

# Germany after Unification: Views from Abroad

ROGER HILLMAN

I

One might have expected a historical watershed like the fall of the Berlin Wall and rapid unification of the two former German states to spawn German films. But on the whole that would seem not to have been the case. There have been reappraisals like Margarete von Trotta's *Das Versprechen* (*The Promise*) (1995), with its subject matter of the Berlin Wall going up, seemingly forever for lovers divided by it, in 1961. There have been scurrilous attempts to confront the problems of Osis and Wessis such as Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Das deutsche Kettensägenmassaker* (*The German Chainsaw Massacre*) (1990), in which Osis who have vanished are in fact being churned out by a sausage machine near the former border. There has even been a wave of highly successful German comedies, films which have drawn in huge audiences -7 million alone for Sönke Wortmann's *Der bewegte Mann* (1994) within two years.<sup>1</sup> Comedies like this film and *Stadtgespräch* (1995) represent a genuine new departure -they are bellylaughingly funny, modish, and frothy, and they almost totally bypass any problems connected with unified Germany within the new Europe. But while the theme of Germany from 1990 onwards has not remained untouched within its own cinema, one has to look outside for truly interesting approaches.

During the heyday of the New German Cinema, such a state of affairs would have been inconceivable.<sup>2</sup> German history and issues of German identity were at the core of a wave of W. German films of the 70s, where contemporary society was analysed in the light of the emergence of that society from the legacy of World War II. Postwar Germany was not just geographically reduced, it was also occupied, which filtered through to popular culture and affected the very impact of popular culture: «The Yanks», as a figure in Wim Wenders' *Kings of the Road* proclaimed, «have colonized our subconscious.» The strongest resistance to this kind of appropriation of the national past came with the two *Heimat* films of Edgar Reitz, angrily reacting to the U.S. *Holocaust* series by reclaiming German history and German mythology for German film.

But no such reaction seems to have applied to representations of the post-1989 complexion of Germany where there is an apparent gap at the level of the German art film. German filmmakers have made at best isolated forays into the new subject-matter, whereas two highly acclaimed films came, and came very quickly, from outside. These were Marcel Ophüls' *November Days*, commissioned by the BBC, and Jean-Luc Godard's (*Deutschland Neu(n) Null*), made for the French TV station Antenne 2.

II

First, briefly, to the Godard. It is a mixture of fiction and documentary, the documentary aspect coming largely in kaleidoscopic montages of past history, on both visual and acoustic planes, not unlike the style of Kluge's *Die Patriotin* (1979). In a typical scene we see what an intertitle -one of many in the film -refers to as the latter-day 'dragons' of history, in this case the ecological obscenity of the open-cut coal mine near Bitterfeld in the former German Democratic Republic (G.D.R). The main figure (cued by a page from Kafka's *Das Schloss*, as the hero approaches the bastion of remoteness) watches this with incomprehension as a dreadful rasping noise accompanies the eternal turning of the cogs of the machinery. It is an apocalyptic, totally depersonalized setting. Another shot shows a broken down Trabi being pushed in the direction of this monster, and then, with a windmill prominent in the background, a helmeted figure on horseback rides up. Spear in hand, he is clearly (given the silhouette in the background) a Don Quixote figure, but probably also, in the context of the rich layers of allusion in this film, evocative of Dürer's *Ritter, Tod und Teufel*. He overtakes the Trabi, creating the supreme irony of the medieval horseman being faster than the standing joke side of technology whose most monstrous outgrowth is the constant sonic presence of the mining equipment. But he is not an arbitrary reference: the idealistic phase of the G.D.R. similarly tilted at windmills with misguided, but often equally convinced, fervour .

This is a film with quotations from Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Hegel and others, something it's hard to imagine a West German director even daring - and there is a strong presence of Germany, the land of poets and thinkers of the past. The fiction strand follows the Cold War spy Lemmy Caution, who had vanished behind the Iron Curtain decades before. He sets off into the West once someone tells him the Wall has gone. At the end he stays in a clinically cold hotel room and finds a Bible there. Now Lemmy Caution was the established gangster-film persona of Eddie Constantine, the main lead in Godard's film underdiscussion, but also in his 1965 film *Alphaville*. There Lemmy had travelled across intergalactic space to a technocratic dictatorship of the year 1990. The inhabitants of Alphaville are entirely regulated by a super-computer, a state of affairs which Lemmy Caution, armed with a volume of poetry, contests. Near hotel beds there are books the locals call Bibles, but Lemmy discovers they are in fact dictionaries from which words progressively disappear, words like 'tenderness.' In the earlier film, Lemmy finally flees Alphaville with seemingly the only redeemable person, and she shakes off the computer's control by falteringly formulating the words «Je vous aime.»

