturated society, identity remains a key site of cultural contestation. As Wendy Everett points out, the structural changes that have reshaped Europe in the aftermath of the Soviet bloc's disintegration and ushered in the new era of German unification, merely serve to bring these questions of identity back to the fore:

Given the constant need to re-value and reassess past and present which is one of the consequences of such change, it is not surprising that questions of identity, whether personal, national, or indeed, European, should have assumed a particular importance in recent years. (7, 1996)

The representation of cultural difference, whether couched in the terminology of gender, race, nation, geopolitical location or sexual difference, is clearly of key sociological and political significance. As this study will demonstrate, genre, tone, budget, director and target audience may all play a role in the way in which this cultural difference and cultural contestation is portrayed. However, while often demanding the application of a different set of theoretical tools, this diversity of style, format and structure does not detract from the social significance of the struggle itself. In this respect, feminist theory's critique of the cooption and expropriation of gendered difference within mass culture, and its positing of critical ways of seeing and alternative models of representation, is as relevant to the post-emancipation, mainstream, woman-centred relationship comedies of the 1990s as it was to the evolution of the *Frauenfilm* of the 60s and 70s. Equally, as the task of rebuilding an economically devastated East and reuniting it to a diametrically opposed ideological system continues, the ideological



battle for ownership of its past and present, through cultural representation, also moves on. The outcome of this struggle will be central to the future of this now reunified country but also raises questions as to the viability of the ideal of western, capitalist 'democracy itself.

In the wake of recent racist attacks in the *neue Bundesländer*, and in the context of an increasingly tense and fractious social climate, the flux of new immigrants from the East has reopened the *Ausländerpolitik* debate and raised some uncomfortable parallels with an apparently *bewältigt* past. The discourse of stigmatisation and exclusion of ethnic minorities built upon by an increasingly visible right-wing extremist lobby, holds particular relevance for the largely naturalised Turkish population, whose second, third and fourth generations are entering a significant sphere of cultural influence with their inroads into the German film industry.

## Conclusion

In my survey of the as yet 'uncanonised' work of the 1990s, I will draw upon a broad cross-section of German films, consisting of both popular and critical successes, and covering a range of themes, to illustrate the value of a cultural studies approach to the study of film within the disciplinary boundaries of Germanistik. While these texts lend themselves to the unravelling of sexual, racial and national identities they could also be seen as implicated within the wider postmodern project to deconstruct all essentialist formulations of identity<sup>10</sup>. Christine Gledhill recognises this more complex understanding of identity construction as central to film theory's revaluation of the mainstream cinematic text:



It is only if we accept the role of the mass media in making cultural definitions – and also post-structural theory’s exposure of the ideologically ‘pure’ and full representation, whether feminist or dominant, as an illusory goal that we can take a more positive stance towards the spaces of negotiation in mainstream production (1995, 201).

By adopting this cultural studies approach to the construction of marginal and marginalised cultural identity within film it will be possible to compare and contrast in new and interesting ways the representational practices of both mainstream and non-classical cinematic texts. However, by offering a more inclusive and fundamentally sociological understanding of contemporary film production, this study may also move closer towards the displacement of ‘the verities of the Western canon with its attendant Eurocentric, humanist, patriarchal, “high” cultural proclivities’ (Ginsberg and Thompson 1996, 5).

Many cultural critics have chosen to situate recent developments in the German film industry within the context of a period of post-New German Cinema decline. It is somewhat ironic, then, that all three bodies of films dealt with in this study could be situated within traditions dating back to the socially and politically committed filmmaking of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. However, in line with Renstchler’s ‘cinema of consensus’ reading of contemporary German cinema, all three bodies of texts would appear to either implicitly or explicitly reject the left-wing political discourse associated with these various traditions.

While the most prominent of the New German Comedy directors of the early 1990s unambiguously reject the heavy, serious, intellectual work of their New German Cinema forbears (‘Das Lachen macht’s’ 1996; ‘Gepäck abgeworfen’ 1996; Kilb 1996a; Kilb 1996b; Coury 1997), there is an equal indifference displayed by the directors of the

woman-centred comedies, such as Sherry Hormann and Katja von Garnier, to the tradition of feminist filmmaking which lies behind their woman-centred narratives ('Tempo' 1993; 'Abgeschminkt' 1993; Caprio 1997). These directors may still be concerned to make films for and about women but they do so within the context of a lighthearted, narrative-driven genre cinema. Similarly, the comic farces and serious psychological *Kleingeschichten* of the post-*Wende* cinema instigate a repositioning of the political project of East German socialism outwith the radical left-wing political discourse of the West German intellectual left of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Pflaum 2000). The newly emergent Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s also signals a significant departure from the early work of the New German Cinema, moving beyond the positioning of foreigner-as-victim and located exclusively within the context of the socially engaged *Problemfilm*.

In all of these respects, the films dealt with in this study signal a change in style, tone and register from the socially and politically engaged work of the New German Cinema period. Clearly, a main motivation for this theoretical focus upon a diverse range of genres and styles is to include the critical consideration of the popular cinematic text in the investigation of marginal identity representation. However, rather than subscribing to Eric Rentschler's view that these contemporary articulations of classical dominant cinema represent an abandonment of political engagement, it is the fundamental contention of this thesis that both alternative and mainstream filmic texts can be engaged in critical and empowering representations of marginal social groupings.

This adoption of a structural and theoretical framework commonly defined as postmodern identity politics has been driven as much by the films themselves and their treatment of issues surrounding race, gender and nation, as by my own academic schooling, disciplinary biases and political leanings. The emphasis within this study is on a contemporary *cultural* rather than strictly *film* studies analysis. However, nowhere



in this study do I attempt to assert the absolute dominance or efficacy of identity politics. I am well aware of the criticisms directed against what Terry Eagleton has termed 'the modern-day culturalism' (2000, 43). To Eagleton's extremely credible charge that such modern-day identity politics have tended towards a universalist position despite their avowedly anti-universalist principles, I would reply that there is indeed much more (or often *less*) to culture than politics, as there is also much more to politics than culture. However, at a time when the broader academy would appear to be descending into an ever-tightening spiral of self-referential specialisation (Bourdieu 1998; Said 1985) cultural studies must, I believe, remain committed to a textually justified and sociologically supported politics of culture, and it is to this principle that I have attempted to remain true.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams defines such a cultural reading as in pursuit of the particular 'structure of feeling' of a particular period- a metaphor for a notion of 'social experience in solution' (1961). In other words, an articulation of the meanings and values of a society as they are actively lived, and the relationship of these personal and social experiences to the formal ideologies and beliefs (patriarchy and female emancipation) and patterns of behaviour in existence at that time. In this way Williams is able to encompass the essential doubleness of culture, as both symbolic and functional, affective and material.

<sup>2</sup> For our purposes it is sufficient to define 'suture' as the process through which the text, through the medium of the camera, attempts to ensure the viewing subject's identification with the point of view of a character in the fiction, or with the perspective of the omniscient camera. For a more thorough investigation of its respective psychoanalytic and film theory histories, see Silverman 1983.



<sup>3</sup> The term late capitalism has been employed to imply a range of contemporary developments from multinational capitalism, economic globalisation and media-capitalism, to the more general modern world system or post-industrial society. In Frederic Jameson's influential *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) late capitalism is presented as synonymous with both multinational capitalism and postmodernism. While I shall develop Jameson's ideas in Chapter 2 late capitalism is employed here to refer to the particular articulation and form of capitalism in the late twentieth-century. This form is characterised by the unimpeded global movement of capital and the related transnational migration of peoples but also by a transformation in the social relations which once defined capitalism. One result of this transformation has been an obfuscation of the relationship between labour and commodities, and indeed, labour as a commodity, and the much less defined economic structural reliance on class. Both of these latter changes can be seen as typical hallmarks of the development of post-industrial society which relies on service industries, knowledge-production, and information technology to create wealth, rather than heavy industry and manufacture.

<sup>4</sup> This model of dialectical relations between alternative and mainstream cultural registers signals a clear departure from the simplistic binarism of sociology's early interrogation of the margin/mainstream relationship, as epitomised in the following quote by Edward Shils:

'Society has a centre. There is a central zone in the structure of society. This central zone impinges in various ways on those who live within the ecological domain in which the society exists. Membership in the society, in more than the ecological sense of being located in a bounded territory and of adapting to an environment affected or made up by other persons located in the same territory, is constituted by the relationship to this central zone.' (1975, 3)

<sup>5</sup> This tradition and its contemporary relevance shall be explored in greater detail in Part II.

<sup>6</sup> This is drawing on Thomas Elsaesser's notion of an 'historical imaginary' in relation to the Weimar film (2000). This 'imaginary' becomes an appropriate term in times in which political events dominate readings of a particular historical period. For example, in the realm of cultural production, political readings of cultural texts tend toward the extrapolation of 'allegories of

meaning' (4). In the case of the treatment of those films dealing with the reunification and, more particularly, East German history, this approach has been markedly absent, and thus deserves reappraisal.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the incorporation of subcultural discourses into the cultural mainstream see Hebdige, D. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen: London.

<sup>8</sup> In his essay, *Analysis of Culture*, he attempts to denaturalise and demystify the apparently objective process of canonisation. Williams saw this process as traditionally founded upon an 'ideal' definition of culture. In other words, a view of culture as the peak of human perfection. The 'selective tradition' describes the ideologically implicated process through which cultural texts, be they literary or artistic, are chosen to represent the dominant cultural content of a particular historical period. However, this apparently objective process of selection is actually implicated in the value systems of the society in which it takes place. In other words, the works that we choose to represent a particular cultural period – be it past or present – are dependent upon the values and beliefs which hold dominance in the particular society- and by implication, the cultural establishment- in which they are selected.

<sup>9</sup> "Der Fassbinder der neunziger Jahren wäre [...] wahnsinnig geworden, denn er hätte ja immer drei Jahre gebraucht, um einen Film zu finanzieren." (Berg 1993, 46)

<sup>10</sup> 'The deconstruction has been conducted in a variety of disciplinary areas, all of them, in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity.' (Hall 1996,

1)



## Chapter 2

### *Mediated Identities in a Postmodern Age*

The fundamental contention of this study is that film analysis is a valid tool for the exploration and interrogation of cultural identity. Writing on the construction of identity within European cinema, Wendy Everett states that film ‘both reflects and creates identity; both reveals and composes the myths and images which shape European vision and European identity’ (11, 1996). However, for the purpose of this study, identity also remains the entry point through which we are able to engage with an unusually broad range of generic and stylistic filmic forms; from the big-budget, mainstream entertainment feature to the more experimental, low-budget film. Together, these diverse forms provide a significant insight into the issues and concerns preoccupying contemporary German cinema and the individual and collective identities troubling its margins. Yet to engage with these diverse cultural forms effectively, my methodology must cross a range of disciplinary boundaries, including those of political history, film studies, sociology, Marxist cultural theory and gender studies. In so doing, I hope to reanimate the understanding of the representation and performance of gendered, racial, and national identities as articulated in contemporary German cinema<sup>1</sup>.

The emergence of cultural studies’ preoccupation with identity politics, as articulated in the categories of class, gender and race, was outlined in Chapter 1. This debt to British, French and American fields of cultural studies is acknowledged through extensive reference to a variety of cultural studies practitioners. The relevance of their work, I shall argue, transcends the boundaries of their own geopolitical and disciplinary origins. From Williams, Hall and Eagleton to Lyotard, Baudrillard and Bourdieu, and from Grossberg and Denzin, to Gledhill and Radway; each has their own particular



academic heritage and preferred cultural métier, and yet all share an awareness of the peculiar functions of culture and cultural reproduction that maintain such a position of social and political dominance within the late-capitalist democracies of the West. Collectively their work could be seen as representing a theoretical meta-canon – a canon built upon the political interrogation of culture and cultural production, and the implication of these cultural practices in the processes of social marginalisation. This latter concern is most commonly articulated in relation to the historical construction of cultural hierarchies, the historical canon of German Film Studies being a case in point.

This study relies on the incorporation of such a broad range of extra-disciplinary theoretical sources to highlight the meta-disciplinary, transnational relevancies of its representative texts. In this respect, this work can be seen as contributing to the revision of historiographical procedures currently taking place within the study of German film history and the more general renewed interest in the popular cinematic text and its consumption (Carter 2000; Hughes 2000). However, before beginning this analysis of race, gender and nation, as represented within the woman-centred relationship comedies of the early 1990s (Part II), the post-*Wende* cinema of the reunified Germany (Part III), and finally, the increasingly prominent Turkish-German cinema (Part IV), it is first necessary to examine the debates which have been conducted around the construction and social signification of cultural identity. It should be noted that for the duration of this section, the primary focus is theoretical. Consequently, reference to specific filmic examples shall remain largely unelaborated.

### **Diversity and Difference: ‘Cultures-In-Between’**

As Terry Eagleton’s *The Idea of Culture* demonstrates, contemporary cultural criticism

continues to pursue an intensely complex, relativised and differentiated understanding of the idea of 'Culture'. This understanding of culture parallels the work of semiotic and poststructuralist theorists, whose project it has been to 'detotalize social reality by demonstrating the micrologies of power, the diverse enunciative sites of discourse, the slippage and sliding of signifiers' (Bhabha 1996, 53). One result of this project has been the unambiguous rejection by contemporary cultural theorists of the idea of self-contained, uncontaminated national cultures<sup>2</sup>. However, the consequent push towards replacement notions of 'global cultures' has, hitherto, been equally problematic. Clearly, some cultural theorists remain fundamentally wary of the ideological appropriation of the 'global' in the service of an increasingly dominant neoliberal agenda, which is only too pleased to equate the demand for 'global cultures' with the expansionist designs of 'global capitalism'. However, this problem may also reflect the resistance of the term 'global culture' itself, firstly, to true conceptualisation and, consequently, to collective identification. As Bhabha terms it, such notions simply 'resist imagination' (1996, 53).

In an attempt to counter this attempted construction of a universal and universalising culture, Bhabha goes on to develop a theory of the differentiation of cultures within cultures. He does this by turning to the contemporary theme of immigration and the politically, religiously and economically necessitated migrations of populations. However, he explicitly rejects the theorisation of these movements as equatable with the transposition of cultural organic wholes. Instead, he employs a theory of the dialogical relationship between the native cultures of the immigrant populations and the host cultures in which they find themselves. Bhabha's subsequent description of the cultures of immigrants as 'cultures-in-between' (1996) symbolises the impossibility of culture's self-containedness as the basis for the construction of cultural boundaries. In other words, it forces us to recognise that 'the translation between



cultures, whether assimilative or agonistic, is a complex act that generates borderline effects and identifications, peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash' (Eliot 1949, 63-64).

These metaphors of cultures-in-between and culture-sympathy/culture-clash shall be returned to in Part IV when my film analysis shall turn to the representations of the Turkish-German community within contemporary German film. According to our sociological reading of film as feeding into broader social and political debates around race, gender and nation, the films of the Turkish-German cinema must in turn feed into debates around the position of immigrant and ethnic minority communities within post-reunification Germany. One of the most prominent discourses influencing these debates in western society is the discourse of multiculturalism<sup>3</sup>. However, according to Bhabha, the notion of cultures-in-between stands in direct opposition to the reading of ethnic difference as represented within multicultural discourse.

Bhabha is extremely critical of the inherently essentialist and essentialising project of western multiculturalism, which he sees as typical of the cultural diversity approach to cultural heterogeneity. Developed primarily by European and American theorists as a means of examining relations between the western and non-western and third-world cultures, this western liberal tradition has been attacked for playing into the hands of cultural essentialists:

This kind of liberal relativist perspective is inadequate in itself and doesn't generally recognise the universalist and normative stance from which it constructs its cultural and political judgements. (Bhabha 1990, 209)

In 'The Commitment to Theory' Bhabha discusses the crucial distinction that he sees existing between cultural difference and cultural diversity. To Bhabha cultural diversity



is an epistemological object, an object definable by empirical knowledge:

Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalised cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity. (1994, 34)

The cultural diversity approach, therefore, allows for the theorisation of cultures in isolation from each other – an approach reminiscent of film theory's construction of the national cinema canons, cinemas essentially defined by their knowable difference from other national cinemas.

Cultural difference, on the other hand, stems from a highly problematised, political and fluid reading of culture, and, in particular, the cultures of the margins:

The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalisation – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding *to* does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification. (1994, 162 [his emphasis])

Cultural difference, then, can be articulated from the point of view of the minority cultures and social positions that are being represented and, in the process, can destabilise and disturb the power dynamics which enforce their marginality. Similarly, in the realm of film, theoretical moves away from an emphasis on high cultural canons have facilitated the study of cinemas and films hitherto ignored within the academy of

Anglo-American film studies. Writing on the subject of popular European cinema, Dimitris Eleftheriotis recognises this, pointing to the significance of the question of cultural difference within a radically pluralized European cinematic landscape. It is the assertion of cultural difference, he argues, that has been responsible for challenging ‘the imaginary (and oppressive) unity of national culture’ (2001, 52). What is essential, however, is to conceptualise difference ‘not as the assertion or creation of unbridgeable epistemological and cultural chasms, but as what initiates complex but knowable relations of exchange and interaction’ (2001, 51).

This recognition of the political value of the representation of cultural difference represents a significant starting point for my own analysis of marginal identities as represented in contemporary German cinema. Extending across the spectrum of race, gender and nation and including a diverse array of cinematic styles and genres – from classical mainstream comedies to elliptical and narratively abstruse critical *Kleingeschichten* – this study sets out to assess the political implications of these films’ mobilisation of markers of difference and identity. It is the fundamental contention of this thesis that both politically reactionary and oppositional representations of cultural difference can be found across the entire spectrum of contemporary German film production. By exposing these articulations of gendered, racial, cultural, national and geopolitical difference it is hoped to assess their respective merits for the marginal social groupings they purport to represent.

In their most reductive and reactionary political form these representations of difference could feed into the discourses of sexism, racism and nationalism. Thus in the mainstream romantic comedies of Part II, the New German Comedy women often appear trapped in reactionary narrative trajectories towards patriarchal union and sacrificed autonomy. In this respect, their clearly defined gendered difference often struggles to find articulation beyond a patriarchally determined positioning as glamour-



babes and sex-objects. This clichéd two-dimensionality of characterisation is paralleled in the cardboard cut-out East Germans of the post-*Wende* comedies of Part III. As the bumbling and simplistic Struutz family in *Go, Trabi, Go* cross border after border in pursuit of an elitist bygone national cultural heritage, all true cultural exchange is resisted, leaving the ‘them’ and ‘us’ divisions of nationalist intractability firmly in place. Similarly, Fatih Akin’s *Kurz und schmerzlos* and Lars Becker’s *Kanak Attack* of Part IV offer us a vision of immigrant cultures in complete isolation from the white, western society which determines their positioning within public discourse and governmental policy.

It would appear then that in all of the films mentioned above there exists a real danger of reversion to cultural, and thus ideological, stereotypes, as well as a tendency towards the cultural diversity approach to cultural representation criticised by Bhabha. The production of such cultural stereotypes is symptomatic of the play of power between minority and majority cultures, and the orientalising discourses<sup>4</sup> which arise from any reductive, collective social consciousness. The attractions of such a simplistic dichotomous view of culture in defining distinct identity demarcations and displacing ‘different’ or disturbing cultural practices to the margins is clear. As Maryon MacDonald points out, ‘the more powerful centres of self-definition, however, have inevitably generated more powerful and persuasive images of order for themselves, locating disorder on their margins’ (1997, 225). Such orientalising identity formations ultimately reproduce existing social systems by mobilising stereotypes which function in the majority’s favour. The location and sociological interpretation of these cultural stereotypes remains central to this analysis of gender, race and nation within 1990s German cinema.

However, it is the primary hypothesis of this study that in all of the films selected – whether classically mainstream as with the texts mentioned above, or more



stylistically and narratively alternative – there also exist representations of difference which neither negate difference ‘in the name of the universality of culture’ nor affirm it ‘in the fortress of national and cultural particularity’ (Eleftheriotis 2001, 65). To explore these moments of cultural difference and exchange it is necessary to look at each of the three bodies of film dealt with within this study in turn.

### **Turkish German Cinema: *cultures du métissage*?**

As Bhabha is keen to point out, the question of how such cultural, racial or national identities are constructed within cultural discourse is particularly pertinent to immigrant populations. The new Turkish-German cinema is just one such site, in which marginal – in this case, ethnic – identities are represented and constructed within a predominantly mainstream cultural context. Commenting on the sociological function of multicultural discourse and its effect on the representation of foreigners within mainstream German cinema, Stefan Reinecke argues the following:

Man meint in solchen Debatten nicht die konkreten Ausländer, als deren Repräsentanten man sich ausgibt – man benutzt sie eher als ein Mittel, um das eigene politische Selbstverständnis zu verteidigen. (1995, 12)

This sociological interpretation of cultural stereotypes as ‘others’ against which mainstream society can construct its image of itself contains echoes of Maryon MacDonald’s argument cited earlier. Recognising the operation of this same process within the context of Turkish-German minorities living in Germany the writer, journalist and poet Zafer Şenocak states the following:

Die Frage woher man kommt ist direkt an den Körper gerichtet, denn um diese Frage zu stellen brauchen wir ein Bild vom Anderen. Ein Bild, das wir in der eigenen Dunkelkammer produzieren. (Şenocak interviewed by Konzett 2003, 133)

This process of othering points to a far more reactionary interpretation of the centre/periphery relationship than the emancipatory one envisaged by Bhabha. For Bhabha the story told by society's disenfranchised minorities is 'an indigenous or native narrative internal to its [the society's] national identity' (1997, 6)<sup>5</sup>. In this respect, Bhabha argues for the possibility of a dialogical relationship between those marginalised social groups and the dominant discourses which determine their object status<sup>6</sup>.

Clearly, the very existence of a Turkish-German cinema in Germany is problematic to any articulation of identity solely 'along national-cultural lines'. Consequently, in Part IV I will be concerned to examine the processes of cultural exchange, resistance and demarcation which exist within the new Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s. In particular, I shall explore the potential ability of this minority culture to adapt, assimilate and resist the dominant cultural discourses with which they find themselves confronted. Bhabha's psychoanalytic theorisation of language, performance and identity has focused largely on the resistance of postcolonial identities to the forces of neocolonialism. However, by focusing primarily upon the psychological resistances of the individual, as opposed to the group, Bhabha discounts any broader Marxist critique of the material circumstances which facilitate the exploitation of these minorities. In view of this, and in pursuit of a theoretical framework capable of theorising the socio-economic positioning of the Turkish-German community, I shall



turn in the film analysis section of this chapter to the work of Norman Denzin. Denzin offers a Marxist critique of the role of the visual media in late-capitalist society and their role in representing, constructing and promoting postmodern identities.

This question of the ability of a minority culture to resist interpellation by dominant interest groups holds relevance, I believe, for the new wave of post-New German Cinema texts, dealing with the fate of immigrant and ethnic minority communities living in new, reunified Germany of the 1990s. In Part IV I shall argue that this new body of films extends beyond the orientalisng formulations of a previous generation's *Kino der Fremdheit*<sup>7</sup>, to allow for the exploration of the actual day-to-day reality of life between two cultures – a *cinéma du métissage*. To do this I shall trace the historical representation of Turkish and Turkish-German populations from the New German Cinema of Rainer Werner Fassbinder (*Angst essen Seele auf*) and Helma Sanders-Brahms (*Shirins Hochzeit*) of the 1960s and 70s, through to the *Problemkino* of Tevfik Başer (*40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland; Abschied vom falschen Paradies*), and finally on to the potential *Métissagenkino* of Thomas Arlsan (*Dealer; Geschwister*), Fatih Akin (*Kurz und schmerzlos*) and Lars Becker (*Kanak Attack*).

Derived from the French word *métis* – meaning ‘half-caste’ or ‘crossbreed’ – the term *métissage* has come to represent an interstitial, hybrid culture which exists within rather than between or outside two cultures. Drawing on recent work undertaken in the area of intercultural communication<sup>8</sup> Claude Audinet describes the arrival of the term *culture du métissage* and its myriad cultural articulations in the following way:

Mais avec les mots culturels ou interculturel, se glissait le mot *métis*, dans des failles inattendues. Rencontres métisses, cultures métisses, musique ou journaux métis. (1999, 10)



(Along with the words cultural and intercultural the term *métis* has crept unexpectedly into everyday use. *Métis* gatherings, *métis* cultures, *métis* music and *métis* newspapers.[my translation])

Taking its impetus from the public and academic debates surrounding the notions of transnationality, postnationalism, and the ethnic minority-related discourses of integration and assimilation, the 1990s have seen this term take on a new significance; namely, as a description of the experiences of 2nd, 3rd and 4th generation children of immigrant families in Western Europe and their lives within two distinct cultures:

S'il [métis] se retrouve à l'autre bout du monde, amis aussi aux frontières de l'Europe, et également au couer des cités, qu'en faire? Car avec l'arrivée du mot se trouve désignée la réalité nouvelle de nos sociétés. (Audinet 1999, 10)

(If the *métis* can be found at the other end of the world but is equally familiar to the frontiers of Europe and the hearts of our cities, what do we do with it? Because with the arrival of this term a new reality is also born within our societies. [my translation])

### **Post-Wende Cinema: *Wir sind ein Volk***

This notion of a new society defined by the to and fro of cultural exchange between native and host cultures, is as relevant to the discussion of the reunification of Germany as it is to the fate of the Germany's ethnic minorities. Arguably, many East German communities might also see themselves as 'minority cultures'; ideologically, socially and culturally devalued peoples who have fallen victim to the hegemonic forces of

western, capitalist society. In line with the narrative centrality Bhabha ascribes to his 'disenfranchised minorities', the cultural representation of both groups must be seen as implicated in the construction of 'intersubjectivities and collective experiences of nationness' (1997, 2) within present day Germany. In other words, in their interplay with the hegemonic and essentialising discourses of 'true' and 'false' nationality (Balibar, 1990), such minority voices remain central to the formation of the inherently limiting boundaries of Benedict Anderson's imagined national community<sup>9</sup>.

Consequently, in Part III I shall explore the varied cinematic representations of eastern Germany – past and present – and their potential implication in the redefining of a post-reunification national, social imaginary. In pursuit of this I shall examine the representation of East German identity in films as distinct in tone and register as Andreas Kleinert's *Verlorene Landschaft* (1992) and *Wege in die Nacht* (1999), Oskar Roehler's *Die Unberührbare* (2000), Manfred Stelzer's *Grüß Gott, Genosse* (1992) and Peter Timm's *Go, Trabi, Go* (1990). In this respect, this section seeks to evaluate Bhabha's argument for the centrality of the marginalised, minority narrative within both national and nationalist discourse, while emphasising the efficacy of his use of the theoretical model of postcolonialism. While the aforementioned films all engage with the realities of the post-*Wende* present, a particular focus of this section shall be the cinematic representation of East German history, as represented in films as diverse as Frank Beyer's *Nikolaikirche* (1995), Leander Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999), Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* (2000), and Margarethe von Trotta's *Das Versprechen* (1994). This area of my study shall attempt to account for the potential assimilation of social concerns regarding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* with the *Aufarbeitung* of the East German past.

The dominance of filmic treatments of the GDR past within the post-*Wende* cinema is, I shall argue, implicated in the process of reintegration of the two Germanies



into a single and ideologically unified state. As Marcia Landy points out in her study of the historical film, ‘versions of history thus play a powerful role in determining how individuals and groups inherit and understand their social and cultural milieu’ (2001, 1). In this respect, the application of a metaphor of colonisation to the integration of East Germany into the widened, arguably West German, national whole, remains central to my reading of the oppositional potential of the post-*Wende* cinema.

### **New German Comedy: Marginalised Women and the Negotiating Spectator**

Focusing upon the destabilisation of ‘originary and initial subjectivities’ (Bhabha 1997, 1), our discussion of racial and national identity as represented in contemporary German film has so far ignored our third area of identity representation – that of gender. In her feminist investigation of the mechanisms of the nation-state, Nira Yuval-Davis points to the centrality of gender in any discussion of nationalist or nationalising projects. Commenting on the foundational relationship between gender and nation, she writes, ‘it is women – and not (just?) the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia – who reproduce nations, biologically, culturally, and symbolically’ (1997, 2). As an historically marginalised social grouping, women have occupied a position vis-à-vis white, western, patriarchal society as ambivalent as that currently held by the Turkish-German and former East German populations. It remains to be seen, however, whether the theoretical frameworks applied to these discussions of racially and ideologically devalued peoples, positioned in terms of their difference from a mainstream, hegemonic cultural discourse, could be equally applicable to the cultural representation of gendered difference.

Therefore, in Part II, the focus of this study shifts to the representation of gender



and sexuality within the mainstream, women-centred *Beziehungskomödien* of the early 1990s. In line with my approach to the Turkish-German and post-*Wende* cinemas outlined above, this section is concerned with the location of a discourse of resistance within the conformity of this classically normative romantic comedy film genre. The progressive potential of what are most commonly disregarded as reactionary romances, lies, I believe, in their manipulation of generic form. One aspect of this generic subversion is located in the ‘homosocial’ relationships between women, which structure the films’ more traditional romantic narratives<sup>10</sup>. These mutually supportive relationships between women are central to the films’ ultimate subversion – and thus the consequent ‘failure’ – of the romantic narrative.

In order to pursue this sociological interpretation of identity and politics, representation and power, it is first necessary to add a temporal specificity to our debate and to also outline the more general peculiarities of the cinematic medium in which it takes place.

### **The Postmodern Self and the Critique of Postmodernity**

In his introduction to *Theory, Culture and Society* Norman Denzin makes clear reference to society’s marginal identities when he defines the postmodern as the ‘set of emotional experiences defined by resentment, anger, alienation, anxiety, poverty, racism, and sexism’ (1991, vii):

These cultural identities are filtered through the personal troubles and the emotional experiences that flow from the individual’s interactions with everyday life. [...] The raw economic, racial, and sexual edges of contemporary life

produce anxiety, alienation, a radical isolation from others, madness, violence, and insanity. (Denzin 1991, viii)

Drawing upon a clearly Marxist tradition, Denzin focuses upon the dysfunctional symptoms of an exploitative technocratic postmodern society – the situation determined, according to Frederic Jameson, by the ‘cultural logics of late capitalism’ (1984). Denzin attributes a central importance to these emotional experiences in the construction of the postmodern self. This is ‘the self who embodies the multiple contradictions of postmodernism, while experiencing itself through the everyday performances of gender, class and racially-linked social identities’ (Denzin 1991, vii).

Of particular relevance to this study is Denzin’s subsequent reference to the mediating constructs of performance and contradiction as central to any interrogation of the postmodern self. Performance has long constituted a key area of film analysis. Equally, the integration of the fluid concepts of performance and contradiction has been central to the development of a non-essentialising contemporary identity politics. Consequently, both concepts will feature strongly within my own analysis of identity construction and representation within 1990s German cinema.

In terms of the various subject positions he chooses to interrogate, Denzin’s exploration of postmodern identity builds upon the basic cultural studies trinity of race, gender, and class. Clearly, this trinity is equally central to the structuring principles of this thesis. However, Bhabha adds to these the organisational and conceptual categories of generation, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation and institutional location. This move away from the ‘singularities of class and gender’ (Bhabha 1997, 1) is clearly designed to reflect the divergent and multifaceted nature of identity formation and affiliation beyond any totalising identity categories; even those of race, class and gender. While this study draws its structure from these ‘originary’ three, there remains



an awareness of the ideologically implicated assumptions which accompany such practices of identity marking. Equally important is the recognition of the possibility of other equally influential, and sometimes contradictory, identity affiliations.

For example, within my analysis of the recent woman-centred, relationship comedies, sexual orientation is repeatedly denaturalised and implicitly released from clear-cut gender association (*Stadtgespräch*). Equally, within the post-*Wende* cinema, geopolitical locale takes on an ideologically-laden significance in the absence of racial or ethnic differentiation (*Neben der Zeit; Verlorene Landschaft*), while generation becomes a key signifier of differentiation between past and present systems (*Wege in die Nacht; Die Unberührbare*). In the Turkish-German cinema of the last decade the often excluding and exclusive representation of masculinity can tend towards a unifying and naturalising vision of ‘ethnically’-determinable identity (*Kurz und schmerzlos; Kanak Attack*). However, the combination of geopolitical and socio-economic positioning, in this instance, questions the apparently reactionary nature of these self-representations. At the same time, a potentially autonomous, empowering and dissonant language of *métissage* is troubling to the post-68 liberal dream of seamless racial integration. As such filmic examples illustrate, such a radical stratification of identity positions is as much a recognition of a heterogeneous and multicultural social reality as an attack on Hegelian notions of totalising experience.

To return to Denzin’s critique of late capitalist society:

Large cultural groupings (young women, the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians), are unable either to live out their ideological versions of the American dream or to experience personal happiness. [...] They bear witness to an economy, political ideology, and a popular culture which can never deliver the promised goods to their households. (Denzin 1991, viii)



Denzin's location of the marginalised of society, and their experiences, at the centre of the construction of the postmodern identity could be taken as a metaphor for my own focus on counter-hegemonic interest groups and their representation within and outside of the cultural mainstream. In this respect, the disparity that marginalised communities perceive between the democratic ideal of social equality and their actual experience of late capitalist stratification, can be seen as feeding into the reappropriation of meaning they enact within the processes of cultural consumption. In line with Denzin's, all three of the selected subject groupings in this thesis represent ideologically, socially and culturally devalued peoples. The relationship of these peoples to the hegemonic cultural forces of white, western, middle class society is often at best ambivalent.

### **The Cinematic Age**

Having established the defining characteristics of what Denzin refers to as the postmodern self, he then goes on to argue for the centrality of the cinematic medium in the self-recognition of this postmodern identity. Citing Baudrillard, he defines late-capitalist society as a society which knows itself only through the reflections that flow from the camera's eye (Baudrillard 1987). This is a society with 'an intense preoccupation with the real and its representations', 'a pornography of the visible' which goes hand in hand with a 'commodification of sexuality and desire' (Denzin 1991, vii). As voyeurs adrift in a sea of symbols (Baudrillard 1987), the inhabitants of this society both know and see themselves through cinema and television. This echoes Lyotard's investigation into the nature of the postmodern condition in which he argues for the central role of photography and film to contemporary identity construction

(1984).

According to Lyotard the visual media employ a syntax and vocabulary which enable the viewer to quickly comprehend and thus become conscious of his/her own identity. In this way, the process of self-recognition and identity affiliation undergone by the viewer takes place in parallel with a process of identity affirmation. For Denzin, Baudrillard and Lyotard the visual media are central to any critique of the postmodern condition:

The post-modern terrain is defined almost exclusively in visual terms, including the display, the icon, the representations of the real seen through the camera's eye, captured on videotape, and given in the moving picture. [...] The search for the meaning of the post-modern moment is a study in looking. It can be no other way. This is a visual, cinematic age. (Denzin 1991, viii)

Having argued the case for a neo-Marxist critique of late-capitalist society, Denzin draws on Baudrillard to argue for the sociological significance of the visual media in social, cultural or political interrogation of the contemporary social formation. However, arguing for the study of cinema as socio-cultural critique, Denzin challenges the economic determinism of the traditional Marxist theory he has hitherto employed. In his words, postmodernism is 'more than a series of economic foundations' (Denzin 1991, ix). Indeed, this is a dramaturgical society in which visual cultures have achieved such dominance that the performance of 'representations of the real have become stand-ins for actual, lived experience' (Denzin 1991, x). In other words, in the face of a cinematisation of contemporary life, an inversion has taken place in the order of 'real' and 'representational' hierarchies. The postmodern condition becomes synonymous

with a recognition of reality as ‘staged, social production’ (Denzin 1991, x), a reality judged only in relation to its cinematic or video representation. Citing Lyman, he then adopts this metaphor of the dramaturgical society (Lyman 1990, 221). This metaphor is strongly reminiscent of the representational confusion of Baudrillard’s ‘hyperreal’ in its age of simulacra and simulation (1983).

### **The Sociological Significance of the Cultural Text**

Echoing the basic Marxist assumption of cultural studies, this dramaturgical metaphor facilitates a reinscription of the importance of art. In other words, art can be viewed as more than just a reflection of social structure and its history but as an actual active agent in its constitution. This draws on Louis Althusser’s work on the relationship between art and ideology, in which the text is characterised as ‘a site upon which the significant relations of representation and ideology are distilled’ (Klinger 1995, 76).

From this starting point, the ideological significance of the cultural text and the processes of meaning-making which its circulation within the social sphere entail, become clear. In the case of the contemporary German film, with its myriad and ideologically-laden ‘systems of representation’, Stuart Hall’s definition of the relationship between ideology and the cultural text, is useful:

By ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works (Hall 1996, 26).



Interestingly, Hall refers to 'systems of representation' as only one of many forms of cultural expression. He prefigures Eagleton's recent work on the assumptions that lie behind the multiplicitous and often contradictory definitions of the term 'culture'. The sociology of film advocated by this study assumes a fundamentally structuralist definition of culture. This structuralist take on signification as an active social process restates the argument put forward by Raymond Williams that culture can constitute and construct, as well as reflect and represent society's social processes. Operating within the sphere of pure signification of the arts, the symbolic, in such a representational practice as film, takes on a vastly increased significance.

This echoes recent work done on the representation of cultural difference within contemporary German cinema. Writing on the influence of the cinematic representation of migrants to the domestic immigration debate, Karpf, Kiesel and Visarius argue that, 'schließlich sind Filme nicht nur Indikatoren, sondern auch Promotoren gesellschaftlichen Bewußtseins (1995, 7). Wendy Everett shares this belief in film's contribution to social change, pointing to the nature of film as a 'fundamental constituent in this process of interrogation; an inextricable part of the ongoing, open-ended process of reassessment and change' (1996, 11). In other words, film can construct as well as reflect identities.

However, such an interpretation of film and identity must also take into account the context of production and reception. As has already been outlined in Chapter 1, this study's focus upon identity dictates its transition between a diverse range of generic and stylistic forms, including both mainstream and non-classical cinematic texts. In the context of German film studies' historical trivialisation of the commodified popular cultural text, the most problematic area of this study's film analysis relates to the particular discourses and reading practices situated around the reception of a mainstream, narrative German cinema. In this respect, the focus of this study on the

work of such directors as Andreas Kleinert (*Neben der Zeit, Verlorene Landschaft*), Frank Beyer (*Nikolaikirche*), Völker Schlöndorff (*Die Stille nach dem Schuss*), Tefvik Baser (*40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland, Abschied vom falschen Paradies*), and Thomas Arslan (*Dealer*) requires little apparent justification. Without exception all of these films embody explicit engagement with the aesthetic experimentation and political radicalism of a high cultural German tradition. However, on the face of it at least, this cannot be said to be true of the mainstream, woman-centred New German Comedies, the immediate post-Wende comic farces, or for that matter, the stylised gangster flicks of the new Turkish-German cinema.

According to Lyotard, mainstream narrative texts have a particular relation to notions of reality and truth. Echoing Frankfurt School approaches to popular culture, he views such texts as dealing in unified totalising visions of reality which are at once reassuring and falsifying. As a mass medium designed to convey first order images and sequences – in other words, images that are presented as a reflection of reality – based on established communication codes, their products offer an ease of decipherability designed to ‘deceive, seduce and reassure’ (1984, 74). In their adherence to the ‘correct rules’ of representation and their refusal to ‘re-examine the rules of art’ – as in the case of modernist art – they communicate with ‘an endemic desire for reality’ (1984, 75) while promulgating ‘fantasies of realism’ (74).

Such a reading of conformity within the popular cultural text has important implications for our reading of both mainstream, classical filmic texts and the more experimental works included in this study. On the surface at least, this argument might appear to counter any theoretical attempt to attribute any sociological or political value to the marginal identities represented within the cinematic mainstream. Clearly, it highlights the dangers of reading any simplistic sociological correlation between the system of representation and first order reality it purports to represent. Indeed, whether



implicated in the textual practices of a commercially motivated entertainment cinema or the socially-realist practices of an engaged alternative cinema, systems of representation must be read as much for the fantasies of unity that they indulge in, as for any social reality they may purport to represent. Evidently, cultural representation may be interpreted at a textual or meta-textual level, according to its treatment of subject matter and the wider structuring imperatives of genre and economic or political context.

Consequently, while countering simplistic demarcations of aesthetic worth, this reading of contemporary German cinema is equally resistant to unproblematised extrapolations of sociological significance. In the case of Part II's political revaluation of the progressive potential of the romantic narrative within the woman-centred New German Comedies, political interpretation must take into account the simultaneously liberating and limiting potential of histories of genre and reception. As a genre historically synonymous with the construction of reactionary gender fantasies such analysis must be aware of the potentially restrictive and transgressive possibilities of a clearly defined generic framework and history. Equally, it must be alive to the complex interplay between fantasy and reality, and the spaces opened up for narcissistic self-projection and distanced ironical laughter.

As exemplified in the post-*Wende* cinema, the reunification of Germany has opened up a space for both filmmakers and critics to engage with the discourses and imperatives surrounding a revitalised national imaginary, and to do so across a broad range of generic forms and stylistic registers. In the newly emerging cultural landscape of post-Wall Germany the possibilities for projecting a new, unified national German identity represent major potential sites of ideological fantasy. As Hans Joachim Meurer argues, the association of national identity and national cinema has historically led to a particularly active role being played by both West and East German governments in the promotion of bodies of films perceived as representing suitable images of national



cultural cohesion (2000). This promotion of typically high cultural forms of cinematic production was, as Meurer points out, ‘primarily motivated by the desire to establish a national cinema which would function as a symbolic sphere, confirming categories of what was desirable for the ‘Self’ while symbolically annihilating non-desirable influences of the ‘Other’ (2000, 246). As has already been argued, the construction of identity in opposition – in other words, in relation to the binaries of self and other – constitutes a major focus of this study of cultural identity as represented within contemporary German cinema. However, as has also been made clear, it is the fundamental contention of this thesis that the true sociological value of such identity constructions can only be assessed by examining the full range of stylistic forms and genres that exist within contemporary German film production. Therefore, in Part III I shall attempt to assess the extent to which both mainstream and alternative cinematic texts within the post-*Wende* cinema engage with notions of national identity, historical context and place of origin. This is not to argue that the ‘split screen’ that Meurer perceived as existing not just between the cinemas of East and West but between the state approved and funded high cultural cinematic forms and the more popular, narrative genre cinemas has ceased to exist. Instead, it is to point out that the interrogation of racial, gendered and national identities can be pursued equally productively across the full range of cinematic forms and registers.

The potential for a fantasy of unified ethnically determinable identity is an equally important point of reference for our readings of the Turkish-German cinema. In this respect, the repeated positioning of young Turkish-Germans solely within the context of Germany’s socially dispossessed is extremely significant. Such limited representations undoubtedly point to some uncomfortable social realities regarding the positioning of many marginalised social groups within post-industrial western societies. However, the repeated and often unproblematised association of ethnicity and crime

would appear to come close to a semiotic unity of representation, in which sign and referent, cause and symptom achieve a dangerously essentialising equivalence. These dangers must, nevertheless, be read in the context of the increasing visibility and cultural influence afforded to these communities by the films that represent them.

It is clear that, despite their popular, generic forms, films from all three sections of this study contain elements which can be read as 'progressive and conservative, challenging and legitimating' (Davidson 1997, 309). Indeed, the fundamental contention of this thesis is that counter-cultural elements and the representation of counter-hegemonic interests are intrinsic to the cinematic construction of marginal and marginalised identities. Traditionally, such oppositional elements have been commonly looked for by German film scholars within the peripheral cultural context of alternative cinemas. However, while not disregarding these cinemas, it is the aim of this study to also locate these forces of reaction and resistance within the less immediately obvious narrative and generic norms of mainstream popular cinema.

## Conclusion

Within the discipline of cultural studies, the theorisation of a dialogical relationship between forces of cultural production and cultural consumption has been well documented. Recognising the cultural process as one of resistance and negotiation, allows us to progress beyond overly reductive theories of subject interpellation. Cultural identities may well be produced and consumed in relation to that which they are not, and yet, moving beyond simplistic binaries of 'self' and 'other', we may find ourselves in an 'in-between', third space, which recognises the complexity of the process of cultural self-recognition and identity affiliation, while facilitating an empowering



politics of transgression.

In the case of the woman-centred New German Comedies this empowering politics of transgression may be found in the contravention of traditional boundaries of 'genre and gender. In the cinema of the post-*Wende*, questions of national identity would appear to be being articulated through a struggle to reposition East German history in a non-essentialist and ideologically transparent context, signalling a significant and potentially transgressive meeting point between identity and politics. Equally, the Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s would appear to be challenging the traditional victim status ascribed to ethnic minority representation within the genre of the socially engaged *Problemfilm*. The debate surrounding integration and assimilation may still be being pursued within the realm of multicultural liberal discourses. However, the issues of concern to a new generation of German-born Turkish-Germans suggest an aggressive reappropriation of a non-ethnically determined identity, which transgresses both parent and host cultures and extends towards a third space of culturally and linguistically determined *Metissage-Kultur* (Seeßlen 2000, 24).

Such a reading of identity construction within contemporary German cinema cannot, however, restrict itself to the progressive potential of such social representation. As has already been mentioned, the processes through which identities are constructed and promoted can just as easily serve those interests which wish to demonise and exclude. The implication of the cultural mainstream in the promotion of Lyotard's 'unified, totalising visions of reality' designed to gratify the 'endemic desire for reality' (1984, 75) is clearly relevant to the visual unity offered by the classical, realist cinematic texts which comprise a significant focus of this study. However, while recognising this and allowing for the existence of potentially reactionary representations of identity differentiation, the primary focus of my study of contemporary German cinema remains the potentially counter-hegemonic relationship enacted between the



cultural peripheries and centres. In other words, I wish to explore the possible positions and sociological imperatives behind the representation of marginalised identities within both cultural mainstreams and peripheries, an approach in line with the emancipatory aspirations of contemporary identity politics.

Raymond Williams argues that the hegemonic potential of culture relies on its ability to facilitate communication between the various members of society. In the context of these cinematic representations of racialised, nationalised and gendered identities communication must reflect both content and context to take place successfully. In other words, it must occupy that uneasy, ambiguous space between the counter-hegemonic interest groups it purports to represent and the audience it seeks to address. As Christine Gledhill points out, the importance of cinematic representation for such minority interest groups is great:

Social outgroups seeking to identify themselves against dominant representations – the working class, women, blacks, gays – need clearly articulated, recognisable and self-respecting self-images. (1995, 199)

The existence of such marginal identity representations within 1990s German cinema, and their potential to fluctuate between reactionary, essentialising stereotype and a playful interaction with ‘fluidity and contradiction’ (Gledhill 1995, 199), demands a critical engagement which attempts to locate their significance and function within a cinematic, postmodern age.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that despite their implication in the orientalising practices of ‘othering’, none of these traditional identity categories shall be viewed as indicative of ‘real’ social

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difference, but rather as modes of discourse which relate to groups of subjects whose social positioning is defined by their gendered, sexual, racial, or national difference.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this theoretical rejection of the idea of the unified, pure, national culture has not been reflected in the wider social sphere of European media discourse. This is evidenced in the wanton Eurocentrism and aggressive nationalism of much recent media and political debate, surrounding issues such as foreign military intervention, European integration and national immigration laws.

<sup>3</sup> Founded on a belief in tolerance and respect for ethnic difference, multiculturalism has dominated the political debate surrounding the multi-ethnic nature of contemporary western society for several decades. As I go on to argue, there are many problems with this approach to ethnic diversity. Critics, including Homi Bhabha, argue that the multiculturalist agenda is ultimately one designed to control cultural difference and disguise an assumption of the centrality of predominantly white ethnic groups. I shall return to the issue relating to the multiculturalism debate in Part IV.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this study I refer to 'orientalist' and 'orientalising' practices and discourses. In its original form Said described Orientalism as the objectification of the Orient and Orientals, peoples and concepts stamped with a constitutive otherness, an essentialist character, commonly defined by passivity, lack of autonomy and alienation. Since then Said's concept has become a mainstay of all postcolonial discourse and is currently being adopted within a wider cultural studies context to account for all fixed and essentialising constructions of 'otherness'. For example, Bhabha rearticulates the importance of postcolonial critique in the investigation of all contemporary cultural constructions of identity (1997). It is in this context and not in that of an explicitly postcolonial setting that I employ this term here and throughout this study.

<sup>5</sup> The work of such diaspora theorists as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Wilson Harris has been central to the problematisation of ethnic identities within the wider discipline of postcolonial studies. Focusing on communities almost exclusively populated by displaced Third World peoples, these theorists have argued against the unitary, essentialising and closed identities commonly ascribed to such populations, stressing instead the multi-rooted, hybrid and



interstitial nature of ethnic minority identities.

<sup>6</sup> I draw here upon Bakhtin's notion of 'dialogical analysis', subsequently adopted by media and cultural studies theorists to theorise the 'contract' between reader and text (see Bakhtin 1984).

This contract problematises the simplistic one-way flow of ideology traditionally viewed as both determining a text's production and being uncritically imbibed by the consumer. Instead, the text must maintain relevance to the consumers' lives and experiences and provide 'popular pleasures' which complicate any simplistic affirmation of dominant ideology.

<sup>7</sup> This term has been retrospectively applied to the wave of New German Cinema films which took as their subject matter the plight of the foreign immigrant workers brought into Germany from the 1950s onwards. Films such as Helma Sanders-Brahm's *Die industrielle Reservearmee* (1971) and *Shirins Hochzeit* (1975), or Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher* (1969) and *Angst essen Seele auf* (1973) are typical films of this genre. However, while clearly concerned with the lack of political rights and racial prejudice which faced these early *Gastarbeiter*, these films have retrospectively been criticised for what is seen as a paternalistic approach (Töteberg 1995).

<sup>8</sup> In its most basic form 'intercultural exchange', or 'intercultural communication' refers simply to the communication which occurs between different cultures or between people with different cultural backgrounds. Clearly, this field has long since been established as a valuable research area for the furtherance of cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, particularly in the context of language learning and transnational business dealings (eg. Hofstede 1984). However, more recently it has begun to draw upon a wider range of methodologies and disciplines- including sociology, psychology and anthropology- to pursue the broader relevances of language learning, translation and cross-cultural communication to the society as a whole. In terms of my use of the term and in the context of contemporary identity debates, this evolution has been viewed as a continuation of the multiculturalism debates of the 1980s, and the subsequent work of diaspora and hybridity theorists. In this respect, I deploy the term to suggest a more politically correct and non-essentialising view of cultural difference and origin, as well as the possibility of a 'third' or 'in-between' space where cultures might meet and which is not



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prescribed by static cultural origins.

<sup>9</sup> In *Imagined Communities* Anderson explores the notion of “nationness” and the imagined construct of the national community. Such a construct must by its very nationalistic foundation recognise the limits of its own peculiarities and political sovereignty. Ultimately, the borders of the nation are defined by geopolitical realities and not by any humanistic recognition of the parity of all beings.

<sup>10</sup> I draw here upon Eve Sedgwick’s concept of the ‘homosocial bond,’ developed to account for the nature and significance of male/male relationships as represented in the mid-eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century novel (1985). I will argue, in Part II, that in the context of these woman-centred romantic comedies this term can be reconfigured to an exclusively female setting.

---Part II---

*Sex and Gender*

**Women Amongst Women -  
The New German Comedy and  
the Failed Romance**



# Introduction

## ‘Der deutsche Film boomt’<sup>1</sup>

In terms of domestic audience popularity, 1996 was a high point for the German film industry. Less than three years after the 8.4 per cent slump of February 1993, the German film industry’s domestic market share had risen to an unprecedented 21.9 per cent, its highest level for twenty years<sup>2</sup>. The psychological significance of this popular revival can, perhaps, best be measured by the subsequent film industry and media speculation as to a return to the golden era of 1950s *Papas Kino*<sup>3</sup> (Kilb 1997; Seeßlen 1997). Forty years on from the avant-garde renaissance of a previous generation of young filmmakers, this reference to an earlier era of mainstream film production is pointedly ironic. The ‘conventional’ film, once so explicitly rejected by Alexander Kluge and the other signatories to the Oberhausen manifesto, would appear to be undergoing a domestic revival. According to the popular press, it is this revival which is set to sweep away ‘the decaying structure of auteurist New German Cinema’ (Halle 2000, 2) and replace it with a new brand of narrative-driven entertainment cinema.

Whatever the veracity of such claims, the roots of this popular revival can be traced back to the early 1990s and the surprise successes of films such as Detlev Buck’s *Karniggels* (1991), Sönke Wortmann’s *Allein unter Frauen* (1991) and *Kleine Haie* (1992), and Katja von Garnier’s *Abgeschminkt* (1992). These films inspired a stream of comic features ranging from slapstick *Prolkomödien*<sup>4</sup> to male and female buddy movies. In recognition of the generic specificity of this popular renaissance, the national German Film Prize awards of May 1996 took on the title of *Die Nacht der Komödianten*. Contrary to the reality of a domestically successful product, tied through film-board and

studio funding requirements to a clear regional specificity, some press reports went as far as to ascribe a new international standing to German cinema. In this the comments of the Berliner *Tagesspiegel* of the 5<sup>th</sup> January 1996 were typical:

Mit Komödien habe der deutsche Film in den letzten Jahren seine Vitalität wiedergewonnen und an gute Traditionen anknüpfen können. Durch Komödien habe 'das deutsche Film' Internationalität, weltweite Beachtung und Anerkennung 'zurückgewonnen'. ('Kulturseite' 1996)

Dominating this genre, however, was a series of star-led, relationship comedies obsessively reworking the themes of gender and sexuality for an affluent, post-1968 generation ('Das Lachen macht's' 1996; 'Gepäck abgeworfen' 1996). According to Sabine Hake these films are typical of the mainstream cinematic output of the 1990s, relying on the 'adaptation of generic conventions to contemporary sensibilities' and, as we shall see, 'including an acute awareness of identity as a construction and a performance' (2002, 182). Drawing on such earlier successes as Doris Dörrie's *Männer* (1985) and Peter Timm's *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* (1992), von Garnier's film set a trend for a revival of the romantic comedy genre within the German film industry.

This trend has continued with such domestic box office hits as Wortmann's *Der bewegte Mann* (1994) and *Das Superweib* (1996), Rainer Kaufmann's *Stadtgespräch* (1995), Dörrie's *Keiner liebt mich* (1996), Sharon von Westerheim's *Workaholic* (1996), and Sherry Horman's *Frauen sind was Wunderbares* (1993) and *Irren ist männlich* (1996). Focusing on issues of gender and sexuality, these films represent a significant sub-genre of the critically dubbed New German Comedy (Kilb 1996b), or German Comedy Wave (Halle 2000), which has foregrounded women both as subject of representation and consumption.



In 1996 Brad Hagen acknowledged this industry-wide shift in an article in *Variety* film magazine stating that, ‘two thirds of the other biggest hits of the first half of the year were German productions with a decidedly femme-appeal slant’ (20). The presence of such films and female directors, such as Hormann, Dörrie and von Garnier, has been associated with an increasing visibility of women and issues of relevance to women within the 1990s German film landscape (Lenssen 2001). A possible explanation for this shift away from the male-orientated action-hero films, which dominated the 1980s, towards ‘softer’ films with a strong female presence, could lie in a change in audience demographics. During the eighties male audiences dominated. Accordingly, Hollywood action movies and domestically produced male-lead comedies enjoyed an unassailed dominance. At the beginning of the nineties, however, a shift occurred. Now women account for over fifty percent of the all-important under twenty-five, cinema-going audience (Hagen 1996). Some films are even attracting audiences that are more than seventy-five per cent female (Hagen 1996, 20).

According to Hagen, ‘women are becoming more aggressive in Germany these days when it comes to picking movies, and industry pundits say the trend shows no signs of abating’ (1996, 20). Whatever the reasons, women have been recognised as an extremely important market for the German film industry, and this is reflected in film production and marketing strategies. Interviewed by Hagen, Gerhard Neckermann, author of market studies for Germany’s Federal Film Board, echoes his words pointing out that “‘women and children have become central target groups’” in Germany (Hagen 1996, 20). Anatol Nitschke, sales manager of independent film distributor Filmwelt-Prokino agrees: “‘All our marketing campaigns for films that could appeal to women are directed at them first’” (Hagen 1996, 20).

This move towards a more audience oriented filmmaking practice is itself nothing new within the context of German film history (Seeßlen 1997). Institutional



changes within the German film industry, such as the growth of 'economically oriented' funds, encourage the replication of financially successful projects which offer clear mass appeal (Kilb 1997). The female-centred<sup>5</sup> romantic comedies with their glamorous stars, their pacey narratives and their contemporary urban settings would appear to fit this bill. Financial incentives and effective marketing strategies are never, however, a guarantee of audience popularity and box office success. In his investigation of the cultural significance of the New German Comedies David Coury argues that 'what these new films have in common structurally is their reliance on traditional elements of the classic cinema: causality, linear narrative, closure, and the most necessary element of all, a happy end' (1997, 356).

To analyse and explain the full extent of this structural commonality and the popularity these films appear to be enjoying requires a move away from theories of production and marketing towards an understanding of characterisation, narrative and genre. In this way it may be possible to explain the apparent resonance of these films with their socially and historically specific audiences and to move beyond the critical rejection of the mainstream *Kommerzkino* as depoliticised consensus cinema. In an attempt to explore the social and psychological significance of this sub-genre of female-centred romantic comedies in their representation of self-determining female identities and the apparently pleasurable romantic narratives they construct, I intend to ask three central questions: firstly, to what extent is it possible to argue for the existence of a discourse of resistance within the conformity of this classically normative cinematic genre?; secondly, do these films construct a dialogue with the heritage of a feminist tradition?; and thirdly, what is the role of pleasure in their articulation of a specifically female desire?

## Pleasure, Politics and the Female-centred Film

The debate surrounding the combination of pleasure and politics within the *feminist-centred* film has been at the forefront of feminist discussion since the early 1970s (Caprio 1997). In the 1990s, however, this debate was widened to include the consideration of the role of pleasure in the *female-centred* film, and the ways in which traditional feminist discourse negotiated notions of a feminist heterosexuality (Gaines 1995, 382). Central to this shift in critical attention away from an exclusively feminist-centred cinema was Claire Johnston's call for a release of women's 'collective fantasies' and a 'working through of desire', objectives which would 'demand the use of the entertainment film' (1973, 31).

The move away from the explicitly foregrounded gender politics and socio-political critique of the 1970s *Frauenfilm* has been well-documented in the German context, with female directors increasingly keen to avoid positioning within the 'women's corner' (Lenssen 2001). As Julia Knight recognises, the decline of overtly political women's filmmaking in Germany has been traditionally attributed to many of the same causes that led to the more general decline of the New German Cinema (1992, 153). One of these causes was the change in political will that accompanied the re-election of the CDU/CSU in 1982. This signalled a re-directioning of funding away from the more politically, socially or culturally motivated film projects of the 60s and 70s to more light-hearted, popular, and thus economically viable ventures. In conjunction with this diminishing state support, the improved professional opportunities available for women filmmakers in television and the general improvement of women's position in society accelerated this gradual dissipation of a recognisable feminist film culture (1992, 153).

Whether through choice or necessity many new female directors have moved



into a more explicitly commercial sector, producing films which adhere more closely to the conventions of a mainstream narrative entertainment cinema. In general terms, filmmakers such as Doris Dörrie (*Mitten ins Herz*, 1983), Pia Frankenburg (*Nicht nichts ohne dich*, 1985) and, more latterly, Katja von Garnier (*Abgeschminkt*, 1993) have been concerned with the injection of humour and enjoyment into the cinematic representations of women. According to Claudia Lenssen there have never before been as many women working as directors, screenplay writers and producers as there are today, far outnumbering the presence of women during the New German Cinema period (2001). In film schools today there are almost as many female students as male and their work appears to be attracting ever-increasing attention.

Interviewed by Lenssen, Vivian Naefe (*Zwei Männer, zwei Frauen, vier Probleme*, 1998) points out that, of those students who graduated alongside her at the Munich Academy of Film and Television, all of her female colleagues are repeatedly in the news, whereas the male contingent is rarely heard of. However, while acknowledging the gender inequalities that remain, particularly in the realm of mainstream feature film production, these directors no longer want to make films solely for women, but rather films for everybody (Lenssen 2001). In so doing they are keen to avoid the victim/problem-status of women common to a previous generation of women filmmakers' cinematic material. This new generation of filmmakers looks beyond the national boundaries of Germany for their role-models and influences. As Lenssen points out, 'if you ask today's women directors about their idols, it is noticeable that the first, still active generation of women filmmakers and their older films are rarely perceived as historical greats' (1996).

Significantly, these directors have since been joined by a significant number of women traditionally associated with the New German Cinema. For example, Margarethe von Trotta's *Fürchten und Lieben* (1988), *Zeit des Zorns* (1994) and *Das*



*Versprechen* (1994) all display a move towards the structuring and stylistic devices of a more mainstream narrative cinema. In 1987 she also worked alongside New German Cinema directors Helke Sander and Helma Sanders-Brahms on the romantic comedy *Felix* (1987).

However, this shift towards a more woman-centred, mainstream brand of women's film-making had already begun a decade earlier. In the late 1970s, female directors began to question the documentary format and experimental narrative as the most effective transmitters of the social message they wished to impart to their female audiences. The subsequent move towards more conventional dramatic structures was designed to connect with a wider cross-section of women and to do so on an emotional, rather than purely intellectual, level<sup>6</sup>. However, this move did not signal the abandonment of a clear feminist agenda. Apart from the wider audiences now being reached, it also coincided with an increasingly vocal political project to compete directly with the male dominated, mainstream representations of women which had hitherto been the norm (Knight 1992, 84).

### **Female-centred Gender Comedies and the Place of Pleasure**

Aware of the importance of this historical context, Temby Caprio sets out to explore the recently commercially successful genre of woman-centred, romantic comedies in Germany. Focusing on Katja von Garnier's popularly acclaimed graduation film, *Abgeschminkt*, she sets out to evaluate this genre's potential as a new brand of entertainment cinema for women, which combines both pleasure and politics in its articulation of a specifically female desire (Caprio 1997). As her starting point she cites Johnston's call for a filmic response to both the over-politicised feminist-centred film

and the equally extreme ideological positioning of mainstream cinematic representations of women. Caprio then asks whether the success of women's filmmaking in the 1970s – in 'representing and foregrounding the authentic experiences of women' and representing the 'particular aspects of women's reality that have been traditionally excluded from the public sphere' (Knight 1992, 87) – can be seen as part of a tradition that has been continued into the 1990s.

The centring of female protagonists, such as the archetypal strong, blond role model and star persona, Katja Riemann (Blum 1998), would appear to suggest a conscious targeting of women. Consequently, these texts have invited a degree of feminist interest which has attempted to explore and account for the films' relationships with their predominantly female audiences (Caprio 1997; Hors 1991; Karasek 96; Korff and Reichhardt 1997; Weingarten 1997). Radical feminist discourse, with its belief in a social and sexual separatism as the only alternative to patriarchal collaboration, has historically rejected such mainstream texts for offering false promises of a politically correct feminist heterosexuality (Gaines 1995, 383). Just as the defenders of the high cultural canons have disregarded such low cultural *Unterhaltung* on grounds of its lack of aesthetic or social worth, so too have the champions of an art-house, feminist counter cinema. This clearly echoes the traditional dichotomy seen as existing between the serious work of the New German Cinema and the trivial pleasures of a mainstream narrative cinema (see Chapter 1).

More recently, however, there have been criticisms of this prohibitive and dogmatic approach to women's cultural consumption. These criticisms have sparked a renewal of feminist interest in mainstream popular culture (Caprio 1997; Gledhill 1995; Shumway 1995). According to Christine Gledhill, the aim of this enterprise has been to relate 'commonly derided popular forms to the conditions of their consumption in the lives of socio-historically constituted audiences' (1995, 193). This, in turn, could be



seen as an attempt to 'elucidate women's cultural forms, and thereby to challenge the male canon of cultural worth' (1995, 193). In this context, Gledhill draws upon the notion of negotiation. This theoretical construct is central to contemporary cultural 'studies' problematisation of the ideologically 'pure' and full nature of cultural representation. Negotiation then becomes the framework through which Gledhill is able to explore the role of pleasure in the relationship between women and cinema.

