The Aesthetics of a Collapsing Border

The Fall of the Berlin Wall in German Cinema

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Abstract

This article is a diachronic study of the fall of the Berlin Wall as it has been represented in German fiction films from 1989 until 2010. The focus is on the formal features of the inclusion of the event in filmic narratives and on the reactions by film critics to the representations. By studying the aesthetics of representation and the reactions and expectations expressed by critics, it is possible to trace the ways in which the event has changed from a sacrosanct experience, vividly remembered, to a historical affair of little controversy. At the same time, the article also depicts a change in the representations themselves. Starting with gritty realism, the films turn to ironic hyperbole in their depictions of the fall from around 1999. After 2003, however, the unreal representations give way to generic dramas that adhere to strictly conventional narratives and aesthetics. This, the article concludes, coincided with the transformation of the memories of the event from communicative to cultural.

Keywords

Germany – Berlin Wall – 9 November 1989 – history – memory – cinema

In 1989, East Germans revolted against the Communist leadership which eventually responded by dismantling the German-German border regime. From 9 November Berlin’s East German border could be safely negotiated. The revolution was a fact and it was televised live around the world. The Berlin Wall’s symbolism during the Cold War was immense. Its dismantling preceded the televised revolutions of Czechoslovakia and Romania and it surpassed them in emotional symbolism and political significance. The recordings from the opening of the Berlin Wall have been relentlessly recycled in Germany ever since: original footage from November 1989 portraying the collapse of the border
regime has appeared frequently in news programs and documentaries. At the same time, the opening of the German–German border has featured in a large number of German fiction films produced for television and cinema.

This article examines the symbolic afterlife of the event in German cinema. It probes, firstly, how the fall of the Wall has been represented in German feature films, and, secondly, opinions on how the Wall *should* have fallen. The diachronic study of how the fall of the Berlin Wall has been represented and how the expectations to such representations have changed over time sheds new light on how the highly symbolic dismantling of the Wall has been remembered in Germany. It is argued that the first cinematic attempts at representing it hesitated to show the actual event, but concentrated instead on tangentially approaching the experience of the collapse of the GDR, with authentic images as the preferred medium when representing the fall of the Wall. Only towards the end of the 1990s did German cinema turn to hyperbole, irony, and satirized reenactments in depicting the tumbling Berlin Wall. Initially, film critics were skeptical of films that did not stick to traditional realism as it conflicted with their memories of the event; however, come the new millennium, such unrealistic reenactments had lost their provocative potential. A decade later, it appears that the opening of the Berlin Wall has become an uncontroversial story with predominantly positive connotations in German cinema. This, the article concludes, has to do with the waning of personal memories of the actual event and the gradual surmounting of the German–German division.

**Cinema and Memory in Unified Germany**

In unified Germany cinema is intimately related with the process of remembering the GDR past. Several institutions endorse films as a source of historical knowledge. Deutsche Film- und Medienbewertung, an independent assessor of films’ quality, has recurrently bestowed films about the GDR past with the accolade “valuable” (*wertvoll*) or “particularly valuable” (*besonders wertvoll*) which distributors embrace in their film promotion. The Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung regularly produces education material to accompany the use of history films in schools. A large study of schoolchildren’s historical knowledge about the GDR showed that 89 percent of pupils in the East and 86 percent of those in the West had seen films about the GDR past (Deutz-Schroeder and Schroeder 2008: 195). As documentaries and features films have become increasingly accessible on a wide range of private television channels, official broadcast websites, YouTube, DVDs, streaming services, and through illegal download networks, they now reach a far greater audience than an
artefact on display at a museum, or a history book in a local library (Hughes-Warrington 2007: 1). The institutions traditionally tasked with preserving and disseminating knowledge about the past—archives, libraries, monuments, and museums—are being superseded by visual media in terms of permeation. Even German state television’s role for the historical culture has been “undermined by the rise of commercial television and German unification,” as Wulf Kansteiner has shown (2004: 587).

With Jan Assmann’s terminology of cultural and communicative memory we can argue that cinema has become a central media for the dissemination of cultural memories of the GDR. In his seminal article on collective memory he defined cultural memory as “maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)” (1995: 129). The interpretations of the past inscribed in cultural artefacts (such as films) and institutional (cinema) practices tend to prove stable over time. In the case of the highly symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall, it is therefore particularly interesting to query if and how the representations of the event also lean towards stabilization over time.

