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Gentrification by genre? The Berlin rom-com

Kim Wilkins

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant uptick in the number of people relocating to Berlin. This influx is most often viewed as a response to rebranding the reunified German capital as a creative city – a tactic that foregrounded Berlin’s longstanding reputation for cheap rent, liberal attitudes, artistic culture, and vibrant nightlife. The housing market responded as vacancies plummeted while rent prices skyrocketed. Alongside the widely lamented changing face of the reunified capital, the spike in rent prices is one tangible outcome of Berlin’s rapid gentrification. This essay examines the aesthetics of gentrifying Berlin through an examination of a genre commonly associated with the imperatives of gentrification: the romantic comedy. Unlike other cinema traditions associated with urban space, the romcom is commonly understood as a genre that frames the city as a site of aspirational affluence and consumerism. This framing has, to date, overwhelmingly referred to romcoms produced in the American context. Through analyses of three romcoms set in Berlin – Germany’s highest grossing romcom to date *Keinohrhasen* (‘Rabbit Without Ears’, Schweiger, 2007); the 2019 installment in Emmanuel Benbihy’s ‘City of Love’ anthology film series, *Berlin, I Love You*; and Doris Dörrie’s *Glück* (‘Bliss’, 2012) this essay interrogates whether romcoms set in Berlin can be, as has been claimed of their US counterparts, understood as a genre of gentrification.

Keywords: genre, gentrification, German cinema, romantic comedy

Imagine this film sequence. It is early morning in the city. Bodies shuffle past one another on the street. Most are glued to their phones: some talk apace others walk with their heads down, staring at their screens. One young woman studies her phone with a particular intensity. A coffee rests in her

other hand. She is a fresh arrival in the city on her way to her first day at a new job. She is excited and nervous in almost equal measure. However, she fails to take stock of her path and suddenly collides with a similarly preoccupied man. Her phone takes flight and crashes down on the asphalt. The cup of coffee is flung forward, landing with full, scalding, force in the centre of the man's shirt. The man lets out a yelp of pain. He drops his phone. It hits the ground and the screen shatters. He is furious. The young woman, shaken, looks into his eyes. What happens next? I posit that, for many readers, this question will be met with a four-word answer: they fall in love.

I have often used this hypothetical sequence as an exercise in first-year film courses on genre. Students have always been quick to identify the sequence as belonging to the romantic comedy. The collision, they noted, reads as a conventional, perhaps even contrived, 'meet-cute' – a, if not the, staple plot device of the genre in which the lovers-to-be first encounter one another in an improbable, humorous, adversarial, or suggestive manner.[1] The nature of this meeting enabled the students to predict the film's plot and surmise that the collision was fated. Eyes often rolled as I was informed that these two people would, of course, 'belong together'. Such reactions are not uncommon. Indeed, the romcom has often been criticised for what is regarded as its overly formulaic plot structure, which Claire Mortimer summarises as:

...boy meets girl, various obstacles prevent them from being together, coincidences and complications ensue, ultimately leading to the couple's realisation that they were meant to be together. In keeping with the comedy genre, the narrative concludes with a happy ending, with the final union of the couple. The dominant theme is the 'battle of the sexes', which provides the central dynamic of the genre. The narrative often hinges around the central couple, who initially are antagonistic towards each other, but who come to recognise their inescapable compatibility in the face of great adversity and, often, mutual loathing.[2]

While film students may be expected to be able to identify genre cues, what was illuminating in this exercise was not the ease with which the romcom was recognised, but how the genre filtered their understanding of specific locations and the interactions that transpire within them. When I asked in which city students imagined the scene taking place the answer was almost unequivocally 'New York'. This response is predictable given the prevalence of New York as a setting for romantic comedies, particularly since Woody Allen's 'nervous' romcoms of the late 1970s.[3] More intriguingly, the man's visible anger was taken as entirely benign. Read in the context of the romcom, a

situation ordinarily conceived (at a minimum) as intimidating was not only read as 'safe' but romantic – a story to tell the grandkids.

In this essay I consider a specific context in which the romcom city is conceived as 'safe': gentrification. Associating the romcom with gentrification is not new. As Johan Andersson and Lawrence Webb write the romcom has become a '[popular form] in which to dramatize gentrification and neoliberal restructuring'.^[4] Martha Shearer proposes that, as a genre, the romcom exhibits 'longstanding preoccupations with transformation, wealth, and luxurious lifestyles [that] have coalesced into a predilection for both gentrified spaces and property development narratives'.^[5] These scholars specifically refer to romcoms produced in the American context, and more often than not set in gentrified, post-1970s New York.^[6] By contrast, my focus is Berlin, a city never once identified as a potential location for the hypothetical meet-cute, despite its rich film history (both as a site of production and setting) and its rapid gentrification over the past few decades, which has been a topic of debate both within and beyond Germany's borders.^[7] Through analyses of three romcoms set in Berlin – Germany's highest grossing romcom to date *Keinohrhasen* ('Rabbit Without Ears', Schweiger, 2007); the 2019 installment in Emmanuel Benbihy's 'City of Love' anthology film series, *Berlin, I Love You*; and Doris Dörrie's *Glück* ('Bliss', 2012) – I ask, can romcoms set in Berlin be, as has been claimed of their US counterparts, understood as a genre of gentrification? Can the transposition of the American (and predominantly New York) romcom's generic markers in *Keinohrhasen* and *Berlin, I Love You*, and their adoption of the 'City of Love' franchise format and riff on the 'I ♥ NY' tourism brand, be conceived as textual gentrification strategies? How might a romcom such as *Glück*, whose underclass protagonists occupy Berlin's distinctly unglamorous, un-touristic spaces function as part of a genre of gentrification?

