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## **Berlin' Movies in Post-Wende Berlin and Germany**

Alissa Hope Nesbitt

*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Alissa Hope Nesbitt entitled "Berlin' Movies in Post-Wende Berlin and Germany." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in German.

Peter Höyng, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

David Lee, Charles Maland

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Charles Maland

Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew  
Vice Chancellor and  
Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

# **“Berlin” Movies in Post-*Wende* Berlin and Germany**

A Thesis Presented  
for the Master of Arts Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Alissa Hope Nesbitt  
December 2004

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank all of the professors from the German department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. They have been continually supportive and patient. I especially thank Dr. Peter Höyng for his encouragement over the years, especially in the drama and Berlin courses. My experience in Berlin will not soon be forgotten! I appreciate the time that the other members of the committee, Dr. Lee and Dr. Maland, have spent reading and correcting my thesis—especially at this busy time of the semester. In addition to these faculty members, I would like to thank Jason for his constant support over the past four years. My gratitude also goes out to Jenessa Hunter for setting the best possible example (academically and otherwise) and whipping me into shape.

### Abstract

Historian David Large concludes his narrative study of modern Berlin by questioning how Germans can come to terms with their new national identity. He suggests that the renewed political and social emphasis on Berlin may be key: “It might just be that Berlin, the city where the Germans have experienced the peaks and depths of their national experience, can help to show the way” (Large 647). One of the ways to see how Berlin and the German identity are interlocked is in the cinema, due to its influence on collective consciousness. Furthermore, films can also serve as a valid and timely medium for social and historical analysis. With this in mind, I have chosen four Berlin films: *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, *Lola rennt*, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, and *Good bye, Lenin!*, in order to analyze social, political, and economical aspects of life in Berlin after the fall of the Wall. In the first chapter, I give a brief historical overview of Berlin movies. After this introductory chapter I discuss how each film portrays the history and economy of reunited Berlin and how these images and emerging themes serve as vehicles for social and political commentary—especially on the topic of recent history and reunification. I then summarize how Wenders, Tykwer, and Becker chose to address the issue of Berlin’s and ultimately Germany’s tumultuous past and present and possibly, its future.

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“Berlin is a city that cries out for a sequel. Even though there are ties with the past everywhere, Berlin is also a city where you keep stubbing your toe on the future.”  
--Wim Wenders, 1987

## Introduction

Historian David Large concludes his narrative study of twentieth-century Berlin by asking how Germans can come to terms with their post-wall national identity. He suggests that the renewed political and social emphasis on Berlin may be key: “It might just be that Berlin, the city where the Germans have experienced the peaks and depths of their national experience, can help to show the way” (Large 647). One of the ways to see how Berlin and the issue of German identity are interlocked is through the cinema, not the least due to its reflection of collective consciousness. In *German National Cinema*, Sabine Hake explains the effect of film on society:

The place of the cinema at the centre of modern mass culture draws attention to its affinities with urbanism, consumerism, tourism, and distinctly modern sensibilities, and it underscores its changing constellations with working-class culture, white-collar culture, and youth culture. Likewise, the attention to film as an integral part of modern life expands the terms of historical analysis in productive ways. (Hake 3)

The important position that cinema holds in social discourse makes it a valid and timely medium for social and historical analysis. With this in mind, I would like to use the following four “Berlin films”<sup>1</sup> to analyze the city of Berlin after the fall of the wall:

*In weiter Ferne, so nah!* (1993) by Wim Wenders, *Lola rennt* (1998) by Tom Tykwer, as

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<sup>1</sup> In order to classify a film as a “Berlin movie,” we must first establish a working definition of this genre. I propose adopting the definition offered by Barton Byg, who is not only a film critic but also the curator of the DEFA (*Deutsche Film AG*) collection at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In an introduction to a film series simply entitled “Berlin films,” Byg presented these simple qualifications for a film to be considered a Berlin movie: “the film’s action and themes make Berlin the *only* possible setting” (Cafferty 267).



well as two movies by Wolfgang Becker: *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (1997) and *Good bye, Lenin!* (2003). Not only were these four films produced after the fall of the Berlin wall, but they also depict the momentous physical, social, and economic changes the city has undergone in this historic period known as the *Wende*.

In *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, Wim Wenders takes his characters from his first Berlin movie, *Der Himmel über Berlin*, and attempts to bestow upon them a new life. The trapeze-artist Marion settles down with Daniel, a former angel, and they seem to have started a “normal” life for themselves. The two have come from the romantic yet desolate Berlin of 1987 to the Berlin of 1993. As viewers, we experience their new lives through the wide, meandering gaze of Wenders’ camera and “the episodic narrative form which minimizes the importance of a story” (Graf 51). Wenders proceeds to comment on the effect of the new economy on the lives of Berliners. In this reunited Berlin, money seems to be one of the determining factors in the happiness of their lives (Bromley 71). The pursuit of money and its demoralizing effect is personified by the newly human Cassiel and his inadvertent entry into Berlin’s criminal underworld.

In contrast to the angels in *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, the titular character in *Lola rennt* does not, cannot and will not take the time to leisurely observe the city around her. I suggest that she is a sort of “anti-flaneur” who does not view the city with an open, appreciative gaze; instead, the city serves as a symbolically rich setting for her adventures. With Lola’s speed, director Tom Tykwer ultimately rejects the Benjaminian and Baudelairean experience of strolling through a modern metropolis. Berlin becomes a space of hindrances that need to be “conquered” in order to survive. Many critics have

compared Lola's Berlin to a game board, or even an interactive video game setting, in which random obstacles appear at every corner. Time and luck (or the lack thereof) are of the utmost importance.

*Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* and *Good bye, Lenin!* are the remaining two movies in my analysis. Both of these movies deal with life in Berlin and in reunified Germany (during and after the *Wende*), but even with some similarities (family structures, plot devices), they differ stylistically and thematically. Even more interestingly, both films were written and directed from the point of view of a "Wessi," Wolfgang Becker. Becker's 1997 film *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (alternately titled *Life as a Construction Site* or *Life is All You Get*) introduces us to twenty-something Jan Nebel, who lives with his sister, her boyfriend, and a niece in a *Plattenbau* in the former East Berlin. *Good bye, Lenin!*'s (2003) Alexander Kerner is in a similar situation, living with his sister, her boyfriend, a niece and his mother.

In both films, the dour setting of certain residential neighborhoods of former East Berlin stands in great contrast to the garish storefronts and advertisements of the West. There are shots of *Plattenbauten* with western images crudely attached to them: Calvin Klein ads are plastered on the construction sites around Jan's building, and Coca-cola and IKEA ads are unfurled on buildings in Alex's neighborhood. Alex's mother cannot believe that someone from West Germany is moving into her neighborhood, let alone her apartment building ("Ihr seid aus dem Westen?"<sup>2</sup>). Most importantly, their Berlin is certainly "eine Baustelle": construction sites and skeletal frame of buildings are highly

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<sup>2</sup> "You all are from the West?"

visible in both films, an altogether appropriate setting for these two stories of transformation, adjustment, and maturation.

In the first chapter, I will discuss the history of Berlin movies, and how they are situated in the history of Berlin and Germany itself. The films that are covered are a selection of important films from each era, and my list is by no means a conclusive one. After the introductory chapter which should help to place the four selected Berlin films into a greater historical context, I will present a discussion about how each film portrays the history and economy of reunited Berlin and how these images and emerging themes serve as vehicles for social and political commentary—especially on the topic of recent history and reunification. Finally, I ask what Wenders', Tykwer's, and Becker's films could mean to audiences in the future.

## Chapter I

### “Berlin Movies” and the Presence of History

An early instance of Berlin as a “character” in the plot of a film is Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphonie einer Großstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of the Big City*) (1927). By using a documentary-like style of photographic montages of the city’s daily life with musical accompaniment, *Symphonie einer Großstadt* became one of the first cinematic representations of Berlin as *the* modern metropolis. The film “reflected the progressive-republican hope that technological rationalization would translate into political and social advancement” (Large 209). *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*) (1929) also used a mix of documentary and narrative techniques to show the young and affluent denizens of Berlin enjoying their spare time. It was also one of the first directorial efforts of Billy Wilder (Hake 39).

*Metropolis* (1927) stands in opposition to *Symphonie*’s portrait of man and machine’s mutually beneficial coexistence. Instead, Fritz Lang shows us a city where the majority of the populace lives enslaved in a robotic underworld. *Metropolis* does not fit Byg’s definition of a Berlin film in that it could potentially take place in any large urban center; in fact, Lang said that he was inspired to make this film by the sight of the New York skyline (Large 198). Whatever Lang’s intention, it has traditionally been perceived as a filmic metaphor of modern Berlin and an allegory of Weimar-period society (Hake 34).

*Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931 by Piel Jutzi), based on the novel of the same title by Alfred Döblin (1929), allowed audiences to experience the seedier sides of the Weimar Berlin with the ultimately doomed Franz Biberkopf. This modernist narrative and the

filmic adaptations have served as the definitive *Großstadtroman* for the city of Berlin. Alfred Döblin was a doctor who served the poorest people in Berlin, and *Berlin: Alexanderplatz* gives us a glimpse of the city in which he worked. Biberkopf tries to find redemption in a city where prostitutes, pimps, and criminals control the streets. It is interesting to note that the area of the Alexanderplatz features prominently in one of the other Berlin films, *Good bye Lenin!*, almost sixty years later.

After the Weimar period, Berlin was not often seen in films until the end of World War II. The genre of the *Heimatfilm* (homeland film) became prominent because of their subtle glorification of the “blood and soil” Nazi ideology. These films emphasized the purity and beauty of life in the German countryside, especially the Bavarian Alps and the Rhineland. Berlin would not have been a logical setting for this genre of film, which has been called an “anti-modern diatribe” (Hake 79). One of the only times Berlin appeared in a film during the era of National Socialism was in Leo de Laforgue’s update of *Symphonie einer Großstadt, Symphonie einer Weltstadt* (*Symphony of a World City*) (1942). It has the dubious distinction of being the last film to show Berlin before Allied bombs destroyed most of it (Hake 80).

After the World War II, the Allies wanted to disband *UFA* (*Universum Film Aktion Gesellschaft*), the film studio that had exerted almost monopolistic power on German cinema from its inception in 1917. Not surprisingly, the Allied powers did not complete this huge undertaking until 1956. In their rebuilding of what soon became the West German film industry, the Hollywood model of competing studios initially prevailed (Hake 88). *DEFA* (*Deutsche Film Aktion Gesellschaft*), which was meant to replace *UFA*, was founded in Berlin in May 1946. *DEFA* eventually became a state-

owned company in East Germany with many ideological ties to the Socialist government. The Soviets allowed them to make *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers are Among Us*) (1946), the first feature film that contained images of the destroyed Berlin landscape and the first of the *Trümmerfilm* (rubble film) genre. Strangely, most directors did not utilize the city itself for *Trümmerfilme*; instead, these films were shot in the giant Babelsberg studios. Only *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*) (1947) by Gerhard Lamprecht, used footage shot in Berlin mixed with documentary footage of the city. West Germany's films in the post-war era focused little on the city of Berlin, generally avoiding references to the border and all locations within. (Hake 98).

The cinematic response to Germany's past finally came as a result of the Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962 and the development of the independent *Autorenkino* (Author's cinema)<sup>3</sup>. This new generation of directors,

as seen from this nostalgic vantage point, militated against collective forgetting, taking leave of a problematic national past by constantly problematising that past's presence, turning against mindless escapism and crude commercialism, insisting that films need not only serve as pliers of distraction but rather might operate as time machines and critical vehicles (Rentschler 263).

A member of the *Autorenkino* movement, Wim Wenders made the film that has been most associated with cold-war Berlin: *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*) (1987). Wenders and the Austrian writer Peter Handke collaborated on the script's poetic (and sometimes stilted) dialogue. The film was shot mainly in West Berlin with many of the

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<sup>3</sup> The *Autorenkino* was a rebellion against the declining film industry in Germany, which up to that point was turning out a great deal of *Heimatfilme* and pornography. The Manifesto contained three things: a critique of conventional (West) German filmmaking, a plan for the future of German cinema, and a list of demands for governmental support (Hake 144). The members of the *Autorenkino* movement were tired of the post-war Germany as a "country without images" (Koepnick 153). Films by members of the *Autorenkino* are some of the first films that started to directly address Germany's history (Rentschler 263)

main scenes taking place at or around the Berlin Wall. Wenders had initially applied for permission to shoot in East Berlin as well and received permission to do so, but the East German government reneged at the last minute (Bromley 74). Instead, Wenders utilizes aerial shots of East Berlin. Perhaps because of the limitations of location (and the angels, of course), Wenders has called this film his “vertical road movie” (Beicken and Kolker 152)

*Der Himmel über Berlin* follows the story of angels Daniel and Cassiel—first as they watch the inhabitants of the divided city, then as Daniel falls in love with the nomadic trapeze-artist Marion. He must choose between his angelic existence and the love of a woman. The semi-documentary sequences in which the angels fly are reminiscent of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement of the 1920s which was, “a means of representing the politically charged modernity of daily urban life” (Beicken and Kolker 143). Wenders received many accolades for *Der Himmel über Berlin*, including the *Palme d’Or* at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival. Retrospectively, it now serves as a “documentary movie” since it was shot shortly before the wall was opened.

In her book *German National Cinema*, Sabine Hake takes note of a “sea-change” of sorts in the German national cinema of the 1990s. From 1990 to 1997, Hollywood blockbusters took the top spot at German theaters. Because American movies like *When Harry met Sally* and *Home Alone* continually brought in the crowds, the German film industry took notice. By 1993, Germany’s film industry was producing a spate of light-hearted romantic comedies, despite (or perhaps, because of) the recent events in world history. A new *Erlebniskultur* (culture of diversion) took root in the mid 90s and its

cinema did not allow for films that dealt with difficult subjects—no more *Trauerarbeit* (dealing with tragic events of the past) (Levy and McCormick 193). Its attempt to merge Hollywood sensibilities and German bourgeois values was largely successful, but it left little room for historical drama or “experimental” films:

This division of labour between international tastes and preferences, as embodied by American popular culture, and regional and local sensibilities, as captured in the highly successful but basically unexportable filmic manifestations of German humour and sentimentality, left little room for the kind of formal innovation and critical reflection usually identified with art cinema (Hake 182).

Perhaps Berlin filmmakers were confronted with the past by merely walking outside, which could explain why the most significant films made in Germany from 1989 to 1993 were documentaries (Brady and Hughes 279).

Margarethe von Trotta’s 1995 film *Das Versprechen* (*The Promise*) was one of the few films that both deviated from the trend towards entertainment and dealt with reunified Berlin. It presents “the postwar division as the tragic story of two young lovers divided by ideology but meant to be united” (Hake 189). The film ends with the joyous reunification of Berlin, but the status of the lovers is left unclear. While the majority of the film takes place in Berlin (they also meet in Prague), the city serves mainly as a backdrop for their love story. It is an important film in that it departs from previous gender roles in Cold War-era Berlin films, where the victimized woman is usually trapped in East Germany. However, *Das Versprechen* has also been criticized as a sentimental look to the past with nothing new to say (Remler n. pag.)

Not all movies dealing with reunification were historical dramas. The genre of the so-called *Wiedervereinigungskomödie* (reunification comedy) exhibited a good



combination of the post-unification trend towards entertainment and the “ethos of self discovery” that the new German cinema emphasized. While it is not a Berlin movie, the first comic treatment of the reunification deserves mentioning. Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *Das deutsche Kettensägenmassaker—die erste Stunde der Wiedervereinigung* (*The German Chainsaw Massacre—the First Hour of Reunification*) (1990). The film, which is a campy yet gruesome horror, tells the story of an insane West-German family who use axes and chainsaws to hunt East Germans on the border and turn them into sausages. The citizens of the former DDR are helpless victims in the new “savage” economy, which tends to be one of the standard themes of the *Wiedervereinigungskomödie* (Brady and Hughes 287). Two of the films in this analysis, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* and *Good bye, Lenin!* could also be classified as reunification comedies.

Many reunification comedies have been embraced by the German public (such as the *Trabi* series); yet director Leander Haussman evoked a mixed reaction with his immensely popular comedy, *Sonnenallee* (1999). It was one of the first films to reflect life in the former DDR with sunshine, music, and border guards who were not portrayed as evil. Haussman, an *Ossi* himself, mistakenly thought in 1999 that enough time had passed for such a film to be accepted by the general public: “Es musste so lang dauern, weil die Ossis noch keinen Abstand hatten. Und diesen Film durfte nur ein Ossi machen” (Cafferty 253).<sup>4</sup>

Not long after *Sonnenallee*’s release, there was a suit filed against Haussmann for “Beleidigung von Angehörigen einer Gruppe, die unter Willkürherrschaft verfolgt

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<sup>4</sup> “It had to take so long, because the *Ossis* didn’t have enough distance. And this film could only have been made by an *Ossi*.”

wurde”<sup>5</sup> under Paragraph 194 of the German penal code. The only reason this suit was taken seriously was because *Help e.V.*, an organization which supports victims of violence, filed it. They expressed their concern that the film made light of a situation where many people had lost their lives in pursuit of freedom in the West. The suit has since been dropped, but not without a final accusation that in the film “die Verbrechen der DDR-Diktatur bagatellisiert werden”<sup>6</sup> (Cafferty 255). One can still go to the *Sonnenallee* website and purchase movie-related merchandise, as well as kitsch items from the DDR.

