Berlin, the unchanging symphony of a big city: Determining story in *Der Himmel über Berlin* and *Lola rennt*

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When one thinks of the German city film, one necessarily thinks of Berlin, the only real metropolis the country has ever known. Berlin as German capital (of one sort or another) has been the setting of any number of important films. Two modern pictures – *Der Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire* (1987) and *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run* (1998) – are set in two very different Berlins, one divided by a wall, the other a healed version of its former self. A close examination of each film's narrative, however, reveals that the stories are quite similar. This paper will analyse this similarity, draw attention to the function of the Berlin setting for the films' narratives, and discuss the degree to which Berlin is an essential element in the stories being told. The argument is then made that these Berlin stories fall into a larger tradition of city films (set in Berlin and elsewhere) in which the city serves as a site of emotional healing.

Introduction

As different as they are in tone and appearance, *Der Himmel über Berlin* (dir. Wim Wenders, 1987) and *Lola rennt* (dir. Tom Tykwer, 1998) tell essentially very similar stories. Both films are set in Berlin: Wenders's Berlin is a melancholic, drab, historically split city, Tykwer's a throbbing, patched-together post-*Wende* (and post-Wenders!) metropolis. Both films are narratives about new beginnings and overcoming alienation. Both stories pose questions about the fundamental nature of existence and identity, about the ability of willpower to rise above circumstance. And both stories are about storytelling itself. This essay explores the sameness of these narratives and the differences of these Berlins. It examines the relationship between story and setting and, in so doing, considers the importance of Berlin for the films. The essay concludes with a discussion of the tradition of the city film in order to situate the place of these two films within that tradition. The point to be made is that these are *narrative* films, and that it is therefore necessary to reveal the basic, principal stories within these films in order to comprehend the role that the city plays in them, and the roles that the films can play within a larger cinematic tradition.

The Narratives

Der Himmel über Berlin, shot largely in black-and-white film, moves at a languid pace as it follows angels who float through the streets of the city. These angels can perceive, but do not sense in a physical way, and they are outside of time, the linear measure of human existence. The angel Damiel is growing increasingly dissatisfied with an existence devoid of human sensory perception: 'manchmal wird mir meine ewige Geistesexistenz zuviel. Ich möchte dann nicht mehr so ewig drüberschweben, ich möchte Gewicht an mir spüren, das die Grenzenlosigkeit an mir aufhebt und mich erdfest macht' (Wenders and Handke 1987: 19-20). Angelic timelessness only compounds his troubles. When the angel Cassiel reminds him of how they were here before the beginning, how they watched Berlin develop out of the bogs of pre-time into the metropolis of today, Damiel replies: 'Ich bin schließlich lang genug draußen gewesen, lang genug abwesend, lang genug aus der Welt. Hinein in die Weltgeschichte!' (Wenders and Handke 1987: 84-85).

Marion, the trapeze artist who is the object of Damiel's affection, likewise questions the nature of her existence. Marion's unexpected job loss – the circus goes bankrupt – provokes a wave of melancholy during which her thoughts range from wondering who she is ('Wer bin ich, wer bin ich geworden?') (Wenders and Handke 1987: 43), to her fear of performing, to her search for love ('Sehnsucht nach einer Welle von Liebe, die in mir emporstiege') (Wenders and Handke 1987: 49). In a later dream sequence, in which Marion has a vision of Damiel, her thoughts appear to crystallize as she recites part of the poem that is the leitmotif of the film: 'Als das Kind Kind war, war das die Zeit der folgenden Fragen: Warum bin ich Ich und nicht Du? Warum bin ich hier und nicht dort? Wann begann die Zeit und wo endet der Raum?' (Wenders and Handke 1987: 118-19). The next morning, the same morning Damiel falls to earth, Marion sits at the abandoned circus site and thinks: 'Ich könnte nicht sagen, wer ich bin. Ich habe nicht die geringste Ahnung von mir. Ich bin jemand ohne Herkunft, ohne Geschichte, ohne Land, und darauf bestehe ich. Ich bin da, bin frei, ich kann mir alles vorstellen, alles ist möglich. Ich brauche nur aufzuschauen, und schon werde ich wieder die Welt. Jetzt, auf diesem Platz, ein Gefühl von Glück, das ich immer behalten könnte' (Wenders and Handke 1987: 144).[1] The uncertainty

[1] The words 'ohne Geschichte' are spoken in the film, but do not appear in the published script.

of chance – why am I who I am and not you? – is transformed into the confidence that anything is possible, and Marion wanders Berlin's streets exuding hope. Finally meeting Damiel at a dance club, she states that the time of chance has come to an end, that a decision must be made that will become a great story: 'Es gibt keine größere Geschichte als die von uns beiden, von Mann und Frau. Es wird eine Geschichte von Riesen sein, unsichtbaren, übertragbaren, eine Geschichte neuer Stammeltern' (Wenders and Handke 1987: 163). This great love story is based not on chance but on decisions made by Damiel and Marion to find, as Søren Kolstrup (1999) points out, a place to belong.

