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*Ostkreuz* and Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin is in Germany***

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Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) has arguably been the most successful of films dealing with the ramifications of the GDR's demise, but it is by no means the only one. The focus here is on two less well-known films which provide alternative perspectives to Becker's more commercial film, exploring in gritty detail the difficult adjustments that many eastern Germans had to make. In *Ostkreuz* (1991), Michael Klier tells the episodic story of 14-year-old Elfie, who literally and metaphorically inhabits a no-man's-land between the two Germanys during the *Wende*, and deploys a neorealist aesthetic to reinforce the difficulties confronting the girl, and by inference, Germany. Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin is in Germany* (2001) is less bleak, but is told from the perspective of Martin Schulz, jailed in East Germany in 1989 and released eleven years later into the Federal Republic. The film follows his attempts to rebuild his life, and especially to forge a relationship with the son he has never seen. Both set in Berlin, these films complement one another in examining Germany's progress since 1989 and offer a useful contrast to Becker's film.

As the critical acclaim for *Der Untergang* (Hirschbiegel 2004) in the English-speaking markets demonstrates, the Anglo-Saxon world's enduring fascination with National Socialism shows little sign of abating. Even Caroline Link's *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (2001), Germany's last Oscar-winner, dealt implicitly with the persecution of the Jews, which might go some way towards explaining its award success. By the same token, the mixed reception of Sönke Wortmann's *Das Wunder von Bern* (2003) might be taken as evidence that the same audiences cared little for German films that thematically speaking strayed too far away from Nazi Germany; certainly, its relative failure in the United Kingdom might be attributable to its focus on an iconic moment in German football history. And yet that is not the whole story. That Wortmann's film got a cinema release at all in the UK, and has subsequently appeared swiftly on DVD here too, is indicative of a welcome resurgence of international interest in German cinema since the late 1990s, sparked by Tom Tykwer's unexpectedly popular *Lola rennt* (1998), and sustained recently by Fatih Akin's acclaimed Golden-Bear-winning *Gegen die Wand* (2004), which has also enjoyed a commercial release on DVD. If there is one film, however, which truly embodies the rude health of

German film on the world stage, then it is Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003). It still seems remarkable that a film dealing with the *Abwicklung* of the GDR should have been such a massive global smash. If it has made people outside Germany aware of some of the fundamental socio-political and emotional issues surrounding the *Wende* – as well as *au fait* with such esoteric delights as *Spreewaldgurken* and *Mokka Fix Gold* – then that is surely to be welcomed, for there is far more to an understanding of German society and culture than an awareness of National Socialism and its legacy. Equally, it must be remembered that Becker's delightful, melancholic film does not tell the whole story of the events leading up to the reunification of Germany in 1990; it offers merely one perspective on a much more complex network of experiences and memories. In their different ways, two films that have not enjoyed commercial success beyond Germany's frontiers, namely Michael Klier's *Ostkreuz* (1991) and Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin is in Germany* (2001), explore the significant challenges that faced many former East German citizens following the momentous events of 1989 with a more gritty realism than Becker's tale. They thus provide insights which both complement, and contrast with, *Good Bye Lenin!*, and are fascinating examples of how German cinema has recorded recent history.

One important element which links all three films is that the directors are all western Germans, or at least spent their adult lives in the west – Klier's case is the least clear-cut in this respect, inasmuch as he was born a Sudeten German, settled with his family in the Soviet zone of occupation in 1947, before fleeing to the west in 1961. That their films can be deemed sensitive depictions of the experiences of *Ossis* during the upheaval of the *Wende* flies in the face of stereotypical notions of *Wessis* and their attitudes to the events of 1989 and beyond. As an eastern German, Katrin Sass, star of *Good Bye Lenin!*, was deeply impressed by the nuanced understanding of GDR life in Bernd Lichtenberg's screenplay, in which "viele Dinge haargenau so beschrieben [werden], wie ich sie in Erinnerung habe" (Töteberg 2003: 164).<sup>1</sup> She was equally bowled over by the director himself:

Ich habe beim Dreh oft vergessen, ob Becker nun aus dem Osten oder Westen kommt. Er wusste so wahnsinnig viel über die DDR, hatte sich intensive damit auseinandergesetzt,

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that Sass played the eponymous heroine in Klier's later film looking at life after the *Wende*, namely *Heidi M.* (2001), for which she won the *Deutscher Filmpreis* in Gold as best actress.

wusste es besser und genauer als ich. Da war ich platt: Er hatte Sachen intus, die hatte ich selbst längst vergessen – und ich erinnerte mich allein wegen ihm wieder daran. (Töteberg 2003: 165)

Sass's experience challenges Leonie Naughton's slightly simplistic contention – in an otherwise engaging and comprehensive study – that all eastern-produced films depicted the unification process as fraught with difficulty, whilst their western counterparts offered more idealized depictions of the changes:

Western-produced and -funded unification films function as vehicles of history insofar as they present a romanticized view of East Germans' experiences of unification: easterners emerge as the beneficiaries of union with the west. They are presented with ample entrepreneurial opportunity and good fortune; they display a particular affinity with nature, gravitate toward preindustrial modes of production, and are often identified as 'primitive' in that they embrace mysticism and champion residual forms of culture associated with the rural idyll. [...]

Eastern-backed and -produced films addressing unification [...] rarely endorse these perspectives: they are more inclined to depict urban or suburban East Germans who fail to benefit from unification and are outcasts. Often they are mentally unstable, distraught, or forced to engage in criminal activity to survive in the new Germany. (Naughton 2002: 9)

On the contrary, one might argue that Becker, Klier and Stöhr all provide admirably detached explorations of the adjustments required of their eastern German protagonists, precisely because of their western perspective. Each of the three narratives is quite different, with the respective protagonists facing quite contrasting challenges befitting their different situations and ages: the teenaged Elfie in *Ostkreuz* is simply trying to get by day by day; Martin in Stöhr's film seeks to forge a relationship with the son he has never seen, who was born during his prison sentence; and Becker's Alex struggles to shield his mother from the truth of the collapse of the GDR for fear that the shock will cause a second, potentially fatal, heart attack. Taken together, however, the films offer a far more variegated picture of the *Wende* and its ramifications – socially, economically and most importantly of all, psychologically – than Naughton presupposes.

Michael Klier's *Ostkreuz* is arguably one of the bleakest of unification films. While it was the comedies such as *Go Trabi Go* (Timm, 1990) and *Wir können auch anders* (Buck, 1993) of the earlier unification films that enjoyed some commercial success, it is unsurprising that the stark and sombre *Ostkreuz* should have passed many by, despite winning acclaim at the International *Jugendfilmfest* in 1991. Naughton comments on the

indifference or annoyance that, mostly, western critics displayed towards eastern unification films, citing one who ‘remarked that most of [the German films released in 1991] would not be worth watching again’ (Naughton 2002: 121). For Margaret Köhler, the genre existed at a level below American soap opera by presupposing an audience ‘with an intelligence quotient bordering on idiocy’ (quoted in Naughton 2002: 121). In this context, *Ostkreuz* can be seen as a significant exception proving a rule. Far from being an escapist comedy predicated on a desire for commercial success, *Ostkreuz* establishes a markedly different perspective from the outset with its unostentatious credit sequence and unembellished, desolate opening panning shot. The penetrative gaze of the camera throughout forces us to confront the existential difficulties facing Elfie, the fourteen-year-old protagonist, and allows us very little, if any, respite. The film is decidedly uncomfortable viewing, not least because of the stunning performance by Laura Tonke as the teenager, around whom practically every scene is constructed. Her face is etched with the battered innocence of someone old before their time, but with little opportunity of any other mode of existence.