However, a study of films and the institutions that surround them do not provide the full picture of a historical culture. Only reception studies, “the ogre that awaits every cultural historian” as Alon Confino memorably put it (1997: 1395), can inform the historian about the actual significance of a cultural artefact. The study of cultural artefacts’ permeation and reception allows for insights into how the more personal and temporally circumscribed memories—what Assmann termed the communicative memories—relate to the representations conveyed through the artefacts. These everyday reactions are ephemeral and difficult to pin down. A study of film reviews does not allow for wide-reaching conclusions about cinema and memory. After all, the newspaper review is a narrow genre that reflects only the judgments and expectations of a certain journalistic elite. Nevertheless, it is one of the few sources available to the film historian and as I demonstrate in the analysis below, it can provide incisive evidence for changing perceptions of a symbolic event like the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The first decade of German film production following the fall of the Wall was largely dominated by popular genre productions that inspired very different reactions from critics and academics. Some celebrated the success of German romantic comedies, action films, and literary adaptations as proof that German cinema could finally compete with Hollywood after years of the New German Cinema’s depressing auteur films with limited appeal (Pinkert 2008: 203–204). Others agreed with Eric Rentschler, who in an often quoted article dismissed unified Germany’s cinema as a harmless and unambitious cinema of consensus (Rentschler 2000). Since the turn of the century, however,
a new batch of films has appeared that engage in more serious social, political, and historical reflection. A large number of feature films either have been set in the GDR past or have problematized the ghosts of the past in post-Wall Germany. Concurrently, the study of contemporary German cinema has experienced a renaissance.

Numerous studies have examined the German films that skillfully thematized the recent past, while at the same time managing to successfully address the contemporary challenges faced by their audiences across a unified Germany (see, for example, Cooke 2005; Hodgin 2011; O’Brien 2012; Frey 2013). Three films succeeded, more than any other to ignite popular and academic debates about the East German past—Sonnenallee/Sun Alley (Haussmann 1999), Goodbye, Lenin! (Becker 2003), and Das Leben der Anderen/The Lives of Others (Donnersmarck 2006). These films all struck such a chord with the millions of Germans who saw them that their narratives and images infused the debate over reunification with new, shared visions of the recent past (Lindenberger 2011b). However, this article is less about the GDR past and the question of East German identity at the heart of the aforementioned monographs.

Rather than look at the more controversial cinematic accentuation of the past, I focus instead on the representation of a specific historical event, the fall of the Berlin Wall, in German cinema. The films analyzed here range from idiosyncratic low-budget productions to large commercial enterprises intended for wide domestic and international distribution. By tracing the changes and continuities in representations of the fall of the Berlin Wall in a varied selection of feature films, and by contrasting these representations with their reception by film critics, it is possible to obtain new insights into the visual afterlife of the Berlin Wall, and into the meanings images of the wall acquired in unified Germany’s memory landscape.

The Media and the Fall of the Berlin Wall

For the East German population in 1989, one event clearly stood out as the harbinger of the beginning of the end of communism. During the summer, tens of thousands of citizens had fled to the West through Hungary’s open borders and the West German embassy in Prague. The Monday demonstrations in Leipzig and other cities had grown in size week by week since they began in September. But it was the press announcement by a perplexed Günter Schabowski on 9 November 1989 that set things irreversibly in motion. Once Schabowski had declared the German–German border open to the East
Germans, the genie could only be forced back into the bottle with the help of excessive violence—which the GDR leaders and border guards hesitated to apply. The revolution did not end with 9 November, of course. The Monday demonstrations continued to call for free democratic elections, but with the Wall gone, East Germans voted with their feet and thus undermined the East German state—as had been the case in the lead-up to the erection of the Wall in 1961. The East Germans wanted a quick reunification, and found an ally in the West German chancellor Helmut Kohl. Eleven months later, after tense international negotiations over the future of Germany in Europe and the world, a unified Germany emerged on 3 October 1990.

As the most palpable measure taken by the GDR to discourage its citizens from abandoning the state, the Berlin Wall became a loathed icon of the Cold War (Drechsel 2010). After its erection, the ever expanding grey concrete monument and the death strip running parallel with it came to embody the regime’s aura of permanence. The German–German border became a simple fact of life, even in the rural regions where it constituted a most abnormal rupture in the landscape (Berdahl 1999: 149–151). As Thomas Lindenberger (2011a) has pointed out, the pessimism ran so deep that the end of the Cold War was barely envisaged as anything but apocalyptic. Optimistic fantasies about the reunification of a divided Germany were few and far between.

With the advent of television in the decades following the Second World War, significant historical events became increasingly associated with live images of those events. Roland Barthes polemically wrote about the coverage of May 1968 that “it was the event itself,” and Baudrillard controversially suggested that the First Gulf War was a media event—the war itself never really took place (cited in Manghani 2008: 43). Evidently, Baudrillard was wrong, but he was right that television images exercised a tremendous power by shaping the public understanding and subsequent remembering of significant events (at least until smartphone cameras and social media made everybody a potential journalist). Much suggests that this is equally true of the fall of the Berlin Wall. What was captured that evening in Berlin in the live television coverage by baffled journalists, who combined vox-pop interviews with grainy point-of-view camera shots of the celebrating crowds, became a metonym for the opening of the German-German border.

Footage from the border opening in the provinces does exists, and it is a fact that the intra-German border could also be crossed from 1 a.m. on 10 November, which led to long queues of Trabants waiting to enter West Germany (Childs 2001: 88); yet since many domestic and international television crews were stationed in Berlin and could quickly begin to transmit events live as they unfolded there, it was Berlin that became the center for the production of images of the
event. And since the Berlin Wall was already a potent political icon of the Cold War, it is understandable that images from remote rural border crossings never attained the same iconic status as the recordings from Berlin. In millions of homes around the world, and in the areas of East and West Germany where people could not go and see for themselves, the images of the Wall and the Berlin cityscape became synonymous with the opening of the German–German border, and ultimately with the decisive moment of the peaceful East German revolution. From the very outset, the experience of the border opening was largely fixed by the television images from Berlin—in other words, the cultural memories of the event inscribed in the media images influenced people’s everyday communicative memories. This relationship between individual experience and cultural memory has been examined by a couple of films that depicted the fall of the Wall, including the first film to feature it: *Stilles Land*.

