

Leonie Naughton

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German Unification on Film

by Leonie Naughton

This is an abridged version of a paper delivered at the international conference „Die Medien und die politische Wende in Europa“, organized by Deutsches Historisches Museum and the International Association for Media and History (IAMHIST) at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, September 17-19 1999. A full version will appear in the forthcoming „Jahrbuch der DEFA-Stiftung“, edited by Ralf Schenk.

Leonie Naughton is a film historian and author who lectures in Cinema Studies at Monash University, Melbourne. She has published extensively on German cinema and cultural policy. Currently she is working on a book entitled „That Was the Wild East: Film Culture, Unification and the ‚New‘ Germany“ to be published by the University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor in 2001.

On my last trip to Berlin in June 1999 I committed an act of petty, senseless theft. I souvenired four Euros worth of material - a flight magazine. They used to be free and even then, were hard to give away. One article in this particular magazine attracted my attention: a report on Berlin and how the metropolis is being transformed into the new national capital. The usual, glossy, glamorous images were featured. But a telling insert reflecting upon the Zeitgeist of the city was also included. It was titled: „What it takes to be a Berliner.“ This apparently entails a number of contradictory instructions, the „first being never to lose your sense of humour, however difficult it sometimes is. Berliners are open and communicative, but no one has quite figured out when.“ The second guideline stresses „Never smile at strangers on public transport. People will know you are foreign.“

One could well argue that these days with unification, Berliners have little reason to smile, at least at one another. Many locals have witnessed, if not experienced, hostility between Ossis and Wessis (East and West Germans). Fears about the costs and success of unification have hardly abated. For many in the West the price of unification is exorbitant and seemingly never-ending. Many East Germans have little to smile about: unemployment is rampant and many feel like second class citizens in united Germany. As social critics have commented, East Germans „experience and encounter West Germans in a very real and immediate fashion as the boss at work, the superior in the office, the landlord at home, the political leaders [until recently] in Bonn and public opinion dominated by the West. From a Western point of view, the (Eastern) ‚other‘ is primarily experienced as a drain on ‚Western‘ revenues and incomes“ (Welsh, Pickel and Rosenberg 115).

Considering the inequities in living standards and the „wealth gap“ between East and West (which is expected to take several more decades to diminish), it is perhaps not all that surprising that Ossis and Wessis continue to view one another, and unification, with a large measure of suspicion. Consi-

dering the adjustment crisis unification prompted, it is perhaps inevitable that East and West perspectives on unification are at times irreconcilable and at times contradictory. Depictions of life in the „new“ Germany are subject to dispute, at least in the realm of film.

I take as my starting point two observations. The first, made by Eric Rent-schler about an earlier period of German film history: „Films can preserve memory an function as vehicles of History. They can also serve as a means of forgetting, a medium to stylise, distort or erase the past“ (222). The second observation also relates to traces of „historical memory“ and its consolidation or marginalisation: „all [complex societies] periodically rewrite their dominant national mythology to reflect shifts of power, political expediency and taste ... the past [and present] is a central battleground for the contestation of cultural identities“ (Welsh et al 123).

Throughout the 1990s, and with varying degrees of success, filmmakers in the ex-GDR and the old federal states have engaged in contesting historical memories of the Wende and of unification. I want to look briefly at a few points of divergence in productions that issue from the West and the East and the ways in which their perspectives on unification vary.

In East German productions that critique life in the „new“ federal states, East Germans are regularly presented as driven to extreme measures to survive: often they have no option but to live their lives in exile as is the case with protagonists in *Bis zum Horizont und weiter* (Peter Kahane, 1999) and *Burning Life* (Peter Welz, 1993). The survival of East German protagonists in these films leads to desperate and sometimes life-threatening situations: Walter commits suicide in *Wege in die Nacht* (Andreas Kleinert, 1999), like Katja and Henning in *Bis zum Horizont und weiter*; Ramona kidnaps another woman's baby in *Engelchen* (Helke Misselwitz, 1996); Heiner emerges as a budding serial murderer in *Abschied von Agnes* (Michael Gwisdek, 1993).

By contrast, western unification films are more inclined to present Osis as the beneficiaries of unification. In Helma Sanders-Brahms feature, *Apfelbäume* (1992), an East German family inherit their grandmother's orchard and farm house. In *Der Brocken* (Vadim Glowna, 1992) a West-East co-production, Ada brings prosperity to the East German island of Rügen and solves local unemployment by capitalising on the market for eco-goods. Her initiative leads to what is referred to as „Economic Miracle number two.“ In *Go Trabi Go 2 / Das war der wilde Osten* (Wolfgang Büld, Reinhard Kloos, 1992) Udo Strutz and his family inherit a garden gnome business through which they become millionaires. Western unification films like these present East Germans with all sorts of entrepreneurial possibilities and options. This is not perhaps all that surprising. Given the long-standing emphasis western perspectives on the GDR placed upon privation, it was unlikely that many West Germans would consider that the assimilation of the bankrupt eastern states would

involve any form of meaningful sacrifice or loss on the part of East Germans. For tens of millions in the „old“ Federal Republic, unification meant that a debilitated and indefensible regime had been deposed by a population that sought assimilation into a land of affluence, abundance and opportunity. From a West German perspective, unification could hardly be viewed in terms of the misfortune of those in the former GDR: on the one hand because the East was already established as the site of sacrifice and privation; on the other because unification necessitated such a massive transfer of funds, merchandise and expertise from the West to the East.

