

Introduction: New Prospects—After the Berlin School?

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Within *New German Critique*'s long-standing commitment to analyzing German-language thought, literature, politics, and culture, film has played an integral role.¹ At crucial points in its history, the journal has taken stock of contemporary German cinema, first doing so in a special issue devoted to New German Cinema (Fall–Winter 1981–82). That issue probed the impact of this internationally acclaimed new wave at the zenith of its success. At a time of widespread enthusiasm for this countercinema, the editors expressed concerns about the ways in which many American critical treatments of recent West German cinema had “misread, ignored or distorted its place within the long range history and present context of the German Federal Republic.” By and large, these analyses, however well intentioned, focused on textual idiosyncrasies and gave short shrift to contextual determinants; for that reason they failed “to connect the aesthetics of contemporary filmmaking to the political and

1. In addition to numerous articles on an array of films, filmmakers, and film theorists, the journal has run special issues on *Heimat* (Fall 1985), Weimar film theory (Winter 1987), Alexander Kluge (Winter 1990), Siegfried Kracauer (Fall 1991), German film history (Fall 1993), Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Fall 1994), Nazi cinema (Spring–Summer 1998), Weimar visual culture (Winter 1999), East German film (Winter 2001), postwall cinema (Fall 2002), Nazis, culture, and cinema (Fall 2007), from Weimar cinema to postmillennial urban culture (Fall 2013), Cinema, experience, and the public sphere (Summer 2014), and new films concerning German memory and the Holocaust (Fall 2014).

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social traditions emerging from the Weimar and fascist periods” and to the production of culture within the West German public sphere.²

After the demise of New German Cinema, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and German unification, *New German Critique* again took stock of film culture in the Federal Republic of Germany in a special issue on postwall cinema (Fall 2002). At that time German films had become rare guests at the most prominent film festivals and had “all but disappeared from American arthouses and distribution circuits.” We regretted at the start of the new millennium that we had “lost touch with contemporary German cinema.”³ Yet that issue’s introduction expressed reason for hope: “Entries at German film festivals over the last three years suggest that a decisive transition is at hand as an array of different voices as well as younger directors increasingly comes into view and assumes firmer contours.”⁴ To be sure, many of the films that received attention in this second round of taking stock returned to the Nazi past in the form of latter-day retro films that became known, not unproblematically, as German heritage cinema. Other films, though, offered encouraging signs of life, signaling things to come in their illuminations of obscured spaces and marginal perspectives, in their shared resolve “to expand our regard both for what is real and what might be possible.”⁵

Since then the so-called Berlin School has delivered on this resolve, consistently and compellingly. Rather than simply show reality as it is and in this way confirm the status quo, argues Marco Abel, Berlin School films “abstract from our preexisting cliché perceptions of reality in order to induce a different experience of it by making reality itself appear more intensely *sensible*.”⁶ In making reality look strange, they allow viewers to see the world with fresh eyes and in novel ways. Films made by German directors once again enjoy international attention and regularly find their way into the most prestigious festivals and onto the pages of the most prominent film journals. Many scholarly articles and books focus on the works of Christian Petzold, Christoph Hochhäusler, Angela Schanelec, and others, to such an extent that some colleagues have become concerned about the disproportionate attention devoted to the Berlin School.

Interest in the Berlin School has without question been a driving force in recent German and German-language film scholarship. Writing in 2016, Gerd

2. Bathrick, “Introduction,” 3.

3. Rentschler, “Postwall Prospects,” 3.

4. Rentschler, “Postwall Prospects,” 4.

5. Rentschler, “Postwall Prospects,” 5.

6. Abel, *Counter-cinema of the Berlin School*, 16.

Gemünden referred to the Berlin School as “the single most important German film studies topic to develop during the last decade,” before pointing to the problems that come of allowing any single tendency to serve as the privileged center of inquiry.⁷ Similarly, Lutz Koepnick appreciated the analytic acumen on display in publications on the Berlin School. Nonetheless, he voiced strong misgivings about the circumscribed manner in which such discussions have treated art cinema. In their narrow focus on German points of orientation, North American film scholars overlook “larger international developments and transnational redefinitions of art cinema.”⁸