But in the later film we are left in the bleak surface perfection of the hotel room, and the latterday Alphaville of West Germany is not exorcised. The profession of love is confined to the cultural heritage, alongside the historical rigours, of the earlier Germany. In the richness of his tapestry Godard superimposes some historical layers that are questionable, at the very least. Thus the hotel maid, whom we've earlier seen in the East, parrots with a glazed expression the slogan «Arbeit macht frei» ('Work makes you free'), the 'greeting' over the entry to Auschwitz. Presumably Godard is alluding to the idealistic roots of the former G.D.R. in the working class, the notion that this would be the first German state in which your own labours would indeed liberate the individual (cf. the paradoxical 'democratic' in the State's official title). But the arresting compression of stages of German history, and perhaps even the positing of a continuity at one level when it is impossible for the viewer to restrict associations to a single level, is an overly risky approach.

A recent review speaks of «the ethical importance attributed to self-reflexiveness in cinema from Godard on.»<sup>3</sup> Certainly this seems to free up Godard for his kaleidoscopic references to earlier European cinema and for the resurrection of Lemmy Caution. The former also enables him to link up with the first substantial film about Germany made after the previous major turning point in its history, namely Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1947). German film had to wait another 20 years roughly till Kluge's *Abschied von gestern (Yesterday's Girl)* put it on course to approach critically its own contemporary social reality. For the coming 20 years the signs are quite unclear as to what from the German scene might follow Godard's lead, beyond the magnificent obsession of a Third *Heimat*, on which Reitz is reputedly working.

### III

In *November Days* Marcel Ophüls interviews ordinary citizens from the heady time of the title (referring to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989), both about those days and about subsequent developments, roughly up to the currency union. He also interviews celebrities: the fallen politicians Krenz and Schabowski, the former Stasi chief Markus Wolf, W. Berlin mayor Walter Momper, Brecht's daughter, and the former East German writers Stephan Hermlin and Heiner Müller. Ophüls manages to elicit unwittingly compromising answers from the big names -assisted by camera work showing the true state of play or else splicing in extracts from earlier films or music which act as ironic commentary. From the final footage selected only one celebrity, Kurt Masur, declines to answer a question, claiming Ophüls' 'ironic' stance from someone outside the Leipzig protests is unacceptable to him. Ophüls admittedly claims the last word even there.

But elsewhere there are various reminders that documentary is no more than one approach to reality. In an interview with one of the party faithful and his wife, Ophüls asks a leading question about the worker's enthusiastic waving of his Party card at a rally. It is a leading question on behalf of us, the viewers, because the visuals preceding the question have certainly given that impression. But when the man points out that wasn't so, we see the same footage in slow motion, and only then does it become clear to us and Ophüls that in fact someone closer to the camera who *was* holding a card has been virtually superimposed on the empty handed man being interviewed. Ophüls then makes no secret of his own blinkers and the inbuilt blinkers of documentary. At the same time he does stake a claim for the

potential reliability of one of documentary's weaknesses, namely the memory of the person interviewed, at least when this person is a Party idealist rather than a Party functionary. Documentary conventions are then inverted -the camera can lie and the interviewee can, contrary to apparent evidence, be telling the truth. This scepticism does not, however, debilitate this film. As we assess a series of contradictory accounts from those once seemingly in control of events, the earlier interview signals from the outset the limits of a documentary approach.

Ophüls signals certain other restrictions. He is working with a BBC crew, who continually try to get their subjects to speak English despite the agitation of highly charged events. This sort of imperialism inherent in many documentaries is also alien to Ophüls, who because he is able to put his subjects at linguistic ease is able to penetrate the surface far more deeply. But even there not totally, as the resistance of Kurt Masur reminds us. These are the acknowledged problems of perspective. But there are unacknowledged ones too, as when the name Mercedes is to be connected, almost self-evidently, with Chamberlain's trip at Hitler's invitation. This association seems suspect even when applied to British viewers, let alone others.