### Counter-Images of the Revolution in *Stilles Land*

The first fiction film to depict the fall of the Berlin Wall was the young East German director Andreas Dresen’s full-length feature debut *Stilles Land/Silent Country* in 1992. According to Dresen, the film was intended to provide an everyday perspective on events—one markedly different from the dramatic images of suppressed demonstrations and the opening of the border in Berlin.\(^1\) *Stilles Land* begins in the early autumn of 1989 when a young ambitious theater director, Kai, arrives in a small Pomeranian town decided to stage Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. With earnest realism, the story of Kai and his frustration with the motley crew of amateurs evolves at an unhurried pace. The new political winds are subtly registered and hitherto repressed opinions slowly surface in the secluded town. The artists organize a tiny demonstration, but it barely attracts the attention of the local police who are more concerned with a radio transmission. The impassive police officers and their disengaged dialogue subtly challenges the dramatic images of ruthless attacks on peaceful demonstrations in Leipzig, Dresden, and other East German cities from September 1989.

True to the isolated atmosphere of the town built up during the first fifty minutes of the film, the plot continues to unfold without much drama or spectacle. Thus, the actual fall of the Wall is witnessed only by watching West German broadcasts, and so far from Berlin and West Germany the television reception is poor. Just a single, long shot of a distorted television screen is

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\(^1\) Interview with Dresen in the magazine *TIP* vol. 21, 1992. Quoted in the booklet included in the Filmgalerie 451 DVD release of *Stilles Land* (2007), unpagedinated.
shown in the film when the Wall falls; the only audible words spoken are “Wahnsinn” over the sound of chisels already working to bring down the concrete. Then the reception fails completely, and the troupe remains frustratingly disconnected from the outside world in their remote theater. After a futile attempt to reach Berlin in the company’s battered bus, they face the fact that history will be written without their presence. The exuberance is short-lived, the exalted freedom soon comes to a grinding halt. At this point the film cuts to the morning after the revolution. A close-up of the television screen reveals an improved reception. Inebriated crowds are singing on screen, whilst the troupe lie tired around the room among empty bottles. A young member of the group had gone to Berlin to get an antenna before the border was opened and ended up spending a night in custody. In the wake of the intervening events, he is now heard elaborating on his story, making it increasingly heroic. With this scene, Dresen subtly comments on the tendency to dramatize revolutionary events in retrospect and to inscribe oneself in a collective narrative of courageous resistance.

Dresen’s incorporation of the fall of the Berlin Wall into the film’s plot is striking in a number of ways. First, *Stilles Land* illustrates the fact that it was an event propelled by live television. The characters in *Stilles Land* struggle to connect with the events taking place in the East German capital, and the poor television signal makes it painfully clear how they are sidetracked while history unfolds elsewhere. Second, Dresen eschews the iconic images already so familiar to German audiences in 1992. The only original footage to appear on screen in the film is the few seconds of distorted television broadcast from West Berlin. The ecstatic celebrations in Berlin are not mirrored in the town, but are first gazed at with disbelief, and then resignation takes over as the bus breaks down en route to the capital. Noticeably, the film makes little use of ex-diegetic sound to enhance the audience’s emotional response to the plot: for instance, no music accompanies the scenes when the first border crossings are witnessed on television. The only dramatic situation experienced firsthand (but off-screen) by a member of the cast is when he is arrested in Berlin, and even he is released the following day having not been ill-treated by the police.

On the whole, the film counterbalances the Berlin-centered images of events. Out in the sticks there were no memorable demonstrations, no iconic police violence, and the television reception was so poor that it was almost impossible to watch the broadcasts from Berlin. The narrative structure of Dresen’s history of the everyday does not present the fall as a revolutionary climax. The German–German border collapses but neither as the dénouement, unlike the majority of productions representing the fall of the Berlin Wall, nor as a starting-point to set the scene of the film, as was the case in a some more
recent productions. Melancholic music accompanies the end sequence as a lonely Kai trudges down a rainswept country road. Initially, the music accentuates the gloom, but then it shifts from minor to major, and the final image of a smiling Kai alone in the theater conveys a sense of hesitant optimism despite the uncertain future awaiting him and his native country. Dresen’s version of history shuns the dominant, Berlin-centered cultural memories of the revolution, and depicts events as they were also experienced on the ground.