When we first see her she is playing by herself on a patch of waste ground, killing time while she waits for her mother who is viewing a flat. At first, there is nothing incongruous about the scene, as a listless Elfie appears to be acting as many young teenagers would in a similar situation. As the film unfolds, however, and the camera steadily explores her expressionless face with long takes and close-ups, it becomes clear that hers is not the lot of typical teenagers. She smokes incessantly, mimicking the engrained flourishes of experienced smokers, and if it looks unconvincing, possibly because the actress was not a smoker in real life, it simply adds to the alienating effect that Klier is striving to establish: here is a young girl whose childhood has been swept away from her by political events, and who is consequently forced to adopt the responsibilities, and mannerisms, of adulthood for which she is unprepared and unsuited. By focusing unremittingly on Elfie’s expressions, Klier’s camera speaks volumes about a generation of *Zonenkinder* caught in the middle.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Over the past few years, a number of autobiographical texts have been published by young authors, for whom the *Wende* came as a mixed blessing. Whilst it opened up new possibilities, the *Abwicklung* of the GDR also stole their childhood from them. The most iconic of these texts is Jana Hensel’s controversial *Zonenkinder* (2002), but the best is Jana Simon’s *Denn wir sind*

Elfie and her mother are living in a *Containerlager* in Berlin, a Kafkaesque labyrinth of temporary cabins in the middle of a no-man's-land – possibly Potsdamer Platz although it is never made explicit – where East Germans mingle with other refugees from Eastern Europe. As the very title of the film implies, Berlin has become a crossroads, both literal and metaphorical, as communism collapses across the continent.<sup>3</sup> All are looking for work, and every morning a gaggle of people wait expectantly outside the huts for the possibility of landing some manner of *Schwarzarbeit* with one of the 'Sklavenhändler', as Elfie calls them, demonstrating a perspicacity that belies her age. It is clear that the refugees are eking out an existence by whatever means they can, even Elfie, who tries to sell a presumably stolen car radio to other refugees. Indeed, she proves herself extremely resourceful, demonstrating an entrepreneurial skill born of desperation by taking a bucket from the communal kitchen in the camp and cleaning shop windows. In so doing, she encounters the Pole, Darius (Miroslaw Baka), a petty criminal, whose wallet she steals after he is involved in a scuffle in the street. After he bullies her to retrieve it, she tells him that she needs DM 3,000 as a deposit for the flat her mother has seen. She follows him doggedly and so he offers her an errand passing counterfeit money, knowing that she will be underage and exempt from prosecution if she gets caught, which duly happens. For her part, Elfie is unfazed by her arrest and continues to assist Darius in his various ill-fated schemes.

Naughton has pointed out that criminality 'emerges as a vital narrative catalyst' in many of the unification films, where theft is presented as 'one of the earliest lessons to be learned when East German characters undergo initiation into private enterprise: pilfering is figured as a natural component of capitalism and a by-product of unification' (Naughton 2002: 94). Whilst it is certainly the case that Elfie's involvement with Darius drives the story, there is little to suggest her activities are to be seen as an overt critique of capitalism. Even though

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*anders* (2001), which succeeds in conveying the tension which faces this generation. Whilst their childhood experiences have been called into question, they have nevertheless benefited from the greater freedom of opportunity afforded them in the new Germany.

<sup>3</sup> Ostkreuz is the name of an important S-Bahn station in east Berlin, a junction linking north, south, east and west. Whilst the topographical configuration of the actual station as an arterial crossroads in Berlin is clearly used metaphorically by Klier, he does not seek to imply that the action itself takes place in this part of the city. Klier seeks to create an allegorical space in the film, trapped between east and west, the impact of which would be reduced by explicit association with a specific locale.

she willingly participates in Darius's nefarious activities, and later resorts to stealing her grandfather's valuable Meißen porcelain dinner service, Elfie is never censured; the film shows her simply trying to create a private space for herself and her mother. In contrast, Darius's willingness to exploit the young girl for his own ends appears far less tolerable, exemplified best when he takes her to Poland to act as an interpreter during the sale of a stolen car to the Russian mafia. When the deal falls apart, Elfie is threatened at gunpoint and Darius flees in the car leaving the girl behind to fend for herself. Justice is later seen to be done when Elfie betrays Darius to the police at Alexanderplatz station, an episode that also reveals the girl's ruthless determination to survive, which the Pole appears to acknowledge with grudging admiration as he is led away.