Unlike the inexorable close-ups of Hermlin, Schabowski, Krenz or Wolf, the late Heiner Müller is occasionally reflected, like Ophüls sitting opposite him, in a mirror. In addition, only in these sections, we sometimes see a camera crew through the pane of glass. Müller is largely treated as a «moralische Instanz», upright midst the succession of suspect figures in high places who are interviewed in the course of the film. In view of the question mark thrown up subsequent to Ophüls' film about the Stasi involvement of (even) Müller, this is a reminder- though clearly not intended as such -that the reality constructed by any documentary is relative to historical insights of the day. The effect of the mirrors and the foregrounding of the outside frame of the film crew is though less an exercise in self-reflexiveness than an allusion to Stasi-type devices, further filters on reality, dissembling omniscience, however ideologically different. Here too there is a nice twist when Schabowski at one point is interviewed against a background of sky and a cityscape of Berlin. But lest viewers be misled into thinking his camera crew is also on Schabowski's balcony, Ophüls asks him why he has opted to be on the other side, the outside, of his lounge room curtains, and the answer given is that his neighbours would react allergically to a fallen public figure profiting from his own fall.

Alongside excerpts, especially musical numbers, from earlier German cinema, or films directed by émigrés like Sternberg and Lubitsch, Ophüls projects considerable commentary between the lines of his film's script, between the positioning of its cameras and the cutting-table assemblage of its faces. The final freeze frame returns us to a very early image of a couple having crossed the Wall for the first time, with her face a perfect mix of wonderment and apprehension, her own later commentary being that she was 'scared.' This, a voice from the *Volk*, is allowed the last say in a film which has managed to retain the euphoria of those November Days without being blinkered to their attendant problems. It is probable, I suspect, that such a view is only possible from outside Germany. Beyond his irony, this applies especially to the provocative combination in Ophüls of highly individual political documentary and show music genres -it is not flippant, and need not trivialize subject matter (especially for instance the context of early performances of *White Horse Inn*, where he documents pre-War antisemitism through the casting). Possibly the paucity of post '89 German feature films about contemporary Germany is attributable to the *Narrenfreiheit* (carnivalistic freedom) of a Godard or an Ophüls.

#### IV

Berlin has long been a drawcard for Russian communities. In the 1920s half a million Russians lived there, and even now the figure is 45000 legal and an estimated further 25000 illegal Russian migrants. Half the legal ones are out of work, and a quirky film by director Dusan Makavejev shows us their lot, via the last member of the Soviet troops stationed in East Berlin, abandoned by his regiment which has headed home. This film focusses on the complex, highly ambivalent attitudes surfacing since the initial period of euphoria following the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification. In most of Makavejev's other films, bizarre extremities of sex and violence stud the often surreal atmosphere and the ironic detachment. Here the tone is rather one of good humour, salvaging smiles and resigned shrugs from a desperate situation -the soldier has lost his unit, and via that his identity as a soldier, clinched at the end

by his holding in front of the camera the empty uniform, now a real theatre prop or an item of merchandize for the Polenmarkt.

Issues of German identity feature in the background, with any lament for E. Germany collapsed into the even more precarious situation of the Russian, his wrangling with E. bloc ideology via Lenin and Stalin reflecting too of course the situation in the former Soviet satellites, but most accentuated in the former superpower, his homeland.

The film starts with *Wings of Desire*-type footage, a swirling camera movement above Berlin, but it's E. Berlin, largely elided in Wenders' film. This cuts to a 40s Soviet film called *The Fall of Berlin*. Quoted extensively towards the end of *Gorilla Bathes at Noon*, it lives on crowd scenes, surging patriotism, historical triumph, and hopelessly overplayed individual emotion. Makavejev's own film traces a totally cyclical development from the pro-filmic event of his forebear, as we progress from Stalin's troops victoriously entering Berlin to the withdrawal of Russian troops in the wake of German unification. The question posed by this history is clear: were the Russian sacrifices in vain after all, and what sense can a soldier of a former occupying power salvage from the dramatic turn of events in world history?