*Stilles Land* was well received at film festivals in the first half of 1992, but struggled to find a distributor. When a few copies finally reached German theaters, the reviews were predominantly positive. The film’s self-reflexive approach, subverting clichés about the Stasi state and the “glorious” revolution, spoke to critics of all ages and backgrounds, and was lauded especially by those who had lived under the East German regime for providing an honest account of everyday life there. *Stuttgarter Zeitung*’s review encapsulated it well: “*Stilles Land* is not a satire, but a precise observation of the schizophrenia of the GDR ... and neither is it a nostalgic film” (“tki” 1992).² *Tagesspiegel* agreed that the film “gives a realistic image of autumn 1989 from the perspective of GDR citizens” (Paul 1992). *Berliner Morgenpost* hailed its “precise observation of everyday details” (Elterlein 1992), and the legendary East German film critic Horst Knietzsch noted in *Neues Deutschland* that the film “is an ambitious artistic testimony to the people in the GDR in the days of the system change of 1989/90” (Knietzsch 1992). Between the lines of these reviews, one can read a clear satisfaction with the film’s alternative portrayal of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a necessary corrective to the standard television images. Somewhat ambiguously, the experienced East German filmmaker Dietmar Hochmuth noted in the *Freitag* that “the original images are terribly worn; yet the fictitious images have a hard time against them” (Hochmuth 1992), indicating a need for complementary perspectives on the event, yet admitting the difficulties that faced dissenters in the maelstrom of staple media images. From the reviews, we sense a need for correcting what by 1992 had become the pervasive cultural memories of the event, preferably by articulating commonplace communicative memories.

**Das Versprechen** and “How It Actually Was”

Also the next film to be considered was prompted by a strong urge to show hitherto neglected aspects of the fall of the Wall. Shortly after the fall of the
Wall, Margarethe von Trotta—a renowned filmmaker of the New German Cinema generation—began work on a script for *Das Versprechen/The Promise* (1995). The film depicts a couple separated for 28 years by the Berlin Wall who ultimately meet again on 9 November when the Wall falls. Trotta expected her film to be one of many to deal with the fall of the Wall, and her prediction was not wholly mistaken. When *Das Versprechen* opened the Berlin Film Festival in 1995, *Stilles Land* had already reached screens, and later in 1995 the television film *Nikolatkirche* (Beyer 1995) depicted events in Leipzig in the run-up to the border opening. The new political and economic situation following reunification had been the premise for a number of films such as the Trabi comedies *Go Trabi Go* (Timm 1991) and *Go Trabi Go 2—Das war der wilde Osten/That was the Wild East* (Büld and Klooss 1992), the deadpan road movie *Wir können auch anders/No More Mr. Nice Guy* (Buck 1993), the slasher satire *Das deutsche Kettensägenmassaker*, and the neo-realist drama *Ostkreuz* (Klier 1991). Moreover, several of the final DEFA productions had contemplated the end of the East German state including *Letztes aus der Da Da eR/Latest from the Da Da eR* (Foth 1990), *Jana und Jan* (Dziuba 1992) and *Herzsprung* (Misselwitz 1992). What none of these films did, however, was to engage directly with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps because the event had been so thoroughly reported in the media and in documentary films, feature filmmakers felt they had little to add.3 In any case, *Das Versprechen* was eagerly anticipated as the first film fully devoted to the history of the Berlin Wall, and expectations were sky high. Trotta herself contributed to the excitement by declaring that she wanted to get to the “truth” of 9 November 1989 with her film (Seidel 1995).

The film follows Sophie and Konrad, a young couple who endeavor to flee from East to West Berlin after August 1961. Sophie succeeds, but Konrad’s attempt is foiled. Eventually he decides to stay in the GDR, where he pursues an academic career. In 1968 they meet at a conference in Czechoslovakia, but the crushing of the Prague Spring forces them to go their separate ways again. Nine months later Sophie gives birth to their child in West Berlin, but Konrad refuses to emigrate from the state that benevolently sponsors his research. In the 1980s Sophie begins a new relationship, while her son by Konrad, Alexander, regularly visits his father in East Berlin.

The final sequence of the film takes place on the night of the border opening. First, the film cuts to a high-angle shot of a border crossing. The street is packed with cheering crowds shouting and jumping up and down with

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3 See also Marc Silberman (1994) for an overview of the documentary films about the events and Reinhild Steingröver (2014) for reflections by DEFA directors on the film ideas they were unable to realize in unified Germany’s film industry.
excitement. The camera pans down through the crowd, catching the staple image of a light-blue Trabant entering West Berlin flanked by ordinary people dressed in winter clothes, before it zooms in on Sophie and Alexander, who is now a young man. He is excited, whereas Sophie appears unable to enjoy the spectacle.

The setting resembles the original television footage with its bleak, gloomy tones and imitation of the eye-level medium and long shots that show journalists asking people to put their feelings into words. As on 9 November 1989, women offer flowers to the bemused border guards, and sekt bottles are merrily circulated between strangers. Notably, the entire sequence at the border crossing in Das Versprechen is a reenactment; not a single original image is spliced in to distort the homogeneous visual style. Save for the panning of the camera, Trotta’s “truth” does not appear much different from the “truth” of the television images. Like Stilles Land, however, Das Versprechen is ambiguous about the fall of the Wall and avoids a happy ending. The euphoric scene as the wall comes down is accompanied by a lone trumpet over a melancholic synthesizer line, and when Sophie finally identifies the old beloved in the crowd, her face expresses melancholy on the freeze frame that fades to the end titles. Separated
for twenty-eight years, it is too late for them to patch over old wounds. A few scenes earlier, a journalist approached an older woman who seemed unmoved. “And you aren’t celebrating?” he asked. “For me it comes too late,” she answered bitterly. Thus the fall of the Wall concludes Das Versprechen, but not on a joyful note. In Trotta’s melodramatic epic the traumas left by decades of separation did not heal with the first taste of freedom. Her version of the truth about the fall of the Wall seemed to address not only the historical event itself, but also the contemporaneous disputes over reunification in the mid-1990s. If that was her ambition, it was nevertheless a point lost on the reviewers, who focused primarily on her decision to recreate the fall of the Wall.