In line with Gledhill's investigations, this renewal of feminist interest has lead to a much wider revaluation of the role of the psychological, political and aesthetic importance of pleasure and play in the woman-centred text. Perhaps the guilty pleasure seekers (Gaines 1995, 386) are not quite so guilty after all; and perhaps the pleasures associated with the female consumption of images of heterosexual relations, with its related issue of a gendered power imbalance, should not be simply rejected out of hand as incorrect, but rather examined in terms of their actual representation and popular resonance. In this way the apparent *truth* of a politically correct feminist theory, placed in opposition to the incorrect *fantasy* of the woman-centred text, is forced into revision<sup>7</sup>. It is this concern with the potential of mainstream cinema to offer its female spectators positions of identification other than that of the 'colonized, alienated, or masochistic' (Gledhill 1995, 194), which motivates the critical investigations within this section. In line with the broader cultural studies approach of this thesis, I shall attempt to identify the 'progressive and conservative, challenging and legitimating elements' (Davidson 1997, 309) that exist within this mainstream romantic comedy genre.

## Reactionary Romances and the Politics of the Popular

This question of a politics of desire is one, which is addressed by Janice Radway in her work on women's consumption of popular romantic fiction, *Reading the Romance* (1987). Drawing on the ethnographic data supplied by her study group of romance readers, 'the Smithton women', Radway attempts to construct a model of an *ideal* romance; in other words, a romance which provides the pleasures of meaning making and emotional resonance demanded by its readers. Radway politicises these apparently reactionary heterosexual fantasies of seduction by developing a concept of 'utopian promise' (1987, 73), which imagines the reorganisation of the traditional power imbalance in heterosexual relationships.

As with all products of popular culture it is primarily in the act of consumption that meaning and, more importantly, the potential for oppositional meaning arises. John Fiske argues that, 'popular texts are inadequate in themselves – they are never self-sufficient structures of meanings (as some will argue highbrow texts to be), they are provokers of meaning and pleasure, they are completed only when taken up by people and inserted into everyday culture' (1995, 6). Gledhill echoes this statement, pointing out that 'meaning, in the popular cultural text, is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience' (1995, 195).

Pursuing this complex relationship between ideology and textual and social subjects, she continues:

When popular cultural forms, operating within a melodramatic framework, attempt to engage contemporary discourses about women and draw on women's cultural forms in order to renew their gender verisimilitude and solicit the



recognition of a female audience, the negotiation between 'woman' as patriarchal symbol and woman as generator of women's discourse is intensified'. (202)

Consequently, it is in the event of reading, rather than the ideal romance's often reactionary romantic plot structure, that Radway locates the potential for oppositional meanings. As the reader fantasises about the possibility of a reorganisation of traditional heterosexual relationships, she is simultaneously opening up an oppositional space in which the needs of her partner/husband/family are temporarily subordinated to her own.

Over the following three chapters the narrative strategies employed by Radway's ideal romances shall be compared and contrasted with those of the woman-centred German comedies of the 1990s. Apart from the obvious generic links between the romantic comedy film and the work of romantic fiction, including the reliance on excessive sexual stereotyping and the foregrounding of codes of gender construction, both genres hold a central commercial position within the mainstreams of their respective media. In this respect, both Radway's work and my own take a clear critical stance within the high/low cultural debate in their focus on the consumption of popular, mass cultural phenomenon. Significantly, Radway positions her own work as opposed to the New and post-New criticism preoccupation with works of apparently high aesthetic value. Writing in the forward to the second edition, she articulates her aspiration to have provided in her work 'a critique of the assumption that works selected on the basis of their aesthetic achievement could ever be representative of the large sections of the population that never read such books' (1987, 2).

In a remark as relevant to the post-New German Cinema of the 1990s as it was to the popular romantic fiction of American 1980s, and one which offers a salutary reminder of the lack of popular acclaim enjoyed by the feminist cinema of the 1970s,

Radway subsequently states the following:

If statements are to be made about more ‘ordinary’ Americans, the popular literature produced for and consumed by large numbers ought to become the primary focus of culturally oriented scholarship. (1987, 2)

In the context of the dramatic arts this sentiment is echoed by the film genre critics Neale and Krutnik. They refer to the processes of democratisation which have been associated with the historical shift of generic emphasis from the costume dramas of the high art studios to the melodrama and comedy of popular theatre and film (1990). According to Neale and Krutnik, the latter two genres are implicated in the project to ‘bestow dignity on the lives of ordinary people, giving them both dignity and status’ (1990, 23). In a different context, the critically disparaged filmic transition in Germany ‘from high seriousness to low farce’ (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 24), has equally significant political implications (see Chapter 1).

To return to Radway’s ‘event of reading’, it is clear that the ideological unravelling of identity representations can gain much from a focus on the point of consumption. However, such representations can never be divorced from the cultural context in which they are produced. In other words, all textual analysis must acknowledge the complex web of economic and political interests at work in a text’s production and distribution. In the case of the German relationship comedies of the mid-1990s, their specific generically defined articulation of contemporary gender relations remains firmly embedded within the system of economic imperatives and normative aesthetic practices of a commercial mainstream.

In line with cultural studies’ rejection of an overly-deterministic ideological reading of cultural consumption, however, this study remains committed to a



progressive reading of these texts. As John Fiske points out, 'if the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. They will not be made popular' (1995, 2).

## Reaction or Resistance?: The Romantic Trajectory of the 1990s *Beziehungskomödie*

The centring of women as subject of representation and consumption is as relevant to the work of popular romantic fiction as it is to the new wave of romantic German comedies. In terms of narrative structure both genres revolve around a female lead's quest for the ideal (heterosexual) relationship. Invariably the narrative opening involves a questioning of the heroine's identity, which is then linked to her lack of a suitable partner. A meeting and moment of (mis)recognition with her lover/husband-to-be typically follows and closure is achieved only after all initial differences have been reconciled.

In the German context, it is interesting to note the substantial percentage of the new relationship comedies which have been adapted from works of woman-centred popular fiction. Peter Timm's *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* and Sönke Wortmann's *Das Superweib*, both started out as best-sellers for women's author Hera Lind. More recently, two of Ingrid Noll's darker and more critical fictional explorations of women's relationships to the heterosexual norm, *Die Apothekerin* and *Die Häupter meiner Lieben* have capitalised on their success by being adapted for film. There have also been film projects connected to two of Eva Heller's other works of woman-centred popular fiction, *Frau zu sein bedarf es wenig* and *Beim nächsten Mann wird alles anders*. The

question which Caprio asks, and the one which is taken up by this study, is whether these adapted works of romantic fiction can be seen to be actively involved in a process of re-negotiation with the heritage of a feminist tradition. In other words, to what extent do these woman-centred texts consciously explore, repackage and exploit the themes, forms and messages of an earlier oppositional cinema?

According to Radway, the reactionary core of the ideal romance – based as it is upon the quest for the ideal (male) partner and resolution of all problems in consummation of this relationship – is imperative to the reassurance of its readers that a utopia of ‘successfully managed heterosexual relationships’ (1987, 176) can exist. Without this the ‘vicarious nurturance and enjoyment’ (173) the romances provide their readers is denied. In the following three chapters, I shall explore the potential of the woman-centred *Beziehungskomödien* of the 1990s to provide a vicarious nurture and imaginative focus for their audiences.

In this respect, I am interested to determine the extent to which the popularity of these films can be seen as resting upon their successful promotion and representation of the experiences, feelings and fantasies of a significant proportion of German women. Equally, is there a political dimension to the films’ reclamation of a heterosexual desire that both patriarchy and an idealist feminist matriarchy have historically denied women? Norman Denzin defines postmodern culture as a ‘masculinised culture of Eros, love, desire, femininity, youth, and beauty’ (1991, 149). To what extent do these woman-centred romantic comedies of the mid-1990s substantiate or weaken his belief in postmodern culture’s persistent promotion of the idea that the ‘path to happiness and fulfilment is sexual and lies in the marital, family bond’ (Denzin 1991, 149)? And finally, if there is a discourse of resistance within the conformity of this classical, mainstream genre does it truly serve the interests of the audiences and the traditions it purports to represent?



## Forenote

As a forenote to this study I would like to make clear that the contemporary cultural currency of issues relating to gender and, in particular, the representation of women dictates that the films and themes dealt with in this section are as much a domain of male filmmakers as of female. This adds a particular pertinence to the extent to which this current wave of films can be seen as contributing to the project instigated in the 1970s to provide women with a cinema offering 'viewers a recognisable representation of themselves and their lives' (Knight 1992, 88). However, it should be noted that the narrative focus of this study does not extend to the potential for a distinctly feminine or masculine aesthetic.

Secondly, I wish to point out the inherent difficulties in any discussion of political progressivity in the context of the comic genre. The first problem relates to the issue of audience identification. Whereas more serious genres such as melodrama<sup>8</sup> rely on complete spectator identification and engagement with the plot and characters, comedy involves a 'play between identification and distancing' (Neale 1990, 149). In other words, the audience is disrupted from passive consumption of dramatic illusionism by laughter. Through this process of *Verfremdung* the fiction is foregrounded and the viewer reminded that this is a film they are watching and thus apart from the real world. However, it is precisely at these points of comic rupture that the true tension in the play between transgression and familiarity articulates itself. In the case of these woman-centred romantic comedies, the familiar is represented by the traditional narrative framework of the romantic comedy. From eccentric-female-facing-relationship-dilemma, to romantic quest and, ultimately, conflict resolution. However, I shall argue that despite this conservative reinstatement of order, there remains a significant element of the transgressional. This lies in the blow that is dealt to traditional

notions of the romance and the romantic fantasy in the process.

In my opinion, the thematic subversion of generic convention, which I shall explore in these films, contains elements of both generic parody and social satire. In its wider resonance with a new brand of woman-centred, romantic fiction, which satirises the classic romance's ideal of heterosexual relations, this subversion is significant. This claim to generic progressivity persists, I shall argue, even in spite of the films' ultimate reproduction of heterosexual norms. Whether these deviations from the generic norm are ultimately seen as truly challenging to the tenets of the romantic comedy or merely examples of generic evolution designed to secure its long-term survival, does not, I believe, affect the social import of the contemporary prevalence and popularity of these themes<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, and on a different note, it is important to bear in mind some of the problems that my application of feminist theory to the New German Comedies might entail. According to Judith Butler, the inherent problematic of feminist politics lies in its presumption of the foundational nature of identity categories. 'Woman', Butler argues, can never designate a fixed category and is, ultimately, 'a false substantive and univocal signifier that disguises and precludes a gender experience internally varied and contradictory' (Butler 1987, 141). While 'deemed necessary in order to mobilise feminism as an identity politics' these categories of 'man' and 'woman', 'simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up' (Butler 1990, 147). Such categories are fundamentally unstable and, consequently, must be viewed with a degree of scepticism and ideological scrutiny.

In line with the approach to identity analysis already outlined in this essay, identification must be looked upon as an ambiguous and often ambivalent process. As a result, the readings of female identification and sexuality put forward in this section do



not aspire to final and complete signification or conclusion. However, as Butler also argues, the ambiguity of such ontological terms and categories, and their common mobilisation in the pursuit of projects of social and sexual exclusion, does not preclude their use or interrogation. As has been made clear, it is the fundamental aim of this study to expose exactly those points of rupture, ambivalence and contradiction which mark out identity categories as progressive, political and different from the normative environment of conventions in which they exist. This is of course particularly relevant to a romantic comedy genre which operates within the context of a commercial mainstream and which must draw on its own traditions of the positioning of the female subject/object. To return to the language of Butler, it is the performative aspect of these particular articulations of gender and sexuality with which this section is interested, articulations which open up spaces for non-classical, empowering and, ultimately, unharmonious visions of contemporary womanhood.

On a more general level, Butler's arguments warn of the limitations of too dogmatic an application of feminist theory, a warning that applies equally to my analysis of the representation of women within the New German Comedy genre. For example, while my sustained focus on female protagonists ensures a pluralist and multifaceted approach to the theorisation of female identity, the notion of patriarchy, to which I have repeated recourse in this section, remains rigid to the point of precluding any other interpretation of gender relations than that of an abusive and unequal power imbalance. Clearly, in an intellectual climate of poststructuralist relativism which questions all generalising theories of social determinism, such recourse to simplistic sociological variables is extremely suspect. However, I would argue that the rigidity of the notion of patriarchy I have employed cannot be divorced from the rigidity of patriarchal representation within the films. This rigidity precludes the imposition of dialectical models, models which might offer a more affirmative role for the

heterosexual male. In this respect, the very narrowness of definition ultimately strengthens the underlying social message which the films would appear to be offering as themes of identification.

One such film that embodies this profound female ambivalence vis-à-vis an apparently far from adequate male population is Katja von Garnier's *Abgeschminkt*.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Kilb, A. 1997. 'Wir können nicht anders... Über den Erfolg der jüngeren deutschen Filmkomödie', in Amend and Bütow 1997, 25.

<sup>2</sup> All statistics from *FFA: German Federal Film Board* [online], viewed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2000, <<http://www.ffa.de>>

<sup>3</sup> A reference to the mainstream melodramas, musicals and *Heimatfilme* which dominated the 1950s. Until the more recent revisionist work of Marc Silberman (1995) and Heide Fehrenbach (1995), these films had been largely ignored within official German film histories, labelled as escapist and reactionary populism for the masses (Horak 1997).

<sup>4</sup> This term, originally cited by Georg Seeßeln in an article for *Die Zeit* (1997, 56), has come to represent a body of films which centre their slapstick narrative trajectories around the misadventures of uncouth, lower class males, as typified by Tom Gerhard's popular successes *Voll Normal* (1994) and sequel *Ballermann 6* (1997).

<sup>5</sup> This term, often used in opposition to the representation of women and women's issues in a more traditional avant-garde, explicitly feminist context, has gained increasing currency in the contemporary debate surrounding the representation of women within mainstream cinema, and indeed, within mainstream popular culture in general. I have taken it to imply a meta-genre of mainstream cultural texts, which centre women and thematic concerns of direct relevance to women, as the primary subjects of representation. My understanding of the term 'female-centred'- or as I shall consequently refer to it, 'woman-centred'- carries with it no preconceptions as to the relative progressive or regressive nature of this representation. However, as Toril Moi's use of this distinction suggests the 'female' (as opposed to 'feminist')



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critic has an important role to play in the feminist project of making women visible (1989).

<sup>6</sup> Examples of such films would include Cristina Perincioli's *Die Macht der Männer ist die Geduld der Frauen* (1978), Margarethe von Trotta's *Das zweite Erwachen des Christa Klages* (1977) and Helma Sanders-Brahms' *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* (1979-80).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the conflict between radical feminists and 'pro-sex feminists' in the late 1970s and early 1980s see Willis, E. 1992. *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays*, University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire.

<sup>8</sup> At this point let it suffice to define melodramatic representation within the cinematic context as a trans-generic style, which focuses upon human emotion, physical hardship and adversity and often encompasses criticisms of social and political mores.

<sup>9</sup> In many respects, the history of genre theory within film studies could be seen as analogous with the wider scope of this study, representing as it does a move away from the auteur studies of a previous generation to a discipline capable of engaging with the mainstream Hollywood and popular cultural product.

## Chapter 3

### *The Promise of Patriarchy*

#### *Abgeschminkt* and the Ideal Heroine

As with many of this decade's most successful young German directors Katja von Garnier seems uncomfortable with comparisons between her work and that of the *Autoren* filmmakers of the sixties and seventies. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, von Garnier speaks of the incongruity of her own light-hearted approach to the portrayal of women and women's issues in cinema:

Es gibt jetzt so viel Komisches und Ironisches über Frauen zu erzählen. Witzige Frauenfilme – klingt schon wie ein Widerspruch in sich – sind ja in Deutschland bisher selten. Alles war so entzetzlich schwerblütig. ('Tempo' 1993, 375)

In an *epd film* magazine interview of the same year she is even more explicit in her rejection of the feminist stance of an earlier generation of women filmmakers, citing a different kind of female character as her role model:

Ich wollte Frauencharaktere zeigen, die aus den neunziger Jahren sind. Die weder

die Karrieregeilheit der achtziger noch das Kämpferische der siebziger Jahre im Kopf haben. Sondern bewußte Frauen, die einfach alles TUN und nicht nur alles



WOLLEN. ('Abgeschminkt' 1993, 42)

However, while rejecting the title of *Frauenfilm*, she has no doubt as to the reason for the success of her debut film *Abgeschminkt*, stating that, 'viele Frauen erkennen sich wieder, Männer können was lernen' ('Tempo' 1993, 375).

This acknowledgement of both specifically female orientated themes of identification and a male directed pedagogy seems to contradict this anti-feminist stance. Clearly, the film adheres in terms of narrative, casting and subject matter to the norms of a classical, mainstream cinema. However, its many other characteristics combine to position it within a wider tradition of feminist filmmaking and the contemporary sociological feminist debate<sup>1</sup>. These characteristics include the film's female authorship, its centring of issues of female gender and sexuality so symptomatic of the 90s German comedies, and its commodification as a product designed to appeal to a predominantly young and female audience. This aspect is explicitly recognised within the film itself as the two main protagonists, Frenzy and Maischa, turn to camera and address themselves to the audience as brokers of women's pleasure (see Chapter 5).

Conforming to the norms of dominant narrative cinema the film traces a path from middle class identity crisis to ultimate conflict resolution. In this respect, the New German Comedies encompass an extremely narrow social focus, remaining 'dogmatisch zielgruppenorientiert' and 'stark eingeschränkt' to a social stratum of 'künstlerischen-kreativen' 30-somethings (Prümm 1996, 121). This revision of the 'gute alte Midlife-crisis [...] zur "Krise um die 30"' (1996, 121) signals a significant departure from their much cited precursor *Männer*. In almost every other aspect, however, the new comedies replicate Dörrie's focus on the aspirations and dilemmas of a post-68 generation, aspiring to an ambiguous space 'zwischen studentischem Milieu und der Sphäre des "bürgerlichen" Berufs [...], zwischen den fluiden studentischen Verhältnissen, die man

nicht aufgeben möchte, und den starren Berufsrollen, denen man sich verweigert, zwischen heruntergekommener WG und schickem Luxusappartement' (1996, 122).

As is invariably the case in the nineties 'Comedia Sexualis' ('Das Lachen' 1996, 223), this crisis is expressed in terms of relationship difficulties, in other words, the lack or unsuitability of a partner. As a generic concern of the relationship comedy there remains a significant point of departure in these films from the classical Hollywood romantic comedy of the 1930s<sup>2</sup>. This lies in the way that the traditionally implicit themes of gender and sexuality are foregrounded, reconfigured and then related directly to the representation of self-determining female identities.

In *Abgeschminkt* the identity crisis which faces the central female protagonist Frenzy (Katja Riemann), and which articulates itself in her artistic block, is ultimately resolved through her relationship with the German-American soldier, Mark (Max Tidof). This conflict resolution through traditional heterosexual romantic involvement appears to conform to the patriarchal construct of female identity and fulfilment as existing only in relation to the male. It is this reactionary structural core which Radway perceives at the heart of every ideal romance. Intertextually, Frenzy's initial resistance to this notion is as typical of Riemann's archetypal portrayal of the strong, aggressively independent careerist as it is of the ideal heroine of Radway's romances. Indeed, as shall be seen from her portrayal of the central female protagonists in *Abgeschminkt*, *Der bewegte Mann*, *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* and *Stadtgespräch*, Riemann corresponds to the model of the ideal heroine of romantic fiction in almost every aspect.

These characters are invariably coded as displaying the *male* characteristics of independence (from male financial support), professional aptitude (in the traditionally male dominated public sphere of work and business), and a spunky tomboyishness, suggestive of the possibility of an autonomous, potentially aggressive sexuality. However, in the films as in the works of fiction, the initial strength and independence



attributed to the female protagonists is ultimately compromised. In *Der bewegte Mann* Doro's initial display of strength in throwing out her macho, promiscuous lover is brought into question by her consequent pursuit of, and marriage, to this serial philanderer. Frenzy's capitulation to the powers of the patriarchal status quo in *Abgeschminkt* would appear to be twofold. Subsequent to her meeting with Mark, she appears to compromise her sexual integrity by abandoning her *male* characteristics of bad-tempered tomboyishness, in favour of a decidedly patriarchal concept of femininity. However, this is allied to the compromise of her professional and artistic integrity as she willingly transforms her spunky *Mosquitofrau* into a 'fast pornographisch' (Peter Sattmann: *Abgeschminkt*) male sexual fantasy.

Significantly, this narrative progression accords entirely with Janice Radway's model of the ideal romance. The conclusion of the ideal romance is always accompanied by the central female protagonist's realisation that *her man's* initial show of arrogant or chauvinistic behaviour – 'du solltest kleine Jungs nicht auf so eine Art auflauern. Es könnte zu einer Toilettentrauma führen' (Max Tidof: *Abgeschminkt*) – hides, in fact, a much more profound reality of gentleness and caring, merely an unsophisticated display of his actual attachment to her. This realisation then allows the heroine to drop her *artificial* defences of *maleness* and revert to her *natural* femininity.

### Rebels, Reactionaries and Relationship Crises

This rebel-to-reactionary transformation – a standard trope of both Radway's ideal romances and the romantic comedy of Hollywood's classic period – clearly reproduces gender stereotypes through its advocacy of a changed sense of female self within an unchanged social arrangement. In Rainer Kaufmann's *Stadtgespräch* this model would

appear to be replicated. In this film Riemann plays Monika, a thirty-something radio presenter and agony aunt who hosts an early morning radio show. By the mid 1990s Riemann was firmly established as 'Deutschlands Filmstar Nummer eins' (Blum 1998, 9) and alongside her equally popular male-counterpart, Til Schweiger, was looked upon the forerunner to a revitalised German *Starkino*. However, Riemann also found herself quickly typecast as the 'Komödiantante' (1998, 9) of the new, young German film. In the context of this popularity Riemann's portrayal of the strong, blonde, independent professional takes on a new significance. The model of female individuation and autonomy, the feisty independence, aggressively pro-female stance and professional aptitude that her New German Comedy characters embody, all contribute to the ideal of nineties *Girl Power* that she has come to represent, and thus to the fantasy of 'idealised self' (Macdonald 1995, 87) that she offers her female audiences.

In this respect Monika's choice of career is not insignificant. In common with Frenzy she represents that epitome of nineties European success, the media professional. Creative jobs are key to *Abgeschminkt*, *Stadtgespräch*, *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*, *Workaholic* and *Das Superweib*, both as markers of middle class status and opportunities for character individuation. This is integral to the themes of identification and reassurance which the films offer the aspirationally bohemian 'wirtschaftlich abgesicherten Elite' ('Das Lachen' 1996, 223) at which they are aimed. However, it is also central to Radway's description of the ideal heroine in romantic fiction. Literary and media jobs, such as those occupied by the Frenzy, Monika, Rhoda (Christiane Paul: *Workaholic*) and Franziska (Veronica Ferres: *Das Superweib*) are especially favoured by the authors of the ideal romances as they represent a particular position of power and cultural capital<sup>3</sup> for their romantic heroines – power through and over the culturally mediated use and manipulation of language.

Whether graphic designers, radio and television presenters, or novelists, these



female protagonists symbolise an engagement with the feminist debate surrounding the visibility and representation of women within the public sphere. On the surface, their status as successful, independent, culturally visible women, would appear to counter 'Gaye Tuchman's seminal critique of the 'symbolic annihilation of women' (1981, 183) within the mass media. This engagement with feminist discourse also takes place on a more material, self-conscious level of direct interaction, as shall be demonstrated presently.

In accordance with the narrative conventions of the romance, Monika's potentially radical socio-sexual stance and self-sufficiency, in Kaufmann's *Stadtgespräch*, is quickly subsumed within the much larger generic concern of the relationship crisis. Monika, like Frenzy, is thirty and partnerless. A 'biologische Zeitbombe' (Karin Rasenack: *Stadtgespräch*) just waiting to explode, Monika is constantly reminded of her inadequacy by her mother, Frau Krauss. The citing of a parental generation as the upholders of a traditional bourgeois, patriarchal ideology is common to a large proportion of the New German Comedies. In this respect, Frau Krauss enjoys the same reactionary function as Frenzy's father in *Abgeschminkt*; in other words, to remind their daughters of their duty to marry and raise families. Pointing out the unavoidable link for women 'zwischen beruflichen Karriere und privater Misere' (Prümm 1996, 122) they also function to highlight the apparent incompatibility of women and the public sphere. However, despite this function as representatives of unadulterated bourgeois respectability, with its associated values of patriarchy and materialism, these characters occasionally develop beyond their initial traditionalism to a stance more accepting of new social paradigms. This is exemplified by Frau Krauss' ultimate acceptance of her son's homosexuality, her daughter's celibacy and Sabine's single-parent status. Frau Winkel's support of the career-mother, Franziska, in *Das Superweib*, functions in a similar way.

As with all romantic heroines, the greater the initial resistance to the notion of romantic involvement – ‘Ein Mann ist wirklich das letzte, was ich brauche’ (Katja Riemann: *Stadtgespräch*) – the greater the significance of her ultimate transformation. Enter the positively charming Erik (August Zirner), whose attributes include good looks, a large car, a good job, a flair for Slavic languages, and incredibly slanting eyebrows – for Monika, a veritable ‘Mr Perfect’. Her subsequent overnight transformation from apparently strong, independent career-woman to gooey-eyed, lovesick teenager mirrors the feminisation process that Frenzy undergoes in *Abgeschminkt*. Significantly, it is to the older, professional, patriarchal figure that she is attracted, the epitome of bourgeois respectability and conservatism. Recognising this her mother, the archetypal, bourgeois German mother, ‘die Seele der neuen Filmkomödie’ (Kilb 1996a, 3), is delighted at the match. Not even the discovery of Erik’s marriage can dampen her enthusiasm. For her, marriage, status and financial security, the cornerstones of bourgeois ideology, are everything.

### **Sex, Marriage and Ageing Patriarchs**

In Timm’s *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* Riemann’s initial romantic suitor, Klaus Klett (Uwe Ochsenknecht) is hardly less reactionary in his phallocentric representation. Appearing out of the night in a screech of ABS brakes and exhaust fumes, the suited, cigar-smoking ‘Dr Porsche’ makes clear the power imbalance of this particular damsel-in-distress scenario, as he whisks Pauline Frohmuth (Katja Riemann) away from her broken down VW Beetle and speeds her to her opera recital. Klett’s power is defined in terms of professional success, material affluence and sexual prowess, and this in contrast to Pauline’s junior status, uncertain career prospects, and apparently inferior



socio-economic standing. Immediately categorised in terms of his chauvinism and predatory sexual nature, he mocks Pauline for her career ambitions while unashamedly gazing on her exposed flesh as she changes out of her wet clothes in the passenger seat.

The foil to Klett's hyper-masculinity comes in the shape of the romantically attentive and sensitive culture critic, Georg Lalinde (Henry Hübchen). However, while Klett's aggressive, patriarchal seduction of Pauline is problematised by her parallel and very different love-affair with Georg it is ultimately the arrogant and promiscuous misogynist, Klaus, who proves to be both the father of the unborn twins<sup>4</sup> and the ultimate source of romantic fulfilment and patriarchal support for Pauline. The feminised, impotent Georg, tyrannised by his wife and rejected by Pauline, returns to the stalls and to his comfort zones of vicarious involvement with the (melo)dramatic narratives of life. The ideal romance's citation of patriarchal aggression and arrogance as a moment of female *misrecognition* (73) is clearly evoked and Pauline is left to set up home with the 'unverschämter mieser arroganter Angeber' (Katja Reimann: *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*) she once so fiercely berated.

The problematic nature of this potentially reactionary romantic trajectory is echoed in the film's treatment of Pauline's sexual promiscuity. Subsequent to her fêted premiere at the opera Pauline departs for the post-performance party, which takes place in the converted loft of a renovated warehouse. Such spaces are a common trope of the New German Comedies, cited as flats or exhibition venues, to signal the creative, bohemian aspirations of the materially affluent professional classes. Throughout the party, Pauline's flirtatious teasing of her various male friends and admirers – not least of all Georg, who remains faithfully by her side despite his own lack of ease amongst the youthful frolickers – signals a thinly disguised, potentially aggressive sexuality, which sits uncomfortably with the representation of female protagonists within the classic romantic narrative. In this respect, her character offers a possibility of a reconfigured

female sexuality ,outwith the normal bounds of patriarchally determined female identities.

For would-be male suitors the message is clear, as her resounding rendition of *Hit the road, Jack* at the opening of the party makes clear. However, this commentary on contemporary sexual politics is further complicated by her behaviour on her first dinner-date with Georg at her home. Responding aggressively to Georg's persistent romantic overtures she turns on him and questions his motives for being there:

Pauline:           Was wollen Sie von mir eigentlich? Finden Sie es schön mit mir  
Aldiwein zu trinken?

Interestingly, this scene is almost unique amongst the New German Comedies in the citation of a potential class, or at least socio-economic, differential between characters, embodied in the *Aldiwein* reference. However, this is neither followed up in the rest of the film nor is it ever entirely convincing. Pauline's own bourgeois status is clearly attested to by the spacious converted warehouse with fitted kitchen, grand piano and polished pine floors in which she lives and more general social sphere of middle class bohemia in which she circulates. Ultimately, the utopian vision of middle class security and material wealth remains untroubled by the possibility of any other, less glamorous social realities. However, the significance of this scene lies in Georg's answer. After a moments reflection, he replies, 'Ja, ich liebe Sie' (Henry Hübchen: *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*). From this moment on any pretence of independence and sexual self-determination is abandoned by Pauline and the Chris Walden's romantic orchestral soundtrack accompanies them into the bedroom.

This scene is quickly followed by Klaus' entrance to the flat and his attempted aggressive seduction. Whatever her implied promiscuity Pauline's subsequent refusal of



Klaus' advances makes clear her location of sex solely within the realm of romance. Responding to his question as to the reason for her not taking the pill, she replies tartly, 'ich bin keine Frau so...für eine Nacht' (Katja Riemann: *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*). However, as the audience is well aware this is not the case and it would appear from the ultimate progression of the romantic narrative that her initial resistance to Klaus is not to the act of intercourse itself, but rather to his bullish approach at approaching it. At the mention of love she may go weak at the knees but when sex is too explicitly on the agenda she quickly asserts her chastity. Subsequent to his second knight-in-shining-armour appearance, rescuing her from the jaws of a ferocious Doberman, she is able to reintegrate him into the romantic, melodramatic narrative which governs her life, just as it governs her operatic material. This done, she sleeps with him immediately.

In Sönke Wortmann's 1996 hit comedy *Das Superweib*, this model of female transformation from rebellion to conformity would appear to be inverted. As its title would suggest this film engages arguably most directly of all with the question of women's rights and women's position in a male-dominated society and, more particularly, with the 'personal costs hidden inside the role of wife and mother' (Radway 1987, 301). Veronica Ferres plays Franziska, wife of successful young film director Will Groß (Thomas Heinze) and mother of two. The fantasy of identification the film offers its female audiences is one of transformation as Ferres evolves from *plain-Jane*, everywoman housewife and mother, to glamorous best-selling authoress.

Again the portrayal of the patriarchal male, this time in the form of Franziska's husband, is entirely negative. An exploitative and unfaithful husband, as well as an entirely inadequate father, Thomas Heinze's repeated characterisation as the 'mieses patriarchalisches Arschloch' (Thomas Heinze: *Allein unter Frauen*) of the New German Comedy, functions to expose any fantasies still remaining with regard to the institution of bourgeois family life. In this respect, it exposes an uncomfortable reality behind the

ideal romance's reassuring assertion – to its predominantly married readers – that the institution of marriage is ultimately 'protective of women's interests' (Radway 1987, 74).

In the process, the cultural representation of family as a social system 'whose basic rightness must not be challenged' (Klinger 1995, 79) is brought under equal pressure, reconfigured from locus of support and solidarity to one of female oppression and patriarchal domination. This destabilisation of reactionary notions of masculinity through the rejection of patriarchal support systems is a theme common to all the woman-centred relationship comedies and represents the first indication that all is not well in the world of heterosexual norms. Typically these films contrast the weaknesses and general negative influence of the patriarchal figure with the strength and hidden potential of the matriarch. Subsequent to her divorce, Franziska is shown to succeed not only in her professional life, but also in her love life and her role as a mother.

It is in their portrayal of the institution of marriage that the films initially appear to depart most radically from the conventions of Radway's ideal romances and the classical Hollywood romantic comedy. Traditionally, the mainstream romantic comedy took as its founding social norm the institution of marriage (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 136); in other words, the comedy revolved around relationship difficulties, which were ultimately resolved by marriage. Thus, however strong, independent and 'spunky' leading ladies such as Rogers and Hepburn, or in the German context Harvey and Ziemann might be, their submission was ultimately required for the successful consummation of the romance. In this way, marriage was mysticised through its link with romantic love and the bourgeois status quo was maintained.

As David Shumway recognises the romantic comedy was, in this respect, merely continuing the 'cultural work that many of the most important forms of cultural production – novels, operas, poems etc. – had been performing throughout the period of



bourgeois hegemony' (Shumway 1995, 383). According to Shumway the traditional romantic comedy constructs the illusion that both complete desire and complete satisfaction are obtainable, and are so in marriage. Significantly, this generic convention retained its currency right into the 1940s, despite the dramatic rise in divorce rates and extra-marital promiscuity, evolving eventually into the sub-genre of the 'comedy of remarriage' (Cavell 1981, 85).

In these contemporary German romantic comedies, however, marriage is either rejected as an institution ultimately exploitative of women – as in *Stadtgespräch* and *Das Superweib* – or simply ignored as an obsolete relic of a parental generation – as in *Abgeschminkt*. For Pauline, in *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*, even the birth of her twins does not necessitate marital commitment. As the inadequate nature of both Georg and Klaus' previous relationships has demonstrated, marriage and exploitation are mutually inclusive. As a consequence, neither Klaus nor Pauline feel the need to invoke the official sanction of state and church. However, in view of this demystification of marriage, where is the romance of these new romantic comedies posited? Furthermore, how are the desires of their largely female audiences negotiated?

### **Fantasy, Feminism and the Spice Girls**

In the case of Franziska, the relationship of desire constructed between performer and spectator (Ellis 1995, 98) would appear to revolve around a tripartite amalgamation of independence, empowerment and glamour. On the surface, at least, Franziska would appear to represent a truly progressive female heroine, worthy of feminist attention. The first argument in opposition to this interpretation, however, is the accidental nature of her divorce. The extent of her essential *Frauenpower* is somewhat undercut when one

considers the fact that not only did she marry this blatantly inadequate male, but stayed married to him, without even considering the possibility of divorce. Equally, despite the two-dimensional characterisation typical of the film comedy, Heinze's overtly exaggerated representation as a kind of patriarchal monster could be seen as trivialising the whole issue of women's oppression by men.

There is also the problematic issue of the representation of male/female relationships as existing solely on a sexual level, an aspect of relevance to all of the films under examination in this section and, indeed, many of films in Parts III and IV. The exception to the rule within the romantic comedy genre is where the male characters are coded as either feminised – as in the case of the gay characters René (Kai Wiesinger) in *Stadtgespräch* and Norbert (Joachim Krol) in *Der bewgete Mann* – or desexualised – as with Enno (Joachim Krol) in *Das Superweib*. Indeed, Franziska, as with all of the New German Comedy women, is as incapable of forming platonic relationships with men as they are of viewing her as anything other than a sex object. To quote McRobbie in her 1991 study of the teenage girl's magazine, *Jackie*, this view of relationships between men and women as existing only on a sexual level, 'cancel[s] out completely the possibility of any relationship other than the romantic one between boy and girl' (98-9). Arguably, this purely sexual reading of the male/female relationship can only work in favour of a patriarchal ideology, which seeks to place women in the role of wife and mother, and prevent any meeting of the sexes on equal terms.

Equally, the dream of empowerment represented by her overnight transformation from downtrodden housewife to best-selling author is, in its choice of the glamorous Ferres and its narrative reliance on chance and luck, more likely to reinforce women in their own sense of physical inferiority and the inescapability of their societal positioning. Dwight Macdonald argued that this process of *disempowerment* is enacted in all products of mass culture:



The whole competitive struggle is presented as a lottery in which a few winners, no more talented or energetic than anyone else, drew the lucky tickets. The effect on the mass reader is at once consoling (it might have been me) and deadening to effort and ambition (there are no rules so why struggle?). (1957, 68)

This particular brand of 'Frauen sind die besseren Männer' feminism (Karasek 1996, 226) does little to promote the cause of self-determining female identities. As her single-minded pursuit of commercial success, her aggressive seduction of two passing acquaintances, and her excessive bout of drinking (followed by a hefty session of throwing up) all go to prove, Franziska is out to prove that she can beat the boys at their own game. The paradox is that in spite of this wholesale adoption of apparently male *qualities*, she never loses a certain 'girlier-than-girliness' ('Girl Power' 1996). In other words, while pretending to the accolade of *Superweib*, she simultaneously fulfils all the criteria of a patriarchally defined concept of femininity.

This is a defining feature of all of the New German Comedy women. Remaining sweetly and prettily naive throughout, Franziska dutifully fulfils her role as a mother while retaining an overtly raunchy sex appeal. The roles of mother and object of the male voyeuristic gaze are exactly those two representations of women so fiercely rejected by successive generations of feminist theorists and filmmakers alike. Despite this, one of the most important attributes for this New German Comedy brand of feminism would appear to be glamour.

In this respect, all three of our fictional female protagonists conform to Radway's model of the ideal heroine. Never vain but always beautiful, these figures

tend almost to neglect their bodies in their rejection of cosmetic artificiality. Riemann is the prime exponent of this particular 'natural look'. Refusing Maischa's lipstick in *Abgeschminkt*, she requires the aid of her brother to *feminise* her in *Stadtgespräch*, and in *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* she displays a consistent preference for the androgynous look of jeans, tie and waistcoat. However, this initial challenge to stereotypes of traditional feminine behaviour is given the lie by the glamorous transformations which each of the female leads subsequently undergoes. These transformations are ultimately integral to the heroines' pursuit and attainment of professional and sexual success. On a metatextual level, these transformations facilitate the audience's pleasurable reconciliation of these characters with their real-life actresses and their widespread representation within the media as female sex-objects. Physical attractiveness would appear to be a key signifier in the audience's scopophilic fantasy of identification with these stars, and in the case of the heroines of our ideal romances and romantic comedies, outward appearance is explicitly connected to traditional conceptions of a *natural* femininity

The political implications of equating this reconfigured *female* gaze with a female object whose attractiveness is emphasised, is interesting. On the one hand, it could be seen as perpetuating the patriarchal bias of 'the look' in cinema, positioning the woman as defined by appearance and ultimately attractiveness to men. This conforms entirely to Naomi Wolf's contention that such images represent 'a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth' (1990, 10). However, both in the context of a romance between women – an aspect of the films I shall examine shortly – and the representation of Riemann, in particular, as embodying a *natural*, *abgeschminkt* attractiveness, this female to female gaze could be reinterpreted<sup>5</sup>.

Catherine Mackinnon describes this socially defined concept of femaleness as follows: 'Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men,



which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms' (1982, 530-1). Without this, the reassurance which these fantasies of societal conformity provide their female audiences, is withheld. Recognising this, Radway argues that 'the ideal heroine's thinly disguised sexuality and more explicitly developed rebelliousness do not threaten the reader, in large part because the fact of her true femininity is never left in doubt' (1987, 127).

In other words, the rebelliousness initially displayed by these romantic heroines is simultaneously ratified and delegitimised by their unquestionable femininity. This reactionary representation of femininity brings into question the progressive nature of the new brand of feminism represented by these woman-centred films of the 1990s, as the following quote on the *Spice Girls* suggests:

This brand of 'Girl Power' really is a kind of ad-agency version of what nineties feminism has become: a safe form of self-expression that has more to do with changing your hairstyle than changing the world. It is a strange combination of superficial bolshiness and girlier-than-girliness, of shocking appearance and utter conservatism [...] it is no real threat to anybody. ('Girl Power' 1996)

However, this reading does not take into account the relationship of these actresses with their audiences.

David Bordwell has argued that classical cinema relies upon a typically limited and relatively static combination of standardised plot-lines (1985). As has been demonstrated, the films of the New German Comedy wave are no exception in this respect. Recognising this reliance on narrative standardisation Pierre Sorlin points to the crucial differentiating role of character in classical cinema. Within the overridingly commercial context of mainstream cinema audience identification is paramount.

Consequently, ‘the appeal of a movie – its effectiveness – is closely linked to the cast’ (1991, 16). In other words, ‘actors do not just carry out stage work; they interact with the spectators who simultaneously trust them and perceive them as stereotypes’ (1991, 17). This process of identification with actors and actresses, which nevertheless recognises the archetypal or stereotypical nature of their representations, takes on an increased significance within the context of stars.

This idea of audience identification is elaborated upon in much more detail in Richard Dyer’s earlier work on the historical, ideological and aesthetic significance of stars. He argues that the appeal of stars lies not in the charisma of the particular individual but in the meanings which that star signifies, and in particular, the ideological contradictions which their image could resolve for the audience (1979). In the case of Riemann, Paul and Ferres the apparently contradictory notions of femininity and female sexuality offered to their female audiences operate around such false dichotomies as strength and sexiness, sexual innocence and aggressive sexuality, success in love and success in career. Understanding these female stars as objects of desire for their female audiences, whose possession of the cinematic viewpoint offers a stake in a female claim to an autonomous cultural construction, we can begin to explore the possibilities of a signifier which could represent the ideal of a *complete* female self. To explore the possibilities of a process of re-negotiation of patriarchally defined conceptions of femininity, I shall now return to a thematic appraisal of the films.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Katja von Garnier’s *Abgeschminkt* in relation to a German tradition of feminist filmmaking see Caprio 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the generic form of the classic Hollywood romantic comedy see Neale and Krutnik ‘Chapter 7: The Comedy of the Sexes’ 1990.



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<sup>3</sup> I draw here upon Pierre Bourdieu's term which refers to the significance of distinctions of cultural taste to the struggle between subordinate and dominant social groups (1984). 'Cultural capital' accrues to those members of society in a position of socio-economic or class-based power who utilise cultural consumption to legitimate social difference and ensure power over social reproduction. The positions of socio-economic and cultural power occupied by the New German Comedy women represent equally influential and socially reproductive positions of power.

<sup>4</sup> It remains unclear in the film whether the birth of twins is a signifier of Klaus' alpha-male virility or merely exploited for comic potential as in the final sequence of the film he is left holding not merely 'the baby' but, in fact, 'the babies'.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of this point see Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### *A Farewell To Idylls*

Die Frauen sind alleinstehend, berufstätig und fast immer kinderlos. Das seelische Gleichgewicht hält kein Traummann aufrecht, sondern die Freundin, die Mutter oder der gleichgesinnte beste Freund. ('Das Lachen' 1996, 224)

#### Women Amongst Women

*Abgeschminkt's* exploration of female camaraderie, as embodied in the relationship between Frenzy and Maischa, has to be seen as a significant point of departure from Radway's model of the perfect romance. Drawing on an established genre of female buddy movies, the film charts a brief interlude in the lives of two 90s, unmarried, professional females on a quest for male companionship. In the ideal romance subsidiary female characters enjoy an ambiguous if not directly ambivalent relationship with the female lead. Typically these characters are granted only cursory treatment and when developed at all it is merely as negative foils to a positive heroine. According to Radway, these female characters represent an all too apparent danger to the promise of patriarchy around which the ideal romance is based. In other words, other women can function only as a challenge or threat to the successful, monogamous, heterosexual partnership.

Believing that all romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to fulfil its female subjects, Radway draws on Nancy Chodorow's socio-psychoanalytic



deconstruction of female identity formation (1978). Of particular interest to Radway is the way in which Chodorow's feminist revisions of Freud impact on the tripartite daughter-mother-father relationship. For Chodorow the socio-historical positioning of women as mothers results in the constitution of female children with an ongoing need and desire for their primary parent, the mother. Consequently, a tension arises in the mature female identity between oedipal and pre-oedipal objects of desire. Drawing on this, Radway is able to hypothesise that the reader of the romance attempts – through the nurture and security provided by the ideal romance – to return to a pre-oedipal state of maternal nurture. Ultimately, this pre-oedipal mother figure represents a state of fulfilment incapable of achievement within the traditional system of patriarchal, heterosexual relations<sup>1</sup>.

In this respect, the goal of all romances could be seen as the symbiotic reunion of the child/reader and mother/pre-oedipal, non-patriarchal figure. According to Radway, the romance reader, like all women, must achieve two objectives to overcome this sense loss engendered by separation from the pre-oedipal figure of nurture: firstly, she must recognise the unsatisfactory nature of the patriarchal society which initially engendered this lack, and secondly, she must find someone to replace a patriarchal figure who, within the existing system of societal relations, can never realistically fulfil her needs. Paradoxically, the security, reassurance and fulfilment provided in the fantasy world of the ideal romance depend upon precisely these two realisations *never* coming to light.

In von Garnier's *Abgeschminkt* this utopian promise of successfully managed heterosexual relations is explicitly challenged. Indeed, heterosexuality in the woman-centred New German Comedies is a construct constantly on the verge of crisis. From the outset, in which the two friends compete to invent 'die größte Lüge der Welt', the scene is set for a playful exploration of an intimate and mutually supportive female camaraderie, and this in the face of a general male inadequacy. Initially, the character of

Maischa appears to conform to the ideal romance's stereotype of the artificial femme-fatale foil. In contrast, Frenzy is coded as embodying a *natural* sexual innocence, hiding behind a facade of cynical men-weariness. Her continued advice to Maischa, 'daß es im Leben um mehr geht als nur Männer!' (Katja Riemann: *Abgeschminkt*) is, however, ignored.

Maischa's positioning as an object of male sexual fantasy is asserted from the outset, as the semantic link between her job as a nurse and her elderly male patient who 'will sicher wieder nur grapschen' (Nina Kronjäger: *Abgeschminkt*) is made. The scene of her petulant deception of her boyfriend operates on several levels. On the one hand, Frenzy's aiding and abetting of the lie reinforces the film's theme of female collusion in the face of an inadequate and unimaginative male population, as embodied in Maischa's boring boyfriend, Klaus. However, this initial act also marks Maischa out as a potential threat to the idyll of patriarchy. This *geschminkt* vamp not only lies to her boyfriend but in her pursuit of René (Gedeon Burkhard) displays a promiscuity and aggressive sexuality which represents a direct threat to patriarchal order<sup>2</sup>.

According to the norms of classical dominant cinema as well as those of the ideal romance, such a female must eventually be punished. The punishment is summarily delivered by the lover that she so aggressively pursued. Within a patriarchal society women who step outside the bounds of the traditional monogamous heterosexual relationship run the risk of losing all recourse to the respect and protection that this institution apparently affords. In the world of the ideal romance this new morality of female promiscuity is unambiguously condemned, threatening as it is to both the patriarchal institution of marriage and traditional (patriarchal) concepts of female sexuality. In contrast, the romantic history of our single, independent heroine, Frenzy, remains unelaborated. Consequently, her sexuality retains an aura of both innocence and ambiguity.



The apparently reactionary nature of this tale of good femininity versus bad femininity is, however, far from straightforward. The first problem lies in the sex scene between Maischa and René. Having attained her long sought after goal of seduction Maischa realises that for René she represents nothing more than a workout machine on which to expend his sexual energy and physical vanity. This investigation of the possibility of an abusive system of male/female relationships is of equal consequence to the ideal romance. The romantic hero's initial behaviour is normally presented as highly ambivalent or at least ambiguous, a fact which the heroine invariably interprets as evidence of his purely sexual interest in her.

However, the utopian promise of patriarchy that Radway sees the ideal romance as providing its readers dictates that this recognition of men's treatment of women as purely sex objects is ultimately coded as a moment of misrecognition. This is achieved through a transformation of the hero's aggression into tenderness, the implication being that his initial behaviour must have been the result of a previous hurt, suffered at the hands of a bad woman. The ideological message is clear. Firstly, male aggression towards women is natural and should, therefore, be forgiven, as it is merely a defence mechanism to protect men from being repeatedly hurt at the hands of women. Secondly, this socially unattractive character trait hides a much more profound nature of tenderness and respect. For a man to realise this *true* nature only requires the right woman. And finally, male objectification and fetishisation of the female form is a myth—a myth which the heroine must eventually recognise. Maischa's relationship with René challenges all of these assumptions.

René's initial display of complete self-obsession and egoism in his dinner conversation with Maischa is shown to hide not tenderness but merely a deeper level of self-interest and vanity. The abusive nature of the sex is reinforced both by Maischa's detached observation of the ceiling during intercourse, and her subsequent traumatised

scrubbing of her unclean, abused body. In terms of the ideal romance, this direct semantic link with the rape scene comes far too close to exposing the uncomfortable truth as to the myths of patriarchal tenderness and respect. This combination of patriarchal abuse and sexual predation is cited directly by Radway's romance readers as a clear indication of a failed romance<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, one of the key functions of the ideal romance is the diffusion of women's fear of male aggression. In this case the opposite is achieved. In addition, Maischa, the punished, femme-fatale foil, is reinstated as a positive role model by virtue of her new-found independence – indicated, albeit somewhat superficially, by her single-handed construction of her own bookshelves – and her association with Frenzy.

In contrast, the juxtaposed relationship of Frenzy and Mark would appear to be directly implicated in the promotion of a utopian promise of patriarchy. This relationship conforms in almost every respect to the ideal romance's ideal of heterosexual relations; from the questioning of identity arising from relationship difficulties – common to all the woman-centred New German Comedies – to the ultimate promise of the validity of the patriarchal norms of femininity and heterosexual relations. The debate surrounding the validity of these norms in a pluralist, postmodern society where heterosexuality is now merely a choice amongst other choices, and the nuclear family is becoming increasingly exceptional, is explicitly cited as Frenzy and Maischa converse over the predominance of homosexual behaviour amongst animals, and the rigidity of Frenzy's father's opinion of women's societal roles, as defined within the concepts of 'heiraten, Kinder kriegen und so' (Katja Riemann: *Abgeschminkt*).

According to Frenzy, her father is disapproving of her career and will not be satisfied until she settles down, marries and starts a family. Presented as the embodiment of bourgeois, patriarchal ideology, however, he is easily rejected. His representation, is as exaggerated and stereotypical as that of Frau Krauss in



*Stadtgespräch* and he is rendered, therefore, ineffective. Frenzy's independence and success are testimony to her rejection of this traditional bourgeois formula of marriage and family.

### Romance Between Women

The suggestion of a sensual, almost sexual dimension to the two friends' relationship is toyed with in several scenes of the film and represents the second clear challenge to the normative ideal of heterosexual togetherness. The first scene comes as Frenzy hovers over the sleeping beauty form of Maischa, tempting her lips with various delicacies designed to arouse her from her slumbers. The sexual connotations of the final spoonful of chocolate, with its contemporary semantic links as the female aphrodisiac and better-than-sex, suggests another layer of intimacy than that already indicated by their sharing of the marital bed. The calm of this gentle awakening is immediately countered, however, as Maischa remembers her forthcoming date and throws herself into a desperate hunt for the ideal outfit. The performative aspects of this *Pretty Woman* scene represent a microcosm of the film in general, as it playfully explores issues of female gender and sexuality.

Of greater significance, however, is the inversion of the traditional cinematic male gaze, as Frenzy observes Maischa dressing and undressing. The dichotomy of personality is extended into the realm of clothing, as Frenzy rejects the sex object connotations of Maischa's tight-fitting, sexy little number, in favour of baggy jogging pants, hooded top and a general *abgeschminkt* appearance. While Maischa expends her energy on rote-learning football scores in the hope of impressing her date, Frenzy concentrates on her artwork, thus reiterating the division between private and public

realms as potential loci of female individuation. The physical intimacy of their friendship, as they uninhibitedly share bathroom and toilet space in this partitionless converted warehouse, is further emphasised by their playful cheek to cheek waltzing and frank discussion of each others' bodies: 'Also, ich finde deinen Busen wunderschön.' (Katja Riemann: *Abgeschminkt*).

Echoes of this playful exploration of a woman-to-woman sensuality can also be seen in the relationship between Monika and Sabine (Martina Gedeck) in *Stadtgespräch*. The ironic setting for their moment of recognition is the fitness studio. In an attempt to maintain their physical attractiveness to their men – or *man*, wherein lies the comic irony of their meeting – both women submit themselves to strenuous workout regimes. Undercutting the patriarchal conformity of this obsession with physical appearance, however, is the suggestion of a sensual or even sexual attraction to their initial friendship. As a fight breaks out between two women in the gym Monika and Sabine enjoy a shared smile of understanding before rushing to break up the warring parties. Back to back they hold the women apart before turning to face each other flushed and excited. Sabine's coy smile instantly results in a self-conscious patting into place of her hair on the part of Monika.

As if in denial of the sexual/sensual space duly opened the next scene sees a starry-eyed Monika hovering over Erik's romantic answering phone message. However, Monika's subsequent hesitant use of the line – 'Du hast sicher keine Zeit' (Katja Riemann: *Stadtgespräch*) – instigates a dinner engagement which closes with the two women walking intimately arm in arm, as they discuss their respective lives and the perfect existence which each sees the other as leading. Monika's bashful closing comment – 'Das war jetzt schön mit dir' – completes the romantic imagery of this first date scenario. This initial meeting sets the scene for the couple's ultimate togetherness which, although never overtly developed on a sexual level, is shown to be much deeper



and stronger than any of the heterosexual relationships they subsequently pursue.

In her gender analysis of Michael Crichton's *Coma* (1977), Gledhill recognises the significance of the single sex fitness studio as a subcultural social space suggestive of an order outwith the parameters of conventional heterosexual self-definition (1995). In this space where women meet and talk, take pleasure in physical being and membership of an exclusively female community, there exists scope for a gendering or repossession of the cinematic look as women watch women and women interact with women. This repositioning of the pleasure of looking at female bodies, suggestive of a gendered complicity or social solidarity at odds with the foundational narrative imperative of the gender comedy, is an element common to both the aforementioned scenes – involving respectively, Maischa and Frenzy and Monika and Sabine.

Shumway notes this contemporary reworking of the screwball or romantic comedy genre to include the possibility of romance between women as of potential political significance (1995). Citing the example of Susan Seidelman's *Desperately seeking Susan* (1985), he writes of the 'romance of identification' between the two female protagonists, and which 'given the lack of female identification by women in screwball comedies or other Hollywood films [...] must be regarded as a politically significant reversal of convention' (398). This relationship between Roberta and Susan is mirrored in both *Stadtgespräch* and *Abgeschminkt* in which female identification is found to be far more fulfilling and reliable by both female couples.

In Timm's *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* the only similarly gendered space is opened up as Pauline attends her antenatal classes. However, in contrast to the feelings of solidarity and community evoked by Monika and Sabine's experiences in this heavily structured and normative social arena, Pauline quickly finds herself marginalised as it becomes apparent that she is attending alone and not with the expected husband or partner. Significantly, it is her best friend Uschi (Maren Schumacher) who rescues her

from her isolation, thus reaffirming their friendship. The sexual significance of her adoption of the male support role, both physically and metaphorically, is played out to the last scene in which she contrives to hand over the role of provider and carer to the now apparently transformed Klaus (Uwe Ochsenknecht).

Equally significant is the positioning of Uschi as the initial source of resistance to Pauline's recently discovered pregnancy. Her avocation of a termination is accompanied by an aggressive outburst which seems to suggest that abortion represents not only a hard-won right of women but almost a duty for the dedicated career-woman of the 1990s. Ultimately, however, her radical stance is relativised by her return to her friend's side and the reactionary positing of Pauline's *perfect* marriage to Klaus.

In this exploration of female camaraderie and sensuality, the films would indeed appear to be investigating the possibilities of a pre-oedipal wish for a non-patriarchal figure of nurture, and as Radway points out, 'all that it implies – erotic pleasure, symbiotic completion and identity confirmation' (1987, 146). However, the bell for this sexuality playtime is ultimately rung and our female protagonists return to the school of heterosexual norms. Frenzy chooses Mark and undergoes an immediate regression to the embarrassing, adolescent *Schwärmerei* of waiting by the telephone, and huddling inside her boyfriend's American baseball jacket. Meanwhile Monika and Sabine embark on a series of casual heterosexual encounters, which once again result in them dating the same man.

### **Homosocial Solidarity**

Despite the ambiguity of these endings the exploration of female support and desire as embodied in these two films would appear to lend itself to analysis under Eve



Sedgwick's notion of homosociality (1985). Developing this concept to account for the nature and significance of male/male relationships as represented in the mid-eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century novel, Sedgwick explores the power structures which this system of relations has historically held in place, and their implication for women. Particularly significant is her account of the socially constructed discontinuum which exists between male homosociality and male homosexuality. For reasons relating to the centrality of obligatory heterosexuality to male-dominated kinship systems, patriarchal society has traditionally, and aggressively, rejected any possibility of a link between the homosocial and the homosexual. The interests of men loving men cannot, and must not, be seen as concomitant with men promoting the interests of men.

In contrast, this 'diacritical opposition between the "homosocial" and the "homosexual" seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society' (Sedgwick 1985, 2). In other words, the aims of women who love women can be seen as congruent with the aims of women who promote the interests of women. This ties in with Hélène Cixous' assertion that the female self is more able to accept the 'location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the non-exclusion of difference or sex, and starting with this "permission" one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body' (Cixous 1989, 104).

Men, on the other hand, are 'trained to aim for a glorious phallic monosexuality' (104). According to Freud, man's fear of being a woman – the *Ablehnung* of femininity – is, in fact, fear of the leaning towards one's own sex – of homosexuality. Following this line of argument the alliance between misogyny and homophobia can be seen as as closely forged as that between feminism and gay rights. In this context, the coalition between the women and the gay couple in opposition to the heterosexual, patriarchal male at the end of *Stadtgespräch*, takes on a new significance, as does *Abgeschminkt's*

exploration of an exclusively female camaraderie and desire<sup>4</sup>.

In his work on heterosexual desire within the broader New German Comedy genre Halle refers to the destabilisation of heterosexual imperatives brought about by the intrusion of a 'temporary-gay narrative' (2003, 11). While I do not intend to expand upon Chris Straayer's definition (1996) of exactly what this narrative entails it does raise some issues of relevance to woman-centred comedies. One of the films Halle refers to in relation to this narrative is Kaufmann's *Sadtgespräch*. According to Halle it is the gay character René's desire for the male lead Erik which is primarily responsible for the film's comic disruption of gender and sexuality. The use of homosexual characters as simultaneous source and resolution of heterosexual crises is common to many of the New German Comedies. In this context Halle argues that the primary sources of narrative disruption within the romantic comedies come from outwith the parameters of heterosexuality (2000, 12). I would argue, however, that the fundamental binary and point of narrative conflict in these films lies not in the opposition between homosexual and heterosexual but between the homosocial and heterosexual, or to go further, the homosocial female and the heterosexual male. Clearly, these latter two categories are not mutually exclusive.

Themes of female camaraderie and the possibility of alternatives to traditional patriarchal support systems are also developed in *Das Superweib*. Franziska's divorce makes, ultimately, little difference to her already solitary existence as a married woman. The settlement which Enno (Joachim Krol), her lawyer, arranges for her ensures that she is as financially secure (and dependent) as a single woman, as she was when she was married. However, having *accidentally* instigated this step to freedom, breaking free from the patriarchal bonds of marriage, she begins to re-evaluate her societal positioning within the domestic sphere of family and home. In this respect, the film uses the divorce to affirm the freedom of the individual over and above social solidarity.



Her entrance into the public sphere is instigated by Enno's suggestion that she write down her experiences as an exploited wife and mother. His continued support of her as she embarks on her career as an authoress, however, is relativised by his characterisation as a *feminised* male. Within the generic conventions of the New German Comedy his character comes far closer to the figure of the 'freundlicher Schwul' – the role adopted by Krol in the earlier *Der bewegte Mann* – than patriarchal 'Traummann' (Kilb 1996). The other major support figure in Franziska's new life as a jet-setting career woman, is Enno's mother. A wealthy widow, Frau Winkel's (Liselotte Pulver) traditional bourgeois respectability is offset by her unquestioning acceptance of Franziska's newly defined role as single mother and career woman. Despite the positive nature of this portrayal, as representatives of a value system which defines female individuation as existing primarily in relation to marriage and motherhood, these parental figures are generally rejected. The reinstatement of both Monika and Frenzy as single, childless women attests to this rejection of both 'intakte Kleinfamilien alter Bauart' ('Das Lachen' 1996, 224), and the bourgeois institution of marriage in which these values are traditionally enshrined.

This is of relevance to Chodorow's description of the process of female individuation within patriarchal society, which posits the possibility of female self-realisation as existing solely within the bounds of marriage and family. This is why the reassuring and reactionary ideal romance always eventually recommends 'the usual sexual division of labour that dictates that women take charge of the domestic purely personal spheres of human endeavour' (Radway 1987, 123). Frenzy and Monika reject both of these models of symbolic satisfaction of female desire in favour of friendship and career.

The portrayal of patriarchal males as innately inadequate even further problematises the relationship of women to the institutions of family and marriage.

Whether overtly patriarchal and abusive, feminised and asexual, or simply absent, the New German Comedy men resist all pretension to the 'ideal carer' role of Radway's 'androgynous' romantic heroes (1987, 302) – in other words, heterosexual males whose 'spectacular phallocentricity does not preclude both tenderness and sensitivity. This general *inadequacy* is further heightened by the essential *adequacy* of the women in pursuing successful and creative careers, while simultaneously managing familial responsibilities and relationship demands. As has already been seen, the characterisation of women within the New German Comedies is at its best ambiguous, switching back and forward between elements that can be read as either progressive or reactionary in relation to their traditional societal positioning. The representation of men, however, enjoys no such ambiguity. The role of *Versorger* traditionally attributed to men is irrevocably questioned, and a traditional, unproblematised notion of male mono-, heterosexuality is unambiguously destabilised. It is ultimately the recognition and response of women to this unquestionable male inadequacy that represents the locus of the comedies' most progressive textual politics.

### **Working Girls: Carer or Career?**

The centring of woman-as-careerist encapsulated in the opening scenes of both *Stadtgespräch* and *Abgeschminkt*, is equally relevant to *Das Superweib*. In this film, with its explicit citing of the maternal support figure, motherhood is represented as a natural and unquestioned result of heterosexual marriage. It is, however, also represented as a further source of women's exploitation at the hands of men, who neglect their roles as parents. Franziska's decision to embark on a career as a professional novelist indicates a clear shift in female priorities. Franziska quickly comes



to the conclusion that it is of equal (or even greater) importance for her to develop her own abilities and realise her full potential as an autonomous individual as it is to fulfil her role as a committed mother. In this respect her rejection of her husband is not only a rejection of a restrictive and unequal system of male/female relations but also that of the sublimation of the female self in care of the family. This inversion of traditional hierarchies of private and public spheres – epitomised in the final scene of Timm's *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*, in which Pauline is pictured at the pinnacle of her operatic career while her partner, Klaus, is left quite literally holding the baby – is central to the representation of women within the woman-centred New German Comedies.

Arguably, Sherry Hormann's *Workaholic* engages most explicitly of all with the relationship between career and female identity. The film takes as its starting point a reactionary construction of male/female relations which positions the woman primarily within the domestic context and in opposition to the man's almost exclusively professionally defined *raison d'être*. For Rhoda (Christiane Paul), the deficiency in her relationship with workaholic partner Max (Tobias Moretti) is purely and simply one of time:

Max:	Was wünschen Sie sich von deinem Traummann an einem Sonntag?
Rhoda:	Zeit.