With its depiction of urban decay and individuals struggling to survive the aftermath of great social upheaval, *Ostkreuz* recalls the atmosphere of early postwar *Trümmerfilme* such as *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (Staudte 1946), even if the latter's overtly political didacticism is absent from Klier's film. There is a sense in both films that time has been temporarily frozen, yet there is a fundamental difference between them which suggests that another comparison is more useful here. Although the bulk of the action in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* takes place in the narrative present, Wolfgang Staudte does not exclude the past, offering details about, and allusions to, the recent experiences not only of his protagonists, but of Germany as well. At the conclusion of the film's opening segment which, akin to a prologue, introduces the two protagonists, the camera zooms in slowly to focus briefly on a poster on a ruined wall, displaying a clichéd depiction of Germany under the heading 'Das schöne Deutschland'. The ironic juxtaposition of a tourist idyll with the stark reality of a city in ruins is the first significant ideological stroke in a film that seeks to confront postwar Germany with the grim legacy of its fascist regime, as befits the first DEFA (Deutsche Film AG) production. The point is reinforced more strikingly in a later flashback sequence, which reveals that Dr Mehrrens's fragile mental state stems from having been a powerless witness to the liquidation of a Polish ghetto. The other protagonist, the angelic Susanne, with whom Mehrrens falls in love, has returned to the city from a concentration camp. By way of contrast, in *Ostkreuz*, we have no idea about the recent pasts of the protagonists, nor is it made explicit when the action takes place, although we infer that it is at some point

soon after the fall of the Wall. In *Ostkreuz*, the focus is exclusively on the moment, which for Christopher Wagstaff is a defining characteristic of Italian neorealism:

What neo-realists have always insisted is that their art was a response to a moment in time. For them the problem was not so much the *apriori* one of changing their aesthetic, but that of *finding a way* to convey what they had to *express*. The content demanded the form. The function of their art was to give expression. (Wagstaff 2000: 38) [original emphasis]

Just as the early films of neorealist directors such as Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica produced snapshots of society coping with the aftermath of fascism, so Klier's film in its tone and style is a response to the upheaval of the *Wende*. Without any concrete temporal coordinates to pin the action down, it is at times almost as if the moment of socio-political change has just occurred, and that the Berlin of *Ostkreuz* is now suspended indefinitely between past and future. It is indeed another *Stunde Null*.

Film theorist André Bazin was famously drawn to postwar Italian cinema's 'aesthetic of realism' (Bazin 2000: 13), celebrating its unconstructed depiction of the world and an 'immediacy of things in themselves' (Nowell-Smith 1999: 78). As Wagstaff outlines, the movement was driven by an imperative to uncover the suffering that the past had inflicted, and associated with that motivation was the need to 'break with [...] rhetorical artistic schemata which seemed to bear no relation to life as it was lived' (Nowell-Smith 1999: 76). The neorealist film-makers, many of whom were on the left politically, resolved to hold a mirror up to the world around them without embellishing, or manipulating, what they saw. Bernard Dick underlines how Bazin championed *mise-en-scène* over montage as the best means of achieving 'a high degree of realism' on the screen, especially 'by shooting certain scenes in long take' (Dick 2005: 324), thereby allowing the audience to engage fully with the situation facing the protagonists. The effect of this aesthetic was enhanced when used in conjunction with deep focus, a device which brings events in the foreground and background into focus simultaneously:

Deep focus has three [...] advantages for Bazin: it brings spectators into closer contact with the image; it is intellectually more challenging than montage, which manipulates spectators and annihilates their freedom of choice by making them see only what the film-maker wants them to see as opposed to deep focus, which presents spectators with the entire image, from which they may choose to see only part, such as the foreground; and it allows for ambiguity, which is absolutely essential to works of art, whereas montage reduces a scene to one meaning. (Dick 2005: 325)



Bazin's attraction to the aesthetic of neorealism is thus axiomatic, for directors such as Rossellini sought to confront the audience with 'things actually happening at the time' (Bazin 2000: 16) and to animate them accordingly. Unlike with montage, where the director's manipulation of the cutting process introduces an implicit commentary on the events depicted on the screen, the *mise-en-scène* of neorealism stimulates, presents a challenge, but cannot control interpretation.

Klier's style in *Ostkreuz* is predicated upon the same desire to 'bring the spectators into closer contact with the image'. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Klier admitted to having been inspired by Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1947), which was in the main shot like *Die Mörder sind unter uns* amidst the actual rubble of Berlin.<sup>4</sup> One contemporary reviewer of *Ostkreuz* heralded the film as "ein Musterbeispiel eines neuen deutschen Neorealismus" (Wiegand 1991), and certainly the use of a teenage protagonist who has to fend for herself in an inhospitable environment at a time of historical change signals an obvious kinship between the films. But *Ostkreuz* also evokes the aesthetics of neorealism by deploying such devices as long takes, often comprised of close-ups on Elfie's face, or slow panning shots which dwell upon the landscape and allow us ample opportunity to observe the panorama of this second *Stunde Null* in Germany. In this respect, the influence of Rossellini's portrait of postwar Berlin, in which the credits roll over a series of long tracking shots of the rubble, is again self-evident. The slow panning shot of the opening sequence in *Ostkreuz* is arguably the best example of Klier's adoption of the same technique. Indeed, such scenes are evocative of the God-forsaken post-apocalyptic landscapes often found in dystopian science fiction films of recent times, inviting the audience to interpret the images figuratively, as well as literally. Sandro Bernardi argues that in *Germany Year Zero* Rossellini employed the desolation of Berlin symbolically so that 'the ruins we see are not only of Berlin but allude to that immense ruin which is [...] the western world, overturned by the same ambition [as National Socialism] of reorganizing the world according to human law' (Bernardi 2000: 55). As interpretations go it is desperately bleak, yet the fateful impact the breakdown of morality and community has

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<sup>4</sup> Rossellini and Staudte both shot some scenes in the studio, although the bulk of the action was shot in the genuine rubble of the city.

upon Rossellini's young protagonist resonates beyond the film's documentary-type realism. One hesitates to suggest that Klier is seeking to use Berlin in quite the same way. But there is no denying the unease that the *mise-en-scène* conjures up about the future of post-*Wende* Germany, which is enhanced still further with the director's use of Fred Frith's cold, eerie music. It should be noted, however, that music is used sparingly. Even when it is present, it is very faint, suggesting that the director does not want to distract the viewer from the camera's main focus.<sup>5</sup>

If music is scarce, dialogue is equally sparse. Characters use an economy of words, and as a consequence never betray their thoughts or feelings to one another. In truth, there seems precious little to talk about. As a result, it is unclear what kind of relationship Elfie enjoys with her mother, who seems more concerned with getting out of the camp by sleeping with one of the 'Sklavenhändler' than fretting about how her daughter might respond to this opportunistic liaison. She justifies her actions to her daughter with promises that she will finally get her own room, but when Elfie refuses to go with them, her mother makes a half-hearted attempt to convince her to come, opting swiftly for the material over the maternal. Even with her friend, Edmund (Steffan Cammann), Elfie says very little. When the two of them go to a bar for a meal with the money she has made from selling her grandfather's porcelain, what is in essence a date simply draws attention to their gaucheness, two youngsters pretending to be adults. After sitting in silence and at one point giggling awkwardly, Elfie tells Edmund to eat up – it is all they have to say to each other.