And her decision to do so was roundly panned. Freitag dismissed her account of the opening of the Wall as kitsch, looking like a “celebratory parade” (Magenau 1995). In Tagesspiegel, the vivid memories prompted a similarly negative reaction: “that night in November, which everyone remember so well, as euphoria or as television image, exactly this legend, Margarethe von Trotta tries to reenact as a historical panorama ... with numerous extras and in the style of the painter Tübke. It can only fail. And fail it does” (Martenstein 1995). Frankfurter Allgemeine agreed that the film’s greatest shortcoming was the “jubilant army of extras” (Seidel 1995) and the decision to not use documentary material for the Wall scenes. Echoing Dietmar Hochmuth’s reaction to Stilles Land, the review in Berliner Morgenpost summed up the general reaction: “the documentary images from back then cannot be surpassed by a cinematic reenactment” (Strunz 1995). Thus what the reaction to Das Versprechen shows is a continued skepticism about the potential of a feature film to successfully challenge the standard television images of the event. The reviewers regarded the cultural memory of events in Berlin to be so deeply inscribed in the omnipresent footage that no film could supplant it—particularly not if the film depicted events that many reviewers had experienced firsthand and still remembered vividly in 1995. Thus, Trotta’s reenactment was considered ridiculous because of the insurmountable discrepancy between people’s personal memories and the emotive, yet steriley orchestrated scenes. When asked why she chose to reenact the fall, Trotta answered, “because there are no reasonable images” (Geißler 1995). Dissatisfied with the “fumbling and zooming” (Seidel 1995) of the original footage, she wanted to present “the truth” of that first night using panorama shots and steady cam. Her adamant attitude nevertheless defeated her purpose in the eyes of the reviewers. While Andreas Dresen had staged a peripheral experience that had eluded the cameras in 1989, Margarethe von Trotta tried to displace the images of the real event—so vividly remembered by reviewers and repeated endlessly on television—with simulacra, while claiming her version to be truer. Artistically, the attempt was considered a
disaster, and with a mere 210,000 tickets sold in German cinemas the film did not leave much of a mark on cultural memories of the fall of the Wall.

A New Plurality in *Helden wie wir*

In 1995, Thomas Brussig published the burlesque novel *Helden wie wir*, whose narrator claimed to have brought down the Berlin Wall. The book quickly became a bestseller and a screen adaption was planned, but it took three years to find the right director (Marquardt 1999). In the meantime, the fall of the Wall was still avoided in feature films. After the media’s castigation of Margarethe von Trotta, it seemed that no one dared touch the subject. When the film version of *Helden wie wir/Heroes like us* (Peterson 1999) finally premiered on the symbolic date of 9 November 1999, it was a far cry from the sensitive realism of *Stilles Land* and the truth-seeking ambitions of *Das Versprechen*. Abandoning realism for the surreal and fantastic, the film incorporated 9 November 1989 in its narrative in the most spectacular way seen in German cinema hitherto.

The film opens with original footage from the night of the border opening accompanied by Louis Armstrong’s standard, “What a Wonderful World.” An optimistic song originally conceived in the anxious political and racial climate of the US in the late 1960s, it has since been used in contrast with very violent images, most memorably in *Good Morning, Vietnam* (Levinson 1987) and *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore 2002). In *Helden wie wir*, the use of Armstrong’s song initially invites the audience to revel in an end-of-history reading of the fall of the Wall: the illegitimate regime crumbled, the Wall collapsed, and suddenly a separated people were united in joy. After one minute of original footage and Armstrong’s caressing voice, the film changes to slow-motion and a voice-over explains: “I'm under no illusions. No one will believe my story. But those who don't know my story won’t understand what’s going on with Germany. I, Klaus Uhltscht, have opened the Berlin Wall.” On screen, a cheerful young man appears in the midst of the celebration in West Berlin. The visual style follows on from the preceding original footage, but when the camera tilts down it reveals that the man is naked from the waist down, and a large censor bar between his legs indicates genitals of gigantic proportions. Using the post-production techniques most famously employed in *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis 1994), the protagonist appears in the midst of the historical event, and this, together with the ridiculous claims of the narrator, the slow-motion, and the music, undermines the initial grandeur of the event and calls into question the familiar television images of the fall of the Berlin Wall.
The remainder of the film remains ambiguous in its narrative and visual style. In a Plattenbau flat, cartoon images appear outside the windows. The protagonist’s birth is shown in a black-and-white montage combined with archive images of the Soviet tanks crushing the Prague Spring. The history of the GDR is quickly recapitulated in a Super 8-style montage accompanied by funky upbeat music and an ironic voice-over commenting on the achievements of the regime. Original news footage is occasionally spliced into the diegesis, and the visual style often switches between high-quality 35 mm and grainier images resembling original television footage. Like Forrest Gump, the protagonist in Helden wie wir is shown attending and influencing a number of important historical events, and at the end we finally see how he caused the fall of the Berlin Wall by distracting the border guards with his nudity and thus allowed the crowd to push open the gate. This sequence is once again accompanied by Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” and concludes with a montage of original television images from the border opening. All the iconic situations are included in the happy ending: spontaneous hugs between strangers, singing, clapping, crying, sekt drinking, women kissing border guards, people celebrating standing on the Wall, and Trabants driving into West Berlin flanked by cheering crowds.