A conservative genre?

It is unsurprising that students never offered 'Berlin' as the potential setting for my hypothetical meet-cute. As Peter Sobczynski wrote in his scathing review of *Berlin, I Love You*, 'when one tries to imagine a city known for its overwhelmingly romantic properties, Berlin does not exactly leap to the mind'.^[8] Sobczynski has a point – films and television programs set in Berlin tend to draw the city 'as a historically significant place under the Nazi regime, as a

subcultural punk and drug swamp of the 1980s, [or] as a site of reunification and Europeanisation in the post-wall era'[9] – that is to say, in line with the city's tumultuous history. Furthermore, German cinema is not internationally renowned for its romantic comedies. In fact, with the exception of Holocaust films and others situated within the nation's traumatic history under the broader banner of 'dark' heritage cinema, little scholarly attention has been dedicated to German contemporary genre cinema per se.[10] With the exception of a handful of break-out international hits such as *Goodbye Lenin!* (Becker, 2003) and *Toni Erdmann* (Ade, 2016) one could be excused for thinking that Germany simply does not produce many genre films, or at least very few comedies. While this perception neatly aligns with the humourless German stereotype, it belies the fact that comedy is the most successful domestic film genre.[11]

Perhaps this popularity is precisely the reason for comedy's omission from German film scholarship and criticism. After all, the preoccupation with 'serious' cinema at the expense of the popular – particularly the comedic – is widespread. As Antje Ascheid writes, the 'French scholars dismissively labeled France's stylish genre thrillers of the 1980s the Cinema du Look, implying that surface had replaced substance' and 'American critics similarly lamented the decline of the New Hollywood of the 70s in favor of generic blockbusters'[12] despite, as I have written elsewhere, the fact that its canon is widely acknowledged for its selective omission of romantic comedies and other generic fare.[13] As Jeffers McDonald writes:

To a certain extent, 'genre film' has as its implicit opposite the notion of the 'art film'; furthermore, genre films carry connotations flavoured with 'American, low-brow, easy', while assumptions about art films include 'European or independent, high-brow, difficult'... Romantic comedy is, arguably, the lowest of the low... viewed as 'guilty pleasures' which should be below one's notice [but which] satisfy because they provide easy, uncomplicated pleasures.[14]

Such assertions were reiterated in the German context when Eric Rentschler branded the reunified nation's post-Wall cinema the 'cinema of consensus'. Rentschler argued that 1990s German cinema was 'dominated by a formula-bound profusion of romantic comedies, crude farces, road movies, action films and literary adaptations', which, by contrast to the overtly political and intellectual New German cinema of the likes of Fassbinder,

focus on identity crises which are in fact pseudo-crises for they have no depth of despair, no true suffering, no real joy. With their triangulated desires and mismatched partners, their schematic constellations and formulaic trajectories, these yuppie comedies of errors follow strictly codified patterns.[15]

Inheriting more from Hollywood than their New German Cinema predecessors, directors such as Doris Dörrie, Sönke Wortmann, and Dominik Graf were conceived of as the 'purveyors' of the new cinema that 'at no price [wished] to come off as rarefied or esoteric, to challenge or disconcert their public'.[16] Paul Cooke similarly described the romcoms of the post-Wall era as 'both politically and aesthetically conservative'.[17] While the prevalence of Germany's complex history and politics in its cinema culture may evoke a uniquely pointed disavowal of popular cinema that eschews overt politics, the claim that the romcom is an inherently conservative genre is familiar. As Kyle Stevens points out, recent trends in film criticism have sought to negatively pit plot-driven genre cinema against the presumably more intellectual and experiential affordances of global art cinema (in particular 'slow cinema'). This trend echoes decades of film scholarship that diametrically opposed art and genre cinema, with the former afforded an elevated status in part due to the prevalence of conclusions marked by ambiguity and the latter reduced to financially motivated 'mere' entertainment. Within this context, the romcom 'is most often explicitly rejected because its endings are thought to be: first, predictable; and second, unrealistic, i.e. merely escapist because it ends too happily'.[18] Contrary to Stevens' position, narrative predictability and escapism are widely assumed vehicles for conservative messaging. Claire Mortimer makes this assumption explicit when she writes:

The romantic comedy hinges on the importance of the institution of marriage...Marriage is a means of restoring order and granting happiness to the characters, integrating them into society and resolving disruption and conflict. The romantic comedy is arguably more conservative than other comedies, as it respects society's structures and dominant ideologies, offering a resolution that reinforces tradition and conformity.[19]

Mortimer's summation pertains, as does the vast majority of writing on the romcom, to those within the Hollywood context. Hollywood is, after all, commonly conceived as the cinema culture of genre par excellence, and the romantic comedy as a cornerstone of that entertainment system since the advent of sound.[20] In recent decades, concerted efforts have been made in European film scholarship to overhaul the hierarchical art/genre film divide

– the romcom included. Yet, unlike the sustained engagement with the British romcom variant (particularly following the Hugh Grant vehicles of the 1990s) or Mary Harrod's impressive body of work on the French romcom, scholarship on the German romcom has remained sparse. For this reason my conception of the romantic comedy is informed by scholarship centred on the American, and particularly Hollywood, context where it has, until fairly recently, been largely considered the sovereign domain of the white, heterosexual middle, and upper-middle class.[21] Despite the work of scholars such as Kathleen Rowe, Leger Grindon, Celestino Deleyto, Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, and most recently Kyle Stevens, who have refuted the presumed intrinsic conservatism of the romcom the considerable popular belief remains that 'the ideology of the romantic comedy spreads a false consciousness about gender relations, courtship, and sexuality', as Grindon puts it.[22] Deleyto identifies these arguments as aesthetic and ideological determinism, predicated on:

a circular argument that has been more or less universally accepted whereby only those films that include certain conventions and a certain 'conservative' perspective on relationships are romantic comedies and, therefore romantic comedies are the most conventional and conservative of all genres.[23]