Marion and Damiel's interest in creating story is echoed in the scenes involving the tired old man whom Cassiel shadows. His lyrical thought speeches advocate the need for storytelling: 'Soll ich jetzt aufgeben? Wenn ich aufgebe, dann wird die Menschheit ihren Erzähler verlieren. Und hat die Menschheit ihren Erzähler verloren, so hat sie auch ihre Kindschaft verloren' (Wenders and Handke 1987: 57). The viewer does not learn it in the film, but the old man's name is Homer (whose epics Wenders was reading during the filming of *Der Himmel über Berlin*).[2]

Lola rennt is also a narrative film that reflects on the nature of storytelling, although in a less overt manner. The film begins with Hans Paetsch, a noted *Märchenerzähler*, reciting a prologue: 'Wer sind wir? Woher kommen wir? Wohin gehen wir? Woher wissen wir, was wir zu wissen glauben? Wieso glauben wir überhaupt etwas?'. Every answer to these questions, we are told in a nod to the film's epigraph by Eliot, brings with it a new question: 'Doch ist es am Ende nicht immer wieder die gleiche Frage [...] und immer wieder die gleiche Antwort?' (Tykwer 1998: 6). This cycle of questions and answers foreshadows the narrative structure of the film: three acts or 'runs', as it were, in which the same incident – Manni losing the mob's money – is the starting point of Lola's three runs to save him by getting the cash. Only the last run is successful.

Lola and Manni are both mortally injured during the film: Lola at the end of the first run, Manni at the end of the second. These wounds trigger two interludes that show Manni and Lola lying together in bed in what the iconography of cinema would have us believe is a post-coital moment. Both of these scenes begin with a question. In the first interlude, Lola,

[2] Cook 1997: 176. See also Raskin 1999b for Wenders's comments on the need for stories.

whose head is lying on Manni's arm, asks him if he loves her. When he says 'Sure I do', she asks him how he can be sure. This begins a conversation in which the exasperated Manni tries to convince Lola of his love, but Lola thinks he could have just as well met another woman and be lying with her right now, telling her exactly what he has just told Lola: that she is the best, that he loves her. At the end of this interlude, Manni asks her what is wrong:

> Manni: Willst du weg [...] von mir?
> Lola: Ich weiß nicht. Ich muß mich grad entscheiden [...] glaub ich. (Tykwer 1998: 60)

At this point we return to the street where Lola is bleeding. She looks into the camera and says: 'Aber ich will nicht. Ich will nicht weg. Stop' (Tykwer 1998: 61).

During the second interlude, Manni and Lola's positions are reversed, both physically and narratively. Manni – whose head is now lying on Lola's arm – questions Lola about how lasting her love is. He poses the hypothetical question about what she would do if he were to die. Ignoring her claim that she would not let him die, Manni imagines a period of grief in which Lola displays great fortitude until one day a super sensitive guy with green eyes comes along. He is so nice and so caring that, before you know it, Lola has forgotten all about Manni. At the end of this monologue Lola reminds Manni that he is not dead. His response to this – 'Nicht?' – occurs back on the street where Manni is injured. The third run can now begin.

Determination, not chance, allows the protagonists to move the stories forward. Lola never waivers from her goal and will not let obstacles prevent her from saving Manni and, in so doing, keeping their love relationship intact. As Maurcie Yacowar points out 'Lola has always claimed that love can solve any problem; Manni virtually dares her to save him' (1999: 558). The sheer force of Lola's will allows her to restart the story twice or – by means of a scream that reminds us of Oskar in *Die Blechtrommel* – to win at the roulette table (normally a game of chance, but not when Lola is playing). In *Der Himmel über Berlin* the protagonists, dissatisfied with the stories that had been dictating the course of their existences, start new stories as well. Damiel does this by willing himself to become human, thereby stepping out of timelessness and into history. Marion, in wondering why she is who she is, questions the randomness and arbitrary chance of existence. Much like

Lola, Marion wills a new, self-determined story for herself into being, a story that is not propelled by chance but by purpose and resolve.