Helden wie wir was the first film deliberately to mock the images of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Stilles Land provided a realistic take on the events experienced in the province, Das Versprechen strived to encapsulate the atmosphere in Berlin on the night of the fall as realistically as possible, and both films avoided an unthinking celebration of the historical event and added a touch of ambiguity, for instance through the use of melancholic music; Helden wie wir, meanwhile, made no attempt to achieve a realist ambience. Its frequent changes of visual style drew attention to the different aesthetics employed, and thus questioned the importance of the mass media for how the event entered people’s cultural memories. Its unreliable narrator challenged not only the iconic images, but also the traditional idea of cause and effect behind the fall of the Wall.

Where Das Versprechen received a unanimous pasting from German critics, Helden wie wir’s cornucopia of visual styles and tongue-in-cheek gags provoked reactions of all sorts, from the dismissive to the unconditionally approving. Several critics questioned the fundamental ethics of the representation, and asked whether it was acceptable to make a commercial comedy about the GDR. Although no one went so far as to judge it downright offensive, a growing fear of “Ostalgie” (nostalgia for the East) permeates the more skeptical reviews. Of primary interest here, however, is the reaction to the way the fall of the Wall is represented. Frankfurter Allgemeine’s reviewer was disturbed by the opening
scene’s black-and-white images, and considered them a cheap way to create an impression of authenticity. Moreover, he found the use of Armstrong’s song simplistic compared to how it was employed in Good Morning, Vietnam (Platthaus 1999). Frankfurter Rundschau was also critical of the use of Armstrong’s tune, but acknowledged that its pleasingly conciliatory mood might encourage the “audiences of East and West to hug one another like they once did at the gates of the Wall” (Rall 1999). However, the fact that the song was perhaps intended to stimulate this uncanny feeling and subvert the imagery so frequently used did strike one reviewer (Skasa-Weiß 1999). Otherwise, the fall of the Wall was generally considered to have gone off reasonably well, and was not a target for unfavorable comments. As Süddeutsche Zeitung’s reviewer observed, “the film repeatedly uses documentary material and makes it—for instance, at the fall of the Wall—imperceptibly slide into the fictitious scenes, and makes the fictitious scenes look like documents of the time” (Gansera 1999), and that pleased the film critic.

Compared to the critical reaction to Das Versprechen, it is striking to see the plurality of reactions that met Helden wie wir. While some appreciated the use of documentary footage and its blending into the diegesis, others objected to this instrumental attempt to achieve authenticity. Ten years on from the fall of the Berlin Wall, and there was still no consensus about which aesthetics should apply in its representation. It seemed that the communicative memories of that special night were already waning, having lost their sacrosanct status. Certainly, this time not a single reviewer objected that the film failed to communicate “how it really was.” Or perhaps the German audience was now ready to accept films that refused to recycle the atmosphere of the all-too-familiar television images. Helden wie wir might not have sold more than 200,000 tickets, but in its wake followed a number of reasonably, even very, successful German feature films such as Sonnenallee, Die Stille nach dem Schuss/The Legend of Rita (Schlöndorff 2000), Die Unberührbare/No Place to Go (Roehler 2000), Berlin is in Germany (Stöhr 2001), and Good Bye, Lenin!, all of which dealt with the fall of the Berlin Wall in new, creative ways. Ultimately, a few years into the new millennium, the reviewers’ aesthetic expectations of a film showing the fall of the Berlin Wall had relaxed to the extent where a reenactment could pass almost unnoticed, as we shall now see.

A Grand Theater: Herr Lehmann’s Reunification Party

Leander Haussmann’s comedy Herr Lehmann/Berlin Blues (Haussmann 2003) was based on the eponymous novel by Sven Regener from 2001 and provided a
new perspective on the fall of the Wall. This time, the historical event was depicted purely from a Western point of view, and one that was peculiarly disengaged.

The film tells the story of Herr Lehmann, a single 29-year-old, and his assorted friends and acquaintances in late Eighties’ West Berlin. The greater part of the film is composed of odd conversations fuelled by the protagonists’ considerable intake of alcohol. To the main character, the working-class and bohemian quarter of Kreuzberg is the center of the universe. West Germany is a different country, and the neighboring East behind the Wall barely features on the mental maps of these West Berliners. For this reason, the film was sometimes regarded as nostalgic for the old West Berlin, a counterpart to the much debated “Ostalgie” films such as Sonnenallee and Goodbye, Lenin!

