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*Die Unberührbare***

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## Time, Transformation and Tradition in Oskar Roehler's *Die Unberührbare*

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Oskar Roehler's *Die Unberührbare* (1999/2000) explores its protagonist's traumatized response to the fall of the Wall. As a Marxist-Leninist with political roots in the anti-capitalist movements of the late 1960s, she has long been committed to the notion of the GDR as the 'better Germany' even while embracing a Western lifestyle. This paper explores the sense of loss she experiences at the demise of the GDR and shows it to be less a political than an existential trauma, one rooted in her inability to come to terms with the fact that time cannot stand still in either a personal or a political sense, and one which culminates in her self-destruction. It goes on to argue that while the film rejects the attempt to hold back time which constitutes the paradoxically self-destructive survival strategy of its central figure and apparently accepts the inevitability of historical progress, it nevertheless seems to participate in a kind of nostalgia not dissimilar to that it criticizes in the portrayal of its central figure. With its overt critique of Western capitalism it glorifies what is presented as a specifically East German sense of community. Moreover, it pays homage to a tradition of socially-critical film-making rooted in a pre-*Wende* context. In both these respects it risks becoming as anachronistic as its central character but, as this paper demonstrates, ultimately it avoids doing so.

In her recent study of post-*Wende* German cinema, Leonie Naughton has identified two distinctly different types of unification film: one, western-produced and -funded, presents "a romanticized view of East Germans' experiences of unification" in which "easterners emerge as the beneficiaries of union with the west"; the other, eastern-backed and -produced, is "more inclined to depict [...] East Germans who fail to benefit from unification and are outcasts" (Naughton 2002: 9). As will be seen below, the image of East German reactions to the *Wende* that emerges in the West German Oskar Roehler's film *Die Unberührbare* (1999/2000) fits neatly into neither of these categories. More significant for my argument here, though, is the fact that Naughton's distinctions refer only to the way in which East German experiences of the *Wende* have been depicted in film. This highlights the extent to which *Die Unberührbare*'s thoroughgoing focus on a distinctly West German reaction to the events of 1989 makes it an exception to the rule of contemporary German cinema. To cite one enthusiastic reviewer:

Endlich einmal schafft es ein deutscher Spielfilm, sich aus der West-Perspektive mit der Zeit der Wende auseinanderzusetzen, in der die Linke sich in Ohnmachtserklärungen erging, die bundesdeutschen Feuilletons nichts weiter taten, als die Verstrickungen der Ost-Schriftsteller zu sezieren, und der Konservatismus der Ära Kohl fröhliche Umstände feierte. Und endlich einmal spürt man etwas von der Depression, von dem Schock (als Kehrseite der allgemeinen Euphorie), den der Fall der Mauer im deutschen Westen auslöste. (Rall 2000)

This quotation notes, and indeed celebrates, the melancholic tone of a film which focuses on the crisis experienced by its central character at the fall of the Wall. As a Marxist-Leninist with political roots in the anti-capitalist movements of the late 1960s, Hanna Flanders has long been committed to the notion of the GDR as the ‘better Germany’, even while she continues to enjoy the advantages of a Western lifestyle, and what is depicted in this film is the extreme sense of loss she suffers at its demise. Not surprisingly, reviewers generally read the film, like Veronika Rall in the quotation cited, as above all a response to the *Wende*. While it is certainly this, an exclusive focus on the film’s real historical context potentially obscures what are, as I intend to demonstrate here, some of its less obviously historically determined concerns. This paper explores the extent to which the trauma the film depicts is in fact as much a deep-rooted existential crisis as it is a response to concrete historical circumstances, proposing as the ultimate cause of Hanna’s self-destruction at the end of the film her inability to come to terms with the fact that time cannot stand still in either a personal or a political sense. It will then go on to suggest that the film, while it on the one hand rejects the attempt to hold back time which constitutes the paradoxically self-destructive survival strategy of its central figure and apparently accepts the inevitability of historical progress, nevertheless participates in a kind of nostalgia not dissimilar to that it criticizes in the portrayal of its central figure. Finally, I return to the question of the film’s status within the landscape of contemporary German cinema and explore other ways in which it might be considered to run counter to cinematic trends at the time of its making.