The interrelation and incompatibility of public and private spheres, indicated by his trip to the office on a Sunday and already visually signified by the opening panning shot of their home – revealing fax machines and computers variously adorned with ladies clothes and lingerie – is thus established from the outset. Recognising the power imbalance implied by Max's subordination of their relationship to the demands of his

career – ‘Du machst Karriere und ich zahle den Preis’ (Christiane Paul: *Workaholic*) – Rhoda ultimately decides to relinquish her role as guardian of the domestic sphere and pursue her own professional advancement.

On the surface, at least, this decision would appear to represent a significant step forward along the path towards self-sufficiency and determination. Prior to this decisive turning point her presentation is linked explicitly with patriarchally defined notions of a fetishised femininity. In the scene of her first petulant response to Max’s prioritising of work over private life, she is pictured seated in on a pink lacquered swing in the garden. As she sits in this open yet entirely private space of minutely manicured nature, and studies a *Petra* love-quiz on the characteristics of the ideal man, her *natural* femininity is at once infantilised, commodified. Swinging coquettishly on this beautified perch within the gilded cage of her luxury villa, Rhoda’s decorative *Barbie*-potential is emphasised. At the same time, her consumption of trivial popular culture is contrasted with the serious demands of Max’s job. The childish, irrational aspects of her nature are re-emphasised throughout the film as she twice drinks herself into unconsciousness in response to Max’s lack of attention and is then just as easily bought off by the promise of material goods as recompense.

Equated with this is the representation of her overtly sexualised physicality. In a fit of guilty remorse after her first alcoholic binge she pats her stomach disparagingly, bemoaning, ‘schau mal, wie dick der ist’ (Rhoda: *Workaholic*). In the hungover aftermath of this first childish tantrum the body – or woman-as-body – once again takes precedence. In this scene as in the subsequent scene frenzied clothes shopping, the dressing, shaping and controlling of the body purely in the service of increased sexual attractiveness to men, takes on a palliative significance as diversion from the real inequalities of her situation.

As Naomi Wolf make clear in *The Beauty Myth* this commodified beauty is



linked explicitly to a patriarchal construct of female sexuality, and thus employed to curtail the forces unleashed by the sexual revolution and feminist movement of the late 1960s and 70s (1990). This overtly political beauty myth represents the last feminine ideology which has the power to control women. The work of feminist criticism in challenging the myths of motherhood, chastity, domesticity and passivity, has long since been completed by a western neoliberal agenda which seeks to incorporate the relatively untapped and flexible female labour force into productive relations with the market economy. According to Wolf the mass dissemination of images of overtly sexualised women – as well as the mass neurosis inspired by it – constitute a form of social control emanating from ‘a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth’ (1990, 10).

Clearly, this claim of the simplistic one-way transmission of patriarchal ideology does explain women’s apparent willingness to consume and aspire to such images. However, it does not sit comfortably with the dialectical or dialogical relationship which cultural studies has ascribed to producer/consumer relations. This is recognised by Wolf herself as she develops a notion of ‘vital lies’ and ‘collective panic’ to describe the way in which society itself – and women included – turn to reactionary and thus reassuring images in times of change. For women this change is embodied by the increased personal, educational and professional opportunities available to them. The modern obsession with health, beauty and fitness, as exemplified in our New German Comedy women, would appear, however, to represent the persistence of the beauty myth beyond extra-domestic success.

The fears and dangers of even short periods of female sexual unattractiveness are constantly reinvoked in the New German Comedies. Whether Monika’s flabby arms, Maischa’s spots, or, perhaps most explicitly, Doro’s period of relative undesirability during her pregnancy, if the New German Comedy woman does not want her man to go

wandering as soon as her back is turned, she must constantly remain sexually attractive. Ultimately, it is the recognition of this uncomfortable reality which precipitates the pivotal glamorous transformation scenes integral to all of the woman-centred New German Comedies.

Subsequent to her self-pitying drinking binge, Rhoda, and butch bestfriend and gender foil, Elly (Nadeshda Brennicke), embark on yet another *Pretty Woman* spending spree. Reassuring her friend as to the good sense in her extravagant purchase of lingerie worth 499DM Rhoda explains, 'das ist die Investition in meine Zukunft' (Christiane Paul: *Workaholic*), signifying clearly the objectified, fetishised role she sees herself as occupying in her relationship with Max.

In this respect, her decision to leave Max in apparent pursuit of professional and sexual emancipation represents a significant break from the system of power relations in which she finds herself implicated. However, like Franziska in *Das Superweib*, she is entirely incapable of escaping – and indeed, actively exploits on occasion – her social and/or generic positioning as sexual object of male desire. Defining herself solely in sexual relations to the men she encounters, she ensures her career advancement by flirting with the older, high society sophisticate and entrepreneur, Cedrik (Juraj Kukura). Equally questionable is her path to sexual emancipation, beginning as it does with her capitulation to the arrogant seduction of self-confessed womaniser and playboy, Paul (Ralf Bauer). Even more significant is that this journey to apparent self-discovery, is motivated not by a recognition of her exploited and undervalued positioning within her relationship to Max, but rather by the thought that professional success might make her more sexually attractive to this abusive partner:

Elly:            Wenn du ihn wirklich treffen willst, dann mu du ihn mit seinen  
eigenen Waffen schlagen.



Rhoda:           Und nichts macht so sexy wie Erfolg!

Clearly, this reactionary order of female emancipation has much in common with Karasek's reading of Franziska's role in *Das Superweib*. To recuperate a progressive potential for these woman-centred comedies beyond the reactionary normativity of their romantic teleologies, it is necessary to return to the question of narrative and genre.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this relationship between mother, daughter and father and its role in the construction of the female identity, see Chodorow 1978.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the significance of the screen vamp or *femme fatale*, see Kaplan 1980. For a discussion of the threat of female sexuality within German film see Huyssen 1981-2.

<sup>3</sup> According to Radway, in the failed romance the narrative has not only emphasised 'the hero's extraordinary cruelty' but has also stressed 'the purely sexual nature of the attraction exerted by the heroine upon the hero' (1987, 169)

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the interplay, and indeed, 'mutual interimplication' of homosexuality and heterosexuality see Sedgwick 1993.

## Chapter 5

### *Unambiguous Endings?*

#### **It's so Nice to have a (Wo)man about the House**

As the misdemeanours of the *Stadtgespräch*'s Erik are gradually exposed, it becomes clear that the bond of female camaraderie between Monika and Sabine will be tested to the full. Simultaneously, Monika's relationship to her brother, René, is put under a similar pressure as she discovers they are competing for the same man. However, despite pressures these relationships survive and, indeed, are strengthened, as the various parties mutually conclude that it is the serial seducer, Erik, who is to blame for all of their problems. Their consequent rejection of Erik allows them to re-cement their relationships in the face of general patriarchal inadequacy. The best (girl)friend, the non-patriarchal male and the sympathetic mother – in other words, the bonds of homosociality and homosexuality – prove to be the most reliable support systems. Monogamy, already discredited by the unequal burdens of chastity it has been shown to place on its subjects, is further brought into question by Monika and Sabine's implied continued carefree promiscuity. The film plays out to the final soundtrack of *It's so nice to have a man about the house*, providing the ironic backdrop for yet another literal and metaphorical kicking out of the heterosexual, patriarchal male.

Meanwhile Franziska, in *Das Superweib*, basks in the material comforts that her newfound literary acclaim have won her – albeit in the somewhat compromised setting of capitalist Hollywood. This compromise, ultimately integral to her success, is initially foregrounded by her ex-husband's bastardisation of her first novel to conform to the



demands of a male-orientated, commercial cinema industry. In spite of this, however, Franziska's transformation from demure and dependent wife and mother to feisty, autonomous career-woman, leaves us in no doubt as to the winners and losers of this particular metamorphosis scenario.

In contrast to the ideal romance, the final credits of *Abgeschminkt* do not roll to a *nurturing* and *enjoyable* invocation of consummated male/female togetherness but rather to an explicitly female directed address of female/female camaraderie and fulfilment. Again the bonds of homosociality are shown to be infinitely preferable to those of heterosexuality. In this respect, it is the internal challenge of homosociality and not the external fear of homosexuality that poses the biggest threat to the inadequacy of heterosexual norms. The goal of Chodorow's search for the mother has been achieved and made flesh. In the face of an obsolete parental generation, and abusive or feminised patriarchs, the best female friend represents the only suitable carer. Frenzy may have found a boyfriend, and in so doing overcome her writer's block, but it is a boyfriend whose absence renders him just as inadequate as every other man in *Abgeschminkt*: from Frenzy's sexist, leering boss who ultimately forces her artistic compromise, to Maischa's boring boyfriends and abusive lovers. As the final broken frame shot makes clear it is women who represent the true brokers of women's pleasure – just as it is women (Katja von Garnier and Katja Riemann among them) who stand to make a commercial killing out of this process of pleasure-brokering.

Despite the equally dubious nature of the commercial imperatives to which they work, Monika and Franziska are also concerned with the brokering of women's pleasure. Through their championing of female independence and exposure of patriarchal inadequacy, their radio shows and popular fiction target female audiences. Writing to and for their fellow women, these women would appear, at least notionally, to be engaging with Cixous' call for 'feminine writing', writing that 'will always exceed

the discourse governing the phallogentric system' (1989, 109). Perhaps in so doing, they can also 'begin to speak', and 'begin to point out some effects, some elements of unconscious drives, some relations of the feminine imaginary to the real, to writing' (1989, 109).

In the world of the New German Comedy women, men are merely the 'hartnäckige Verehrer, die stundenlang euer Band vollquatschen und euch penetrant eure kostbare Zeit stehlen' (Nina Kronjäger: *Abgeschminkt*). Addressing her female audience directly, Maischa continues, 'Frauen, habt ihr die Nase voll von Männern, die nur im Wege rumliegen, euch hindern, das zu tun, was ihr wirklich tun wolltet?'. Men, it would seem, represent little more than minor irritations that can sometimes be pleasurable but in the main must be negotiated around other more important occupations.

### Self-Reflexivity and Generic Subversion

The self-reflexive nature of *Abgeschminkt*'s final breaking frame address in which Frenzy and Maischa turn to camera and introduce themselves to their female audiences as brokers for women's pleasure is significant on several levels. As an explicit point of rupture or distancing it demonstrates the film's awareness of its role as a 'woman's film', thus paying lip-service, at least, to the feminist filmmaking tradition that lies behind it. In so doing, it exposes the narrative conventions of the romance genre to which it belongs and which it is in the process of subverting. It is in the context of the film's 'reflexive, deconstructive relation to what is recognised as the standard classic text' (Klinger 1995, 77) that the location of a potentially progressive textual politics becomes possible.



In its reconfiguration of the ideal romance's unproblematised representation of a reactionary model of heterosexual relations, this audience address could also be read on the level of a revisionist return to Judith Butler's phantasmatic 'we' construction of feminist politics. While the heterosexual romance remains the relationship of choice it has been relativised to such an extent that the independence, and creativity of the young, professional woman are compromised only marginally. The narrative logic of Frenzy's ultimate professional success leaves the audience in no doubt as to the answer to her final question, addressed to Maischa: 'Du meinst, Männer, die nicht da sind, machen kreativ, oder was?' (Katja Riemann: *Stadtgespräch*). This realisation is echoed by Pauline in *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*, as Georg's romantic overtures result in a farcical performance at a church recital in rural Baden-Württemberg. Recognising that her professional life, independence, and ultimately, individuality may be compromised by this man, she ignores his apologies and leaves him.

On the surface, at least, it would appear that *Abgeschminkt*'s political message is limited to a rather jocular exposé of patriarchal inadequacy, placed in opposition to a somewhat superficial exploration of female solidarity. However, this interpretation does not do due justice to the film's subversion of its own generic conventions. Shumway sees in the endings of all romantic comedies 'metaphors for sexual consummation' (1995, 392). Such an interpretation adds an extra, sexual level of signification to the positing of female/female relationships as the point of closure in both *Abgeschminkt* and *Stadtgespräch*. The problem with such a radical reading of the films from a feminist perspective, however, is that it ignores the norm of heterosexual relations, which all three ultimately reproduce.

This represents the fundamental contradiction upon which all of the films are built. The ideal romance's positing of the patriarchal male as the path to the 'symbolic fulfilment of a woman's desire to realise her most basic female self in relation to

another' (Radway 1987, 151) has been unambiguously rejected. It is not the ideal romance's 'imaginative transformation of masculinity to conform with female standards' (147) with which the films are concerned, but rather with the rejection of the masculine altogether. And yet, the implication with which all three of the films conclude is that our heroines will continue to pursue an aggressive, girl power heterosexual promiscuity, despite the process of demystification of the male/female romantic myth to which they have been party. However, this apparent contradiction can itself be politicised when we read it as a refusal of closure.

Shumway sees the ending of the traditional romantic comedy as 'an absolute point, an eternal moment in which all contradictions are resolved under the force of a force that allows no differences, no excess' (1995, 393). In contrast, these German romantic comedies fail completely as romances in that they cannot convincingly resolve their representation of female independence, solidarity and recognition of patriarchal inadequacy with the sexual norms their generic form historically dictates. Hitherto, I have adopted the interpretation of genre as a set of rules for the production of meaning which operate at the interface between cultural consumption and production. For successful communication to take place these rules must be enforced. In this respect, the comedies' display of difference from the environment of generic conventions in which they operate (Klinger 1995, 79) and their apparent resonance with their female audiences would appear to establish a claim to a certain generic progressivity and, thus, a counterpoint to the commonly perceived 'harmonising effects of genre' (Hake 2003, 180). Making explicit the inherent tensions between 'feminism as an emergent ideology and romance as a residual genre' (Radway 1987, 304) this notion of generic subversion remains central to any political, cultural studies reading of the New German Comedies.

This reflects the contemporary use of genre conventions, not 'as a blueprint for the production of a popular commodity, but as a historical form to be self-consciously



used as needed: transformed, parodied, played off against, and so on' (Shumway 1995, 395). In other words, even if we accept the historical mutability of the genre form recognised within film studies from Bazin onwards, and the dangers in ascribing 'progressivity to a structure which relies upon the disruption of historically received norms (Klinger 1995), these comedies still embody a clear reconfiguration of the relationship between film, filmmaker and audience. In *Abgeschminkt, Das Superweib* and *Stadtgespräch* romantic closure is resisted and thus the endings are never sufficient to contain the 'excess of meaning produced in the course of the film' (Klinger 1995, 83). They unambiguously reject the vicarious nurturing of the ideal romance while at the same time offering a tantalising glimpse of a future alternative object of desire. Merchants in the brokering of women's pleasure themselves, they yet make explicit the 'temporality of satisfaction' (Shumway 1995, 393) that the romantic consummation of the traditional romantic comedy is at such pains to conceal.

However, by its very definition the consummation of the romance must question the goal of its own narrative trajectory. In other words, a romantic fantasy that constructs itself around the attainment of an idealised object must, with the realisation of this object, cease to be romantic. Perhaps, it is in the avoidance of this death of desire that these New German Comedies are ultimately brokering pleasure to their female audiences. As failed romances, which reaffirm the female homosocial bond while questioning the 'postmodern cult of Eros' (Denzin 1991, viii) and its idealised conceptions of love and intimacy, these films resist the fixing of desire, thus resisting the consummation of the narrative for their female audiences. According to Gledhill, the narrative organisation of the classic mainstream cinematic text functions to hierarchise the 'different aesthetic and ideological discourses which intersect in the processes of the text, to produce a unifying, authoritative voice or viewpoint' (1995, 193). The woman-centred New German Comedies, however, resist the 'complete reading' which such

classic narrative organisation and closure extends to its audience, allowing the ‘ambiguities’ and ‘enigmatic false trails’ (193) generated by the processes of the text to remain unambiguously open.

For Frenzy, Monika, Franziska, Rhoda, Pauline and Doro the romantic fantasy is maintained by consciously playing the romance. With the exception of Pauline and Doro, all of these female protagonists acknowledge that emotional intensity can only be maintained by the avoidance of ‘love that has been besmirched by the mundanities of marriage and family’ (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 135). In view of this Doro and Pauline’s ultimate acceptance of marital union would appear problematic. Drawing on overtly reactionary bourgeois notions of motherhood and family, the narrative logic of both films would appear to suggest that for both pregnant women there remains little acceptable alternative – at least *socially* acceptable alternative – other than that of marriage. It is the realisation of this which could be seen as initiating Doro’s desperate pursuit of Axel. Through marriage she wins for herself (and her baby) a certain degree of social acceptance and security.

Pauline, on the other hand, rejects the involvement of both suitors, resolving instead to retain her independence and integrity through the occupation of the more socially ambiguous role of single mother and careerist. Articulating bourgeois society’s suspicion of such social status, and questioning the strength of the homosocial bonds which apparently bind the women in the other New German Comedies, her best-friend Uschi is categorical in her dismissal of Pauline’s decision to attempt to raise the children alone. Although, Uschi’s return to her side as figure of support and solidarity precedes Pauline’s marriage to Klaus, the narrative logic of the film would appear to support the tone of her original doubts. Ultimately, it is only subsequent to marital union and the financial security which this brings, that Pauline’s future happiness is assured. This would appear to tie in with Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik’s model of the romantic



comedy which allows for the treatment of conflicting tendencies in the desire of the woman, but only if they are 'made meaningful in regard to her eventual, and inevitable, *integration* within heterosexual monogamy' (1990, 139).

'And, yet, this reading of the endings of both films as politically reactionary is far from simple. In the case of Doro, Axel's continued promiscuity casts profound doubt on the ideal nature of the bourgeois construct of marriage. Indeed, the success of her marriage would appear to be entirely dependent on the subjugation of her own wants and needs to those of her husband. In this respect, the film comes uncomfortably close to exposing exactly that mundane domination of family and marriage that the ideal romance is at such pains to conceal. For Pauline, on the other hand, it would appear that marriage represents a true ideal of sexual equality and support. The inversion of traditional gender roles, which places Pauline in the public sphere and at the height of her professional success, and Klaus in the domestic role of carer and male figure of support, leaves the audience with no doubt that traditional gender inequalities have been effectively redressed.

However, the fantastical nature of Klaus' unexplained transformation from arrogant, promiscuous macho, to loving, supportive and domesticated carer, questions the narrative veracity of this gloriously optimistic ending. In this respect, the film's conclusion would appear to conform to Klinger's construction of the progressive genre in which the traditional narrative form is exaggerated to such an extent as to expose the irony, or excess of meaning, which must lie at the heart of its reinstatement of narrative equilibrium:

There is a veneer of optimism present that is not only unconvincing, but countered by a system of meaning produced stylistically, which imbues the conclusion with unmistakable irony (Klinger 1995, 83).

Whatever the processes involved, the ‘competencies’ articulated by Radway which ‘prepare certain women to recognize romances as relevant to their experience and as potential routes to pleasure’ (1987, 300) would appear to have undergone a radical reconfiguration. The question remains as to whether this degree of generic parody transcends the boundaries of Neale and Krutnik’s view of generic deviation, as ‘regularised variety’ integral to the continued functioning of the generic form. However, in view of film studies’ traditional reading of genre as a bridge and point of complicity between industry and audience (Hutchings 1995, 61), I would argue that the existence of generic subversion takes on a particular sociological significance. Clearly, genres transcend individual films. Equally, their rules supervise both the construction and reception of the films that they structure (Ryall 1975). In this respect, they allow a reading of film which takes into account film as industry product and film as popular medium (Hutchings 1995).

## **Genre and Identity**

The rules that govern genre, it would seem, are as significant to the construction of progressive female subjects within the New German Comedy film, as they are to the positioning of their female audiences. From its inception in the age of classic Hollywood cinema, the romantic comedy genre has represented a key site of cultural ‘negotiation between female desire and the places “offered” to women in a patriarchal society’ (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 133). Equally, it is a genre which has historically relied upon explicitly polarised notions of sexual difference. In this respect, the New



German Comedies are no exception. However, as Judith Butler points out, the establishment of gender hierarchies and sexual binaries is as integral a part of the discursive traditions which theorise the cultural construction of identity as it is to the generically bound cultural representations themselves. Commenting on the centrality of gender and sexuality to the epistemological inheritance of contemporary theories of identity politics, Butler formulates the following:

The rules that govern intelligible identity, i.e., that enable and restrict the intelligible assertion of an 'I', [rules that] are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. (1990, 145)

Just as contemporary identity politics has struggled, unsuccessfully, to escape the stranglehold of overdeterminatory binarisms of gender and sexuality, the generic preoccupation with sexual and cultural stereotyping – the literary and theatrical inheritance of both romantic and comic traditions – represents an equally intransigent barrier to contemporary articulations of the romantic comedy genre.

Yet, as we have seen, within the boundaries of generic convention there remains scope for divergence from the norms that the genre traditionally dictates. In terms of the progressive cinematic text, this represents a space for films which appear supportive of the ideology which condition their existence, while actually rupturing the veneer of their own premises. In other words, the text which appears to conform to the norms of its generic form exposes, nonetheless, the operative ideology behind its generic and narrative structures.

However, the key issue for Butler is not that these rules exist but rather the way in which they operate – namely, through repetition:

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not *a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules through the production of substantialising effects. [her emphasis] (Butler 1995, 145)

Signification, then, asserts itself through this compulsion to repeat, and agency, as a consequence of this fact, is located in the possibility of a variation of this repetition. Indeed, it is ‘only within the practice of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible’ (1995, 145). In other words, there is potential for the subversion of the myriad of discursive injunctions at play within any construction of identity. Potential for a subversion of identity is situated in the extent to which the ‘phantasmatic’, naturalised borders of this *true* identity – whether it be gender or sexuality – are shown to be false. These Butler refers to as ‘practices of parody’:

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalised gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were (1990, 146).

In their playful, if not parodic, engagement with key culturally and discursively defined constituents of female identity – namely, motherhood, heterosexuality, romantic longing, sexual desire, friendship, marriage and career – the New German Comedy films and their female protagonists engender a subversive laughter which represents their true locus of textual politics. These failed copies of romances would appear to represent a broader divergence from Klinger’s ‘environment of conventions’ than just mere denial of narrative consummation. It is this popular reformulation of the romantic comedy



genre that I would argue facilitates the socio-psychological extension of our original textual analysis.

# Conclusion

## The Failed Romance

Auf flachem Unterhaltungsniveau werden in vielen der Junggesellinnen-Farcen – auch hier gilt das Vorbild *Abgeschminkt* – die Nachwirkungen der Frauenbewegung verhandelt. ('Das Lachen' 1996, 222)

In an argument which brings us at the apparently subversive conclusion of the romance back to its more reactionary origins, Temby Caprio states that the nineties shift of emphasis from socially critical *Frauenfilm* to politically correct *Frauenkomödie* should be viewed with a certain degree of caution (1997, 385). Despite the apparently progressive nature of their centring of female protagonists, such as the archetypal strong, blond role model, Katja Riemann, the films' positioning of these new, anti-patriarchal *Powerfrauen* within a genre of (heterosexual) relationship comedies is to be treated with a certain amount of scepticism.

Firstly, it could be argued that the female characters portrayed in these films do more to reinforce patriarchal conceptions of feminine identity than to challenge them. This is in part due to the rebel-to-reactionary model of transformation that both Frenzy and Monika appear to appear to adhere to, a model which they share with the heroines of Radway's ideal romances. In this respect, the apparent threat which these autonomous women initially pose to their patriarchal counterparts is never as serious as it may at first seem. Apart from a certain 'superficial bolshiness', all of these women ultimately conform to specifically patriarchal concepts of feminine beauty and sex appeal. In other words, the reactionary traditionalism of their presentation as glamorous



sex objects, negates the radicalism of any potential feminist stance, and the sexual division of gender stereotypes is reproduced. Their essential *Girl Power* would appear to rely quite heavily on their appearance and, in this respect, conform to Denzin's definition of postmodern culture as a 'masculinised culture of Eros, love, desire, femininity, youth, and beauty' (1991, 149). In addition, although they purport to portray independent women, the very structure of all three films gives the lie to this claim. Without exception the plots of these films all revolve around women who are facing a crisis due to the *lack* of men in their lives. In this respect, Neale & Krutniks' definition of the romantic comedy as concerned with the desires of the heroine only insofar as they relate to heterosexual union would appear to apply (1990).

### **Female Solidarity and Happy Endings**

The first major discrepancy between the romantic narratives of the German comedies and those of Radway's popular fiction lies in the films' exploration of an exclusively female camaraderie. This theme of female homosociality not only relativises the importance of the heterosexual relationship and marriage as the source of, or path to, female individuation and fulfilment, but also, in the process, highlights the general inability of the traditional, heterosexual patriarchal male to provide the emotional care and support that the career woman of the nineties both requires and demands. In this respect, these comedies would appear to come closer to Neale and Krutnik's model of the romantic melodrama than that of the comedy, in that they 'frequently allow a siphoning of desire not just from marriage but from the restrictions of romance itself, opening onto a narcissistic economy of desire' (1990, 145).

While classic narrative closure through heterosexual consummation is resisted,

pleasure, a mediated construct organised largely ‘to flatter the patriarchal ego and its Unconscious’ (Gledhill 1995, 194), also undergoes a radical reconfiguration. The ‘demise of the affirmative culture’ which Thomas Elsaesser saw as such an integral part of the fifties melodramas is equally apparent here, as the ironic treatment of marriage and men disturbs ‘an unproblematic transmission of affirmative ideology’ (Klinger 1995, 81).

Significantly, all of these films retain a structural reliance on happy ending. Karl Prümm sees this as clear indication of the departure of the New German Comedies from radical feminist film of the 1970s:

Offen artikulieren sie [die Komödien] ihre Hoffnungen auf die große Liebe, die bürgerliche Sekurität, auf die Begegnung mit dem Prinzen... (1996, 123)

As Gledhill makes clear, this reliance is integral to the spectator’s ultimate interpellation into a position ‘constructed outside the processes of contradiction, difference and meaning production’, itself essential to their participation in the ‘pleasures and meaning of the text’ (Gledhill 1995, 193-4). However, despite this, the ideal romance’s utopia of patriarchal promise is exposed for the fantasy it is – *abgeschminkt* in its entirety. ‘Der Prinz, der ab und zu auf seinem Schimmel vorbei galoppiert’ (Katja Riemann: *Abgeschminkt*) is unceremonially unhorsed and unmasked. As Monika puts it in *Stadtgespräch*, ‘Romantische Bootstour, Liebe, Mondschein ist einfach gelaufen’ (Katja Riemann: *Stadtgespräch*). In the New German Comedy world of unstable gender roles and even more unstable relationships, the romance reader’s ‘Sehnsucht nach klarer Orientierung, nach traditionellen Mustern, nach Eindeutigkeit’ (Prümm 1996, 124) would appear to remain singularly unfulfilled.



## Palliative Pleasures

According to Radway the ideal romance maintains a clear distance between women's ordinary lives and their romantic fantasies (Radway 1987, 301). The new woman-centred German comedies explicitly challenge this discrepancy. However, despite this they are not without their own palliative representations. In all three films the strength of the central female protagonists is supported largely by virtue of their professional and creative aptitude, as well as the associated financial independence which their career status confers upon them.

Undoubtedly, career concerns represent an ever-increasing reality for a large proportion of the middle-class women. Professional success brings with it the associated reward of financial self-sufficiency. However, the fear that the price of commitment to a career could be the absence of romantic involvement, as embodied in the single, thirty-something working girls, Frenzy and Monika, is clearly an issue of particular contemporary pertinence. For Franziska career represents the path out of her unfulfilling and exploitative positioning as wife and mother, on the road to ultimate autonomy and self-realisation. A conflicting interpretation, however, could read her separation from her family and ultimately single status as a reactionary warning to women as to the cost of this fantasy of strength, independence and professional success.

Equally, the projection of images of women as valued and valuable members of the workforce could tie in with a neo-liberal discourse concerned only with the perpetuation of economic growth. According to Denzin, in the conservative, post-liberal climate of the 80s and 90s, the new ideal subject – of political and, concomitantly, economic discourse – personifies the sacred values of 'religion, hard work, health and self-reliance' (1991, 149), and with the exception of religion – an apparently obsolete value in the secular environment of modern-day Germany – these values would appear

to be embodied by our New German Comedy women. Indeed, the commercial success of these films could be read as attesting to the 'broadly based popular and emotional appeal' of the 'new conservative formations' described by Hall and Grossberg as an increasingly dominant political paradigm within late-capitalist society (1992). However, as Halle points out, economic anxieties are ultimately 'displaced to low-level background concerns and do not provide the structure of the narrative' (2000, 7).

### ***Girl Power Sexualities and a New Morality***

The films' exploration of a distinctly non-submissive female sexuality reflects a wider contemporary societal obsession with the promotion of strong and sexy cultural icons for female identification – icons which positively extol the merits of a new aggressive and promiscuous female sexuality. Clearly, the homosocial heterosexualities of these mainstream New German Comedy women operate within a gender debate and discourse far removed from the explicitly politicised (bi)sexualities of the films of feminist filmmaker Monika Treut. However, as in Treut's more radical investigation of female sexuality *Die Jungfrau Maschine* (1988), female promiscuity is cited as an antidote to the myth of romantic love, which is viewed as a mechanism designed to prevent women from pursuing their own sexual pleasure<sup>1</sup>. This 'unleashed female sexuality' which is 'capable of satisfying itself outside the structures of patriarchal dominance that are still perpetuated most effectively through marriage' (Radway 1987, 74) is representative of a new morality of female promiscuity which is explicitly rejected by the readers of Radway's ideal romances as too threatening to the monogamous, heterosexual relationship structures in which they find themselves implicated.

In the new woman-centred German comedies, which brave the incorporation of



an explicit sexuality into the ideology of love, sex is never taken to represent a point of romantic climax or mystical, magical union. Instead, it is marginalised to merely another site of traditional male control, and one that requires aggressive occupation by the new, self-determining woman of nineties. In this respect, these films can be seen as in direct opposition to 'the romance's endless rediscovery of the virtues of a passive female sexuality' (Radway 1987, 303) and consciously contributing to a reclamation of an active heterosexual desire for women.

This would appear significantly at odds with Neale and Krutnik's interpretation of the revival of the 'comedy of sexes' as symptomatic of a need to re-invoke the concept of the couple 'as a safeguard not merely against the divisions of modern life but also against the post-AIDS danger of "illicit" sexuality (that which is outside the "norm" of heterosexual monogamy)' and as representative of a 'desire to return, nostalgically to pre-1950s conceptions of romance [...]' (1990, 172). Indeed, in this respect, these particular woman-centred comedies would appear to come closer to Klinger's formulation of gender representation within the progressive genre, representations explicitly concerned with the investigation of 'the threat and the enigma of female sexuality in all of its psychoanalytic complexity' (1995, 84). The overt promiscuity of these romantic heroines, who desire and attain wealth and independence, may mean that they transgress the traditional conservative boundaries of the romantic comedy genre. However, they also categorically resist the negative connotations of film noir's *femmes fatales*.

### **Middle-class Dreams of Escape**

According to Janice Radway, 'there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and

readers bring to texts and media messages in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location' (1987, 298). With regard to our woman-centred German comedies it would appear that concerns surrounding career, motherhood and sexuality represent truly enjoyable themes of identification for the films' female audiences. In other words, class reassurance is of paramount importance, visually assured by a backdrop of contemporary bourgeois markers, against which our middle-class professionals play out their fears and aspirations. From the inimitable 'Altbauwohnungen' to convertible VWs, the 'konformistisch legeren Klamotten der Nonkonformisten', to dinner parties, art exhibition soirées, and the fetishised muscle-tone of the leisured classes – both films and characters are unquestionably 'fest im westdeutschen Mittelstand verankert' ('Das Lachen' 1996, 222).

In this respect, the politics of the sign – as embodied in the Adornian 'externals'<sup>2</sup> – takes on a particular significance. While the hegemonic imperative of the films' interpellative techniques<sup>3</sup> dictates an articulatory stance which proclaims the universality of its themes of love and romantic longing, its socio-economic focus speaks only of class exclusivity. Creative jobs assure middle-class audiences of their individuality, while relationship dramas with happy ends assure them of romantic involvement, if not fulfilment. 'Auch wir werden's mit der Liebe und dem Leben schon packen' ('Das Lachen' 1996, 223). As recognised by Shumway, there is no room for the portrayal of any 'genuine sites of poverty or oppression, or a utopian social vision' (1995, 399) within the fashionable bohemia which represents the new middle-class dream of mobility and escape. The generic elevation of sexuality and gender above other discourses, and the associated preoccupation with the formation of subjectivity through the bonded sexual relationship, would appear to function to obscure and subordinate all other voices – such as of race, class and alternative socio-economic



position. And yet, while this generically typical social exclusivity must be kept in mind, it does not negate the useful analysis of sexual politics that the films provide.

## **Resistance and Conformity**

Interestingly, Radway does not choose to interpret the insistence of the Smithton women on an unchanging reactionary core to the ideal romance as necessarily against the interests of women. The ideal romance may indeed fall far short of an incitement to female revolt but neither does it represent a 'strictly conservative refusal to acknowledge any change' (1987, 75). As we have seen there are elements within these mainstream representations of female identity both 'progressive and conservative, challenging and legitimating' (Davidson 1997, 309). In this respect, Janice Radway's measured analysis of the progressive potential of women's romantic fiction is particularly apt:

It is rather a cognitive exploration of the possibility of adopting and managing some attitude changes about feminine sexuality by making room for them within traditional institutions and structures that they understand to be protective of a woman's interests. (1987, 75)

This argument in favour of progressive social change working from within the system is echoed by John Fiske:

It is arguable that the needs of the people are better met by progressive social change originating in evasive or interior resistance, moving to action at the

micropolitical level and from there to the more organised assaults on the system itself, than by radical or revolutionary change. (1995, 20)

Perhaps this interpretation of the ideal romances as an 'exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women' (Radway 1987, 75) could perhaps represent a more positive and useful starting point from which to approach these mainstream, woman-centred entertainment films, and the ideological implications of their resonance with their female audiences. In their simultaneous reification and subversion of reactionary models of male/female relations, these films would appear to conform to Radway's political interpretation of romance reading. Radway envisages the romantic narrative as the 'ritual retelling of the psychic process by which traditional heterosexuality [...] constructed for women' while also representing 'a protest against the fundamental inability of heterosexuality to satisfy the very desires with which it engendered women' (1987, 303). In essence, a 'rewriting of the romance in an effort to articulate its founding fantasy to a more relevant politics' (1987, 306) or as Hake argues, 'the restoration of traditional femininity and masculinity, but in more enlightened terms' (2002, 183).

Arguably this shift of feminist interpretation away from a purely ideological reading of the texts, which allows for the articulation of meaning beyond the boundaries of the progressive/reactionary dichotomy, represents a conscious effort on the part of the cultural critic to avoid the premature foreclosing on critical and textual negotiation warned against by Gledhill. While retaining interest in specifically gendered readings of narrative development and character representation, the critic, in this case, must attempt to 'open up the negotiations of the text in order to animate the contradictions in play' (1995, 200). As a result, the textual negotiations provided can be of relevance both to



the continuing project of feminism and the investigation of pleasure as fundamental to generic construction.

The ideological messages with which these two comparable genres leave us, however, could not be more disparate. The ideal romance operates by supplying its readers with reassurance that the 'minor acts of violence' which they daily suffer at the hands of their men are fundamentally the result of 'misunderstandings or of jealousy born of "true love"' (Radway 1987, 75). In so doing it provides 'coping strategies' for an existing system of unequal sexual relations, thus avoiding the need for any 'traumatic upheaval' (75). Our woman-centred romantic comedies also position women within this all too familiar context of relationship drama. Equally, they exist firmly within the context of a commercial mainstream. As we have seen commercial concerns regarding the growth of an increasingly dominant consumer group have clearly influenced choices of thematic material and styles of representation designed to appeal to female audiences. Indeed, Frenzy, Monika and Franziskas' ultimate compromise of their artistic integrity to satisfy patriarchal bosses could be taken as emblematic of the films' wider repackaging of feminist discourse for a mass audience of the post-emancipation nineties. Clearly, capitalism, as an ideology, cannot ignore the potential of such groups, 'emerging into new public self-identity' (Gledhill 1995, 199), as new and fertile markets.

As Sabine Hake points out, this compromise between artistic and commercial interests could be taken as of much broader relevance to the pragmatic, marketing-oriented output of the new young producers and directors of the 1990s, who have targeted a domestic audience's desire for both less complicated and more optimistic narratives (2002, 180). Consequently, the social, economic and cultural hegemonies of bourgeois society function to co-opt and commodify such marginal identities, thus mediating their oppositional strengths and bringing them firmly into the realm of

mainstream cultural expression. Accordingly, in the case of the woman-centred New German Comedies, the images and ideas circulating within the women's movement are appropriated to supply a 'necessary aura of novelty and contemporaneity' (1995, 199). The problem with such an overtly deterministic view of culture's ideological function, however, lies in its vastly over-weighted emphasis on theories of production – an emphasis which denies the possibility of negotiation at the level of institution, text and audience.

As this cultural studies analysis of the woman-centred New German Comedies has shown us 'the figure of the woman, the look of the camera, the gestures and signs of human interaction' can never be wholly given over to a particular ideology, 'unconscious or otherwise' (1995, 199). In the case of our New German Comedy protagonists the symbol of woman is offered as a figure 'caught in the contradictory demands of independence, professional practice, of female community, of heterosexual intimacy and, later, dependence' (Gledhill, 1995, 206). Consequently, it is impossible to say that the 'image is claimed either for patriarchy or for feminism' (Gledhill 1995, 206). In all of these respects, the woman-centred comedies offer a profound insight into the complex play of power relations that operates within all mainstream representations of historically marginalised social groupings and questions the simplistic popular consensus readings of popular German cinema. The ambiguity and contradiction inherent in these mainstream explorations of female identity is replicated in the equally ambiguous representation of national and racial identity in the early *Wende* comedies of Part III and the Turkish-German gangster dramas of Part IV. However, as we extend this reading of race, gender and nation within contemporary German cinema, it shall become clear that progressive and conservative forces operate in all cinematic representations of identities historically excluded from the normalising hegemonies of a white, western, patriarchal society – whether mainstream or otherwise. It has been the



project of contemporary cultural studies to elucidate this conflictual nature of culture. As Halle argues, ‘the pleasure of such films draws from both disruption and fixity’ (2000, 16). Cultural exchange, therefore, must be viewed as a process of constant negotiation. In the same way cultural signs – based as they may be on markers of gender, class, ethnicity or, political and ideological allegiance – are ultimately sites of struggle.

*Abgeschminkt*, *Stadtgespräch*, *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*, *Workaholic* and *Das Superweib* all clearly embody elements of this struggle between the forces of ‘incorporation and resistance’ (Fiske 1996, 4), negotiation and play (Gledhill 1995). Clearly, the films embody a ‘strange mixture of liberal, progressive, and conservative attitudes’ (Hake 2002, 183). Through their explorations of the themes of patriarchal inadequacy and female homosociality the films toy with the generic conventions of the romantic comedy, although arguably, rarely managing to do more than inject the questions they raise as to the nature of female sexuality and self-determination with a certain ambiguity. In this respect, they truly offer food for reflection upon the ‘limits of political film-making in the nineties’ (Caprio 1997, 385).

However, in the process these failed romances also negotiate a mainstream imaginary space in which a male-centred female reality is problematised and a female-centred alternative is explored. It would be difficult, indeed, to argue that Claire Johnston’s vision of a cinema which combines both ‘the notion of film as political tool and as entertainment’ has been realised in these new German comedies. And yet, in their subversion of the romance and their situation within the context of a wider cultural preoccupation with the foregrounding of strong, female role-models, these mainstream explorations of a specifically female desire could be seen as contributing to alternative ways of seeing that ‘will affirm woman somewhere other than in silence’ (Cixous 1989, 111).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Monika Treut's interrogation of female sexuality and the inadequacy of gendered and sexual binaries see Gemünden 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno's externals arise in his theory of film and photography and could be described as the objects of our everyday reality. In other words, the objects, possessions and settings utilised by film to replicate the physical backdrop of our everyday lives. In this way, we are presented with a world which conforms in so many aspects to our own perception of reality that we accept it as such and we are confirmed in our own perception of reality. According to Adorno this represents the way in which film moulds and edits cinematic reality to serve the various ideologies, clichés and slogans which the culture industry wishes to propagate.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to Althusser's notion of the processes through which the human subject is constructed by and in the interests of ideology. While useful as an entry point into the discussion of the power relationships articulated through social, cultural and political discourse, it has been widely criticised for its overly determinatory equation of subjectification and subjection, and the circularity of its argument, assuming a subject that while apparently formed by ideology can still recognise its own interpellation.



**---Part III---**

***Nation and History***

***Vergangenheit bewältigt?***

**- The Cinematic Treatment of  
the *Wende* and East German  
Past**

## *Introduction*

The woman-centred *Beziehungskomödien* enjoyed a particular period of popular and commercial dominance in the mid-1990s. Extending beyond the parameters and limitations of this genre-based, classical mainstream cinema, other filmmakers had begun working to investigate and reposition the stories and histories of the now integrated *neue Bundesländer* within a widened, and subsequently reanimated, national context. The radical socio-political transformations that accompanied East Germany's collapse and ultimate reunification with the West could not help but politicise the broader arena of public discourse. With voices from East and West competing for recognition and ontological dominance, cultural expression and representational practice took on an increasingly politicised aspect. The subsequent integration – or sublimation – of East German social and political institutions into the western economic and political status quo, lent an added layer of significance to culture's positioning as a major site of ideological struggle. In this respect, my study takes into account those academic and media discourses relating to the application of a metaphor of colonisation to the integration of East Germany into the widened, arguably *West* German, national whole (Rosenberg 1992; Schulz & Hansen 1992; Knoblen 2000).

Typically, literary and journalistic explorations of East Germany, past and present, encompassed the full range of generic possibilities, ranging from political histories to representative case study biographies, and from harshly satirical *Alltagsgeschichten* to humorous and entertaining fictional autobiographies. Filmic explorations of the unification and the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic were, at least initially, however, limited to documentary accounts commissioned in the immediate aftermath of the *Wende*.

As Hans-Günther Pflaum points out, the fall of the Wall represented a reality



much more fantastic than any fiction, a fact noted by many of the feature film directors to attempt a retrospective treatment of the *Wende* (1994). As in Manfred Stelzer's *Grüß Gott, Genosse* (1992) these filmmakers often seemed to prefer the distance of a *Mauerschau* narration of events, frequently staging their characters watching the events of November 9th on television or interspersing the action with snapshots of documentary footage. Owing to their unique position many of these poignant fleeting moments were captured on film by DEFA<sup>1</sup> directors.

Such retrospective projects as Jürgen Böttcher's *Die Mauer* (1989/90) and Heike Misselwitz's *Sperrmüll* (1989/90) represent key texts in the portrayal of a national identity, with its own socially constructed ways of seeing and remembering. In the context of the discourses of colonisation which have surrounded East Germany's incorporation into the reunified national whole (Rosenberg 1992a), such films could also be read as caught within a liminal phase of struggle with a new and increasingly powerful social and cultural paradigm. However, as the old institutions disappeared overnight the complex system of studios and administrative centres which comprised *DEFA* made it increasingly difficult for the *Treuhandanstalt* and subsequent *Bundesanstalt für vereinigungsbedingte Sonderaufgaben* to finance and co-ordinate its continued operation.

In the sphere of feature film production, opportunities for East German directors in the already harshly competitive West German film market have been equally limited, especially in the first half of the 1990s (Ritzenhoff 1997). As Barton Byg points out, the absolute economic dominance of the imported Hollywood product, renders a domestic German film industry in the East or the West (1995) commercially unviable. Consequently, 'the continued existence of any film institutions bearing traces of a GDR identity is largely dependent on political decisions and government subsidy' (1995, 158). In this context, 'it is clear that artists explicitly identified with the GDR will have

to struggle for support' (158). Despite this, however, and in spite of an initial lack of serious engagement, cinematic treatments of the *Wende*, and in particular of the GDR past, originating in both the new and the old *Bundesländer*, have become increasingly common.

Pursuing my cultural studies analysis of contemporary German cinema, I intend to move beyond the boundaries of gender studies and the potential re-imagining of women's social identification post-feminism, towards a reading of the place of nation within the work of both East and West German filmmakers in the 1990s. While precedence shall be given to films originating in the *neue Bundesländer*, this section sets out to explore the varied cinematic representations of eastern Germany – past and present – and their potential implication in the redefining of a post-reunification national, social imaginary. This thematic preoccupation with discourses of the nation and the pursuit of the representation of national identities within contemporary German cinema dictates the extension of our film analysis beyond the boundaries of mainstream cinematic production to a much more diverse array of generic and stylistic forms and registers. However, the focus remains on the incidences of critical and, potentially, politicised engagement with the marginal social identities that the films represent, beyond the reactionary and conservative voices of popular consensus.

Thus from the stereotypical comic protagonists of the mainstream *Wende* comedies, and their apparently orientalisating visions of West and East (*Go, Trabi, Go; Grüß Gott, Genosse*), we move on to former New German Cinema director, Margarethe von Trotta's historical explorations of the East and West separation (*Das Versprechen*). While von Trotta's film adheres in almost every respect to the norms of a classical dominant cinema – pursuing a linear narrative trajectory through a stereotypically *groß Geschichte* rendering of East German history, populated by established West and East German stars, and constructed using invisible editing techniques and an often



melodramatic non-diegetic soundtrack – it also opens up the debate on the importance of representations of East German history to the (re)formation of a post-reunification German national identity. Leander Hausmann's *ostalgic*<sup>2</sup> *Sonnenallee* adds to this debate around the representation of East German past within a mainstream cinematic context but also raises some interesting questions as to the right to ownership of this representation by East, and not West, German filmmakers. In the terminology of contemporary identity politics this is a debate about the nature of difference and who, in the sphere of cultural production, controls its representation<sup>3</sup>. Hausmann's film is also significant in its portrayal of the unspectacular normality of life in the East.

Frank Beyer's *Nikolaikirche* and Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* extend this debate around the different ideological imperatives of eastern and western filmmakers in representing the socialist past, retaining a highly politicised vision of the 'other Germany' and its relationship to the West. The work of Andreas Kleinert signals a shift in style and register outwith the boundaries of mainstream cinema's straightforward linear narrative teleologies into a realm of deeply allegorical and troubling psychological realism that moves for the first time since the comedies beyond the fall of the Wall into the uncomfortable world of post-reunification Germany (*Verlorene Landschaft; Wege in die Nacht*).

It shall be argued in Part III that these classical and non-classical cinematic texts, with their historical and contemporaneous narratives, may well be implicated in the reinscription of an East German imaginary within the national consciousness and thus an unsettling of received notions of national identity. As has already been discussed in Chapter 2, such a study clearly necessitates the incorporation of a variety of interdisciplinary discourses – discourses surrounding nationhood and film, cultural stereotypes and comedy, and history and nostalgia. In this respect, my film analysis in this section shall draw of necessity on a range of disciplines, from anthropology and

film studies, to historiography and postcolonialism. However, throughout my investigation of this generically and stylistically diverse area of German film production, I shall maintain my focus on the cinematic representation of identity and the culturally and politically mediated construction of identity through difference. One such area in which difference has played a particularly emotive and often orientalising role, and which the reunification of Germany has brought back to the political fore, has been the debate around the construction of national and nationalist identities.

### Looking for the Postnationalist Moment

It is clear that the *Nationalstolz* debate in Germany is a long way from losing its political sensitivity. In the wake of German *Umweltminister* Jürgen Trittin's castigation of CDU-General Secretary Laurenz Meyer as a skinhead for saying 'ich bin stolz, Deutscher zu sein', and in the light of the fervent media debate instigated by the recent stationing of German troops in Macedonia, this political sensitivity has been strikingly reaffirmed. Gerhard Schröder's almost painfully politic response to the question of his own feelings of national pride is equally symptomatic of western liberal discourse's struggle with the heritage of the European nation state:

'Ich bin stolz auf die Leistungen der Menschen und auf die demokratische Kultur stolz. Und in diesem Sinne bin ich ein deutscher Patriot, der stolz ist auf sein Land.' (Joffe 2001, 1)

The extent and complexity of this public debate testifies not only to the



particularly public implication of Germany, past and present, in the discursive struggle to define and align on the issue of national identity, but also its contemporary relevance both within and outside of European borders. Within the European Union this debate revolves primarily around political and economic issues of integration and autonomy, control and dominance. As countries such as Britain struggle to combat or – depending on political allegiance – support isolationist tendencies, Germany sets out to publicly reconcile its communitarian and egalitarian ideals with its unquestionable economic dominance. Meanwhile countries on the southern and eastern fringes of the existing fifteen member states, such as Turkey and Poland, are petitioning for entry. With the relatively recent collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Block, nations which once appeared unshakeably unified have had to deal with the increasing vociferous claims of sub-nationalities, desperate to assert their rights to nationhood and an often violent nationalism.

In the face of the consistently combative history of the nation-state it is perhaps surprising that it has proved such an enduring and influential feature of the modern world. But this is undoubtedly the case. According to Benedict Anderson's almost twenty-year-old claim espoused in *Imagined Communities*, 'the 'end of the era of nationalism,' so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight' (1983, 3). As the current political debate in Germany clearly exemplifies, 'nationness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (1983, 3). However, despite its contemporary currency the terms that surround the theoretical debate – primarily, 'nation', 'nationality' and 'nationalism' – are notoriously difficult to define. Recognising this, Anderson goes on to berate the lack of 'plausible theory' on the subject, evoking a state of affairs that disciplines as diverse as cultural studies, social anthropology, film studies and Marxist historiography have been struggling to rectify.

## Nationhood and Film

Anderson's basic premise is that feelings of nationhood – dating back to the late eighteenth Century – have historically been disseminated through cultural artefacts. This investigation of the representation of nationhood in aesthetic culture, the point 'where the vagaries of national culture intersect with the complexities of art' (Berman 1993, vii), has constituted the central focus of cultural studies' project to examine the construction of national identities in late capitalist society. Running counter to the naturalising myths of nationalist discourse, this understanding of nation states as culturally and politically mediated entities represents the starting point for film studies' ideological analysis of the relationship between cinema and nation. Broadly speaking this particular avenue of film studies research has concerned itself with the bilateral interrogation of the construction of national cinemas and the representation of nationalist discourse within film.

The post-*Wende* cinema, engaging as it does with the representation of East German past and post-reunification present, offers an interesting perspective from which to reflect upon the development of national cinema theory. Fighting criticism from the European cultural establishment, early filmmakers and film theorists were keen to emphasise the high cultural and creative possibilities of film. These early attitudes gradually fed into broader film studies' debates around the representative potential of small and exclusive canons of critically acclaimed cinematic texts. These often internationally acclaimed texts were increasingly heralded by Anglo-American film studies' practitioners as embodying the unique characteristics of a national cultural style. This critical focus on the high cultural filmic traditions of Europe's cinemas placed popular European cinema in an increasingly marginalized position. As Dimitris Eleftheriotis points out, the post-World War I dominance of Hollywood cinema and the



associated development of such film critical binaries as Europe/Hollywood, art film/popular cinema led to a situation where popular European cinema was looked upon as a cheap imitation of its American cousin. National European cinemas could only be sought after and defined in the singularity and anti-classical traditions of the European art film.

From the late 1970s onwards, however, this largely Anglo-American school of film theory faced challenges from feminist, post-structuralist and post-colonialist cultural critics cognizant of the marginal social groupings and mainstream cultural texts disregarded by such an exclusive and excluding cultural tradition. This diverse array of anti-essentialist voices and interest groups questioned this tradition's simplistic and politically dubious belief in the unified and politically and culturally definable nature of nations, nationhood and, by extension, national cinemas.

In the same way that the reunification has challenged the supposedly fixed and unified structure of Germany's social, political and cultural borders, the post-*Wende* cinema poses questions of the constructed nature of the 'national' as articulated in the concept of a German national cinema. By virtue of its very existence, the cinema of the post-reunification period must point to the culturally and politically contingent nature of earlier constructions of national and cultural identity. As previously stated, this section of the study is concerned with the cinematic representation of the East, past and present, and the way that it feeds into contemporary debates around and attitudes towards the reunification. The most striking point of commonality within and amongst the films studied within this section is the underlying ambivalence which would appear to be being articulated towards the realities of post-reunification present. It is this primarily eastern ambivalence towards the reunification that poses the most difficult questions vis-à-vis the possibilities of a harmonious and unified national future and, indeed, the question of the national altogether.

In this respect, it is hardly surprising that the figures that populate the post-*Wende* cinema are typically defined by their cultural, political and economic marginalization. This peripheral social positioning mirrors the marginal viewpoints of the New German Comedy women of Part II and the Turkish-German males of Part IV. All three of these marginalized communities represent a cultural and social challenge to the critical canons of German film history. This challenge is articulated primarily by the popular cultural form that most (if not all) of the texts treated within this study embody. In another respect, these communities all represent social groupings antagonistic to the traditions of white, western patriarchal filmmaking and criticism which have been so instrumental in the construction of these canons in the first place. The articulation and exploration of cultural difference undertaken by all of the films featured in this thesis question fundamentally the supposed unity of the nation which initially facilitated the construction of discursive national cinemas. It has always, according to Eleftheriotis, been 'politically valuable to assert difference in order to challenge the imaginary (and oppressive) unity of national culture' (2001, 52) and this represents a primary objective of this study.

In a critique of his own seminal work on the nature and construction of national cinemas, Andrew Higson reiterates this stance, pointing to the dangers of viewing national cinemas as seamless totalities founded upon an assumption of national identity and tradition as 'fully formed and fixed in place' (2000, 65). However, this is not to deny the role of film and culture in general in shaping public discourse and promoting collective ideologies. According to Higson, it is 'public debate that gives the nation its meaning, and media systems with a particular geographical reach which give it shape' (2000, 64). It would be easy to oversimplify and overestimate the political role of film in the construction and, in the context of the post-*Wende* cinema, possible deconstruction of national identities. However, while recognising the need to avoid



drawing simplistic correlations between films and a people's ideological understanding of their national identity, it is still the reading of films as a potential 'loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage and history' (MacKenzie 2000, 4) which I intend to employ in my analysis of nationhood and post-*Wende* German cinema. Before pursuing this investigation of 'nation as represented in film', it is perhaps necessary to clarify our notion of 'nationalist' discourse.

Highlighting the ideological implications conferred upon the notion of 'nationalism' by two centuries of national conflict, and more specifically the role of Germany in the First and Second World Wars, *Zeit* columnist Johannes Joffe expresses a German public impatience with the incessant reinvocation of national pride solely in conjunction with Nazi crimes: 'Unehrlich ist aber auch, wer aus "Nation" gleich "Nationalismus" macht und "Patriotismus" als "nationale Arroganz" denunziert. Wenn denn ein Deutscher stolz auf diese Bundesrepublik sein will, muss er nicht in der braunen Brühe fischen – nicht im Geraune über Volk und Vaterland' (2001, 1). While it is imperative to remain sensitive to the political interpretation of 'nationalism', the implication I am primarily concerned with in my analysis of the representation of nationhood in contemporary German cinema is the sociological classification of nationalism. In other words, nationalism 'as if it belonged with 'kinship' and 'religion', rather than with 'liberalism' and 'fascism'' (Anderson 1989, 5).

This desire, expressed by Joffe, to be finally done with the past and allow for the possibility of new and positive constructions of national identity has a particular contemporary pertinence in the wake of Germany's reunification. As the work of such social anthropologists as Victor Turner (1995) and Sharon Macdonald (1997, 1) has demonstrated, it is primarily at times of social and political change that questions of identity come to the fore. As the *Wende* period of radical social and political change passes and the cultural sphere has time and space to adjust, there has been an increasing

willingness apparent in the public sphere to examine the processes, past and present, eastern and western, responsible for the current social, political and economic constellation of the two once divided Germanys. This is ultimately a debate about the nature of difference and who, in the sphere of cultural production, controls its representation. In the context of the semantic transition of East German rhetoric from *wir sind das Volk* to *wir sind ein Volk* in the final days leading up to the fall of the Wall, it is clear that in the newly unified Germany the construction of difference as national difference is of central social and political importance.

### **Post-Wende Cinema and the GDR Past**

As we can see, the production of films dealing with the GDR past and East German present has become increasingly common in the 1990s. This normalisation of the filmic depiction of the East has been marked by a relegation of the eastern problematic from narrative subject to filmic background, as exemplified in films such as Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* (2000), Andreas Dresen's *Die Polizistin* (2000), and Janis Jopp's *Vergiß Amerika* (2000). However, parallel to this transition a shift of focus has taken place with regard to the notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. While the treatment of the Nazi past still remains of paramount interest in international reception of the German film treatments of history (Davidson, 1997), and indeed, of German cinema in general (Ginsberg and Thompson, 1996), there appears to be a contemporary willingness within Germany – as demonstrated by filmmakers, critics and audiences alike – to transpose the problematics of national history eastwards. In this respect, any exploration of the reinscription of an East German imaginary within the national consciousness – which the post-Wende films could be seen as representing –



must take into account the potential assimilation of social concerns regarding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* with the *Aufarbeitung* of East German past.

The dominance of filmic treatments of GDR past within the *Wende* film genre is undoubtedly deeply implicated in the process of reintegration of the two Germanys into a single and ideologically unified state. As Marcia Landy points out in her study of the historical film, 'versions of history thus play a powerful role in determining how individuals and groups inherit and understand their social and cultural milieu' (2001, 1). However, as Davidson demonstrates the therapeutic potential of this 'working through of the past' is not without ideological implications:

The annexation and obliteration of the GDR brings with it a need for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in its own right, which, while absolutely necessary in some respects, also acts as a *de facto* legitimisation of West Germany's development. [his emphasis] (1997, 318)

This reference to the potential ideological implications of competing histories is further elucidated by Higson in his reading of film and nationalist myth making:

The process of nationalist myth making is not simply an insidious (or celebratory) work of ideological production, but also at the same time a means of setting one body of images and values against another, which will very often threaten to overwhelm the first. (Higson 1989, 37)

Landy pursues this equation of nation building and cinematic representation in the context of historiographic procedures:

Historicising has played a key role in consolidating notions of national,

gendered, ethnic and racial identities, presenting deterministic and essentialist conceptions of time and human action. (2001, 2)

However, as Bhabha points out the complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation' and make them the immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives tend invariably towards the 'disjunctive' and 'analogous' rather than the concrete and unifying (1990). This is the ambivalent terrain of the nation-space that Higson, Bhabha and Anderson all acknowledge in their attempts to define its discursive boundaries.

Hitherto, academic and journalistic debates surrounding these films have tended to revolve around notions of narrative verisimilitude, the *Ostalgie* debate and the ideological imperatives behind the varying representations of the 'other' Germany. In this section I shall assess the extent to which contemporary German cinema engages with the cultural dynamic which exists between the two halves of Germany, and the processes of cultural legitimisation that can be seen in the films' portrayals of their respective histories.

The work of Andrew Higson, Robert Rosenstone and Marcia Landy<sup>4</sup> (among others) is especially useful to this interpretation of history as represented in film. In particular, Higson's ideological reading of films as potential 'loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage and history' (MacKenzie 2000, 4) and Landy's political sociology of history, which recognises the powerful role that versions of history play in determining how individuals and groups inherit and understand their social and cultural milieu, represent key theoretical tools with which to approach this investigation.

In the vacuum of post-reunification Germany the construction of cultural identity takes on an increasingly political significance. As harsh socio-economic



realities and inequalities become increasingly apparent, tensions between two 20th Century geopolitical entities and their conflicting received reconstructions of self-through-past, are no longer to be concealed beneath the initial unification euphoria of the early 1990s. It is this backdrop of cultural and political contestation – a contestation at the heart of contemporary cultural studies and poststructural identity politics – which constituted the implicit focus of my interrogation of gender and sexuality in Part II. Part III continues to chart the contradictory and often conflictual path of identity representation within 1990s German cinema but with the focus now on the narratives and images engaged with the representation of East German history and the potential within these narratives for ‘disjunctive’ narratives of political and historical displacement. However, in order to do justice to the evolution of the post-*Wende* cinema, it is first necessary to take a look at a genre of films which refused almost all engagement with East German history, preferring instead the optimistic socio-historical context of the immediate post-Wall period: namely, the comedies.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft* – State-sponsored and controlled film production company of the GDR.

<sup>2</sup> The growth of an increasingly nostalgic attitude towards the East German past has been widely discussed in academic and film media circles (Peitz 1999; Rall 1999; von Thüna 1999). Typically this nostalgic turn has been attributed to various social factors affecting the *neue Bundesländer* since reunification: namely, the exponential rise in unemployment and apparent continued decline in economic prosperity, relating subsequently to a perceived rise in street crime, racist violence, poverty, and increasingly fractious relations between East and West (Roth and Rudolf 1997; Loth 1989). This lack of short-term quality of life improvement has provoked questions as to the true value of capitalist democracy and a revaluation of the system

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of East German Socialism. A new brand of contemporary *Ostalgie* has found articulation in the increasing popularity of *Ostalgie-Partys*, the consumer goods of the former GDR and East German film and music.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between representation and power, and the discourses which serve specific types of power relationships see Foucault 1980.

<sup>4</sup> The works here implied and later referenced include the following: Higson 2000; Higson 1989; Rosenstone 1995a; Rosenstone 1995b; Landy 2001.



## Chapter 6

### *German Reunification: A Laugh a Minute?*

Significantly, of the few films which initially took the events of the immediate post-*Wende* period as their thematic focus, the majority were comedies. True to the euphoric spirit of the times, films such as Peter Timm's *Go, Trabi, Go* (1990) and Manfred Stelzer's, *Grüß Gott, Genosse* (1992), pursue light-hearted, linear narrative trajectories in their humorous geographical and/or ideological displacement of stereotypically portrayed East German identities. *Go, Trabi, Go* is a playful vacation comedy (*Ferienfilm*) of East German culture transposed to a 'foreign' and hopelessly confusing Western context. 'Nur im Fremden erkennt man das Eigene' runs the motto, doubly fitting as it is Goethe's *Italienische Reise* which accompanies the East German family Strutz on their journey into foreign parts.

The significance of this choice of classic German literature, embodying eternal values divorced from any relationship to the former East Germany<sup>1</sup>, is emblematic of a wider cinematic refusal to engage with the day-to-day problems of the early *Wende* period. In this respect, this citation of one of the leading cultural representatives of the German classical tradition – a tradition free from the contamination of the fascist legacy and around which the identity of the post-1973 East German *Kulturstaat* was constructed – could represent an interesting continuity between past and present uses of culture to suppress history.

"Auch ich in Arcadien!", exclaims Udo Strutz (Wolfgang Stumph) in broad Sachsen dialect as the family begin their alpine descent into the Gardersee valley.

However, the Goethean vision of Italy as the jewel in the cultural crown of the western civilisation of antiquity is brought into sharp contrast by a much more prosaic modern reality. While Jacqueline and Frau Strutz are distracted by the attentions of two dashing and amorous young Italian suitors, the wheels of the East German *Trabi* are stolen. According to Stephan Speicher the comic function of these reactionary cultural stereotypes is clear:

*Go, Trabi, Go* arbeitet mit einem der klassischen Mittel der Komödie: der Verwendung bekannter Stereotypen, die ins Absurde überdreht werden. (1991)

These explicit citations of ‘Italianness’, in relation to notions of the ‘lover’ and the ‘illicit’ do more, however, than merely rearticulate cultural stereotypes. On an ideological level they further develop the narrative of Udo’s gradual disillusionment with the West and question the film’s otherwise simplistic representation of the journey as a straightforward progression from ‘the (nasty) confines of the East for the (idealised) freedom of the West’ (Mittman 2003, 330).