Deleyto resists prescriptive – and self-affirming – genre classifications in favour of an approach that, qua Ludwig Wittgenstein's family resemblances, takes similarity as its base. In the case of the romcom, Deleyto identifies three interrelated constituents that the genre puts into play:

a narrative that articulates historically and culturally specific views of love, desire, sexuality and gender relationships; a space of transformation and fantasy which influences the narrative articulation of those discourses; an humour as the specific perspective from which the fictional characters, their relationships and the spectator's response to them are constructed as embodiments of these discourses.[24]

In this reformulation, the romantic comedy is understood through the presence of its conventions within films, rather than by the films themselves, in turn allowing the genre to be viewed 'within a more flexible framework' which 'liberates them from ideological rigidity'.[25] I subscribe to Deleyto's more flexible genre framework as a productive and inclusive approach to the romcom and agree that the genre has been condemned to conservatism through circular reasoning. However, in considering the ways in which the romcom has been read as a genre closely associated with gentrification, it is precisely the self-fulfilling generic and ideological criterion of the romcom

in its popular conception that interest me here. The genre's assumed conservatism, coupled with its common conception as a cinema of the white middle class[26] means that it is not only a neutral safe domain for 'the playing out of a fantasy of reciprocal desire',[27] as Deborah Thomas writes, but one imagined as inhabited by the most privileged members of society.

A genre of gentrification?

Andersson and Webb write that prevalent genres 'can be read as barometers of changing attitudes about the American city, from fears and anxieties to aspirational and glamorized myths'.[28] In the context of New York City, this claim appears almost self-evident – and illuminating in the racist and classist biases that underpin conceptions of genre and urban space – as blaxploitation cinema and vigilante thrillers in 1970s American cinema are often read in the context of de-industrialisation, high crime rates, and 'white flight' in urban centres, whereas the re-emergence of the romantic comedy in the proceeding decade has been understood in terms of accelerating processes of gentrification. This is the trajectory charted by Stanley Corkin who frames New York as moving from a squalid, often violent, and morally debased setting in early New Hollywood cinema to its reframing as a site of glamour and love, most notably in Woody Allen's early romcoms. These late 1970s films, writes Corkin, provide 'visions of gentrifying and gentrified New York'.[29] The New York romcom presented an

urban space idealized by sophisticates and those who aspire to be. There is a critical mass of the urbane, intellectual, and attractive people... with active social lives who seem intent on pursuing suitable matches within their own class.[30]

Corkin's assessment corresponds to the commonly conceived notion that, unlike other cinema traditions associated with urban space, the romcom city is a site of aspirational affluence and consumerism.[31] This is precisely the configuration at play in *Keinohrhasen*, a film that adopts and indigenises the semantic and syntactic elements of the American romcom.

Keinohrhasen opens in the Ritz-Carlton hotel at Potsdamer Platz. Inside the hotel the grandeur of its chandeliers and marble columns mark it as a site of luxury. The camera glides across the lobby floor, past its plush décor and ostentatiously uniformed bellboys, sweeps over the bifurcated staircase and lands on a handsome celebrity gossip-writer, Ludo (Til Schweiger), who,

flanked by his young photographer and right-hand man, Moritz (Matthias Schweighöfer), is interviewing the famous German actor, Jürgen Vogel for a muck-racking entertainment rag. The pair stare at Vogel, who, following a stint in California has replaced his characteristic gapped tooth grin with an overlarge set of capped teeth that appear unnaturally white against his deep fake tan and the straw-coloured side-swept bob atop his normally bald head, while his proud display of gluteal augmentation surgery appears farcical (and indeed is later revealed as a ruse). The scene cuts to a brief establishing shot of the Brandenburg Gate and the Straße des 17. Juni. A group of small children huddle around their day-care teacher, Anna (Nora Tschirner), a bespectacled young woman with long, unkempt brown hair clad in a frumpy knee-length skirt and oversized cardigan. Her faced is poised with fierce determination as she steps onto the zebra crossing. Moritz and Ludo careen down the same street. Distracted by a sexist conversation about Vogel's appearance and implant surgery, they spot Anna too late and must swerve to avoid collision. In this moment a meet-cute has occurred – one not wholly dissimilar to the hypothetical I provided my students – situating *Keinohrhasen* as a romcom. This generic association is solidified when Ludo's exploitative paparazzo practices land him with a 300-hour community service sentence to be carried out at Anna's day-care centre. There it is revealed that the two are not only childhood acquaintances but that the popular young Ludo delighted in humiliating the uncool Anna. With the power-relations reversed, the stage is set for a conventional romcom trajectory, as Mortimer outlines, from mutual loathing to romantic union. Antje Ascheid goes so far as to claim *Keinohrhasen* is 'a bona fide romantic comedy in every way' as it is not 'interested in supplying a socially critical subtext or in spending time on anything but what the romantic comedy proper has always been about: the battle between the sexes'.^[32] Although this summation ignores divergent imperatives of the romcom's various cycles and misdiagnoses the genre's capacity for social critique, Ascheid's assignation of *Keinohrhasen* as a conventional romcom in the American mould asserts its utility for analysing the romcom's gentrifying imperatives in a Berlin setting.