The wall has been down for almost fifteen years and Berlin is again becoming a major world city; it is again politically, socially, and economically more relevant than ever: “Berlin as an urban space reveals questions of memory and identity in the late twentieth century and had become an emblem for the tensions of our time” (Jaccard 240). The city is also attempting to regain its status as a center of filmmaking, as it was before World War II. The former *UFA* studio in the Berlin suburb of Babelsberg is still being used for film production. The Berlin Film Festival, or the *Berlinale*, has also placed Berlin gained international prominence. The festival makes a point to showcase German films along with Hollywood blockbusters and independent cinema. It now takes place at the new Sony Center in Potsdamer Platz, which also happens to be the home of the German Film Museum. The museum contains permanent exhibitions on German film history and its greatest star, Marlene Dietrich.

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<sup>5</sup> “Insult of members of a group that was persecuted under an authoritarian government”

<sup>6</sup> “the crimes of the GDR-dictatorship were parodied.”

This chapter provided a historical overview of Berlin films and their place in German film and national history. It showed that each of these films can be considered as something more than “Berlin movies”; for example, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* are also considered reunification comedies. Yet this history of Berlin movies should help to place *In Weiter Ferne, so nah!*, *Lola rennt*, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* and *Good bye, Lenin!* in historical and geographical context, and to facilitate their discussion in further detail.

## Chapter II

### Wim Wenders' *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*

Wim Wenders, one of Europe's most honored filmmakers, is perhaps better known for his cityscapes than for his storytelling. It has been said that all of Wenders' films, even those that are "road movies" and purportedly have no ties to a physical location, are always (sometimes indirectly) tied to a sense of place: "A Wenders film is inextricably linked to some place, not just as a description of the landscape, but as an occasion to call attention to the materiality of the space itself" (Light 218). After Wenders made a series of road movies of the 1970s, he produced films in the cities of Lisbon, Tokyo, New York and Los Angeles. These films were not just "set" in these locations; rather, the setting played an integral part in the actions and "aura" of the film. Sabine Hake believes that Wenders made this shift from road movies as he was maturing artistically and personally and just simply grew tired of constant travel. From an artistic standpoint, he started to feel that "homages to the classical metropolis were the perfect compromise between feeling and belonging" (Hake 158).

In *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, the theme of "homelessness at home" from *Der Himmel über Berlin* is revisited, especially with the members of the circus troop. Wenders uses the other characters of *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* to personify the desire to "belong" as they search for a home in post-wall Berlin: "Deterritorialization is a feature of most of Wenders' films but recently, figures are seeking to be re-territorialized (like the angels), looking for what will restore an equivalent of territory, valid as a home" (Bromley 72).

Wenders' films can also be a study in contradiction. He tries to distance himself from narrative, yet tells convoluted stories in his films. He also takes obvious pride in beautiful imagery, yet consistently defends the absolute power of the written word: "Unser Heil...in diesem zur Zeit so heillosen Land ist unsere deutsche Sprache"<sup>7</sup> (Brockmann 378 and Personal Interview 8).

### *Wenders' Beloved City*

While it is sometimes arguable if Berlin is an absolutely vital part of a film, other films are unmistakably "Berlin." In all the literature pertaining to this film and even in a discussion with Wim Wenders, it is most obvious that Berlin is a central character in *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*. In an interview directly after winning the *Palme d'Or* for *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, Wenders was asked why Berlin was so special in his films and why couldn't it have been "the sky over New York, over Düsseldorf?" He replied:

Absolutely not, Berlin was the original inspiration for the film. Before we had the idea of the guardian angels, before we had any kind of plot, I wanted to make a film about Berlin. The angels are a device that enables me to talk about Berlin. No other place would have given me that idea. (Wenders 473)

At the time the Wall fell, Wenders was in Australia working on the massive undertaking of filming *Bis ans Ende der Welt (Until the End of the World)* (1991) and learned about the historic event from "some crazy guy, a Lithuanian who lived in a cave" (Wenders 425). He could not believe it, but a few hours later he received a fax from his office in Berlin confirming this man's seemingly prescient statement. Wenders said that

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<sup>7</sup> "Our salvation...in this currently unholy country is our German language."

<sup>8</sup> I interviewed Wim Wenders in Berlin on March 9, 2004, as part of a multi-disciplinary course on Berlin conceived by Dr. Peter Höyng of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. A transcript of this interview is available.

not until that very moment had he once thought about doing another movie like *Der Himmel über Berlin*, but he felt that he had to address the changes in the city and that the angels were the only vehicle he could think of to express his emotions on this topic. His continuance of the semi-documentary viewpoint of *Der Himmel über Berlin* further establishes the film's ties to the everyday inhabitants of Berlin. Wenders sees film-making as an archival activity, and he attempts to capture the feelings and the aura of the new Berlin (Wenders 415). Ultimately, the events in the city of the Berlin spurred the film into being. Therefore, *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* can undoubtedly be counted as a "Berlin" movie.

With *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* Wenders not only wanted to continue his portrait of Berlin, he also wanted to unite the disparate collective images of the city. He felt that Berlin was so much more than a divided city and that this new film would demonstrate this to the German people and the rest of the world. Lutz Koepnick suggests that Wenders was attempting to "normalize" the images of a reunited Berlin by giving it a new iconic image in the panoramic opening shots (Koepnick 156). He gives us a new way of thinking through our relationship to the dilemma of Berlin's space, a sort of psychic "startling" (Light 216).

### ***Berlin's Inescapable Past***

Wenders unites Berlin's Nazi past to its present through the character of Konrad, the former Nazi chauffeur. Stock footage of Berlin in the Nazi era intertwines with Konrad's reminiscences. During the war, Konrad drove for Tony and Hannah's father, who served as an officer in propaganda department. The fact that he was "just" a driver

(and not a soldier) makes it easier for us to view him as a sympathetic character. Wenders does not seem to be overtly passing judgment on Konrad's (or any other Berliner's) wartime activities. In fact, Konrad has redeemed himself by looking after little Hannah after her father and brother flee the country. Some have questioned Wenders' favorable treatment of the former Nazi, calling *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* a quietist film because Konrad does not receive some sort of punishment for his past actions. Perhaps Wenders' "punishment" of Konrad is showing him in his old age and at his most vulnerable moments.

The physical topography of Berlin is again united to its past, as it was in *Der Himmel über Berlin*. One of the most famous scenes in that film shows the old man Homer, the eternal storyteller, wandering across the no-man's land and asking himself where Potsdamer Platz has gone. *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* returns to this symbolically and historically rich area of Berlin: "Potsdamer Platz is like a black hole of history, where negative matter is transformed into spirituality, a time warp triggering the flow of collective memory (Jesinghausen 81)." During World War II the area and the adjoining Leipziger Platz housed Hitler's *Neue Reichskanzlerei* and the *Gestapo* and *SS* headquarters (Large 586). Potsdamer Platz appears again briefly—not as no-man's land, but as a bustling construction site. It is becoming a center of commerce again, as it was before World War II.

### ***Internationalism in Reunited Berlin***

The sequence of events near the end of the film that features the removal of the black market guns summarizes Wenders' message to German people of hope and

international cooperation. The former angel Cassiel becomes the assistant of Tony Baker at the urging of the vaguely malevolent spirit “Emit Flesti” (“time flies”). He becomes involved in this criminal gangland through a combination of innocence and intrigue—the job provides both money and excitement. At first, Cassiel does not realize the exact nature of Baker’s business, which happens to be that of the stereotypical eastern-European mafia. The events unfold as Cassiel makes the decision to destroy the videos and remove the illegal guns to safety. The film’s setting is again tied to the city’s past—the films are stored in old Nazi vaults. Reunited Berlin’s new vices are housed in the same place as Nazi Berlin’s.

In these scenes, Wenders emphasizes the multi-national and cultural atmosphere of post-wall Berlin and Germany. To retrieve the weapons stashed in the underground bunker, various feats of acrobatics are performed by Marion’s French circus troop. We hear a cacophony of languages during these scenes and even more in the rest of the film: German, Italian, French, English, and Russian. The young girl whom everyone is trying to save has the Russian name of Raissa, which also happens to be the name of Mikhail Gorbachev’s wife. The film *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* was itself created with the cooperation of producers and art directors from seven countries.

### ***Berlin’s Economy of Greed***

In the reunited Berlin of *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, money seems to be the determining factor in the happiness of their lives (Bromley 71). Daniel has to spend many hours at the pizzeria, away from his wife and young daughter. The characters in all four of these Berlin movies have less than ideal living situations: Lola lives with her



parents, Jan lives with her sister, boyfriend and niece and only gets a place to live when his father dies, and Alex lives with his mother, sister, boyfriend and niece. All of these characters (with the exception of Lola) are employed, yet they do not earn enough to live as they would wish.