Making choices about where to focus attention is a challenge, especially with respect to contemporary bodies of films for which one does not have ready points of reference. As the archive of the Berlin School has grown over the last decade, speaking about it has become less challenging, for we now have a nuanced sense of its emphases, inflections, and investments.⁹ As stated, however, it is a mistake to employ the Berlin School as the main standard of measure in any assessment of contemporary German cinema, all the more so given that its ostensible adherents question the very appellation and, in many instances, even contest their membership. There is no doubt that the Berlin School was at the center of something in the first years of the new millennium, not least of all in public debates. Take, for instance, Günter Rohrbach’s harsh attack on Berlin School filmmakers in 2007, which targeted the positive reception of Valeska Grisebach’s *Sehnsucht* (*Longing*, 2006). Rohrbach assailed film critics who had written enthusiastically about Grisebach’s conspicuously undernarrated and modestly attended film while attacking Tom Tykwer’s well-crafted and financially lucrative production *Das Parfum* (*Perfume*, 2006). Such critics, in Rohrbach’s assessment, steadfastly remain in their own circles, forging

7. Gemünden, “Film and Media Studies,” 547.

8. Koepnick, “German Art Cinema Now,” 656. Abel and Fisher’s edited collection *The Berlin School and Its Global Contexts* was conceived as a direct response to expressions of concern along these lines from Koepnick as well as from Sabine Hake (see esp. 8–13).

9. Olivia Landry’s recent book is a noteworthy addition to the large and ever-growing body of scholarship on this movement. Her study, although undeniably appreciative of previous contributions, seeks “to broaden the scope of the study of the Berlin School and its achievements” by probing its “films as subjects of a new kind of cinema” that participates in a performative turn (*Movement and Performance*, 5). Other significant new publications include Giovanni Marchini Camia and Annabel Brady-Brown’s special issue of *Fireflies* on Schanelec; Hester Baer and Angelica Fenner’s special issue of *Camera Obscura* on “women’s film authorship in neoliberal times” (which includes articles on Schanelec and Maren Ade); Ilke Brombach and Tina Kaiser’s rich collection *Über Christian Petzold*; and Gozde Nalboglu’s *Post-unification Turkish German Cinema*, which has thoughtful chapters on the films of Thomas Arslan and Aysun Bademsoy.

alliances with difficult filmmakers while neglecting their professional responsibilities to the larger body of German filmgoers.¹⁰

In effect, Rohrbach sought to drive a wedge between art house culture and the general public. Such an act of separation, we believe, is problematic. National cinemas—even if such entities circulate today mainly as imaginary discourses—function within media ecologies. They should not be univocal but polyphonic, and the less they favor tried-and-true formulas and foregone conclusions, the more they resemble something like art. As cinema history has repeatedly demonstrated, good and bad popular films can and do coexist with good and bad art house ones. It is hard to imagine that a national cinema could be healthy if it does not have room for both. Rohrbach's divisive rhetoric was spawned by a sense that German film culture as a whole had been injured, but his intervention had an injurious impact on those filmmakers who were told by the president of their national film academy that they were making the wrong kinds of films.¹¹ Despite such hostile sentiments, Grisebach stayed her course. Almost two years after the release of her successful film *Western* (2017), Gemünden asked Grisebach what the term *Berlin School* meant to her today. Early on, she replied, when young directors were meeting in person and “everyone was making their first or second film,” this was exciting and the label was “very helpful in a practical sense.” Yet Berlin School films had a different resonance in the United States and the English-speaking world (“where interesting texts have been published and where the term was taken seriously”) than in Germany, where the Berlin School “was quickly put into a cubbyhole: Is it good? Is it bad? First it was hyped, and then it became a derogatory term.”¹²

To say that the Berlin School *was* at the center of something, however, is misleading, since its filmmakers are still very much at the center of things.¹³ Grisebach's *Western*, like Petzold's *Transit* (2018), is among the most interesting recent German exports and will likely be joined soon by *Ich war zuhause, aber* (*I Was at Home, But*, 2019), which won Schanelec the director's prize at

10. “Must we abandon all reasonable critical standards?” asked the angry producer. “If, as one read recently, Christoph Hochhäusler's *Milchwald* (*This Very Moment*) is a masterpiece, what then is *Citizen Kane*?” (Rohrbach, “Das Schmollen der Autisten,” 157).