In Herr Lehmann, the wall falls as the protagonist has reached a nadir. Left by his girlfriend and with his best friend hospitalized after a nervous breakdown, Herr Lehmann celebrates his thirtieth birthday on a solitary drinking spree. An unkempt woman enters the bar and announces the Wall is open. Her pronouncement barely attracts the attention of the intoxicated guests, but the bartender switches on the television. The first reaction to the images of East Germans crossing into West Berlin is “They’re all coming over,” but the bartender retorts indifferently: “Yeah, somebody mentioned that.” Someone suggests that they should go and see what is happening, and Herr Lehmann reluctantly follows, after finishing his beer. Out on the street he is quickly carried towards the Wall by a stream of people accompanied extradi-egetically by Cake’s popular 1996 cover of Gloria Gaynor’s disco hit “I Will Survive,” a version which exudes a conciliatory optimism similar to “What a Wonderful World.” The extras present at the Wall do not resemble the collage of ordinary people, old and young, from East and West, seen in the original television images; they look rather like elated hipsters convening for an illegl street party, and even the few older people act out of age, high-fiving passers-by. As Herr Lehmann approaches the festivities at the Wall, a piece of it is removed by a crane and additional extras flow into the West in something resembling a Pride parade. An androgynous dancer in angelic disguise on top of the Wall enhances the queer atmosphere. The colorful reenactment of the fall in Herr Lehmann is a far cry from the realism of Stilles Land and Das Versprechen.

On its release in October 2003, Herr Lehmann met with mixed reactions, but most reviewers found the depiction of Kreuzberg in the 1980s amusingly precise. This time, however, the reenactment of fall of the Wall barely provoked any reaction. “The Wall falls at the end and you hear a new funny dialect,” wrote Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger (Kaspar 2003), while Tagesspiegel simply noted
that “with the opening of the Wall, the novel and the film, and the Eighties in general, are over” (Martenstein 2003). Frankfurter Rundschau found it obvious that the film would end with “a big scene with extras, and with a piece of the Wall removed, exactly like a moment of great theater” (Kothenschulte 2003), and to the reviewer in Frankfurter Allgemeine it was clear that “it is not only about historical authenticity, but about the extension of a life experience into the present—fall or not” (Althen 2003). The only objection to the scenes showing the fall of the Wall came from Berliner Zeitung, which argued that the cheerful scenes on the night of the fall rang false. The actual reaction by the inhabitants of Berlin's Kreuzberg district had first been “a lack of interest, then fear, and then paranoia and disgust” (Balzer 2003), and none of the optimism shown in Herr Lehmann. This caveat does not alter the fact that the principal reaction of the reviewers was utter indifference towards the aesthetic choices pertaining to the fall of the Wall in a film that brought in more than 700,000 people to German cinemas.

Since 2003, the fall of the Berlin Wall has figured repeatedly in German feature films such as Liebe Mauer/Never Mind the Wall (Timm 2009) and Friendship! (Goller 2010), in successful television fiction such as Wir sind das Volk—Liebe kennt keine Grenzen/The Final Days (Berger 2008), Das Wunder von Berlin/The Miracle of Berlin (Suso Richter 2008), and Jenseits der Mauer/Beyond the Wall (Fromm 2009). The clear tendency evident in all these productions is a representational ossification of the event, with the opening of the German–German border on 9 November 1989 repeatedly represented as a Berlin-centered story involving the stereotypical images of celebration. In these narratives, the Wall's collapse represents the end of an illegitimate regime and the elated reunification of a people. Rarely do they show the morning after the revolution with all its uncertainties, and rarely do they allude to the troubled reunification process that was to follow. The fall of the Berlin Wall has become a plot device used to resolve all complications in the narrative, a plot device that comfortably allows the filmmakers to deliver a happy ending.

From a visual point of view, recent productions contain no attempts to employ new creative aesthetics, but use original footage or reenact the fall in highly schematic ways. Even a crowdfunded mockumentary like This Ain't California (Persiel 2012) fits this pattern. The film about the skateboard subculture in East Berlin in the 1980s was composed of assumedly amateur Super-8 material and edited in a rampant music video pace. Its documentary found footage pretentions originally confounded the German film journalists and in that respect, the film was indeed a novelty in German cinema. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it soon became clear that the filmmakers claim to having found the material could not hold. In the “making of” material included on the
DVD, the crew eventually admitted to having filmed and processed most of the material with Super-8 filters. The initial untruths about the provenance of the material undoubtedly helped the film achieve its aim: to depict the East German skateboard subculture as vividly as possible. Yet for the new footage to pass as old, it was necessary to blend it with familiar images that provided the socio-political context. Thus, even an aesthetically innovative production as *This Ain't California* eventually resorted to a typical fall of the wall montage comprising images of peaceful demonstrators and a jubilant crowd at an opened border crossing.