The newly human Cassiel wanders into a life of alcoholism and petty crime, which seems to run rampant in this portrayal of Berlin. Cassiel's necessary pursuit of money has a demoralizing effect on his new life. The economy of greed, flourishing in the vacuum left by socialism, is represented in *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* by the multinational mafia, by the forger, and by Tony Baker, the German-American "businessman" who comes back to Germany to capitalize on the new economy. It is no coincidence that Baker is half-American. Wenders has stated that capitalism came into East Berlin "with no respect for nothing," and who could be more capitalistic than an American businessman (Personal Interview)? It seems that the only person with a "regular" job is the former angel Daniel, who now owns a pizza restaurant. The audience receives a glimpse into the lives of a former Nazi chauffeur, an circus troupe, an American businessman with criminal ties, an actor (Peter Falk reprising his role from *Der Himmel über Berlin*), and a famous musician (Lou Reed). While these diverse characters may seem contradictory to Wenders' wish to show reality, they could also speak to the variety and possibility of career choices and lifestyles in the new Berlin.

### ***The Unexpected Rejection of In Weiter Ferne, so nah!***

While the common movie-goer and professional film critic usually have little in common, they could agree on this: *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* was a commercial and critical

failure. Some critics were upset that it wasn't "*Der Himmel über Berlin II*"; others faulted the film for being just that, or even worse: "nicht viel mehr als einen zweiten Aufguss seiner alten Idee" (Remler n.pag.)<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps the film's structural weaknesses stem from the fact that Wenders and Handke did not team up again to write this script; instead, it was written by a then unknown Berlin actor and writer named Ulrich Zieger (Brady and Hughes 291). Ironically, the events of recent history made this new film less convincing. *Der Himmel über Berlin* operated under the assumption that the wall was never, ever going to fall, and *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* had to deal with this totally unexpected result (Jesinghausen 80). This unexpected reunion of Berlin and Germany sent Wenders searching for a film that could mirror such an event, and Wenders may have tried too hard to emphasize unity in everything about the city:

A continuation in prose of what had once been poetry, *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* revisits the angel-haunted Berlin of the previous film, now that the city had been reunited. Apparently, in Wenders' view, that means everything else has to be united—men and women, Germany and America, heaven and earth, time and eternity, and (of course) all the characters that had passed across the screen." (Klawans 881)

Over ten years later, Wenders seems to take the movie's universally poor reception very personally and remains disappointed by the oft-repeated accusation that he was trying to "re-make" *Der Himmel über Berlin* in a post-wall atmosphere: "In my mind it was not at all a remake, it was a continuation, but in the public opinion it was immediately classified as a remake, which defeated the purpose of the movie (Personal Interview)". He felt that Berliners had to take this opportunity to confront their history,

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<sup>9</sup> "nothing more than a remake of his old idea."

because 1990 provided the perfect time and his film provided the perfect (albeit cinematic) space:

I think this was the general problem with reunification: Germany has avoided coming to terms with the fact that 1989 was the end of the Cold War, and was really a great chance to reconnect with the end of Germany's common history in '45. That did not take place. And that's why for such a long time there remained this antagonism between the former east and the former west. The former west still believed they were Germany, and the former east still believed they were Germany, but they didn't really for a long time...and eventually it happens, because time heals, but Germany I think heavily avoided coming to terms with its own history and identity. (Personal Interview)

Many years earlier he expressed a similar frustration with *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* and its failure to carry his message of hope to the German people: "I wanted to be so much more specific with *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* than with *Der Himmel über Berlin*. If I take the liberty to use the angels a second time and to continue their story, then I have to say something that too often remains unsaid" (Cook and Gemünden 80).

The added fact that *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* was a sequel could have been damaging to the film's credibility and reception. Even in non-"art-house" cinema, sequels are dangerous territory. Those that enjoy a modicum of success are rare and even less so in the art world. The film's style, which verged wildly from contemplative narrative to a suspense flick, confused many viewers. While most critics do acknowledge the film's incongruities of style, some have used it in drawing direct parallels to the chaotic state of Berlin. Post Cold-War Berlin and German were suddenly and awkwardly united, and a film that included both Gorbachev and Lou Reed expressed this strangeness.

In a recent conversation with Wim Wenders, I presented the following question: "If you were to make a third movie dealing with Berlin, where would you film it? Would

you use your angels again, or is this story complete?” He indicated that this story was complete, and that he would never, ever make another movie in Berlin again. When asked why he made this decision, Wenders went on to say that he had an “important message” for the German people, but they were not ready to hear it. He blames this for the movie’s critical and commercial failure. In Roger F. Cook’s article “Angels, Fiction, and History in Berlin: *Wings of Desire*,” Wenders also answers to the criticisms that the movie’s message was too optimistic and ignored issues of Berlin’s (read: Nazi) troubled past. Cook insists that Wenders “integrates them [the historical problems] into a new aesthetic vision that answers to one overriding question: How can Germany live with that past?” (Cook 186). The following chapter on *Lola rennt* will show how director Tom Tykwer deviates both cinematically and thematically from Wim Wenders in avoiding the question of Berlin’s past and focusing on its fast, modern present.

### Chapter III

#### Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt*

With his first films *Die tödliche Maria* (1993) and *Winterschläfer* (1997), writer and director Tom Tykwer placed himself at the forefront of German cinema in the 1990s. He broke from the trend of light, romantic comedies with his innovative approach to storytelling, which often featured a non-linear narrative. Both of Tykwer's first two films show his interest in the relationship between "temporality and causality"; for example, *Winterschläfer* demonstrates the importance of a few seconds in determining someone's fate (Hake 192). The themes of time and chance will be central in his third and most successful film to date, *Lola rennt*. It encapsulates "Tykwer's world of chance and fate, with its ready excuses" (Möller 13).

#### *Could Lola Run Anywhere Else?*

In almost all of the press surrounding *Lola rennt*, self-taught director Tom Tykwer asserted that the film's setting was unimportant. However, the classification of *Lola rennt* as a Berlin movie has received much attention, with emotionally-charged arguments in both directions. Tykwer has insisted repeatedly that the movie could have taken place in any large urban center. *Lola rennt* could "just as easily be set in Peking, Helsinki, or New York, the only thing that would change is the scenery, not the emotional dimension" (Sinka n.pag.). It is interesting to note that this oft-quoted statement stems from a non-German interview, and it has been claimed that Sony, the film's overseas distributor, did not want to advertise the fact that *Lola rennt* was a German film. Apparently, German films have the unadvantageous stereotype of being "dark, dour, and

depressing,” and Sony executives wanted the film to be successful internationally. This fact could explain why Tykwer contradicts himself in an interview conducted during the film’s German release, where he comments more on Berlin’s exciting status as a city in transition (Sinka n.pag.).

Alexander Remler offers a particularly scathing critique of Berlin’s trendiness as a “setting” for post-wall German films. Whereas Ruttman (*Symphonie einer Großstadt*) made the city sing, Remler claims that new German filmmakers make the city “sprachlos” and use it as a “reizvolle Kulisse (exciting background),” not a basis for the films’ plots. He argues that these directors want to take part in the excitement of reunification and rebuilding but they have nothing to say about the city of Berlin itself. Remler also criticizes Lola’s logistically impossible run through the cityscape, charging that is not a statement about the new unity of the city; instead, it is a thoughtless and meaning tour of the city’s space (Remler n. pag.). I would like to argue that *Lola rennt* does make specific references to Berlin, such as the film’s opening scene. The scene opens with an aerial shot of Berlin without the wall. Then, the two sections smash together with a loud crashing sound (Sinka n. pag.). I believe that Tykwer sets the tone for the entire film with this opening sequence: the awkwardness and surreal nature of Berlin’s reunification corresponds directly to the obviously synthetic nature of the film.

To further argue that *Lola rennt* is, in fact, a Berlin movie, I would like to draw from Martin Jesinghausen’s discussion of the Benjaminian term “aura” as applied to cinematic analysis. In Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” aura is defined as “einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so

nah sie sein mag” 10 (Benjamin 372). Coincidentally, Jesinghausen believes that

Wenders is a master of producing cinematic aura:

In *Wings of Desire* and *Faraway, so Close*, Wenders has succeeded in creating auratic film in the best possible sense...he takes physical urban space and transforms it successfully through cinematic alchemy into metaphysical space, thus creating the filmic auratic experience...Berlin for Wenders represents an archetypal site where the cinematic miracle of metaphysical distancing can be performed. (Jesinghausen 79)

Even though Tykwer has repeatedly denied that *Lola rennt* is a Berlin movie, I argue that the film produces an ultra-modern, sleek, yet chaotic aura that is distinctly “Berlin”—much in the way that *Metropolis* is a film about Berlin without being explicitly set there (Mesch n. pag.).

