Introduction:

German Film since the *Wende* (2)

Joanne Leal, London

The seven contributions to this volume have been developed from papers given at the conference "German Film since the *Wende*" held at the London School of Economics in April 2005 and organized by the Association for Modern German Studies with support from the Goethe-Institut London. An initial selection of papers emerging from the conference appeared as volume 1/2006 of this journal. That collection has as its focus films which reflect directly on the changing nature of German society since the *Wende*. It includes readings of popular successes like Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999) and Wolfgang Becker's *Good bye, Lenin!* (2003), but also probes films whose more challenging aesthetics and/or subject matter, while they might have limited their popular appeal, make them fascinating objects of analysis, like Oskar Roehler's *Die Unberührbare* (2000) or Michael Klier's *Ostkreuz* (1991).

The contributions to this volume are in general less concerned with direct cinematic explorations of the consequences of German reunification, investigating instead a number of other filmic trends that have emerged since 1989. In 2002 Eric Rentschler stated that:

> To speak of cinema in Germany at this moment means to recognize […] the ways in which it figures within much larger and more powerful transnational and global constellations. Likewise, it is to realize […] that the Germany we see on the screen has become as diverse and multicultural as the Federal Republic from which it issues. (2002: 4)

It is both the diversity of recent German cinema and also its increasingly transnational nature that these papers investigate. They explore films which probe critically post-*Wende* Germany's (and Europe's) multicultural identity and they investigate a cinema which engages with aspects of the nation's troubled past. But they also examine films which move away from any kind of direct socially critical engagement with contemporary reality and which might therefore be understood as representing a break with the critical traditions of the New German Cinema and a contribution to the so-called "normalization" of German culture in the post-*Wende* period.

The volume begins with two papers on the work of one of the most fêted of recent German filmmakers, Tom Tykwer, a director who, unlike those mentioned above, seems consistently loath to engage directly with the socio-political reality of a reunified Germany. David Clarke explores Tykwer's oeuvre with a view to determining in what ways his cinema can be understood as an *Autorenkino*. Examining the persistent significance of the themes of repetition and chance across his films, he demonstrates how Tykwer, with recourse to signature stylistic elements, creates in his cinema an artificial realm in which his heroines', and less frequently heroes', commitment to love is consistently rewarded by the transformation of their environment to meet their needs. What is missing in his films, it is argued here, is the kind of political commitment that characterized the work of his *auterist* predecessors, the filmmakers of the New German Cinema. Clarke maintains that by contrast the recognizably personal style of Tykwer's cinema serves no socially critical purpose but has become an end in itself, pointing towards a new commodification of the *auteur* in post-*Wende* cinema.

In a contribution that complements Clarke's, Dora Osborne offers a close analysis of *Winterschläfer* (1998), one of Tykwer's lesser known films, exploring the extent to which it demonstrates an unwillingness to engage with historical realities. With reference to the concepts of abjection and dormancy found in Julia Kristeva's writings and Freud's notion of dream-work, the paper reads the film in psychoanalytic terms as depicting a post-traumatic retreat to a prenatal state. With detailed reference to visual and acoustic features, it organizes its analysis around the exploration of the film's representation of sleep, the significance it attaches to boundaries of various sorts, the function of missed encounters and the way it shows trauma inscribed on the body. The essay concludes that for all its turning away from history the film is in fact not completely devoid of contemporary political resonances. Acting as a precursor to *Lola rennt* (1998) and sharing its ambivalent reaction to historical change, it can be understood as a displaced response to the traumatic experience of change represented by the *Wende*.

Tykwer's *Lola rennt* is one of the films cited by Randall Halle in a recent article on "ensembles of transnational cinema" as representative of what he identifies as a fundamental shift in the nature of German cinema since the beginning of the 1990s:

> In Germany the last decade has seen a dramatic transition from a state-subsidized model of film production that was free of anxiety about profit and commercial appeal to a mode dominated by private interest and big capital. This transition has been one of both film economy (a move to profit) and film style (a move to narrative entertainment). It has also produced films that circulate beyond a national film market. (2002: 11)

In his contribution to this volume Halle explores this marked change in relation to developments in German horror film production and the two contributions which follow his also examine related questions regarding the post-national and/or the transnational direction taken by recent German cinema. They do so, however, with reference to films whose relationship to a notion of "narrative entertainment" is complex and whose commercial appeal has been limited: (mainstream) documentary cinema and the work of female German-Turkish directors.

Randall Halle's contribution examines what might be described as the renaissance of the horror film after unification, identifying two separate phases of horror film production. An initial phase of nationally-specific, sub-cultural *Wende* horror produces films in which the anxieties associated with unification find expression. 1993 sees the emergence of more mainstream Transnational Horror which is understood as in part the product of the economic restructuring of the film industry. He reads Christoph Schlingensief's *Das deutsche Kettensägenmassaker* (1990) with its appeal to national experience and Stefan Ruzowitzky's more globally-oriented *Anatomie* (2000) as representative of the respective periods before offering a number of reflections on the significance of German horror in a global context which also serve as stimuli for the further study of horror film production.