Keinohrhasen was released in 2007, only a few years after gentrification became a widespread phenomenon in the city's public debates. As Andrej Holm writes:

[The average] rental prices for housing [in Berlin] stayed about the same from the early 1990s until 2005. The main reasons for this were substantial public investments and subsidy programs, a high level of construction activities in the early 1990s,

a sizable segment of public and social housing and strong rent regulations in the 1990s. All these factors contributed to a housing system which was much less vulnerable to market dynamics. As a consequence, gentrification could only slowly gain ground and was until around 2005 only discussed within the context of specific neighborhood transformations in parts of East Berlin (such as Prenzlauer Berg or Mitte).[33]

Since 2005, Berlin's housing market has intensified so profoundly that in 2020 the Berlin Parliament passed a law to freeze rent prices for a period of five years.[34] Although the impacts of Berlin's multifaceted gentrification processes were undeniably less pronounced in 2007 than they are today, there was certainly growing criticism of (and protests against) Berlin's increasingly neoliberal urban development plans.[35] *Keinohrhasen* is unconcerned with Berlin's increasingly neoliberal urban development, however, by employing the generic markers of American romcoms that have perpetuated the conception of the genre as the province of wealthy, white cis-gendered urbanites it may be read as participating in a cinema of gentrification.

Narratively speaking, *Keinohrhasen* centres on the gendered expectations of sexual and romantic relations. As such, the film is reminiscent of the sex comedy cycle, which Kathrina Glitre describes as 'a type of Hollywood comedy produced during the late 1950s and early 1960s' such as the Doris Day vehicles *Pillow Talk* (Gordon, 1959) and *That Touch of Mink* (Mann, 1962) with plots that 'repeatedly [centre] on the twin themes of virginity and seduction. Most commonly, a virginal career girl and a bachelor playboy.'[36] Indeed, Ludo is a wealthy, attractive, rake who exploits his vocation to entice new sexual conquests with a devil-may-care attitude while Anna is a less sexually active (even slightly naïve), unfashionable, and uptight woman dedicated to her job. Importantly, the sex comedy cycle is also, as Giltre writes 'entirely metropolitan', usually set in Manhattan, with 'glamorous apartments, swanky bars and restaurants, and corporate offices'[37] featuring as recurring sites of action. In concert with this metropolitan setting, the cycle employs 'consumer industries and products as plot material' and a 'glossy' aesthetic that enables the focus on consumerism to be showcased through 'spectacular haute couture costumes, widescreen formats and colour processing'.[38] Although *Keinohrhasen* is set in 2000s Berlin – then Germany's poorest city – rather than 1950s or 1960s Manhattan, it nonetheless (as in the opening scene in the Ritz-Carlton hotel) creates a world of privilege and ostentatious consumption around its central characters.[39] As Ascheid aptly surmises, Ludo feels at home in trendy restaurants, drives a Mercedes, and exudes sexual

confidence. In *Keionhrhasen* Berlin is also finally on par with other romantic capitals. City shots never suggest social inequality but instead communicate the lively glamour of the stylish metropolis, a bright lights and big-city aesthetic that forms the backdrop for seemingly upwardly mobile characters with modish careers (jobs in media, journalism, art, publishing, fashion, and music dominate the romantic comedy). Even the day-care center where Ludo undergoes his inevitable transformation is located in a beautiful bourgeois home. Likewise, the apartment shared by the two young teachers...is just as unrealistic as the equally spacious New York apartments inhabited by desirable urban singles in the Hollywood comedies. In this sense, then, *Keionhrhasen* is like the classic comedies of consensus that Rentschler describes, marked by the celebration of an apolitical yuppie lifestyle.[40]

Although Ascheid's focus is on Ludo, it must be noted that Anna is depicted within the same socioeconomic class, qua Corkin's assessment of the romcom's glamorous world of same-class romance. Her unkempt visage and pointedly anti-haute couture style are purely physical markers of difference that place her in contrast to the sleek, more conventionally attractive women with whom Ludo ordinarily cavorts. This is established early on in a sequence in which Anna and Ludo independently socialise in the same chic restaurant, and reiterated when Anna is receiving a relaxing massage in the same luxury hotel in which Ludo attempts to secure an exposé of a celebrity engagement. Furthermore, it is not simply that the bourgeois home houses a day-care centre, but that it is Anna's workplace. Her clients are almost exclusively the blonde-haired children of the well-to-do and aspirational creative class (most prominently theatre actors), who uniformly dress their children in the neutral tones and vintage-inspired fashion that dominate the glossy pages of boutique children's clothing catalogues. In lieu of the glitzy world of haute couture *Keionhrhasen* extends a 'tasteful' neutral aesthetic regime that corresponds to what Kyle Chayka calls 'AirSpace' – a homogenous 'hipster' style increasingly replicated in different geographic locales and proliferated by digital platforms like Foursquare, Instagram, and Airbnb.[41] AirSpace, writes Chayka, is

marked by an easily recognisable mix of symbols – like reclaimed wood, Edison bulbs, and refurbished industrial lighting – that's meant to provide familiar, comforting surroundings for a wealthy, mobile elite, who want to feel like they're visiting somewhere 'authentic' while they travel, but who actually crave more of the same: more rustic interiors and sans-serif logos and splashes of cliché accent colours on rugs and walls.[42]

AirSpace is an aesthetic of the gentrified. Like the perceived over-genericity of the romcom, its familiarity allows its consumers to feel at ease – safe even – within different geographic settings. It is not, as Ascheid suggests, that by incorporating the visual itinerary of the American romcom, *Keinohrhasen* presents Berlin as a romantic capital but that Berlin is made almost interchangeable with other romcom cities – namely New York. The confluence of an AirSpace visual aesthetic of paired back neutral tones and a city distinguished only by flashes of tourist landmarks in an otherwise homogenised urban space positions *Keinohrhasen* not as a cinema of gentrification so much as a cinema of the gentrified, with those impacted by its processes – the city's significant homeless population, refugees, low income earners, migrants, people with disabilities, and the elderly – kept out of frame. Gentrification, as Ilse Helbrecht states, is at its essence a displacement and separation process that 'segregates the social strata of a city along the social-spatial axis of wealth'.^[43] Through Ludo and Anna's inhabitation of elite spaces, Berlin becomes a series of sites of luxury and consumption. *Keinohrhasen* is granted the appearance of apoliticality as its youthful, white, and wealthy protagonists are typically the benefactors – and beneficiaries – of neoliberal urban development rather than those to whom gentrification poses an empirical threat. In the absence of tensions that emerge from the processes of gentrification, *Keinohrhasen* can present its Berlin as a non-threatening backdrop to – and playground for – Ludo and Anna's courtship.