### ***A City Without History?***

Tom Tykwer maintains that he does not set out to deal specifically with Berlin’s historical issues in *Lola rennt*; nonetheless, the film does not occur in a historical vacuum. While he mainly avoids outright commentary on Berlin and German history, he still manages to give the film a historical context by using intertextuality and self-reflexivity. In stark contrast to *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, there does not appear to be an obvious moral commentary—there are no angels sacrificing their lives for a girl imperiled by a group of gangsters. Like Wenders, Tykwer looks into the personal life of regular Berliners; in *Lola rennt*, these are the people Lola encounters on her run throughout the city. As each episode with Lola and Manni ends differently, so do these glimpses into the bystanders’ future. For instance, one woman wins the lottery in one

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10 “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”

episode, yet in the next episode becomes a child kidnapper. Perhaps Tykwer is calling attention to the importance of chance on life's outcomes: this is what happens when "people who are still living in the same neighbourhoods but who are placed into a new socio-political order" (Hamm-Ehsani 57).

Berlin's film history also makes an appearance in *Lola rennt*. For instance, Lola happens to have the same name of Marlene Dietrich's character in *Der blaue Engel*. Tykwer also gives a nod to *Die Blechtrommel* and little "Oskarchen" in the climactic scene at the casino. With her piercing screams, Lola is able to manipulate those around her and express her frustration, breaking glass and shocking people into silence as Oskar did nearly twenty years earlier. In "Screening Modern Berlin: Lola Runs to the Beat of a New Urban Symphony," Karin Hamm-Ehsani displays the connections between *Symphonie einer Großstadt* (1927) and *Lola rennt*. She states that *Symphonie* acts as a cinematic subtext in *Lola rennt*, and *Lola* acts as a "filmic recreation of Berlin's urban space and its social and cultural texture at the end of the twentieth century" just as *Symphonie* did for Berlin at the beginning of the century (Hamm-Ehsani 50). I agree with Hamm-Ehsani's argument and would like to add that *Metropolis* also acts as subtext for *Lola rennt*'s Berlin and its somewhat menacing and uncontrollable urban environment.

### ***Technology and Modernity in Reunited Berlin***

The artificial, mixed-up setting of Lola's modern Berlin has often been compared an interactive video game setting where random obstacles appear at every corner.

O'Sickey agrees with this claim, saying that the city space of Berlin is best seen as a link to Lola's potency and capability as a super fast hero:



The Berlin setting of the film is paradoxically rendered as an indeterminate, but also site specific, entertainment complex which hinges upon the high-speed functioning of multiple networks auto-mobility. Urban mobility as circuitry is performed by the film's super-athletic Lola (O'Sickey 126).

The three episodes of *Lola rennt* do seem to be structured to resemble a video-game. Lola and Manni must run and jump through obstacles (a plate of glass, for example). Tykwer repeatedly uses the Friedrichstraße U-Bahn stop as an establishing shot at the beginning of each segment, (Mesch n. pag.). Video games also begin each episode with the same scene. Characters in video games are allotted a limited number of "lives," usually three. Lola and Manni have also been given three "lives," or three chances to race through the obstacles of Berlin's streets and retrieve the needed money.

The presence of the modern techno music accompanying them along their routes is very telling. Claudia Mesch describes Lola as a cyber-hero, to whom techno music is the only logical accompaniment. While this sort of music is popular throughout Europe, Berlin has become well-known for its techno clubs, record labels (Kitty-Yo), and artists. Techno music is also an essential part of the annual Love Parade, when hundreds of thousands of people with brightly colored hair and tattoos occupy the center of the city.

The fact that Tykwer used digital video in *Lola rennt* has significant ramifications both in the world of independent filmmaking and in the film's imagery. He had a budget of 3 million marks, which is low even for an independent filmmaker. The use of digital media helped him to save a great deal of money, especially in the film's introductory sequence. The aerial shot of a large group of people forming the title was made with only 300 extras instead of the 5,000 they would have needed for a better effect (O'Sickey 123). Saving money wasn't the only upshot of using hypermedia: the obvious fakeness of

the digital footage opens a whole new area of filmmaking, in which reality is toppled and images can be manipulated according to the director's desires. *Lola's* opening shot can also be interpreted as a direct response to the opening of *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* and *Der Himmel über Berlin*. Instead of slow camera movement that takes in the natural landscape, Tykwer bombards us with a fast image and sound that parallels Berlin's pace and modernity and sets the frenetic rhythm for the movie. Wim Wenders has recently spoken out on the effect that digital filmmaking might have on the future of the cinema, and he seems to have some doubts: "Ein heutiges Publikum, das mit digitaler Technik gross geworden ist, sieht die 'Aura' und die Wärme des Filmbildes gar nicht mehr als Wert an sich an. Im Gegenteil, das wird oft nur als antiquiert empfunden" (Beier and Schmundt 72).<sup>11</sup> Yet in 1998, shooting part of a full-length film with digital technology was still relatively novel, and it gave *Lola rennt* a completely new feel—gritty, grainy, and completely modern.

In contrast to the angels and Konrad (the old taxi driver) in *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, Lola does not (cannot, will not) take the time to leisurely observe the city around her. I suggest that she is a sort of "anti-flaneur" who does not view the city with a lingering, appreciative gaze; for Lola, Berlin merely serves as a setting for her adventures. With Lola's speed, Tykwer ultimately rejects the Benjaminian and Baudelairean experience of strolling through a modern metropolis and attempts to render the city as irrelevant:

The route Lola runs makes no logical sense within Berlin's topography.  
The implied space cannot be traversed with the twenty minutes that she is

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<sup>11</sup> "Today's audience, who grew up with digital technology, doesn't see the "aura" and warmth of film as important. Instead, it is often seen as just antiquated."

given...An audience will have no illusions that Lola's routes from her apartment on Albrecht Straße to her father's bank...to the Bolle supermarket in midtown Berlin were chosen because they are traversable in the shortest available time (O'Sickey 125).

Whether Tykwer intended it or not, Lola's peculiar journey throughout all of Berlin makes her a cinematic pioneer of sorts: "*Lola rennt* becomes the first German film to present a truly unified Berlin and its lead Lola...the first filmic protagonist equally at home in all of Berlin's disparate parts" (Sinka n. pag.). Neighborhoods in East Berlin mix indeterminately with suburbs in Charlottenburg. The resulting confusion of space serves as an equalizer—"East" and "West" is now irrelevant.

### *The Economics of Chance*

While Berlin may have become an ultra-modern metropolis, its modernity has not necessarily translated into prosperity for its denizens. With *Lola rennt*, Tykwer makes a powerful statement on the economic situation of the inhabitants in reunited Berlin. Lola is unemployed and still lives at home. Manni is officially unemployed but turning into a small-time crook, running errands for a criminal organization. Because this is Berlin, he works for the eastern European mafia. Manni's name in itself could be significant—when Lola frantically calls for him, she sounds like she could be screaming "money." Lola's father is the head of a large bank on Unter den Linden, a center of financial activity post-*Wende*. The bank, Deutsche Transfer, must be referring to the economic actions of the reunification, when the "transfer" of money from West to East Germany was a source of constant controversy.

Even with the tangible benefits that should stem from a good job in a Berlin bank, Lola's father remains utterly miserable. Here, money can be interpreted as having an emasculating effect on Lola's father. His relationship with Lola's mother is in shambles, so he seeks female companionship elsewhere. His girlfriend at work is pregnant, yet the baby is not his. This fact must be especially infuriating to him because this is the second "child" that is not his but he is asked to raise (in one of the sequences, he reveals to Lola that he is not her real father). What little we see of Lola's mother denotes the importance of her role in the family and the insignificance of her daily activities. She talks on the phone to her lover while sipping whiskey and watching television, apparently still in her nightgown in the middle of the afternoon.

There is a specific scene in the climax of the third and final episode from *Lola rennt* that clearly demonstrates the economic disparity in reunited Berlin. In this episode, Lola nearly collides with an eighteen-wheeler during her run to the supermarket to meet Manni. She has just missed her father at the bank because he is supposedly in a meeting. Recovering from the shock of the accident, Lola looks up from the street and sees the casino. She attempts to enter but the employees hesitate to let her in because her appearance does not match their dress-code. To be sure, Lola does look different from the other patrons. Her shocking red hair, visible tattoos, and disheveled manner contradict the well-to-do aura of the casino. She is not part of the moneyed leisure class of the new German economy who can afford to play at a casino in the middle of the afternoon.

She bets all of the money she has—almost one-hundred Marks—on the roulette table. We do not receive an explanation as to her number of choice, twenty, but it could have something to do with her time limitations. Each episode takes exactly twenty

minutes and the events that happen in this time are potentially life-changing, giving this number a great deal of significance. Additionally, the number twenty harks back to the theory of Berlin as a game board—this is the final level of the video game, which is almost always under time limits.