*Die Unberührbare* is in many ways a highly personal film. On one level it can be read as Roehler’s attempt to understand the life and death of his mother, the novelist Gisela Elsner, on whom its central character is based, and who had debuted to critical acclaim in 1964 with the satirical novel *Die Riesenzwerg*. With its damning portrayal of West German consumerism, this novel gave expression to criticisms of the Federal Republic which were to become common currency within the student movement and, by the end of the 1960s, Elsner found herself firmly in step with countercultural developments. However, when she

continued in the 1970s and 1980s to write in the same vein, her novels failed under changed historical circumstances to find a West German readership. It was only in the GDR that she continued to be published and celebrated as a critic of the capitalist West. She nevertheless continued to live in Munich from where she experienced the fall of the Wall at a stage in her life when she had already become increasingly reclusive. Plagued by financial troubles, she committed suicide in 1992 by throwing herself from a hospital window.

Roehler's film, however, does substantially more than simply reproduce some of the details of his mother's tragic personal life. More significantly, it transfers Elsner's representative status as a voice of the protest generation to the film's central character, who has been described by one reviewer as "die letzte 68er-Intellektuelle, die endlich die Zeichen der Zeit begreift" (Weingarten 2000: 169). In doing so the film moves beyond the personal and at this level can be read as an attempt to understand a generation which, particularly in the 1960s, but also throughout the life of the Federal Republic, criticized the state from a left-wing perspective, viewing socialism (albeit not of the sort practised in the GDR) as a viable alternative to capitalism, and as an exploration of the response of these '68er' to the end of the communist experiment in East Germany.<sup>1</sup> More than this, however, and on a less historically locatable level, the film also examines broader, trans-generational questions about the interconnections between the personal and the political in the construction of identity and it explores the dangers of defining a sense of self in relation to national, political or ideological concerns which are inherently unstable and open to change. In this respect, and at its most general level, *Die Unberührbare* can be said to be about time itself, offering an exploration of what happens when we are forced to confront the fact that the world in which we live – and in fact we ourselves – are not stable but mutable and subject to the vagaries of the historical process.

The film opens with a credit sequence during which we hear the familiar television soundtrack to the fall of the Wall. Somebody appears to be changing channels but the news is inescapably everywhere. The first visual sequence shows Hanna on the telephone, clutching a bottle of arsenic and first one and then two cigarettes, stating her intention to

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<sup>1</sup> In his perceptive reading of the film, Cooke (2004) is particularly concerned to highlight its exploration of issues around the theme of the generational conflict.

kill herself. These images are intercut with television pictures, implying a connection between Hanna's obvious distress and the euphoria of the rest of the population. Why she should take the news of the fall of the Wall so badly emerges in the interview sequence with the young reporter who has come to record her views on these historic events. She experiences them as the triumph of capitalism and therefore as a betrayal of truth:

Mich macht es krank zu sehen, wie diese Einheitsmenschen sich hier breitmachen, es ekelt mich an, wie die in den Unterhosen wühlen, wie die raffen. Mir ist jetzt erst schlagartig die deprimierte Wahrheit bewußt geworden, daß die für 'Mon Cherie'-Pralinen kämpfen und damit sie sich Westtampons, Bananen und Colaflaschen in ihre Fotze stopfen können. Die kämpfen noch nicht ... im Sinne von Lenin ... für die Wahrheit.<sup>2</sup>

However, when the journalist asks for a definition of the 'truth' Hanna refers to here it becomes clear that her aggressive response stems not merely from a sense of political betrayal but that her anger is a consequence of the collapse of an ideological framework through which she has defined the meaning of her own existence:

Die Wahrheit ist, daß ich keinen Traum mehr habe. Ich habe an Lenin geglaubt. Wenn ich zugeben müßte, daß Lenin nicht recht hatte, sondern dieser schmarotzerische Pöbel, der jetzt auf den Straßen rumläuft, dann hat das Leben keinen Sinn mehr für mich. (Roehler 2002a: 42)

Hanna gives unabashed expression to a sense of having been personally undermined by the collapse of communism, the result of the fact that she has made the existence of an alternative social order central to her definition of self. The fall of the Wall makes untenable the identity she has constructed as an oppositional writer whose works remain unappreciated for political reasons in the West but whose creativity has contributed to the building of a better society in the East. Ideological change undermines the rationale of her existence, forcing her to face up to the fact that as an artist and as a politically committed individual she has achieved little of lasting value, something that is made nowhere more clear than in the scene in which she is accosted by a drunken member of staff at her East German publishers:

Du bist doch diese verwöhnte, blöde Fotze aus dem Westen, die außer irgendwelchen Champagnerempfangen in Moskau nie was von unserer politischen Wirklichkeit mitgekriegt

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the film are taken from the published version of the screen play. Here Roehler 2002a: 42.

hat und nur an die Scheiß-DDR geglaubt hat, weil sie das einzige Land war, das noch ihren geistigen Dünnschiß gedruckt hat. (Roehler 2002a: 71)

The loss of the GDR as compensatory other clearly unravels the final threads holding Hanna's existence together in the present. It is therefore not surprising that in an attempt to escape the immediate sense of self-alienation she returns to the personal relationships which constitute her past. This, however, is a strategy that only serves to destabilize her existence still further.

The second phone call we see her make is to her East German publisher and former lover, Joachim Rau, to tell him that she is finally going to fulfil what was once presumably a shared dream by joining him in Berlin: "Ich dachte, ich mach's wahr [...] jetzt, wo die Katastrophe perfekt ist" (Roehler 2002a: 34). What follows is a series of scenes in which she confronts the people who have been important in her life but in which these relationships are revealed to be unsustainable. She visits the son she has not seen for three years but is unable to establish a connection to him, not least because she is unwilling to acknowledge that he has grown up and moved on since they last met. She encounters Joachim, the former lover who had once assured her that if she came to Berlin she could live with him, a promise clearly made at the point when this would have involved her moving to the East and one he is not prepared to keep under changed historical circumstances: "Ich kann meine Versprechen nicht mehr einlösen [...] Die Zeiten haben sich drastisch geändert" (Roehler 2002a: 72). What both these encounters demonstrate is that Hanna is seeking sanctuary in a past that no longer exists and is unable to establish new ways of relating to people more willing to adapt to a changing world than she is. Elsewhere she encounters people who appear to share her inability to change and with whom she is clearly locked in a damaging behavioural dynamic determined at some point in the past. She visits her parents to ask for financial, and by implication, emotional, help, an appeal that founders on her mother's hostility towards her. But equally important to the failure of this encounter is the fact that her parents continue to treat her as the child she once was and that she continues to respond in kind. This visit to her parents is followed by a chance meeting with her ex-husband, Bruno, who embraces as willingly as Hanna, the opportunity this encounter provides to hide from an unsatisfactory present by recreating the past, a realm he anyway seems largely to inhabit. He too couches his disillusionment with

contemporary reality in political terms, invoking the names of dead terrorists to give expression to his frustration that the present has no place for the political radicalism of his youth. But as with Hanna, his trauma manifests itself above all as a sense of self-alienation, existential loneliness and personal failure. The pair attempt to find solace in the recreation of past intimacy but the attempt is never more than half-hearted and ends with Bruno's rejection of Hanna for failing to help him find his way back to happier times. What these encounters demonstrate is that Hanna's unstable sense of self is related to her failure long before the *Wende* to establish personal relationships that can change, develop, and thus help sustain her over a period of time. Instead they remain rooted in an (already dysfunctional) past and have therefore little relevance for the present.