The City

In his essay on the elusive cinematic city, Colin McArthur discusses the 'substantial discursive presence' of famous cities, that is, a widely held general perception of a city's collective identity (1997: 19-20). This presence can change over time, but each era will have its own image of a city. This notion can be applied to Berlin, a city with such a presence not only within the German imaginary, but internationally as well.

Berlin is unmistakably visible in both films: there is no anonymity with regard to the setting, although the use of that visibility is not the same in each film. *Der Himmel über Berlin* is more obviously a Berlin film in that it, unlike *Lola rennt*, uses well-known landmarks. In many films such landmarks serve merely to establish the location – how often does a film set in London offer a glimpse of Big Ben? In *Der Himmel über Berlin*, however, these landmarks serve as homes to the angels. Moreover these sites – the Gedächtniskirche, the Siegessäule, the Berlin Wall – cannot be separated from Germany's political and social history; they invoke a city that has shaped, and been shaped by, human history. (These historical signs are reinforced by other images in the film: Cassiel's remembrances of war-time Berlin, by the film-within-a-film starring Peter Falk that is situated in 1945 Berlin, and by the remembrances of Homer, who searches for the Potsdamer Platz of his memory and finds only an empty field.) Berlin is also recognizable in *Lola rennt*, but unlike *Der Himmel über Berlin* few historical landmarks are seen. Lola runs through streets and past buildings that are part of Berlin, but which are at widely dispersed locations. The film produces an edited, compact version of the city; as Margit Sinka (2000) points out, this patchwork of sites is geographically unreal and therefore results in a truly new, unified Berlin coming to the screen.[3]

Simply the physical needs of the films' narrative structures – an angel's-eye view of Berlin or the coverage of Lola's run – require camera work that moves beyond conventional

[3] See Gerards (2001) for a chart listing the locations used in each of the film's scenes.

filmmaking practices.[4] In the case of *Der Himmel über Berlin* a 'liebevoll-zuneigender Blick' (to speak with Guntram Vogt 1999: 175) sweeps over and through the city, facilitating the viewer's identification with the angels' point of view. The viewer is given privileged insight into the inhabitants' thoughts and can sense their alienation. Their estrangement is associated with the urban environment since the people being overheard are situated in very familiar city contexts: driving along a roadway, dancing in a club, sitting in a small apartment. A mournful score only adds to the misery. Yet, despite the glum nature of Berlin, the alienation need not be hopeless. There are scenes where the Berliners, with the assistance of the angels' empathy, move beyond their melancholy. The dying man scene is one example.[5] The camera begins with Damiel's point of view as he moves through the streets like a flâneur. But then Damiel comes into the picture himself, a jarring transition that reminds the spectator of the constructed nature of this story. The camera rocks the two as Damiel assists the dying man to focus on happier moments from his life, and the city, in the form of the bridge, traffic, pedestrians, and houses, enfolds the scene. As Damiel leaves and assumes a loftier perspective, the spectator is reminded, as so often in the film, of transportation's role in the life of the city. Roger Cook notes that the free-floating perspective of the camera annoys spectators conditioned by dominant cinema; they become 'restless, impatient for the narrative control to assert itself. In this way, the film arouses in the viewing subject a desire for narrative' (1997: 171).

As for Marion, it is in fact the city itself that gives her hope; the wall, and the city it surrounds, serves as a kind of anchor. When she learns of the circus's demise she asks herself what she is going to do. Her answer: 'An nichts mehr denken. Einfach nur da sein. Berlin. Hier bin ich fremd, und trotzdem ist alles so vertraut. Auf jeden Fall kann man sich nicht verlaufen, man kommt immer wieder an der Mauer an' (Wenders and Handke 1987: 46). Berlin will be able to function as the site of Marion's new story because it allows her simply to be – 'einfach nur da sein' – within the confines of a familiar environment.

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[4] Cook feels that Wenders enters new territory in this regard: 'Because the protagonists are angels, Wenders had to establish a radically new point of view for the camera, one unique not only to his own work but to cinematic narrative in general. Locating the camera as the eye of an angel presented constant challenges during the shooting and resulted in innovative solutions, particularly in terms of the camera movement, which was to give the illusion of unlimited movement through space and time' (Cook 1997: 167-168).

[5] Raskin (1999a) analyses this scene with great care.