Erica Carter focuses on Stanislaw Mucha's documentary film *Die Mitte* (2004), reading it as representative of a number of recent trends in German film: not only a new concern with the possibilities of the documentary as a mainstream form but also a growing interest in questions of European identity in the light of the opening up of the former Eastern bloc countries. She probes the film's investigation of the nature of cultural identity in contemporary Europe and examines what it has to say about the possibilities of east-west relations. In the final section she identifies those aspects of a film made by a Polish director with a transnational crew and shot across several European countries which allow it to be understood as characteristic of a new post-national German film landscape.

Giovannella Rendi explores the concept of transnational cinema as it applies to German-Turkish film since the *Wende*. The first part of the essay offers an historical overview of the treatment of the theme of the migrant in the 1980s and early 1990s, first in films by German directors and then by filmmakers of Turkish origin. If the former tended to present foreign workers as victims, the latter continued the trend but substituted women for men as the mistreated subjects of their films. The second half of the 1990s saw a new generation of German-Turkish directors like Fatih Akin, Thomas Arslan and Yüksel Yavuz producing what is identified here as a transnational cinema which gives expression to the agency of male migrant figures but continues to depict passive female subjects. In its second half the paper draws out the distinctive features of the recent work of female German-Turkish directors Seyhan Derin and Ayşe Polat focusing particularly on the theme of the journey as it emerges in their films, their reworking of popular genres and their referencing of the enclosed spaces in which migrant experiences were played out in many of the earlier films. It concludes that their work offers evidence of a female voice in Turkish cinema which is distinct from that of their male colleagues.

The volume's next contribution draws attention to a different trend in post-*Wende* filmmaking: a new manifestation of "the return of history as film" (Kaes 1989), the presence of "more and more features from reunified Germany turning to real stories of the past centred on individual experiences" (Davidson 2006: 46). Brady and Hughes investigate one of the most controversial examples of recent cinema's historical turn, exploring the significance of Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (2004) in relation to previous representations of Hitler. Focussing initially on the critical reception of the film in both Germany and Britain and the debates about the representation of Hitler it provoked, they go on to examine images of Hitler in Brecht's *Arturo Ui* (1941), post-war *Trümmerfilme*, GDR cinema and films by Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Christoph Schlingensief, amongst other examples, considering the question of what might be understood as legitimate representation. They demonstrate how *Der Untergang* embodies a shift away from a tradition of representation in which the figure of Hitler in depicted via processes of Brechtian *Verfremdung* to a willingness to confront his image within a medium of mass entertainment.

Brady and Hughes include in their paper a section on "Teaching *Der Untergang*", calling attention both to a strand of the original conference and to one of the aims of the Association for Modern German Studies: the exploration of intersections between research and teaching practice. This is precisely the concern of the volume's final contribution with its focus on strategies for teaching the films of Andreas Dresen. Laura McGee begins by identifying Dresen as one of the last of the "lost" generation of film directors in the GDR, locating his work within the context of his experience of the last years of the socialist state with reference to two essays written before the fall of the Wall in 1989 while Dresen was attending the Academy for Film and Television "Konrad Wolf" in Babelsberg. The paper goes on to identify a number of strategies for teaching two of Dresen's features: *Raus aus der Haut* (1997) and *Nachtgestalten* (1998), drawing attention to those aspects of each film which might be of particular interest to both secondary school level and undergraduate students. It demonstrates that the films are particularly successful in giving expression to the (moral) dilemmas of everyday life and in making manifest the interconnectedness of individual existences in post-*Wende* Germany.

Sabine Hake ends her study *German National Cinema* with the following prognosis for film in Germany:

> The validity and vibrancy of this important cinematic tradition depends upon workable compromise between art cinema and popular cinema: between generic tradition and formal innovation; between political intentions and social fantasies; between private investment and public funding; and between real appreciation for the local and the regional and a critical examination of the national as a new/old category of cultural identity within an increasingly streamlined global media landscape. (2002: 192)

As this overview indicates, the contributions to this volume offer an insight into the varying degrees of success with which contemporary German film is negotiating precisely these tensions, drawing out in the process some of the defining features of this most recent and undeniably vibrant manifestation of a (trans)national German cinema.

References

Davidson, John E. (2006) Shades of grey: coming to terms with German film. In: David Clarke (ed.) *German Cinema since Unification*. London-New York: Continuum, 43-77.

Hake, Sabine (2002) *German National Cinema* London-New York: Routledge

Halle, Randall (2002) German film, *aufgehoben*: ensembles of transnational cinema. *New German Critique* 87, 7-46.

Rentschler, Erich (2002) Postwall prospects: an introduction. *New German Critique* 87, 3-5.

Biodata

Joanne Leal is a lecturer at Birkbeck College, London. She wrote her PhD thesis on 'Neue Subjektivität' in 1970s German fiction and has written on Karin Struck, Verena Stefan and Botho Strauß. She is currently working on a jointly authored study of the collaborative projects of Wim Wenders and Peter Handke.