Moreover, her attempt to overcome self-alienation through encounters with others does in fact bring to light a further facet of her inability to deal adequately with the passing of time. This strategy exposes her to emotional and sexual intimacy which in turn forces her into an uncomfortable confrontation with another kind of change she is unwilling to acknowledge, the physical transformation that accompanies the ageing process. Hanna puts great emphasis on her appearance, using clothes, make-up and her extraordinary wig as a form of simultaneous self-assertion and defence. One of her responses to the fall of the Wall is to buy herself a Dior coat, signalling her desire to assert herself as a confident and attractive woman but also her need to hide from the reality of her experience. The wig and the make-up can also be understood as an attempt to conceal evidence of the passing of time from others and from herself. The men around Hanna generally respond to her in sexual terms: the Berlin gigolo, Dieter, the GDR teacher, her ex-husband Bruno. In most of these encounters, Hanna's age and its effect on her appearance are an issue in one way or another. With the gigolo, it is Hanna's fear which dominates the encounter, interpreted by him as apprehension that he will not find her attractive. Dieter, in truly sexist terms, uses Hanna's age as a weapon to attack her when she rejects his advances. With Bruno, the issue is more complex. In what might initially seem to be a positive moment of recognition beyond the superficial, he claims that her ageing exterior does not disguise the fact that she is still the girl she once was. She, however, claims that this in fact constitutes a misrecognition that takes into account only surfaces: "du verwechselst wahrscheinlich meine schwarzen Augenringe mit mir" (Roehler 2002a: 116). If this is the case, then it is a

misrecognition that Hanna fosters. She admits to doing her make-up the same way for the last thirty years, hiding her changing self from the world, and forcing those around to remain static rather than dynamic in their relationships with her.

Throughout the film we see Hanna trying to cope with her addiction to various substances: cigarettes, alcohol and prescription medication. She eventually collapses as a result of a barbiturate overdose and at the clinic to which she is taken receives the news that she has a so-called *Raucherbein* and will need to stop smoking immediately if there is to be any chance of saving her leg. Her experience of the withdrawal process to which she briefly submits indicates the function of addictive substances in her life. They allow her to deaden painful awareness of feelings and memories which without cigarettes disturbingly return: "In mir drin bewegt sich alles so leicht und unheimlich, die ganzen Erinnerungen ... meine Gefühle kehren zurück" (Roehler 2002a: 147), she complains. As a means of inhibiting consciousness of the world around her, these substances have also been instrumental in keeping at bay a sense of the passing of time, something of which she now becomes only too painfully aware and which threatens to overwhelm her. Thus we see her, a vulnerable figure in a hospital gown, alone in a high-ceilinged room, gazing nervously at its only ornament, an oversized clock, which she eventually manages to prise off the wall and throw to the ground – "Es tickt so laut" (Roehler 2002a: 142) – only to have it replaced by a nurse who scolds her like a child and attempts to pack her off to bed. What this scene underlines is that the fall of the Wall is clearly not the cause of Hanna's crisis but rather the catalyst for a process of recognition that having largely failed at establishing meaningful relationships and having relied instead on an ideological foundation for an identity which has become too inflexible to be ultimately sustainable, she is unable to cope with life in a world in which fundamental change is possible, in which time must inevitably pass and in which her youth and youthful idealism will be ever further removed from the reality of her existence.