The Soviet Union bore the brunt of human losses in WWII, losing some 20 million of her inhabitants, and in her eyes only the occupation of her former attacker and the establishment of the E. bloc as a buffer zone and a sphere of influence could go some way towards compensating for that decimation. Makavejev's film starts with all that gone, with all the inflated but confident patriotism of the *Fall of Berlin* film evaporated, and with nothing to replace it. The earlier footage moves to the point where the soldiers proclaim: «Berlin is ours,» but what immediately precedes this action is the desertion of this city in the early 90s by the successors to these victors.

Integral to Makavejev's technique is drawing out the inverted parallels between the two historical situations. After the first extensive excerpt from *The Fall of Berlin* we get a vignette in which the historical tables have turned completely, with a very polite German officer obliged to pursue the rooftop inhabitant from the Soviet military with an embarrassed but firm request for his papers. The teabag in the samovar is a gently humorous indication of the Russian's identity crisis. His alienation, shown in extreme form in him as the sole remnant of the unit, is further emphasized by the fact that right till the end of the film he speaks no German, indirectly showing the isolation in which the Russian troops have lived.

Bananas are obtrusive in this film, and a pineapple he steals is a further sign of the formerly inaccessible fruit of the West (with Mediterranean markets not available to the former Comecon). Viktor muses on whether he's related to a figure in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, i.e. a high point of Russian culture, juxtaposed with a scene where he buys bananas from a guestworker fruit vendor, who declines payment! The erstwhile underbelly of German society has risen to the point where charity can be shown to the true contemporary underclass, to which the Russian officer belongs (living in his shadowy shanty commune). This point is reinforced when his German girlfriend's partner appears unexpectedly, playing a mean bongo drum to his wife's tapdancing (in the jacket of Viktor's uniform; once invested with pride and meaning, it has become a theatre prop). The intruder, of distinctly non-German appearance, asks who the man was in his bed, and then comes out with the immortal line: «Ausländer raus!» There has been no levelling of social classes as projected by socialism, but a hierarchy has remained, with only the rungs occupied changing. Makavejev reminds us that we've had a similar view of biological evolution, with the bananas intended for the monkeys at the zoo being pinched by Viktor, just as later he seems to pinch the baby gorilla's bottle for the orphaned baby he has adopted. For him and the underprivileged of Berlin, life has become tougher than for the former inmates of the jungle.

A series of brief scenes relates to the issue of identity ,1) at the zoo, Viktor visits the Siberian tiger born in Stuttgart, which has never seen Siberia; 2) Viktor the soldier declines the offer to earn money by bumping off a man -a disparity between his profession and his nature, or are they quite different categories?; 3) the aeroplane he heroically straddles, winning the girls, proves to be from the Australian Air Force, one of the genuine existing absurdities of Berlin.

In Viktor's no man's land in contemporary Berlin, his idol has been dismantled by the end as a historical icon. He vainly seeks to defend Lenin, from the paint smears of those defacing the statue, and from the verbal smears of the throng gathered to see the statue's dismantling -one demagogue says: «Lenin war schliesslich Ausländer» («After all, Lenin, was a foreigner»). Finally he accompanies Lenin's disembodied head on the back of a truck. This extended dethroning of a former hero ironically echoes E. bloc practice itself, as one personality cult succeeded another. At an ideological level the film shows a return to a pre-Stalinist era in a vain effort to recover original ideas and visions in a faceless, visionless present. At a historical level it starts with Stalin's conquest of Berlin and finishes with a new-look Berlin that has ousted the presence begun with Stalin and has even removed the reminder of his historical predecessor. Whereas at the beginning we see the Reichstag building ablaze and Berlin in ruins, with Russian soldiers in the foreground, fighting for every inch of territory, we see at the end a disoriented Viktor in front of a peacetime Reichstag with people on the lawns. The only reminder of the Russian presence are the relics of their uniforms, badges etc. on sale at the Polish market.

Viktor tries to hold fast to earlier ideology, and hence preserve some sense in his existence. In four scenes a Lenin figure appears in his dreams, a comrade in drag, with a tango rhythm to underscore the exotic and the absurd nature of the scenes. In the second sequence this tango orchestrates a dance clinch, as the Russian officer is swept into her arms, where he's unable to extricate himself from her vampire-like clutches. When he awakes from the vision in his weird commune, the sock the female Lenin has knitted for him is there, on his foot, a miracle sustaining the faithful believer.