This stereotypical representation of foreign otherness is even extended to the equally clichéd representation of West German identities. *Wessis*, in *Go, Trabi Go* are characterised by material affluence, arrogance and a superficial preoccupation with appearance, as exemplified by the occupants of the BMWs and Mercedes who ostentatiously overhaul the struggling East German *Trabant* on the West German *Autobahn*. Frau Strutz’s (Claudia Schmutzler) émigré sister and Bavarian husband – the obese family Amberger – are treated equally unsympathetically. Greedy, gluttonous and hypocritical, the Ambergers’ xenophobic attitudes are extended even to their own Bitterfeld relatives, from whom they feel it necessary to hide the silverware. Bernd Amberger’s (Ottfried Fischer) initial exclamation on viewing the arrival of his eastern



relatives is typical: 'Schaut aus wie eine Türkenkaravane!' (Ottfried Fischer: *Go, Trabi Go*). The derogatory nature of his equation of *Ossis* with Turks is explicitly referenced as he enthusiastically relates to Udo the financial rewards to be reaped by cramming as many homeless Turkish immigrants as possible into his garden caravan and charging them exorbitantly for the privilege.

This critical dialogue with images of western difference is articulated perhaps most strikingly in the scene in Italy in which Udo's soulful recitation of Goethean poetics against the backdrop of a beautiful Tuscan sunset is contrasted with a montage of the female Struutzs' frenzied shopping spree. Such images resonate with the criticisms of former East German intellectuals who viewed the East German people's rabid adoption of western materialistic values with increasing anxiety. Stefan Heym's comments were typical, referring to the former socialist citizens as 'eine Horde von Wütigen, die, Rücken an Bauch gedrängt, Hertie und Bilka zustrebten auf dem Jagd nach dem glitzerneden Tinnef' (1990, 265). Images of eastern German materialism are unsubtly foregrounded from the opening of the film. The Struutz family's departure from the now desolate industrial landscape of Bitterfeld is framed by visions of whole families outside their homes washing their newly purchased VWs with almost religious fervour. The unsympathetic positioning of these materialistic Easterners is embodied in Udo's vested, chain-smoking neighbours who sarcastically remark that Udo's old Trabant is unlikely to make it past Leipzig, let alone to Naples. The men's constant jibes are then transformed to leering stares as Jacqueline threatens an impromptu strip-tease in response to her father's disapproval of her clothes, foregrounding her equally unsubtle positioning as sexualised object of the male gaze.

These images of materialistic greed would appear to support Robin Detje's case that Timm's film, like Stelzer's *Superstau* (1991), offers a consistent, if light, critique of western bourgeois society:

Diese beiden Filme [*Superstau* and *Go, Trabi, Go*] erzählen uns alles über die Wiedervereinigung, was wir schon immer (und Helmut Kohl und Günther Krause noch nie) wissen wollten: Wohlstand ist Stillstand. (1991)

In contrast, the innocence, honesty and straightforwardness of the Struutz family are reasserted throughout. Indeed, the narrative viewpoint and progression of the film show a clearly defined sympathy for the unsophisticated and incorruptible personalities of the East German family as they struggle to contend with the forces of western prejudice which seek to categorise and exploit them. As Johannes Bauer points out, the sweet innocence and simplicity of easterners – a recurring image in the early *Wende* comedies and one which looks forward to the wanton *Ostalgie* of the Leander Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* – almost makes one grateful for 'die vierzig Jahre geistige Enge im Spieß-Sozialismus' (1991, 37) in which they were formed.

Equally, as the mocking tone of the Struutz's neighbours suggests, escape from the new values embodied in the shiny, new VWs – even when transported in the tough old-fashioned yet reliable Trabant – is ultimately doomed to failure. Unification may have guaranteed easterners the freedom to travel but there is no freedom from the capitalist free-market economy values of the new society, even in Goethe's Italy. The borders between the old Germanys are now gone, and with them the East is ushered, for better or for worse, into the new socioeconomic order of the western capitalist economy.

In the context of this ultimate inescapability, implicated within a wider discourse of western modernity, the positing of innocence and uncomplicated straightforwardness as the defining characteristics of East German 'otherness' may have less positive ramifications. The exoticisation of this East German *Urmensch* implies an extra-modern – or as Elizabeth Mittman argues, precapitalist (2003), – location that may usefully



critique a neurotic, late-capitalist postmodern condition, but only by virtue of its own exclusion. The role of such exclusion in reinforcing perceptions of the social and economic situation of the *neue Bundesländer* as a fundamental failure of a non-western other to master modernity (in all its political and economic variants) is problematic<sup>2</sup>. The Bitterfeld landscape which frames the Struutz family's departure from the East does little to challenge this image. With the smoke of the few infamously polluting chemical stacks still in operation drifting across the foreground and the background littered with the now silent cranes and excavation machinery of the mining industry, there appears little to hold the family there. This is most tellingly highlighted by the opposition set up between the traditional *Ferienfilm* genre of the 1950s and *Go, Trabi, Go*'s contemporary setting and characters.

The West German and Austrian *Ferienfilm* developed out of the *Heimatsfilm* of the 1950s and generally followed the holiday adventures of a German family heading for southern Europe and the sun. This genre emerged at a time when West Germany was enjoying an unprecedented level of affluence and its wealthy citizens were becoming increasingly interested in travel. Unlike the families of the traditional *Ferienfilm*, however, the Struutz family are by no means affluent and are increasingly reminded of this fact by the people they meet and the capitalist cultures that they encounter. Thus, the Easterners' attempts to mimic this genre fall a long way short and do little more than highlight the dissimilarities between the two cultural and economic contexts. As Mittman argues, 'though the Easterners' travels mimic those of the 1950s they do so with a marked, even embarrassing, belatedness that forces the viewer to register a historical jolt in the asynchronicity of East and West' (2003, 332).

Just as the unassuming and incorruptible Herr Struutz is placed in opposition to the smugness of the West German relatives, the portrayal of the *Besser-Wessi* Westerner in the 1992 film, *Griß Gott, Genosse*, is hardly more sympathetic. Reflecting the

communist regime's derogatory language of the *Überläufer*<sup>3</sup>, the central character Uncle Ludwig (Georg Marischka), who fled to the West before the construction of the Wall, is positioned as a symbol of cowardly self-interest whose initial support of his recently liberated eastern 'comrade', Adolf Wendler (Jürgen Schmidt), is immediately abandoned as soon as it ceases to be politically opportune. However, Wendler's own opportunistic behaviour as he arrives in the West and lies his way into a teaching job is also condemned.

Despite his wholehearted adoption of Bavarian culture – once again positioned as representing a quintessence of (West) Germanness – Wendler's past eventually catches up with him, in the shape of a non-conformist pupil he denounced before leaving the East. As his newly constructed social persona crumbles so too does his affluence and position in West German *Kleinbürgertum*. In a turn reminiscent of Stefan Heym's treatment of property rights in his short story 'Auf Sand gebaut' (1993), and one which is repeated in *Go, Trabi, Go*'s far less optimistic sequel, *Go, Trabi, Go 2*, return home is equally impossible. Even their short period of absence has led them to be regarded as Western interlopers back east. This raises some interesting questions as to the place of East Germans and, indeed, East Germany in general in the new united Germany.

References to the old East German regime in *Go, Trabi, Go* are almost non-existent, which renders the film's political standpoint vis-à-vis the socialist past more difficult to determine. This is particularly significant in the context of the sympathetic portrayal of the East German Struutz family. An extremely short dialogue, between Udo and the elderly mechanic, Herr Gamshuber (Dieter Hildebrandt) who turns up sporadically to fix their ailing *Trabi*, and who turns out to be ex-GDR citizen himself, is, however, singularly illuminating:



Herr Gamshuber:      Dafür sind die [Trabi-] Teile original aus Sachsenwerke,  
aus der guten alten Zeiten.

Udo Struutz:            Guten?

Herr Gamshuber:      Alten.

Clearly, while the Struutz family themselves may embody a romantic image of eastern simplicity and straightforwardness, any similar nostalgic treatment of the ‘old days’ of the GDR is sceptically received, at least by those with such fresh memories of its reality.

In the context of this ideological ambiguity, the conclusion of the film is equally significant. While Schorsch undergoes yet another transformation, this time from *Trabi* to Cabriolet, Udo reasserts the superiority and durability of the simple East German car: “Rita. Die Trabants sind doch die Härtesten!” (Wolfgang Stumph: *Go, Trabi Go*). This affirmation of East German identity in the face of overwhelmingly opulent and apparently superior western lifestyles and standards of living indicates a more critical approach to the dream of a capitalist utopia. As Robin Detje puts it, the moral of the story is simple: ‘Teure Autos sind nicht zur Fortbewegung gemacht – billige treibt die Sehnsucht ans Meer’ (1991).

The ultimate stasis equated with material affluence contrasts strongly with the Struutz’s continued mobility. Not only do they successfully achieve their goal – the completion of their Goethean *Reise* to Naples – but the ending also coincides with the new beginning which Rita’s unborn child heralds. Exactly what this future will be, however, remains uncertain. In this respect, Udo’s romantic aspirations parallel the film’s escapist tendency. In the process of their journey the family Struutz undergo an undoubted transformation. However, just how profound this transformation – embodied in Schorsch’s new bodywork and Rita’s new hairstyle – may be is hard to judge. From Jacqueline’s final citation of Goethe, however, it would appear that it is a distinctly East

German *Heimat* identity – albeit of the stereotypically Sachsen variety – that is ultimately enjoying reaffirmation:

Jaqueline Strutz: Das ist das Angenehme auf Reisen, dass auch doch das Gewöhnliche durch Neuheiten und Überraschung das Aussehen eines Abenteuers gewinnt.

Ultimately, in its linear narrative structure, sympathetic portrayal of its East German protagonists and its overarching preoccupation with the exploitation of cultural stereotypes for comic effect, *Go, Trabi, Go* is clearly defined as a film ‘für das große Publikum’ (Detje 1991). While undoubtedly affecting its commitment to any more serious socio-political or ideological critique, this mainstream positioning does not necessarily alter its significance as one of the earliest post-Wall feature films to engage with the new unified reality, and to depict East German identity in a wholly positive light. As Detje points out, this could at least partially explain its enthusiastic reception in the *neue Bundesländer*:

Das Premierenpublikum im großen Rundkino auf der Prager Straße in Dresden jubelt; es sieht sich und seine Welt als Medienereignis. (Speicher 1991)

In general, however, these early comedies rarely managed to extend their symbolic significance beyond the two-dimensionality of their clichéd protagonists. Immersed as they were in the euphoria of the times, films such as Heiko Schier’s *Alles Lüge* (1991), Manfred Stelzer’s *Superstau* (1991), Vladim Glowna’s *Der Brocken* and



Peter Kahane's *Cosimas Lexikon* (1991) embody a formulaic reliance on sympathetically portrayed East Germans – who often turn out to be better capitalists than their grasping West German counterparts – combined with happy endings. The ideological implications of this problem-free presentation of the integration – or rather wholesale assimilation – of East German Socialism into West German capitalism, clearly situates the films in the immediate post-Wall period. Juxtaposed with the more ambivalent portrayals of life in the new Germany of comedies such as *Der Brocken* (1992) and, even *Go Trabi Go*'s sequel *Go Trabi Go 2* (1992), this early optimism is even more significant. Confined within the limits of the mainstream comedy genre, these explorations of East and West German identities, however, struggle to extend their repertoire beyond the bounds of the simplistic cultural stereotypes – be it of provincially backward or weak-willed conformist *Ossis*, or self-satisfied and affluent *Lederhosen*-wearing *Wessis*.

In the context of cultural studies' politicisation of identity representation, the evolution of this derogatory labelling and thus differentiation of East Germans by West and West Germans by East is clearly of much more significance than a mere conflict over semantics. Instead, it is a sign of political struggle, the struggle to decide who can claim authority and thus power over the other. In the realm of cultural production this power is ultimately the power to shape social reality. Identities are constructed through, and not outside difference, and in this respect 'are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are a sign of an identical, naturally constituted identity' (Hall 1996, 4). To rephrase in the terminology of postcolonial theory, it is only through the relation to the 'other' – the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks – that the 'positive' meaning of any term, and thus its identity, can be constructed. For the film and cultural analyst then, the task is to establish the 'the play of specific modalities of power', the ideologically implicated 'enunciative strategies' within which

they emerge.

In the context of their simplistic mobilisation of cultural stereotype and the orientalisating discourses of otherness, the *Wende* comedies are reminiscent of Bhabha's interpretation of cultural diversity. In other words, they do little to challenge 'the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalised cultures' (1994, 34), allowing for the theorisation of cultures in isolation from each other. There are, however, inherent difficulties in any ideological reading of comic texts. As has already been stated in relation to the woman-centred *Frauenkomödien*, the first problem relates to the issue of audience identification. Other dramatic modes such as melodrama rely on a much greater degree of spectator identification and engagement with the plot and characters. Melodrama generally operates by inviting the audience to empathise, and/or sympathise, with the protagonist's plight. In other words, the audience is being asked to believe in the fundamental reality of the protagonist's narrative. The comic narrative, on the other hand, relies upon a play between different modes of audience address. Some of these modes of address might invite audience identification with the narrative and characters. However, these moments of identification are juxtaposed with moments of comic distancing. In other words, the audience is repeatedly disrupted from passive consumption of dramatic illusionism by laughter. In this way the fiction is foregrounded and the viewer reminded that this is a film they are watching and thus apart from the real world.

If there is a political dimension to the *Wende* comedies then it is precisely at these points of comic rupture that it articulates itself. Reliant as they are on a specific play of identificatory and distancing relations between characters and audiences, these post-Wall comedies raise some interesting questions as to the true victims of their comic exploitation. Detje comments on the ambiguity of this comic positioning in his critical exploration of Stelzer's *Superstau*: 'Deshalb müssen die Zonis am Rande des Superstaus



die Witzfiguren mimen und Seegurken für Meeresfrüchte halten – superblöd’ (1991). The fundamental question that these comedies leaves us with is: is it really western capitalist society and its laughable excesses that are the butt, and thus reason for success of, the *Go, Trabi, Go* joke, or is it rather the bumbling, unsophisticated East German *Urmensch*, and his equally unsophisticated *Urauto*?

Mittman argues that this derogatory positioning of the East is articulated in *Go, Trabi, Go* through a process of feminisation. This feminisation takes its most explicit form in the constant crisis of paternal authority – a typical trope of the vacation film – which affects Udo. Throughout the film Udo, and his alter ego Schorsch, are placed in a series of situations where their status and virility are brought into question. As has been well documented, the automobile has come to carry considerable symbolic significance beyond its utilitarian functions in contemporary culture and thus reflects considerably upon its owner<sup>4</sup>. The comic positioning of Schorsch – and by implication his owner – relies upon an inversion of this traditional positioning of car as symbol of status and virility.

As Schorsch trundles from breakdown to breakdown, she<sup>5</sup> is forced undergo a series of indignities from the sneering insults of Porsche-driving West Germans to the rough manhandling of Italian thieves, and is even required to perform tricks in front of a paying public to reduce her repair bill. Thus from fetishised object of East German *Ostalgie* she transforms to object of western capitalist voyeuristic curiosity. At the same time Udo’s authority is questioned from the outset at the hands of his mocking neighbours and rebellious daughter. Rita’s early reference to their lack of necessity for contraception with him in his current state of stress and the subsequent attempted seduction of mother and daughter by two amorous and *young* Italian suitors exacerbates this questioning of Udo’s essential masculinity.

As Mittman argues, this attempted emasculation of Schorsch and Udo is

reminiscent of the much-cited feminisation of the East in representations of the unification. Clearly, such a line of argument is supported by the unfavourable binaries upheld by the film between a backward and economically ineffective East and an affluent, modern and sophisticated West. However, it is possible to pursue a less negative interpretation of this process of eastern feminisation if we take into account the broader dichotomies set up between masculine and feminine identities. The representation of Jacqueline's self-conscious and provocative sexuality is central to this masculine/feminine opposition.

As already outlined, Jacqueline is presented throughout the film as the sexualised object of a male gaze. The gendering of this gaze is foregrounded by repeated shots of her sparsely clad behind, usually within the context of point of view shots of male characters. This visual motif is continued from the opening scene in which she turns away from the camera – and her leering neighbours – and begins to take her off her jeans, to the equally sexualised framing of her behind as the centre-piece for her parents lift with the sexist (and racist) lorry driver, and is finally transposed to the female nudist who leans provocatively into the interior of Schorsch to receive a cigarette lighter from the trembling hand of Udo. Conforming in almost every aspect to the popular cinematic norms of scopophilic identification, Jacqueline misses no opportunity to pose provocatively for her (male) audience. However, in line with the self-awareness of the New German Comedy women, there is also an agency and aggressive sexuality to Jacqueline, which counters the passivity traditionally ascribed to such sexualised female positioning.

Despite her flirtatious behaviour *she never consummates the relationships she develops along the way, remaining independent and aloof from the aggressive sexual predation of the whole series of fundamentally inadequate western males who attempt to woo her* – from the gluttonous but affluent Bernd Amberger and his voyeuristic son, the



charming Italian suitors whisk them off their feet but are ultimately left standing at the dance, and the arrogant Munich *SchickiMicki* whose distasteful advances are brought to a sudden undignified halt by her crushing put-down. In this respect, while the unsophisticated and vulnerable virility and masculinity of the East may be questioned, the super-masculinity of the greedy and predatory West is shown to be repugnant and, ultimately, hollow. By the end of the film Udo, Rita and Schorsch have all discovered a new lease of life and Jacqueline is reunited and reconciled with her soon to be expanding family. Thus the resolution of *Go, Trabi, Go*'s narrative problematic would appear to have less to do with the mindless optimism of 'a fantasy of integration' (Mittman 2003, 337) than with a rather reflective reaffirmation of an extra-capitalist German other.

### Postcolonialism and Cultural Stereotypes in Europe

Clearly, the *Wende* comedies of the early 1990s rely heavily on cultural stereotype and publicly received notions of the cultural and historical difference to highlight the differences that exist between eastern and western parts of the now reunified country. This rather simplistic reading of the post-*Wende* comedies as embodying the ideological tensions and revisions of East Germany's transition from communist state to capitalist democracy is one which will require much more in-depth investigation and substantiation. For the moment it may suffice to point to the socio-economic disparities that currently exist between eastern and western parts of Germany. In 1998 gross annual incomes averaged around 61, 800 DM in western parts of the country. In the new regions this figure remained around 47, 400 DM ('Arbeitslosenstatistik', *Lebenslagen in Deutschland*). Total national unemployment figures in 1998 may have decreased by 0.4

per cent to 12.3 per cent ('Bevölkerung und Arbeitsmarkt- Arbeitslose, Kurzarbeiter' *Statistisches Taschenbuch*, 2002) but unemployment in the eastern regions of Germany remained at 19.5 per cent ('Arbeitslosenstatistik', *Lebenslagen in Deutschland*). In May 2000, the average unemployment rate in East Germany was 16.9 per cent, more than twice the West German rate of 7.5 per cent. In some eastern regions unemployment is well above 20 per cent.

The persistence of these socio-economic inequalities in the *neue Bundesländer* can only add credence to the voices which have long criticised the integration of East Germany into the reunified national whole as more akin to a colonisation of one state by another (Rosenberg 1992; Schulz & Hansen 1992; Knoblen 2000). Political developments would also appear to support the relevance of this model of social and ideological colonisation. In the wider context of the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and eastern block countries, an apparently irresistible and globally fundamental capitalist hegemony continues its rise. The prevalence of colonising and orientalist discourses also likely to increase in the context of the growing diasporas of guest workers and refugees, both in Germany – the eastern half of which now represents a doorway to eastern Europe – and throughout Western Europe.

According to both liberal and neo-liberal discourse, we currently inhabit a post-Imperial, postnationalist present. On the one hand, this claim is undoubtedly motivated by moral considerations stemming from the liberal recognition of European culpability in the colonising practices and discourses of the past, and a subsequent desire to distance racist and xenophobic sentiments from the construction of 21st Century national identities. On the other, it originates in economic concerns with the place of European nations within the apparently inescapable contemporary reality of the 'global economy'. Whatever their motivation, these discourses are fundamentally concerned with the avoidance of all recourse to ethnic, racial and national stereotypes. Such



stereotypes are not only reminiscent of a deeply uncomfortable and combative nation state history, but could also potentially promote isolationist tendencies threatening to the economic future and political unity of Europe.

In this context, the recently published petition by the British Commission for Racial Equality for non-racist electoral campaigning, the aggressively anti-xenophobic response of liberal and conservative politicians in Germany to recent racist attacks in the former East, the continuing commitment – on the part of France, Germany, and to a lesser extent, Britain – to the aspirations of the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht and the recently implemented European Monetary Union, all represent significant statements of intent on the part of the new centre-left politics which have dominated parts of western Europe.

However, it is important to recognise the sociological contradiction inherent in the ever closer economic and political bonds being forged amongst western European countries and, increasingly, with their eastern neighbours. Alongside the voices calling for greater racial tolerance, and indeed, largely responsible for their original expression, there has been a growth in national-populist, far-right and neo-fascist politics throughout Europe. Represented in the public sphere by such political leaders as Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Filip Dewinter in Belgium, Karl Lucks in Germany, Jörg Haider in Austria and Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, these increasingly popular and powerful political forces have found common ground in their articulation of exclusive and xenophobic European nationalisms. Finding an attentive and fertile breeding ground in the social and economic deprivation of the former East Germany – the point of entry to western Europe for the increasingly diasporic populations of the East – this increase in right-wing extremism has led to what has been termed ‘the largest outbreak of racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic violence in Germany since the Nazi era’ (Ginsberg and Thompson 1995, 4).

This has been one of the less fortunate results of the collapse of barriers between eastern and western Europe. The transnational, transracial harmony of nations may be essential to the ultimate success of the neoliberal dream of globalised economies. However, the opening of borders and freedom of trade and movement can lead to the retrenchment rather than abandonment of reactionary and exclusive notions of identity. This is testified to by the pan-European increase in violence against foreign and migrating labour groups.

As Sharon Macdonald points out in her work on identity complexes within western Europe, whether we see the future changes necessitated by the increasingly transnational movement of trade and labour as a threat or an opportunity depends largely on our own particular social identity, and its cultural, political and economic imperatives (1993). Unfortunately, it would appear that social change brought about by an increase in the level of immigration is all too often perceived by the host culture as a threat rather than an opportunity. The increasingly polarised notions of 'them' and 'us' which follow invariably result in tension and conflict. This is noted by Breckenridge and van der Veer in their postcolonial analysis of the transnational movement of peoples, trade and information across physical national boundaries, asserting that 'orientalism plays a role in the definition of cultural selves in the diasporic confrontations with cultural alternatives' (1993, 13).

In the context of the increasing ethnic pluralisation of western society and the concomitant mobilisation of racial discourse for political ends, it is clear that stereotypes are far from relinquishing their cultural currency. Consequently, their simplistic denunciation by liberal discourse as prejudice is not enough. As Macdonald continues, even the very discourse, which attempts to develop common policies on issues such as immigration is itself in danger of resorting to stereotypes (1993). Therefore, it is imperative that we develop an anthropological understanding of how stereotypes



function, and their sociological implication in the adaptation of communities – be they local or supralocal – to change.

## Conclusion

Clearly, cultural stereotypes occupy a particularly central position within the genre of film comedy to which all of the films cited in this chapter belong. Exploited ostensibly for comic rather than political effect and relying on distanciation and disruption rather than engagement and affiliation, the comic value of such stereotypes might, however, undercut or at least weaken the value of the sociological reading that this study would attempt to ascribe to them. As in the case of the New German Comedies, however, the application of a theory of genre can minimise these potential pitfalls.

Peter Hutchings describes the sociological function of genre in terms of its relationship to audience expectation: ‘Genre provides audiences with particular sorts of knowledge which they can use to organise their own viewing’ (1995, 61). The popularity of the *Wende* comedies in both East and West would appear to testify to the enjoyable themes of identification contained within their narrative structure and the particular socio-historical context within which they operate. The notion of genre as defined by the common cultural consensus it represents and not by a predetermined set of characteristics, takes the ideological analysis of genre’s sociological function one step further (Hutchings 1995). As Hutchings points out this move towards a sociological understanding of genre is symptomatic of the shift between the early formal generic focus of André Bazin – which included a broad and largely unsupported allusion to the function of genre as myth – to Robert Warshow’s description of the importance of

Hollywood western and gangster genres in seeking to resolve the particular needs and contradictions of American society (1995, 62-3).

It is this sociological approach to genre which facilitates the socio-political reading of these early 1990s *Wende* comedies. In other words, if we accept Warshow's description of the importance of genre it becomes possible to read these films as representative of the needs and contradictions, fears and anxieties, hope and dreams of a significant subsection of German society. Pursuing this line of reasoning, Elizabeth Mittman argues, 'film comedy from slapstick to satire, offers fertile ground for nuanced depictions of the state of German polity after 1989' (2003). The cultural specificity which characterises the post-*Wende* comedies, just as it characterises the woman-centred New German Comedies, may be often criticised for the parochialism of its approach and the transnational success that this thereby precludes for the German film comedy, but surely it is this very cultural specificity which supports the reading of the comedy as a 'legitimate forum for the expression of political and social tensions?' (2003) In other words, it takes on issues of local and national interest and currency, but does so not in the alienating form of the traditional German *Problemfilm* but in a comic genre more palatable to a wider domestic audience.

The themes identified in these predominately eastern German productions, include anxieties relating to the unknown and corrupt West (*Grüß Gott, Genosse, Go Trabi, Go*), fears of a predatory western capitalist take-over (*Go, Trabi, Go 2, Der Brocken*), and the positioning of easterners as backward, bumbling simpletons (*Wir können auch anders, Go, Trabi, Go*). As Mittman points out, films like *Grüß Gott, Genosse, Go Trabi, Go* and *Wir können auch anders* all fail fundamentally in terms of the resolution demanded by their mainstream comic generic conventions. This resolution depends in all three films upon the integration of the central protagonists into a post-reunification capitalist culture. The failure of all three groups of protagonists to



do this undermines the ‘unified, utopian vision’ (Mittman 2003, 346) of East/West relations offered by each of these mainstream comedies and points to their transgression of their generic boundaries to engage with the much broader and less light-hearted themes of loss, anxiety and disorientation. Viewed in this light, the significance of the *Wende* comedies beyond the satisfaction of an escapist and apolitical humour could be considered to be as popular and ambiguous, transgressive and uncertain as the *Wende* period itself.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The particular classical tradition I refer to here arises at the turn of the Nineteenth Century, with the adoption of the French word *culture* to denote a ‘spiritual, critical and high-minded’ (Eagleton 2000, 10) notion of cultural activity. As indicated by Eagleton, this particular version of German *Kultur* also embodied a Romantic, pre-Marxist critique of early industrial capitalism, a point of especial relevance to its citation in a post-GDR context.

<sup>2</sup> This positioning of marginal groups vis-à-vis a western capitalist and imperialist metanarrative of modernity shall be further developed in my exploration of racial otherness, in Part IV.

<sup>3</sup> It is ironic that in *Go, Trabi, Go 2* the terminology of the *Überläufer* is reversed to become the *Übersiedler* and applied not to an escaping individual but to a returning family – namely, to the newly returned Struutz family. This similarly derogatory labelling would appear to suggest that East Germans are neither at home neither in the West or the newly emerging East.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the symbolic value of cars in contemporary culture and in particular their connection with male virility see Hardison 1989.

<sup>5</sup> While there is no explicit reference to Schorsch’s gender within the film I draw here upon the classical attribution of the female gender to cars through their association with the body. For a more detailed analysis of the attribution of gender to machines see Chandler 2001.

## Chapter 7

### *‘Aufarbeitung der DDR Geschichte’*

#### Love and Politics in the Shadow of the Berlin Wall

Despite the contemporary focus of these few comic *alles wird gut Wende* films, the majority of feature films to be produced in the 1990s have been preoccupied with reconstructions of the German Democratic Republic’s past. Positing the Berlin Wall as barrier to romantic consummation Margarethe von Trotta’s much-heralded 1994 offering, *Das Versprechen*, draws on a long filmic tradition of the metaphoric exploitation of this symbol of East/West division.

As in Reinhard Hauff’s *Der Mann auf der Mauer* (1982) a successful escape attempt leaves the two central East German romantic protagonists on opposing sides of the ‘antiimperialistische Schützmauer’. However, whereas Marius Müller-Westernhagen’s character struggles to come to terms with this ‘other Germany’ in which political activism has been replaced by the more pressing concerns of material acquisition and *Beziehungsprobleme*<sup>1</sup> the newly arrived Sophie (Meret Becker) faces no such problems in assimilating the new culture. Despite having left her beloved Konrad (Anian Zollner) in the East, she quickly settles into the western way of life, finding employment in her Aunt’s fashion house – an industry often cited as symbolising the worst excesses of western superficiality and consumerism. Paralleling the successes of the New German Comedy women in their upwardly mobile and creative career trajectories, Sophie’s steady socio-economic ascent is marked by professional success,



marital security and material comfort.

In spite of a symbolically ambiguous climactic conclusion, in which the two former lovers and the two halves of Germany are reunited on the famous *Glienicker Brücke* on the night of 9th November 1989, the film's focus is primarily on the past. Significantly, this is a past which not only excludes any reference to contemporary problems and difficulties in post-reunification Germany but also romanticises both East German and West German life through its narrow social focus.

While Sophie's good looks and family connections ensure painless integration into the capitalist democracy of the West, Konrad's career path is defined by an equally fast-tracked rise to status and respect, this time as the prodigious apprentice of the famous physicist Professor Lorenz (Otto Sander). His profession not only marks him out as an extremely privileged East German citizen, with freedom to travel and relative affluence, but also ensures the required intellectual distance to meditate on the discrepancies between his country's founding ideological principles and the somewhat different reality of 'real existierender Sozialismus'.

This recognition is most vociferously articulated in one of his many encounters with the *Staatssicherheit* official, Müller (Hark Bohm). In an attempt to force Konrad – now a respected and privileged Professor (August Zirner) – to retract an unauthorised interview given to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, he is threatened with the withdrawal of visiting rights to his recently discovered West German son. In a fit of anger Konrad turns on the *Stasi* man and challenges him to justify his profession:

Konrad: Warum geben Sie sich für sowas her?

Müller: Sie werden sich wundern. Als ich so alt war, als Ihr Junge war, Ihr Alexander, da wollte ich schon für die Sicherheit

arbeiten, das ist ein Kinderwunsch. Erinnern Sie sich an die Aufklärungsfilme gegen die Nazis? Da ist mir so ein Hass entstanden, wollte ich unbedingt etwas dafür tun, dass sowas nie wieder passiert.

But for Konrad this early idealism cannot justify the contemporary means used to achieve political ends:

Konrad:        Und dazu ist jedes Mittel recht? Jede Lüge?

Müller:        Die Wahrheit, lieber Professor, liegt grundsätzlich bei uns.

Müller's initial citation of the enthusiasm and idealism which, fired by the historical realities of the Nazi years, helped found the German Democratic Republic, is typical of many of the films which deal with the heritage of the East German socialist system. However, the clear injustice and inhumanity of this attempt at state-sponsored blackmail expose the film's attitude to the blind allegiance to dogma and faith in an all too fallible state, articulated by the *Stasi* official.

One of the effects of this rather rigid focus on the privileged echelons of eastern and western society is to blur the lines of difference between the two cultures. As the young refugees arrive for the first time in the unknown West they exclaim with surprise, "Wir sind noch im Osten. Hier sieht es genauso aus wie bei uns". Despite the improbability of such a naive comment apparently being voiced in 1961 when the Wall had only just been built, the film's portrayal of life in West and East would appear to imply that – with the exception of the *Stasi* – there really was little difference. The comment by Konrad's father, Dieter Mann<sup>2</sup>, that as a working class youth his son might



well enjoy more opportunities in the East than in the West does little to dispel the social exclusivity of the film's narrow social focus.

Recognised as one of the first serious films to treat both the separation and ultimate reunification of Germany, and amidst great media interest, von Trotta's film was chosen to open the Berlinale in 1995. In this respect the film was widely heralded by the domestic and international media as of central importance to the process of *Aufarbeitung* of the East German past, apparently so necessary to the continued integration and assimilation of the two Germanys (Kilb, 1995). However, it would appear at least on the surface that von Trotta's film struggles to extend beyond the clichés of character and social setting so typical of the earlier comedies<sup>3</sup>.

Konrad – the outstanding eastern European intellectual, victimised and hampered at every turn by an oppressive and short-sighted communist regime – could be viewed in the tradition of countless East German literary protagonists, featured in the works of such writers as Christoph Hein and Stefan Heym. The character of Sophie appears to be equally underdeveloped and two-dimensional, and struggles to find a personality capable of signification beyond the various socio-political systems she is used to represent. In the brief political respite of the Prague Spring her character is temporarily added depth and moral conviction as she briefly considers the possibility of abandoning her affluent new life in the capitalist West for life with Konrad in Prague. “Demokratie plus Sozialismus, das ist die Zukunft”, she blithely remarks to the more cynical and worldly-wise figure of Konrad's mentor, Professor Lorenz. However, almost as soon as the words are spoken the tanks roll into the streets of the Czech capital and the clichéd vision of unlicensed frivolity and American rock music – with which the film entirely unsubtly categorises the brief spring of communist liberalism – is brought to an end. Subsequent to this meeting Sophie returns to the West and continues her irresistible rise towards comfortable middle class prosperity.

Functioning here to heighten the dramatic tension of the reunited lovers' frantic lovemaking, the film's unsubtle use of editing and elision characterises its reductive approach to history. The initial escape attempt takes place in 1961 – the year of the Wall's completion. The couple's first subsequent meeting is situated in Prague in 1968 – the year of the Prague Spring and the reassertion of repressive Stalinist policies. The final reunion occurs on the night of 9<sup>th</sup> November, 1989. As Nick James points out, the film's structure appears to be a result of its rather tall order to tackle '28 years of history through the eyes of one man and woman in love' (1996, 52). Referring to the contrived use of the couple's reunions to document major events in social and political history, James points to the 'near miniseries level of coincidence she [von Trotta] inflicts upon them' and its broader failure to construct a melodrama 'that analyses (à la Fassbinder) the social and political components of their relationship' (1996, 53). This representation of East German history is symptomatic of the problematic balance von Trotta and her co-scriptwriter Peter Schneider attempted to strike between 'die kleine persönliche Geschichte', on the one hand, and 'die große Historie' (Riebsamen 1995), on the other. This is summed up by the film's mainstream billing as 'Eine Liebe, eine Hoffnung, eine Mauer'. Clearly, this balance could also be clothed in the terms of the debate of entertainment and romance versus historical verity<sup>4</sup>. Such an approach must have significant implications for the validity of the film's critical investigation of the reality of life under the two ideologically opposed regimes. According to James, the emotional tone of the film in its engagement with characters and setting is distinctly nostalgic, a nostalgia that appears to resemble a yearning for 'a time of political certainties' (1996, 53). Sentimental remembrance, he goes on to argue, is, however, 'hardly the most politically useful of feelings to invoke in an audience' (53).

Significantly, von Trotta decided to re-stage the events of the night of November 9th 1989 without the usual recourse to documentary material. Despite, or perhaps



because of this, the concluding scenes of the film offer a much more problematic and ambiguous vision of the future than the cursory and overly simplified view of East and West German history hitherto effected. As a roving reporter questions a silent and solitary female figure, isolated amongst the jubilant masses, which throng the *Glienecke Brücke*, “Und Sie? Freuen Sie sich denn nicht?”, she replies, “Für mich kommt es zu spät. Wenn nach dreißig Jahren der Käfig aufgemacht wird, kann man nicht mehr fliegen”.

Despite its rather trite, overdramatic form – reinforced by Jürgen Kniepers’ consistently overly dramatic soundtrack – this statement casts a warning shadow over any blind optimism that the East German past and the individual, personal histories shaped by it can be ‘worked through’, *bewältigt*, and incorporated painlessly and seamlessly into a new (West?) German national identity. The ambivalence of the lone woman’s response to unification is further reinforced by the ambiguity of Sophie and Konrads’ final exchanged glances. The physical distance between them maybe disintegrating rapidly but the emotional distance built up over decades will take much longer to bridge. The metaphoric value of this reunion for the future of a united Germany is made clear by Andreas Kilb:

Als Konrad und Sophie sich dann zuletzt, am 9. November 1989, an der Glienicker Brücke wiedersehen, sind sie längst nur noch Stellvertreter ihrer beiden getrennten Welten, irgendeiner und irgendeine, die im gesamtdeutschen Freudentaumel einander in die arme fallen. Und ihre Liebe ist nur noch ein Wort.  
(1995)

What is left, according to Kilb, and what will be much harder for the two Germanys to overcome is , ‘die andere Mauer – im Denken und Fühlen, im Alltag, im Reden und

Tun' (1995).

### *Sonnenallee* and Apolitical *Ostalgie*?

Leander Hausmann's film version of Thomas Brussig's novel *Sonnenallee* was one of the most successful German films of 1999, attracting audiences of over 1.8 million. Released on the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the GDR and set on the eastern end of the Wall-divided *Sonnenallee*, Hausmann's film is a playful, theatrical romp through the annals of 70s East German pop history. Situating its coming-of-age narrative in the "not so gloomy after all" shadow of the Berlin Wall, the film focuses upon the universalising and largely extra-political themes of teenage angst, romance and rebellion.

The opening scene comprises a sustained pan over the contents of a teenager's bedroom, overlain by a 70s rock music soundtrack. The aural and visual cues contained within this opening point to the major thematic preoccupations of the film to come. Panning across a series of black and white photographs, notions of the past, and more importantly, historical representation, are brought to the fore. From the photographs the camera moves to a Stars and Stripes flag pinned to the wall, immediately injecting a note of incongruity into what we already know to be a film about the socialist state of East Germany. On one level this points to the rebelliousness and radicalism of youth. However, as Micha's (Alexander Scheer) voice-over narration soon makes clear, the flag is symbolic of a land with a vibrant youth pop culture and not a vibrant capitalist democracy. This superimposition of symbols and subjects of potential political import upon the more superficial (and arguably universal) themes of teenage pop culture, fashion and romance is characteristic of *Sonnenallee*'s more general approach to the representation of the former GDR.

The contradiction inherent in this approach is hinted at by Micha's opening



comment, 'Ich wollte immer ein Popstar sein. Einer der was bewegt' (Alexander Scheer: *Sonennallee*). There may be an element of credibility in this apparently contradictory association of 'Popstar werden' and 'Einer der was bewegt' when viewed in the context of the liberal idealism and counter-cultural stance of 60s and 70s youth culture and, more particularly, the politically critical stance of GDR pop bands such as *Pankow* or the more recent, *Die Skeptiker*. However, this does not entirely efface the inherent immaturity of Micha's teenage dreams of pop-star fame and his rather vague desire to effect some sort of social or political change. This notion of youth and immaturity is developed in his subsequent comment, 'Das Land in dem ich jetzt lebe ist sehr jung'. Placing this statement before the potentially politically critical statement that, 'sie verbieten hier gern und viel', would appear to suggest that culpability for these weaknesses – embodied as they may be in the state's mistaken attempts to suppress its people, Micha's ultimate unwillingness to engage in political activism, or the film's wider failure to take a political stance on the subject of East German socialism or, for that matter, West German capitalist democracy – can be to some extent put down to the loveable foibles of youth.

As in von Trotta's film the Wall is once again positioned as romantic impediment despite the fact that the two would-be star-crossed lovers live as neighbours on the same side. For the ungainly, short-sighted Micha, Miriam (Theresa Weißbach) represents the object of desire around which to weave his teenage fantasies and for whom he writes the fake diaries charting his life in the former socialist republic. Unfortunately for Micha, however, Miriam is far more preoccupied with her BMW Cabriolet-driving golden boy *Wessi* from Regensburg. Micha's quest to dissuade her from her belief in the better 'kissing abilities' of westerners<sup>5</sup>, and the associated preferability of the western way of life, constitutes the film's main narrative motivation.

In common with *Das Versprechen* the film adopts a linear, causal approach to

history and time. However, the model of historical progression which drives von Trotta's work forward to the ultimate reunification of both personal and political narratives is obscured within Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* by the foregrounding of Micha's romantic coming-of-age narrative. Clearly, the generic demands of the romantic comedy dictate to a large extent the developmental stages through which the teenage Micha's quest for Miriam will progress. As projection and longing are translated into action and Miriam's initial resistance is revised and ultimately resolved, the chronological progression of this autobiographical narrative is maintained.

However, this personal, romantic narrative is paralleled in the character development of a more directly political representative. Horkefeld (Detlev Buck), the district *Abschnittsbevollmächtigter*, represents at the opening of the film a figure of chastisement and conservative stricture for the group of non-conformist youngsters at the centre of the film's narrative. Through his exposure to the youth, vivacity and querulous antiauthoritarianism of the young friends, however, he gradually abandons his rigid adherence to party dogma and is "humanised" – in other words, brought into the fold of the film's sympathetically treated and empathetically received characters.

In fact, the boundaries of this fold become increasingly stretched as the film's up-beat comic tone refuses the positioning of any character as representative of a demonised communist 'other'. Even the border guards – responsible for the deaths of over 190 escaping citizens over the 30 year life-span of the Wall – are incorporated into the film's singing/dancing finale, articulated by Micha's voice-over narration as a celebration of the apolitical and universalising themes of youth and love:

Micha:           Es war einmal ein Land und ich habe dort gelebt. Und wenn man  
                       fragt, wie es war, es war die schönste Zeit meines Lebens, denn  
                       ich war jung und verliebt.



Micha's voice-over commentary both introduces and concludes the narrative. Employing here the standard *Märchen* opening the narrative presents itself as a subjective viewpoint, but a viewpoint representative of a 'story being told' rather than the self-consciously 'subjective memory' employed by many of the other works of the post-*Wende* cinema. A significant tool in the film's coding of its cinematic past, this voice-over narration facilitates an access to a concrete linguistic temporal reference that is less easy to communicate through the purely visual devices of the traditional flashback. For example, Micha's opening commentary situates the narrative geographically, temporally and subjectively. Geographically in the GDR – a country not much older than its youthful narrator; temporally, at the tale-end of rock music's popular reign, the 1970s; and autobiographically, as the first person narrator of his own past. The avoidance of the use of the flashback device is significant in that flashbacks require the articulation of a posthistorical or post-flashback present. The use of voice-over narration and story book phraseology in *Sonnenallee* might imply the existence of a post-narrative present but avoid, simultaneously, the necessity of describing it. Consequently, the film manages to maintain its nostalgic ambience and avoid any difficult political questions which treatment of the post-reunification present might raise.

On another level the voice-over narration of *Sonnenallee* serves to invite the viewer in to an empathetic relationship with the central protagonist's position in a fictive and past social reality. At the same time, however, this device encourages a critical distance by foregrounding this very process of historical rendering as a subjective experience of the fictional character. In this respect, the naturalisation of history enacted through the linear unfolding of time – symbolised in the progressive romantic and political trajectories of Micha, Miriam and Horkefeld – is questioned by

the frame-breaking voice-overs. I shall return to this notion of the displacement of historical and/or political narratives when we consider the representation of history in Andreas Kleinert's *Verlorene Landschaft*.

The central and highly sexualised object of Micha's male-gaze, Miriam, is presented as the only eastern girl to equal the much sought after beauty and glamour of the visiting *Westfrauen*. Symptomatic of the film's treatment of an apolitical teenagehood, Miriam does not so much stand against the socialist system – despite her western alliance – as outside it. Firstly, as object of male fantasy, her character is unable to escape the patriarchal positioning of the Madonna/whore dichotomy, alternating between a Gretchen-like blond, blue-eyed innocence and a hot-panted raunchiness. And secondly, her apparent resistance to the social and political status quo, represented by her western clothes and boyfriend, is shown to be entirely superficial and with no political motivation as her behaviour is called into question by the East German authorities. At this point Miriam immediately offers the *selbstkritische Beitrag* which was required of all straying East German citizens and, to reaffirm her commitment to the state, promptly stands for election to the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*.

“Von Oberflächlichkeit habe ich die Schnauze voll!”, she retorts as Micha, under the influence of alcohol and homemade hallucinogenics, quite literally falls at her feet at Mario's party. And yet ultimately, this is exactly what she settles for. Whether the material allure of her West German lover or the pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric and air-guitar playing antics of wannabe pop-star, Micha, Miriam's need for fantasy fulfilment is consistently shown to be the central driving force behind the extremely limited and two-dimensional narrative trajectory which her character pursues. Andreas Peitz recognises this as a much broader criticism which could be levelled at Thomas Brussig's treatment of GDR history in both *Sonnenallee* and his earlier work of narrative fiction *Helden wie wir*:



Zu besichtigen sind zwei Märchen im versöhnlichen Tonfall der Ostalgie, mit spöttischen Dissonanzen gewürzt. Auf dass der bittersüße Nachgeschmack jener frommen Lüge zurückbleibe, der zufolge vier Jahrzehnte Sozialismus doch recht glimpflich gelaufen sind. (1999)

However, according to Hans Günther Pflaum, Hausmann and Brussig's jovial exposé of East German *Spaßrepublik* is intended to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally (1999, 34). Significantly, the film's geographical focus is extremely narrow, concentrating almost the entire action in this one street and consequently avoiding the potential wider social and political significance of such emotively charged landmarks as *Alexanderplatz* or *Friedrichstraße*. In view of the film's elevation of the private and personal over and above the public and the political, Pflaum's symbolic reading of the film is especially necessary. Cited as contributing significantly to the cinematic treatment of the 'unspektakuläre Normalität des Alltags' (Knoben 2000, 10) in the former GDR, this film has, along with the film version of Brussig's second novel *Helden wie wir* (Sebastian Peterson, 1999), been credited with a repositioning of a positive East German imaginary in the national conscious and an expansion of the filmic vocabulary of East Germany as represented in film.

In tone this film undoubtedly continues the work started by the comedies, but at a time when the *Vereinigungs-Euphorie* of the pre-currency unification period had faded in both East and West, and the harsh reality of life in the *neue Bundesländer* was becoming increasingly apparent. Reflected in German film by an increasingly prevalent portrayal of the GDR past as exclusive site of oppression and social injustice – which would appear to seek to remind people just how badly off they were then (Davidson

1997, 318) – Hausmann’s film takes on an even deeper significance. In its reinvestment of the minutiae of East German life with a nostalgic sentimentality and humour the film would appear firmly rooted within the context of the *Ostalgie* debate<sup>6</sup>, and the narration of a past many people would like to remember<sup>7</sup>. (What *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* did for the Puhdys, *Sonnenallee* does for that emblem of East German practicality and design flair, the *Multifunktionstisch*).

Although emanating this time from an East German director this nostalgic tone echoes the ‘partisan nostalgia’ (James 1996, 53) ascribed to von Trotta’s *Das Versprechen*. This reflects Barton Byg’s argument that a common trait of the post-*Wende* films is ‘a certain melancholy and nostalgic quality, even where they attempt a confrontation with historical wrongs in the GDR’ (1995, 160). In this respect, films such as Hausmann’s could be seen as conforming to the DEFA legacy of avoiding contemporary controversy and, thus, ‘depriving them of both a vehemence in their settling of past accounts and a vision of the future’ (1995, 160). However, interpreted differently, these same films could be argued to offer a radical revision of the cultural presentation of the East and a critical counterpoint to the devaluation of East German experiences after the fall of the Wall<sup>8</sup>.

In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Frederic Jameson argues that the contemporary fascination with the ‘nostalgia film’ is a result of the changes which have been taking place in postindustrial society (1984). According to Jameson, this fascination originates in the social reaction against the fragmentation and depersonalisation of postmodern times and is spurred on by a shamelessly appropriative culture industry, obsessed with superficial pastiche of past cultural styles. For Jameson, the dominance of pastiche – which he divests entirely of the political implications of parody – in postmodern culture is an entirely negative cultural phenomenon. This is largely due to its attempts to colonise history through the creation of intertextuality, an



intertextuality which in turn begets an ‘hysteric overflow of possibilities, the hypertrophy of styles’ (Wilson 1990, 230). In this respect, pastiche ultimately destroys meaning and incites the schizophrenia of contemporary society. The ‘nostalgic mode’ is then a form of cultural production which draws upon a history of aesthetic styles rather than “real” history itself. It relies upon the pastiche of past aesthetic styles as markers of that historical period, placing in the process, ‘flavour’ and ‘suggestion’ over and above historical reality.

In view of its temporally opportune return to the ‘retro chic’ of the 1970s – as articulated through fashion, music and youth – Hausmann’s *Sonnenallee* would appear to conform to Jameson’s model of cultural pastiche within late-capitalist society. Many contemporary cultural critics have reiterated this negative take on the nostalgic mode, emphasising its traditional associations with dominant and conservative forces, which have sought to co-opt nostalgia for their own reactionary politics. The sentimental *adieu* to East German history, facilitated by *Sonnenallee*’s nostalgic focus on detail and lack of critical engagement with wider social and political realities, is of potentially great political significance.

The simplistic rejection of East Germany’s social and political structures is clearly beneficial to those contemporary interest groups concerned with the preservation of the (western) political and ideological status quo. With the GDR safely assigned to the past and written off as a ‘failed experiment’, discourse with the progressive socialist voices of the East is kept to a minimum. These voices were central to the channelling of popular resistance in the final months and days of the republic. Articulated most famously by the writers and intellectuals, such as Christoph Hein, Christa Wolf and Stefan Heym, who addressed the protesters ‘am Alex’ on the 4th and 9th of November, these voices were consistent in their demands for a radical revision of the socialist experiment from ‘real existierende Sozialismus’ to ‘Sozialismus mit menschlichen

Gnaden', but not its wholesale substitution with a western capitalist model.

In a recent article journal Stuart Tannock sets out to reinterpret this rather negative take on cultural nostalgia by stressing its socio-psychological value as an effective way of dealing with the past. Such an approach, he argues, must acknowledge 'the diversity of personal needs and political desires to which nostalgia is a response' (1995, 453). As Jameson himself pointed out the key socio-psychological significance of the pastiche and retro style in contemporary film lies in its articulation of a 'desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past' (Jameson 1984, 66). The utopian nature of this cultural representation of history is in turn symptomatic of a lost object of desire, which must be recaptured. According to Marcia Landy the cultural treatment of history is, in turn, a key site of identity construction and, therefore, integral to the social cohesion of any nation state (Landy 2001, 1).

In the newly reunified Germany history takes on a particularly meaningful role. For East Germans the revisiting, reworking and repositioning of their country's recent history within a much enlarged national cultural sphere must be central to their construction of identity within the post-*Wende* present<sup>9</sup>. The lost object of desire could well represent a universal psychological yearning for a never-to-be-realised infantile – or in the case of *Sonnenallee*, adolescent – state of perfection. As Elisabeth Wilson puts it, it is 'a search for the lost happiness of a romanticised infancy in which contradiction and conflict did not exist' (1990, 228). Tannock articulates this function of nostalgia as the search for 'authentic origins and stable meanings' (1995, 453):

The nostalgic subject turns to the past to find/construct sources of identity, agency, or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted or threatened in the present.



For many in the socio-economic reality of post-*Wende* East Germany, democracy may often appear equivalent to unemployment, freedom of self-determination with social atomisation and rising crime rates, and freedom of choice with a constant reminder of the material lifestyle they may never be able to attain. In this context this potentially emancipatory reading of nostalgia is of particular relevance. According to Hal Foster, this nostalgic escapism can often be equated with a more general and reactionary flight from the modern itself. This he then describes as a flight ‘from the industrial present into a pre-industrial past [...] from lived class conflict into the ideal realm of myth’ (1985, 122-3) or, in Tannock’s words, ‘the prelapsarian world’ (1995, 456). In the terms of this debate, the question poses itself whether this retreat contains elements of the social protest Foster praises in the eclectic historicism of 19th Century art and architecture, or whether it is more akin to the ‘*post-histoire* escapism’ (his emphasis) of nostalgic articulations of contemporary culture (1985, 123).

*Sonnenallee*’s popularity, especially in the *neue Bundesländer*, may truly attest to a cultification of the East<sup>10</sup> and a concomitant *Fälschung* of GDR past. In this respect, the humorously portrayed ineffectiveness of *Volkspolizist* Horkefeld, could be read as a microcosm of the film’s wider treatment of the GDR. As Pflaum points out, ‘aus der sicht seines Filmes war eben die ganze DDR eine einzige, ebenso böse wie lächerliche deutsche Klamotte’ (1999, 35). However, the political implications of this writing off of East German history as a bad joke unworthy of real critical engagement are of potentially great significance to our investigation of the ideological consequences of East/West integration:

Im Nachhinein hat der Gedanke etwas Verführerisches – nicht nur für die Generation, von der *Sonnenallee* erzählt. (1999, 35)

After inciting friends, family, soldiers, and *Stasi* officials alike to dance together in opposition<sup>11</sup> – although exactly what they are supposed to be opposing is never quite clear – Micha and Wuschel (Robert Stadlober) boogie their way through the abandoned and open border controls. As they move forwards, however, the camera is left to pan backwards onto the now deserted and now atmospherically tumble-weed strewn streets of East Berlin. This explicitly historicising move complements the film's humorous exploration of everyday life in its presentation of the GDR as a homely idyll of friendship and solidarity, in which there were no real victims or perpetrators. As Ariane Heimbach phrases it, forgetting is always present in cultural representations of the past: 'Glückliche Menschen haben ein schlechtes Gedächtnis und reiche Erinnerungen' (1999).

Tannock echoes these ideas when he comments on the importance of focusing on that which 'has been edited out of the nostalgic text – on the conflicts of interest and differences of position that are occluded, on the social groups and relations that are to be cut out of the picture, on the hidden values that may, intentionally or not, be in the process of being legitimated' (1995, 457). However, Heimbach's emphasis on memory rather than history has significant implications for our reading of postcoloniality in the post-*Wende* text. Commenting on the necessity of an ideologically sensitive postcolonial critique Marcia Landy writes in her study of film and history, 'the impetus to rewrite (or even abandon) history is related to the fall of Communism and the dizzying speed of world-wide capitalisation that has contributed to the increasing division between rich and poor, between people of colour and whites' (Landy 2000, 19). In the context of this film and its particular emphasis on the subjectivity of historical representation, such a model of postcolonial critique also facilitates the useful distinction between history and



memory, in other words, official histories and popular memories.

As *Sonnenallee*'s central protagonists literally dance out of this carefully constructed, nostalgic prelapsarian world and the viewer – and the western world – reviews the now deserted stage set of East German socialism, the 'lapse' or cut that shall precipitate 'the Fall' into the 'present, postlapsarian world' (Tannock 1995, 456-7) is left unarticulated. This ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the post-*Wende* present is dictated, I would argue, by more than the limited historical focus of the film, however. Echoing the dreams of escape and reconfigured sexualities of the New German Comedy women, nostalgia's socio-psychological signification as a longing for a past 'in which things could be put into play, opened up and moved about' (1995, 456), articulates a desire for a community, identity and agency that the present social reality of the *neue Bundesländer* cannot supply.

This nostalgic preoccupation with the past would appear to tie in with Russell Berman's belief in a contemporary change in our experience of time. Echoing Lyotard's interpretation of the postmodern condition, Berman sees the proliferation of *post* formulations – postmodern, postmarxist, posthistory and so on – as betraying 'an exaggerated cathexis of the past to which we never feel equal' [his emphasis] (1993, 3). Lyotard himself refers to this timeless tense as the 'future anterior' (1986). The focus of these films on GDR history enables a repositioning of a positive East German imaginary which the treatment of contemporary *Ostprobleme* would render more problematic. In this respect, these films represent a significant counterbalance to what critics have termed the political, economic and cultural colonisation of the East by the West (Rosenberg 1992).

This historicisation – or if we like re-historicisation – of East Germany ties in with Berman's interpretation of the 'simultaneously debilitating and exculpatory function in the present' (1993, 3) of the current preoccupation with history in Germany.

On the one hand, it enables a reconstruction of national identity in the *neue Bundesländer*, beyond the western capitalist critique of communism. On the other hand, however, its exculpatory effects with regard to the present are potentially just as attractive to those conservative forces with a vested interest in the maintenance of the political and social status quo. Such groups would clearly wish to avoid any real reorganisation of temporality.

In other words, as long as the true social reality of social deprivation, unemployment and racial tension, is glossed over – whether through contemporary-staged light-hearted comedies or nostalgic visions of the past – the economic and social policies of the ruling political party remain unchallenged. In this way the apparent threat to the ideal of western capitalist democracy symbolised by these positive or at least uncritical readings of communist history are mediated. This occurs firstly through an expurgation of all traces of the political from their treatment of the everyday life and culture of the East (and West), and secondly, by their avoidance of any issues relating to the contemporary situation in the *neue Bundesländer*.

But perhaps the very artifice of *Sonnenallee*'s self-consciously ironic trip down socialist memory lane, filmed entirely on set at Babelsberg studios, could be taken as wider metaphor for the surreal atmosphere of a claustrophobically oppressive and restrictive society, in which social reality was never anything but a politically mediated contingency. Andreas Peitz:

Die Bilder Sebastian Petersens [...] dokumentieren den Realitätsverlust; die infantile Verblendung dessen, der in eine Gesellschaft eingesperrt ist und sich darin sein Wolkenkuckucksheim bastelt. (1999)



Yet, as in von Trotta's film it is in the treatment of the characters' schizophrenic occupation of a political stance somewhere between *Anpassung* and *Verweigerung* that *Sonnenallee* appears to come closest to a degree of social realism. The intensely complicated web of contradictions in which the GDR's inhabitants were sometimes forced to live is perhaps most insightfully and humorously illustrated by Herr Ehrenreich's (Henry Hübchen) drunken explanation of the system for the posting of flags on the national *Parteitag*. As a "secret" member of the *Stasi* Herr Ehrenreich's neighbour is precluded from such an overt demonstration of party loyalty. However, as the neighbours of a *Stasi* official, the Ehrenreichs are forced to post a flag, but only as a result of the knowledge they possess as to their neighbour's secret occupation.

On a more serious level, Mario's ultimate compromise of what appeared to be the group's shared principles when he starts working for the *Stasi* in order to secure a future for his wife and child, represents a much more serious level of conformity. However, the film's position on this apparent 'selling out' is markedly ambiguous. Micha's childish and humorously ineffective attack on his former friend, to a soundtrack of a mournful 70s pop ballad, appears to situate Mario's transformation as an inevitable result of growing up, and Micha's resistance as an inability to do so. The reintegration of Mario and his wife into Micha's final dance procession further negates any critical stance the film may have adopted vis-à-vis Mario's actions.

In many respects, the film's structure – thematically preoccupied with the hopes and aspirations of adolescence – displays interesting parallels with Hall and Whannel's conclusions on the phenomenon of teenage culture. In essence, it represents a 'contradictory mixture of the authentic and the manufactured' (1964, 276) and one whose reinvestment of East German history with a positive socio-cultural worth is problematised by the wider context of mainstream narrative entertainment in which it exists.

“Guck mal! Ein Zoni!”, remarks the stereotypical Wessi enjoying the *Mauerschau* viewing platform provided for western tourists. As if in response to the demands of this audience the GDR and its inhabitants put on a truly entertaining performance in Hausmann’s film. But just as the elevated position of the West Germans is humorously debunked by the cinematic gaze reversal in *Sonnenallee*, and we are forced to reflect on our increasingly common positioning of the East as museum piece and its people as zoo animals, so too are western expectations of a filmically “objective” portrayal of a “liberated” people’s political past.

*Sonnenallee* may well indulge in a rather superficial celebration of the still relatively underrepresented normality of life in the GDR, but its popularity in the East (Peitz 1999; Rall 1999) would seem to indicate that it also connects with a community’s desire to reposition life in the socialist state in a less simplistically condemnatory context. According to Veronika Rall, ‘er [der Film] praesentiert einerseits die “ostalgitische” Perspektive, der die DDR-Geschichte zum reinen Dekor gerät’ but also and just as significantly, ‘votiert er gegen die massive Entwertung der Ost-Biografien nach dem Fall der Mauer’ (1999).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Aber die Leute sind nicht gefährlich. Sie haben keine Geheimnisse. Sie haben nur Beziehungsprobleme.” (Marius Müller-Westernhagen: *Der Mann auf der Mauer*)

<sup>2</sup> Both Dieter Mann and Corinna Harfouch were well-known figures of GDR cinema long before the Fall of the Wall.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Klischee türmt sich auf Klischee, interessanterweise sowohl Westklischees vom Osten als auch Ostklischees vom Westen.’ (Martenstein 1995)

<sup>4</sup> ‘Sie schreiben eine Liebesgeschichte, die “direkt und mitreißend”, “emotional und trotzdem symbolisch” sein und zugleich der historischen Wahrheit Rechnung tragen sollte.’ (Kilb 1995)

<sup>5</sup> “Und ich dachte, die im Westen küssten besser” (Theresa Weißbach: *Sonnenallee*)



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<sup>6</sup> See note 2, Introduction, Part III.

<sup>7</sup> As Arianne Heimbach argues, '[w]ie die DDR wirklich war, kann keiner sagen. LHs Komödie "S" zeigt, wie mancher im Osten sie wohl gerne erinnert' (1999). This reference to the forgetting inherent in the 'ostalgie' perspective takes on an added significance later in the film with the non-diegetic use of the *Pudhys*' cult classic *Geh zu ihr*. Made famous in the context of another East German teenage romance, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1974) this song challenged the norms of decency and sexual conservativeness of the day in its thinly veiled eroticism. However, in line with the *Sonnenallee*'s more general positive take on life in the East German socialist state, the *Pudhys* were also one of the bands most closely associated with an affirmative stance towards the GDR government.

<sup>8</sup> 'Er präsentiert einerseits die "ostalgie" Perspektive, der die DDR-Geschichte zum reinen Dekor gerät, andererseits votiert er gegen die massive Entwertung der Ost-Biografien nach dem Fall der Mauer.' (Rall 1999)

<sup>9</sup> 'Nostalgia, by sanctioning soothing and utopian images of the past, lets people adapt both to rapid social change and to changes in individual life histories- changes, in the latter case, that may well lead into social roles and positions (of adolescence, adulthood, old age) in which individual agency, sense of identity, and participation in community are severely restricted.' (Tannock 1995, 459)

<sup>10</sup> 'Zehn Jahre nach ihrem Ende führt die DDR ein zweites Leben als Kultobjekt.' (Peitz 1999)

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the subversive potential of dance see Franko 1993.

## Chapter 8

# *The Possibility of Critical Engagement*

## *Post- 'Wende'*

The thematic concerns and comic narrative trajectories of the post-*Wende* comedies would appear on the first reading to suggest a lack of explicit social and political engagement. In this respect, they fail to critically engage with either the legacy of the German Democratic Republic's past or the immediate post-Wall present. Seen in the context of a wider cinematic landscape of depoliticised gender comedies, this apparent lack of true critical engagement has been argued to represent a post-New German Cinema transition to a period of increasingly conservative cultural legitimisation (Davidson 1997, 307). Eric Rentschler has described contemporary German cinema as a 'Cinema of Consensus' (2000), characterised by a formulaic reliance on mainstream narrative genre cinema and an avoidance of all difficult social or political themes.

Clearly, the 1990s has seen a revival of a domestic commercial mainstream, eclectic and uninhibited in its search for themes of identification for its reanimated German audiences. The cinema of consensus reading of contemporary German cinema does not, however, reflect an accurate cross-section of contemporary German film production. The plethora of documentaries dealing with the aftermath of the *Wende* and the roles of prominent East German politicians, the *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* and the *Stasi* in the running of the communist regime, has been well referenced within German film studies (Ritzenhoff 1997). However, both western and eastern feature filmmakers have



also produced works which critically engage with the legacy of the GDR state.

### Alternative Visions of the Past

Most of the East German feature filmmakers to approach the subject have focused their energies around an exploration of the workings of the former GDR state and its origins rather than engaging with the social problems of post-*Wende* eastern Germany. Frank Beyer's *Der Verdacht* (1991) goes back into the GDR past to examine the complex web of torn loyalties, tensions and betrayals invoked by the *offiziell* and *inoffiziell* organs of the East German *Überwachungsstaat*, while Herwig Kipping's *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* (1991) explores the brutal and repressive reality behind the utopian imagery and language officially ascribed to the "golden years" of the republic's origins. Author of the censored GDR-films *Spur der Steine* (1965) and *Geschlossene Gesellschaft* (1978), Beyer has tended to focus upon a critique of the schizophrenic fluctuation between *Anpassung* and *Verweigerung* that was the lived reality of a significant proportion of the East German population. In his 1995 film, *Nikolaikirche*, he pursues this exploration of the dilemma of East Germans trying to reconcile social morality and state ideology on a daily basis.