*Die Unberührbare* presents Hanna's suicide as the logical consequence of the failure to create a viable sense of self in the present and would thus appear to be ultimately critical of her rootedness in the past and her abortive attempt – quite literally in the hospital scene – to hold back time. However, the film itself can also be said to look backwards in more ways than one and to participate in more than one kind of nostalgia. Its depiction of personal

relationships acts as a critique of West German capitalism and the isolation, hypocrisy and exploitation it promotes. Hanna herself is a victim of that system in economic terms. She has a product unwanted in the West German market place and this leaves her struggling to finance her existence. But she also suffers emotionally as a member of a consumer society which exploits the desire it helps to promote for youth and beauty, which presents anything as possible if enough money is available, but in which human relationships have clearly atrophied. It is no coincidence that the only moment of real tenderness Hanna experiences in the West comes from the gigolo whom she pays for it. The film highlights the lack of compassion offered up as a central characteristic of Western society by contrasting the scene in which Hanna, in the process of buying her Dior coat, is fawned over by sycophantic shop assistants anxious for a sale with the one in which her attempt to return the coat is met with icy disdain despite her obvious financial and emotional distress.

Conversely there is a glorification of what is presented as a specifically East German sense of honesty, warmth and community. The film might reject the notion of the East as the (politically) better Germany, but it still seems to want to suggest that it is ordinary Easterners who are the (morally) better Germans. The counterparts to the mostly men who reject Hanna in the West are the women who are prepared to help her in the East. One offers her emotional support at the point at which she has been rejected by Joachim and takes her to stay at the publishers' *Autorenwohnung*. The other rescues a Hanna traumatized by a sleepless night in this distinctly grim apartment, greeting her with the words: "Sie sehen schrecklich aus. Aber das macht nichts" (Roehler 2002a: 93), an indication that she adheres to a value scheme in which surface appearance is less important than the evidence of human need. The warmth of the welcome she is offered by the woman's family – clearly set up to contrast with the coolness of the reception given her by her own mother – provides her with the confidence to join them without her make-up and wig, reinforcing the notion that the social dynamics in the East might not require of Hanna the kind of defensive survival strategies demanded by an existence in the capitalist West. Hanna and the GDR family do, however, have very different attitudes to the fall of the Wall. There would appear to be a deliberate echo of her claim that the East Germans have failed to fight for Lenin's truth in the expression family members give to their sense of euphoria:

ALFONS: Kannst du dir vorstellen, wie das ist? Ich dachte immer, man verlernt die Sehnsucht nach der Wahrheit. Aber sie wird immer stärker.

CARMEN: Bis es eines Tages explodiert. Wir sind der Beweis dafür.

IRENE: Deshalb sind wir seit Tagen so glücklich. Das ist wie ein Rausch.

(Roehler 2002a: 99f.)

It is precisely because they are desperate to embrace an alternative truth – one to which she is unable to adapt herself – that they cannot provide Hanna with a more permanent refuge from crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Given that the film's portrayal of a capitalist reality is essentially negative and given that it was made a decade after the *Wende* for an audience well aware that Easterners' initial enthusiasm for the promises of the West had waned, it is hard not to read the euphoria of the East German family as deeply naïve. One might want to argue that their ideological naivety is merely the counterpart of Hanna's, who like them has embraced wholeheartedly a political system of which she has no concrete experience, and that it can serve to support a reading of the film as essentially critical of the ideological obsessions of its central figure. However, given that in its critique of capitalism the film presents an East German value system as superior to that embraced by its West Germans, I would want to argue that it does not ultimately reject but actually opens up the potential for a more positive reading of Hanna's ideological position, offering up at least the possibility that her mistake was not to reject the West but to go to the East only once the values it fostered were on the point of being abandoned.

The film's tendency to align itself ideologically, at least to a degree, with its central figure would seem to be further reinforced by its aesthetic and by Roehler's acknowledgement of its filmic antecedents. In his review of *Die Unberührbare*, Hubert Spiegel notes that:

Nichts an diesem Film ist zeitgemäß: nicht sein Gegenstand, die Reise einer gescheiterten, tabletten- und nikotinabhängigen Schriftstellerin in den Tod; nicht seine Ästhetik, die Erinnerungen an die große Zeit des deutschen Autorenfilms heraufbeschwört, ohne darüber epigonal zu werden; nicht die Schwarzweißbilder mit ihren ruhigen, ganz den Schauspielern zugewandten Einstellungen; und auch nicht die Art und Weise, wie dieser Film sich seiner Hauptfigur zuwendet nicht allein vertrauens-, sondern hingebungsvoll. (Spiegel 2000: 179f.)