11. Together with Senta Berger, Rohrbach served as the first president of the German Film Academy from 2003 to 2010.

12. Gemünden, “‘It's Good to Lose Control.’”

13. In his reviews of German films at the Berlinale in 2018 and 2019, Abel lavishes praise on films by Petzold, Schanelec, and Grisebach but otherwise regrets “the overall lack of quality in German cinema” and has good things to say about only a handful of other offerings (“Clouds over Berlin”; “‘Il Faut Souffrir’”).

the 2019 Berlinale. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's historical melodrama *Werk ohne Autor* (*Never Look Away*, 2018), a three-hour feature about an artist who closely resembles Gerhard Richter, is undoubtedly more widely known than any of these other titles, as it was nominated for an Oscar as Best Foreign Film. To be sure, critics both in Germany and abroad have faulted it for its stylistic conservatism and narrative clunkiness, its failure to deliver on its lofty ambitions, and its attempt "to use the tools of kitsch to illuminate the mysteries of art."¹⁴ Fortunately, there remain many kinds of venues in which films can be screened and discussed. In this special issue we have chosen two successful contemporary Berlin School films as points of departure before moving on to other recent German-language features and documentaries that we consider equally worthy of critical attention.

Grisebach's powerful *Western*, paired with Thomas Bidegain's *Les Cowboys* (2015), is the subject of this issue's lead article, by Codruța Morari. The film sustains an enthralling dialogue with the conventions of American westerns. Although Grisebach is familiar with the genre, she has created something that is less a western than an "eastern," one of several revisions in this vein that enlist the genre to scrutinize modern-day conflicts and reflect on what meanings community and nationhood hold for people living in Europe today. "Tales of the West," concludes Morari, "have been uprooted and redeployed, and in the process reconfigured and updated, assuming new shapes that probe the complex forces and intricate workings of a global world." Equally compelling is Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann* (2016), about which Jörn Glasenapp writes. Set in Bucharest, Ade's film can also be read as an eastern. Critical discussion, though, has lingered on the flow of international capital as the film's key theme. Such a single-minded political emphasis, however valid, is short-sighted, claims Glasenapp, because it fails to acknowledge the film's emotional ambivalence, arguably the defining attribute of Ade's authorial identity. It renders her main characters' emotions consistently one thing *as well as* another, leaving the spectator to confront the messy incongruities that lesser filmmakers tend to avoid.

Two other contributions to this issue explore approaches that, in different ways, diverge from those of Berlin School filmmakers. Volker Pantenburg discusses films by Julian Radlmaier and Max Linz, who are also products of the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (dffb). Their self-reflexive stylization as well as their anarchic humor might well be understood as a break with their renowned Berlin School predecessors. The scenic miniatures of

14. Scott, "'Never Look Away' Review."

Radlmaier's and Linz's films are politically minded in the manner of early Jean-Luc Godard features like *Les carabiniers* (1963) and *La Chinoise* (1967); they also take recourse, resolutely, to the activism and agitprop of the dffb's first generation. They draw on various strains of political modernism and on a list of predecessors that includes René Pollesch, Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (whose *Acht Stunden sind kein Tag* [*Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, 1973] made a strong impression on both), and Harun Farocki, demonstrating a lively conversance with the history of film and philosophy as well as a wide range of contemporary theory.

Similarly, Anne Röhrborn's examination of Stephan Geene's *Umsonst* (2014) views Geene's contemporary portrait of life in Kreuzberg as a self-conscious metareflection. Unlike most Berlin School works, Geene tries to make Berlin more real by establishing artifices and peeling them away, one after another. The director's use of improvisation, authentic locations, and non-professional actors also brings to mind the proclivities of contemporary so-called German Mumblecore (also known as "Berlin Flow") and stands in stark contrast to the rigorous formalism of Berlin School features.¹⁵ *Umsonst*'s narrative rambling and spontaneous dialogue reflect at once budgetary limitations and a desire to work outside the formal parameters of the TV-dependent and script-bound subsidy system.