Interestingly, Beyer is clear in his intention not to attempt a documentary account of last days of the Republic. Instead, he wishes to construct a fictional *Kleingeschichte*, which could nonetheless be useful in characterising a significant stage in German history. Contemporary and personal in its focus, this modern *Kammerspielfilm*, which examines the 1980s resistance movement centred around the *Nikolaikirche* in Leipzig, presents 'Familiengeschichte als Zeitgeschichte' (Svhenk 1996, 17). The central family and its variant members function as a microcosm of the

wider socialist state.

The film opens with a close-up of the loading and firing of a Makarov pistol – the standard issue for police and *Stasi* officials in the GDR. The history of this gun dates back to 1942 and its development in Soviet Russia for use by a Soviet army desperately short of guns. After the Second World War this gun was adopted by the police and secret services in Soviet Russia and subsequently exported to various other Communist Bloc countries. In other words, the gun is a symbol of an old regime only too willing to adopt the draconian methods of repression practised in accordance with an often-harsh Soviet-style communism – a style a long way removed from the ‘Sozialismus mit menschlichen Gnaden’ demanded by Stefan Heym and other East German intellectuals in the months leading up to the fall of the Wall. Symptomatically, the gun is held in the hand of highly decorated *Volkspolizist* Albert Bacher (Günther Naumann), one of the most loyal supporters of this old regime. Practising on the firing range, Bacher is admonished mildly by a colleague for achieving only nine points out of ten – ‘Diese Abweichung war schon früher deine Schwäche’. It is ultimately this small ‘Abweichung’ or deviation, however, that will signal the start of a rising tide of opposition that will sweep away the structures of the old socialist state. In this respect, Bacher’s death shortly after firing the gun at the start of the film marks out the fate of the ideas and values of the *Gründergeneration* of the old regime.

The second family member to enter the camera’s frame is Bacher’s son, Sascha (Ulrich Matthes), who has followed him into the security services as an ambitious *Stasi* official. As the apple of his father’s eye, Sascha represents the continuity between generations and the continuation of the established tradition and form of East German socialism. Sascha may have followed in his father’s footsteps but only just in time to see its structures demolished by the tide of change which sweeps through the country in the penultimate months of the republic, sweeping his sister and her disillusioned and



alcoholic husband along in its wake. In a later pivotal scene Sascha is pictured quite literally in his father's shoes as he practises on the same police firing range where Albert Bacher died. On hearing that 700 demonstrators have now gathered in the *Nikolaikirche*, Sascha's colleague exclaims, 'Die Flut steigt', thus reinforcing the images of a relentless and unstoppable tide of change.

The state's mistaken and, in the context of the break up of the Soviet Union, increasingly untenable position, is made clear in the second scene of the film in which the *Nikolaikirche*'s priest, Pfarrer Ohlbaum (Ulrich Mühe), preaches a sermon on the value of truth and political resistance:

Pfarrer Ohlbaum: Warum seid ihr nur so verstockt, ihr Herrschenden?...Wovor schützt ihr euch? Vor der Wahrheit? Vor der Veränderung?

This rather contrived progression from 'the way of the gun' – associated with old age and, ultimately, death – to 'the dove of peace' – embodied in the youth and vitality of the young priest and his even younger environmental activists – signals the relatively simplistic dichotomies of past and future, good and bad which the film employs to structure its narrative.

The service of the greatly respected and party loyal Albert Bacher – 'ein grosser Sohn der Arbeiterklasse' (*Nikolaikirche*) – is recognised by the state after his death by the naming of a street in his honour. With such an eminent father it is hardly surprising that his daughter, Astrid Bacher (Barbara Auer), has hitherto enjoyed trouble-free promotion to her current position as architect to the central town planning committee for Leipzig. The reconciliation of her professional and moral integrity with the party line she is expected to toe becomes increasingly difficult, however. As Astrid is forced to

confront the disparity between the state's exaggerated, utopian claims and the actual lived experience of the average GDR citizen she finds her conscience increasingly difficult to ignore.

This is most strikingly illustrated in the sequence which begins with television footage of the self-congratulatory pomp and circumstance of the carefully orchestrated 1<sup>st</sup> May celebrations and which ends with Astrid's mournful cycle ride through a run down, suburban slum. Ultimately, the burden of this awareness becomes too much to bear and Astrid refuses to sign the committee's largely fabricated annual housing improvement report. Her explanatory comment that, 'vielleicht hätte ich das vor Jahren machen müssen' (Barbara Auer: *Nikolaikirche*) marks the beginning of her changing attitude towards East German socialism but the stress of this change also signals the start of her growing mental and physical deterioration. It is through the character of Astrid and her transformation from loyal public servant to active political dissident that Beyer's film articulates its harshest criticism of the socialist regime, its reliance on the misrepresentation of facts and, ultimately, its use of intimidation and coercion to maintain power.

This increasing disparity between state-mediated 'realities' and the everyday experience of East German citizens is particularly marked for those of the post-*Gründergeneration* age group, with greater access to international media sources and less investment in the founding ideologies of the republic. Consequently, the material and psychological well-being of the film's central characters, in a time when blind faith is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, is dependent upon their ability to avoid and repress uncomfortable truths. To protect his father's memory and avoid facing up to the possibility of his own misplaced allegiances, Sascha erases the tapes of his mother's meeting with the man his father framed and imprisoned.

Up until this point and despite her daughter's conversion to political activism,



Frau Bacher (Annemome Haase) herself adamantly refuses to believe that the humanist values she believed the socialist state to embody are so sadly lacking. This inability and unwillingness to understand the tide of opposition which is sweeping through the country – “Wir haben das alles aufgebaut mit unseren Händen. Wollt ihr das alles zerstören?” (Annemome Haase: *Nikolaikirche*) – is articulated most clearly in the final scene as she wanders hopelessly lost and uncomprehending amongst the 70,000 demonstrators who throng the streets of Leipzig on the night of 9<sup>th</sup> October 1989.

For others the changes also appear too much to cope with. Astrid's husband's flight from reality drives him to the bottle and into an increasingly estranged relationship with his wife and daughter. Meanwhile Astrid's depression, breakdown and ultimate admission to psychiatric hospital all symbolise her struggle to come to terms with the present and past realities of the country which is her home, just as the rejuvenation of her stagnating marriage represents an optimistic metaphor for the future. This optimistic note is reiterated by the *Nikolaikirche* parishioner and environmental activist whose call for civil honesty and courage is addressed as much to the powers that be as to the congregation before him, as he states, “Herr, lass uns neu anfangen und nie wieder aufhören, öffentlich und privat die Wahrheit zu sagen” (Rolf Ludwig: *Nikolaikirche*).

In respect of its narrative focus, Beyer's film both continues and extends the work of *Sonnenallee* and *Das Versprechen* in its repositioning of GDR history within a widened national cinematic context. Where *Sonnenallee* appears to occupy itself primarily with a celebration of teenage culture and the concomitant “normality” of GDR life, and *Das Versprechen* with a romantic narrative thwarted by its rather arbitrary situation on either side of a physical and ideological wall, Beyer's film constructs its narrative around actual political events. In this respect, the film represents a significantly radical move, entering territory already occupied by official public discourse about

terror and dictatorship, cowardice and culpability, long since established by (western) political and journalistic commentary. Indeed, as pointed out by Thomas Ahbe (1995), to construct any piece of artwork around the subject of the GDR and *Wende* period is clearly to lay oneself open to the political knives of public opinion. *Nikolaikirche* is no exception, having been criticised on several occasions – primarily by those involved in the resistance movement itself – for its lack of correspondence to the actual events and protagonists of 1989.

However, as Beyer himself acknowledges, his film is in no way attempting a documentary account of the past. Instead, it is a ‘Geschichte über Geschichten’. In other words, it parallels Hausmann’s *Sonnenallee* by engaging in a debate about the nature of historical representation, at a time and in a context where the cultural treatment of national histories has taken on a revived political significance. While resisting the wanton *Ostalgie* of Hausmann’s film, and in spite of Beyer’s own uncomfortable relationship with the old regime, *Nikolaikirche* retains a relatively unjudgemental approach to the forces of government control and dissident opposition in the final years of the socialist republic. For example, Astrid’s ultimate decision to join the resistance movement comes only after enjoying a life-long level of privilege, which few inhabitants of the GDR would recognise.

Equally, the attempt to portray the apparatus of the *Stasi* from the inside realistically and free from both hysteria and *Ostalgie* through the figure of Sascha resists simplistic categorisation of perpetrators and victims, guilty and innocent. In this respect the film offers a challenging and ideologically atypical counterpoint to a western capitalist discourse, which seeks the simplistic rejection of any defence of communist practice. As Martin Wiebel, the film’s editor, points out, ‘Frank Beyers Film *Nikolaikirche* konkurriert mit den optischen Erinnerungen, die jeder Zuschauer an die Berichterstattung über die Ereignisse an der DDR hat.’ (Westphal 1996). However, it



would be dangerous to pursue this line of reasoning too far. Beyer himself obviously believes that allegiance to the state and to the state security services in particular was at best a dangerous mistake, and at worst a crime. Yet despite this, he both problematises and personalises the issues he deals with to an extent which reinforces the true complexity of the system of loyalties and betrayals, conformity and resistance, and reaffirms the need for critically engaged and ideologically open investigations of life in the socialist republic.

If there is an absence in the film, aside from its rather narrow social focus on the privileged echelons of DDR society, it has to be the film's lack of engagement with the reality of the post-*Wende* present. While the film's proclaimed narrative focus would appear to justify this, it allows a rather simplistically optimistic conclusion, which avoids all treatment or speculation on the future of its protagonists now the battle for change has been won. Astrid and her husband may be reunited but how will the reunification of Germany – a reunification they had not themselves been fighting for – live up to their expectations? Similarly, how will Sascha and his mother – both symbols of the old regime – be able to adapt to the changes that they will face in the new Germany? Will they face prosecution for the part they played in the maintenance of the institutions of the state? For a film released six years after the fall of the wall it is conceivable that a slightly more open and ambiguous ending could have raised the significance of the film beyond that of a fictionalised documentary of past events. Despite this omission, however, the film remains a key text in the debate surrounding the representation of GDR history in film. Fundamentally, the film succeeds in its reinscription of a politically activist and pro-democratic East German self through its portrayal of key individuals within the political resistance movement. In so doing, it maps out an alternative national psychology, which resists exclusive association with and definition by the apparatus of the state.

Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* (1999) also concludes with the coming of the *Wende*. For Rita Vogt (Bibiana Beglau), however, the consequences of the fall of the wall are far less ambiguous than those experienced by the Bacher family. Ultimately, the collapse of the East German regime signals the unearthing of her final hiding place. Stripped of the protection of her *Stasi* mentor, Erwin Hull (Martin Wuttke), she is shot by a policeman as she tries to cross a West German border control on a stolen motorcycle. The death of this politically engaged idealist parallels the demise of the socialist state, whose apparently unassailable structures are swept away overnight, in a blaze of hurriedly burned *Stasi* files. For Rita, the innocent idealist, there is no place left to go, as Erwin indicates, "Da geht es nach Osten, da geht es nach Westen. Gesucht wirst du überall" (Martin Wuttke: *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*). Evoking the romantic image of 60s revolutionary spirit, Rita is pictured astride a speeding motorcycle with her hair blowing free in the wind and heading fearlessly towards almost certain death<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Rita's sympathetic treatment is continued throughout the film and we are left with an image of a woman martyred to her ideals. To read any simplistic ideological critique of the unification into this ending, however, would be to ignore the problematic portrayal of left-wing radicalism – both as an extra political dissident force and as a state supported ideology – which the film offers us.

Schlöndorff's film was chosen to open the Berlinale film festival in 2000. This reflects, in part, a revival of interest in all things East German but also the personal cultural kudos of one of the few New German Cinema directors to have maintained feature film production in the 1990s. Significantly, the initial and often vociferous criticisms which the film attracted were for its apparent lack of political engagement, as Andreas Kilb reports:

Als *Die Stille nach dem Schuß* auf der Berlinale uraufgeführt wurde, monierten



die Kritiker, der Film vernachlässige die politische Dimension seine Sujets, er sei gefällig, populistisch, banal. (2000)

Several of these criticisms were directed at the film's opening montage. This sequence details the 'heitere Jahre' (Bibiana Beglau: *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*) of Rita's life as a *Rote Armee Fraktion* activist. This 'wilde Farce über die Mitglieder der RAF' (Kilb 2000) commences with a bank robbery in which the gun-toting terrorists take time out to offer their hostages chocolates while bombarding them with clichéd Marxist dogma. "Dieses Geld gehört der Arbeiterklasse!", exclaims Rita's lover Andi (Harald Schrott). Reminiscent of the opening scene of Hausmann's *Sonnenallee*, the 70s rock soundtrack completes this highly entertaining and highly romanticised vision of the activities of the *Baader-Meinhof* terrorist group, appearing to seek to equate their actions with the more general perceived post-60s liberalisation and anti-establishment drift of society at large.

According to Hans Günther Pflaum, Schlöndorff's superficial and extremely cursory treatment of these West German terrorists 'betreibt weder Aufklärung noch Abrechnung mit der RAF'. Criticisms like those of Pflaum and Kilb were hardly surprising given Schlöndorff's unambiguously sympathetic interpretation of Inge Viett's equally controversial memoirs. As a central figure in the RAF activities of the 1980s, Viett's action-packed memoirs attracted much media attention after their publication in 1999. However, there has been much criticism of her extremely one-sided and conveniently elliptical narratives, which offer little if no critical reflection on the rights and wrongs of her actions (Preece 2003). Demonstrating his close but extremely partisan dramatisation of the events of Viett's time with the RAF, Schlöndorff describes the film as a story about a certain type of woman 'who is totally altruistic, seemingly unselfish [...] who always feels the need to take care of others' (2001, 19).

The criticisms levelled at Schlöndorff's film are clearly intended to point to

unfavourable comparisons with the much more in-depth, realistic and politically engaged work of earlier films, such as Fassbinder's *Die dritte Generation* (1979), von Trotta's *Die bleierne Zeit* (1981), or even Schlöndorff's own work in *Deutschland im Herbst* (1978) and *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (1975). However, Schlöndorff himself makes clear that it is not his intention in *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* to pursue the preoccupations of these earlier films. As he himself argues, this film is more about 'closing a chapter on terrorism rather than reopening it' (Schlöndorff interviewed by Crowdon and Portus 2001, 19). Instead, this is a film 'about life in the GDR' (2001, 19).

With the firing of the first shot, however, and the death of the lawyer who attempts to hinder their jailbreak attempt, the music stops and the *Guerilla-Romantik* comes to an abrupt end. As the group flees to the East, where they are granted a brief respite before being shipped on to Beirut for further extra-paramilitary training, the tensions between them mount as recriminations fly, consciences are questioned, and Rita is forced to confront the reality of her lover's infidelity. For Rita the 'grosser Spaß' of the early years is past and she becomes increasingly disillusioned with the movement. Her political disillusionment, as she realises that her actions cost lives is paralleled by her disappointment in love. Significantly, her love interest, Andi, is also the group's leader. However, this romantic motivation adds another much more human dimension to Rita's political engagement in the terrorist movement. In this way, Rita's narrative presentation as at least partially innocent 'Opfer der Verhältnisse' (Pflaum 2000) is reinforced and she is thus able to retain the audience's sympathies. After a second shooting, this time in Paris, Rita is forced to return to the GDR, and adopting the new identity provided by the *Stasi*, abandons her terrorist past in favour of the "normality" of life in the 'Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat'. It is at this point that the true focus of the film – namely the central protagonists attempts to rebuild her life 'post-terrorism' – comes to



the fore, as Pflaum points out:

*Die Stille* erzählt von einer schwierigen Ruhe nach der Gewalt, in die doch immer die Vergangenheit eindringt und die gemeinsam mit der DDR Ende nimmt.’ (Pflaum 2000)

As indicated by the allegorical positioning of personal and political, these attempts to atone for her past and regain the right for a normal social and emotional existence are, ultimately, fruitless. However, Rita’s enthusiastic vision of life in the communist utopia requires reassessment long before the events of 1989. Indeed, despite the claims of Arianne Heimbach that the film’s portrayal of GDR life is limited to that of ‘hübsch ausgestattetes Schrebergarten-Idyll’ (2000), the values and ideals of the socialist dream which actually survive Rita’s experience of the all too fallible reality of ‘real existierender Sozialismus’, are few and far between. Beyond the cosy *Gemütlichkeit* of the RAF’s initial introduction to the East German state as guests at an improvised *Stasi Grillparty* in one of the *Führungsquartier* of Berlin, Rita quickly comes to recognise that the reality of life for the ordinary citizens of the GDR might be very different from what she has been led to expect.

As Andreas Kilb points out, the world that she experiences is one full of contradictions. In this world *Stasi* Generals proclaim their romantic credentials and life in the regimented greyness of the *Plattenbauten* exudes security and a certain cosy charm:

Was sieht sie? Eine Märklin-Welt. Betonmauern im Gleichschritt, von hellem Grün umbuscht, Trabis und Apfelbäume, schnuklige Häuschen am Waldrand und Gemütlichkeit unter Linden. Dahinter die graue Gefrässigkeit des Betriebs.

Alltag im VEB Modedruck (Kilb 2000).

In the dull monotony of work in the clothing factory Rita appears to find at least partial escape from the nightmares of her past. Unfortunately, however, her quickly adopted friend Tatjana does not enjoy a similarly motivating imperative to seek out the best in the conformist atmosphere of *sozialistischer Alltag*. As a result she finds release in alcohol and all of Rita's attempts to save her count for nothing. Indeed, it is her emotional attachment to Tatjana which leads to her ultimate imprisonment at the hands of the entirely unsentimental *Stasi*.

The dream of *bürgerliches Glück* – arguably the socialist equivalent of the very bourgeois conservatism and conformity that she was previously campaigning against – is to be denied to Rita in all its shapes and forms. Her engagement to the aspiring young physicist Jochen (Alexander Beyer), who dreams of pursuing a career in the Soviet motherland, is similarly cut short when she attempts to share the burden of her past with her future husband. His reaction – “Das darf ich doch gar nicht wissen” (Alexander Beyer: *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*) – displays above all a concern for himself and thus seals the fate of the relationship<sup>2</sup>.

In all of these respects, the film offers counter-cultural images to the state disseminated propaganda of a socialist utopia and challenges the idyllic visions of the East prevalent amongst West German left-wing intellectuals of the period, amongst whose number Schlöndorff would have undoubtedly counted himself. Pflaum:

Der Film konfrontiert die radikale linke, zutiefst der Bundesrepublik und überhaupt dem Westen verhaftete Utopie mit dem real existierenden Sozialismus der DDR. (2000, 36)



This problematic confrontation of left-wing idealism with the reality of East German socialism is equally central to Oskar Roehler's film, *Die Unberührbare* (2000). Offering a deeply problematic and critical approach to the subject of German reunification and yet one which represents a significant departure from the *Ost-Perspektive* films of directors such as Andreas Kleinert and Frank Beyer, this autobiographical account of the last days of Roehler's mother's life continues the work of Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* by dealing with the fall of the Wall as a site of West German trauma. In particular, it depicts the shocked recognition on the part of western left-wing sympathisers of the socialist ideal that the East Germans, despite their ideological education, were just as materialistic and lacking in idealism as those in the West. "Die kämpfen für Mon Cherie", exclaims Hanna Flanders (Hannelore Elsner: *Die Unberührbare*) – the fictional left-wing author based on Giesela Elsner – as the wall comes down and she realises the socialist ideal which gave power to her criticism of western bourgeois consumer society is forever lost. Arriving in Berlin, in the desolate wilderness of eastern high-rise housing blocks, she is divested of her last illusions regarding the reality of life in the socialist utopia. The poverty-stricken inhabitants aggressively dismiss her writing, mocking the hypocrisy of this Dior-coated socialist, as they then ultimately take her in and provide the only warmth and 'Berührung' she experiences before her suicide.

In Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*, Rita's attempts to believe in the socialist ideal are perhaps most tellingly challenged as she generously donates 10 DM to the state's charity collection for Nicaragua. In so doing, she evokes the scorn of her work colleagues who recognise the unlikelihood of the money actually reaching its alleged destination. Unsurprisingly, Rita's subsequent pleas for the socialist cause as infinitely preferable to that of capitalism – "Ihr habt keine Ahnung, was kommen wird.

Ihr wisst nicht, was ihr verliert” (Bibiana Beglau: *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*) – are unanimously ignored.

An interesting aspect of the criticism of *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* has been the emphasis placed upon the collaborative nature of the project, for which the renowned West German director Volker Schlöndorff and the equally well-established East German scriptwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase worked together. In the main these comments were directed at delineating the lines of difference between these two figures from ideologically divergent social systems and, in so doing, uncovering the potential for conflict in the filmmaking process. Kirsten von Hagen’s question to Schlöndorff in a newspaper interview was typical:

“Wie beurteilen Sie die ost-westdeutsche Zusammenarbeit mit dem Drehbuchautor Wolfgang Kohlhaase, der fast vierzig Jahre lang in den Babelsberger Defa-Studios als Dramaturg und Drehbuchautor wirkte?” (von Hagen 2000)

In his answer Schlöndorff acknowledges their differences in terms of their varying *Weltanschauungen*, displaying an awareness of the socio-ideological conditioning with which each comes to the other’s social reality:

“Trotzdem haben wir natürlich verschiedene Weltbilder. So wie er gewisse Schwierigkeiten hatte, die Szenen mit den Terroristen in den Griff zu bekommen, so hatte ich oft Schwierigkeiten nachzuvollziehen, wenn er das ganz normale Leben in der DDR beschreibt.” (Schlöndorff, cited by von Hagen 2000)



Clearly, this is a debate about ideology and the competing versions of social reality and “normality” experienced by the populations of East and West Germany. However, on a more general level it is also a debate about the nature of difference and who, in the sphere of cultural production, controls its representation. In this respect, the fundamental equation of the failed left-wing *Baader-Meinhof* movement and the apparently equally unsuccessful socialist state must be viewed as of extreme ideological significance.

For Georg Seeßlen the parallels in the development of this anti-capitalist movement for West German change, on the one hand, and the more general project of East German socialism, on the other, are clear:

Beide Wahnsysteme entwickelten sich zu geschlossenen Systemen, die niemanden mehr entließen, in denen es keine Selbstreflexion und Selbstkorrektur mehr gab... (2000)

This notion of *Wahnsinn* is subsequently developed by Seeßlen, who refers to ‘der Wahn einer Gesellschaft auf deutschen Boden, die sich sozialistisch nannte und vor allem eine Karikatur bürokratischer Kleinbürgertyrannei war’ (2000, 36). Seeßlen’s interpretation of the development of the socialist system resonates with the film’s portrayal of the inherent censorship, propaganda and double standards of the East German communist regime. However, Schlöndorff and Kohlhaases’ portrayal of life in the GDR is much less simplistically condemnatory. Ultimately, it is in the drab communal work-life of the socialist state that Rita comes closest to a life of normality and comradeship and it is the fall of the state and the collapse of communism that precipitates her ultimate demise. Schlöndorff, himself, asserts his apparently neutral position vis-à-vis the politics and ideologies of East and West by arguing that he has ‘keine Kategorien, um zu bewerten, was gut und schlecht, gut und böse war’ (von

Hagen, 2000). While this comment must be read with a degree of caution it at least points to the intentions of filmmaker and scriptwriter to revisit the value judgements inherent in such traditional binaries as terrorist versus law-abiding citizen, communist versus democrat, and more generally, East versus West.

This latter category of East versus West is particularly relevant to Seeßlen's critique of the communist state's final desperate attempts to stem the tide of political change, 'die am Ende weniger konkrete Gegner als gegen die äußere Wirklichkeit selber gerichtet waren' (2000, 36). This emphasis on a state ideology which attempts to oppose 'external reality' signals what Seeßlen sees as the unnaturalness and ultimately doomed nature of the East German socialist experiment. While this reading of the penultimate years of the socialist regime might indeed appear to be borne out by events and is replicated in the vast majority of films which deal with the collapse of the GDR and which are referenced in this section it is a critique which is also implicitly ideological. In other words, to categorise any system as fundamentally unnatural, other and flawed is to presume the existence of a comparative system which has none of the aforementioned failings. What is imperative in any analysis of the filmic treatment of East German history and *neue Bundesländer* present is to recognise the possibility of an unspoken ideological norm shaping and guiding both films and their critical interpretation – namely, the norm of western capitalist democracy.

Breckenridge and van de Veer's make this point when describing the politics of postcolonial orientalisng discourses which seek to institute comparative frameworks 'in which "the West" is contrasted with "the rest"' (1993, 2). They then cite the example of the western study of South Asian democracy and politics in general as a "failed experiment" through its implicit comparison to an idealised western reality. This potential hidden presence of a ideologically western comparative context must be kept in mind in any analysis of the post-*Wende* cinema and its variant critical interpretations.



To pursue this hypothesis of an unspoken and ideologically implicated comparative framework at work within both critical filmic treatments of the GDR and film criticism's interpretation of these texts, let us now turn to a selection of films which critically engage with the post-*Wende* present of the *neue Bundesländer*.

### The Problems of the Present

According to the East German journalist Christoph Dieckmann, the controversy surrounding the political correctness of a German national pride is an exclusively West German preoccupation<sup>3</sup>. This is primarily as a consequence of the German Democratic Republic's unique relationship to national history. As its apparent ideological antithesis, fascism was viewed not only as inherently evil but also a logical consequence of capitalism. Thus an integral part of the grounding mythos of the socialist state was the unquestioned assumption that its break with the ideological tenets of fascism precluded East Germany from any implication in the crimes of Nazi Germany: 'Nazis hatten wir nicht, die saßen *drüben*, von Globke bis Hoechst. Dafür beutelte die DDR ein Nationalkomplex' [his emphasis] (2001, 5).

This original construction of identity in opposition meant that at least in the early years of the republic there was a public perception of having more in common with their communist allies, such as Vietnam and North Korea, than with their West German compatriots. With Honecker's accession in 1973, however, the state recognition of the importance of a uniquely 'German' cultural identity led to a reinfusion of the German classical tradition à la Goethe, Bach and Marx – in other words, a shift back towards to a pre-1945 reality.

This creation of a proud national cultural identity free from the stain of all fascist collusion was central to the creation of a powerful social cement to bind the East

German people to the socialist project. However, more recently, this lack of public *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has been seen as implicated in the contemporary increase in right-wing extremism in the East. Dieckmann, however, categorically dismisses this idea, citing the material impoverishment of the East and not the historical construction of national identity, as central to the rise of the neo-fascist right. In other words, Dieckmann lays the blame firmly at the door of West Germany and its economic policies in the *neue Bundesländer*: 'Statt diesen Dynamo der DDR-Sozialisten umzurüsten, wurde er mit Kohlschem Schwung verschrottet. Das hat den Osten weit nach rechts gerückt' (2001, 5). This interpretation is reflected to varying degrees in the small percentage of feature film productions which critically engage with the social reality of the post-*Wende Ostprobleme*. In its most extreme, form this ideological, economic and political colonisation of the East has been represented as a literal butchering of East Germans by the West. Christoph Schlingensief's low-budget splatter-movie, *Das deutsche Kettensägemassaker* (1990), clearly represents one of the most harshly satirical West German treatments of the *Wende*. As the title of the dystopic sequel, *Terror 2000 – Intensivstation Deutschland* (1992) suggests, the future of this capitalist take-over is viewed with equally little optimism. In the recently published *Light Motives*, Randall Halle assigns these films to a distinct sub-genre of Unification Horror, which rehearse, in his opinion, 'the anxieties induced by the defamiliarisation of the *Wende*' (2003, 291). In contrast with more conventionally realist genres, these films do not attempt to provide 'a document of the social but rather a provocation of the psychological context' (2003, 291).

Two films which engage with a more realist approach yet one which is equally concerned to expose the psychological consequences of unification and life in the post-*Wende neue Bundesländer*, are Andreas Kleinert's *Verlorene Landschaft* (1992) and *Neben der Zeit* (1995). These films develop a critical counter-balance to the popular



*Ostalgie* renderings of GDR life. This is achieved by tracing the transition from the ideological prescriptiveness of the communist state to the equally confining economic strictures of the new post-Wall world. Both films exploit isolated rural locations, designed to emphasise the continuity between the two apparently opposed ideological systems, at least as experienced by the provincial population of the GDR. As a result, almost all engagement with “major” publicly received historical events is resisted.

The physical and psychological barriers constructed in *Verlorene Landschaft* to protect the family from the incursions of the socialist state do not lose their justification after the re-unification of the two apparently ideologically opposed Germanys. Membership of any state or society, it would appear, requires an abandonment of personal integrity and individuality in favour of the larger social group. The ruling powers of this larger social group, however, be they capitalist or communist, are motivated primarily by self-interest and not by altruistic concern with the “ordinary” masses.

Kleinert’s film opens with the scene of the Elias’ (Werner Dissel) conception as his parents make love amidst the ruins of a bombed-out house sometime during the Second World War. There then follows the first moment of ellipsis as the film flashes forward 9 months to Elias’ birth. The visual tropes of blood, sweat and decay accompany a variety of religious motifs cited around the birth of the child. Throughout the film these tropes remain as the signifiers for the external social reality from which the parents withdraw with their son, and from which they attempt to shield him. This withdrawal from society is characterised by a fundamental inarticulateness. This is initially signalled by a complete absence of dialogue and consequently developed on the level of miscommunication, surreal innuendo and failed attempts to construct empathetic relations. It is only within the artificially “safe” environment of the fenced-in enclave that any fluid conversation can take place, and even here it is constantly marred

by the child's inquisitive questioning about the world beyond the fence, questions which the parents refuse to answer.

Flash forward. Western Germany. The post-reunification present. The sweat-soaked adult Elias awakes from a nightmare to receive a phone call requesting his return to his parents' home in the East. His parents have died and he is to inherit the house. So begins Elias' prodigal return to his past, a past dominated by the claustrophobic and oppressive presence of his parents, determined to "protect" him from the social and political realities which caused – and, as becomes apparent, continue to cause – them such pain.

Stylistically this return to the past is facilitated by a complex flashback structure. Pointing to the film's more general take on historical reconstruction, and returning us to our earlier discussion of East German history and film, time, history, and narrative are consistently problematised by the breakdown of continuity editing. While the internal trajectories of both past and present narratives remain linear and incremental – the continuous presents demanded by the imaginary reality of the cinematic narrative – their essential cohesion is questioned by the apparently random order in which the flashbacks occur.

Equally, both past and present narratives are consistently elliptical. This complication is intensified by the apparently unmotivated transition, within both narratives, of alternately realistic and anti-realistic modes of narration. On one of his journeys back into his childhood Elias is accompanied by smoking coffins and steaming pools of blood. Back in the present the apparently sleeping Elias suddenly finds himself on a night-time street and surrounded by the furniture of a diaspora of refugees fleeing the East. It is left to an elderly lady to ask why all of the inhabitants are leaving. This question finds an echo of an answer in Kleinert's next film, *Neben der Zeit*. Trapped in an equally isolated community – a community which under the communist regime had



been assured an artificially maintained existence catering for the needs of Russian troops, and which now finds itself abandoned and forgotten in the Berlin-centred political economy of the new eastern Germany – the central protagonist Sophie states simply: “Hier ist ja nichts mehr” (Julia Jäger: *Neben der Zeit*).

The fragmented and discontinuous nature of this narrative, in which the lines between the real and the imagined are blurred, and action and affect become disengaged, clearly situates the film within an anti-realist tradition of filmmaking in which the subjective nature of narratives – be they historical or otherwise – is foregrounded. On another level this episodic, fragmented narrative could be seen as symptomatic of a more general postmodern ambivalence towards classical historiography. Rejecting the ‘monolithic views and penchant for teleology’ (Landy 2000, 2) of traditional ‘master narrative’<sup>4</sup> historiography such a theoretical position offers, in Marcia Landy’s words, a questioning of ‘prevailing beliefs in realism and in the role of history as moral arbiter’ (19).

In contrast to the linear model of historical progression presented in films such as Hausmann’s *Sonnenallee* and Schlöndorff’s *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*, Kleinert’s film perceives history as a cyclical process. The only two historical events of national significance to impinge at all upon the lives of Elias and his parents are the establishment of the German Democratic Republic in 1949, and through the cipher of Elias’s prodigal return as an adult and successful West German politician, the reunification of the two Germanys. Both are treated equally negatively.

The pain, sweat and isolation that mark Elias’ conception and entry into the world at the start of the narrative are still present at the end. The parents’ ambivalence regarding the wider socio-political systems of both former and contemporary republics is equally unresolved. Indeed, if anything this ambivalence is intensified by the return of Elias, himself the epitome of social aspiration and professional success. The rural world

of eastern Germany is a world marked by decay, ruin, stagnation, and despair. Elias' cynical reception of the optimistic political rhetoric of social progress he himself employs in a televised address, does little to efface this<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of the narrative relationship between past and present the flashback device used is clearly significant. Building upon the inherent past tense signification of the photographic image (Barthes 1975) the function of the cinematic narrative is, fundamentally, to create one time in another time. In this respect, the flashback could be taken as a metaphor for the fictional narrative in which a representation is made of the past which intervenes into the present flow of the film's narrative. Clearly, this juncture between past and present implies the presence of both history and memory – a point which we have already noted in relation to the postcolonial revisitation of suppressed histories – and one which has clear implications for the discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in relation to the construction of historical narratives.

The causal logic of the traditional flashback usually structures the return to the past as of explicatory value to the present. In the case of Kleinert's film, the initial flashback motivated by Elias's shock reunion with his parents – his parents are not actually dead, but instigated this macabre joke in order to see their son one last time – is to be interpreted as an exploration of the reasons for the coldness and distance of Elias' response to the news of his parents' apparent deaths. In the course of the multiplicity of flashbacks subsequently offered by the film, the viewer gains an insight into the oppressive and restrictive atmosphere of Elias's over-protected childhood and his occasional forays into the outside world which culminate in his ultimate escape as an adolescent to the West. In this respect, the flashbacks instigated by Elias' response to various significant objects from his childhood provide an additional psychoanalytic dimension to the central protagonist's personality.

Augmenting the subjectivity of narrative viewpoint already suggested by the



floating temporalities of the modernist narrative structure, this first flashback is accompanied by a transition from colour to black-and-white. A standard cinematic device to suggest an earlier time period, this new mode persists, however, beyond the duration of the initial flashback. In fact, the film remains in black-and-white until the actual death of Elias' parents at the film's conclusion. Once again, a stylistic device is used to question classical representations of the past and maintain a critical distance between viewer and text. The transition to black-and-white film operates, in this respect, as a cipher for Elias' more general state of mind, rather than to effect a narratively realistic reconstruction of historical events.

This emphasis on the psychological rather than sociological, or historical, is equally applicable to Kleinert's most recent exploration of the darker social consequences of reunification. *Wege in die Nacht* (1999) follows a quest to impose meaning and structure by force in a society in which loss of power and position is accompanied by an apparent loss of morality and justice. The film centres its narrative around the easily identifiable and stereotypically authoritarian personality of Walther, ex-*Genosse Direktor* of a now "rationalised" East German factory, who finds himself unemployed and unable to adjust to the new democratic "freedoms" of western society. The film is concerned with a criticism of the communist political system which formed such characters, but also of the inherent inequalities of the new capitalist Germany and the apparent ideological and moral vacuum of its culture<sup>6</sup>. Echoing Elias' cynical laughter which concludes *Verlorene Landschaft*, this film points to the economic devastation and social dissolution that underlie the West's political and ideological rhetoric of economic prosperity and democratic opportunity.

Walther's status as both *Opfer* and *Täter* of both political systems – a characteristic of almost all Kleinert's central protagonists – is clearly designed to warn against all blind political allegiance. Equally, it demonstrates Kleinert's own willingness

to engage with the true complexity of the question of blame and responsibility, wrong and right, in the maintenance of the old regime and its replacement with a new one. In this respect, the film continues the work of *Verlorene Landschaft* and *Neben der Zeit* in offering a treatment of the post-*Wende Ostprobleme* which resists simplistic ‘othering’ of either political systems or their inhabitants. In addition, as one of five German films released in 1999 to treat the GDR and *Wende* – including *Sonnenallee* (Leander Hausmann), *Helden wie wir* (Sebastian Peterson), *Die Unberührbare* (Oskar Roehler), and the documentary *Heimspiel* (Pepe Danquart) – it represents a renewed interest in all things East German, reflected both in film production and audience popularity<sup>7</sup>.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Julian Preece points out this image of Rita speeding along on a motorbike without a helmet completes the symmetry of visual motifs starting with the opening image of a film poster for *Viva Maria* featuring Brigitte Bardot as that archetype of glamourised female urban terrorist and then moving on to Rita’s attempted arrest in Paris for again riding without a helmet. Linking the incident in Paris in which she shoots and kills the French policeman (Viett’s shot only wounded the policeman who attempted to arrest her) and the final scene of her death may introduce a note of necessary atonement for her earlier sin.

<sup>2</sup> Preece argues the introduction of a male love-interest into Rita’s life signals a clear departure from Inge Viett’s own publicly declared lesbianism and again points to Schlöndorff’s desire to construct a sympathetic character acceptable to mainstream audiences (2003, 371).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Die ganze Stolz-Debatte, falls sie ernstlich so heißen darf, ist eine westdeutsche Angelegenheit.’ (Dieckmann 2001, 5)

<sup>4</sup> ‘The global role of televisual media has also contributed to dislodging notions of “universal” truth and faith in essential and commonly shared conceptions of reality.’ (Landy 2000, 19)

<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the location of political as well as psychoanalytic signification in Elias’ character, as



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a West German politician campaigning in the east, would be entirely justifiable.

<sup>6</sup> 'In Walters autoritärer Art, in seinem "übergriffenen" Idealismus meint man das System zu spüren, das ihn geformt hat. Und die Atmosphäre zwischen Perspektivlosigkeit, Paranoia, Stagnation und Gewalt kann man durchaus als Bestandsaufnahme ostdeutscher Befindlichkeit und als Warnung verstehen.' (Knoben 1999, 50-51)

<sup>7</sup> 'Die interessanteste Entwicklung im neuen deutschen Film ist aber das plötzliche Interesse für die DDR und die gar nicht mehr so neuen Bundesländer. Nachdem der deutsche Spielfilm lange Zeit fast blind für dieses Thema war, entstanden 1999, zehn Jahre nach dem Mauerfall gleich fünf Filme, die sich mit der DDR oder der Folgen der Wiedervereinigung beschäftigen.' (Knoben 2000, 10)

## *Conclusion*

The point is that there is neither a monolithic imperial project nor a subaltern reaction, but rather that there are different historical trajectories of contest and change. (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993, 10)

### **Representations of the East in Post-*Wende* German Film: The Play of Resistance and Conformity**

The revision of ideological polarities represented by the reunification, and the reassertion of a western, and increasingly fundamentalist capitalist hegemony<sup>1</sup> in its wake, has, I would argue, facilitated the application of a model of social and ideological colonisation to an analysis of the post-*Wende* German film. However, despite the unquestionable value of an application of postcolonial discourse in a postcolonial social context – albeit one differentiated by ideology rather than race or ethnicity – it is clear that to talk of a one-way transmission of affirmative and hegemonising ideology would be overly simplistic. There remain, as we have seen, many elements of the filmic representations of the East and eastern German experience overtly resistant to the ordering and governing attempts of an apparently dominant and dominating discourse of popular consensus. ‘Colonised subjects’, are never, according to Breckenridge and van der Veer, ‘passively produced by hegemonic projects’ but act rather ‘as active agents whose choices and discourses are of fundamental importance in the formation of their societies’ (1993, 5) – a point which returns us to the basic cultural studies dialectic of ideology and popular cultural product.

On the surface, the wave of comedies to appear in the immediate aftermath of



the *Wende* would appear to resist critical narrative engagement with the more pressing social and economic realities of life in the *neue Bundesländer*. However, their role in the initial dialogue to redefine a cultural space in which East and West German identities can meet beyond the ideological and political imperatives which defined pre-unification cross-border cultural debate cannot be underestimated. Clearly Herr Struutz's quest for an Arcadian pastoral idyll represents more than a mere evocation of a classical German tradition. In *Go Trabi Go*'s sequel, the sub-textual ambivalence of this critique of western modernity – articulated primarily through the comic juxtaposition of stereotypical East German and West German characteristics – takes on a much darker hue. As the Struutz family return from their pioneering trek into the West they find their home and livelihood threatened by the rapacious acquisitive designs of West German business interests, and the system of social relations formerly in operation irretrievably altered.

This ambivalent take on the imposition of capitalist values onto East German culture questions the cultural diversity approach to cultural representation exemplified elsewhere in the films reliance on excessive cultural stereotyping. Equally, the East German authorship of many of these early comedies adds yet another dimension to their representation of 'otherness' as defined by post-1945 national divisions. These directors enjoyed little temporal distance from the events which were directing their changing social reality and were unsurprisingly influenced by the presiding atmosphere of optimism permeating the *Wende* period. However, potential for conflict with the new funding authorities, post-*Treuhandanstalt* and *Bundesanstalt für vereinigungsbedingte Sonderaufgaben* – a combination of the West German system of regional film subsidy bodies funded by central government in Bonn and private sponsorship from the all-important West German television companies – was still very much in evidence<sup>2</sup>. That this could affect both generic and narrative considerations has been amply documented

by the film industry itself, which has recognised the paradigm shift affecting both national and regional film funding systems of the last decade (Schaefer 1997). Characterised by an overt ‘Wille zum Erfolg’ (Schaefer 1997) commercial stance, this redirectioning of funding has been seen as directly implicated in the success of the largely West German filmic phenomenon of the *Neue Deutsche Komödie*, discussed in Part I of this study.

As the work of cultural studies theorists such as Russell Berman has suggested, in the sphere of cultural production history represents a major site of identity construction. According to Berman it represents a temporal field in which identities are ‘constructed, contested and revised’ (1993, 3). He continues, ‘this history continues to witness the constant reinvention of identities, especially collective ones, through signs of distinction’ (3). If we draw on a postmodern reading of history, which recognises the implication of its cultural representation in the struggle for political power and the justification of this power, then we can begin to understand the social and political significance of the post-*Wende* films’ portrayal of GDR past.

In many respects, von Trotta’s film represents the most simplistic and unproblematised portrayal of East German history. Hampered by the narrative expectations aroused by its situation within a genre of mainstream epic romance and failing to escape the rigid middle class focus of the melodrama’s historical propensity, the film runs the risk of resorting to a reductive vision of East German history placed in opposition to an unspoken norm of western social reality. Such a ‘biopic’ approach to historical reconstruction, only concerned with those watershed moments of GDR past, flirts dangerously with monumental and essentialist historiographic practices, reliant – within the context of a commercial mainstream cinema – on spectacle.

Beyer’s *Nikolaikirche* is equally problematic, in this respect, reinscribing the politicisation of the East German self while attempting to posit alternative, positive



subjectivities. The ideological implications of the reification of the good-capitalism-versus-bad-communism divide in such films could be seen as bearing testimony to the dominance of conservative forces which would rather avoid unmediated criticism of the current ideological and political status quo. Clearly, with the collapse of the GDR and its reintegration into the capitalist democracy of the West, the potential for the continued demonisation of the communist ideological 'other' through the 'working through' of a new history does not diminish.

In contrast, Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* offers a much less explicitly political portrayal of GDR history. Drawing on a comic interpretation of the coming-of-age romance it resists *Das Versprechen*'s positioning of East German social reality as a purely politicised entity. In this respect, *Sonnenallee* resists the ideological consensus building of the anti-communist capitalist West. Hegemony theory echoes Bhabha's take on cultural diversity by describing such a consensus as reliant upon the division of the social formation 'into two mutually exclusive worlds corresponding to two social groups' (Grossberg 1992, 244), the relations between which are organised hierarchically.

Refusing the division that such political positioning entails, *Sonnenallee* cites the state institutions and official functionaries of the GDR as barriers to youthful exuberance, self-determination and rebellion, and not – as in Beyer's *Nikolaikirche* – to democratic self-determination. Clearly, such themes are designed to be as universal, perennial and apolitical as the themes of love, fun and idealistic aspiration which structure the filmic protagonists' lives. Arguably Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* develops further this repositioning of East German history outwith the ideologically-defined hence invisible parameters of the implicit western self, by exposing the inadequacy of the social roles and possible lives that both societies impose upon their inhabitants, and which politics and ideology dictate may not be transgressed.

The continuities between East and West, past and present, are amply illustrated by the films of Andreas Kleinert. Perhaps more significantly, however, the emphasis in films such as Kleinert's *Verlorene Landschaft* and, indeed, Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* on distancing techniques which foreground the subjective nature of historical reconstruction is clearly resistant to the kind of "official" social and political histories that traditional historiography has favoured. As Davidson has demonstrated such traditional histories could find themselves implicated in the simplistic ideological 'othering' of the former GDR and current *neue Bundesländer*.

In contrast, these two films would appear to come closer to a metatextual historical approach, which relies upon the self-conscious 'subjectivisation' of history. In this respect, both films clearly abandon the 'search for the universalising "big story"', which as Ien Ang points out, 'should open up the space for the telling of smaller more particular stories' (1992, 28). Such 'small narratives', concerned with the reinvestment of East German history with a positive socio-cultural worth (*Sonnenallee*) or the allegorical articulation of deep scepticism vis-à-vis both socialist and capitalist systems (*Verlorene Landschaft*), clearly confound western expectations of a filmically *objective* portrayal of a *liberated* people's political past.

In Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* the causal narrative logic introduced by Micha's opening voice-over narration dictates the exposition of Micha's own personal biography – as well as the romantic narrative he subsequently becomes involved in – but perhaps also, on a socio-political level, it explains why it is that Micha's narrative does not conform to our ideas of the traditional East German (Communist) biography. As has been demonstrated, nostalgia has its own special place in the 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977) articulated by communities in times of rapid social change. While such projection into history can be both reactionary and radical, disempowering and emancipatory in its effects, it ultimately draws a break between past and present, a break



which challenges the sources of 'identity, agency, or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present' (Tannock 1995, 454). As Karen Ritzenhoff argues in her investigation of the DEFA documentaries which documented the *Wende* period, the most telling accounts were those which relied upon the collection of testimonies from those people affected by the changes and 'by articulating the doubtful look for the future of these interviewees and by indicating that the reunification has denied them a sense of national identity linked to East Germany' (1997, 335-6).

The approach to cultural representation and comparison adopted in Hausmann and Kleinert's films appears to aspire to the highly problematised, political and fluid reading of culture which Bhabha ascribes to cultural difference. In other words, both films represent the cultures of the margins in a way which 'resists totalisation' of cultures and simultaneously disturbs 'the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification' (1994, 162). Adopting the point of view of the marginalised culture of East Germany itself, this differentiated approach to cultural representation destabilises and disturbs the power dynamics inherent in the attempt to unproblematically impose a new system of values and traditions, and their associated readings of East German history, onto the newly emerging communities of the East. In so doing, it subverts the potential desire for an 'imaginary (and oppressive) unity of national culture' (2001, 52) in post-reunification Germany, or at least challenges the wholesale imposition of a (West) German national identity which denies the existence of cultures of worth within the broader cultural and social histories of East Germany.

Fundamentally, films such as these question the role of official histories as 'moral arbiter' (Landy 2000, 19) and may offer a politically significant and theoretically opportune insight into what it means to represent history on film in the 21st Century.

Historicising may have played a key part in consolidating notions of national identities but it can also just as easily destabilise these identities, it would appear. However, perhaps the existence of such 'small narratives', which offer subjective, personal narratives thus displacing official (western) versions of history, could be taken as a metaphor for the presence of other revisionary (hi)stories within the post-*Wende* cinema. With the normalisation of the filmic depiction of the East in which the eastern problematic has been relegated from narrative subject to filmic background there has occurred a multiplication of critical *Kleingeschichten*, largely from the East – *Heidi M* (2001), *Nachtgestalten* (1999), *Die Polizistin* (2000); *Wege in die Nacht* (1999); *Berlin is in Germany* (2001) – but also from the West – *Die Unberührbare* (2000). These films avoid the valorisation of difference that while celebrating minority voices can equally easily be co-opted into the service of nationalist discourse, and they challenge the unspoken colonialist comparative framework which contrasts *the West* and *the rest*.

According to Bhabha such stories represent the 'counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries – both actual and conceptual – and disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities' (1990, 300). As such they represent a filmic response to attempts to establish power through consensual agreement, a characteristic of all hegemonic struggles. If we continue the application of our model of ideological colonisation within the context of this cultural studies approach to identity construction, such narratives resist the imposition of the ideological visions of reality imposed by dominant groupings. Instead, they posit ontologies and experiences, cultures and politics of an arguably subordinate grouping. Whether or not Davidson's assertion of a post-*Wende* transposition of national history eastwards is correct, cultural representations of both past and present, in post-*Wende* Germany can clearly play a central in Bhabha's project to reinscribe the 'textuality of the present' (Bhabha 1997,



247). As Elizabeth Mittman argues in her analysis of the post-*Wende* comedies, these films demonstrate clearly that ‘there are no answers inside of “Germany,” as it is currently configured, to unification and its representational dilemmas’ (2003, 345). However, neither do these films ‘mindlessly reproduces the invisibility of the East’ (Mittman 2003, 328) – a criticism that has been aimed at the broader post-*Wende* cinematic scene. Perhaps in their problematised engagement with the place of the former GDR in the now reunified national whole, these films might point to the possibility of a more dialogical and mutually respectful future.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion as to the increasing power and dominance of the ideological model of western capitalism see Bourdieu 1998.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the difficulties faced by eastern filmmakers in the immediate post-Wall period see Ritzenhof 1997.

---Part IV---

*Race and Ethnicity*

*Currywurst und Döner*<sup>1</sup>: The  
Place of Race in  
Contemporary Turkish-  
German Cinema



## *Introduction*

German film studies has always been a highly politicised field of study. Ginsberg and Thompson point to the obsession within the field ‘with the logics of its own conceptual identity – the “German”’ (1996, 5). Throughout the history of German film studies this obsession has led to the promotion of an ideal, normative concept of “Germanness”. It is clear from Part III of this study that German reunification has brought with it its own problems with regard to the cultural representation of national identity. There is, however, another area of contemporary film production, equally resistant to the unproblematised representation or extrapolation of German national identity – namely, the revitalised and increasingly critically and popularly acclaimed *Immigrantenkino*.

Situated around the success of Fatih Akin’s 1997 internationally acclaimed ‘Multikulti-Gangsterballade’ (Suchsland, 2001) *Kurz und schmerzlos*, films such as Christian Baudisins’ *Tadesse: Warum?* (1993), Roland Suso Richter’s *Eine Hand voll Gras* (2000), Yüksel Yavuz’s *Aprilkinder* (1998), Horst Sczerba’s *Eine unmögliche Hochzeit* (1996) and Tevfik Baser’s *40QM Deutschland* (1986) have reopened the debate surrounding the portrayal of ethnic minorities – and in particular, Turkish-German minorities – within film. At the same time these films have raised the question as to the possibility of a new wave of post-New German Cinema, second and third generation immigrant films, which extend beyond traditional formulations of *Kino der Fremdheit*, or socially oppositional *Problemfilm*, to allow for the exploration of the actual day-to-day reality of life between two cultures – a *cinéma du métissage*.

This theorisation of the to and fro of intercultural exchange<sup>2</sup> – the ability of a minority culture to adapt, assimilate and resist the dominant cultural discourses – is as relevant to the discussion of the reunification of Germany and the summary ‘integration’

of the *neue Bundesländer* into the national (western) whole as it is to the fate of the Germany's ethnic minorities. Putting aside the rather uncomfortable associations which connect the integration of East Germany and the rise in right-wing extremism and racist violence, both of these 'minority cultures' could essentially be viewed as representing ideologically, socially and culturally devalued peoples. These populations often find themselves marking out ambivalent and even antagonistic stances vis-à-vis the hegemonic forces of white, western, bourgeois society. Equally, as Bhabha and Anderson have shown, the problematics of the nation state – its formative history and the practices of social cohesion it utilises – are central to the contemporary relationship of western European countries to their immigrant populations.

In the context of a globalised economy which has failed to address the increasing disparity between the one Third: Two Thirds worlds, the proliferation of war and ethnic conflict, and the persistence of natural disasters and climactic change which render large parts of the world increasingly hostile to habitation, the transnational movement of peoples has come to represent a defining characteristic of the contemporary postmodern condition. Naturally the extent and effects of this contemporary diasporic condition have had significant and irrevocable consequences for the perceived homogeneity of the West's imagined national communities (Anderson 1991). As Homi K. Bhabha points out in *The Location of Culture*, the social and cultural recourse to "native" ethnic origin is becoming increasingly problematic in the construction of national identities:

The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities – *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* – are in a profound process of redefinition. [his emphasis] (1997, 5)



As nations struggle to come terms with the reality of this hybridisation<sup>3</sup> of the imagined national community, there is increasing evidence of national cultures being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities. Bhabha describes this process as being particularly marked in the case of the Western urban centres which have been experiencing an exponential rise in immigrant and refugee populations. As a result these peoples are becoming increasingly central to the internal construction of national identities:

The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of post-war migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national id.* [his emphasis] (Bhabha 1997, 6)

As a result, and in order to pursue our ideological deconstruction of identity beyond the confines of gender and nationhood, I wish to now turn my attentions to the situation of the increasingly politically, socially and culturally visible population of Turkish-Germans living in Germany and their cultural representation in contemporary Turkish-German cinema. In keeping with the broader theoretical focus of this study, this section will include examples of both popular, classical cinema and more alternative, non-classical cinematic texts. Taking as its starting point the representation of these marginal and marginalised communities, I shall continue to demonstrate the communalities which exist between films of a variety of tones and registers, genres and styles in their critical engagement with what are complex and often contradictory identity positions.

## Race Relations and the *Kanaksta*

Dieses Schwindelwort von der Identität ist der Dreh- und Angelpunkt des westlichen Bewußtseins. Bullshit! Es gibt keine Identität. Wurzeln, Verortung, alles Dreck. Identitätskrise, lächerlich. Was es gibt, sind wir. Die Kanaksta. Und wir werden uns zeigen. Wir werden auffällig werden. Es geht ab... Kanak Attack! (Feridun Zaimoglu cited by Lottmann 1997)

This opening citation is creditable to the 32-year old writer and self-styled ‘Held der jugendlichen Kanaksta-Bewegung’ (Lottmann 1997), Feridun Zaimoglu. Zaimoglu positions this statement – and, indeed, much of his writing – as an aggressive rallying call for a new generation of young Turkish-German *Kanaksta* keen to distance themselves from a parental generation’s supposed acquiescence<sup>4</sup> to the unspoken *Unterordnung* of ethnic minorities in white, western society. While initially aimed at the Turkish-German community, Zaimoglu’s writings and statements have found a receptive audience amongst Germany’s other marginalised migrant communities, not to mention a profitable market amongst Germany’s more liberal-minded, middle class consumers. The category of *Kanaksta* mobilised by Zaimoglu represents an amalgamation of the derogatory German slang term for a Turk, or foreigner, *Kanake*, and *Gangster*. Thus, this inverted derogatory label is presented by Zaimoglu as a cross-ethnic counter-identity which poses a direct challenge to the status quo of white, western middle class dominance (Cheesman 2002, 187).

As the single largest ethnic minority<sup>5</sup>, the position of the over 2 million Turkish nationals living and working in Germany has long served as a central indicator of national mood vis-à-vis foreign immigration and the *Ausländerfrage*. Typically the issues dominating this debate have remained consistent throughout the Twentieth



Century. On the conservative right, reactionary fears of *Masseneinwanderung* and the *Überfremdungsgefahr* have bolstered calls for a strengthening of the *Ausländergesetze*, the restriction of citizenship entitlement, and the increased use of *Ausweisung* and *Abschiebung* as a warning against transgression of national laws. On the more liberal left, however, there has been an increasingly audible clamour of liberal voices advocating racial tolerance and social inclusion. These voices have pointed to the historical culpability of the West in the contemporary problems of the Two Thirds world countries and the more general duty of the rich centres of the world to provide asylum for the ever-increasing tide of economic and political refugees. As Tom Cheesman points out, one of the reasons for the success of Zaimoglu's works has been its fortuitous timing with a demand from intellectuals amongst this latter group 'for evidence of innovative, creative contributions to German culture from the "margins" and especially from migrants' (2002, 181). These intellectuals, he argues, have been strongly influenced by the Anglo-American cultural studies debates around race, migration and culture.

In the terms of the contemporary debate surrounding the construction and nature of cultural identity, these two apparently polarised positions are significant. On the one hand, we have the reduction of identity to an indisputable and irreversible nightmare of 'otherness', a black-and-white binary opposition of them and us. On the other hand, stands the multi- or, more recently labelled, intercultural dream of integration – situated, it must be pointed out, somewhat uncomfortably close to its less politically correct partner, assimilation. Zaimoglu, however, not only rejects both proffered identities but also the entire terminology of the debate: "“Es gebe keine Türken, es gebe keine Herkunft, es gebe keine Identität, das sei alles Gehirnwichse...”“ (Zaimoglu cited by Lottmann 1997).

Zafer Şenocak offers a similarly ambivalent approach to the notion of identity when he talks of the meaninglessness of *Heimat* or *Heimatlosigkeit* for a Turkish-born, German-educated immigrant such as himself:

Denn Heimatlosigkeit basiert auf einem Konzept von Heimat, beschreibt den Verlust dessen, ein solches Konzept habe ich nicht. (2003, 133)

However, in contrast with Şenocak's clear and cohesively argued approach to the notion of homeland and identity, Zaimoglu's views often appear internally contradictory and overly simplistic. Zaimoglu's citation given above is a case in point. Despite his arguably poststructuralist take on the question of cultural identity, his subsequent descent into hyperbole and profanity positions his writing more as an attack on white, educated liberal German culture and discourse than any postmodern questioning of essentialist identities. As Tom Cheesman points out, since arriving on the literary scene in 1995, Zaimoglu has remained consistent in his attacks on the German establishment, highlighting the persistence of institutionalised racism, the failure of 'weak' Turkish-German politicians to implement reform of ethnic minority rights, and the equally weak multiculturalist policy adopted by the government and liberal intellectuals. In other words, while sometimes struggling to achieve comprehensibility beyond the level of emotional invective and internal inconsistency, Zaimoglu's writings remain of significant literary and political import. It is interesting to note that, while Zaimoglu's *Kanak Attack* rallying call may have succeeded in arousing more cultural controversy than political or social ferment, an organisation of the name *Kanak Attak* was formed in 1998 and continues to raise anti-racist awareness by organising cultural events<sup>6</sup>.

In this respect, Zaimoglu's relevance for this section lies more in the representative ambivalence that he displays towards mainstream German society, than



any problematised additions he can make to the analysis of cultural identity and its construction. As we shall see, this marked ambivalence towards white, bourgeois society is reflected in the vast majority of the Turkish-German films we shall look at in this section. It is in this context, that Zaimoglu's writing has been taken up by the media as the latest articulation of a new and aggressively affirmative Turkish-German culture, asserting itself across the cultural spheres of music and television, film and literature.

With his first book, *Kanak Sprak: 24 Mißtöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft*, Zaimoglu proclaimed his intention to bring the voices of second and third generation Turkish-German immigrants, in their apparently 'raw', and 'unrefined' street state, to the attention of his fellow *Kanaksta* and, more generally, into the wider German cultural mainstream. Whatever the charges of inconsistency (and sometimes incoherence) that can and have been levelled at Zaimoglu's extra-literary pronouncements, *Kanak Sprak* marks a linguistic and cultural break with previous traditions of *Migrantenliteratur*. Zaimoglu's rejection of this earlier generic form accords with broader postcolonial criticisms that such literature has historically failed the immigrant subjects it set out to represent by denying them agency and voice. In contrast, Zaimoglu argues that his work is written for and by the very *Kanaken* that have historically been excluded from mainstream cultural spheres<sup>7</sup>. In line with this socially realist approach to subject representation, Zaimoglu's characters are drawn almost exclusively from the margins of German society<sup>8</sup>. In *Kanak Sprak* Zaimoglu's interviewees include sex-workers, pimps, drug dealers, asylum seekers and the unemployed. The central character of his second book, *Abschaum: Die wahre Geschichte von Ertan Ogun*, which was subsequently adapted for cinema by the director Lars Becker, is a drug dealer and pimp – in other words, far removed from the comfortable existence of German majority society.

Outwith the sphere of popular culture, other writers, academics and journalists such as Zafer Senoçak and Claus Leggewie have engaged more critically with the issue

of Turkish and ethnic minority rights. In particular, these voices have spoken out against the cross-party stagnation which many believe to be affecting the public and political debate on issues as various as Islamic religious education in schools, the *Doppelbürgerschaftsrecht*, and the increasing rise in racist attacks which has characterised the post-*Wende* years. Despite their equal frustration with the pace of political and social change and the apparent militancy of their stance – ‘Die Geduld ist zu Ende, Ausreden und Illusionen sind aufgezehrt’ (1993, 8) – Senoçak and Leggewie distinguish themselves substantially from Zaimoglu by aspiring to put forward a clear political manifesto. This manifesto attests to the multifarious failures of the current half-hearted policies of ‘integration’ and lays out the changes that they see as necessary for the success of the multicultural society that Germany has become:

Dieses Buch ist eine Premiere – nicht allein vom Inhalt her als ein politisches Manifest der deutsch-türkischen Minderheit für politische Gleichstellung, soziale Integration und kulturelle Autonomie. (1993, 8)

In many respects, Turkish-German culture would appear to be undergoing a minor renaissance in the late 1990s. In the sphere of music new cross-cultural syntheses are being achieved which combine elements of traditional Turkish folk music styles and instrumentation with popular and rap music genres. Significantly, these new pieces are often written and performed either in Turkish or in the unique mish-mash of Turkish-German street slang – the language that Zaimoglu entitles *Kanak-Sprak*. This is the case with male Turkish-German sex-symbol and teenage idol Tarkan, whose third album *Ölürüm Sana* (1999) became an overnight bestseller in Turkey, Germany and across Europe.



Tarkan may have quickly replaced other pin-up idols on the bedrooms walls of both Turkish and German teenage girls. However, the younger male contingent has embraced the rapidly expanding Turkish-German Hip Hop scene<sup>9</sup>, dominated by such artists and collectives as *Richie*, *Bösen Abdul* and *Fünf Sterne Deluxe*, all of whom featured on the soundtrack of Fatih Akin's *Kurz und schmerzlos*. According to Stephan Düfel, 'Hip Hop gilt als Männermusik' (1995), a key factor to its success within an Islamic culture which remains intensely patriarchal. The *Türkendeutsch* or *Ghettosprache* lyrics of HipHop collectives such as *Karakan* or *Cartel*, with its massively popular *Araba yok* and *Posse Attack*, alternate between serious topics such as racism and right-wing extremism – "Jetzt seid ihr daran, Glatzköpfe, wir werden euch kriegen!" (Cartel) – and the more superficial themes of cars, sex and clubbing.

Significantly, the mainstream commercial success of many of these new Turkish-German music impresarios has been assured by their widespread adoption outwith their own ethnic communities by a much wider German audience. This is testified to by the rapid increase in new clubs – such as *Bodrum* in Cologne – and radio programmes such as *Türkisch-Kisses* – produced by the private Berlin radio station *Kiss FM* – increasingly attractive to a broad cross-section of German youth.