That romcom cities like Berlin in *Keinohrhasen* tend to be framed around consumer culture and affluence allows them to be understood in line with what gentrification scholars Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly term the 'gentrification aesthetic', whereby a gentrified neighbourhood's 'look' can be described as 'a landscape of conspicuous consumption that makes the process readily identifiable'.^[44] Indeed, in many popular romcoms, characters tend to inhabit comfortable inner-city dwellings, be fashionably attired, and employed in white-collar professions the nature of which often facilitates meets-cute situations of courtship, and temporary obstacles to a couple's union. The proximity of their abodes to city centres enables dates to take place against a backdrop of coffee shops, parks, and iconographic city markers. That is to say, the gentrified city is not only the setting for the romcom but an urban system that generates the conditions through which its iconographic and narrative repertoires may play out.^[45] This configuration aligns with Andersson's assessment of the 1980s Manhattan-set 'new romances' – *Splash* (Howard, 1984), *Something Wild* (Demme, 1986), *Moonstruck* (Jewison,

1987), *Working Girl* (Nichols, 1988), and *When Harry Met Sally...* (Reiner, 1989) – a cycle that facilitates what he calls ‘gentrification by genre’.



Figs 1, 2, 3: Elite spaces and the AirSpace aesthetic in Keinohrhasen.

Following Stephen Neale, Andersson conceptualises 1980s ‘new romances’ as an echo of the 1930s and 1940s screwball comedy, as they tend to follow a gendered pattern whereby a sexually assertive woman attempts to liberate a

more traditional (and often highly materialistic) man before the couple eventually resolve into ‘an “old-fashioned”, “traditional” and ideologically conventional position’.[46] In these films, the city’s restructured economy facilitates aspirational narratives ‘about white-collar work and the renegotiation of romance and gender roles’, yet unlike 1930s screwball comedies, which often featured high-society settings as ‘a form of escapism from the economic depression, the class journeys in the films from the booming 1980s often go in the opposite direction with characters “slumming” it downtown’.[47] ‘Downtown’ refers to SoHo, a location that Andersson identifies as Manhattan’s erogenous zone in new romances, where

eccentric or arty inhabitants [function] as a source of escape for more conventional protagonists (or in some instances warn against their seductive appeal). Through the narrative device of the urban encounter, these films analogize the experiences of romance/sex, discovering an edgy neighborhood and, ultimately, (re)discovering oneself in a gentrification trope.[48]

As such, the romcom facilitates an investment of erotic capital into particular urban locations, and in doing so participates in framing the symbolic perception of these locations as sites of desire. Although the neighbourhoods in which these films are set tend to be diverse, their central characters are almost exclusively white and relatively youthful, overlapping with the key image of the so-called ‘pioneering’ gentrifiers, ‘often seen to embrace urban difference without necessarily interacting with it’.[49] In these films, ‘gentrification by genre’ refers to the way their narratives package and showcase scenes or settings associated with art and subcultures as mass commodities that is, in turn, consumed by broad audiences. It is precisely this touristic art-led gentrification that, belatedly, motivates *Berlin, I Love You*.

Berlin, I Love You is a 2019 installment in Emmanuel Benbihi’s ‘Cities of Love’ franchise, a series of vignette films that take place within one specific city and focus on the possibilities of love each affords. These films uphold a feature Diane Negra identifies of the post-9/11 American romcom: ‘a shared dedication to the view that the couple and the city stand in particular relation to one another, that the union of one is somehow bound up with the unity of the other’.[50] Although this tight connection between coupledness and the city is not presented as bound to the ‘fears and fantasies about the stability of American social geography’[51] as in Negra’s study, it does suggest that the specificity of urban locales facilitate, and even conjure, unique romantic unions by virtue of their distinct socio-cultural, iconographic, topographic, and geographic qualities. Where *Keinohrhasen* carved out a version of Berlin that,

but for a selection of briefly displayed postcard-esque shots of famous landmarks, is at once an unfamiliar and yet immediately recognisable gentrified city whose elite spaces facilitate a highly conventional iteration of the romcom trajectory to play out unimpeded by the social or economic inequalities of gentrification processes, *Berlin, I Love You* seeks to display Berlin's 'essence' as the driving force behind romantic (and other intimate) unions. This essence is overwhelmingly conceived as the city's inherent, and persistent, creativity and liberality in the face of its history of division and, in line with the series title's play on the long-running I ♥ NY tourism campaign, presented as a touristic imperative.[52]

The film's prologue solidifies this enterprise. An animated sequence in black and white portrays a truncated history of the city's division – the Brandenburg Gate obscured by messes of barbed-wire and a recreation of Peter Leibing's famous photo of Conrad Schumann's leap to the West – as a dusky (and heavily accented) voice sings a tribute to the city. Suddenly, the sombre tone shifts. An electronic beat takes over the soundtrack and the animation transitions to colour. John F. Kennedy delivers his famous 'ich bin ein Berliner' speech and a flurry of celebratory images of American intervention and Berlin's techno and club culture emerge. A voice-over narrates:

So, this is Berlin. A pounding heartbeat of a divided muscle, grown out of fear of complete destruction. Crushed and reduced to ashes. And it rose from its ashes like a phoenix. Like a golden angel. People come to Berlin to dream. To dance and to fall in love. And some of them, to fly away. I came here to sing.