### ***Lola Runs to the Box Office***

Film critics (especially those in Germany) generally agreed that *Lola rennt* was not a Berlin movie. In *Film Comment*, critic Olaf Möller declares, “*Lola* represents everything that went wrong with German cinema in the nineties,” and it seems the main source his irritation with this film is the fact that there is apparently nothing “German” (or “Berlin”) about it. He asserts that *Lola rennt* “is easily accessible and digestible for people all over the world (as it is utterly devoid of anything *German*, anything idiosyncratic or irritating about *us*)” (Möller 11). Whether the film was German or not did not seem to matter to the movie going public: it did very well in Germany and Sony had to scramble for the international distribution rights.

Even though the presence of history is only subtly felt, the immediate present and future are inescapable. The only movie to eclipse *Lola rennt*’s success at the box office came five years later, with one of the final two films in this analysis, *Good bye, Lenin!*. *Good bye, Lenin!* looks to life in the former East Berlin directly before and after the fall of the wall while the other film, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, portrays the city seven years later.

## Chapter IV

### Wolfgang Becker's *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* and *Good bye, Lenin!*

In a *Spiegel* article written during the release of *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, director Wolfgang Becker is hailed as an “Autorenfilmer alten Kalibers” (*auteur* film of the old caliber). His ultra-realistic and unorthodox filmmaking style can be brutal to watch, earning him favorable comparisons to another film icon, Rainer Fassbinder: “Becker entwickelt genau jenen Hunger auf Gegenwart, der auch Fassbinder trieb, jene Lust am Hier und Jetzt, jene Neugier darauf, wie die Leute leben und denken und reden” (Weingarten 55).<sup>12</sup> Andreas Kilb, an important German film critic, describes his work as “armes, schnelles, direktes Kino als Spiegel der deutschen Wirklichkeit, Großstadtgeschichten, so trist und ziellos wie das Leben selbst” (Kilb n. pag.)<sup>13</sup>

### *Berlin in Cinematic Context*

Becker's latest film, *Good bye, Lenin!* can easily be classified as a Berlin movie. Its plot is based on events that could only happen in the divided environs of Berlin; no other city in modern history has had to deal with the after-effects of having been divided for forty years. However, *Good bye, Lenin!* is quite unlike other Berlin movies “because of its radical revision of the wall's narrative standing: in most other Berlin films the Wall is the problem; here it is the absence that cause complications” (Iordinova 27).

In addition, *Good bye, Lenin!* is not being marketed as a film about Berlin. Katrin Sass, the mother and the coma victim in *Good bye, Lenin!* and a popular actress from the

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<sup>12</sup> “Becker develops precisely that hunger for the present which also drove Fassbinder, that pleasure in the here and now, that curiosity about how people live and think and speak.”

<sup>13</sup> “poor, fast, live cinema as a reflection of German reality, big-city stories, as dismal and pointless as life itself.”

DEFA studios, insists that this is not a Berlin movie: “It’s not about the fall of the Wall. It’s about a mother and a son, a family. It’s a story the audience should be able to relate to with or without the historical background” (Iordinova 28).

I would like to argue that Becker’s 1997 *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* is also a Berlin movie, even though it could possibly take place in another urban setting. However, placing the film in reunited Berlin lends it a unique sense of immediacy and legitimacy. The “Baustelle” (construction site) of Berlin serves as a particularly apt setting for this cinematic adaptation of a *Bildungsroman*. The characters are going through the universal crisis of finding a circle of friends and a career, yet in the rapidly changing environment of post-*Wende* Berlin these routine obstacles seem especially overwhelming:

“This [political upheaval] can be especially disorienting for young adults searching for their place in a changing social and economic environment that is plagued by high employment, as is the case in the eastern parts of Germany today” (Hamm-Ehsani 57).

The time period of the mid-1990s could prove to be of more importance to *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* than its setting in Berlin. The British film *Trainspotting* (1996), which took place in Edinburgh and London, utilized a similarly gloomy urban, working-class aesthetic. These two films also had similar topics unique to the youth culture of the 1990s, such as the ever-present danger of AIDS. While *Trainspotting* placed an emphasis on drug use, in *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* the characters merely drink beer. The films have similar themes, such as frustration with the present and a wary hope for the future and steady employment. Katrin Sass’ statement about the ability of people everywhere to relate to *Good Bye, Lenin!*’s story would perhaps be more appropriate when applied to this film. Becker also thinks *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* contains universal themes,

Die Figuren im Film erleben, was wir alle kennen, dass einem die verschiedensten Dinge gleichzeitig zustossen—die Liebe, jemand stirbt, man hat kalte Füße, die Angst vor AIDS, der Job ist futsch, und man hat auch noch Ärger mit der neuen Freundin.”  
 (“Normalos kommen nicht vor” 119)<sup>14</sup>

While *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* touches on solemn subjects, it has been praised as one of the most successful German romantic comedies in the late 1990s (Naughton 227). There are occasional “laugh-out-loud” moments, such as Jan’s stint as a supermarket mascot and Buddy’s Elvis impersonations. Yet I believe that the “funniest” moments are actually those that display the sardonic, understated humor that is said to be unique to Berlin, the so-called *Berliner Schnauze*. In the beginning of the film, Jan’s friend Buddy puts makeup on one of the *Schlachthof*’s victims and serenades the pig as he dances around on the bloody floor. His boss knows that this is Buddy’s (and Jan’s) last day, so he does not seem to be bothered by this somewhat macabre scene. Perhaps Becker is attempting to set the tone for the upcoming episode in which Jan encounters his recently deceased father. The audience receives a dose of gallows humor when Jan’s father’s casket smashes an IKEA cabinet. Becker’s display of *Berliner Schnauze* can often be subtle, as when he interrupts Jan and Vera’s first romantic walk together by placing the graffiti message “Liebe in den Zeiten der Kohl-Ära”<sup>15</sup> behind them on a construction wall. With this play on words, Becker references the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez. If one is familiar with this book, the differences between Márquez’s magical, epic love story and dreary post-*Wende* Berlin are quite evident.

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<sup>14</sup> “The characters in the film experience what we all know, that one of these different things can happen at the same time: love, someone dies, you have cold feet, the fear of AIDS, your job has disappeared, and you’re mad at your new girlfriend.”

<sup>15</sup> “Love in the time of Kohl-era”



### *Berlin as Construction Site*

Perhaps the first thing one notices about *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* is the film's light, or more accurately, the lack thereof. Films in the 1970s and 80s carried on the literary tradition of presenting Berlin in a sometimes unflattering light--Richard Falcon notes "the images were either of cold, dingy squalor or Weimar decadence and unease" (Falcon 30). Wolfgang Becker certainly perpetuates this image of Berlin as existing in a state of permanent winter: "Berlin ist grau, die Hinterhöfe herrlich verkommen, die Altbauwohnungen ziemlich eng. Die Frauen, die dort hausen, sind zerzaust und verschlampt, die Männer haben den Bierbauch am rechten Fleck" (Kneibe n. pag.)<sup>16</sup>

If it is daylight, the overcast sky lends the city a gloomy and depressing aura. Jan Nebel (fog) is certainly in the right town. His name is so fitting that he's asked "ist das ein Künstlername?"<sup>17</sup> The only place with adequate lighting is the department store where Vera is temporarily working:

A commonplace Cold War image was of West Berlin as an island of capitalism in the sea of the communist GDR, its status as a showcase of consumption epitomized by the massive Kaufhaus des Westens department store and the gleaming glass display cabinets along the Kurfürstendamm." (Falcon 28)

Jan is thankful that the light from a television seems to soften the blow when he stumbles upon his dead father. The scene is extremely disturbing, yet Jan comments that "alles wird warm ausgeleuchtet." <sup>18</sup>

Many of the "changes" in the new Berlin of *Good bye, Lenin!* seem to be mainly cosmetic. Ariane quickly gets rid of all her mother's old furniture, sending it to the

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<sup>16</sup> "Berlin is gray, the courtyards wonderfully rundown, the old apartments fairly small. The women that live there are disheveled and slovenly, the men have beer bellies in the right place"

<sup>17</sup> "Is that an artist name?"

<sup>18</sup> "Everything is warmly lit up."

*Sperrmüll* (discarded furniture and other large objects). She and her boyfriend replace it with trendy multi-cultural décor and a tanning bed. Becker's amusing use of high-speed montage shows the increase in the volume of traffic and new cars—though for Alex's mother, they are all supposedly "West German refugees." Outside shots show advertisements for new western cars, lingerie, IKEA, and unfortunately for Alex, Coca-Cola, whose red banner replaces those of the DDR (Yacowar 589). The ultimate symbol of change is, of course, the disembodied head of Lenin flying underneath a helicopter.