Eastern backed productions rarely display optimism over the fate of East Germans under unification. Easterners are regularly, almost without exception, presented as losers if not the casualties of the union of East and West. The human cost of unification is usually very high for East Germans. Eastern productions align unification with loss and privation rather than abundance and prosperity. Protagonists may lose their lives, their freedom and/or their sanity. In *Engelchen*, Ramona verges on losing all three. She attempts to commit suicide after her baby dies at birth and is subsequently arrested after she takes desperate measures to reconstitute a family. Misselwitz's earlier feature, *Herzprung* (1992) sees Johanna's husband commit suicide in despair over the fate he faces with unification. Johanna is inadvertently killed by a group of neo-nazis.

Bis zum Horizont und weiter suggests that unification may be a health hazard for East Germans. Henning, it is revealed, suffers from an unspecified form of cancer, which we may well deduce is the product of radiation from the huge electricity towers which clutter the horizon and dwarf the family home.

East German productions that address the challenges and tribulations of unification almost invariably present easterners as misfits and outcasts living in complete isolation: they have no place within a community and no extended families. It appears that the introduction of the market economy to the East and the new social order have undermined any sense of community belonging. *Abschied von Agnes* is a fine example. Michael Gwisdek plays the character of Heiner, a lonely and seemingly demented figure who has no acquaintances what so ever and derives comfort from imaginary conversations with his deceased wife.

Like other eastern productions that depict life in the „new“ Germany, *Abschied von Agnes* takes an urban setting. This vantage point rarely is predominantly eastern. *Adamski* is set in part in Alexanderplatz. *Engelchen* is set in Ostkreuz on the outskirts of Berlin. *Bis zum Horizont und weiter* is initially set in inner city Berlin. Eastern productions are more inclined to focus on urban life and industry than western produced unification films. In *Engelchen*, Ramona and her sister work in a lipstick factory. In Misselwitz's earlier film,

Johanna works in a poultry factory. Adamski works in a department store. In *Wege in die Nacht* the male protagonist haunts the derelict electricity plant he once managed. In *Bis zum Horizont und weiter*, Henning is a former coal miner. Each of these films' portrayal of the East after unification is in dramatic contradistinction to the impressions fostered in most western backed unification films which take a predominantly pastoral setting. Eastern productions depict the „new“ states in part as de-industrial wasteland. Much of *Horizon* is shot on location around deserted coal mines likening the East to a barren moonscape.

Western productions are more inclined to present the East in more idyllic, mythical terms. Films like the Trabi comedy *Das war der wilde Osten* and *Der Brocken* picture the East as a rural idyll, as a pre-industrialised paradise - a type of Eden. The most successful western productions identify the East as a pristine region where there is an abundance of primary produce. Locals don't engage in any form of industrialised mass production. East Germans gravitate towards cottage industry: the garden gnome factory Udo inherits in the second Trabi comedy seems to provide employment for the entire community of Landwitz, and the workers are gratified by their craft which is completely untainted by any mechanisation. In *Der Brocken* the inhabitants of Rügen knit their way out of a recession by selling their handicraft. In some western unification films, the East is identified as Heimat, a point of mythical origin where residual culture and rural customs prevail.

The concept of Heimat dates back to last century and it is, of course an enduring German film genre that prospered throughout the War and the period of reconstruction in the West. In celebrating the rural idyll, these films were often set against a backdrop of mountain ranges or mountain tops, drawing on the prototype of the earlier Bergfilm.

In the 1990s western unification films identify the East as Heimat while reviving the iconography and the sentiments of the genre. In these films, the East is defined in narcissistic relation to the West - the East is designated the „before,“ a point of mythical origin to the West which is defined as the „after.“ The East emerges as the locus of much of what the West has lost.

Recycling of Heimat iconography is perhaps most fragrant in the Trabi comedy, *Das war der wilde Osten*. At the end of the film, Udo and his wife Rita are reunited against a Heimat backdrop of a mountain range. Udo, the East German, is identified as the mythical primitive of Hollywood cinema by his wife who calls him „her“ Tarzan.

The town-country „opposition, the threat of modernisation and development, the struggle to preserve tradition (Höfig 411-414) and the inheritance plot (348-351), common to the Heimat genre, are revived once again in western productions like these. In *Wir können auch anders* (Detlev Buck, 1993) and *Das war der wilde Osten* vagabonds triumph, as in the Heimat film, whe-

reas each comedy reaches resolution with a community fete, mirroring the festive closure of the earlier genre (Höfig 294-299).

Eastern backed and produced unification films eschew this equation of the East and Heimat. *Bis zum Horizont und weiter* satirises this western tendency to align the East with the rural idyll and East Germans' presumed affinity with nature. In one scene Heimat imagery introduced: Katja reclines in a sunny meadow, and the scene is imbued with romantic serenity. But in the second shot, when Katja awakens from her slumber, the Heimat setting is despoiled, again by massive electricity towers. Elsewhere when Katja travels through the countryside in exile, she sample some of the fruits of the forest. But the plant food she tries to ingest is inedible and she spits it out in bitter disgust.

Whereas in western productions the 'true' East is imaged as a region that abounds in natural beauty, with picaresque country scenery unscathed by the exigencies of the industrial age, in eastern productions the „new“ states are regularly depicted as the antithesis of Heimat: a desolute, de-industrialised wasteland. As Walter and Sylvia remark in *Wege in die Nacht*, it is no longer recognisable: „It's like the hereafter ... the kingdom of the dead.“

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