In Lola's case, the city remains more distant, and the viewer of *Lola rennt* has a far less intimate experience of the city. Lola, too, is a flâneur of sorts, and the camera seldom separates itself from her path, although pillars or construction sites often obstruct its view of Lola. The spectator is not privy to the thoughts of citizens, but their possible futures are caught in a high-speed succession of still photographs; these variations on a theme reinforce the idea of randomness or multiple possibilities upon which the whole film is based. Lola, herself a mode of transportation, comes into contact with almost all common elements of urban transit – commuter train, cars, ambulances, trucks, taxis – but these are usually obstacles in her path. There is no sense here that the city is her anchor, even though one cannot imagine Lola existing anywhere else but a city. Lola's motion, accompanied by a techno score that thumps along with her pounding of the pavement, accentuates the anxiety surrounding her seemingly hopeless mission; the song's refrain, however – 'I wish I was a ...' – reminds the viewer that Lola believes in wishes; she is an optimist.

The City Film

In analysing the role of cities in films, interpreters become geographers of film. The geographic study of space, as Jeff Hopkins points out, is the study of what places signify for people (1994: 51). Geographers of film, such as Mark Shiel, Stuart Aitken, or Leo Zonn, give primacy to the image over the text,[6] and often see in the spaces of film a reflection of a 'geography of the mind' (Aitken and Zonn 1994: 20). James Donald, in his sociology of the city imaginary, claims that cinema has taught 'audiences across the globe ways of seeing and so imagining the modern city, whether or not they live in one. The imagined landscape of the city has become, inescapably, a cinematic landscape' (1999: 68). The city of the film, in other words, becomes the city of the mind. These claims prompt questions related to the exploration of the city in these Berlin films: to what degree does the representation of Berlin correspond to a reality of the city itself? To what degree does this representation construct a new conception of Berlin? Does this representation of Berlin bring meaning to the film as a whole?

[6] See Shiel 2001: 5-6, Aitken and Zonn 1994: 7.

In *Der Himmel über Berlin* and *Lola rennt* the city takes up a large amount of the filmic space. But is Berlin essential to the film's communication of meaning? One must take a cynical view of comments by Tom Tykwer who, for the domestic release of *Lola rennt*, stated that this was a Berlin film, but then, upon the international release of the film, claimed it could take place in any metropolis (Sinka 2000). The main argument of Margit Sinka's paper on *Lola rennt* is that the film 'resonates [...] with some of the most prevalent Berlin discourses at the turn of the millennium' and that this 'provides the film with a cultural relevance on its home territory that it can not [sic] possibly have for international audiences' (2000). She then makes a very thorough study of the media discourses of the late 1990s, showing that the ascendance of a new type of Berliner, called 'Die Generation Berlin' by sociologist Heinz Bude, is reflected in the persona of Lola: these persons are 'self-reliant individualists unbound by convention'; they are 'optimistic doers, not complainers prone to inaction, tortuous decision-making, melancholy, or dissatisfaction. Enterprising, entrepreneurial types, they are constantly in motion [...]. Setbacks do not thwart them, for they are resilient' (2000). Sinka is correct in pointing out that Lola largely embodies this definition, but caution must nonetheless be exercised: most of Sinka's sources date from after the release of the film, and so the question must be raised as to how much 'Die Generation Berlin' is reflected in the figure of Lola, and how much of the definition is influenced by the very popular film. In other words, has the city of the film become the city of the mind? (As with all questions of the chicken or egg variety it is most likely a mixture of both.) It is probably also safe to say that the film can have a resonance outside of its home market if for no other reason than that the existence of a new generation of 'doers and shakers' was reported not only in Berlin in the late 1990s, but also in America (in connection with the new technology industries) and in Britain (under the playful motto 'Cool Britannia'). But the film's 'Germanness' cannot be avoided: Yacowar, for example, writing from within a Canadian context, and without exhaustive knowledge of Berlin's media, arrives at a conclusion about Lola that is similar to Sinka's: 'Like the new young Germany, Lola won't take loss for an answer. Undaunted by the weight of the past, the corruption around her, and a discouraging future, she strives and then re-strives until she gets what she wants' (1999: 565).

The reception of *Der Himmel über Berlin* has also wrestled with the role of Berlin. While critics are awe-struck by Wenders's depiction of the city,[7] there have also been complaints that Wenders does not deal emphatically enough with the question of history, that the theme of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) crops up at times, but is never at the centre of attention.[8] The frustration of these critics stems from the fact that *Der Himmel über Berlin* contains scenes that can be understood within a New German Cinema tradition that contemplates recent German history, but that the narrative whole of Wenders's film – a love story that discusses the nature of storytelling, but does not comment all that specifically on German history per se – resists such an interpretation. Wenders himself has stated in interviews that he considers Berlin very important for his film, and it is true that the city's discursive presence is hard to ignore. On the other hand, Wenders's own encouragement of the remake *City of Angels*, set in Los Angeles, lessens the necessity for a Berlin setting.