As viewers we are aware of the historical axis from Lenin on to Stalin and the occupation of Berlin, through to the Soviet evacuation of the city as part of the post-unification agreement. It's far more ambivalent when the narrative progression at one stage of Makavejev's film operates in apparent parallel to the historical progression, with Stalin arriving by air in the *Fall of Berlin* film just after the statue of Lenin in E.Berlin has been dismantled. The temporal connections between the film's main focal points are circular, something made possible by its references to Lenin being to a figure neither «live» nor reenacted in history, present either in Viktor's dream or else as the monumentalized, deposed statue in the former East Berlin. After starting virtually with the first Stalin-era clip, the narrative axis proceeds to the present with the Soviets (but for Viktor) gone, arcs back to Lenin (as dream-figure and stone monument), returns to the historical intermediary point of Stalin, as described above, and finishes back in the unresolved questions of the present, a sort of whimsical variation of Nietzsche's 'ewige Wiederkehr.'

The moving about between time levels of world history is truly virtuosic. When Viktor is netted on top of the Lenin statue, captured like a zoo animal, he defies his captors with the hopelessly out-of-kilter words: «Ich bin ein Berliner», which encapsulate much of his identity crisis in the film. He *is* a Berliner of sorts by dint of time spent there, even though he has never assimilated. He is at least as much a Berliner as the coiner of that historical phrase, John F. Kennedy. But where Kennedy meant to throw down the gauntlet to the E. bloc, Viktor is attempting to rescue its last remaining icon. Just as the Stalin figure in the old filmstock is palpably a cardboard replica, Viktor concedes: «maybe I'm a paper soldier, but I'm made of very good quality paper .» At the end his paper-thin existence has been reduced to a question-mark hanging in the air, off-camera, as his visual presence recedes bit by bit, clothing item by clothing item, leaving...? Leaving an actor playing the historical anachronism of a Russian soldier in vacated Berlin. Like the anachronism of Lenin. Or Stalin. History is an old movie, even when, like Makavejev's, it's spliced with a new one.

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Since the Wall has actually fallen -instead of being rendered transparent as it is in *Wings of Desire*- German filmmakers have made few significant approaches to the evolving identity of the new Germany. Thomas Elsaesser sees the issue of current self-representation as undergoing a «period of reassessment.»<sup>4</sup> Could the catalyst come from a reaction to the films discussed in this paper akin to Edgar Reitz's to the *Holocaust* series? For the appropriation of one's national history still meets with strong rejection -witness initial reactions in Germany, since apparently tempered, to Daniel Goldhagen's controversial book. But perhaps Reitz' irritation branded him as an unrepentant '68er, an 'Ewiggestriger,' and maybe the new Germany within the new Europe doesn't leave room for such reactions.

To negotiate their contemporary history German filmmakers may need to engage new forms of creative friction somewhere between feature film and documentary, like Godard, but also like Kluge. Back in 1978, the director Costard made a film in which Godard is prepared to devise a film on the theme: «Is it possible to make films in Germany today?» In 1979 the answer to this question came in the form of high watermarks of the New German Cinema, *The Patriot*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, and *Germany Pale Mother* among others. In our decade Godard, Ophüls and Makavejev have shown it is possible for non-Germans to make films in Germany about today. It would be a bizarre acknowledgement of a different identity crisis if the new German realities continued to defy its current makers of films.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) KILB, Andreas. «Am Sonntag, wenn Mama kommt», *Die Zeit* Nr.18 (3 Mai 1996), Feuilleton, 15.
- (2) Down till sections 4 and 5, which are new, the following discussion varies an earlier Festschrift contribution. Cf. HILLMAN, Roger. «From Caligari to Hitler to Heimat to... Godard?» in *Lesen und Schreiben: Festschrift für Manfred Jurgensen*, ed. Volker Wolf (Tübingen and Basle, 1995), pp. 69-74.
- (3) DONALD, James, review of Peter Wollen's *Singin' in the Rain* monograph, *Sight and Sound* (June 1993): 42.
- (4) ELSAESSER, Thomas. «Subject Positions, Speaking positions: from *Holocaust*, *Our Hitler*, and *Heimat* to *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*», in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (N.Y. and London, 1996), p.172.

ROGER HILLMAN is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Modern European Languages at the Australian National University, Canberra. He teaches in the German Program as well as coordinating Film Studies. Research interests focus on questions of film and history, especially the use in the New German Cinema of classical music whose reception is coloured by ideology. Recent publications include coediting the volume *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).