The aforementioned dichotomy between popular and art house cinema has made for substantial misapprehensions. A glaring example is the way in which conventional film history has foregrounded works of the Young German Film—the West German features that premiered at Cannes and Venice and received wide praise during the mid- to late 1960s—and has forgotten (i.e., virtually written off) the estimable contemporaneous endeavors of Rudolf Thome, Klaus Lemke, and Roland Klick, each of whom is discussed in Dominik Graf and Johannes F. Sievert's *Offene Wunde deutscher Film* (*Open Wounds: A Journey through German Genre Films*, 2017) and granted a second life. The dynamics that generated a need for Graf and Sievert's alternative history was unfortunate and fateful, a point made in Eric Rentschler's contribution, which elaborates the deficits and lacunae in standard notions of postwar German film history. Graf and Sievert's endeavor to retrieve missing pieces of the past provides an opportunity to look back and take stock—and to think again. Along similar lines, Laura Frahm's contribution focuses on Graf's non-

15. German Mumblecore, all but unknown in the United States and virtually nonpresent in German film studies, has developed over the last decade into the site of a substantial body of films and a thriving subculture. For a useful introductory survey, see Zywiets, "German Mumblecore."

fiction work, emphasizing the cinematic architecture of his essay films. These films, although inspired by Chris Marker's *La jetée* (1962) and *Sans soleil* (1983), among others, "traverse the very boundaries of the essay film" and put forth "a chorus of forgotten voices" and "alternative histories." They function as "counterprojects" to Graf's fictional film practice and are best understood as media-archaeological excursions.

In previous examinations of contemporary German cinema—ones tangentially related to the Berlin School—nonfiction filmmaking has been sorely neglected. Apart from the contributions in this special issue that discuss essay films by Graf, three of this issue's contributions look at major German and Austrian documentarians. Olivia Landry's study of Philip Scheffner's *Half-moon Files* (2007) brings to our attention the capacity of nonfiction to revise history by returning to an archive and juxtaposing the images and sounds that one finds there. The film centers on the search for traces of a colonial soldier who left behind only an "acoustic fingerprint," the starting point for Scheffner's hypermedial inquiry. The concerns guiding this 2007 work anticipate his more recent film *Havarie* (2016), which, with an intense timeliness and an acute attention to media, scrutinizes footage of migrants facing peril as they struggle to make their way to Europe.

Fatima Naqvi's essay explores the distinctive point of view associated with the Austrian director Nikolaus Geyrhalter. In his documentary work Naqvi locates a highly stylized employment of one-point perspective that echoes Renaissance painting. According to Naqvi, Geyrhalter's "vectorial" cinema suggests to us, through its specific visual and audio cues, what the world will look like after humans have vanished. Paying similar attention to a director's artistic inspirations, Brad Prager's analysis of Ulrich Seidl's films, particularly *Safari* (2016), is based on that Austrian director's avowed fascination with still photography and painting. As a portraitist, Seidl shapes the images, even his nonfictional ones, determining and sometimes overdetermining how his subjects express themselves. In both cases, these documentarians painstakingly plot shot compositions and long takes, which connects their undeniably fascinating practices to those of several major directors of the moment.

The present special issue makes no claim to be comprehensive or exhaustive. It provides, as the title suggests, a consideration of various new prospects that we deem promising. Many ambitious films made today in Austria and Germany have little in common with the Berlin School. In seeking to go beyond the Berlin School, we want neither to leave it behind nor to declare that school is out. But we would do well also to direct our attention to other sites of creative

endeavor and not assume that the Berlin School is the sole sector of German cinema worthy of critical reconnaissance. We hope to broaden the field of inquiry, suggest new coordinates, and, with luck, pique curiosity that might lead to further explorations and discoveries.

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