Describing itself as 'der deutsch-türksiche Berlin-Spiegel für alle, die toleranter sein wollen', the Berlin television station AYPÄ TV was set up in February 1993. The manifesto of this news and documentary station, which broadcasts in both Turkish and German, is couched by its founders Claudia Dantschke and Ali Yildirim in the liberal terminology of racial tolerance and peaceful multicultural coexistence:

Ausführliche Information, Toleranz gegenüber anderen Kulturen, Engagement für das deutsch-türkische Zusammenleben in Berlin. (Glass 1995)

While this entry into television production remains relatively unique, the Turkish press in Germany has a much more established position and history. According to a telephone poll carried out in Berlin in 1991, 86% of the Turks questioned read a weekly or daily mother-tongue newspaper (Durgut 1993, 113). In 1993 the liberal *Hürriyet* was estimated to have a readership of approximately 110,000, while the more nationalist conservative paper *Türkiye* was read by around 35,000 readers. At their inception in the 1960s, these newspapers aspired to providing useful information to aid the integration of the newly arrived and apparently temporary *Gastarbeiter*. However, today their stance is liable to be much more political, with a mandate to articulate the fears, concerns and interests of their now permanently settled Turkish-German readers. Post-reunification and, more particularly, in the wake of the racist attacks in places such as Mölln, Solingen and Rostock, this role has undergone a further politicisation. The emphasis now is on an increasingly strident affirmation of the Turkish-German community as a permanent, legitimate and beneficial part of German society (Durgut 1993, 113).

The implications of this reification of cultural autonomy for the *Integrationspolitik* of successive German governments is clear, as pointed out by Turkish-German Green Party *Abgeordnete* Cem Özdemir:

Die türkischstämmige Gemeinschaft, so wird in Deutschland seit ein paar Jahren gerade auch von progressiver, aufgeschlossener deutscher Seite geklagt, zieht sich immer mehr zu. Sie schauen ihr Fernsehen, lesen ihre Zeitungen, gehen in ihre Kneipen, tanzen in ihren Discos und strömen in ihre Moscheen. Das ist alles richtig, und es zeigt vor allem, daß eine Integrationspolitik, die auf Assimilation zielt, in Zeiten moderner Massenkommunikation nicht mehr funktioniert. (1999, 218)



Whatever the individual merits of these particular articulations of new Turkish-German cultural expression, the increasingly mainstream visibility which they achieve for their communities and interests can only function to bring the issues and problems facing ethnic minorities in Germany closer to the forum of public debate. Central amongst these issues is the question of entitlement to German citizenship. Up until 1999 children born in Germany were entitled to German citizenship only if at least one parent held citizenship. While this problem issue has been at least partially resolved the infamous *doppelte Staatsbürgerschaftsrecht* is still excluded in all but exceptional cases<sup>10</sup>. It is exactly this public debate and the political change that could follow that is being so forcefully demanded by writers and academics such as Zaimoglu, Senoçak and Leggewie. According to Senoçak, there has never been a more critical time for Germany's relationship to its ethnic minorities:

Deutschland steht am Scheideweg: Entweder vollendet es den Schritt zum modernen Staat, der sich nicht ausschliesslich ethnisch-national definiert, oder es fällt in archaische Formen des Gemeinwesens zurück, wo Zugehörigkeit über ethnische Herkunft geregelt wird, das Kollektiv über dem Individuum steht, Einwanderung von Fremden unmöglich und Rassismus ungeschriebenes Gesetz ist. (Senoçak and Leggewie 1993, 11)

To explore the themes, forms, and efficacy of this potentially hybrid form of cultural expression, I wish now to return to the medium of film and its particular relationship to those social concerns and issues of relevance to ethnic minority communities.

## From Barracks to Ghetto

In a recent article in the German film magazine *EPD Film* Georg Seeßlen investigates the history of the representation of immigrant voices in German and European film, focusing in particular on the recent rise in popularity and acclaim of the Turkish-German cinema (2000a). Seeßlen develops an historical overview of the thematic trends of immigrant cinema in Germany from the 1970s right through to the present day. In this respect, he is concerned with films which investigate the essential dilemma of the immigrant, caught between desire to maintain his/her own culture and the need to assimilate the new.

According to Seeßlen the universal dilemma of the immigrant is to find a path which mediates between the retention of the home culture and a partial assimilation of the new. The reality of this 'life in two cultures' or 'life between two cultures' represents the source of all fundamental social and psychological insecurity and ambivalence, faced by the immigrant as he/she attempts to integrate themselves into the host culture.

Unsurprisingly, the problems faced by the initial wave of mainly Southern European and North African immigrant workers who continued to arrive in Germany throughout the 1950s and 1960s were by far the most materially pressing. Problems with housing, employment, and racism – which if not physically experienced was at least implied by the rights of domicile and employment allotted to them – remained issues of prime concern for these early *Gastarbeiter*. As a result many of the early German-directed *Immigrantenfilme* of the 1970s focused upon the material difficulties and legal inequalities experienced by the immigrant worker. However, as the immigrants material circumstances began to improve other more long-term difficulties arose. As the



*Gastarbeiter* were gradually joined by their families and moved from barrack lodgings to more permanent accommodation a new problem arose – that of ghettoisation<sup>11</sup>.

The larger metropolises, such as West Berlin, München, Cologne, Frankfurt am Main and Hanover, had been living with large ethnic minority communities in their midst for several years. By the mid-1970s so-called *Chinatown* or *Klein-Istanbul* districts had established themselves in towns and cities across the land.

There were several reasons for the collectivisation of ethnic communities. Some of these were economic. In other words, their homes were located in the immediate vicinity of the manufacturing or heavy industry areas. As took place in the coal mining areas of the Ruhrgebiet, in towns such as Bottrop, these settlement colonies were even financed and constructed by the employers themselves. Other reasons were social, relating to the security and sense of belonging to be found in living together with those also experiencing the strangeness of a foreign land and culture.

In 1975, however, the Bonn administration attempted to introduce the *Zuzugssperren* in response to the fears voiced by certain areas that the numbers of immigrants were becoming unmanageable. Although adopted by the five aforementioned cities, these laws were soon discovered to be unenforceable and, perhaps even more significantly, against the interests of the industries who employed the foreign workers. Consequently they were revoked after only two years.

During the economic recession of the mid-1960s these immigrant workers were able to return home temporarily, travelling back to Germany once the economy began to grow again. However, the introduction of the *Anwerbestop* policies of 1973 meant that this freedom of movement was halted. In all future times of economic depression and job loss the *Gastarbeiter* faced the choice of either returning home forever, or staying put. Unsurprisingly, most decided to stay, but with the result that unemployment in the ethnic minority ghettos increased through the depressions of 1975/6 and the early 1980s.

social The increasing social deprivation experienced by these ethnic minority communities – communities denied the legal protection of naturalised citizen status – was only exacerbated by the general down-turn in the manufacturing and heavy industry sectors. Allied to the widely perceived prejudice against foreign populations in their search for work (Özdemir 1999, 213) these communities have experienced increasing social exclusion. The problems experienced by Germany's immigrant population's are by no means unique, however.

In France, in particular, the relocation of large numbers of immigrants and their families to the suburbs – a process begun in the 1970s and continued throughout the 80s and 90s – is currently the subject of much public and political debate. As social exclusion has intensified in the *banlieue* districts of the larger urban conurbations, social problems such as crime, drugs, prostitution and gang warfare have also risen dramatically (*Crossing Continents*, 2001). The harsh reality of life in the *cités* has constituted the subject matter for a number of films during the 1980s and 90s, such as Fabrice Genestal's last film *La squalle* (2000). This film deals with the problems of youth crime and gang rape in this same *Sarcelle* district. However, these problems were recognised by filmmakers in France as at a much earlier stage. Perhaps the most famous of the French films dealing with the plight of ethnic minorities within these areas and consequently marking itself as one of the earliest *métissage* films, was Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'archimèdes*, which was released in 1985 and dealt with the fate of two friends Pat and Madjid, living in Paris' notorious *Cité des Fleurs* and whose only aspiration is to the role of *Ghetto-Gangster*. Mathieu Kassovitz's *La haine* (1995) was equally significant in this respect.

Without exception all of these films lay the blame for the crime and violence that they portray on the social conditions that their protagonists are forced to live in. However, the danger of these social problems being interpreted as problems of ethnicity



and cultural difference by the general public is a danger which Cem Özdemir recognises as all too apparent:

Nun werden auf einmal soziale Konflikte ethnisiert, entdecken die einen, daß es sich bei den anderen ja nicht nur um irgendwelche störenden Jugendlichen, sondern um ausländische Jugendliche handelt. (1999, 213)

Similarly, Georg Seeßlen recognises that in the transition from barracks to ghetto, 'die kulturelle vermischt sich mit einer sozialen Marginalisierung' (2000, 22), a state of affairs which is no means confined to first generation immigrants:

Die äußere Verbesserung der Lebenssituation in der zweiten oder dritten Generation von Arbeitsimmigranten und Flüchtlingen überdeckt nur neue innere Konflikte, und auf der anderen Seite errichtet die Gesellschaft der "Gastgeber" nach den sichtbaren nun auch unsichtbare Grenzen um die Menschen, die immer noch als "Fremde" identifiziert werden... (22)

It is precisely this question of the pervasiveness and persistence of the identification of ethnic minorities as 'foreign' or 'other' and the relation of this to the construction of cultural and racial stereotypes which I wish to pursue in relation to my analysis of the Turkish-German film. However, in order to understand the development of Turkish-German cinema in the 1990s it is first necessary to undertake a brief historical survey of prior filmic representations of Turkish peoples in Germany.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Cem Özdemir's book, *Currywurst und Döner: Integration in Deutschland*, Bergisch Gladbach: Gustav Lübeck Verlag, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See note 2, Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> In this section I will draw extensively on the vocabulary of contemporary diaspora, hybridity, intercultural and postcolonial studies. For a more detailed discussion and explanation of my use of such terms as 'hybridity', 'third space', *métissage*, 'intercultural', 'multicultural' see Part I, Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> "Die ersten Türken, die in den Sechzigern nach Deutschland kamen, waren keine Schwächlinge. Doch ihre Philosophie war es, ruhig zu bleiben und zu ertragen. Die zweite Generation kennt sich in dieser Gesellschaft genausogut aus wie die Deutschen und will sich nicht mehr verstecken." (Sinan cited in: Düfel 1995)

<sup>5</sup> In 1997 peoples of Turkish descent represented 28.6% of the 7.5 million non-German national population 'Daten und Fakten zur Ausländersituation. März 1998', Beauftragten der Bundesregierung für Ausländerfragen

<sup>6</sup> For more information on this cultural movement and their manifesto see <[www.kanak-attak.de](http://www.kanak-attak.de)>.

<sup>7</sup> 'Im Gegensatz zur "Immigrantenliteratur" kommen hier Kanaken in ihrer eigenen Zunge zu Wort' (Zaimoglu, Foreword to *Kanak Sprak*, 1998, 18).

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that, despite this aspiration to realist authenticity, the monologues featured in *Kanak Sprak* are extensively re-crafted and edited by Zaimoglu himself into an extremely stylised and artificially cohesive lyrical narrative form. This is recognised in Zaimoglu's own presentation of *Kanak Sprak* in which he describes these apparently ethnographic interviews as 'translated' from the original. For more on Zaimoglu's reframing of the *Kanaksta* voice see Cheesman 2002.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on the rise of the Turkish-German Hip Hop scene see O. Durrani, 'Popular Music in the German-Speaking World', in Phipps 2002, 197-218.

<sup>10</sup> On reaching adult status the naturalised children of immigrant parents must decide whether to relinquish their citizenship of their parents' country. See 'Das neue Staatsangehörigkeit' 1999.



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<sup>11</sup> By 1973 the number of *Gastarbeiter* living and working in West Germany had risen to 2.6 million. However, by this point many of these workers had been joined by their relatives and families, comprising an additional 1.8 million people. 'Post war history of immigration', *Goethe Institut* [online].

## Chapter 9

### *The New German Cinema and 'Das Kino der Fremdheit'*

Bevor es ein Kino der Métissage gibt, gibt es ein Kino der Fremdheit und des "Elends". (Seeßlen 2000, 23)

During the 1970s a range of filmmakers associated with the New German Cinema movement made films and documentaries focusing on the socially disadvantaged of West German society. These same filmmakers soon became interested in the plight of the foreign immigrant workers who had begun arriving in ever increasing numbers since the 1950s. Films such as Helma Sanders-Brahm's *Die industrielle Reservearmee* (1971) and *Shirins Hochzeit* (1975), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher* (1969), *Wildwechsel* (1972), and *Angst essen Seele auf* (1973), or Christian Ziewer's *Aus der Ferne sehe ich dieses Land* (1979) all dealt with the various material and psychological difficulties faced by the immigrant workers in their attempts to integrate into a foreign and often hostile culture.

With their focus upon the socially marginalised of West German reality these predominantly German-directed and produced projects films brought new voices and themes to their West German and international audiences. Imbued as they were in a tradition of liberal western paternalism, however, these same voices and themes were to prove counter-productive to the egalitarian principles which initially inspired their production:



Dieses Kino der Fremdheit erweist sich am Ende als unproduktiv wie unzeitgemäß; nicht selten werden die Immigranten dabei metaphorisch missbraucht, um ein Opfer zu zelebrieren und eine moralische Eindeutigkeit herzustellen, die der Idee der Metissage widerspricht. (Seeßlen 2000, 24)

According to Seeßlen, the *cinéma du métissage* represents an alternative to the categorisation of foreigner as victim or malleable object of moralising discourse. For example, he describes the hero of the *métissage* film as defined by his/her resistance to complete assimilation into the 'host' culture in which they find themselves. And yet this hero has also relinquished the dream held by previous generations of a possible future return to their native origins and the mother country. In other words, this figure distinguishes themselves by their distance from the norms, traditions and expectations of both host and mother cultures. However, while distanced from the two cultures in which they have been brought up they remain sensitive and vulnerable to the demands that either culture might place on them.

The *cinéma du métissage* is primarily characterised by its refusal to limit the portrayal of ethnic minorities to the sociological problematisation of their apparently inherent ethnicity, transposed as it is to a "foreign" culture. In other words, in opposition to the earlier *Kino der Fremdheit* – which we will revisit presently – this cross-cultural or hybrid cinema does not take as its starting point the essential 'otherness' of the central protagonist. Instead, it seeks to explore in a less moralising and more multifaceted manner the reality of life within two cultures.

This echoes Bhabha's work on the poststructuralist redefinition of 'originary identities' and the pluralisation of notions of 'national cultures'. Cem Özdemir recognises this notion of a culture developing outside the polar extremes of assimilation

or exclusion, as a concrete social reality for second and third generation Turkish-Germans:

Beklagt wird vielmehr, daß eine bestimmte Form der Integration, die in der simplen Vorstellung des Durchschnittsbürgers und vieler Politiker nie etwas anderes als Anpassung, als Assimilation war, nicht geklappt hat. Doch plötzlich stellt man fest, daß sich beispielsweise mit der Einwanderung aus der Türkei nach Deutschland hier eine andere Kultur etabliert hat, die nicht, wie erwartet, in der dritten Generation wieder verschwindet. (1999, 210)

The central theme of 'otherness' and the socially constructed nature of difference is asserted from the opening of Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf*. As the central protagonist, Emmi (Brigitte Mira), enters the hushed *Gastarbeiterkneipe* it is clear that she does not belong. Instigated in part by an unexpected downpour, Emmi's visit to the pub also represents the resolution of a longstanding curiosity in the "exotic" strains of Turkish and North African music which she hears daily on her way home from work. On a deeper subconscious level it also reflects her need for companionship.

It quickly becomes apparent that the initial stony reception which greets Emmi is not merely the result of prejudice on the part of the male *Gastarbeiter* but also a response to the persistent and pernicious racism which they have experienced on a daily basis. "Arab nix Mensch in Deutschland, verstehe?", explains Ali<sup>1</sup> (El Hedi ben Salem). Ali makes this comment in response to Emmi's shock at the overcrowded living conditions imposed upon the exploited imported labour so integral to the economic prosperity of West German society.



Partly as a result of the staged moralising tone of this didactic social criticism the figure of Ali struggles to extend beyond the two-dimensional confines of his function as elicitor of West German ignorance and prejudice<sup>2</sup>. Racism pervades all aspects of work, family and home life in Fassbinder's film. This is articulated most forcefully by Emmi's son-in-law Eugen, played by Fassbinder himself, in his ferocious response to the increasingly multicultural society in which he lives and works: "Es sind alles Schweine!", he retorts to his mother-in-law's question as to why he hates foreigners. This comment is echoed by Emmi's work colleagues who are equally irrational and aggressive in their response to the foreign 'other'. These "geizige ungewaschene Schweine" survive and prosper in Germany only because "sie leben auf unsere Kosten!".

In contrast to the urban setting of Fassbinder's work, Sanders-Brahms' film, *Shirins Hochzeit*, opens with a protracted shot of an arid stony landscape with the looming rocky bulk of a mountain at its centre. Onto this scene is superimposed the face of a woman who recounts in a melancholy voice the myth of 'der eiserne Berg'. This story sets the scene for a film about trial and difficulty, and epic endeavour in the face of impossible odds.

This is the story of Shirin and her attempt to escape an arranged marriage in Turkey by seeking out her former betrothed in a new land and culture in Germany. Within the Turkish institution of marriage, women such as Shirin represent little more than commodified 'goods' to be bought and sold according to the arbitrary will of the family's ruling patriarchs. Progressing from one subordinate role to another, Shirin retains throughout the film her victim status. As a Turkish woman in a patriarchal native culture, or foreigner and woman in a white, western patriarchal culture, Shirin's social positioning is characterised by objectification, exclusion and lack of opportunity.

Significantly, this inescapable subordination is further reinforced by the style of voice-over narration employed by the film which contrasts her own broken, ungrammatical attempts to reflect upon her position with the smooth, fluent, and corrective voice of the 'all-knowing' 'objective' narrator, Helma Sanders-Brahms herself. According to Annette Brauerhoch, in her essay on the positioning of the foreign 'other' in Sanders-Brahms' film, 'die Totale, das Umfassende von Helma Sanders-Brahms' Einstellung legt sich über das Partikuläre, das Gebrochene von Shirins Darstellung (1995, 112).

Despite the sociological validity of Sanders-Brahms wider indictment of female oppression and institutionalised western racism, the egalitarian credentials of this apparently 'shared' narrative voice, are brought into question by the binary opposition which is consequently set up between *das Vertraute* and *das Fremde*:

Die Stimmen der Frauen, Shirins und Helma Sanders-Brahms', beide aus dem Off, sollen einen sich ergänzenden Dialog darstellen und bilden doch eine Hierarchie. [...] Sie [Sanders-Brahms] bezieht den Platz der allwissenden Neutralität und unterminiert damit das von der Frauenbewegung angestrebte Projekt der Vermittlung subjektiver Erfahrung'. (Brauerhoch 1995, 109)

The paternalistic nature of Sanders-Brahms' position vis-à-vis her fictional protagonist – both as omniscient narrative voice, and more generally as white western filmmaker – remind us that colonisation and exploitation can often accompany emancipatory intentions:

Dabei vollzieht die Filmemacherin an ihrer Figur noch einmal nach, was sie thematisch in ihrem Film kritisiert: die Ausbeutung und schlechte Behandlung



ausländischer Arbeitnehmer. Die Form der Kolonialisierung, die diese Form der Arbeit gesellschaftlich darstellt, erstreckt sich im Rahmen des Films bezogen auf ihre Hauptfigur Shirin bis in deren Innenleben. (Brauerhoch 1995, 115)

Just as Shirin is ultimately unsuccessful in her attempt to find work, love and a sense of belonging in the Federal Republic, Emmi's reintegration into the society of her family, neighbours and work colleagues is accompanied by an objectification of her new husband that does not bode well for the future. As she parades Ali in front of family and friends she presents him as a prize race-horse whose muscles are to be appraised approvingly and whose party piece is encapsulated in her patronising command, "sag mal schön Guten Tag!" (Brigitte Mira: *Angst essen Seele auf*). As Michael Töteberg points out, Fassbinder's piece is clearly 'eingebettet in den sozialkritischen Kontext' (1995, 105). However, this comment points to a wider context of objectification of the foreign 'other' in the early West German *Immigrantenkino*, in which immigrants were almost exclusively positioned by their German narrators within the confines of an explicitly sociological context of *Problemkino*. Essentially, their deployment was such as to hinder the development of three-dimensional, psychologically convincing character studies of immigrants as unique individuals in favour of symbolic representations which successfully executed a sharp social and/or ideological critique of West German society.

Clearly, such positioning did not best serve the ethnic minority interests it purported to represent. The paternalistic control of these West German directors not only relegated the voice of the foreign 'other' to subordinate positions but often ran dangerously close to the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' that Alfred N. Whitehead saw at the heart of all racial stereotyping. These characteristics of the early *Immigrantenkino* laid it open to its retrospective labelling as *Kino der Fremdheit*.

Bhabha recognises the political imperative behind the need to progress beyond this restrictive positioning of foreigners within the context of certain sharply delineated subject areas or character demarcations:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. (1997, 1)

Highlighting the concept of 'fixity' at the heart of colonial discourse's ideological construction of 'otherness', Bhabha rearticulates the importance of postcolonial critique in the investigation of all contemporary cultural constructions of identity<sup>3</sup>. Referring to the gradual momentum and symbolic power accrued by the Orientalist tradition, Edward Said points out that the textual attitude to the Orient 'lives its own life, as books about fierce lions do until lions can talk back' (1978, 95). To locate the lions that will ultimately talk back we must look forward to the work of the later *Immigrantenkino* and Seeßlen's suggested evolution of a *cinéma du métissage*. This cinema attempts to represent the ethnic minority experience of a multicultural society in which the cultural projection of community and 'nationness' is struggling to come to terms with the radical pluralisation of identity brought about by the contemporary diasporic condition.

In the attempt to transfer attention from the construction of 'originary', 'unified' identities Bhabha recognises the necessity to focus on the 'in-between' or 'third spaces' of culture and society, a thought entirely in line with the *métissage* film's representation of life between cultures<sup>4</sup>:



These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1997, 2)

According to Bhabha it is here, in these interim cultural spaces, that new notions of community, cultural identity and nation are constructed:

It is in the emergence of interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjectivities and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (1997, 2)

To investigate the relevance Bhabha’s ‘third-space’ notion of ‘double lives’, ‘in-between identities’ and ‘a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities’ (1997, 5), I wish to develop this historical contextualisation of Turkish-German identity as represented in film by turning to a selection of work from the 1980s *Immigrantenkino*.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Signalling the synonymous nature of the history of immigration in Germany and the plight of the single largest ethnic minority group in Germany – the Turkish community – Fassbinder’s *Angst essen Seele auf* was originally written under the working title of *Alle Türken heißen Ali*.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted at this early stage that my application of a model of *Kino der Fremdheit* to the early *Immigrantenkino* of the New German Cinema is intended to highlight the contrast with a new style of subject-oriented representation and is not intended to criticise its political

motivation or its significant value in contributing to both past and present debates around the representation of ethnic minorities in German culture.

<sup>3</sup> As demonstrated in Part I, Chapter 2, this citation of postcolonial theory in a non-colonial context signals the wider relevancy's of Bhabha's work in contemporary identity and diaspora studies. As he himself phrase it, 'the force of colonial and postcolonial discourse as a theoretical and cultural intervention in our contemporary moment represents the urgent need to contest singularities and to articulate diverse 'subjects' of differentiation' (1997, 74). In this context any critical engagement with contemporary diasporic communities, immigrants to the western metropolises who have been left to negotiate their own, new ethnic identities, can usefully draw upon the heritage of a postcolonial theoretical tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Bhabha's notion of a 'third space' owes much to the work on hybridity of other contemporary diaspora theorists, including Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Wilson Harris and Trinh T. Minh. In many respects, the relationship of Turkey and the Turks to Western Europe is very different to that of the postcolonial, Third World populations that these theorists have focused on (see Robins 1996). On the very geopolitical rim of the Western Europe Turkey's moderate and historically secular government has long-since petitioned its western neighbours to join the European Union and the political and economic mechanisms which this represents. However, despite these differences I believe that in the context of poststructural developments in identity theory and the increasingly multicultural reality of the western European nation, these postcolonial theoretical interpretations of multi-rooted ethnic identities and hybrid, intercultural speech acts, can be usefully applied to the situation of Turkish-German peoples in Germany.



## Chapter 10

### *The 1980s and the 'Immigrantenkino'*

Auf die Situation ausländischer Arbeiter in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland sind vergleichsweise wenige Filmemacher eingegangen, zum Beispiel Rainer Werner Fassbinder mit *Angst Essen Seele auf*. Erst ab der zweiten Hälfte der achtziger Jahre haben sich die deutschen Filmemacher verstärkt diesem Thema gewidmet – angeregt auch von ausländischen, in der Bundesrepublik arbeitenden Kollegen. (Pflaum and Prinzler 1992, 103)

#### **Internal Inequalities: Immigrant Communities and the Films of Tevfik Başer**

In 1985, the Turkish-born Tevfik Başer released his first film *40m² Deutschland*. Although released a decade later than Sanders-Brahms' work, Başer's film displays many thematic parallels. For example, it is centrally concerned with the oppression of Turkish women in an overwhelmingly patriarchal culture. In contrast to Sanders-Brahms' protagonist, however, this promised bride does not rebel against her fate – at least not initially. Turna (Özay Fecht) is sent to Germany by her future husband's uncle to be married to Dursun (Yaman Okay). Dursun has already been working in Germany for several years as a *Gastarbeiter* and having established himself is ready to take a wife.

The film opens with a panning shot of a gloomy and unkempt apartment. The incessant electronic siren of an unattended alarm clock accompanies the camera's

journey over fading wallpaper, a cheap glossy poster of a palatial Turkish mosque, both Turkish and German newspapers and an unmade bed. While playing upon the cultural typos of the 'untidy bachelor', and prefiguring in the process the role which Turna will be expected to play in remedying this state of affairs, this opening shot also indicates the liminal nature of Dursun's existence in Germany. As a Turkish *Gastarbeiter* Dursun lives between permanence and temporality, between native and host culture, between the modernity of a western, urban, industrialised existence and the traditionalism of the customs and practices, religious and cultural, which tie him to his homeland.

It is this adherence to his own particular interpretation of Turkish law and custom, as well as the fear of the corrupting influence of a secular western society, that compels Dursun to hold his wife captive in this 'mitgeschleppte und nachgebaute Türkei' (Kühn 1995, 53), this gloomy '40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland':

Dursun:            Du kennst diese Menschen nicht. Sie sind wie eine ansteckende  
                          Krankheit. Die Ehe bedeutet ihnen wenig, sie halten nichts von  
                          Liebe und Sitte....

Perhaps partially influenced by the situation of their home in the red-light district of St Pauli, Hamburg, Dursun's fear of his wife's contamination by this 'alien' and incomprehensible culture, reverses the usual process of 'othering' of foreign cultures which takes place in the in the context of the Western European film. German culture is the culture of corruption, according to Dursun, against whose loose moral standards the clearly delineated religious structures and traditions of the Muslim way of life stand in sharp relief. The only contact with this foreign culture takes place on the one occasion that Dursun, suffering from pangs of guilt for breaking his promise to take her to the



New Year festivities at the Hamburg cathedral, leaves the door to the apartment unlocked.

However, Turna's prison has many walls and once the physical obstacles are overcome there still remain the linguistic and cultural barriers firmly in place. Her inexperience of technocratic, urban society, which left her forlornly attempting to light an electric hob with matches, now leave her literally and metaphorically in the dark, as she is unaware of the light switches in the stair-well. As a result, her slow, trepidatious descent into the depths of the building and out into the western world of immorality and sin that Dursun has warned her of, take on a truly nightmarish quality. Steps on the lower floors, however, and the sudden blaze of brightness as the lights are switched on, send her fleeing panic-stricken back from the fear of the unknown and towards her refuge of security and imprisonment. Mistaking the entrance to the flat across whose threshold she has only once passed she disturbs a neighbour, an elderly German woman. The impossibility of communication between this woman and the other German inhabitants who appear at their doors, and Turna is circumscribed by more than just linguistic barriers. As Turna, clearly distressed, frantically apologises in Turkish there is no attempt to help her or calm her down. The tenement inhabitants merely watch as this neighbour – of whose existence they had not even known – continues her hysterical ascent of the stair-well.

This scene exemplifies, once again, the wilful isolation of one culture from another, as well as the general isolation experienced by the modern urban dweller. There is no communication between Turna and Dursun and their German neighbours, just as there is no communication, translation or *métissage* between Turkish and German cultures. In this respect, Turna and Dursun are both known and unknown, recognised and un- or misrecognised inhabitants of this predominately German apartment building. As individuals they are completely unknown to the other

inhabitants. As Turkish *Gastarbeiter*, however, they enjoy an ambivalent recognition that simultaneously accepts and refuses their social presence. According to Reinecke, this represents the fundamental ambivalence of German society's relationship to its immigrant populations, 'das ambivalente, zwischen Verdrängung und widerwilliger Akzeptanz schwankende Verhältnis der deutschen Gesellschaft zu den Fremden' (1995, 10). And it is precisely this ambivalence that perpetuates the positioning of the immigrant worker as the object of a discourse conducted by Germans within the German public sphere. As Reinecke argues, 'wohl wegen dieser prekären Lage bleibt der Einwanderer, auch wenn wir ihm täglich begegnen, der Fremde, das andere...' (10).

Turna's imprisonment is signified visually within the film by a whole series of medium close-up shots in which she is literally framed-in by windows, doorways and mirrors. These shots remind us that her imprisonment exists on both literal and metaphorical levels. In this respect, her imprisonment is both physical and social, firstly, as a woman imprisoned within a patriarchal Turkish culture and, secondly, as an immigrant prejudiced against by an innately suspicious and xenophobic culture, and objectified by a discourse of social exclusion. The reality of this social and cultural positioning is commented upon by Turna herself, as the bonds of her doubly silenced voice can no longer contain her despair:

Turna:           Es reicht! Ich halte es nicht mehr aus![...] Ist das denn dieses Deutschland von dem du soviel erzählt hast? Jeder Tag ist wie ein Tag im Gefängnis. Zuerst war ich Gefangene in deines Vaters Haus und jetzt hier. [...] Ich bin jetzt hier lebendig begraben.



For Dursun, the more the German public sphere, as embodied in its social institutions, threatens to impinge upon his private realm, the more he will retrench to the most reactionary forms of his native cultural order. This ties in with Sharon Macdonald's comments, (Part I, Chapter 2), which refer to the entrenchment of polarised notions of 'them' and 'us' when faced with foreign cultures, and Breckenridge and van der Veer's notion of the role of orientalism in the 'definition of cultural selves in the diasporic confrontations with cultural alternatives' (1993, 13).

Referring to the "interference" of women's groups and the West German social services in their support of Turkish women against patriarchal oppression Dursun complains, 'und ob wir unsere Frauen verprügelten.....Verdammt, was geht sie das an?' In a comment which looks forward to Seeßlen's evidence of the existence of a *métissage* culture in 1980s German film as located in the conflict between the children of immigrants and their parents, Dursun further laments that this insidious state interference is not only limited to Turkish women:

Dursun:           Und wenn es nur die Ehefrauen wären; aber sie entfremden und trennen auch die Kinder von ihren Eltern.

However unsympathetically western European culture may then be treated, Dursun's maltreatment and oppression of his wife signifies a patriarchal Turkish culture almost entirely beyond redemption. Even his unbridled joy and implicated repentance on discovering his wife's pregnancy – "Und ich tue alles, was du willst!" – is rationalised by his consequent comment as to the gender of the baby-to-be: "Hauptsache ich bekomme einen Sohn" (Yaman Okay: *40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland*). This then emphasises once again the patriarchal order of domestic Turkish life. For Turna, the pregnancy

represents a biological fetter to augment the already existent chains of her cultural socialisation to the life of exploitation and abuse she is forced to lead.

It is clear that Başer's film owes much to the socially critical *Problemfilm* of the 1970s. The site of conflict, however, is no longer situated primarily in the host society but rather in the native culture. Turna, as the archetypal immigrant victim, is nonetheless the victim of her own culture rather than the xenophobia of western society. It is the incongruous cultural baggage that Dursun is unable to relinquish or at least reconfigure on his arrival in this foreign country which excludes any possibility of integration and the subsequent development of a positive culture of *métissage*. Bhabha describes this relationship as 'the translation between cultures, which whether assimilative or agonistic, is a complete act that generates borderline affects and identifications' (1996, 54). In Dursun's case the generation of borderline barriers is more relevant than the generation of points of identification, as he rejects all possibility of 'culture-sympathy' in favour of an uncompromising 'culture-clash' (Bhabha 1996, 54).

Despite his apparently irredeemable character Dursun is as much a prisoner of his culture – confined by the attitudes, prejudices and religious regulations of his cultural background – as Turna is a prisoner of the apartment. Through the lens of the hand-held camera which follows Turna around her increasingly claustrophobic domestic prison, the viewer shares this confinement. However, on Turna's final escape from the building at the end of the film, the audience is left behind hesitating in the stair-well. The film is almost exclusively concerned with Turkish culture and is almost exclusively negative in its findings. The discrepancy between host and native culture is thrown into stark relief when viewed in the context of West Germany's strong feminist traditions – traditions diametrically opposed to such an explicitly reactionary patriarchal order.



In this respect, Başer's first film moves only a little way towards Seeßlen's ideal of an immigrant *cinéma du métissage*. Clearly, the director's Turkish origins preclude the accusations of the western paternalism levelled at the earlier films. However, in other respects the film continues a tradition of the objectification of immigrant voices begun in the 1970s, casting immigrant-as-victim, as almost exclusively defined site of conflict, and perhaps most significantly, as exoticised 'other'. The film's focus on first generation Turkish immigrants also rules out the in-depth portrayal of life between two cultures and the dilemma of integration versus assimilation, themes which lie at the heart of the *métissage* film.

In his second film, *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*<sup>1</sup> (1989), Başer pursues this theme of female oppression within Turkish culture. However, in this film he begins to explore the response of western society to the problems and dilemmas of its immigrant populations. The film opens with the attempted suicide of Elif (Zuhal Olcay), a 30 year-old Turkish woman imprisoned in a German jail for the murder of her husband. This attempt to take her own life is not, however, the result of the prospect of a long-term incarceration but rather that of her impending release. As a Turkish immigrant who has committed a serious criminal offence on German soil, Elif faces immediate deportation back to Turkey after her release.

This deportation order amounts to a death sentence for Elif who will face almost certain death, if not at the hands of the Turkish criminal justice system then at the hands of her husband's aggrieved family. In many respects, *Abschied...* functions as a sequel to *40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland*. As the film flashes back over the last 4 years of Elif's life in Germany it becomes clear that, like Turna, she has been repeatedly raped, beaten and imprisoned by her husband. However, unlike Turna, whose ultimate release is dependent on providence – in the shape of Dursun's epileptic fit – Elif takes control of her own fate and murders her abusive husband.

The imprisonment faced by Elif and Turna is at once physical and cultural. In this respect, Elif's active struggle against her imprisonment and Turna's more passive escape, do not merely represent rebellions against the oppressive patriarchal orders in which they themselves are positioned. Their rebellion is aimed rather at the double estrangement which they experience as both women and as immigrants. As Karsten Visarius explains in a review of *Abschied...* in the film magazine *EPD Film*, 'er [der Mord] war dort die Konsequenz der Einsperrung und Isolation einer jungen Türkin durch ihren Mann, aus Angst vor dem fremden Land – eine Rebellion gegen das Ausgeliefertsein' (1989, 30). For Elif this essential 'otherness', which accompanies her from 'native' to 'host' cultures, only intensifies on entry into the equally clearly defined hierarchical structures of the prison. However, it is the ultimate paradox of the film that it is here, in this state institution of incarceration that Elif will undergo her final emancipation. As she gradually makes friends in the prison, and slowly begins to learn German she grows in self-confidence. With her entry into the symbolic sociality of the German-speaking community assured, Elif, experiences a positive interaction and engagement with her host culture for the very first time.

As the opening of the film has already indicated, however, this somewhat idyllic vision of female solidarity and romance within the walls of a high-security prison, is to be short-lived. As her release date approaches the threat of deportation looms. According to the increasingly protectionist measures introduced by CSU Minister of the Interior, Friederich Zimmerman, in the early 1980s, any immigrant worker or even child of immigrant parents not in possession of a full German passport would be subject to deportation in the event of any serious breach of civil law:



Ein Ausländer kann ausgewiesen werden, wenn sein Aufenthalt die öffentliche Sicherheit und Ordnung oder sonstige erhebliche Interessen der Bundesrepublik beeinträchtigt<sup>2</sup>.

Significantly, this government policy of *Abschiebung* or *Ausweisung* was ratified with little modification both by the CSU/CDU in 1990 and again by the left-wing coalition in 1997. Pointing to the surprising lack of civil unrest amongst immigrant communities in Germany over the last decade, Tom Cheesman argues that the kind of urban riots seen in Burnley in the UK in 2001 would be unthinkable in Germany simply because 'the vast majority of the racially discriminated potential rioters do not have German citizenship and are very effectively deterred from violent protest by the threat of deportation' (2002, 180). Echoing Marianne Lüdckes more explicitly bleak *Die Abschiebung* (1987), Başer is keen to expose the impersonal and arbitrary nature of this bureaucratic decision-making. However, while in Başer's film the ultimate fate of Elif remains ambiguous, the conclusion of *Die Abschiebung* offers no hope and no reconciliation. The final deportation represents a clear refusal to allow any positive reconciliation with such harsh political realities, confronting the audience with the injustice of this legal process.

The institutionalised estrangement represented by the *Abschiebungsgesetze*, or the *Abstammungs*-dependent nature of the *Staatsbürgerschaftsrecht* and associated *Kommunalwahlrecht*, or even the restriction of *doppelte Staatsbürgerschaft* to all but exceptional cases, is recognised by Başer himself as a major obstacle to successful integration in Germany, but by no means the only one:

...ich bin nun mal in der Türkei geboren. Und davon, daß ich einen deutschen Paß habe, werde ich noch lange kein Deutscher. Ich habe einfach einen anderen kulturellen Hintergrund, der sich nicht plötzlich mit dem Wechsel der Staatsbürgerschaft ändert. (Başer quoted in Ebenfeld-Linneweber 1989)

In both of his films Başer is keen to expose the social, cultural and political deficiencies of both Turkish and German systems. According to Seeßlen, such films as Başer's represent 'weniger eine Annäherung zwischen zwei Kulturen als eine Anklage gegen beide' (Seeßlen 2000, 23). Indeed, in their incessant reinvocation of the problem of integration – reiterating again and again the disparity between cultures and the impossibility of their successful coexistence, and preoccupied with the victim status of the immigrant – these films remained firmly entrenched within the *Kino der Fremdheit* tradition.

### **The Turkish-German Experience: Cultures of Conflict**

A film which does, however, attempt to develop the portrayal of life both *between* and *in* two cultures and thus move towards the notion of a *cinéma du métissage* is Hark Bohm's *Yasemin* (1988). 17 year old German-born Yasemin's (Ayse Romey) involvement with Jan (Uwe Bohm) is fiercely opposed by her family, who view any relationship outwith one's own cultural or religious community as nothing more than an 'unnatürliche Verbindung'. Refusing to acknowledge the gentle remonstrations of her father, a Turkish greengrocer, and the aggressive ultimatums of her authoritarian uncle, it is ultimately decided to return Yasemin temporarily to her "homeland" – a country she has never set foot in – to give her time to clear her head and consider a more



suitable match. This narrative trajectory is echoed in Michael Lentz's documentary *Verändert* (1983), in which the daughter, Tina is forced by her parents into an arranged marriage in Turkey, in spite of her westernised German socialisation. Yasemin, however, is spared this fate by the courageous Jan who, discovering the plot executes a dramatic rescue. After a fierce knife fight the couple escape by motorbike.

A second generation Turkish-German, Yasemin appears the epitome of integration and emancipation. As Heike Kühn points out, 'von Geburt ist Yasemin Türkin, ihr Selbstverständnis aber ist das einer deutschen Türkin' (Kühn 1995, 46). She attends a local Judo club where she is shown to be able to defend herself expertly against both girls and boys, establishing her persona as determined and assertive, and also displaying the freedom she enjoys from the more reactionary patriarchal prescriptions of her cultural background. Despite living in the predominantly Turkish corner of Hamburg-Altona, she attends a mixed school, and convinces her father to allow her to continue through the *Oberstufe* and realise her dream of becoming a doctor. It should be noted, however, that the moral regulations of her religion dictate her confinement to the field of paediatrics.

The relative freedom enjoyed by Yasemin is even extended to her attire. Not only is she completely free of the inevitable Muslim head scarf, but she can even be seen in relatively revealing summer dresses. Any aspect of this modern autonomy would have been unthinkable for the women of Başer's or Sanders-Brahms' films. However, this freedom is also shown to have its limits. On her path homewards from school, Yasemin stops and covers herself with a long shapeless jumper before entering her father's shop and bestowing the traditional respectful kiss on her father's hand. The doubled identity encapsulated in this daily transformation lies at the heart of Böhm's portrait of Yasemin. As a second generation immigrant Yasemin would appear a true representative of Seeßlen's *métissage* culture. She has been born in a society whose

social rules and norms she understands and assimilates, while retaining an equally powerful bond to her cultural origins. Despite the essential schizophrenic nature of this existence, Yasemin operates successfully in both cultures and to a point is able to live a happy fulfilled life.

The normality of her representation is praised by Martin Rabijs as a welcome but all too rare occurrence in the filmic portrayal of ethnic minorities in film:

Endlich mal kein Film zum Thema 'Ausländer in unserer Gesellschaft', sondern einer, in dem wir Türken ganz normal sind, mit ganz alltäglichen Problemen. In dem gezeigt wird, daß wir selbstverständlich dazugehören und nichts Besonderes sind. (Rabijs 1988)

Accordingly, he goes on to declare the film free of the western paternalistic colonisation of immigrant voices so typical of their earlier representation:

Also kein Film mit einem "kulturkolonialistischen" geleiteten Anliegen, gespeist von der entmündigenden Kraft des Mitleids – echt oder falsch –, sondern eine frisch und genußvoll erzählte Geschichte, in der Ausländer mal nicht in ihrer Rolle als "Randgruppe" auftreten müssen. (Rabijs 1988)

However, there is much in the film and its conclusion which would appear to mitigate against such an interpretation.

Firstly, there is the question of the nature of the film's representation of class and socio-economic position. According to Cem Özdemir, citing figures from *the Rheinisch-Westfälisches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung*, non-naturalised Germans living in Germany are currently responsible for an annual tax revenue of 100 billion DM



(1999, 86), and this success is nowhere better exemplified than within the Turkish community. Turks have been successful in professions as various as finance, business, education, politics, law, academia and medicine. Yasemin's father's representation as corner shop greengrocer – in other words, hard-working, self-employed, family businessman – could indicate a reversion to cultural stereotypes that a paternalistic western society feels most comfortable with. And most of the other male members of Yasemin's family would appear, from their lack of obvious occupation, to be either unemployed or lazy, or both. In this respect, they could be seen as conforming to the image of ethnic minorities as an economic drain on the national *Wohlfahrtsstaat*, an image central to much of the popular and xenophobic discourse which has historically attached itself to the immigration debate.

This exaggerated binary is replicated in the characters of Yasemin and her sister, Emine (Nursel Koeşe). While Yasemin has apparently enjoyed almost unlimited freedom and looks forward to a career and financial autonomy, Emine has been kept out of school at home. Here she helps her father in his shop. In addition to this she is forced into an arranged with the bullying and aggressive patriarchal figure, Hassan. Hassan's character is shown into stark relief on the night of his marriage to Emine. Unable to consummate the marriage Hassan is willing to cast aspersions on his new wife's chastity to prevent exposure of his own impotence. On this level, the strength and power of Yasemin's verbal and physical autonomy – her *Siegertyp* characterisation (Kühn 1995, 46) – would appear to increase in exact proportion to her sister's silence and cultural entrapment. According to Kühn, 'die getürkten Bilder bauen auf Idealvorstellungen' (1995, 52), and this idealised exaggeration would appear to work against Rabinus' claim of an entirely 'normal', unexoticised portrayal of Turkish culture.

Of equal relevance to the question of a prejudicial portrayal of Turkish culture is the nature of the film's conclusion. Despite the apparent strength and emancipation

attributed to Yasemin's character throughout the film, she is ultimately cast in the role of victim, and more significantly, as victim of her own Turkish cultural background. With her father's transformation from liberal, permissive guardian to reactionary, 'authoritarian patriarch, all that was portrayed as positive in Turkish culture and tradition is lost. This then reinforces the essential inadequacy of the other patriarchal figures in the film, from Yasemin's narrow-minded and bullying uncle, to her abusive and weak brother-in-law, and her hopelessly out of touch and reactionary grandparents' generation.

In this respect, none of the films dealt with in this chapter could be accused of that 'celebratory romance of the past' which Bhabha sees as common to much construction of new cultural identities in colonial cultures. According to Bhabha, this nostalgic take on cultural heritage is responsible for much of the fixity and fetishism attributed to these newly formed and forming cultural identities. However, on the other hand, this negative representation of the intransigence of Turkish culture sits uncomfortably with the notion of a postcolonial critique seeking to identify the interstices of domains of cultural difference. Indeed, this focus on the immobility and stasis of cultural, historical or racial difference is a theoretical standpoint entrenched in the discourse of colonialism. According to Bhabha, this fixity is a 'paradoxical mode of representation' connoting on the one hand, 'rigidity and an unchanging order', and on the other, 'disorder, degeneracy and demoniac repetition' (1997, 66). Unsurprisingly, Yasemin's path to self-realisation and self-fulfilment is shown to be only possible through a complete abandonment of her cultural origins, as pointed out by Hickethier:

Thema des Films ist die Emanzipation der jungen Türkin von den traditionellen Bedingungen, die mit ihrer Frauwerdung zur Fessel werden.' (1995, 32)



Significantly, however, this process of emancipation from the repressive forces of family and tradition can only take place with the aid of Jan. Hickethier:

[...] die kleinen Schritte der Selbstbewusstwerdung, die auf eine von ihr geleistete, eigene Befreiung hinzielen, werden zugunsten der vom Genre vorgezeichneten Befreiung durch den deutschen Mann aufgegeben. (1995, 33)

The demonised and rejected Turkish culture is thus reduced to the position of a problem, and a problem that requires the assistance of a liberal, progressive western culture to resolve it. It is in this respect that Bohm's film comes closest to proposing a rather suspect orientalist dichotomy of 'West and Rest' that would appear to have more in common with the *Problemkino* of the early immigrant cinema period than with Seeßlen's notion of a *cinéma du métissage*. As Göktürk argues, '[w]hereas the promoters of this film claimed to foster cross-cultural understanding, it really reproduced and generated common stereotypes and confirmed the view that German society in general is more civilised and enlightened than archaic Turkish community' (1999, 10). Ultimately, films such as *Yasemin*, *40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland* and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, could be argued to do more to reinforce notions of racial polarity and cultural separation, and in the process implicitly impose a colonialist hierarchy of cultural relations, than to engage with Bhabha's poststructuralist affirmation of 'the borders of culture's insurgent and interstitial existence' (1997, 19). Göktürk takes a similar position in her evaluation of the works of Başer, Bohm and Sanders-Brahms, pointing out that they all feed into a common discourse 'about the victimisation of Turkish women and confirm the subnational positioning of the immigrant' (1999, 11).

Despite the increasing numbers of ethnic minority filmmakers, the foregrounding of immigrant cultures as sites of conflict testifies to the persistence of the *Kino der Fremdheit* throughout the 1980s. Seeßlen argues that, ultimately, this cinema was to prove itself as unrepresentative of the immigrant situation as it was unbeneficial to the political project to assure their equal recognition as German citizens:

Dieses Kino der Fremdheit erweist sich am Ende als unproduktiv wie unzeitgemäß; nicht selten werden die Immigranten dabei metaphorisch missbraucht, um ein Opfer zu zelebrieren und eine moralische Eindeutigkeit herzustellen, die der Idee der Metissage widerspricht (2000, 24).

To assess the validity of Seeßlen's developmental history of the German *cinéma du métissage* and its relation to Bhabha's notion of a form of cultural expression which traces out a 'pathway between racial polarities' (1997, 19) let us now turn to the Turkish-German films of the 1990s.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The screenplay was adapted from the novel *Frauen, die sterben, ohne daß sie gelebt hätten* by Salina Scheinhardt.

<sup>2</sup> Para 45 and 46, 'Daten und Fakten zur Ausländersituation, März 1998'. 1998. *Der Bundesausländerbeauftragte* [online], viewed 27 Dec 2001, <<http://www.Bundesausländerbeauftragte.de/daten/index.stm>>



## Chapter 11

# ‘Cinéma du métissage’ – *A Match Made in Berlin-Kreuzberg*

Have there been any new departures in the 1990s? Are the exiles still in prison, or have they managed to break out? Is the cultural production of migrants still confined to niches, or has it meanwhile become mainstream? Are there any celebrations of hybridity in recent Turkish-German productions? (Göktürk 1999, 11)

‘Jung, deutsch und türkisch’ runs the title of *Sat1*’s recently established website devoted to the celebration of a new and vibrant Turkish-German cinema (‘Jung, deutsch und türkisch’ 2002). Citing films such as *Mein Vater, der Gastarbeiter*, *Ich Chef, du Turnschuh*, *Lebewohl*, *Fremde*, *Sommer in Mezra*, and *Dealer* this site charts the steady rise of the Turkish-German film throughout the 1990s. In this respect, the increasing cultural confidence of marginalised social groupings represented by the New German Comedy women and the former East German protagonists of the post-*Wende* cinema would appear to be equally relevant to the Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s. This increasing visibility is also evident outwith the sphere of filmmaking in both wider cultural and political spheres. Feridun Zaimoglu’s books on Turkish-German life have brought him overnight success and media assignation to the role of spokesperson for a

whole generation of young *Kanaksta*. In a very different context Cem Özdemir, the first Turkish-German elected to the German *Bundestag*, has been able to combine the roles of chairman of the government's working party "*Aktion Courage e.V.- S.O.S. Rassismus*" and, since 1998, the position of *innenpolitischer Sprecher der Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*. In the academic sphere, Claus Leggewie and Zafer Senoçak have found their calls for the recognition of the social and political rights of Turkish immigrants and 'naturalised' Turkish-Germans alike falling on increasingly sympathetic ears.

In terms of concrete political change, the last two years have seen a major shift of domestic *Ausländerpolitik* away from the conservative protectionism and reactionary inertia which characterised the debate for the larger part of the Twentieth Century. One of the most significant changes has been the extension of the constitutional *Abstammungsprinzip*. This legal definition recognises only those German-born children with at least one parent in possession of German citizenship as entitled to citizenship themselves. This has now been broadened to include entitlement for all children who were born in Germany, whose parents' have lived for at least eight years in Germany or who are in possession of a permanent residence permit ('Die neue Staatsangehörigkeit' 1999). This eight-year residency requirement now also forms the basis of the new law of entitlement to German citizenship for non-German born immigrants, a reduction from the previous 15-year period.

Despite the continued exclusion of the *doppelte Staatsbürgerschaftsrecht* to all but exceptional cases<sup>1</sup>, this change in law still represents a significant move forward in the official recognition of the rights of immigrant populations living in Germany. The most significant failure of this law could lie, however, in its exclusion of the children of immigrant parents to be born prior to the date of the activation of the new law, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2000. This naturally excludes a sizeable percentage of the children of the 7



1/2 million foreigners currently living in Germany. These applicants must go through the normal channels for application for German citizenship, albeit with an as yet undefinable 'besonderer Anspruch auf Einbürgerung' ('Die neue Staatsangehörigkeit' 1999).

Cultural visibility and political lobbying, however, are far from the only reasons for the new political engagement with the *Ausländerfrage*. According to Hickethier, the recent shifts in public and political opinion represent a reassertion of liberal values of tolerance and equality in the face of the growth of right-wing extremism and the associated rise in xenophobic propaganda and violence:

Es expandiert erst jetzt-als Folge einer verstärkten öffentlichen Diskussion der Fremdenfeindlichkeit und des Ausländerhasses zu einem gern aufgegriffenen Thema... (1995, 20)

As pointed out in Part III the growth of national-populist, far-right and neofascist politics has been a factor common to much of the European political landscape of the 1990s. In post-unification Germany, however, the propaganda of the right found a particularly fertile breeding ground, a problem only exacerbated by the then government's invocation of "blood ties" and "ethnic unity" as a means of countering the actual social, historical and political disparities which appeared to characterise much of both East's and West's everyday experience of reality. Özdemir:

Aus dem emanzipatorischen Ostslogan "Wir sind das Volk" [und nicht das ZK der SED] wurde die exklusive Parole "Wir sind ein Volk", indessen nach dem Fall der Mauer wiedervereinigten Deutschland die "Ausländer" nichts mehr verloren haben würden. (1999, 115)

This new post-1989 emphasis on 'German nationality through blood' was most strikingly emphasised by the government's reactivation of the 1953 *Bundesvertriebenengesetz*. Under this statute all German *Aussiedler*-such as the German Poles forced into eastern exile by the Russians at the end of the Second World War-are entitled to return "home" and enjoy immediate German citizenship and all of the social and political rights associated with that status. Unsurprisingly, this development did not ease the integration of those other immigrant populations already domiciled in Germany but excluded from state citizenship.

Coming in the wake of the government's decision to refuse visa applications for half of the immigrant workers living in East Germany at the time of the unification- originally none were to be granted-the message to such communities appeared clear:

Die Bundesregierung maß mit zwei Ellen: daß das "Boot voll" sei, sollte nur für Blutsfremde gelten. (Özdemir 1999, 125)

On the tail of this perceived new attack on the rights of foreigners came the much more disturbing physical attacks which have been particularly prevalent in the *neue Bundesländer* and which have attributed such infamy to the names of Rostock and Hoyerswerda. Many reasons have been offered to account for the apparently endemic nature of racism within the new German regions. In many areas socio-economic deprivation has exacerbated the success of right-wing groups from East and West in sowing discontent and racism. The historical treatment of immigrants within the former East Germany has also played its part in forming contemporary prejudices. According to *Bundestagpräsident* Wolfgang Thierse the situation of ethnic minorities in the East amounted to "einer eigenen Form der Apartheid" (Quoted by Özdemir 1999, 119).



Whatever the origins of Germany's by no means unique problems of immigrant integration, the security and acceptance of its ethnic minorities is by no means assured. In this respect, the need for a discussion of the place of such communities in contemporary Germany has by no means diminished, as indicated by Zafer Senoçak:

Nachdem die über Jahre in der deutschen Bevölkerung geschürten Ängste vor "Überwanderung" und Überfremdung", sowie das jahrelange Vermeiden jeglicher Diskussion über eine deutsche Identität jenseits der deutschen Einheit inzwischen zur offenen Gewalt gegen Ausländer geführt haben-vor allem gegen die wegen der unterschiedlichen Religion als besonders fremd und wegen ihrer Zahl als besonders bedrohlich empfundene Minderheit der Türken – ist eine Diskussion der Fundamente der deutschen Gesellschaft nicht mehr zu vermeiden. (1993, 10)

This call for debate may have a particular relevance for a medium such as film, the central tenet of whose narrative is conflict and which is thus founded upon the portrayal of difference and 'others'. Hickethier recognises this internal imperative of the 'dramaturgical media' to confront the self with the other, the known with the unknown, and indicates, in the process, the potential therapeutic significance of film in the representation of dissident voices:

Die medialen Dramaturgien leben geradezu davon, dass sie das Bekannte mit dem Unbekannten, das Reguläre mit dem Aussergewöhnlichen, das Eigene mit dem Fremden konfrontieren. (1995, 20)

This relationship between film and other, known and unknown, native and foreign, as articulated in the Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s, is of particular relevance to Seeßlen's definition of a contemporary *cinéma du métissage*.

### A Family Affair

Wo also ist die Heimat der zweiten Art, diese Kultur der Métissage? Sie muß gefunden, ja, sie muß erfunden werden. Zum Beispiel durch das Kino. (Seeßlen 2000, 23)

Métissage beginnt mit dem Abschied von den Träumen der Emigration. (Seeßlen 2000, 23)

According to Seeßlen, the political aspiration of the *Kino der Métissage* must be to develop a filmic structure based on the actual lived experience of *métissage* and use this to access a greater understanding of the subject. Living as they do *in* at least two cultures, the children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of immigrants enjoy a particular position of insight into the "host" and "native" cultures they find themselves born into. Aware of the variant and often competing boundaries imposed upon them by their bicultural situation these subjects potentially retain an objective distance inaccessible to native or first generation immigrant populations. Consequently, for Seeßlen the true *Métissage-Film* is the product of second and third and even fourth generation endeavours:



Die Métissage-Filme im engsten Sinne, also jene Filme, die von Regisseurinnen und Regisseuren gemacht wurden, die selbst Angehörige der dritten oder gar vierten Einwanderer-Generation waren und von einem autobiografischen Gestus leben...' (Seeßlen 2000, 25)

As in Böhm's *Yasemin*, the dramatic tension of the immigrant dilemma in films such as *Aprilkinder* (Yüksel Yavuz, 1998), *Geschwister* (Thomas Arslan, 1996), *Hochzeit* (Antonia Lerch, 1996), and also, *Lola und Bilidikid* (Kutlug Ataman, 1999), is located in the family. The protagonists of these films find themselves caught between the desire to maintain their own culture and the need to assimilate the new. Through the portrayal of family life, and more particularly, the conflicts that are fought out between the older immigrant generation and the younger naturalised Turkish-Germans, such films attempt a *Bestandsaufnahme* of the codes and double meanings which constitute the means of communication between fellow inhabitants of this *métissage* culture.

In Thomas Arslan's first film of a trilogy aimed at exploring the plight of second and third generation Turkish immigrants in Germany, *Geschwister* (1996), the focus is almost exclusively on this younger generation and their struggle to find purpose and construct identities within the web of often conflictual multicultural discourses they are exposed to. Born of a German mother and a Turkish father, 17-year old Leyla (Serpil Turhan) and her two older brothers, Ahmed (Savas Yurderi) and Erol (Tamer Yigit) have a particularly intimate experience of life between two cultures. The family live in Berlin-Kreuzberg, which along with Berlin-Schöneberg, München-Hassenbergl, Köln-Mülheim and Hamburg-Altona, represent some of the largest Turkish-German communities in Germany.

In many of the historical *Einwandererviertel*, the social problems common to all areas of high unemployment and social exclusion are particularly acute. According to Özdemir, these immigrant communities are often discriminated against in the search for jobs and, consequently, quickly find themselves caught in the vicious circle of the poverty trap. The subsequent problems of soaring crime rates, violence, drugs and poor education – problems endemic to parts of Berlin-Schöneberg, or the notorious SO 36 district of Berlin-Kreuzberg – are the logical consequence of this fact. Iris Hanika describes the downward spiral in which the inhabitants of such areas commonly find themselves trapped:

SO 36 brummt vor Geschäftigkeit, aber es ist das Brummen der Armut, denn nicht nur der Deutsche, auch der Mittelstand mit ausländischen Wurzeln ist inzwischen weggezogen. (2000, 2)

In Arslan's film, Sevim (Mariam El Awat) is Leyla's best-friend and also her escape route from her claustrophobic and restrictive home environment. For Leyla, Sevim represents her only salvation from her deeply ambivalent family relationships, and the tedious apprenticeship which she is serving out in a local textile factory. However, despite the shortcomings of her familial and social environments, both Leyla and her brother Ahmed have relinquished their Turkish nationality entitlement and opted for German citizenship. Erol's experience of life in the adopted culture is even more ambivalent than that of his siblings. However, with no qualifications and an overweening desire to play the macho gangster, Erol quickly slips into the vicious circle of debts and crime. It is ultimately Erol's illegal activities that force him to quit



Germany and opt for Turkish nationality. The film concludes four weeks later with Erol's departure for Turkey to undertake his military service.

The levels of exclusion felt by all three children in their attempts to grow to adulthood and meet the demands of both native and host cultures are great. However, as Seeßlen points out, in the *Immigrantenkino* of the 1990s, 'die kulturelle vermischt sich mit einer sozialen Marginalisierung' (2000, 22). In both *Geschwister* and Arslan's third feature film *Dealer* (1999), it is ultimately social deprivation and not cultural confusion which represents the greatest barrier to social and material betterment. As Özdemir recognised, there is always the danger that when social problems occur within immigrant communities they will be linked not to social environment but to cultural difference. This 'ethnicization' of social problems can only lead to a further ghettoisation of ethnic minorities and an associated hardening of racial and cultural boundaries:

Diese Situation führt im schlechtesten fall zu einer Eskalation im Wohngebiet, die so weit gehen kann, daß entweder die einen oder die anderen wegziehen.  
(Özdemir 1999, 213)

### **Torn Between Cultures**

Despite this ambiguous interrelation of the public and the private, the social and the cultural, Arslan's focus remains primarily personal, exploring the relationships and tensions that bind the family to each other and to their disparate frames of cultural reference. In Yüksel Yavuz's *Aprilkinder* the family also represents the centrifugal force around which the protagonists play out their various dilemmas. Cem (Erdal Yıldız) is

the oldest son of Turkish-Kurdish<sup>2</sup> immigrant parents. His position as nominal head of the family is necessitated by his father's (Cemal Yavuz) complete withdrawal from family affairs and, it would appear, from any social contact at all. His appearances are limited to sporadic wanderings from bedroom to sofa and his vocal contributions to the family's dilemmas to a racking cough. As in Arslan's *Geschwister* the patriarchal head is as incapable of providing leadership in the new 'host' culture as he is of articulating any but reactionary and essentialist views of cultural exchange.

Interestingly, in *Aprilkinder* this figure is played by Yavuz's own father. Yavuz's first film *Mein Vater, der Gastarbeiter* (1994), was, as the title suggests, a documentary account of his father's experiences in Germany. After 15 years in Hamburg's fish-processing and ship-building industries Cemal Yavuz eventually returned home to Turkey to find his Kurdish village all but abandoned and under threat of attack from the Turkish army. In this situation he was forced to survive without any possibility of a state pension. In *Aprilkinder* Cem's father's retreat into 'das innere Exil' (Bax 1999) – avoiding all contact with his family and any involvement with their affairs and troubles – could be read in this context. As a representative of an older generation hopelessly at sea in an apparently alien and incomprehensible modern social reality he has much in common with the East German protagonist, Walther, in Kleinert's *Wege in die Nacht*.

The parents' ultimate estrangement from their surroundings is reflected in the family's use of language. While the parents converse with each other in Kurdish and the children in German, they are all forced to resort to a third language, Turkish, to communicate with each other. According to Seeßlen, this generational estrangement, in which the parents have only a limited grasp of the cultural and linguistic capital necessary to integrate into the host culture, is one of the central elements of the *Métissage-Film*. This separation is most typically articulated in the inability or unwillingness of the parents to understand their children. Just as they have no



understanding of or sympathy for the hybrid musical style of Dilan's (Semen Tepe) teenage Turkish idol Tarkan, they are equally unaware of her blossoming romance with Arif (Kaan Emre), the son of a neighbouring Kurdish family.

As the mother (Serif Sezer) sets off to buy a bed for Cem's forthcoming marriage, she would appear to have no inkling as to her eldest son's affair with the German prostitute Kim (Inga Busch) or, indeed, his more general ambivalence towards the arranged marriage. The extent of this generational and cultural divide is brought into sharp focus by Dilan's distanced westernised observation on the approaching marriage, remarking to her friend, 'die haben sich nicht mal geküsst, das ist doch krass, oder?' Her attempts to reason with her mother fall on entirely uncomprehending ears and eventually she gives up and exclaims, 'die ist ja nicht ganz dicht!' The mother's inability or unwillingness to broach her concerns at her middle son Mehmet's (Bülent Ersüngün) sudden unexplained affluence is typical. In an aside which resonates with Başer's *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, her one interjection is to cite the warning example of their neighbour's son who was arrested for illegal activities and subsequently deported.