The film proper begins. A male street performer (Robert Stadlober) costumed as an angel from *Der Himmel über Berlin* ('Wings of Desire', Wenders, 1987) stands motionless in front of a segment of the Wall at Potsdamer Platz.

In this introduction, the overt reference to Wenders' film may appear as an extension of his angels' ability to see Berlin's entire history at once. Here Potsdamer Platz, a no-mans-land of loss marked only by the grim, graffitied-Wall, is revitalised as a bustling inner-city square. The Wall, now a displaced fragment of history, is transformed into a tourist sight to be photographed – or simply passed – on route to the business-entertainment centre's museums, restaurants, shops, hotels, or high-end apartments and office buildings housed in complexes owned by multinational corporations.[53] Yet, despite this setting and its clear allusion to Wenders' film, *Berlin, I Love You* does not portray Potsdamer Platz as a 'void' to borrow Andreas Huyssen's term, nor

does it invest in a palimpsestic excavation of a site whose post-Wall development and function has fuelled heated debates between city planners, tourism bodies, investors, politicians, and Berlin denizens.[54] Rather, like the angel costume, it is a set piece for the touristic performance of the city's history. Instead of a soulless plaza (as many critics have described it) where history and memory are commodified in line with an overall devotion to capitalist globalisation, this is Potsdamer Platz as envisioned by its tourism campaigns: a future-oriented, global city square that facilitates deep interpersonal connections that transcend national borders.[55] Here, like in the recent Netflix mini-series, *Unorthodox* (2020), Potsdamer Platz is framed as a romantic site for inter-cultural meets-cute, which is made manifest as the narrator, Sara (Rafaëlle Cohen), plonks her backpack and guitar case beside the angel (who is, unsubtly named Daniel) and commences a trite song about the mystical love of the universe and the essential 'sameness' of the human soul. Irritated, Daniel orders her to stop.



A Berlin meet-cute

This conventional meet-cute borrows the 'quirky' liberated woman and more cynical man configuration of the new romance as identified by Andersson. Against the backdrop of Potsdamer Platz's bright lights, Daniel is visibly downtrodden. 'Fed up' with his home city, he plans to abscond the next day. Sara, on the other hand, is a chirpy new arrival from Israel who believes Berlin's inherently creative culture will nurture her musical aspirations. Despite his initial hostility, Daniel resolves to spend the remainder of his time in

Berlin with her and is thereby emotionally rejuvenated. Positioned alongside Sara, the audience is not only privy to their courtship but party to the Berlin tour that establishes their union. With their conventional romcom storyline both bookending the film and interspersed as transitions between its other vignettes, the city unfolds as a space shown by a 'true Berliner'. Yet, far from a deep engagement with the German capital's past, Daniel and Sara's Berlin traversal showcases its history as a set of tourist sites in service of their budding romance: he translates German-language street art ('this house used to be in a different country'), drives with erratic abandon along the route of the former Wall as they squeal with exhilaration, they discuss Sara's future ambitions while overlooking the city from a rooftop, and track down her grandmother's – a Holocaust survivor – former house. There Sara explains, as the painful memories of the Holocaust are not hers, Berlin presents only exciting possibilities. Although Sara's viewpoint appears to mirror that of many Israelis in contemporary Berlin, the film's flattening of history can be read in line with its gentrifying imperatives.[56] Here, the city's historical specificities are co-opted in the name of an 'urban lifestyle' that employs the city's unofficial slogan 'poor, but sexy!', almost two decades after it was first issued, as the foundation of a 'quirky' romantic setting.

Berlin's 'poor but sexy' reputation is attributable to the former mayor Klaus Wowereit, who used the slogan as a means to market the city as the capital of European cool and open for business to members of what American urban studies theorist Richard Florida termed the creative class – a fuzzy demographic including artists, bohemians, academics, scientists, and entrepreneurs, among other white-collar workers who are motivated by shared values of meritocracy, individualism, difference, and creativity. These 'creatives' are, in Florida's formulation, the centrepiece of the creative economy and the principle stimulators for city growth and development. Thus, to 'spur societal innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic development' cities should be reconceptualised as 'creative' centres.[57] As such, while the creative city has been treated as an aspirational formulation in urban planning and city cultures discourse as a harbinger of positive social, cultural, and environmental change, it has been widely criticised for promoting inequality through gentrification. As Stefan Krätke puts it:

The widespread trumpeting of the 'creative class' might be best understood as the marketing of misleading terms in order to create a new urban growth concept which is based on the self-idealization of particular elites within a neoliberal model of society.[58]

Wowereit's proclamation aligned with this ideal. It exploited Berlin's standing as an endemically creative city dating back to the Weimar era – when the likes of Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, Alfred Döblin, Otto Dix, Fritz Lang, and Marlene Dietrich were denizens – as well as its reputation for low rent and living costs, particularly in comparison to other German and European cities. Damiel and Sara's courtship consciously evokes this reputation as they solidify their union in scenes associated with Berlin's creative, and licentious, reputation. This is particularly notable in a sequence in which Damiel performs at a club where patrons with colourful hair, multiple piercings, and meshed clothing hover in corners. The space is dark with video art projected onto walls. A throbbing beat coupled with a busy lightshow begins. Damiel, once more an angel, glides onto the stage via a zip wire where he dances while Sara stands, enraptured, in the crowd. Inspired by the scene and their position in it, the two have sex in the club.