I do not feel that Becker wants to portray Berlin's cosmetic changes in a negative light; he is merely attempting to convey the massive scope of these changes. He warns Berliners not to discard all remnants of the DDR so quickly and without a second thought. When Ariane decides to discard her mother's old furniture, she is trying to rid the apartment of the physical reminders of life before the *Wende*. Her actions later prove to be disastrous because her mother stored their life savings in one of the old bureaus. She eventually realizes the value of the furniture, but by then it is too late.

### ***Love in the Time of "Kohl-era"***

Casual sex and its consequences play a large role in *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*. One of the first scenes in the film shows Jan having a sexual encounter with a woman from East Berlin. He is unable to perform successfully and leaves her apartment, only to run into a demonstration that gets him arrested and generates a thousand Mark fine. The idea that sexual relations between East and West Germans are dangerous is not a new one; in fact, this theme runs rampant in other unification films such as

*Kettensägenmassaker* (Naughton 115). Unfortunately, being fined by the police is not the only harmful result of Jan's sexual activities. On his last day at work, Jan discovers from one of his coworkers that he could possibly be infected with the AIDS virus. He takes an AIDS test but the results are never revealed. Jan's sister also exhibits inappropriate sexual behavior by selling tacky lingerie in her house around her young daughter. Her job serves to emphasize the fact that she is a poor mother.

Unlike *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, the characters in *Good bye, Lenin!* are not admonished for their sexual behavior; instead, their relationships provide a stabilizing influence in their otherwise precariously balanced world. Again, we see how the economic situation in post-*Wende* Berlin affects family structure. Alex's sister Ariane, who already has a young child, has begun dating a co-worker from Burger King, Rainer. He moves into the small apartment and pays the rent, which Alex says "is the equivalent of a phone bill in the west." Rainer provides a father figure for little Paula and comforts Ariane during her mother's sickness and an unexpected encounter with her absentee father. With four adults and a baby, the apartment becomes a fertile ground for arguments. Alex also has new girlfriend, Lara, who is also his mother's nurse. She is wary of Alex's elaborate schemes to deceive his mother into thinking the DDR still exists, but she is (initially) complicit with his plan.

Alex and Ariane's relationships are not without their problems. Rainer (Ariane's boyfriend) and Lara are both "foreigners"—he is from West Berlin and she is from Russia. It is significant that Lara is a strong, yet sympathetic character—other post-wall films have usually portrayed Russian women in the omnipresent mob scene, either as mail-order brides or prostitutes (Iordinova 28). Just as in the city of Berlin, there are

occasional “misunderstandings” in the Kerner household. When Rainer receives a verbal lashing from Alex because he no longer wants to help in the charade, he counters with the commonly heard sentiment “You East Germans are never satisfied. Always whining and complaining.” Lara also grows tired of Alex’s plans, and this becomes the main problem in their relationship. Yet Alex and Ariane’s romantic couplings are ultimately successful, and Becker seems to be making an optimistic statement about the “compatibility of old enemies” (Yacowar 589). Even more telling is the impending birth of their Rainer and Ariane’s child, “a citizen of the new Germany.”

### *One City, Two Economies*

*Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* spotlights the bleak economic perspective of many young people in reunited Berlin. Jan and his friends “have little prospect of benefiting from the economic boom which is bringing Western investment to this side of Berlin” (Wall 259). As the film begins, Jan loses his temporary job at a slaughterhouse. Apparently he steals meat on a regular basis to bring home to his family, but this is not the reason for his being fired. In addition to this misfortune, Jan becomes mixed-up in a protest and runs from the police to avoid arrest. The police find him, and he receives an enormous fine (one thousand Marks) that he could never pay. But if he doesn’t pay it, he could be forced to spend time in jail.

Jan is not the only one with financial dilemmas. His would-be girlfriend Vera is also unemployed. She has a temporary job as a Santa Claus in a department store (most likely Kaufhaus des Westens) and she occasionally begs for money on the tram. It’s not

clear which job is more demeaning. Jan's friend from the slaughterhouse, Buddy, has also lost his job. He runs an unsuccessful karaoke bar that he could lose at any time. Jan and his colleagues are not receiving the benefits that capitalism is supposedly bringing to Berlin. In the opulent and brightly-lit department store, Jan and Vera seem displaced. Their "otherness" is more apparent when Vera insists on crashing an art opening with tables of free food, alcohol, and a well-dressed crowd. Like Lola in the casino, Jan and Vera are foreigners to the nouveau riche society in Berlin.

Jan's father's apartment becomes a symbol of the "urban renewal" in many parts of post-*Wende* Berlin. The building is located in Kreuzberg, an area of West Berlin which was a popular center of intellectual activity with a large multicultural presence even before the wall fell. It attracted many people from other areas of Berlin and Germany with its relatively cheap real estate. Jan and Buddy encounter one of the building's newer inhabitants as they carry Jan's father's casket down the stairs. The casket accidentally scratches the IKEA bookshelf of their new neighbor. He gets very mad and screams at Jan and Buddy, and Buddy retorts with "du Spießer solltest dich verschämen!"<sup>19</sup> This scene effectively portrays the movement of money in post-wall Berlin. Now that this building is being renovated and is located in a cheap part of the city, Berlin's bourgeoisie is taking advantage of these changes. Jan's working class father had to live in the building when it was in disrepair and the area, Kreuzberg, was not one of the "cool" neighborhoods, but it seems that he does not want to leave without a fight: even in death, he damages a symbol of the new prosperity of the few (Scandinavian wood furniture).

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<sup>19</sup> "You philistine should be ashamed of yourself!!"

IKEA furniture appears in both *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* and *Good bye, Lenin!* as one of Becker's symbols of the upwardly mobile middle class.

Becker's portrayal of reunited Berlin's economic plight in *Good bye, Lenin!* is not as bleak as the one in *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*. Alex and Ariane's financial situation is certainly not idyllic, but they are still employed. Their new jobs seem to be poking fun at the changes capitalism is bringing. Ariane has given up her studies in economics for a job in the drive-through at Burger King. Before the *Wende*, Alex had a job repairing television sets. When his job is rendered obsolete, he is one of the lucky employees who are transferred to the new satellite installation division. We see an amusing cross-section of Berlin as Alex and his friend Denis attempt to sell their services. Becker does remind us that not all employees of the DDR were offered new opportunities. An old colleague of his mother's, Dr. Klappath, became an alcoholic when he lost his job as principal of a middle school. Alex enlists his help in setting up his mother's birthday party, but first he must help Klappath out of his alcoholic stupor in order to leave the dilapidated apartment.

Out of all the ways Becker demonstrates the economic differences between the old and new Germany in *Good bye, Lenin!*, perhaps none are more telling than those of the birthday parties. These scenes are directly parallel to one another—they show the same event but with contrasting settings. The first birthday scene is that of Alex's ill mother. Alex goes to great lengths to give his mother a birthday party. To successfully accomplish this he must bring more people into the fold, telling his mother's friends about his scheme while convincing them that it is absolutely necessary for his mother's health. He even pays some former students of Christiane's to dress up as Young Pioneers

and sing East German folk songs. She can't get out of bed, so she does her best to look decent while sitting propped up in her old bedroom. Dr. Klappath also attempts to look the part of a retired school principal. He gives a rambling speech about his esteemed *Genossin* (comrade) and finally, on the behalf of the group, presents Christiane with a basket of the best the DDR has to offer: Mocca Fix, Spreewald Pickles, and a bottle of "Sekt." She seems to be touched by this presentation, if a little overwhelmed by it all. Lara becomes angry at the ever-growing scheme to keep Christiane in the dark and storms out in the middle of the party.

Alex's father's birthday party gives us a glimpse of the wealth the West has to offer—which Alex could have shared, had his mother decided to leave East Berlin. We first see the house as Alex pulls up in a taxi. His father lives in the lakeside district of Wannsee, which is a world away from Alex's *Plattenbau* apartment around the *Alexanderplatz*. The large house is softly lit and we hear the sounds of a celebration. The well-dressed attendees laugh with each other in the beautifully furnished house and in the backyard, watching the band and drinking real champagne

Alex wanders around his father's house, looking quite out of place in his jean jacket. He doesn't really know what to do, so he sits with two children (presumably his half-brother and sister) and watches "Sandmännchen" ("The Little Sandman") with them. Alex's father comes in to put his children to bed and begins talking casually with him, not realizing who he really is. When his young children say that "this is Alex", a look of recognition and sadness passes over his face. He seems embarrassed that there are so many people around at this intimate moment and apologizes for having the party. Then, his friends and new family call his name, demanding a speech. Instead of delivering it in

a shabby bedroom around six or seven people as his former wife did, he gives his birthday speech on a stage in a huge garden with many affluent friends and his new family watching. Unlike Christiane's party, we can assume that no one has been paid to attend, except for the band.