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<sup>3</sup> The fact that it flags up the naivety of East German expectations of a post-communist future indicates that the film does not share the positive view of the eastern experience of post-Wende reality that Naughton claims is common to most western German productions dealing with the subject of 1989 and its aftermath.

It is not only the film's focus on a West German response to the *Wende* that makes it an exception within contemporary German cinema but also the fact that it looks back to an earlier art house tradition of often intensely serious, socially critical filmmaking – not least to the New German Cinema – rather than forward to the more commercially oriented and often playfully postmodern aesthetic of much recent German cinema, including Roehler's own first films.<sup>4</sup> In a critical review of developments in German cinema in the ten years that preceded the release of *Die Unberührbare*, Eric Rentschler identifies the defining traits of the decade's principal trend which he terms 'the post-wall cinema of consensus', a cinema "dominated by a formula-bound profusion of romantic comedies, crude farces, road movies, action films and literary adaptations" (Rentschler 2000: 262), driven by directors who "want cinema to be a site of mass diversion, not a moral institution or a political forum" (Rentschler 2000: 264). Significantly, Rentschler characterizes the protagonists of this cinema – in explicit contradistinction to the troubled heroes of the New German Cinema – as oriented exclusively on a present and a future which are endlessly open to new definition not least because they are no longer experienced as uniquely defined by German history in the same disquieting sense in which they were for their NGC predecessors:

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. Instead of German tales of martyrdom and suffering, the New Cinema of Consensus offers tableaux of mobile young professionals, who play with possibility and flirt with difference, living in the present and worrying about their future, juggling careers, relationships and lifestyles. (Rentschler 2000: 272)

Clearly, Hanna's inability to leave behind a blighted, ideologically determined past in which her sense of self has become inextricably tied up with German division and move productively forward into a differently constructed future aligns her more closely with the protagonists of the New German Cinema than with those of Rentschler's contemporary 'cinema of consensus'. Equally, many other aspects of Roehler's film locate it both aesthetically and thematically within the territory of the New German Cinema: its carefully

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<sup>4</sup> Oskar Roehler's first cinema films were *Silvester Countdown* (1997) and *Gierig* (1998/1999). Cooke has noted that an ambiguous relationship to contemporary cinematic trends can already be identified in the first of these which, while it apes 'the fast-paced pop aesthetics of *Lola rennt*', does so in order to point out 'the self-obsessed vacuity of the world it presents' (Cooke 2004: 34).

constructed black and white images, its striking evocations of mood, its disruption of the flow of its narrative in order to probe often painful emotion, its focus on the generally fraught nature of the relationship between individual needs and the strictures of social context, its interest in the psychological consequences of social and political change, and not least its moral seriousness.

In his article on the film, Paul Cooke has identified echoes of a number of works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder in *Die Unberührbare*, including *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (1982) and Fassbinder's contribution to *Deutschland im Herbst* (1978), identifying the way in which these filmic antecedents are incorporated into an exploration of generational change and conflict:

In *Die Unberührbare*, Roehler uses the tradition of Fassbinder, constructing a 68er version of his Veronika Voss, through which he attempts to revisit and negotiate the generational tensions explored in the work of the New German Cinema, as well as the relationship of this generation to the New Germany. (Cooke 2004: 43)