It seems that the boom in innovative visualizations of the fall seen between 1999 and 2003 has given way to hackneyed narrative and visual structures. Only on the fringes, in documentaries and experimental cinema, do we find inventive approaches to the representation of the fall of the Wall. Bartek Konopka's Polish-German documentary *Królik po berlinsku/Rabbit à la Berlin Konopka* from 2009 depicted Berlin's postwar history through the eyes of its lagomorph inhabitants. The film mocks nature documentaries with its numerous close-ups of cuddly rabbits and a calm narrator explaining historical events from the perspective of the critters. When the wall goes up, the rabbits living in the border zone were sealed off in a habitat secluded from the hazards of the humans. East German border guards were only allowed to shoot at their compatriots. For the animals, the death strip before the wall was a safe haven. As in *This Ain't California*, old and new footage is blended together and it is never clear which is which. Similarly, the voice-over effaces the border between the profound and the ironic. After the fall of the wall we are told that “many of the rabbits were homesick for their old meadow. For the place which had been theirs alone.” The rabbits' history serves as a parable of the East Germans’ post-war experiences to the extent that Erich Honecker is referred to as the “warden” of their paradise.

The tongue in cheek supplanting of rabbits for East Germans is reminiscent of the voice-over in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, which retold the events of 1989–90 with retrospective sarcasm. The civil rights demonstrators went for “an evening stroll for the right of borderless strolling” and Helmut Kohl and Willy Brandt’s jarring rendition of the national anthem the day after the fall became a “classical concert.” In both films, the narrator offers an ironic counterpoint to the emotionally loaded imagery. As Mattias Frey has observed about the voice-over in *Good Bye, Lenin!*: “with the benefit of hindsight, a wiser Alex [the protagonist] can identify his past follies and laugh them away” (2013: 114). The innocent story of Berlin’s bunnies is undergirded by a satirical narrative which dismisses the initial euphoria. No footage from the opening night is shown. Instead, a montage depicts the piecemeal deconstruction of the wall by wall.
peckers. Acoustically, the montage of the fall of the wall is accompanied by the sound to chisels rising to a crescendo and spliced with images of frightened rabbits. In Królik po berlinsku, the fall of the wall does not deliver a happy ending, but a crisis eventually resolved in the final sequence that shows the evacuation of urban rabbits to tranquil pastures.

Conclusion

“Just four years after unification,” writes Rudy Koshar, “less was left of the Berlin Wall in its original place than of the Emperor Hadrian’s Wall, designed more than eighteen hundred years previously” (2000: 3). For a while, the Berlin Wall was all but eradicated from the Berlin cityscape. “Die Mauer muss weg” was the cry from the very first, and East and West Berliners were soon wielding their chisels with delight. It was not until 1999 that Berlin completed its Wall memorial (Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer) and an adjoining information center (Knischewski and Spittler 2006), but since then border museums, monuments, and memorials have mushroomed along the old German–German border (Knischewski and Spittler 2010), and a number of local, short-term projects have made visible the otherwise strangely absent Berlin Wall in the capital’s cityscape (Saunders 2009). This article has traced the filmic representations of the fall of the Berlin Wall concurrent with the changes in the memorial landscape to argue that, in the realm of cinema at least, the fall has changed from a vividly remembered recent event to an uncontroversial occurrence that belongs firmly in the past. The process first began with Andreas Dresen’s Stilles Land, where the Wall fell quietly and far from the isolated province. In 1995 it fell with emotional opulence in Margarethe von Trotta’s Das Versprechen, but that was seen as being out of kilter with the expectations at the time of how it was supposed to fall—reviewers wanted none of the film’s vehemence and supposed clarity, but preferred Dresen’s eye-level realism, confusion, and, most of all, original television images. Individual memories of 9 November 1989 were still so vivid that any attempt to impose steady, high-angle shots was considered intrusive and disrespectful to the real event. In 1999 this had changed radically. When Sebastian Peterson’s film version of Helden wie wir opened, the film critics were unfazed by the assorted aesthetics or Peterson’s mocking treatment of the “revolting” crowds. Finally, when Herr Lehmann came out in 2003, it was generally accepted that the fall of the Berlin Wall could be represented as an unreal carnival; by some, this representational mode was even regarded a truer way of depicting events. The favoring of documentary images seemed to have waned considerably.
Since 2003, the creative cinematic interest in the fall of the Berlin Wall appears to have faded. Instead, television productions preferring schematic reenactments and adhering to strict realism dominate Germany’s film culture. Twenty-five years after the fall of the Wall, the communicative memories recede as the gap between the event and the present grows wider. Slowly, a certain visual and narrative version of events has been inscribed in cultural memories—a vision detached from the uncertainties of the reunification process tangible in Dresen in 1992 and Trotta in 1995, and detached from the heated debates about nostalgia for the East at the turn of the century to which Helden wie wir and Herr Lehmann alluded. Thus, as the controversies of the reunification process are gradually relegated to the backstage of the political theater, the fall of the Berlin Wall in popular feature films and television is identified with the peaceful ending of the Cold War. And thus it should not come as a surprise that the cultural memories of the event coagulate into stereotypical images, a narrative climax rather than the beginning of something new, although there are examples of documentaries and experimental productions which challenge this narrative. Time will show whether or not the new tensions between Russia and the West will imbue the fall of the Cold War icon with different layers of meaning.

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**Secondary Literature**