A Tradition of City Films

The genre of city films is an impossibly large field to cover; the motion picture has come of age and expanded its influence in the representative arts at the same time and with the same force as the city has dominated human habitation. This tradition is both German and international at the same time. Knut Hickethier is right to point out that more American than German city films have influenced the German 'filmic imagination' (1999: 186). But the German connection to city films is nevertheless strong. The Skladanowsky brothers brought short films of Berlin street scenes to the theatres as early as 1896, thereby establishing the representation of urban life via transportation, and connecting the idea of city life to the idea of motion.

Two films from 1927 expanded this tradition in ways that relate to the reading of the two films in this paper. Walter Ruttman's *Berlin, Die Sinfonie einer Großstadt* was a pseudo-documentary portrayal of a day in the life of the city. The use of montage and editing techniques to reflect (or establish) Berlin's hectic nature set a standard that is still

[7] See Vogt 1999: 162f.

commented on today. Although not a narrative film, it does indeed tell the story of the city in terms of the people and events that bring it to life. The film provides the viewer with the perspective of a flâneur drifting through the city, taking in a variety of sights connected to city life: transportation, work, recreation, and social problems.

The other film of 1927, *Sunrise*, was shot in the United States by the German filmmaker F. W. Murnau. The story is quite simple: a fashionable, dark-haired woman from the city is vacationing in the country where she seduces a simple farmer. She convinces him to kill his innocent, blonde wife. He attempts to drown his wife, but is overcome with remorse. She escapes, but he follows, and they come upon a trolley car that takes them into an enormous, bustling metropolis (which was specially constructed in the Californian desert for this film). In the hectic city the couple rediscover their love for each other. This story is often seen as the archetypal cinematic rendering of the dichotomy between city and country;[9] a spontaneous reaction may well be to equate the city with vice, and the country with virtue. Another reading based on the plot of the film is more plausible: the city, despite all of its bustle and its lures, is a site of healing for the couple, and not of alienation. They wander through the city and experience its urbanity, its motion, its hectic pace, and it is here that the couple become reconciled, not in the countryside.

The city as a site for reconciliation, for new beginnings, or for love – in spite of its shortcomings, vices, or troubles – is not an exception in the history of the city film. A number of German films follow a similar pattern. In *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946) the troubled protagonist returns to a rubble-filled Berlin where he is finally able to heal the scars left by the war. *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (1997), a film co-written by Tom Tykwer, puts on view a Berlin that is not necessarily a pleasant place to live in, but even so the characters in the film are able to turn corners, and create new, more fulfilling life stories for themselves despite the obstacles in their paths.

Non-German city films also tell stories about reconciliation within the urban context. A recent example is Wayne Wang's 1997 film *Chinese Box*. Set in Hong Kong at the time of transition to Chinese rule, this film chronicles the last days of the imperial outpost from the

[8] Cook (1997: 186) discusses this issue.
[9] See McArthur 1997: 20ff.

perspective of a dying British journalist. He takes to wandering and filming the crowded streets of the city, and the spectator accompanies him in what appears to be a quest for the real Hong Kong. At the same time, he tries to come to terms with his love for a former call girl. Throughout the film the images, rhythms, and motion of the city impose themselves on the protagonist's consciousness; when he dies filming himself on the city wharf, he is at peace with himself and with the city.

Conclusion

Film's ability, by means of editing, montage, and other devices, to exhibit the motion and organized chaos of city life, has spawned a widely-held view that cinema is the ideal venue for representing the city.[10] Ezra Pound once noted that 'in the city the visual impressions succeed each other, overlap, overcross, they are cinematographic', whereas 'the life of the village is narrative' (quoted in Donald 1999: 74). But narrative films, for all of their tricks and means to subvert their plot lines, are still telling stories of one kind or another. Narrative is not banned from the city; rather, city imaginaries require new kinds of narratives that keep pace with changing urban environments. *Der Himmel über Berlin* and *Lola rennt* provide those new narratives. In both films the protagonists move through the city as they attempt to create new stories for themselves. Though the Berlins are different – Wenders's Berlin revealing an intimacy that Tykwer's obstacles disallow – the stories of healing are remarkably similar, and continue a particular tradition of the city film. But these films bring new life to that tradition by continuing the post-modern tease of reflecting on their own nature simply by playing with the customs of conventional storytelling. That this can be done in Berlin speaks to the enormous sense of possibility and promise which this urban environment continues to hold in our imaginations.

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[10] See Donald 1999: 73f; Möbius and Vogt 1990: 9ff.

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