### *Ostalgie and the Marketing of Memory*

*Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* enjoyed a modicum of success, both at the German box office and with critics. The main complaint about the film was that the ending left too many questions about the fate of the characters. The results of Jan's AIDS test are not revealed and Vera's strange behavior towards Jan is not fully explained. Instead, the end of the film consists of a lovely winter scene of the characters ice-skating. Becker has been accused of "running out of ideas" on this screenplay ("Normalos kommen nicht vor" 119). He counters those accusations by admitting that the script is not perfect, but neither is life, and a happy ending would not be right for this darkly humorous film.

*Good bye, Lenin!* triumphed at the German box office and has done quite well in overseas markets. It received positive reviews, but there has been criticism that the film is riding the wave of *Ostalgie*, which tends to shine a positive light on life in East Germany. Wolfgang Becker has distanced himself from the idea that *Good bye, Lenin!* glamorizes life in the former East Berlin. He insists that he had the idea for this film in the mid 1990s, before *Sonnenallee* was published and the craze for all things DDR began: "Wolfgang Becker arbeitet gerade an einer DVD, die beweisen wird, dass er mit diesem



‘grottenhaften Ostalgiescheiss’ nicht zu tun hat. Er habe nur ein ‘Zeitfenster vor einer Stunde’, sagte er” (Osang 213). 20

With the success of *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, *Sonnenallee*, and *Good bye, Lenin!*, there are some who are concerned that movies are incorrectly shaping a new generation’s idea of the life in the East Berlin:

History in this town is taking the same route it does so often in the cinema. From a white-knuckled reality, shrieked out on streets and sidewalks, to a cozy commercial artifact turning pain into the picturesque. Memory becomes memorabilia. (Kennedy 68)

While it is not uncommon for people to long for the “good old days,” the idea of *Ostalgie* makes some Germans (especially those from the former West) uncomfortable. Perhaps the memories of the DDR are still too recent and the reminders too frequent; there has not been enough time to forget all of the negative aspects of life in the DDR. The question of how to deal with the memory of this era is very complex, and Berliners and Germany are still struggling with their answer.

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20 “Wolfgang Becker is now working on a DVD that will prove he has nothing to do with this ‘imprisoning Ostalgie-shit.’ He merely has a ‘window to this era’, he says.”

**Conclusion—How do these films compare in their portrait of post-Wende Berlin?**

*In weiter Ferne, so nah!* tries to unite Berlin's people with each other and Berlin with the rest of the world. The all-seeing viewpoint of the angels allows us to penetrate the world of any Berliner, so we get an equal glimpse into the thoughts of everyone, from a former communist leader to a young girl. Of the four films in this thesis, this film places the most emphasis on the importance of international cooperation in the future of Berlin. This film was produced, acted, and written by people from all over Europe. It could not have been made with resources solely from Berlin, just as Berlin cannot fully recover on its own.

*Lola rennt*'s Berlin is the most modern and fast of all the films. Serendipity and fate play no small parts in the lives of its inhabitants, and Lola eventually wins her money and her man because she takes a chance. Unlike the Berlin of *Good bye, Lenin!* and *In weiter Ferne, so nah!*, the important landmarks of the city play no part in the setting or the story; instead, the city merges into one playing field, each part indistinguishable from the next.

Of the four films, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* is least dependent on the setting of Berlin. Instead, the events in Berlin give it an aura of change and instability, which is then conveyed in the film. The generation of the "Kohl-Ara" and its problems are more significant than its actual physical setting. Political stagnancy, unemployment, questions. The title, *Life is a Construction Site*, alludes not only to the changes in the character's lives but also to the changing city of Berlin. The "construction" is visually imparted by

buildings in the process of renovation, and there are several shots of cranes and scaffolding.

Pop culture and everyday life are emphasized the most in *Good bye, Lenin!*. There are some changes to the physical landscape of Berlin, namely the removal of Lenin's statue, but the *Wende* is signified mainly by the loss of familiar objects. The coffee is different and the pickles are now from Holland! Burger King and IKEA symbolize the "changing of the guard" in the world of the consumer. While these changes may seem trite compared to regime change, they did affect their everyday existence.

The factor of economics is the common thread that unites the four films' perspective on post-*Wende* Berlin. Each film, through the living and working conditions of its characters, displays the financial disparity that remains between East and West Berlin. Characters like Manni and Cassiel turn to criminal exploits in order to receive money because they have few opportunities for legitimate employment. The families in *Good bye, Lenin!*, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, and *Lola rennt* live in unpleasant situations because one or more of them cannot afford to move out. The theme of "one city, two economies" appeared consistently in each film. A further examination on the greater cinematic response to the *Wende* would prove to be very interesting.

In this analysis, I have examined the cinematic statements that Wim Wenders, Tom Tykwer, and Wolfgang Becker have made about life in reunited Berlin. In conclusion, I would like to consider how these directors might feel about Berlin's future. How will their Berlin films be remembered? Wim Wenders seems optimistic about the future of Berlin. Even though he is disappointed by the way that Berlin has dealt with its

recent history, he seems confident in the goodness of most of its citizens: “For Wenders, Berlin is the sum of its subjectivities, and each man is indeed an island linked, however, by a network comparable to the roads connecting monuments and public places” (Peucker 132). As mentioned in Chapter II, it is unlikely that Wenders will continue where *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* stopped with the stories of angels Daniel and Cassiel. Yet he remains active in the intellectual life of Berlin and speaks out on many issues concerning the city, among them the rebuilding of the Hohenzollern Schloss (Personal Interview). This film will most likely be remembered as inferior to *Der Himmel über Berlin*, but it will remain a valid and often beautiful portrait of a newly reunited city.

Tom Tykwer has not directed a Berlin film since *Lola rennt*. His most recent films have been set in Western Germany and in Italy, so perhaps he does not possess a special filmic affinity for the city. But like Wenders, Tykwer is an influential presence in Berlin. He is the sponsor of the Filmclub Berlin Baghdad, which is planning to send a DVD film library to Baghdad (Porsche n. pag.). He has stated in many interviews that Berlin is an exciting city, on the brink of major changes (Sinka n. pag.). It will be interesting to see if he still believes that “social survival in this new political and economic order has become a matter of wildly fantastic chance. Lola wins in the end because she is willing to gamble in this game” (Hamm-Ehsani 62). I believe that *Lola rennt* will become a classic Berlin film—the image of Franka Potente running down Berlin streets has already become iconic.

Wolfgang Becker seems to be the new star in Berlin movies, making two in the span of six years. In a recent interview, Becker was asked if he still felt that the title *Das*

*Leben ist eine Baustelle* was appropriate. He responded: “Das trifft’s. Nicht nur am Potsdamer Platz, nicht nur in Berlin, sondern im ganzen Land, das ziemlich ratlos in die Zukunft schaut, in diesen verdammten Jahren vor der Jahrtausendwende” (Weingarten 55).<sup>21</sup> Even with Becker’s recent success, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* seems to have disappeared from recent memory. Perhaps *Baustelle*’s dark and ambiguous portrait of Berlin is still too troubling for audiences—it represents an awkward time of change that many would like to forget.

If Berlin is still truly a “construction site,” then Becker’s *Good bye, Lenin!* is certainly not a “Totenmesse für den verflissenen Honecker-Staat”<sup>22</sup> (von Festenberg 114). The word *Totenmesse* implies that something is dead, but the DDR is very much alive in the hearts and minds of many Germans. *Ostalgie* could be the result of former East Germans’ attempt to reappropriate their history. This is certainly not a politically neutral cinema, but:

an example of Germans coming to terms with their accident prone past. The little traffic-light man (*Ampelmännchen*) may be helping to free Germans from the collective guilt that many still feel, which is all to the good. And Ostalgie may also be a sign that the gulf in self-confidence between easterners and westerners is closing in an ambiguous way (Maske 57).

It will be certainly be interesting to see how future generations of Berliners and Germans receive *Good bye, Lenin!* and the phenomena of Ostalgie.

As the city of Berlin evolves in the decades to come, it will no doubt remain the inspiration for many more films. Perhaps the creators of future Berlin films should remember that they are not only making artistic statements with their work; they are also

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<sup>21</sup> “That’ll work. Not only on Potsdamer Platz, not only in Berlin, but also in the entire country, that looks fairly into the future, in these damned years before the turn of the century.”

<sup>22</sup> “requiem for the former Honecker-state.”

forming the public's view of Berlin's past, present, and future. Those directors who make "Ostalgic" German films should be cautious in their portrayal of a state that repressed its citizens for forty years. Anton Kaes' article on the power of images on history further emphasizes this by stating "Cinematic images have created a technological memory bank that is shared by everyone and offers little escape. It increasingly shapes and legitimizes the past" (Kaes 310).

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