The sequence is, undoubtedly, a reference to Berlin's reputation as a nightlife hotspot whose attractions include sexual permissiveness, a lax attitude to drugs, and world-famous clubs, such as KitKatClub, that are almost equally renowned for their trance and techno music selection as they are for permitting sexual intercourse to be conducted openly. Taken alone, it could be read as a representation of the international appeal of Berlin's nightlife, including for the groups of tourists who fly to the city for a weekend dedicated to partying at famous clubs such as Berghain, or KitKatClub, that Tobias Rapp termed the 'EasyJet set' and, as such, part of a (locally contentious) tourism-led gentrification itinerary.[59] However, the pair's subsequent, and final, sequence transforms their sexual encounter from a spontaneous erotic experience to a pivotal moment in the couple's romantic journey. The two arrive at the Mauerpark, an inner-city park renowned for its Sunday hipster flea-market and open-air karaoke. Sara is promptly called to the amphitheatre stage, where, prior to performing an original song she delivers a speech to a huge and appreciating audience:

Hi, my name is Sara. I've been here barely 48 hours and I already feel like I'm a part of Berlin, y'know. But sometimes, you feel alone, and you feel like you're not heard, and you're not seen, but when that happens just turn around, because there might be someone actually listening. In my case, it was an angel, with wings and everything! I guess I just got lucky. So, this song is for all the angels out there, with or without wings.

As Sara sings the film performs its epilogue. Many of the different vignettes' characters appear in the crowd enjoying the experiences, and unions, Berlin affords. Sara finishes her song and runs to Daniel, whom she passionately kisses as the camera completes a 360-degree motion around the enamoured couple.



Figs 5, 6: Sara and Daniel's 'creative' courtship.

Although, unlike Anna and Ludo, the characters in *Berlin, I Love You* generally do not cavort in upscale restaurants or cocktail bars, the film can nonetheless be understood as projecting a gentrifying imperative. The Berlin residents presented all speak English, and only a small few are German. The vast majority have been attracted to the city for its creativity. They are Hollywood

film directors, puppeteers, photographers, voice-over actors, models, dancers, bohemian partiers, performance artists – members of Florida’s ‘super creative core’ – the creatives and innovators characterised as ‘driving forces’ of economic and technological development in the creative city, and thus the nucleus of associated gentrification.[60] The film’s vignette structure emphasises not only ‘the interconnectedness of places within the city via networks of transportation, communication, circulation and exchange’, as Nezar Al-Sayyad writes of the city film, but instils a perception that Berlin’s creativity undergirds all of its connections. The pairing of the Berliner, Damiel – whose name and image overtly references Berlin’s rich film tradition – with Sara, a wide-eyed newcomer hoping to ‘make it’ as a musician in Berlin doubles the city’s conception as a creative city. Berlin is courted for its history and reputation as an endemically creative place, traceable to the legacy of the Weimar era, while that cultural history is overlaid with its position as a creative city in the neoliberal sense. As Jonathan Rock Rokem writes:

Over the past few decades, hundreds of thousands of people have chosen to settle in the reunified heart of the German capital. From 2012 to 2017 alone, the city grew by 243,500 people – 81% of which were foreigners... This has meant that long-term but less affluent residents have been priced out by skyrocketing demand for property, fuelled by global investors and wealthier locals. All too often, it’s a process that occurs along lines of class, race and ethnicity. [61]

The changes to the city brought about by rising property prices and its competitive rental market are, in part, the result of Berlin’s creative city success, with the ‘hex of coolness’ cast upon those vulnerable to the effects of gentrification.[62] As Geoff Stahl writes, ‘poor but sexy’ has since been ‘reduced to a faint-praise brand, stretched to the breaking point over thousands of handbags, its meaning thinned out across t-shirts, postcards, documentaries, songs, and websites’.[63] Indeed, *Berlin, I Love You* may court Wowereit’s famous slogan, however in belatedly reproducing it as a series of touristic clichés in high production value gloss the film better encapsulates his modified – and far less pithy – 2011 iteration: ‘We want Berlin to become richer and still remain sexy.’[64] After all, there is no poverty displayed, instead the film’s refrain become variations on ‘anything can happen in Berlin!’: a sentiment expressed in both instances in which romance literally converts an abandoned warehouse into a glittering ballroom, and when three women expose their experiences of domestic and sexual abuse only to have the scene absurdly transform into a joyous dance party at the behest of a mysterious party-starter named Andre and his band of travelling carousers. The city in *Berlin*,

I Love You is not a gritty site of alternative scenes or sexual exploration, but a safe and sanitised place that courts association with its previous reputation by performing its history and culture of spontaneity, sexuality, and creativity. The city known for its sexual inclusiveness and even deviance is, through the process of imposing a conventional romcom narrative structure, transformed into a site of mainstream heterosexual romantic love.

Conclusion

If both *Keinohrhasen* and *Berlin, I Love You* portray Berlin as a gentrified city through their overtly conventional structures, does this suggest – as has been claimed in the Anglophone context – the Berlin romcom can too be considered a genre of gentrification? And if so, is a ‘safe’ city requisite for the romcom trajectory? Are we really to assume that courtships that take place in upmarket restaurants, hipster bars and clubs, and bourgeois homes are more romantic than others? Or that romantic affection declared into microphones in front of large audiences – as occurs in both *Keinohrhasen* and *Berlin, I Love You* – are more meaningful than less public or performative pronouncements? In the concluding passages of this essay, I argue that, despite the clear identification of both the domestically popular *Keinohrhasen* and international franchise film *Berlin, I Love You* as part of a genre of gentrification, there is nothing inherent in the romcom genre that enacts these gentrifying imperatives. Rather, it is the transposition of a subset of expectations derived from the American, particularly post-1970s New York-set, romcom tradition into the Berlin milieu that allows these films to perform a form of textual gentrification. In these romcoms, the narrative focus on upper-middle and creative class characters allows the city’s elite and creative sights to be framed as aspirational, and touristic sights embedded with romantic potential. But what of romcoms that eschew characters from these classes and the spaces they inhabit? To address this question, I turn to Doris Dörrie’s *Glück*.