It would appear that the divide between host and native cultures is simply too great to bridge. The father has long since lapsed into silence. The mother's silence is both linguistic – being unable to speak German – and psychological – being unwilling to face up to the reality of her children's lives within and as part of German culture and society. This inability to speak German must indicate a certain ambivalence towards the culture she finds herself in, as according to the story of Onkel Pala's (Hasan Ali Mete) smuggling mother and youngest son into the country they must have been resident in Germany for the entire length of Dilan's teenage years. However, her silence is also that of a woman positioned within a patriarchal culture. According to her native cultural positioning her role is to cook, clean and care for the male members of the family. Decisions should be left to the patriarchal head of the family. Despite the assurance and

confidence with which her daughter, Dilan, bewitches and seduces her boyfriend Arif in the extra-familial, social sphere, it is clearly a domestic and subsequently subservient role that her mother envisages her as ultimately occupying.

The father's retirement transfers the full economic burden of supporting the family to Cem, who is the only family member in full-time employment. His younger brother Mehmet's 'zweifelhafte Geschäfte' and aspiration to Mercedes-Benz-driving, street gangster status provide another source of worry for Cem and his mother, despite the financial rewards that these illegal activities appear to provide. The youngest child, Dilan, appears in many respects to be the most contented member of the family. In spite of Mehmet's constant bullying and attempts to assert his patriarchal dominance over his younger sister and, indeed, the entire family, her relationship with her mother and Cem would appear to provide a degree of love and stability. Equally, her romantic interest in Mehmet's best friend Arif is both reciprocated and likely to meet with family approval, her suitor coming from a respectable Turkish-Kurdish family.

The separation that the parents feel from the German society and culture in which they find themselves is replicated in the children who find themselves in a curious state of detachment from both native and host cultures. This ambivalent distance allows them the space to assess the attributes and deficiencies of each culture but simultaneously precludes any true sense of belonging to either. The stresses placed upon the relationships both within and outside the family unit increase as the narrative develops. The tensions between Cem and his family become truly apparent only after his chance encounter and subsequent love affair with the German prostitute, Kim. However, this conflict is never openly articulated, taking form rather in Cem's internal psychological struggle and the battle of loyalties that he finds himself facing.

The exotic other-worldliness of the Turkish brothel in which they meet, represents a space in which social and cultural codes are reversed or abandoned. The



German prostitute servicing Turkish males and working for an exploitative and uncaring Turkish boss echoes the distasteful, menial labour that Cem is required to undertake to satisfy the insatiable meat-eating lusts of the German population. On another level, the exploitative and violent Onkel Pala undergoes a midnight transformation from pimp and gangster into the crooning, androgynous figure of Zeki Müren. All of these factors mark out the relationship between Cem and Kim that develops in this environment as an escape from reality, and, consequently, prefigure its ultimate failure.

Kim's 'otherness' is sharply delineated from the start. While Cem's friend dances with a Turkish prostitute to the resonant lilt of traditional Turkish folk music, the blond-wigged Kim chooses a distinctly western soundtrack of new wave computerised dance music to perform to. This scene not only anticipates her subsequent dismissal from Pala's brothel – "Und ich sag's doch ganz ehrlich. Hier will keine mehr eine Deutsche!" (Inga Busch *Aprilkinder*) – but also marks out her fundamental difference from her Turkish surroundings. It is this difference which will ultimately sound the death knell for her relationship with Cem. Outside the club, in the 'real' world, Cem is already betrothed to his Kurdish cousin who, still living in Turkey, awaits the finalisation of their marriage arrangements. The unbridgeable distance between their two cultures is typified by Kim's relation of the story of one of her elderly customers. While both laugh at the incongruous piety of the man who throws himself onto the floor and prays to Allah for forgiveness after each act of sexual intercourse, it is exactly this adherence to custom and tradition that will see Cem, ultimately, abandon Kim for his Kurdish wife-to-be.

As Kim continues to narrate the story of this elderly Turkish *Gastarbeiter* it becomes apparent that it is from here that the film takes its title. His repeated sentimental reference to his nine *Aprilkinder*, left behind with his wife in Turkey, is explained by the annual summer holiday to Turkey which would have been the one

chance a year for the early *Gastarbeiter* to see their wives and families, denied as they were the accompaniment of dependants. Thus all of his children were born in the subsequent April. This separation from wife and family might also explain his frequent visits to Kim and to establishments such as that owned by Cem's uncle. It is left to the viewer to contemplate the deeper significance of this man's story, and the system of exploitation and inequality that lies behind it.

The estrangement and alienation articulated by the *Gastarbeiter's* story echoes the 'unhomely moment' which Bhabha recognises as the central defining feature of the immigrant's experience of life in the non-native culture. This 'unhomely moment' is not denied Cem, whose uncomfortable position between two cultures – or, perhaps more aptly stated, outside of both – persists despite having lived for most of his life in Germany. According to Bhabha, it is this 'unhomely moment' which relates 'the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence' (Bhabha 1997, 11).

In this respect, Cem's struggle to gain acceptance within both host and native cultures is mirrored in the ambivalence faced by the wider immigrant community in Germany in its struggle to attain social and political recognition. For Cem this cultural inertia acts as a necessary measure to protect him from facing the wider social inequalities that encounter immigrant living in German society. This state of affairs will remain unchanged as long as he is denied full German citizenship and the equal social and political rights that this would entitle him to. It is ultimately this ambiguous legal status that ensures his inability to escape the poverty trap which forces him to remain within the restricting confines of family home and the wider Turkish-German ghetto. His lack of access to an educational framework and employment structure without cultural or racial prejudice represents, for Cem, merely the final barrier to any social aspirations he may have.



The fate of Cem, should he decide against his family's wishes and pursue a relationship outside that proscribed by the system of cultural tradition and custom, is made abundantly clear by his father's response to Kim's visit:

Kim: Ich wollte Cem besuchen.

Vater: Ich habe kein Cem Sohn.

The threat of expulsion from family and culture like that risked by Shirin in *Shirins Hochzeit*, Elif in *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, and Yasemin in *Yasemin*, is ultimately too much for Cem. As a consequence, he must ultimately decide to abandon Kim. As Cem reluctantly lays his arm around his new bride and the couple begin to turn, the camera ascends into a frantic spiral as Cem, eyes closed – just as they have been closed throughout his dream-like relationship to Kim – is swept away by tradition and family loyalty. This reiteration of the imprisonment metaphor, so central to Başer's *40m² Deutschland*, shows that both men and women can become captives of their cultural backgrounds. Hans-Jorg Rother:

Die Tradition trug über ihn und seine leidenschaftliche Liebe zu Kim, der blonden Deutschen, den Sieg davon, und das Familienleben hat einen neuen Gefangenen genommen. (1999)

### ***Culture du métissage: Beyond Race?***

Alienation from both family life and society at large constitute the everyday reality of Lola (Gandi Mukli), in Kultug Ataman's *Lola und Bilidikid* (1999). Cast out from his

family home by a tyrannical older brother, Osman (Hasan Ali Mete), and forced to live as an exile from the Turkish-German community of his childhood, he faces the daily approbation of 'straight' society, both Turkish and German. However, although society at large may have a hard time coming to terms with Lola's homosexuality and transvestism, he has long since done so, carving out a place and identity for himself and his *Macho-Schwul* boyfriend Bili, played by *Aprilkinder*'s Erdal Yidiz, within the Turkish gay community. For Lola this existence has meant a complete separation from his family, a separation which would have remained uninterrupted but for the intervention of Bili, who badgers him to return to the family home and claim his rightful share of his father's inheritance.

While Lola appears reconciled to her sexuality and the exclusion from "normal" straight society that enforces, Bili is not. Although he works as a male prostitute the macho Bili appears ashamed of his homosexuality. According to his strange logic, which he imparts to Murat (Baki Davrat), as long as one limits oneself to the role of active partner in anal sex one is not necessarily gay. After all, for a man "ein Loch ist ein Loch" (Erdal Yidiz *Lola und Bilidikid*). His macho identity, which ensures the respect of his male heterosexual friends, is too important to him to risk, as testified to by his denial of Lola when in the presence of a Turkish *Kumpel*. This acquaintance makes clear the homophobic conservatism of the male Turkish community. Indicating Lola Bili's friend exclaims, "ist er ok Mann? Er sieht ein bißchen kömisch aus. Wegen solcher Typen kriegen wir Türken 'nen schlechten Ruf" (Aykut Kayaçik).

Bili's socialisation is such that he is unable to relinquish his ties to his community and family and consequently encourages Lola to commit to a sex change, an operation which will enable them to live as man and wife and facilitate their eventual emigration to Turkey:



Bili: Wir müssen wie ganz normale Menschen leben, wie Mann und Frau, in einer ganz normalen Familie.

However, Lola recognises this wish for the denial that it represents, and pictures their subsequent future. To accept Bili's demand, Lola realises, would be to accept the cultural positioning of woman in a patriarchal culture, a role which beyond the domestic "bliss" of "Schürze tragen", "Wohnung putzen" and "Plätzchen backen", could have only one possible outcome:

Lola: Aber weil Bili so ein Machotyp war, hat er bald keine Lust mehr als Schwule mit den Schwulen zu leben [...] Aber eines Tages kam Bili nicht nach Hause, und Lola wartete und wartete...

The acceptance of socialisation to the norms and regulative conventions of German and/or Turkish society which Lola refers to can never bring ultimate fulfilment to its subjects, be they heterosexual or homosexual. The only possibility for people such as Lola, and her fellow transvestites, Kalipso (Mesut Özdemir) and Sehzazat (Celal Perk), is to remain on the fringes of society, inhabiting the largely nocturnal world of bars, clubs and city park rendezvous that allow them the freedom to express their desired identities. This changes, however, when Lola returns to the family home to discover that he has a younger brother whom he never knew existed. From this point onwards Lola is no longer interested in inheritance and emigration but rather in the unknown family that she has never met.

Murat is seventeen and also questioning his sexuality. His tentative excursions into relationships with men, however, induce a violent response from fellow students and arouse the suspicions of his brother, Osman. His aimless wanderings alone through Berlin's night-time streets and parks take a more purposeful direction after his meeting with his new-found brother, Lola. It is Murat's consequent voyage of self-discovery which constitutes the central narrative motivation of the film. Murat's tentative quest for identity amongst the gay bars and clubs of Berlin is thrown into harsh relief by the overtly clichéd portrayal of his oldest brother. Taking his role as patriarchal head extremely seriously, he exercises an iron hand over the family. It is Murat who ejected Lola from the family home for the shame her "unnatural" predilections would bring to the family name. Osman then hid Lola's existence from his youngest brother Murat.

Firmly entrenched in a long line of repressive, narrow-minded, reactionary patriarchs, from Başer's Dursun, to Yavuz's uncle Pala and Böhm's equally unpleasant uncle figure, Hassan, the character of Osman struggles to develop beyond the two-dimensionality of cultural cipher. And just like Turnay and Yasemin, Murat also realises that his ultimate path to self-fulfilment can only lie in opposition to the bastions of traditional Turkish culture and the parental home. Anke Sternebourg recognises this as the fundamental dilemma of second, third and fourth generation immigrants, caught as they are between 'modernity' and 'tradition':

Damit erzählt Kutlug Ataman in seinem dritten Film nicht nur die klassische Geschichte vom Erwachsenwerden, sondern auch die Geschichte einer ganzen Generation junger, bei uns lebender Türken, die zwischen Tradition und Moderne nach ihrem Platz suchen. (1999)



Clearly, the representation of tradition and a clear and unambiguous cultural origin and heritage has remained a central preoccupation of the contemporary Turkish-German film, from the early immigrant films of the New German Cinema to the more recent work of filmmakers such as Ataman and Yavuz. As such these representations have undoubted social and psychological importance both for the ethnic communities they represent and their relationship to the wider social context in which they find themselves. According to Bhabha, such representations bear witness to those communities constituted 'otherwise than modernity' (1997, 6). While he recognises the value of these representations in reinscribing 'the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity' (1997, 6), their most crucial role is that of asserting the subordinated peoples' indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories (1997, 9). The dangers of such a preoccupation to the internally constructed and externally perceived identities of immigrant populations are, however, equally apparent to Bhabha. He questions the 'dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that "roots" be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenising the history of the present' (1997, 9).

Hickethier recognises the prevalence of this oppositional binary in the representation of immigrant voices within German film, and hints at the symbolic power of the hierarchical structure it implies:

Der alles durchwirkende Gegensatz von Moderne und Traditionalismus, der das Verhältnis von Deutschen und Ausländern in Deutschland bestimmt, erscheint in den meisten Filmen als kulturelle Differenz: Vorstellungen und Werte der "archaischen, aber geschützten Verhältnisse" der geschlossenen patriarchalischen Gesellschaften treffen auf die Werte der modernen

Industriegesellschaften: zB. in den Konflikten innerhalb der ausländischen Familien, in den Geschlechter-bzw. Generationenbeziehungen. (1995, 35)

The implication of this value-judgement-laden binary configuration are as follows:

Deutschland ist der Ort der modernen Industriegesellschaft, die "Gastarbeiter" kommen aus einer weniger modernen, weniger entwickelten Gesellschaft und haben sich hier ein- und anzupassen. (1995, 35)

In their blinkered, aggressive adherence to an oversimplified and spurious myth of historical origination, and its implicit significations of racial purity and cultural priority (Bhabha 1997, 74), characters such as Dursun, Onkel Pala and Hassan, cast their cultural heritage as entirely negative, reactionary and repressive. In this way they reinforce the value judgements inherent in the modernity-versus-tradition debate, which posit the progressiveness of modernity against the backwardness of tradition. Claude Audinet describes the symbolic division between tradition and modernity in the following way:

D'un côté, l'ethnie, la coutume, et avec elle les récits anciens, les mythes, la religion, les émotions profondes liées au corps. De l'autre, le lien démocratie, la nation et l'international, la loi, mais aussi la nouveauté, la rationalité, la science et le progrès. (1990, 24)

(On the one hand, we have the ethnic community allied with tradition, and accompanied by legend, myth, religion, and a deep emotional significance



ascribed to the body. On the other, democracy, the national and the international, as well as law, innovation, rationality, science and progress. [my translation])

This binary opposition is reinforced by the juxtaposition of the two staged narrative monologues in the film. The first is conducted by Murat's mother, as she confesses to the existence of her second son, Lola. During the washing ritual, in which the head-scarved mother bathes the wounds of her teenage son in a turn-of-the-century tin bath, with supplications to Allah to visit revenge on her son's attackers interjected at intervals, the cultural 'otherness' of the scene is constantly reinvoked. As the mother begins her monologue in Turkish, the camera remains on Murat, leaving her lyrical disembodied voice to hover over a mystical, orchestral soundtrack, a scene reminiscent of the voice-over narrative of the opening of *Shirins Hochzeit*. As she relates the tale of Osman's expulsion of Lola from the family home, she begs Murat to forgive his older brother and to continue to recognise his authority as patriarchal head of the family, with the final concluding comment, "wir versuchen in diesem fremden Land zu leben. Wir müssen beide auf ihn hören. Verstehst du?"

However, just as any sympathy the viewer may have had for Osman is ultimately withdrawn with the knowledge of his sexual abuse of Lola, so too is any sympathy for the laws and conventions of an archaic culture that can allow such abuses to take place. In opposition to this scene stands Lola's *Geburtstagsfeier* monologue in which he speculates on what the future might hold for him and Bili. Whereas his mother's monologue projects back into the past, drawing forward into the present the somewhat tenuous conclusion that despite its inadequacies the status-quo of tradition and patriarchal dominance is best left intact, Lola looks forward to the future and recognises that only a complete resistance to Bili's normative pressure will ensure that the cycle of

patriarchal exploitation and abuse is broken. As Murat rejects Osman, so too must he ultimately reject Bili.

In line with Seeßlen's conception of the hero of the *métissage* film, Lola retains an ironic distance from and an ability to reflect upon his cultural positioning and fate. This distance is denied Lola's mother, who is as incapable of understanding the host culture as she is of freeing herself from the more negative aspects of her native culture. In common with many of the female protagonists of the contemporary Turkish-German cinema, her actions are still prescribed by the cultural conventions of 'sehen, hören und schweigen'. In many respects, Lola and Murat represent two of the very few Turkish-German protagonists who affect a break from tradition and custom that has surrounded their upbringing. According to Seeßlen this break must constitute an integral part of the *Métissagen-Kinder's* response to their cultural positioning by their native culture. Lola, however, pays for this break with his life, as Murat pays for it with the life of his brother.

This rejection of cultural tradition would appear to tie in with Kevin Robin's notion of western modernity as having historically defined itself through a rejection of the pre-modern. This identity constructed itself around a geographical binary of dynamic western self versus a static Oriental Other. The Other is then taken to represent 'whatever was alien to western modernity and its project of development' (1996, 62). Bhabha also recognises the cultural and historical specificity of western Europe's inherent racist tendencies:

We see racism not simply as a hangover from archaic conceptions of the aristocracy, but as part of the historical traditions of civic and liberal humanism that create ideological matrices of national aspiration, together with their concepts of 'a people' and its imagined community. (1997, 250)



However, in Ataman's film both the traditions of 'liberal humanism' and the apparent 'ideological matrices of western national aspiration' are shown in an equally ambiguous, if not ambivalent, light. In spite of the victimisation, intimidation and exclusion perpetrated by the Turkish community towards such characters as Murat, Lola, and Kalipso, the West's commitment to the liberal qualities of sexual, racial tolerance and progressiveness, apparently so central to its modernising project, is hardly more convincing. From the opening scene in which Bili and Lola are pursued and taunted by three bomber-jacketed German youths, it becomes clear that Turkish culture is by no means the exclusive site of the aggressively homophobic heterocentricity displayed by Murat's older brother, Osman.

Subsequent to the attack on Bili and Lola Osman voices concern as to his baby brother's ability to defend himself against racist attack: "Und was wirst du tun, wenn die Deutschen dich verprügeln...wenn sie dich anspucken..." (Hasan Ali Mete: *Lola und Bilidikid*). Positing the aggressors in this scenario as German merely reinforces the dual 'otherness' of the identities which society imposes upon Murat and Lola. This dual burden of racial and sexual difference is ultimately too great to bear in an intolerant and excluding society. Lola and Bili pay this price in full, Bili following his namesake out in a blaze of guns and blood. The film's combative positioning of two Turks against three Germans, two gays against three heterosexuals, transfers any simplistic critique of Turkish society to the level of a much more general indictment of intolerance, racism and homophobia, wherever it may be found.

Despite this extremely serious social and political message the film invokes a multitude of both cultural and sexual stereotypes – from the characterisation of the gay scene as an illicit, seedy, nocturnal den of promiscuity and prostitution, to an equally simplistic reliance upon polarised relationship binaries. Heterosexuals are pitched

against homosexuals, *Macho-Schwul* against *Femme-Schwul*, patriarchal oppressor and iron adherent to custom and tradition against 'westernised' free-thinking, liberal.

However, the film's transference of the central narrative problematic from issues of race to those of sexuality could represent a potentially significant progression in the evolution of the *cinéma du métissage*. In its transference of narrative importance from ethnic identity to sexual identity, Ataman's film could be seen as effecting the move beyond the traditional *Kino der Fremdheit* to a cinema that does not take racial 'otherness' as its starting point. Although this is arguably replaced as narrative problematic by the notion of sexual 'otherness', its presentation is such as to extend the traditional critique of the immigrant film beyond the boundaries of the ethnic minority dilemma to include a more general comment on the state of society's values and preconceptions. Daniela Sannwald:

Er [der Film] zeigt, daß die Welt bunter und vielgestaltiger ist, als man sich vorstellt, und daß Gelassenheit und Toleranz allemal die vernünftigsten Strategien sind, damit umzugehen. (1999)

To examine the ways in which other Turkish-German cinematic texts might be equally active in this transition away from the boundaries of race as a primary marker of difference and culture of origin as a primary site of conflict, let us turn to a figure largely ignored in Seeßlen account of the contemporary *Métissagenkino*: namely, the figure of the street-tough *Kanaksta*.



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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On reaching adult status, the naturalised children of immigrant parents must relinquish their citizenship of their parents' country if they wish to retain German citizenship. For more information see 'Die neue Staatsangehörigkeit' 1999. *Der Bundesausländerbeauftragte* [online], <<http://www.bundesauslaenderbeauftragte>>

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted at this point that I am well aware of the problematic nature of any equation of Turkish-German and Kurdish-German identities. It is not my intention, in this context, to investigate the additional role and representation of Germany's Kurdish minorities, many of whom originate in the lands that have now been claimed and occupied by the Turkish state. Clearly, the breadth and contemporaneity of this issue calls for in-depth investigation and could potentially have a significant impact on those particular articulations of Kurdish-German identity that have hitherto been incorporated under the Turkish-German banner. However, taking my cue from the largely apolitical reading of Kurdish-German identity as represented in the films here under examination, I shall limit my focus here to the investigation of Turkish-German identity.

## Chapter 12

### *Race Relations and the 'Kanaksta'*

Es gebe keine Türken, es gebe keine Herkunft, es gebe keine Identität, das sei alles Gehirnwichse, es gebe nur die Kanaksta und Kanaka, die kämen jetzt raus aus ihren Räumen! Die Devise heiße: Kanak Attack! (Feridun Zaimoglu quoted by Lottmann 1997)

Despite the apparent militancy of Zaimoglu's message, its lack of a clear political statement as well as its internal inconsistencies render it somewhat problematic to analysis. On the surface, at least, his rejection of the notion of identity as constructed through ethnic origin and nationality would appear in line with the wider political project to resist the exclusive representation of ethnic minority communities in terms of their 'otherness'. Senoçak and Leggewie make a similar point in relation to the recognition of the Turkish community as a naturalised and constituent part of German society, stating that 'Das Türkische gehört als ein deutsches Element in Deutschland und nicht als türkisches' (1993, 11).

In this respect, Zaimoglu's message would appear to complement Seeßlen's notion of *cinéma du métissage* and the work of a new generation of Turkish-German filmmakers in its appeal to a younger generation of Turkish-Germans who have been raised and educated in Germany. The first problem comes, however, with his apparent rejection of the concept of identity. According to Zaimoglu, identity is a purely western construct that has no bearing on reality:



Dieses Schwindelwort von der Identität ist der Dreh- und Angelpunkt des westlichen Bewußtseins. Bullshit! Es gibt keine Identität. Wurzeln, Verortung, alles Dreck. Identitätskrise, lächerlich. (Zaimoglu cited by Lottman 1997)

Despite this potentially poststructuralist rejection of identity and, in particular, the West's obsession with it, Zaimoglu goes on to posit his own social category – that of the *Kanaksta*. This inconsistency is augmented by his subsequent rejection of both Turkish and German identities as cultural labels which is then followed by his assertion of his own metropolitan and regional identity: 'Zaimoglu will kein Türke sein. Er will aber auch kein Deutscher sein, aber eigentlich fühlt er sich wie einer, vor allem wie ein Kieler' (Lottmann 1997). As Zaimoglu himself puts it, "Mann, ich bin Kieler! Ich bin Schleswig-Holsteiner, ich bin der Feri, Mann" (Lottmann 1997).

In this respect, Zaimoglu's attack on the western notion of identity could be seen less as a poststructuralist rejection of the 'integral, originary and unified identity' (Hall 1996, 1), than it is an attack on the discourses which define the terms of the debate itself. In this case, Zaimoglu is referring to the cultural labels assigned to the 'them and us' of immigration and ethnic minority debates. This point is echoed by Senoçak and Leggewie:

Täter und Subjekte sind Deutsche. Sie herrschen. Sie bestimmen den Diskurs.

Der Fremde muss endlich aus dieser Rolle hinauswachsen. (1993, 11)

In this particular instance Senoçak and Leggewie are referring to the objectification of ethnic minorities which takes place in all public and political debate. The rejection of the position of 'object of discourse' could be seen as concomitant with an attack on the

middle class, liberal, educated culture that determines this discourse in the first place. This would appear to fit in with Zaimoglu's attitude to the contemporary *Multikulti* debate in Germany:

Kirchentagsdelegierte, Mittlescheitelstudenten, Mutikulti-Vollbartlehrer, Vegetarier, Kurzhaarfrauen mit einem Palästinensertuch vor der Brust. [...] Feridun Zaimoglu haßt diese Leute. (Lottman 1997)

In his defining work on the *Kanaksta* identity, *Abschaum: Die wahre Geschichte von Ertan Ogun*, the words of his central protagonist, Ertan Ogun, echo this sentiment:

Es gibt kein Rechtsstaat, an den Scheiß glaub ich nicht. [...] Es gibt keine Gesetze, an den Scheiß glaub ich nicht. (2000, 163)

The rules and regulations of society are clearly designed to maintain the balance of power between society's winners and losers, its have and its have nots, and the reality of this situation for the *Kanaksta* is unlikely to change: 'Es hat alles nix gebracht, und du im Endeffekt der Verlierer' (Zaimoglu 2000, 163). However, it is this ability to recognise the fundamental inequalities of western society and the positioning of minority communities within its hierarchies of power that signals the political potential of the *Kanaksta* identity. As Zaimoglu makes clear, you do not have to be Turkish-German to aspire to this status:



Viele Deutsche sind Kanakstas. Du bist im dem Moment Kanaksta, wo du die Gesellschaft durchschaust. (Lottmann 1997, 88)

This position of the street-tough Turkish-German *Kanaksta* vis-à-vis the liberal German (and, indeed, Turkish-German<sup>1</sup>) middle classes – or as Cheesman terms it, the German majority society – is most forcefully articulated in the contribution of the title speaker of his second book, *Koppstoff*. *Koppstoff* is a collection of meditations from the female contingent of the *Kanaksta* community. This first contribution is entitled “Ich bin n’ tauffer Liberalkiller”:

Was ich rede, Meister, [...] ist strikt gegen das Liberalultramild, gegen sein Schickimicki, gegen sein Jet-set, gegen sosyete-bebe, gegen Kopfzerbrechen.... All das, was so’n Liberalpissetrinker vorgeben zu verstehen, ist schlimmster Raub vom Reinoriginal, ist Tränendummes und Kontofettes, Toskana-Arschfickiges und Weinkenneriges.... (1999, 11).

As is clear from the language of “Rapperin und Street-Fighterin” Nesrin, the adoption of the *Kanaksta* identity is at least partially characterised by the adoption of a certain style of language.

Referred to as *Türkendeutsch*, *Mischsprache*, *Türkenslang*, *Kanak-Sprak*, or *Ghettosprache*, this new ethno-lexical variation of German carries with it distinct social connotations. As in the case of the Afro-American street-slang of Black American rap music this is the language of the ghetto. This *Ghettosprache* is the language of an urban underclass, increasingly dominated by ethnic minority populations and increasingly disenfranchised from white, western, middle class society. Significantly, this adoption

and development of a new *Umgangssprache* by young Turkish-Germans has been associated with a new attempt at self-definition and one increasingly at odds with both the culture and behaviour of their parents' and grandparents' generation. This socio-specific vernacular has also proven aggressively resistant to the structuring influences of formal – and what is perceived as white, middle class – German language. Perhaps as a result of this, this new street language has quickly been adopted and personalised by the urban youth of the Italian, Spanish, Greek and Balkan ethnic minority communities (Keim and Androutsopoulos 2000, 13). What binds these new language communities together, however, is their marginalised social positioning, as explained by Inken Keim and Jannis Androutsopoulos:

Die Jugendlichen können unterschieden werden in jene, die “auf das Ghetto hin” orientiert sind, und jene, die sich “aus dem Ghetto hinaus” orientieren. Diese Differenzierung kommt auch in ihrem Kommunikationsverhalten zum Ausdruck. (2000, 13)

Undoubtedly a central element in the construction of a distinct *Kanaksta* identity is the attempt to transform a negative social label into a positive one. Parallels with the Afro-American rap music movements reappropriation of the term ‘nigger’ are perhaps most immediately apparent. This transformation of a historically derogatory racist label term into a positive self-affirming identity can also be seen at the heart of the liberal academic project surrounding notions of *métissage*, originating as it does in the historically value-laden descriptive term for ‘half-caste’ or ‘crossbreed’, *métis*. However, while this latter liberal project is defined by an aspiration for racial harmony and peaceful coexistence, the construction of the *Kanaksta* identity – as in the case of its



US counterpart – represents the construction of an identity increasingly hostile to an affluent and educated, middle class society.

For Keim and Androutsopoulos the danger of this oppositional positioning could be to augment the risk of increasing social marginalisation: ‘Die “Kanaken” werden das negative Bild trotzig zur positiven Selbstdefinition als “stark”, “gefährlich” und als gesellschaftliche Outsider’ (2000, 13). However, for those remaining in the ghetto the rejection or inability to take advantage of the traditional *Bildungsabschluss* escape route, limits massively the social and economic opportunities available to them. As the possibilities for social and economic betterment recede the potential for social tension, criminal activity and gang violence within the *Einwanderervierteln* increase (Seidel-Pielen 1996, 1).

Indeed, while there may well be political value in a stance against a dominant and dominating discourse which appears to represent only middle class interests, the male *Ghetto-Haltung* alternative to this, defined increasingly by the aggressive accoutrements of *Kampfhund und Knarre* (Seidel-Pielen 1996, 3), could be seen as offering equally little possibility of social and political empowerment. Interviewed in *Die Zeit*, the young Turkish-German male and ex-gang member, Cem, recognises both the social imperatives behind and the consequences of this aggressive nihilism increasingly prevalent amongst young, ethnic minority males:

Die suchen nach einem Feindbild, das ihr Versagen erklärt. Sie verachten die Gesellschaft, weil sie ihnen zu liberal ist, und entwickeln einen krassen Nationalstolz. (Cem interviewed by Seidel-Pielen 1996, 3)

In order to evaluate the extent and influence of this apparently expanding *deutschfeindliche Subkultur* and its relevance to the representation of the Turkish-German community in Germany, let us return to the films.

### ***Kampfhund und Knarre: The Lions Talk Back***

Aber sie warten auch nicht mehr darauf, dass man ihnen gnädig ein Plätzchen in der ein oder anderen Statistenszene einräumt: ein junges deutsch-türkisches Kino beginnt sich zu formieren, das Geschichten aus den Altbaukarrees und Klein-Istanbuls deutscher Großstädte erzählt, zwischen Macho-Posen und Selbstzweifeln. (Klingenmaier 1999)

While major box office success still eludes much of the Turkish-German cinema to be released in the 1990s, the critical acclaim and media interest evoked by films such as Fatih Akin's *Kurz und schmerzlos* and Lars Becker's *Kanak Attack* (1999), bear testimony to the increasingly fashionable status of Turkish-German film and culture in Germany. The international critical acclaim of *Kurz und schmerzlos*<sup>2</sup>, in particular, has assured Fatih Akin much media attention. Dirk Knipphals, writing in *Der Spiegel*, describes him as one of the great new hopes of German cinema (1998), while Birgit Galle amends this to the great new hope of a *different* German cinema (2000). While slight, this difference in emphasis could be seen as pointing to the uneasy space that the film attempts to inhabit on the margins of the mainstream. On the one hand, the film appears to demonstrate a clear commitment to social realism and the accurate representation of proletariat ethnic minority voices. On the other hand, however, and often overriding these aims lies a conventional linear narrative driven by an obsession



with the celebration of reactionary notions of masculine identity and the linguistic and visual iconography of the commercially-proven gangster film and male buddy movie genre. The extent to which these two apparently opposing trends are mutually exclusive shall be explored in the following analysis.

Akin's film opens with Gabriel's (Mehmet Kurtulus) release from jail. The formality of the two-cheeked kiss which Gabriel bestows upon each member of his waiting family locates the narrative in a non-Germanic social context. At the same time the kiss connects with a key visual trope of the American gangster movie and looks forward to the kiss of betrayal that inevitably follows. The southern European heritage which Akin's protagonists share with their American gangster brethren is evoked throughout the film as the central motifs of brotherhood, loyalty, family, ethnic solidarity and organised crime are developed and explored.

First encoded as evidence of filial bonds, the kissing ritual is subsequently advanced as a signifier of friendship and male bonding. Gabriel and Bobby's (Aleksander Jovanovic) initial meeting, at the traditional Turkish wedding of Gabriel's brother, Cenk (Cen Akin), is more explicitly realigned as the kiss of hood-brothers by Bobby's eulogising introduction:

Bobby: Alice. Weißt du wer das ist? [...] Das ist die Legende, weißt du.  
Das ist der härteste Typ in Altona. Das ist ein richtiger Killer.

Gabriel's 'Godfather' status is summarily reinforced by his stern warning of his wayward friends, "Heute abend bürge ich für euch" (Mehmet Kurtulus: *Kurz und schmerzlos*).

Following on from the opening credit's montage the film is quick to introduce its central thematic focuses of male bonding, violence and crime, all set against the

backdrop of urban ghetto life. The out-of-focus street-fight scene, choreographed against a hard-core rap soundtrack, gradually fades into the scene of Costa's attempted car burglary (Adam Bousdoukos), Bobby's violent ejection from his uncle's restaurant, and Gabriel's release from prison.

The disparity between life in the ghetto and the affluent *bürgerlich* existence more commonly associated with German society – and as intimated in Part I, more commonly represented in contemporary German cinema – is humorously articulated by Bobby's self-important proclamation of his intent to join the Albanian Mafia:

Bobby: Ich steige nächste Woche bei den Albanern ein.

Gabriel: Du willst als Serbe bei den Albanern einsteigen?

Bobby: Das nennt man heutzutage "MültiKülti".

This ironic take on sociology's liberal dream of ethnic harmony displays the ultimate example of multicultural coexistence but in a context which mocks academic pronouncements on the objects of its social discourses. In an essay on the representation of migrant identities within the contemporary Turkish-German cinema, Deniz Göktürk's investigates the possibilities of a shift from the social realism of a 'cinema of duty' towards 'the pleasures of hybridity'. In this essay Göktürk argues that what is needed in diaspora or exile cinemas is an injection of an 'ironic and irreverent spirit' which 'undermine[s] restrictive identity politics by employing humour and irony' (1999, 14). Bobby's darkly humorous remark displays a clear irreverence for the niceties and liberal multicultural aspirations of middle class German society. These children of migrant parents would appear to have little in common with the passive victims of a previous generation's *Migrantenfilme*.



Directly after this conversation Bobby invites Gabriel to join him in his new enterprise and is surprised at the firm rebuff he receives:

Gabriel:        Ich mach' keine linken Dinge mehr. Mann, die Zeiten sind vorbei.

This reference to 'old times' is repeated throughout the film, marking out the disparity between Gabriel's wish to leave his past life behind him and the vicious cycle of violence and revenge which soon sucks him back into the ghetto underworld. Ceyda's (Idil Üner) observation on the macho bravado of their drunken frolicking – 'fast wie alte Zeiten' (Idil Üner: *Kurz und schmerzlos*) – merits a freeze-frame camera shot as a picture is taken of the three friends, arm-in-arm. This is subsequently followed by the scene of Gabriel's provoked attack on Ceyda's new boyfriend, in which Bobby's gleeful congratulations are quickly brushed off:

Bobby:        Das war doch wie alten Zeiten. Lass dich küssen du Sack!

Gabriel:        Leck' mich am Arsch! [...] Kaum bin ich da'raus und schon geht es los.

While Bobby stares in stunned incomprehension at Gabriel's apparently inexplicable anger, Costa recognises the more profound level of their former comrade's desire to change:

Bobby:        Was ist denn los mit dem?

Costa:        Er will erwachsen werden und wir hindern ihn daran.

In its melancholic self-reflexivity Costa's comment marks a significant departure from the standard generic structures of the gangster movie's 'going straight' narrative – as epitomised in the classics of the American genre such as Brian de Palma's *Scarface* (1983) and *Carlito's Way* (1993), or Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather: Part III* (1990), or even his surreal ghetto movie, *Rumblefish* (1983). In these films the bearers of the bonds of friendship and family which ensure their tragic heroes' ultimate downfall are unaware or unwilling to recognise their own culpability. As the 'just like old times' reference is reiterated in the context of the three friends' stoned enjoyment of the aforementioned *Scarface*, it becomes apparent that while Gabriel may have learned the lesson of Pacino's character, and recognised the darker side of the glamorous gangster persona, Bobby has not.

In Ford Coppola's *Rumblefish* 'motorcycle boy' Mickey Rourke finds himself repeatedly sucked back into the life from which he is trying to escape by the hapless hero-worship of younger brother Rusty James (Matt Dillon). Gabriel, in contrast, has not one but two juvenile apprentices to concern himself with. However, while Ford Coppola is at pains to portray the social environment of his central protagonists and its inescapable determination of their fates, it is questionable whether Akin is as equally concerned to do the same.

For example, Gabriel's is the only family background to be portrayed. In a move typical of Seeßlen's interpretation of the *métissage* film, this relationship is primarily articulated in terms of disparity and lack of communication. Reflecting the thinly veiled misogyny of the wider film – whatever its cultural or generic mediation – the parental generation is represented solely by Gabriel's father. Despite the affection suggested by the father's initial greeting of the prodigal son and his fatherly advice at his eldest son's wedding, it quickly becomes apparent that their relationship is more generally typified



by a mutual lack of communication and understanding. Situated exclusively in the context of religious worship Gabriel and Ceyda's father appears completely unaware of the reality of the lives of his children. In this respect, he is as ignorant of Ceyda's various romantic involvements as he is of his younger son's earlier illicit lifestyle. His attempts at connection with his children are limited to sporadic requests for his son to join him in prayer. Gabriel's polite refusal and ultimate departure from the community's mosque mid-sermon articulate the ambivalence and separation which characterise his attitude towards his religious cultural background.

Gabriel is a Turkish-German raised in Hamburg's multicultural quarter, Altona. The Islamic faith that his father practices and represents appears to bear little relevance to Gabriel's experience of everyday life. The third time Gabriel is asked to pray, however – on the morning after the murder of Bobby and Costa – he acquiesces, enjoying a final moment of communion with his father before his departure to Turkey. Even at this point the father remains entirely unaware of the violent storm through which his son has so recently passed. For Gabriel, at least, 'der Abschied von den Träumen der Emigration' (Seeßlen 2000, 25) has most definitely been made. His return to his father's place of birth is mediated by necessity and holds no sense of a nostalgic return to the native homeland. If this were not the case it might be possible to read into this emigration Gabriel's gradual and positive return to his religious and cultural heritage – a return to a more "natural", rural existence in his ethnic motherland and to an alternative model of spirituality and reflection to counter the narcissistic physicality, violence and disorder of his previous modern, urban existence. However, Akin's film promises no such utopian future and the consistent lack of connection and efficacy of the parental generation's support of their children casts a profound ambivalence over the film's portrayal of "native" Turkish culture.

Gabriel's enlightened attitude towards his sister's social and romantic freedom is placed in clear opposition to the reactionary prescriptiveness of patriarchal Turkish culture:

Gabriel: Ich hab dich immer verteidigt, ich hab immer zu dir gehalten. Ich hab dich vor Mammi und Pappi immer geschützt. Du kannst nachts wegbleiben solange du willst. Welche Türkin kann das? [...] Ich hab dich respektiert.

Despite this salutary nod to cultural normativity and in contrast to *Yasemin*, *40m2 Deutschland*, and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, cultural background does not constitute an inescapable and oppressive fetter which must first be rejected before life can begin. Indeed, with the exception of the wedding at the start of the film – quickly becoming the standard visual trope of the Turkish-German film – tradition and custom occupy little space in the lives of these second and third generation immigrant populations, proving entirely irrelevant as ethical or religious reference points. This could signify a normalisation of the treatment of Turkish culture in German cinema in which the ethnic problematic has been relegated from narrative subject to filmic background, as Seeßlen himself recognises:

*Kurz und schmerzlos* (1997) führt zum erstenmal in eine Welt, die der französische und der britische Film längst als Genre-Hintergrund konstatiert, in der sehr unterschiedliche Métissage-Erfahrungen noch einmal in einem dynamischen Milieu miteinander vermischt sind. (2000, 25)



However, a shift has also occurred in terms of the emphasis placed upon the importance of social environment. For example, in Thomas Arslan's films *Geschwister* and the later *Dealer*, the environment constitutes a central thematic preoccupation, representing, ultimately, the context from which the protagonists must escape if they are to survive and prosper. In Akin's film, however, social focus is completely effaced by the primacy of character development. It is in the persistent recourse to night footage – reminiscent of Andreas Dresen's socially committed portrayal of Berlin's down-and-outs, *Nachtgestalten* – that the film is most successful in evoking the claustrophobic atmosphere and dissolution of the urban ghetto existence. It is at these points which the film comes closest to exploring the environmental, cultural and economic imperatives responsible for the final downward spiral into crime and violence and its bloody conclusion. In its exploration of the bonds of male friendship which ultimately seal Gabriel's re-entry into the criminal underworld, it also succeeds in a powerful evocation of personal tragedy. However, as in Lars Becker's *Kanak Attack* the fate of the central protagonist is articulated solely in terms of its personal tragedy. In other words, any social message the film may have succeeded in imparting to its audiences is obscured, not least, by its androcentric love affair with the trappings and narrative conventions of the gangster film.

In the world that the three friends inhabit the pressure to perform machismo is unrelenting and so Bobby's ultimate defection to the glamorous Mafioso life of guns, sharp suits, nightclubs and crime is merely a question of time. The fundamental question of the origin of this pressure to revert to overtly reactionary formulations of masculine identity would appear to be lost in the film's more pressing agenda to celebrate macho posturing and male camaraderie.

The biblical connotations of the father's thrice repeated request to Gabriel to join him in prayer are extended in the character portrayal and development of Costa. The

Damascan transformation of this long haired and bearded thief comes in the lavatories of the post office sorting house as a stolen crucifix instigate a born-again devotion to piety and belief in the omnipresence of the man on the cross. Turned away from the threshold of his lover's home and alienated from the love-cheat, Gabriel, Costa is left to lay down his life alone. However, the seeds of betrayal have long-since been sown and the kisses of friendship and loyalty which opened the film long-since replaced with those of Judas, as Costa and Bobby's business interests force them to abandon Gabriel to the Albanian Mafia.

Interestingly, the ethnicity of the characters is asserted from the outset as a primary marker of their identity. The sub-titled, freeze-frame opening shots introduce us to 'Costa the Greek', 'Bobby the Serb' and 'Gabriel the Turk'. According to Mark Terkessedis, this emphasis on the characters ethnicity contextualises the film firmly within the social and political context of contemporary Germany:

Paradoxerweise macht gerade diese Charakterisierung deutlich: Wir befinden uns in Deutschland. Denn warscheinlich wäre es in kaum einem anderen europäischen Land notwendig, ethnische Herkunft und Nicht-Zugehörigkeit von Migranten dem Zuschauer quasi mit dem Holzhammer kundzutun. (1998)

Operating within the historical context of a mainstream national cinema dominated by the representation of "native" social groups – be they young professional middle classes or poverty-stricken East Germans – this opening sequence immediately alerts us to the protagonists' ethnic difference. However, concomitantly it points to the uniquely German cultural context in which such marking appears normal. However, as Terkessedis goes on to argue, this potentially reactionary elevation of ethnicity as the central foundation of identity remains undeveloped in the main body of the film.



After the film's opening the central characters' non-Germanic origins are only briefly alluded to. For example, Gabriel's family background is evoked in association with his father's religious practices, and Bobby's ethnicity is humorously cited in relation to his work for the Albanians. Costa, for his part, recites a mournful Greek folk ballad in melancholic recognition of his romantic loss – a loss which prefigures Bobby's death and also, his ultimate fate. However, at no time do the three central protagonists draw solace or enlightenment from their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They are products of their immediate social environments – ghetto *Kanaksta*, who whether Greek, Turkish or Serbian live by their street smartness and physical prowess. In this respect, the narrative focus on character rather than culture clearly destabilises the charge of an overly determined ethnicity. However, it is exactly at this point of character representation that the film runs the risk of descent into cultural stereotype and fixity.

In its portrayal of its three protagonists' criminal propensities, the film comes dangerously close to a uniformity of representation that equates ethnic minorities and criminality. As reformed street-fighters, petty thieves and aspiring Mafiosi Akin's characters do little to challenge the popular cultural stereotypes which associate foreigners with crime and violence. As Hickethier points out these stereotypes have become as prevalent in contemporary German cinema as in their more usual context of the media:

Die Darstellung des Fremden im neueren Kriminalfilm bedient sich erklärtermaßen der Aufklärungsdidaktik. Sie setzt in der Regel zunächst bei den Vorurteilen an, dass Ausländer zur Kriminalität neigen, dass sie in kriminellen Milieus zu Hause sind und von ihnen Gewalt und Verbrechen zu erwarten sind.

Das entspricht der gängigen Meinung und wird auch von den Medien immer wieder kolportiert. (1995, 30)

Feridun Zaimoglu also acknowledges the existence and dangers of these simplistic stereotypes which cast Turkish-Germans as either 'the welcome submissive 'liebalilein' who conforms to bourgeois norms; or the feared, violent criminal' (Cheesman 2002, 185). Akin's *Kurz und schmerzlos* and Becker's *Kanak Attack* clearly fall in to the latter category. Indeed, there is little sign of the submissive aspiring middle class Turkish-Germans against whom Zaimoglu expends such invective throughout the whole range of films of the 1990s Turkish-German cinema.

The absence of any sustained critique of the broader social environment in which the three central protagonists live in *Kurz und schmerzlos* is clearly problematic in this respect. In other words, if it is not material, social conditions which have shaped these men and forced them into the criminal underworld which they now inhabit then the finger of blame must be pointed elsewhere. True to the gangster genre form the world that the three central male characters inhabit is a seedy, illicit night-time world, defined by crime, violence and drug-taking. However, in a film in which only one of the central characters is of German-origin and the influence of environment and social positioning is left entirely unelaborated then it would be easy for the responsibility for this transgressive behaviour to fall on the cultural community which has produced these delinquent characters stem. When difference from the norms and values of a law-abiding middle class, German society appears to equate to the difference of ethnic origin and cultural community, then the status quo of social division and racial separation that such a film implicitly demonstrates remains in place. Interestingly, it is only the white, German character, Alice, who objects to Bobby's illicit activities on moral grounds. Equally significant is the fact that all three of the central male characters struggle to



hold down regular jobs, functional relationships and crime-free day-to-day lives. Given this background, it would not be difficult to interpret their respective problems, crises and ultimate fates as problems endemic to the cultural communities from which they stem.

Only Gabriel succeeds in finding and holding down regular employment. Like Yavuz's Osman, he finds work as a taxi-driver, an employment hardly less stereotypical for Turkish-Germans than Bohm's *Gemüsehändler* in *Yasemin*. However, while potentially clichéd this characterisation does point to the prevalence of such occupations amongst Turkish-Germans and other immigrant communities, who due to cultural prejudice and low educational attainment find it easier to find jobs working for themselves or for family. Gabriel's position as a Turkish-German and an ex-con mean that it is only through his family connections that he has any chance of finding work. According to figures released by the Centre of Turkish Studies, the number of self-employed Turkish-Germans stood at over 35,000 in 1992. Of the 100 billion DM in taxes collected every year from workers of non-German origin, a large percentage originate in immigrant-owned businesses (Özdemir 1999, 111).

However, this reading of the three friends' characterisation as entirely negative and disempowering is overly simplistic. The films of the new Turkish-German cinema have been central to the articulation and subjectification of ethnic minority voices within the German cultural mainstream in the 1990s. In this respect, the glamorous, street-cool *Kanak-Schick* agency of the three main male protagonists retains its own substantial symbolic power. The relative success of these films has clearly not been hindered by a culture industry reliant on the production and reproduction of constantly changing and varied "exotic" identities and, to an ever increasing extent, driven by 'cult of youth'. In this respect, the identities constructed and mediated by Akin's film would appear to have moved on from the 'Fremde als Objekt' formulations of the earlier

immigrant cinema. Equally, the lack of explicit social critique avoids the overt positioning of foreigner as victim. Indeed, the street-wise *Kanaksta* of the 1990s Turkish-German cinema are anything other than 'letztlich vertraut und völlig ungefährlich', 'als schutzbedürftig' (Hickethier 1995, 24).

However, the potentially progressive nature of this representation is significantly undercut by the film's thematic preoccupation with violence and crime. In the context of a wider media and political debate in which public fears of a connection between rising crime rates and immigration are a central motivational factor, *Kurz und schmerzlos* does little to challenge cultural stereotypes. Indeed, its representation of race could be seen as an active agent in the processes of 'anxious repetition' and 'othering' traditionally associated with colonialist discourses and which Bhabha referred to as perpetuating the myths of 'disorder, degeneracy and demoniac repetition' (1997, 66).

However, as Cheesman argues, the launch of *Kanak* as a cultural label was 'aimed to make visible the artificiality and rigidity of the conventionally ascribed identities derived from the history of colonialism and of post-colonial migrations' (2002, 187). This represents the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the apparently empowering *Kanaksta* identity. Aggressively assertive, streetwise, and *immer kampfbereit* the ideal *Kanaksta* persona may be, but as long as it associates itself almost exclusively with violence and criminality it positions itself firmly at the fringes of society and can do little to ease the path of immigrant integration or destabilise the more reactionary stereotypes of ethnic difference which circulate in western society – assuming these are processes it has an interest in influencing<sup>3</sup>.



### *Kanak-Schick?*

Lars Becker's film *Kanak Attack* (2000) is an adaptation of Feridun Zaimoglu's fictional autobiography, *Abschaum: Die wahre Geschichte von Ertan Onegin*. Both texts deal directly with the oppositional and socially constructed nature of the *Kanaksta* identity. From *Kanake* to *Kanaksta*, the blame for the transformation of these derogatory racist labels from perception to reality is laid firmly at society's door, as articulated by the book and films' central protagonist, Ertan (Luk Piyes):

Wir sind die Kanaken, vor denen ihr Deutschen immer gewarnt habt. Jetzt gibt es uns, ganz eurem Bild und euren Ängsten entsprechend.

The threat and fear evoked by the violent and criminal image of the Turkish-German gangster is evoked here as a badge of pride, a *Trotzimage* designed to represent an aggressively self-assertive challenge to middle class German society. In Zaimoglu's book Ertan reflects upon society's simultaneous fear of and requirement for such socially marginalised peoples. This represents the potential answer to the earlier charge of inconsistency levelled at the *Kankaksta* identity, which so often appears to play directly into the hands of reactionary cultural stereotyping, as Tom Cheesman argues:

To oppose the 'identitarian regime' which fixes individuals as representatives of constructed groups, it is not sufficient to merely object that one is an individual: it is necessary to subvert the multicultural discourse of identity by devices which include the aggressive, over-fulfilment of stereotypical expectations. (2002, 187)

As society's unquestionable losers these social outsiders have little to lose and will ultimately conform to the identity of 'dangerous alien' (2002, 187) which society imposes upon them.

For the police, the black-and-white nature of this good/bad binary ensures a comfort and sense of self-worth, while further marginalising the *Abschaum* of society:

Er hat schwarz und weiß, die bösen Jungs, die er braucht, um sich zu sagen:  
Nein, ich bin kein Drecksack, ich bin der gute Engel, der Gesetzeshüter, der die  
Schulkinder vor dem Abschaum schützt. (Zaimoglu 2000, 73)

The attitudes of the police – the upholders of society's legal and moral codes – are assumed to be representative of the attitudes of society at large:

...vier Kanaken, vier verfickte Gangster Arm in Arm, grinsen sich eins beim  
Kiff, vier Verderber. Wie ausm Bilderbuch: wrong zu right. (Zaimoglu 2000,  
73)

The wider social function of such filmic evocations of 'otherness' is commented upon by Karpf, Kiesel and Visarius in their foreword to their edition of the *Arnoldhainer Filmgespräche* journal, *Getürkte Bilder*:

Fremdheit hat sich der Film seit jeher als wichtiges Element seiner Sujets zu eigenen gemacht [...], um sich der Werte der eigenen Gesellschaft vergewissern zu können. (1995, 7)



While the target for Ertan's invective is never entirely clear it would appear to be largely aimed at a middle class society whose social, economic and racial hierarchies depend upon an oppressed underclass of urban poor and immigrants. For these people – 'society's loser' – the dream of a democratic *Rechtsstaat* holds no meaning, and in the increasingly ghettoised 'Terra Inkognita der postindustriellen Gesellschaften' (Seeßlen 2000, 27) the chances of upwards social mobility are extremely rare:

Ich seh hier nur Schwanzlutscher, Hurensöhne, ich seh hier Neger, ich seh Araber, ich seh Türken, ich seh Dealer, ich seh Junkies, ich seh Nutten, und morgens schau ich innen Spiegel und seh mich, und das wars dann, das is mein Leben. (Zaimoglu 2000, 179)

The endeavours made by society to break this cycle of social exclusion – especially relevant in the context of the new dominance of centre-left politics throughout western Europe – can be seen as little more than half-hearted attempts designed more to salve society's conscience than to effect any real social change:

Der Kriminelle soll zurückgewonnen werden für die Gesellschaft. Wie denn, amina koyum? Mit fünfhundert Mark Sozialgeld oder was? Ich hab kein Geld inner Tasche, Arsch aufreißen, morgens arbeiten, sich abends ein runterholen und schlafen. Das kann es nicht sein, Alter, was wird mir aufgezwungen?' (Zaimoglu 2000, 179)

Perhaps, the harshest social critique of German middle class society is offered in the scene in which Ertan visits his uncle, who has suffered a nervous breakdown and

been admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The uncle's name is never disclosed, serving to heighten his symbolic significance. The culpability of a capitalist, consumption-driven western society in causing his breakdown is clear:

Onkel:           Ich hab die Schnauze voll, auf dieser Welt zu leben, ich hasse die Welt, ich hasse die Menschen, es zählt nur noch Geld, ich vertrau den Menschen nicht mehr.

This recognition of the stress produced by the attempt to aspire to the 'kleinbürgerliches Ideal' (Reinhardt 2001) of 'Geld und Mercedes und Schmuck und teure Schuhe' (Zaimoglu 2000, 30), brings us back to the questions of class and socio-economic position pursued in our previous two sections. However, in contrast to the wanton materialism promoted by the New German Comedy films, Ertan gives his uncle the hope of a possible alternative existence. Or at least, he appears to do so. His parting quip, "Denk an die Vögel" (Luk Piyas: *Kanak Attack*), appears to point to the possibility of a more natural, spiritual alternative lifestyle. However, when this is contrasted with the reality of Ertan's own situation, as drug addict, pimp, and gangster, there appears little real hope of a positive alternative.

However, this scene represents one of the few attempts of the film (and book) at vaguely distanced social critique. In this respect, Ertan's lack of critical distance and inability to offer any realistic alternative to his ailing uncle could be read as enhancing the social realism of a text told in a first person, stream of conscious narrative and from the point of view of someone on the very margins of society. However, it could also be interpreted as symptomatic of the film's broader failure to step outside its characters and offer a more reflective appraisal of their social context.



This is particularly relevant in the case of the film's breaking frame stylistic devices. Stylistically the film has much in common with Akin's work. Jump cuts, freeze frames, sub-titling and a hip-hop soundtrack do as much to convey the tough, street-cool image of the *Kanaksta* as the characterisation itself. However, while form may function effectively in this respect to mirror content, contributing significantly to the gangster-chic of Luk Piyes' portrayal of central protagonist, Ertan, Becker's Tarantinoesque virtuosity tends to obscure any social message that the book has been shown to articulate. Luk Piyes glamorous embodiment of *Kanaksta-Schick* connects with a contemporary revival of the western social preoccupation with the portrayal of attractive gangster personas. Pointing to the wider commercial attractions of such genre revivals Warshow describes the gangster film as just 'one example of the movies' constant tendency to create fixed dramatic patterns that can be repeated indefinitely with a reasonable expectation of profit' (1970, 129).

Interestingly, *Kanak Attack* has received both praise and approbation for its treatment of the immigrant question. On the one hand, it has been celebrated for its 'lockere, unbeschwerte und oft witzige Erzählweise', consequently avoiding the political correctness and 'erhobene Zeigefinger' of such apparently 'bedrückende Sozialdramen' as Ulrich Edel's *Christiane F. – Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* (Münch 2001.)<sup>4</sup>. In this way, it echoes the work of the woman-centred New German Comedies and the light-hearted post-*Wende* comedies, which attempt to posit an apolitical alternative to explicitly politicised filmic traditions – namely, the traditions that revolve around the representation of a gendered or ideologically determined 'underclass'<sup>5</sup>. However, some critics have seen it as missed opportunity which fails to attain any critical distance or significant social investigation of its protagonist's environment. These criticisms of a trivialisation of subject matter and a general lack of social

engagement have also been directed at the thematically and stylistically similar work of such British and American directors as Quentin Tarantino and Guy Ritchie.

Bernd Reinhardt discusses the film's superficial preoccupation with the presentation of style and lifestyle in an article in the e-journal *World Socialist Web*:

Dass sich hinter den hohlen Posen der "Kanakster", wie Ertan und seine Kumpane sich selbst stolz bezeichnen, in Wirklichkeit nichts anderes steckt als ein durch soziale Entwurzelung hervorgerufenes Lebensgefühl, das sich vor allem durch brutalen, sozialen Egoismus äußert, geht dabei unter. [...] Dem Film fehlt jede kritische Distanz zu Ertans Umfeld. (Reinhardt 2001)

As a result, the 'brennende Wut' which characterises Ertan's underlying point of relation with the outside world throughout Zaimoglu's work and constitutes a powerful evocation of social entrapment and a desperate inarticulacy is obscured by the film's emphasis on stylistic device and glamorised gangster poses.

### **Social Engagement Beyond the Gangster Pose?**

In its depiction of 'immigrant as criminal other' Thomas Arslan's second film, *Dealer* (1999), would appear to reinforce the cultural stereotypes circulated by films such as *Kurz und schmerzlos* and *Kanak Attack*. In so doing, all three films confirm the operation of the cultural stereotype as 'a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated...' (Bhabha 1997, 66). Arslan's film focuses upon a brief episode from the life of the young Turkish-German, Can (Tamer Yigit), a small-time drug dealer



living with his girlfriend and daughter in the predominantly Turkish quarter of Berlin-Schöneberg. Reminiscent of Baser's *40m2 Deutschland* the opening scene consists of a slow panning shot of the sparsely furnished high-rise flat, taking in the ageing wallpaper, the sleeping forms of girlfriend, Jale (Idil Üner) and daughter and finally the wakeful Can, who steps out onto the balcony to survey the concrete jungle of apartment blocks which comprise this notoriously socially deprived and crime-ridden district. True to the pacing and focus of this opening shot, it soon becomes apparent that *Dealer* intends to offer a more meditative and narratively realist approach to the problems of urban deprivation and immigrant ghetto life.

Writing in *Die Zeit* in 1996 on the subject of social deprivation in the Berlin-Schöneberg district, Eberhard Seidel-Pielen relates the story of a 63 year-old man who beaten and shot to within an inch of his life by Turkish youths for trying to prevent them from attacking his dog. The incidence of such cases of violent assault, as well as gang violence, crime, drugs, and racist attacks (not only perpetrated by whites) has increased exponentially in such areas in the last two decades. This is particularly so in areas such as Schöneberg where ever increasing number of ethnic groups live closely packed together in an atmosphere of poverty and urban decay.

However, despite Arslan's apparent commitment to an unflinching portrayal of this harsh social reality, his portrayal of life in the ghetto is by no means entirely negative. For example, while the opening scene may set a context recognisable from the *banlieue* of Paris to the housing estates of Glasgow as the vertiginous cell dwelling areas of the urban poor, its most sustained visual point of reference is not the grey impersonal concrete blocks but the vibrant green of the foliage of the trees which fill the spaces in between. This visual motif is quickly established as signifying Can's inner meditation. As he returns from his nocturnal wanderings in search of customers, his gaze drifts from the peaceful sleeping forms of girlfriend and daughter to the trees

outside swaying in the wind. While there is a persistence and fervour to the branches' movements which suggests the possibility of an inner disquiet and an uncertain future, the trees serve primarily to contrast the natural, positive figure of Can-the-loving-father-and-husband with the much more unstable and morally questionable figure of Can-the-narcotics-dealer.

This visual focus is further emphasised the following morning as the camera cuts from the innocent, sleeping visage of the child to the birds' exuberant song emanating from the branches of the trees, and taking in the civilised order and cleanliness of the apartment on the way. In this respect, it would appear to offer an alternative take on urban deprivation. Arslan's staging of Can's dealing activities in the sunlit summer streets and the green parks of Berlin, augmented by the lazy, if watchful ease, with which the attractive central protagonists lounge through their days of illegality, does little to efface the visual optimism of these opening scenes and again contrasts with the traditional portrayal of urban poverty and crime.

In this respect, Arslan's approach to the portrayal of the immigrant-as-socially-dispossessed is as ambiguous as that displayed by Akin's *Kurz und schmerzlos* and Becker's *Kanak Attack*. This traditional *Problemfilm* positioning of the foreigner in German cinema as 'eine merkwuerdige Figur, die auf den Plan gerufen wird, um zu beweisen, wie verkommen dieses Land ist' (Reinecke 1995, 13) is specifically cited by Arslan, in an interview for *Die Tageszeitung*, as of less interest to him than the psychological makeup of the characters which inhabit these environments:

Normalerweise sind Figuren wie Can bloß Randfiguren. Mich hat das soziale Milieu viel weniger interessiert als die mentale Verfassung einer Person, die sich in so einem Umfeld bewegt. (Thomas Arslan: *Dealer*)<sup>6</sup>



Interestingly, it is at the point in the film when Can's Woyzeckian psychological breakdown is nearing its climax that the physical environment moves into the foreground and displays its dark and threatening underside. Tired of his endless broken promises to change and give up dealing, Jale has taken their daughter and moved into her girlfriend's flat. Exhausted from lack of sleep and constant harassment from the police, Can is finally arrested and, despite his having no drugs in his possession, is threatened with a trumped-up charge, imprisonment and possible deportation if he doesn't provide information on his drug boss and ghetto gangster, Hakan (Hussi Kutlucan).

On release from jail Can attempts to locate his hood colleagues and failing to do so returns cautiously home, with a growing awareness of the suspicion that his repeated dealings with the police may have placed him under. Arriving home in the dark his figure is dwarfed by the massive concrete towers which loom threateningly above him. As he hurries towards the apartment block entrance the grasping fingers of shadow cast by the maze of rectangular intersecting covered walkways reach out behind him. As he nears the door his disembodied voice-over narrates, "ich hatte das Gefühl, daß jemand mir folgte" (Tamer Yigit: *Dealer*). The paranoia and fear that sweeps over Can affords him no rest as he paces to and fro within the now empty confines of his cell-like apartment. When he gazes from the balcony of his solitary flat the following morning he no longer sees the life-affirming green of the trees but the dull grey and peeling paint of the row upon row of anonymous concrete boxes which surround him.

In this way, visual focus is used to emphasise Can's rapid deterioration into paranoiac helplessness and desperation, a state that will ultimately lead him back to drug dealing and closer to his ultimate arrest. This shift to a darker visual focus sits more comfortably with Arslan's subsequent attempts to position Can as a tragic hero, abandoned by his family, exploited by his gangster boss and trapped by his social

environment, than the incongruous visual optimism of the first half of the film. However, while this demonstrates the film's much clearer commitment to some form of social critique it does not redress the issue of Can's clichéd positioning as Turkish-German criminal. The director recognises this problem himself:

Ich habe es als Herausforderung begriffen, einen Film über etwas zu machen, der eigentlich völlig verstellt ist mit diversen Klischees. Die Aufgabe war, nicht absolut von den Klischees abzusehen – weil man dann gar nichts mehr erzählen kann – aber sie im Laufe des Filmes aufzulösen, um eine andere Realität sichtbar zu machen. (Thomas Arslan: *Dealer*)<sup>7</sup>.

This 'other reality' is clearly the inner psychological reality of the central protagonist, Can. For Arslan Can is not merely another unwelcome police statistic, an incomprehensible immigrant gangster, or another helpless foreigner become victim of his social environment. Instead, he is an individual, with his own personal motivations and aspirations, and his own capacities for both good and bad. Can embodies the rich paradox of a committed and loyal family man, whose occupation just happens to be dealing drugs.