However, Roehler himself mentions three films that influenced the making of this one: Fassbinder's *In einem Jahr mit dreizehn Monden* (1978), Louis Malle's *Le Feu Follet* (1963) and Ingmar Bergmann's *The Silence* (1963), going so far as to claim that the 'Atmosphäre und Formwillen' (Roehler 2002b: 22) of these films are more important for this work than any personal experience that might underlie it: "*Die Unberührbare* ist [...] für mich in erster Linie eine Hommage an diese Filme [...] – und erst in zweiter Linie ein Film über meine Mutter" (Roehler 2002b: 21f.). This suggests that Roehler himself is at pains to locate his film within a broader European cinematic tradition rather than just a narrow German one and in so doing to flag up the trans-national relevance of its themes. He insists on the significance for *Die Unberührbare* of three works which have in common a mood of almost unremitting despair and a willingness to probe the darkest sides of human existence: loneliness, unhappy love, rejection, loss of faith, alienation, and a lack of hope which for the central figures in all three films proves to be terminal. Stylistically, and particularly in the way in which the emotional disintegration of the protagonists is traced through the close-up focus on faces and bodies, Roehler's film is closest to Bergmann's, but structurally it follows a pattern common to both *Le Feu Follet* and *In einem Jahr mit dreizehn Monden*. Both of these films trace their protagonist's last days as they revisit their

pasts without finding anything in them, and particularly no human connection, which would provide a justification for a continued existence in the present. It is, though, in the characterization of *Le Feu Follet*'s Alain and Hanna that the greatest similarities are to be found. It is not simply the case that both use alcohol to dull the pain of their failed existences. Both are angry with a world which has transformed itself in a way that undermines the validity of values central to their self-definitions. While in no way ideologically aligned with Hanna, Alain shares her refusal to accept the compromises that come with time and are made by those who are prepared to abandon youthful ideals for the sake of conformity and comfort in a bourgeois world. The stylistic and thematic commonalities between these films would seem to reinforce the view that for all the historical specificity of its story, *Die Unberührbare* is primarily concerned with existential issues that transcend the context of the immediate post-'Wende' period.

If Hanna Flanders's problem can be identified in the broadest of terms as a failure to determine her identity in a way which will allow her to adapt to changing circumstances, leaving her fatally out of step with contemporary reality, one might be tempted to argue further that, with the nostalgia it evidences for a world before the advent of a capitalist hegemony and the homage it pays to a tradition of socially critical film-making that grew out of that context, *Die Unberührbare* itself is just as out of place in the post-*Wende* world as its protagonist: that is, that it paradoxically risks becoming what it exposes Hanna to be – an anachronism. That the viewer does not in fact experience it as such is testimony to the fact that it actually does precisely what its protagonist fails to do. Instead of simply remaining rooted in the past, the film revisits it in a way which becomes productive for an exploration of contemporary issues and it does so not least precisely because it works on a number of different levels. *Die Unberührbare* is a filmmaker son's highly personal meditation on the tragic life and death of his novelist mother. It is also one of the few sustained cinematic depictions of a West German response to the *Wende*, one which focuses on a representative '68er' in order to examine the ambivalent attitude of the protest generation to the end of the socialist experiment in East Germany. But it is moreover a subtle and provoking exploration of more universal themes: the longing for stability, the confrontation with the inevitability of time passing, the difficulties of adapting to the vagaries of the historical process and the consequences of the failure to transform oneself in

line with them. It is not least a consequence of the fact that it works at this broader level of significance that the film does not simply affirm its protagonist's rootedness in the past by doubling it through its location of itself stylistically and thematically within a tradition of European art house cinema. Rather it uses the aesthetics of that tradition to explore the politics of identity in contemporary Germany and in the process reveals their significance beyond the historically specific context of the film's action as issues that transcend national borders and the historical moment. Rentschler describes as one of the strengths of the New German Cinema that its films 'interrogated images of the past in the hope of refining memories and catalysing changes' (Rentschler 2000: 263f.). Ten years after the *Wende*, Roehler's film demonstrates that it is possible to confront German history and its legacy in the present within the broader context of wider questions about time, transformation and the self and in so doing to probe old questions in new ways. In this sense, *Die Unberührbare* continues the critical questioning of the New German Cinema, one of the traditions to which it pays such productive homage.

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**Biodata**

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