The lack of dialogue means there is strikingly little exposition in the film about the characters, which complements the lacunae that puncture the narrative, reflected visually by the often crude fades that link isolated scenes. We have no idea how Elfie and her mother have ended up in the camp, for example, or why they do not live with her grandfather. Similarly, we do not learn where Elfie obtained the radio, nor how she got back to Berlin after the disastrous trip to Poland, significant holes which recall Bazin's identification of the 'enormous ellipses' in neorealist narratives such as Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), in which 'an intelligible succession of events' is depicted although they 'do not mesh like a chain

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<sup>5</sup> This represents one of the key differences between Rossellini and Klier, as the former makes extensive use of music to heighten the drama that unfolds on screen.

with the sprockets of a wheel' (Bazin 2000: 21-22). In *Ostkreuz*, the only character who tells us anything about himself is Edmund. The young boy explains that he was left behind by his parents when they fled to the West via Hungary, but he has no idea where they are and seems unconcerned to track them down. Although it might appear slightly out of keeping with the tenor of the film, Klier apparently makes this concession because it is the actor's own story. The use of non-professional actors is another feature of Italian neorealism adopted in *Ostkreuz*, and the authenticity of Klier's film is enhanced all the more disturbingly not only for allowing us to hear actor Steffan Cammann's true story, but also by the fact that his whereabouts were unknown when the film premiered in 1991.

So is *Ostkreuz* necessarily a pessimistic film? Does it amount to an indictment of reunification, or capitalism for that matter? On the face of it, it is hard to view it as anything other than a bleak appraisal of the *Wende*. We see family ties strained and broken, teenagers confronting a harsh reality that ages them too quickly and leaves them abandoned. And yet, at the film's conclusion Elfie is crucially not alone. Whilst it is hardly an ideal situation, Elfie seems more content with Edmund as they wrap up warm and settle down for a cold night in a derelict building than at any other time in the film. Most strikingly of all, it is with Edmund that we see Elfie smile for the first time, to stunning effect. Her careworn features dissolve into a dazzling smile, offering us a fleeting glimpse of the young girl that still resides within. Her mother may have deserted her, but she has found somebody who makes her happy, and as she proves throughout the film, she is remarkably resourceful for one so young. It might not seem to be much, but Klier might be reminding us that in the darkness, the faintest light burns brightly, an interpretation reinforced by the closing shot of the film with Elfie gazing out of an open window. At the climax of Rossellini's film, the protagonist, also called Edmund, does not survive, committing suicide by jumping from the window of a derelict building, unable to come to terms with the consequences of having poisoned his ailing father. In this way, *Ostkreuz* might not be a critique of the *Wende* as much as a rejection of the promises of 'blühende Landschaften' made by Helmut Kohl to win the elections in 1990, the year before the film's release. It demands a more honest assessment of the state of the nation than had been made hitherto, deploying a provocative neorealist aesthetic to point up the scale of socio-economic distress that existed. Nevertheless, by emphasizing Elfie's resilience *Ostkreuz* is

not without hope for the future. Klier thus steers a path between Rossellini's symbolically negative portrait of Berlin and Wolfgang Staudte's politically uplifting vision of the city, combining elements of both in his own snapshot.

Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin is in Germany* certainly serves up a much less disturbing picture of the new Germany and provides an interesting counterpoint to Klier's film by suggesting that many of the ailments exposed in the earlier picture are being addressed. With the action taking place eleven years after *Ostkreuz*, it is possible to gauge the progress that has been made in the interim. The wastelands of the earlier film have been replaced by the building sites which the protagonist of *Berlin is in Germany*, Martin Schulz, witnesses as he returns to the city after serving eleven years in prison. Arrested for the accidental manslaughter of a neighbour, who had uncovered his plot to escape the GDR with his pregnant wife in the spring of 1989, Martin is released in 2000 and the film follows his efforts to rebuild his life, and principally his relationship with his ex-wife, Manuela, and Rokko, the eleven-year-old son he has never seen. If the early unification films tended to depict the disintegration of families, as *Ostkreuz* does, then *Berlin is in Germany* provides a more hopeful sign that, with the worst of the turmoil over, the rebuilding is not just physical, but emotional. It is implied that Martin sacrificed his relationship with Manuela – by insisting that she no longer visit him in prison – in order that she could start afresh. When he first visits her apartment in Pankow, he sees Manuela with her partner Wolfgang, a *Wessi*. He is later invited to join them during a dinner party, at which Martin is introduced as an 'alter Bekannter', and despite some awkwardness, he accepts her new situation without any obvious bitterness. His main concern is to develop a relationship with his son, initially buying Rokko a gameboy and later visiting the flat to spend some time with him, which Manuela is more than happy to sanction.

By virtue of his incarceration, Martin allows Stöhr to demonstrate just how much has changed in a decade, a device that contrasts with the scenario in *Good Bye Lenin!* where the problems stem from having to conceal the changes that have occurred over a matter of months. Martin is described in a newspaper article as 'der letzte Ossi', the accompanying photograph for which captures his bewilderment at this new world, a world he has only seen on television. Arriving in Berlin, he cannot work out how to use the ticket machine on the station platform, which rejects his 100DM note, as well as his 100 Ostmark note, a

potent early symbol of the complete erasure of GDR culture and society from the new Germany, but also of the ongoing problems faced in uniting the two former states as one. He has trouble describing what toy he would like for his son – embarrassingly he cannot answer the assistant when asked what his son’s hobbies are – and then later has to negotiate the bureaucratic nightmare of the forms required to settle into this new life. He struggles with the Anglicisms that punctuate people’s speech, and when he later attempts to obtain his taxi driver’s licence, he has to tackle the problem of all the new street names in east Berlin, one of the topoi of post-unification texts told from an eastern perspective which lament the GDR’s comprehensive *Abwicklung*. In order to accentuate Martin’s initial dislocation from this new Berlin, during the early segments of the film he is largely shot in medium or deep focus, with this new world bustling with bewildering speed all around him. Jörg Schüttauf’s moving performance as Martin authentically expresses the parolee’s befuddlement, and is as vital for the impact of the film as Laura Tonke’s portrayal of Elfie in *Ostkreuz*.

But we are not dealing with neorealism here. For if Klier’s film produces a snapshot, frozen in time, Stöhr is concerned to show us that Martin does manage to re-engage with society and progress. Indeed, he copes with more resilience than his friend, Peter, whom he prevents from jumping off a rooftop. Peter appears to represent the western stereotype of the *Jammerossi*, for whom the new Germany has been one disaster after another. He cuts a sorry figure, crying in his Trabi as Martin drives him home and then being picked on by a bullying skinhead in a bar. By contrast, Martin ends up riding in a taxi driven by another *Kumpel* from the GDR, Enrique, a Cuban who has adapted well to the changes in society and encourages his friend to pursue the same career. Thus Stöhr is careful to provide a nuanced picture of eastern Germans since the *Wende*, demonstrating that many were able to find their feet. A significant feature of *Berlin is in Germany* and *Ostkreuz* in this respect is that none of the characters show any inclination towards nostalgia for the old days. Martin makes paper planes with his obsolete Ostmark, whilst Manuela has a very comfortable flat in Pankow and a good job, tellingly, as a travel agent.<sup>6</sup> The same absence of *Ostalgie*

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<sup>6</sup> Martin’s disposal of his old notes anticipates Alex tossing his mother’s valueless savings from the roof in *Good Bye Lenin!*.

underpins Becker's film, as Ariane Kerner happily pursues a successful career at Burger King, whilst her brother Alex adapts quickly to working for a western satellite firm. Moreover, he makes clear at the end that the GDR he created for his mother was a country he would have liked to have lived in, but never actually existed.