Glück is in almost every generic sense a romcom. It adheres, without diversion, to Claire Mortimer’s romcom plot outline. A boy, Kalle (Vinzenz Kiefer) and a girl, Irina (Alba Rohrwacher) meet by chance in the cold early morning in Berlin when Kalle’s dog approaches Irina. However, Kalle is not, as may be generically inferred, jogging or walking his dog prior to beginning his workday. Rather both are on the street by circumstance. Irina is an undocumented refugee and sex worker with no fixed abode and Kalle is a

heavy-drinking, rough-sleeping punk. As the two slowly fall in love they encounter obstacles that prevent their union – only these do not take the form of competing lovers, mistaken identity, or uncovered ruses. Instead, they are overwhelmingly related to their stigmatised statuses and the contingencies of poverty: a moment of happiness at a children's playground is interrupted by police and their homelife is regularly disrupted by visitations from Irina's customers, whom she increasingly loathes. The couple experience moments of exuberant joy in various settings in the city before they face great adversity when one of Irina's clients suffers a stroke, and, panicking over the ramifications of this event and her undocumented status, she flees. Having misinterpreted Irina's prior exaggerated statement that she '[wants] to kill [all her clients], dead, finished', Kalle assumes the corpse is her handiwork. Love overwhelms Kalle's strictly vegetarian and haemophobic sensibilities: he dismembers the corpse with an electric carving knife and disposes of the body. Although gruesome, the scene (like many others) plays with a comedic tone.

To facilitate the romcom as a safe domain for the fantasy of reciprocal desire for a couple for whom safety is otherwise far from guaranteed, Dörrie imposes an enclosed narrative strategy in the form of a narrator. Defense attorney Noah Leyden (Matthias Brandt) is introduced at the film's outset when he, accidentally, hits Irina with his car. Understandably, Irina is unwilling to provide her name or agree to contact the police. As a last resort, Noah provides Irina with his business card and an instruction to contact him should she need anything. In addition to this meeting, Noah's voiceover explains that in his profession he is bound to 'fight for the rights of the accused'. To him, innocence or guilt is irrelevant, 'what matters is the motivation behind a crime'. This set-up ensures Irina and Kalle's happy ending. After all, Irina is innocent of murder and Kalle's crime – desecration of the deceased – was motivated by pure love. Indeed, with Noah rallying their cause, Kalle's crime is redescribed as 'misconduct for love' and dismissed. The discovery of Irina's illegal status in Germany is resolved with the mandate that, as Kalle is German, the two shall marry. The film concludes with a close-up shot-reverse-shot as the two, hand-in-hand, smile lovingly at one another.



Figs. 7, 8, 9: Irina and Kalle's romcom repertoire.

From this plot description alone, *Glück* is undeniably a romcom. It not only follows the genre's presumed trajectory, takes place within a major metropolis, focuses on a youthful, white, heterosexual couple and concludes not only with both appearing more conservative than they began (no longer donning punk or sex worker attire) but with the promise of marriage and a legal status for Irina. As such, it could be argued that *Glück* projects (even if reflexively)

the conservative ideology assigned to the romcom. Yet, despite these generic markers, *Glück* has not been analysed as a romcom. Instead it has been received either as a drama or a dark comedy. Negative criticisms of the film claimed that its sleek aesthetic was out of step with its narrative, the cast were too attractive to convincingly play sex workers or rough-sleepers, and the film was overall too fantastical in the facilitation of a happy ending.[65] These criticisms implicitly state that, no matter how many generic markers are employed, the romcom is a domain unavailable to the underclass. Their stories are not considered material for the presumed escapist fantasies of the romcom, but hard-luck plights found in the tradition of gritty social realism. Thus, despite being a genre film, *Glück* was criticised for failing to fulfil the expectations of art cinema. Generically contrived happy endings (even those employed somewhat reflexively) are, it seems, reserved for those whose hands hold microphones and not those placed in handcuffs.

To be sure, although resolutely a romcom, *Glück* does not participate in the gentrification by genre imperatives identified by Andersson, nor as is traceable in *Keinohrhasen* and *Berlin, I Love You*. The social standing and poverty of the characters simply does not afford them access to the spaces that would avail such a reading. As such, I posit that understanding the romcom as a genre of gentrification is predicated on a narrow conception of the romcom that, as Deleyto suggests, is defined by self-fulfilling criteria. The selection of films most often cited as ‘gentrification’ romcoms tend to be those that feature white, wealthy protagonists – the gentrifiers, so to speak – and are thereby premised by an understanding of the genre as the domain of the privileged. The locations these films present align with the characters’ sensibilities – be they upmarket sites of leisure or the ‘alternative’ scenes of the creative city. The use of such spaces as generic markers that facilitate narratives centring on romance or intimacy has enabled the romcom to be considered a genre of gentrification. While a large portion of romcoms that are populated by privileged characters convey their settings – including the once ‘poor, but sexy’ Berlin – as gentrified locales, ascribing this function to the genre per se is, like the process of gentrification itself, a means of segregation and displacement that upholds specific, and exclusive, conceptions of the romcom. And, those romcom couples, like Kalle and Irina, for whom the city is not a safe site of luxury nor an inspiring site for neoliberal creativity are simply excluded.

Author

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- [8] Sobczynski 2019.
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