Arslan employs aural, as well as visual cues to gain access to Can's inner psychological existence. One such technique is the use of voice-overs by the central protagonist himself which appear sporadically throughout the film. In general these interjections struggle to extend beyond monosyllabic transmissions of factual data. For example, 'Spät in der Nacht kam ich nach Hause...', or 'Gegen Mittag. Beginn meines Arbeitstag ...'. Towards the end of the film, however, these isolated commentaries afford greater insight into Can's thought processes and feelings. This is especially true



of his repeated references to change, references which contrast tragically with his own inability to take control of his fate:

Tamer Yigit: Ich wollte mein Leben ändern aber ich wußte nicht wie. Jetzt hatte ich eine Chance. [...] Seltsam, wie sich alles ändert.

Ultimately, however, it is Can's essential inarticulacy – emphasised by repeated and sustained head shots devoid of all dialogue – that remains the most striking feature of his conversation and commentary. This lack of intellectual distance and linguistic proficiency, denying him the ability to reflect upon and project beyond his immediate social environment only enhances the essential veracity of his character and the helplessness of his situation. The film's most lasting image remains Can's confused, questing frown, as he searches for customers for his drugs, answers to his questions and meaning for his life.

According to Ernst Karpf the aesthetic possibilities of film in its portrayal of 'otherness' are unique:

In der Darstellung des Fremden kann der Film seine besonderen ästhetischen Möglichkeiten ausspielen: die Imagination einer Präsenz bis ins Detail, das dem Zuschauer eine Annäherung erlaubt, die er im wirklichen Leben in der Regel zu vermeiden versucht. (1995, 7)

The question that remains is whether the aesthetic possibilities offered to a largely non-Turkish-German audience to engage with an only superficially understood social reality can counteract the risks of a reinvocation of popularly received cultural stereotypes.

Ultimately, the answer to this question must reside in the mode that we employ to analyse these stereotypes. Bhabha has the following to say on the subject:

My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative to an understanding of the processes of identification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse. (1997, 67)

The 'processes of identification' offered to us by Arslan's film rest upon our engagement with his attempt to explore the deeper social and psychological reality behind the cultural stereotype. However, the inarticulacy of his central protagonist renders this empathetic audience response difficult. In *Dealer* a truly harsh social critique is consciously avoided to prevent overly determined characters. Nonetheless, both the strength of its social commentary and its most striking point of potential engagement with its audience lie in the work's refusal to contrive simplistic explanations to complex social, psychological and economic problems. Can may be an extremely inarticulate central character but his silence, far from the brash din and bravado of the *Kanaksta* gangster, leave space for the audience to reflect upon the serious issues of social and racial exclusion and exploitation that the film raises.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Zaimoglu's invective against the educated middle classes is aimed as much, if not more, at the increasingly numerous Turkish-German middle classes as against Germans. Equally, those amongst the Turkish-German community who aspire to such middle class status are seen as submissive, weak conformists, the well-trained pets of the white bourgeoisie (Cheesman 2002, 185).



<sup>2</sup> Akin's *Kurz und schmerzlos* achieved only moderate success at the German box office but won much critical acclaim at both a national and international level, winning awards at the *Adolf Grimme Awards* (2001), the *Bavarian Film Awards* (1999), the *German Film Awards* (1999), the *Locarno International Film Festival* (1998) and the *Thessaloniki Film Festival* (1998).

<sup>3</sup> The parallels with the aggressive self-assertion of the New German Comedy women and, indeed, the resubjectification of eastern German viewpoints with regard to the reunification and the German Democratic Republic's past, are clear. Equally relevant are the contradictions and counter-emancipatory identity positions which are subsequently forwarded. This is the ultimate paradox which Gledhill sees at the heart of all groups emerging into new public self-identities, but doing so in the context of a commodifying cultural mainstream. I shall return to this description of emergent autonomies in my conclusion to Part V.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Zaimoglu himself states that, "heute geht es nicht mehr um Christiane F. und die Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo", sondern um die vielen Migrantenkinder" (Reinhardt 2001).

<sup>5</sup> For more on this question of the value of the repositioning of marginalized social groupings within a mainstream cultural context – in other words, as an alternative to their previous representation solely within the context of the socially committed *Problemfilm* – see Chapter 13.

<sup>6</sup> This quotation accompanied the release of Arslan's film on video. It was printed on the reverse-side of the video's cover and no reference details were provided. For further information, therefore, please see video edition referenced in bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

## *Conclusion*

What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. (Bhabha 1997, 1)

The socio-historical approach adopted in this section has contributed to a developmental reading of Turkish-German cinema. This reading has attempted to trace a tradition of representation from the portrayal of ethnic ‘otherness’ in the New German Cinema period and up to the late 1980s / early 1990s towards the ambiguous cinematic *métissage* of the end of the decade. In so doing, it is the primary aim of this section to demonstrate that critical engagement with ethnic minority discourses and identities in the 1990s has taken place across a broad range of styles and genres, which cross boundaries between classical and non-classical cinematic forms. Clearly, such a simplistic developmental trajectory is extremely problematic and does not bear witness to the true complexity of race and its representation within German cinema. As a model, however, it remains a useful starting point to explore the thematic preoccupations and political implications of over three decades of Turkish-German representation in film.

During the New German Cinema period the primary concern was to portray the lack of political rights of the early post-war *Gastarbeiter* and the racial prejudice which typified their reception in a persistently xenophobic and conservative German society. However, despite these worthy social intentions these early representations of immigrant workers have often been criticised for the paternalism of their approach (Töteberg 1995). In this respect, many of the films belonging to this retrospectively entitled *Kino*



*der Fremdheit* appear more concerned with a socially critical appraisal of West German society than with any engagement with the day-to-day experiences and preoccupations of Germany's ethnic minority populations. Consequently, my analysis of the films of Fassbinder and Sanders-Brahms has focused on the extent to which they can be read as studies of the way in which cultures recognise themselves through their projection of 'otherness'. In this context the sociological function of such films may ultimately achieve aims counter-productive to the egalitarian principles to which they initially subscribed.

The application of a model of postcolonial critique to the representation of ethnic otherness becomes more problematic, however, when these migrant populations renounce any aspiration of return to their native countries and are naturalised – at least in the eyes of the law – into their host cultures. In pursuit of the hybrid hero of the *métissage* film – a hero resistant to positioning by both host and native cultures – my analysis then turned to the work of Tevfik Başer.

In both *40m² Deutschland* and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies* a clear authorial shift is apparent in the importance placed upon exploration of the migrant, as opposed to native, experience. Indeed, in both films references to West German society are almost entirely absent. However, as thematic focus shifts, so too does the site of conflict. The indictment of West German society is replaced by an even harsher critique of the equally reactionary and conservative Turkish-German community. This demonisation of native culture as embodied in the family is a theme common to the films of Başer and, to a slightly lesser degree, Böhm. The limitations of such an approach lie, once again, in its narrative reliance upon the problematisation of ethnicity. In other words, the stultifying and reactionary native culture becomes the central narrative problematic thus hindering the portrayal of life that is lived in both native and host cultures. Ultimately, such films fail to eradicate the problem status of ethnic minorities initially ascribed to

them by the work of the New German Cinema directors, and in the process they reaffirm the possibilities of ethnic essentialism. As Deniz Göktürk argues in her working paper on Turkish migrant identities within Turkish-German cinema, films like Başer's *Abschied vom falschen Paradies* are a 'good illustration of cinematic imprisonment of immigrants within the parameters of well-meaning multiculturalism feeding into binary oppositions and integrationist desires' (1999, 8). In all of these respects, these texts remain fundamentally opposed to the ideals of *culture du métissage* as put forward by Audinet and Seeßlen.

Significantly, however, the community, and its representative microcosm, the family, remains a site of conflict for the cinematic protagonists of the Turkish-German cinema from the late 1980s and early 1990s right through to the end of the decade. For the Turkish and Turkish-German protagonists of films such as *40m² Deutschland*, *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, *Yasemin*, *Geschwister*, *Lola und Bilidikid* and *Aprilkinder* culture of origin is primarily a culture of estrangement. Consequently, relationships between parents and children in the Turkish-German cinema are invariably strained and when treated at all sympathetically remain fundamental obstacles to the pursuit of integrated (assimilated?) western lifestyles. Clearly, these films offer little hope of an inclusive and harmonious cultural coexistence as embodied in the liberal optimism of the *cinema du métissage*.

According to this model of representation native culture is defined in terms of reactionary, anti-modern codes of behaviour. Such ethnic positioning could be seen as reaffirming orientalist representations of 'other' cultures – cultures defined by undemocratic and oppressive systems of control, gender inequalities, religious fundamentalism and a self-imposed isolationism. These identity positions signal a reactionary retrenchment motivated by a fear of a loss of distinct cultural identity. On the one hand, these films offer a salutary reminder to the Turkish-German community,



from inside, to maintain a critical eye on some of its less savoury inherited cultural practices. However, within the European context of increasingly visible far-right agitation, and the wider global context of anti-terror (anti-religious fundamentalist) coalition building, the representation of such essentialist, reactionary ethnicities could take on an added symbolic and discursive force.

Unfortunately, attitudes towards western culture and society as expressed in the Turkish-German cinema of the mid- to late 1990s are no less favourable than those directed at native cultural origin. As a result, the possibility of the Turkish-German film's engagement with liberal dreams of racial coexistence and cultural *métissage* would appear to diminish even further. Visible throughout the history of the Turkish-German cinema and equally characteristic of the work of the 1990s, is an uncompromising ambivalence vis-à-vis western, host cultures. One such target for this ambivalence is the liberal arena of multicultural discourse. For Zaimoglu the political project of multiculturalism is responsible for co-opting the work of a previous generation of *Migrantenkünstler* – or in Zaimoglu's words, *Ali-Poeten* – into 'a system of paternalistic exoticism designed to absorb potential political and social unrest' (Cheesman 2002 189). As Cheesman points out, Zaimoglu attacks these artists for allowing themselves to be 'used as alibis to maintain the illusion of liberalism which disguises a capitalist system of state racism' (2002, 189). The figures of the Turkish-German cinema of the mid- to late 1990s would appear to reject this comforting mantle of western paternalism altogether and with it the metaphor of a *cinema du métissage* which we have attempted to apply.

The cultural isolationism articulated by the Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s is of key significance. Communication between cultures remains a rare occurrence and when it does take place is typically portrayed as an entirely negative process. In this respect, the Turkish-German cinema, of all three cinemas dealt with in this study, comes

closest to an explicit cultural diversity approach to cultural representation. According to Bhabha, such representation is typified by the essential separation of cultures from one another. In *Lola und Bilidikid* the confused younger brother, Murat, is quite literally caught between the rock and hard place of Turkish and German cultures. Both cultures are shown to be equally intolerant, violent, patriarchal and bigoted. When these two cultures meet the only possible outcome is violence and bloodshed. On the surface at least this representation of a reactionary Turkish-German culture would appear to conform to the cultural stereotypes circulated by the Turkish-German cinema of the 1980s. In this respect, this film moves perhaps furthest of all the films discussed so far from the realm of cultural *métissage*.

However, this ignores its equally harsh portrayal of a neonationalist western German culture. Through Murat the film sets out to offer a damning indictment of cultural essentialism in all its forms. It is this indictment that signals the film's political engagement with its characters and their social and cultural environments. This 'pathology of difference' (Cronin 2000, 89), exemplified in the right-wing discourses of German and Turkish-German cultures, is most significantly brought into question by the simultaneous multiplication and disintegration of identity categories that take place on Murat's entry into the gay and bisexual, transsexual and transvestite Turkish-German underworld. Within the discourses and positions of the contemporary identity debate Lola and Murat's most politically significant act is to refuse to be defined by race, nationality or sexual preference.

In Yüksel Yavuz's *Aprilkinder* Cem occupies an equally uneasy no-man's land between native and host cultures. While the domestic sphere, ruled by the immigrant parental generation, remains a bastion of Kurdish cultural tradition and language, the wider public arena within which Cem moves is populated by a culturally diverse range of social and ethnic groups. Employed in a German-owned pork sausage factory Cem



works and socialises with Turks, Kurds and Germans. However, the tension between domestic and public social spheres and identities only reaches its dramatic climax when Cem becomes involved with the German prostitute, Kim. While the one's social exclusion is determined by his immigrant status and to some extent, ethnicity, the other's is a mark of her profession. Both Cem and Kim are forced to exist on the margins of society and both have a relationship with their respective native cultures which is at best ambivalent. However, while Kim is willing to gamble her unsatisfactory present for the chance of a better future with Cem, he ultimately withdraws from the brink of cultural exclusion and is reintegrated into a retrenched, isolationist communal life.

This pessimistic approach towards the possibility of an empowering, inclusive *culture du métissage* is echoed in the less socially critically engaged texts *Kanak Attack* and *Kurz und schmerzlos*. In both films the liberal dream of interracial harmony is realised, but in the violent, extra-societal underworlds of criminals and gangsters. This self-reflexive and ironic appropriation of what Eagleton terms 'the rhetoric of the civics class' (Eagleton 2000, 7) signals an aggressive affirmation of anti-bourgeois feeling which appears to delight in its own self-destructive impulses. This echoes Robert Warshow's seminal film studies work on the gangster genre in which he describes the gangster figure of early Hollywood cinema as 'the "no" to that great American "yes" which is stamped so big over our official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we really feel about our lives' (1970, 136). The complete absence of traditional social aspiration from the lives of the film's hapless criminal protagonists offers the possibility of a critical social commentary within an otherwise unreflective and narrative-driven mainstream genre.

The lack of social critique offered by these two films is to some extent redressed in Thomas Arslan's *Dealer*. While occupying an alternative cinematic stratum which

has up until now attracted much critical but little popular acclaim, films such as Arslan's have been essential in securing a visibility for themes hitherto uncritically treated within a mainstream cultural context. Primarily concerned with the portrayal of the harsh social realities of life amongst Germany's ethnic minority communities, and the poverty which perpetuates existing levels of social exclusion, these films constitute a critical counterbalance to an increasingly popular, mainstream Turkish-German cinema. In contrast to the simplistic and stereotypical cultural labelling of Akin and Becker these films articulate a strangely rootless cultural specificity, equatable with the broad social experience of the West's socially disenfranchised. These communities offer uncomfortable parallels with Cornel West's 'vast and growing black underclass, an underclass that embodies a kind of *walking nihilism* of pervasive drug addiction, pervasive alcoholism, pervasive homicide, and an exponential rise in suicide' [his emphasis] (1988, 277). Such comparisons with the social and racial inequalities problems of the other side of the Atlantic are troubling, particularly when viewed in the context of the ever-increasing tide of immigrant labour which must accompany the current expansion of the European Union.

On the symbolic level of representation, however, the social engagement demonstrated by films such as Arslan's can be read on a much more positive level. For Arslan's characters poverty and social exclusion have replaced race and ethnicity as the primary markers of social identification, a potentially politically opportune intervention into the representation of cultural and social difference. The recent popularity of the Turkish-German cinema and its emphasis on social exclusion as a defining feature of the ethnic minority experience, represents a politically significant step for the communities that these films represent. Bhabha argues for the centrality of the representation of social difference to the political revaluation of the communities of the present:



Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction – that takes you ‘beyond’ yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political *conditions* of the present.’[his emphasis] (1997, 3)

Bhabha refers to this critical narrative issuing from the immigrant margins of the West as the narrative of a ‘new internationalism’. This new internationalism draws upon ‘the history of postcolonial migration, [...] the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees’ (Bhabha 1997, 5). Bhabha sees the value of such narratives in their ability to offer distanced ideological critique of western society and, more particularly, western capitalist democracy. The films of Arslan and, to some extent, Başer, may signal the potential for such narratives within contemporary German cinema. Clearly, such films in isolation, could not hope to affect the emergence of a social solidarity strong enough to bond the disparate and isolated groups relegated to society’s margins. However, they do at least avoid the often simplistic and stereotypical characterisation of certain of the more genre-based Turkish-German films treated in this section.

For example, it could be argued that while films such as *Kurz und schmerzlos* and *Kanak Attack* have been responsible for the introduction of the new immigrant cinema, and by the same token, community, to a much wider domestic and international audience. However, at the same time they often flirt dangerously with a semiotic unity of representation which casts Turk as gangster and their environment as ghetto, while

resisting any truly investigative critical engagement with the socio-political realities which give rise to this social marginalisation. By engaging with the established and enjoyable codes of popular gangster genres these two films offer a readily accessible product of guaranteed mass-appeal. However, at the same time they both play on and reinforce popular and often stigmatising discourses of racial difference, effectively marketing ethnicity and ‘otherness’. In this respect, German cinema’s revived *Immigrantenkino* epitomises popular culture’s essential dialectic between resistance and consent. The following quote by John Storey describes this dialectical process in terms equally applicable to the linguistic example of the unconventional and subversive *Kanak-Sprak* of the new Turkish-German film:

...culture is a terrain on which there takes place a continual struggle over meaning(s), in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings which bear the interests of dominant groups. (1998, xii)

Whether integrated into the dominant discourse – or rather the commercial mainstream – or left on the alternative fringes of the cultural mainstream, the plight of filmmakers attempting a broadening of the public sphere through their representation of otherwise excluded voices, is highly problematic. This represents the fundamental dilemma of the new, critically dubbed *Kanak-Bewegung*. By remaining on the fringes these films allow themselves to be marginalised to the status of dissident voices whose reality and concerns need have no impact on the apolitical collective “we” of mainstream cinematic representation. If commercially successful, however, they risk incorporation into the ‘konfliktscheuen Mainstream-Genrekino’ (Klingenmaier 1999) and will invariably fall prey to the economic and ideological imperatives of dominant



interest groups. If they do succeed in retaining their focus on the socially marginalised, there is also the additional danger that they will contribute to a 'hardening of existing boundaries, as the *Problemfilm* becomes increasingly associated with "others"' (Davidson 1997, 319) and the traditional positioning of immigrant as victim.

In conclusion, let it suffice to reiterate the general ambivalence articulated through the Turkish-German films of the 1990s to the optimistic position of a liberal and inclusive *cinéma du métissage*. While a useful hypothesis around which to structure this study and to theorise the adoption of new subject positions by communities emerging into new cultural self-identities, it remains a metaphor entirely inadequate to theorise the processes of cultural exchange enacted within the work of the Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s.

---Part V---

*(The Possibility of)  
Conclusions*

**Identities and Identification  
Within Contemporary  
German Cinema-  
(Mis)Recognising  
'Otherness' at the Margins of  
the Mainstream**



# *Introduction*

## **The ‘Story’ So Far.... and the Politics of the Post-Age**

Throughout this study of the cultural representation and construction of identity within 1990s German cinema, the notions of contradiction and negotiation have played a formative interpretative role. This approach has clear implications for the study of German cinema within the broader German studies and German film studies academics. This recognition of contradiction is central to the metadisciplinary discourse of contemporary cultural studies which sets out to challenge traditional ideologies of “‘high” cultural proclivities’ (Ginsberg and Thompson 1996, 5) and simultaneously, reinscribe the apparently populist politics of the popular with a notion of resistance (Gledhill 1995). Indeed, it remains a central tenet of this research that to understand the social and political value and influence of popular film requires the application of a combination of film and cultural studies’ methodologies. The complex and often contradictory readings of comedy, sexuality, history, nostalgia, multiculturalism and race conducted in this survey of contemporary German cinema owe clear debts to this merging of cultural studies’ traditions.

The primary focus of this study on the representation of historically marginalised social groupings has facilitated the inclusion of films from across the spectrum of contemporary German cinema production and including both popular and critical successes. Consequently, Part II opened with an exploration of the representation of gender within the woman-centred relationship comedies of the early 1990s (*Workaholic*; *Das Superweib*; *Stadtgespräch*; *Ein Mann für jede Tonart*; *Abgeschminkt*). In terms of popular appeal these films were responsible for a significant

commercial revival within the German film industry. However, while relying on classic linear narratives, glamorous female stars, and enforced happy endings, these ‘failed romances’ also opened up spaces for their female audiences in which conventional constructions of female identity and sexuality could be critiqued.

Remaining with the generic bounds of mainstream comedy Part III’s investigation of the changing relationships between East and West in post-reunification Germany opened with a critical look at the *Wende* comedy genre (*Go, Trabi, Go*; *Griß Gott, Genosse*). While contributing to the normalisation of the filmic depiction of the East within contemporary German cinema these films generally avoided critical engagement with the social, economic and political realities of life in the *neue Bundesländer*. The melodramas were arguably more typical of the wider post-*Wende* cinema in their focus on East German history and, in particular, the events which led up to the fall of the Wall (*Nikolaikirche*; *Das Versprechen*; *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*). While equally evasive in their avoidance of contemporary issues these films could, nevertheless, be seen as entering into the debate surrounding the place of East German history – and by implication, East German social and cultural identity – within the reunified post-*Wende* nation. Constituting a surprising partnership, the escapist theatrical romps of Leander Hausmann (*Sonnenallee*) and the deeply disturbing anti-classical narratives of Andreas Kleinert (*Wege in die Nacht*; *Verlorene Landschaft*; *Neben der Zeit*) offered some of the most challenging critiques of the social and ideological colonisation of eastern Germany by the West. Their ‘small narratives’ offered an unashamedly subjective and personal counterpoint to the early engagement with orientalising ‘groß Geschichte’ and, in so doing, displaced official (western) versions of history.

Part IV stayed with this problematisation of the myth of national unity and the possibility for the existence of stable, unified and coherent national identities, by



engaging with the historical development of the Turkish-German cinema. From the emergence of the migrant voice within the paternalistic confines of the 1970s *Problemkino* (*Shirins Hochzeit; Angst essen Seele auf*) the Turkish-German film has evolved in to a popular and multi-genred form (*Aprilkinder; Dealer; Geschwister; Im Juli; Lebwohl Fremde; Lola und Bilidikid; Yasemin*). While the latest articulations of a Turkish-German hyper-masculinity (*Kanak Attack; Kurz und schmerzlos*) promote a strident and uncompromisingly assertive Turkish-German identity they flirt dangerously with cultural stereotype and a depoliticised cultural nihilism.

What binds these disparate and stylistically diverse cinematic texts is their impact on the way in which notions of race, gender and nation feed into the national cultural debates being conducted with contemporary German society. One such debate, arising out of the established liberal discourses of multiculturalism and racial integration, is the ‘cultural diversity’ versus ‘cultural difference’ debate. According to Bhabha, the cultural diversity approach to cultural representation facilitates essentialist positions which assert the fundamental separation of ‘totalised’ cultures from one another (1994). Cultural difference, on the other hand, stems from a highly problematised, political and fluid reading of culture, and, in particular, the cultures of the margins. Engaging with the points of view of the minority cultures and communities being represented cultural difference can destabilise and disturb the power dynamics which enforce their marginality. As outlined above, there exist within all of the films dealt with in this study points of reversion to cultural stereotype and orientalisng cultural, political, sexual and racial discourses. Equally, however, there exist moments of renegotiation with these conservative cultural positions – moments which point to more empowering, pleasurable and politicised loci of identification for the marginal communities represented within the films.

These points of negotiation and contradiction demonstrate the forces of

‘resistance’ and ‘conformity’ at work within both mainstream and more marginal cinematic articulations of contemporary German identity. Indeed, counter-cultural representations are intrinsic to all cinematic construction of marginal and marginalised identities – from the peripheral cultural contexts of alternative cinema, to the less immediately obvious narrative and generic norms of mainstream popular cinema.

This attempt to highlight the multiple loci of identification operating within the paradoxical activities of cultural consumption clearly lends itself to a revaluation and reinscription of the political value of the popular. However, any such attempt also lays itself open to the ambivalence of recent counter-populist cultural criticism (Eagleton 2000; McGuigan 1992). Such criticism typically decries the postmodern relativism of contemporary identity politics. With this in mind we must return at the conclusion of our narrative to the beginning and reflect upon the teleological expectations which govern all writing and reading practices. As Ginsberg and Thompson point out, such practices rely invariably on recourse to the ‘master’ text, or narrative, in which ‘contradictory elements are aesthetically sutured into a logically resolvable whole’ (1996, 12). While recognising the problems inherent in any attempt to inscribe such teleological reasoning across my survey of 1990s German cinema, I would point to the elision of contradiction and contestation which take place whenever such teleologies are imposed upon diverse ranges of cultural texts. After all, the use-values, levels of meaning and contexts of use of these cultural texts can never be conclusively predicted.

To avoid the charge of saying nothing at all, however, it is necessary to offer an alternative model of interpretation. Ideally, this alternative model would recognise the existence and complexity of such contradictions, while retaining the potential to envisage the ‘totality of possible effects’ (Ginsberg and Thompson 1996, 14). Any study of cinema which does not achieve this runs the risk, according to Ginsberg and Thompson, ‘of the complete collapse of difference endemic to much post-modern film



theory' (1996, 9). The danger faced by contemporary film theory in resisting the teleologising principles of post-enlightenment epistemologies is to tend toward a depoliticised standpoint, which takes no cognition of political and socio-historical contexts. Struggling to come to terms with 'the heterogeneity of the real' (Cronin 2000, 92), such a theory risks the splintering of social discourse within the popular cultural text to such an extent as to exclude any significant and unified socio-political critique<sup>1</sup>.

It is in full awareness of this criticism that this study expounds its essentially liberal and pluralist credentials and sets out to confound the apolitical tendencies ascribed to such an approach. In this respect, this work recognises its own implication within a context of self-reflexive identity politics, affirmative of poststructuralism's rejection of simplistic binaries. According to Christine Gledhill, it is only 'if we accept the role of the mass media in making cultural definitions – and also poststructural theory's exposure of the ideologically "pure" and full representation, whether feminist or dominant, as an illusory goal' – that we may take a 'more positive stance towards the spaces of negotiation in mainstream production' (1995, 201). It is in this context that I have drawn upon an explicitly Marxist tradition of American and British cultural studies – as epitomised in the work of Norman Denzin, Stuart Hall, Christine Gledhill and Terry Lovell, amongst others – to explore German cinema's apparent preoccupation with the social and cultural margins and its engagement with identities and interest groups historically marginalised within late capitalist western society.

To attempt to define the efficacy of my own cultural studies approach to film analysis, in pursuing a politically committed yet non-essentialising reading of the diverse positions and sociological imperatives behind the representation of these marginalised identities, I shall return to the individual films themselves. However, before doing so it is necessary to reappraise the question which framed my initial entry into the discussion of contemporary German cinema; namely, is it possible to trace the

representation of individuals and groups traditionally marginalised from the cultural mainstreams across the heterogeneous spectrum of 1990s German cinema and, in the process, reinscribe the popular cultural text with a notion of resistance? To assess the success of this study in achieving this aim it is necessary to return to the broader context of German film studies already outlined in Part I.

### **Reframing the Popular: Towards a European Specificity**

Tim Bergfelder refers to the recurrence of three major themes within European film studies; namely, 'the problematisation of the term "Europe", the issue of national and cultural identity, and the high art/popular culture divide' (1998, 6). All three of these issues have been deeply implicated in the discourses surrounding the notion and definition of a European art cinema. According to Bergfelder, 'this paradigm of European cinema prescribes a history of masterpieces, stylistic movements and schools, and above all, of individual directors' (1998, 6). Clearly, the ethical framework which defines such alternative filmmaking practices has traditionally been viewed as anathema to mainstream European film production. Contemporary German film scholars have argued that this opposition has been particularly marked in the context of German film history (Carter 2000; Ginsberg and Thompson 1996). The ambivalence of some film and cultural theorists to an apparently reinvigorated cultural populism within contemporary German cultural production (Habermas 1985; Rentschler 2000) is symptomatic of one side of this cultural debate.

In their recently published anthology *Light Motives: German Popular Film in Perspective* (2003) Halle and McCarthy point to the historical divvying up of German



films into opposing camps of good and bad films – or alternatively, those worthy of academic study and those unworthy:

Despite the rise in cultural studies and its legitimisation of popular culture as an object of analysis, Germanists have by and large long neglected a realm that has elsewhere yielded exiting scholarship. Nowhere is this gap more evident than in the field of German film studies. (2003, ix)

Accordingly, the bad films are grouped around the ‘embarrassing fascist propaganda, kitschy Heimat films, alpine porn, and the boom of German comedies in the 1990s’ (2003, ix). Opening my survey of contemporary German cinema with an investigation of the woman-centred New German Comedies of the early 1990s clearly demonstrates the position taken by this study within this high/low cultural debate.

Commenting on the apparent transition from ‘schwermütiges Kopfkino’ to uncritical ‘Unterhaltungskino’, one Spiegel journalist points to the lack of understanding for such a populist revival amongst the intellectual elite of German film criticism and film production:

All das verblüfft zumal die Intellektuellen, die lange Zeit lieber das Volk zur Kultur tragen wollten statt die Kultur zum Volk’ (‘Gepäck abgeworfen’ 1996, 183).

To take the ‘culture to the people’ clearly requires a more audience-oriented filmmaking practice – itself nothing new within the context of German film history (Seeßlen, 1997). Amongst the new generation of 1990s German filmmakers there appears to be a willingness to reject the ‘Kommerziell ist Bordell’ (‘Gepäck abgeworfen’ 1996, 183)

stance of a previous generation's exclusive ideological viewpoint (Spiegel 1996, 215; Coury 1996, 356). Evidently, this change of direction is as closely related to institutional changes within the German film industry as it is to any simplistic modernist cultural dynamic. For example, German film schools are now often closely linked with private sponsors and actively involved in training their students to compete within an intensely commercially competitive market place ('Geh doch nach Poona' 1996). At the same time, the persistent growth of 'economically oriented' funds since 1980, designed to extend the work of the German Federal Film Board, has been responsible for an increasingly dominant commerce-driven paradigm within film funding. These arrangements guarantee continued funding for commercially successful projects, while holding back funding for those projects which do not offer clear mass appeal (Kilb 1997).

This reflects the ever-closer relationships between private and public funding bodies. For example, public film funding bodies such as the *FilmFernsehFonds Bayern* have recently invited private broadcasters such as *Pro Sieben* and *RTL 2/TM3* to become shareholders. The *Filmboard for Berlin-Brandenburg* has also recently involved broadcasters as partners (Blaney, 2000). As this demonstrates, the growth of film financing from increasingly influential television companies – a direct throwback to the Kohl administration during which television companies were encouraged to play an increasingly active role in the funding of film production (Brunow 1999, 12-3) – has been one of the defining characteristics of the 1990s. Equally important has been the increase in private film investment funds. These so-called *Mediafonds* have gradually moved away from the internationally favourable English-language projects towards domestic products for domestic audiences<sup>2</sup>. At the same time American investors have been steadily replaced by domestic sponsors who can now enjoy significant tax breaks for their support of the arts.



The relationship comedies of the early 1990s have remained an easy target for a wide range of anti-populist sentiment from film critics and filmmakers alike (Rentschler 2000; Kilb 1996; Knoblen 1997; Seeßlen and Jung 1997). While this criticism remains valid in its recognition of a stylistic shift in the contemporary German cinema landscape away from the explicitly politicised and avant-garde work of the New German Cinema period it eschews critical and political engagement with the individual films themselves. Undoubtedly, many of these films continue to draw upon what have come to be known as the traditional elements of classic cinema: namely, causality, linear narratives, closure, and even 'the most necessary element of all, a happy end' (Coury 1996, 356). At the same time all exist within an increasingly market-driven commercial arena. However, by adopting a more inclusive cultural studies approach to the treatment of the popular cultural text, in general, and a close textual analysis of the individual films themselves it becomes apparent that many of the films enjoy a much closer relationship with criteria of artistic and political commitment than might previously have been imagined.

Just as the films of von Garnier (*Abgeschminkt*), Kaufmann (*Stadtgespräch*), Wortmann (*Das Superweib*), Hormann (*Workaholic*), Timm (*Go, Trabi, Go*), Stelzer (*Grüß Gott, Genosse*), Hausmann (*Sonnenallee*), Böhm (*Yasemin*), Akin (*Kurz und schmerzlos*) and Becker (*Kanak Attack*) all contain elements resistant to the ordering influences of ideological conformity, so too do the works of the arguably less classically mainstream filmmakers such as Kleinert (*Wege in die Nacht; Neben der Zeit; Verlorene Landschaft*), Roehler (*Die Unberührbare*), Schlöndorff (*Die Stille nach dem Schuss*), von Trotta (*Das Versprechen*), Başer (*40QM Deutschland; Abschied vom falschen Paradies*), Arslan (*Geschwister; Dealer*), Ataman (*Lola und Bilidikid*), Yavuz (*Aprilkinder*). However, to classify these directors and their generically and stylistically diverse engagements with the representation of marginalised identities as respectively

more or less mainstream would be to contravene the central tenet of this thesis. Many of the most popular and apparently mainstream of the aforementioned films offer some of the most politically complex and radical engagements with the communities and identities that they represent – communities in the process of emerging into new self-identity. Meanwhile, many of those films and directors which draw upon explicitly politicised filmmaking traditions in their representations of minor cultures and identities, employ narrative strategies, generic forms and casting procedures more familiar to the normative requirements of a dominant classical cinema.

Indeed, all of the films featured in this study deal with social groups, themes and stylistic approaches hardly consistent with Rentschler's apolitical 'cinema of consensus' reading of contemporary German film production. Engaging with the representation of marginal social groups within contemporary German society this body of films questions the situation of a simplistic caesura between the 'sweeping landscapes of artistic bounty' of the New German Cinema period and the 'commercial wastelands' of the 1990s (Halle & McCarthy 2003, ix).

### **Cultural Studies: Populism Gone Too Far?**

In the transition from the negative determinism of the mass culture theorists towards a consumer- rather than producer-led theorisation of late-capitalist cultural consumption, John Fiske has played a key role in contemporary British Cultural Studies. In a clear rejection of the simplistic ideological positioning of the Adornian 'cultural dupe' which problematises the nature of the power relationship between 'the people' and the cultural industries, he states the following:



For a cultural commodity to be popular, then, it must be able to meet the various interests of the people amongst whom it is popular as well as the interests of its producers. (1987, 107)

The popular significance of the early 90s relationship comedies became truly apparent in 1996 when the domestic German film achieved a 16.2%<sup>3</sup> share of the national cinema-going audience, the highest level for a decade.

Such successes led to film industry and media claims of a return to the golden era of 1950s *Papaskino* (Kilb 1997; Seeßlen 1997), alternately celebratory and derisive in tone. These claims were made against the backdrop of a decline for the German film industry which had seen German cinema drop from a 48% share of the domestic market in 1927, to 25% in 1956, and then into a post-1971 period of unchallenged American dominance which reached an all time low of 8.4% in 1993<sup>4</sup>. A multitude of relationship comedy films, some commissioned for cinema-release, such as Wortmann's *Der bewegte Mann* (6.5 million viewers), and *Das Superweib* (2.3 million), and others initially conceived as television projects and then box-office released due to popular demand, such as von Garnier's *Abgeschminkt* (1.1 million), Kaufmann's *Stadtgespräch* (1.8 million), achieved well over the magic 1 million audience mark. Pointing to a revitalisation of the domestic film beyond the comedy genre, the success of such films as *Lola rennt* (2.2 million), *Sonnenallee* (2.6 million), *Comedian Harmonists* (2.8 million), *Pünktchen und Anton* (1.7 million), and *Das Experiment* (1.6 million) has been equally significant.

For Fiske, the 'pleasurable negotiations' (Gledhill 1995) which facilitate a text's popular acceptance are primarily those produced in the process of meaning-making. While the cultural populism of such emancipatory readings of popular culture has been criticised, by both new and old schools of cultural studies<sup>5</sup>, the metaphor of negotiation

as a description of the relationship between the meanings inscribed on the text by producer and those produced by the consumer has been widely accepted as a post-structural advance on essentialist, binarised interpretations of popular cultural consumption.

Writing on the influence of film in instituting 'models for collective behaviour' (1991, 158), Adorno argues that film possesses an inherent anthropological capacity to connect with those tendencies deeply rooted in human nature which it wishes to promote<sup>6</sup>. This capacity originates in film's apparent claim to objectivity and realism – principle which has shaped film production and criticism from Kracauer (1960) and Bazin (1971) onwards. This sociological function of film to present worlds which conform in so many aspects to our own perception of reality that we accept them as such – at least for the duration of the film – has remained the starting point for our socio-political interrogation of identity.

The possibility of textual negotiation for the consumer, then, is directly related to the film's relative recourse to melodramatic and realist modes. Referring to this complex interaction between what apparently oppositional modes and their centrality to any analysis of the sociological function of film, Gledhill states that, 'popular culture draws on a melodramatic framework to provide archetypal and atavistic symbolic enactments' (1995, 201). Such archetypal and atavistic enactments of identity have been evident throughout this study's interrogation of the popular German cinema of the 1990s. Examples of this characterisation can be found in the reactionary, chauvinistic males who populate the New German Comedies and who are ultimately rejected by the aggressively autonomous New German Comedy women; or in the hyperbolic representations of Turkish-German masculinity, simultaneously obsessionalised, demonised and celebrated by a threatened western middle-class hegemony; or even in a less classically mainstream cinematic context, in the obsessional, ideologically



brainwashed, self-destructive personal narratives of doomed East Germans of the post-*Wende* cinema.

However, as Gledhill goes on to argue, the symbolic power of these reactionary and reductive characterisations still relies upon 'the premise of a recognisable, socially constructed world' (1995, 201). In other words, whatever the particular commitment to realist or anti-realist traditions, to social realism or fictional narrativisation, photographic realism or dramatic illusionism, gendered, racial, ideological or sexual exclusivities or inclusivities, the fundamental sociological implication of cinema – and art in general<sup>7</sup> – dictates the referencing of real environments and societal constructs, real debates and social groupings. All aesthetic and fictional practice is related to collective complicities of recognisable social reality, and it is this meeting point between textual and extra-textual practice, between fictional narratives and the social realities which they attempt to engage with, that has dictated the focus of this analysis of contemporary German cinema.

This then returns us to the place of the consumer and the processes of meaning-making. The effectiveness of this meaning-making is reliant upon the parallels that the consumer can draw between the text and his or her everyday life. Consequently, the meanings produced by the consumer are largely dependent upon their individual social and cultural backgrounds. The pleasures produced from this process of meaning making derive from the sense of power it gives the consumer. The most important aspect of this process for the consumer is that the meanings made are 'ours' (the people's) as opposed to 'theirs' (the dominant class's). In other words, this meaning-making on the part of the people – or subordinate groups as Fiske refers to them – can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the hegemonic forces of the dominant ideology:

Popular pleasures must be those of the oppressed, they must contain

elements of the oppositional, the evasive, the scandalous, the offensive, the vulgar, the resistant. The pleasures offered by ideological conformity are muted and are hegemonies; they are not popular pleasures and work in opposition to them. (1989, 127)

To evaluate the potential for such oppositional, evasive and even scandalous engagements with cultural difference within contemporary German cinema's representation of marginal and marginalised identities, let us now return to the films themselves.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eagleton reiterates this fear when he bemoans the failure of contemporary culturalism. According to Eagleton, the fundamental mistake of 'radical hybridists and liberal pluralists' lies in their denial of the kind of 'communality of belief and action' (2000, 122), itself integral to social(ist) change. In other words, the apoliticising tendencies of such theoretical approaches can only hinder the kinds of socio-cultural criticism essential to the regulation of material production, and only with such politically committed regulation can we facilitate the 'fully participatory democracy' which ensures that the 'channels of access be fully opened to give vent to this cultural diversity' (2000, 122).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the state of contemporary German film production and the financial changes of relevance to wider changes in the German film industry, see Blaney 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Figures according to, 'Filmhitlisten', *FFA: German Federal Film Board* [online], viewed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2000, <<http://www.ffa.de>>

<sup>4</sup> Figures according to Prinzler 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Jim McGuigan and James Twitchell are prime exponents of this criticism of popular cultural studies uncritical drift. In *Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America* (1992) Twitchell complains of the increasing vulgarisation of popular culture which relies upon the generation of



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unreflective emotional responses and escapist fantasy in its mass consumers. In *Cultural Populism* (1992) McGuigan is more concerned to point out the increasing over-sentimentalisation of the consumers of popular culture, by a certain school of popular cultural studies theorists. According to these theorists, the consumers of popular culture always retain an active role in the processes of resistant meaning-making. This belief stems, according to McGuigan, from contemporary cultural studies' over-emphasis on the value of the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people which are placed in opposition to the apparently less-valuable practices of more elitist forms of cultural production.

<sup>6</sup> Adorno termed this process 'the exploitation of ego-weaknesses' (1991, 201)

<sup>7</sup> Referring to the post-Aristotelian view of art as "imitation" or "mirror" of nature, which while hotly contested by a variety of artistic movements past and present, remains a founding principle in the Western tradition of aesthetics.

## Chapter 13

# *Comedy, Cliché and Cash: The Popular Economy of the Marginal*

### Rebellious Women

Put differently, are any and all crucial spaces that might be opened up inside the frame of popular comedy – whether by way of parody, irony, satire or other comedic means – simply foreclosed by its participation in the larger entertainment industry, à la Horkheimer and Adorno? Do visual pleasure and viewer identification necessarily “tame” and thereby depoliticise audience response? Or is it possible that some potentially subversive trace remains when the lights go up and the credits role? (Mittman 2003, 328)

In many respects, the woman-centred New German Comedies represent the most unproblematically popular body of films dealt with in this thesis, in terms of their reliance on a relatively well-established body of stars and genre formulas, and their clear mass appeal. However, taking as its starting point the theoretical transition away from exclusively production-based theories, towards a more consumer-led critique of popular cultural consumption, my analysis of the woman-centred New German Comedies focused upon the potential for a reconfiguration of the text/social subject relationship. Such a reconfiguration would challenge the over-determinatory role of the



text/ideology, ideology/social subject relationship, and open it up to processes of identification both pleasurable and progressive, to the text's female audiences.

It was the theoretical space created by this political signification of pleasure that represented the starting point for Temby Caprio's investigation of the von Garnier's *Abgeschminkt*. In the attempt to 'engage contemporary discourses about women and draw on women's cultural forms in order to renew their gender verisimilitude and solicit the recognition of a female audience' (Gledhill 1995, 202), spaces are opened up within the often reactionary plot structures of the woman-centred romantic comedies to negotiate an ambiguous and potentially empowering image of woman in 1990s unified Germany.

On the one hand, these affluent middle class women operate as primary economic signifiers and could be read as implicated in a neoliberal discourse concerned with the incorporation of a new and flexible labour force into the employment market and the promotion of the post-liberal, conservative values of 'hard work, health and self-reliance' (Denzin 1991, 149). The writers, radio presenters, designers, and architects, who reside in expensive warehouse conversions, drive 'aparte Autos' and wear the 'konformistisch legeren Klamotten der Nonconformisten', clearly point to 'die Ziele, Ideen und Sorgen der 89er' ('Das Lachen' 1996, 224).

However, on a textual level, the financial independence these women enjoy also represents a position of power vis-à-vis the patriarchal imbalance of the traditional heterosexual relationship. Augmented by the homosocial bonds which bind them to their constant female companions, the power of women such as Frenzy (*Abgeschminkt*), Monika (*Stadtgespräch*), Franziska (*Das Superweib*), Rhoda (*Workaholic*) and Pauline (*Ein Mann für jede Tonart*) to determine their own professional and social fates imparts a marked ambivalence to the romantic narrative frameworks in which they find themselves implicated. Ultimately, these frameworks – rooted within the normative

practices of a commercial mainstream – may contest the subject status conferred upon their romantic heroines and deny a more radical revision of socio-sexual status quo. In their subversion of generic expectations the woman-centred New German Comedies clearly demonstrate that ‘genres are not merely vessels for the transmission of dominant cultural values, but can also be activated as a tool for the renegotiation of those values’ (Mittman 2003, 330). The contingent and casual nature of the modern-day romantic/sexual encounter is equally troubling to the romantic myth historically so synonymous with the ideological work of the romantic comedy genre (Klinger 1995).

Performing the ‘failed romance’, the films resist the simplistic romantic consummation demanded by a previous generation of romance consumers. The demystified “Mr Perfect” may regain ground by the very ‘sex in shiny packets’ (Hoggart 1957, 246) -nature of these vicarious glamour-babe selves. Their playfully ambivalent negotiation with a patriarchally determined sexual difference points to a schizophrenic female identity capable of asserting both reactionary and progressive attitudes to the place of women within contemporary German society. Economic considerations undoubtedly play a role in this foregrounding of women as subject of representation and consumption. As throughout the history of German film, women continue to constitute one of the largest potential consumer groups for cinema (Petro 1989; Knight 1992; Schlüpman 1990), and market strategy plays a role in the production of the woman-centred New German Comedies. And yet, in their double-accented articulation of gender issues, these films would appear to represent more than just a novel and contemporaneous media appropriation of feminist discourse. Indeed, this revisionary approach to the romantic comedy genre signals an increasingly complex and problematic engagement with the representation of contemporary womanhood within the cultural mainstream.



## Revisionary Histories and Socio-Economic Disadvantage

The problematisation of the ‘pure’ national subject engendered by the unification of East and West Germany’s polarised geopolitical identities is symptomatic of the broader theoretical approach to identity adopted by this study. This approach has emphasised the need to think beyond narratives of essentialising and static subjectivities and focus upon those moments which occur in the articulation of cultural differences. Ultimately, the adoption of such an approach was dictated as much by the films themselves – engaging as they do with highly problematised and fluid identity representations – as by the broader cultural studies positions laid out in Part I. These complex and often contradictory identities were visible across the broad range of generic, narrative and stylistic forms encompassed by the post-*Wende* cinema.

Within the simplistic and pleasurable binaries of the early *Wende* comedies the euphoria of the moment is projected into a narcissistic obsession with unproblematic representations of cultural diversity. The mobilisation of such cultural stereotypes quite clearly serves the generic demands of comedy, and, on a sociological level, the reactive affirmation of clearly identified East German self. However, it could also be interpreted as a salutary reminder of the true balance of power in a post-communist era. In this respect, the disparaging caricature of West German materialism, as articulated in films such as *Go, Trabi, Go*, *Alles Lüge*, *Superstau*, *Der Brocken* and *Cosimas Lexikon* may represent a significant marking of a deeper insecurity vis-à-vis the forces of an increasingly hegemonic global capitalism. Beyond the playful innocence of the Strutz family’s optimistic voyage of discovery lies a more painful return to a changed society – a society in which homes are casually bulldozed to make way for golf-courses. In this society only the chance roll of the casino dice can facilitate the realisation of the dream of unification. In the absence of a robust socialist ‘other’ against which to define itself,

the institutionalised invisibility and dominance of the capitalist ideological paradigm can only increase.

Beyond the play of reactionary and progressive forces embodied in the comic cultural stereotype, the filmic exposition of a post-East German cultural identity has had repeated recourse to dramatic reconstructions of GDR past. In *Das Versprechen* the representation of cultural identity fails to transcend the melodramatic and polarising influence of the Wall, a criticism which could be levelled at significant proportion of the post-*Wende* films. Consequently, the cliché-ridden self/other binaries of East versus West appear to reinvigorate the political positioning and demonisation of the communist other versus an apolitical celebration of post-ideological western democracy. Despite its reductive approach to both East and West German history and the social exclusivity represented by its central romantic protagonists, it still remains one of the few early post-*Wende* films to purport to represent both eastern and western subjectivities.

Nevertheless, the political implications of any simplistic writing-off of East German history and culture as a failed socialist experiment must significantly effect the possibility of a mutually respectful East/West integration. While Beyer's *Nikolaikirche* and Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* might fail to offer the dual perspective of von Trotta's film they are ultimately more successful in resisting clichéd political positioning. Beyer's film achieves this through a reinscription of a politically activist and pro-democratic East German self, which mediates against the cultural or political devaluation of the East German people. Hausmann's film achieves a similarly counter-cultural aim, while avoiding Beyer's unambiguous condemnation of the East German state, by articulating an extrapolitical, non-ideologically determined East German identity.

The engagement with both eastern and western viewpoints is extended in Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuss* and to an even greater extent in Roehler's *Die*



*Unberührbare*. Both represent seminal works in the body of post-*Wende* cinema in their willingness to foreground and problematise the ideological frameworks propelling their protagonists' narratives. The complex ways in which both directors engage with a western history of idealist socialist agitation transposed to a prosaic East German reality contributes significantly to a critical and non-essentialist dialogue between the two Germanys.

Pursuing this trajectory towards a more explicitly critical engagement with the reunification and its consequences, Kleinert's *Wege in die Nacht* parallels *Die Unberührbare* in exploiting the metaphor of psychological deterioration to explore the darker side of post-*Wende* experience. Despite adhering to normative practices of causality, invisible editing, linear narrative progression, and so on, the critical approach and uncompromising subject matter of both films positions them firmly on the fringes of a classical mainstream. Confusion, contradiction, and disillusionment characterise their protagonists' lives just as they characterise the films' more general problematic approach to German unification. As Mittman argues, such films appear to demonstrate that there are currently 'no answers inside of "Germany," as it is currently configured, to unification and its representational dilemmas' (2003, 345).

However, whether explicitly critical or implicitly ambiguous, avowedly pluralist or gleefully essentialist, the collective body of post-*Wende* cinema represents a significant site of identity construction in post-unification Germany. In this respect, such a body of work informs both individually and intertextually the contemporary debate surrounding nationhood and the possibility for cultural dialogue between two formerly separated nations. In the context of such young and ideologically polarised nations the reunification offers a primer opportunity to recognise the constructed and artificial nature of all national identities. In this context, the interplay of such films with the hegemonic and essentialising discourses of 'true' and 'false' nationality must work

against the tide of simplistic socio-historical/political readings of the 'German' nation still persistent within both public and academic discourses. In this respect, this study's explorations of race, gender and nation as represented in contemporary German cinema are unanimous in exposing the heterogeneous realities and identity positions that underlie the artificial unity of the nation.

The 'normalisation of the filmic depiction of the East [...]in which the eastern problematic has been relegated from narrative subject to filmic background' (Part III, Introduction, 142), represented by more recent films such as *Heidi M* (2001), *Nachtgestalten* (1999), *Die Polizistin* (2000); and *Berlin is in Germany* (2001) represents a shift of focus for the post-*Wende* cinema. The boundaries of identity, as represented with the post-*Wende* cinema, appear to move beyond the artificial limitations of 'nation' or 'ideology'. On a positive level this move may work against more reactionary desires for a unified, orientalising and exclusive national identity. Equally, it poses a challenge to the wholesale imposition of a (West) German national identity. However, while these *new* citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany may escape the exclusive limitations of a western imposed national identity it is still unclear as to how they will escape their increasingly socially marginalised positioning in terms of socio-economic disadvantage.

### ***Kanaksta-Schick* and Social Disquiet in the Turkish-German Cinema**

This move towards the representation of the 'Terra Inkognita der postindustriellen Gesellschaften' (Seeßlen 2000, 27) and concomitant recognition of the blurring of boundaries between cultural and social marginalisation has an equal resonance in the work of such Turkish-German directors as Fatih Akin, Antonia Lerch, Kutlug Ataman,



Thomas Arslan and Yüksel Yavuz. While troubling to the post-68 liberal dream of seamless racial integration, the dissonance embodied in the protagonists of the new Turkish-German film remains true to a cinematic tradition of immigrant cinema. As this cinema has developed it has moved away from West German representations of the immigrant 'problematic' in terms of isolated individuals – innocent victims of a bigoted and uncaring western society – towards Turkish, German and Turkish-German explorations of the internal conflicts and injustices perpetrated by the immigrant communities themselves. This uncomfortable history of German *Immigrantenkino* would appear to reflect the experiences of generations of immigrants, their children and grandchildren in their often uneasy relationship with the western metropole. In this respect, the Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s with its often ambivalent self-portrait of a cultural *métissage* is no exception.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s both 'host' and 'native' cultures as represented in Turkish-German cinema retain their intransigent and excluding boundaries. The family remains a recurring motif throughout these films but only as an emblem for the essential estrangement felt by second and third generation Turkish-Germans from their culture of origin. This can be seen in films as various in tone and genre as *40m² Deutschland*, *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, *Yasemin*, *Geschwister*, *Lola und Bilidikid* and *Aprilkinder*. Equally ambivalent is the attitude displayed towards the western 'host' culture, as articulated by Murat's double exclusion from both 'home' and 'society' in *Lola und Bilidikid*, or the sub-textual anti-bourgeois feeling expressed by Zaimoglu's Ertan character in *Kanak Attack*.

The adoption of a metaphor of *cinéma du métissage* represented the attempt to account for the simultaneous occupation and disintegration of new subject positions within the Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s. Such an evocation of 'in-betweenness', hybridity, and cultural eclecticism appeared to meet the demands of a film genre made

by, (at least partially) for and about a second, third or fourth generation Turkish-German community. Equally, it was ideally suited to a theoretical framework preoccupied with the rejection of all originary, binarised identity categories and underpinned by a liberal discourse of recognition and tolerance. In other words, this cinematic metaphor usefully highlighted the possibility of a move beyond the simplistic assumption of coexistent pure and homogeneous cultural identities. The discourses which determine the language of this debate around the possibilities of ethnic integration and harmonious coexistence are clearly influenced by the broader liberal, multicultural projects to afford visibility and cultural value to the social margins.

The Turkish-German cinema of the 1990s would appear to display a marked suspicion of these apparently egalitarian ideals and projects. Indeed, the application of an affirmative notion of *Metissagenkultur* to the Turkish- and Kurdish-German cinemas of the 1990s appears deeply problematic. The recent appropriation of the term to extend the liberal debate around racial coexistence beyond the perceived problems of the integration, assimilation and multiculturalism discourses does not reflect the ethnic minority experience as represented within the films here under analysis. Indeed, the 'best-of-both' implication of its initial signification could at best be replaced by 'neither-one-nor-the-other'. Significantly, along with notions of identity, hybridity and cultural difference Zaimoglu rejects all mainstream multicultural discourse for its implication in the process of 'deflecting attention from plain social and political injustice' (Cheesman 2002, 186). As Cheesman argues the identities imposed upon these migrant objects figure as 'a waste product of established society which the would-be assimilated must wear as a second skin as the mark of his subjugation' (2002, 186). This resistance to the application of a notion of *métissage* to contemporary German immigrant cinema echoes the social dissonance encapsulated in the more critical explorations of post-unification *neue Bundesländer*. However, while clearly dismissive



of any utopic claims the implicit liberal humanist trajectory of such a narrative may aspire to, the metaphor of the *culture du métissage*, or ‘culture in-between’, remains, in the final analysis, extremely productive in this inclusive reading of dichotomous forces within the popular cultural text.

## *Conclusion*

In his critique of late-capitalist society Norman Denzin berates classical Hollywood cinema for the irresponsible way in which it deals with the themes of class struggle, racism, and sexism. When treated at all these 'obdurate realities' are commonly divorced from the socio-political context in which they exist, and cited as surmountable barriers that require only luck or hard work to overcome. Within the representations of race, gender, and nation as articulated within both mainstream and marginal cinematic contexts of 1990s German cinema, there remains much which might contribute to the construction of reactionary, atavistic, and ultimately reductive cultural identities. However, operating within the metadisciplinary context of contemporary cultural studies, this study has remained committed to exposing the complex and often contradictory identity positions offered across the spectrum of marginal identity representation within contemporary German cinema.

While Denzin finds it necessary to move outside of the boundaries and limitations of classical Hollywood cinema to find examples of voices and accents fundamentally resistant to the strictures of a normative and patriarchal late capitalist society, this study locates them within both mainstream and more alternative cinematic contexts. As John Fiske has pointed out, cultural commodities will only be made popular when they meet the various interests and needs of the people who consume them. To locate the representations of these needs and interests requires a dual cultural studies and film studies capable of drawing parallels between the implicit political subtexts of classical cinema and the sometimes explicit political messages of less popular forms. In the context of the marginal social groupings represented within this study there is as much evidence of counter-cultural discourse resistant to incorporation



into the social and cultural mainstreams, as there is of the hegemonic cultural forces which seek to incorporate, make safe and, ultimately, depoliticise.

Preoccupied with the 'in-between' spaces, the ambiguities and multilingual accents that pertain to these borderline voices, the textual exegesis of this work attempts to uncover the points of negotiation opened up within these films and often left ambiguously unresolved. This negotiation is nowhere more tellingly articulated than in the films' struggles to retain a credible realism in the face of a mass audience far outreaching and often directly antagonistic to the narrow social interests and concerns of the communities they represent. In the process of articulation, the borders of these identities – the interstices of 'domains of difference' – are brought to the fore.

Often this process relies on recourse to cultural stereotypes, sometimes in the service of humour and sometimes for a more socially critical purpose. Along with the reification of received collective projection, however, the exposure of the borderlines of these identities, signals a self-reflexivity that counters any simplistic conservative cooption of difference theory and moves beyond the essentialisms of the cultural diversity approach to cultural representation. Such a recognition may point the way to a more problematic understanding of identity formation in an age in which the realities of social demographics, as well as the forces of capitalist ideology and political liberalism are driving towards an increasingly pluralist *Weltanschauung*.

This notion of cultural self-reflexivity is employed by Eagleton to distinguish between the consciousness of the critically distanced intelligentsia and that of the masses, declaring that 'the same culture will be lived out unconsciously by the people and reflectively by the minority' (2000, 115). However, switching to an anthropological rather than aesthetic interpretation of 'culture as way of life', Eagleton goes on to argue that 'the difference that matters is not between kinds of culture, but between degrees of self-consciousness.' (115) Clearly, Eagleton perceives little potential for self-reflexivity

in the 'unity of belief' which is the 'condition of a healthy popular culture, but hardly of a spiritually aware individual' (115). My analysis of the construction of marginal identities across the spectrum of contemporary German film production would appear, however, to challenge this belief. Moments of a 'knowing' self-reflexivity and consciousness indicative of 'unities' as well as 'disunities' of belief exist on both an inter- and intratextual level. This is apparent in the ambiguous and often ambivalent ways in which the films relate to the heritages of their particular socio-political and generic cinematic traditions – traditions which include, the heritage of a feminist filmmaking tradition or the positioning of women within the cultural mainstream; the legacy of an obsolete ideological system and a disregarded social history; or the personal histories of transnational migration, ambiguous cultural origin and exclusion transposed into a mainstream cinematic context.

Despite the presence of such *disunifying* pretextual discourses, this in no way denies the hegemonic influence of unified belief systems. Clearly, mainstream cultural production relies to a large extent on such collective complicities to communicate with its mass audiences. Indeed, in an age of mass media and mass communication these complicities must be mobilised on a daily basis. However, this does not necessarily dictate an age of mass complicity, or as Eric Rentschler would have it, 'mass consensus' (2000). If only to reflect the true complexity of market demographics, a multiplicity of cultural identity positions must be offered across the range of cultural products and, indeed, within individual texts themselves. As Gledhill argues, 'capitalism cannot ignore the potential market represented by groups emerging into new public self-identity', despite the fact that its processes may 'invariably turn alternative life-styles and identities into commodities' (1995, 199).

This ambiguous and fluctuating dialectic between cultural incorporation and counter-cultural resistance exists within all the films dealt with in this. In Part II this



was shown to be the case for the aggressively self-assertive New German Comedy women. Part III traced the querulous resubjectification of eastern German attitudes to the reunification of East and West Germany and the place of the German Democratic Republic's past. Even the tough self-confidence of the streetwise *Kanaksta* identity, outlined in Part IV, was shown to conceal a much more reactionary alter-ego. The representation of emancipatory identity positions within the cultural mainstream is, therefore, never far from the essentialist and stereotypical positions they appear to reject.

However, as this study has demonstrated, it would be overly simplistic and, indeed, in direct opposition to the theoretical underpinnings of this entire work, to define these borderline identities solely in the Althusserian terminology of reaction or progression, radicalism or conservatism. On an inter- and intratextual level a vast array of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, marginal and mainstream ideological forces and interest groups are represented. As Stuart Hall argues, the meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed in its form (1981). In line with this reinscription of cultural consumption as a site of political struggle, the results of our analysis have tended towards the interpretation of popular culture and its consumption as 'a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience' (Gledhill 1995, 195). While focusing on the textual construction of identity our exploration of the construction gender, race and nation within the context of mainstream German cinema has aimed to open up spaces beyond the 'colonised, alienated, or masochistic positions of identification' (Gledhill 1995, 194) previously ascribed to the cultural consumer.

This tentative approach to the question of a political sociology of culture appears to recognise the 'new political importance assumed by culture in the 21st Century' and the consequent need for an 'an enlightened political context' (Eagleton 2000, 131) in

which to both receive and produce it. However, sounding a warning note to any overambitious belief in the emancipatory potential of cultural representation or, for that matter, cultural criticism, Terry Eagleton points to the persistence of the worlds most pressing global social problems – such as war, famine, disease, poverty and debt – and the ‘precious little’ (130) which cultural theorists have to contribute to their solution.

This salutary reminder of the limits of culture and cultural criticism is as relevant to my own cultural studies analysis of contemporary German cinema as it is to all spheres of cultural analysis and criticism. Clearly, any attempt to impart an overly ambitious emancipatory politics to popular culture is liable to fail. However, such an attempt is no less problematic in the context of a traditionally prioritised high modernist cultural output. Ultimately, culture may reflect material conditions and problems, be they the ‘anger, alienation, anxiety, poverty, racism, and sexism’ that Denzin sees as inherent to ‘the cultural logics of late capitalism’ (1991, vii), or the gender, race and nation issues of the films examined within this study. Equally, in the context of the various national and transnational histories and epistemologies of such social problematics, such representational practices clearly contribute to the contemporary debates and discourses fundamental to the formation of collective self-perceptions. However, according to Eagleton, such cultural representation will not change immediate material conditions and in this respect, culture and cultural criticism require to be ‘put back in its place’ (2000, 131).

I would counter this argument, however, by returning to the sociological significance that Denzin and Baudrillard ascribe to the visual media’s social, cultural and political interrogation of the contemporary social formation. According to Denzin, the cinematic medium is central to society’s self-recognition and its construction of a postmodern identity. In a similar vein, Pierre Sorlin points out that social, political and economic changes are not necessarily felt and perceived as they take place.



Consequently, images become a key site to record, reflect and even possibly promote social change. However, if images can change public perceptions of social realities their absence can also hinder change:

Images are mere instruments for ideology but, when they are lacking, the ideology does not evolve, it is blocked; the endless repetition of the same worn-out images is then likely to reinforce conformity and submission to the established rules. (Sorlin 1991, 14)

In the case of the social groupings represented in this study – groupings who occupy marginal social positions in relation to mainstream institutions, ideologies and discourses – images can be argued to facilitate their self-perceptions and, consequently, the development of new social identities.

Taking as its starting point the representation of these marginal social identities, this study has attempted to demonstrate the communalities which exist between films of a variety of tones and registers, genres and styles. It is these communalities which ultimately challenge the simplistic binarism of the high/low cultural debate. A by-product of this revaluation of the popular cultural text is to refute the implicit assumptions of a high cultural tradition of German film studies that art cinema is more indicative of a moment in German film history than popular cinema. This reassessment of the sociological and political value of popular German cinema is at the heart of much recent work in German film criticism (Bergfelder, Carter and Göktürk 2002; Hake 2002; Halle and McCarthy 2003).

Conducted in a critical and interdisciplinary manner such work is fundamental to the opening up of a mutually enlightening dialogue between ideology and popular culture, popular culture and society. It is only in this way that we can counter the apoliticising effects of a new brand of cultural relativism and open up the popular

cultural text to a socially and politically committed practice of cultural criticism. Referring to the evolving relationship between cultural studies and Marxist theory, Lawrence Grossberg points out that cultural studies did not reject political economy's interest in capitalism but rather the economic reductionism of its approach to culture (1998). Cultural studies remains committed to the location of the economic in cultural and political analysis, and in so doing maintains its social and political imperative.

Subscribing to such a practice of political cultural criticism we may return at the conclusion of our narrative to the beginning and to the particular instantiations of contemporary German film culture that have constituted the focus of this study. In so doing we find a (post)national cinema, which, oblivious to its critical renunciation in the light of 'glories past', is still very much alive and has much to tell us about the incongruities and contradictions of post-reunification German present.



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