In *Berlin is in Germany*, by virtue of his status in the GDR as a *Paragraph 213er*, Martin never really acts like a supposedly typical *Ossi* about what has happened.<sup>7</sup> Even though Manuela's partner is a *Wessi*, Martin's principal aim is to earn enough money to forge a proper relationship with his son, rather than to compete with Wolfgang for his son's affection. Indeed, it is Wolfgang who feels the more resentful and threatened, and calls the police when Martin comes to Manuela for help, after getting unwittingly caught up in a police raid at the sex shop he works in part time. Even during his subsequent police interview, Martin's hostility towards the officer stems from his suspicion that he used to belong to the Stasi, only to be nonplussed when he turns out to be from Bremen. Thus Stöhr steers clear of the stereotypical east/west confrontations of many post-unification texts, opting for a more nuanced depiction of a society which is gradually learning to live together and where ingrained attitudes and reactions need to be overcome.

The clearest indication that progress has been made since 1989, and the depiction of post-*Wende* society in *Ostkreuz*, is that Martin refuses to resort to criminal activity to get by. Whereas for Elfie it is presented as an existential necessity, in Martin's case it is not something he is prepared to countenance. When Viktor, the sex shop owner, tries to tempt him into taking part in a robbery, Martin refuses. When he is subsequently barred from sitting the taxi driver test, for which he has expended so much time and effort, because of his criminal record, his frustration provokes a tirade at Viktor, saying that disreputable people like the sex shop owner deserve to be strung up for their activities. Whilst this outburst is wholly out of character, it nevertheless underlines his total rejection of illegal ways and means of getting by, even when his efforts to reintegrate himself into society by respectable means have failed.

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<sup>7</sup> Paragraph 213 was the law under which those accused of attempting to escape the GDR were tried.

As Daniela Berghahn suggests, the film ends optimistically, and more obviously so than *Ostkreuz*. There is every indication that Martin will succeed with the help of family and friends ‘though, significantly, his closest friends and allies are not West Germans but his former East German wife and immigrants’ (Berghahn 2005: 226), a fact all the more intriguing since Stöhr himself is a *Wessi*. Nevertheless, the reunified State, in the guise of his probation officer, seems very sympathetic to his plight, which reinforces the sense that the future is indeed bright, despite the initial problems he has. This encouraging resolution arguably adheres to the template of *Wessi* unification films Naughton identifies. Yet it is far from clear whether Martin will be ultimately able to resurrect his relationship with Manuela, although she visits him in prison with a letter from their son. The presence, albeit peripheral, of the skinhead who bullies Peter and taunts Martin, meanwhile hints at other social problems as yet unresolved. Moreover, the film retains a melancholic tone throughout, culminating in Martin’s almost suicidal despair at the prospect of another prison spell. Nevertheless, Stöhr is mindful to guide the film between overly melodramatic extremes of emotion, thereby keeping it just to the right side of the western-inflected cliché it might otherwise have become.

Klier and Stöhr between them have produced very useful documents of the transitional period in Germany since 1989. A comparison of the two films, released a decade apart, indicates how much progress has been made in certain areas, without suggesting that the process is complete. Arguably of greater significance for any analysis of the unified Germany’s evolution is the fact that both films, which focus exclusively on the experiences of eastern Germans, were directed with great sensitivity by western Germans, and Klier went on to direct the acclaimed *Heidi M.* (2001), which follows another individual’s re-adjustment to life in the new Germany.<sup>8</sup> These directors thus challenge stereotypical notions of how the *Wende* has been perceived on both sides of the supposed ‘Mauer im Kopf’, and address the disinterest or prejudice that had a negative impact upon the perception of unification films in the early 1990s, especially among western critics. It is surely healthy that issues surrounding unification have not disappeared from view in the twenty-first century. The success of commercial films like *Good Bye Lenin!*, arguably

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<sup>8</sup> The film was produced by X-Filme, which was also responsible for *Good Bye Lenin!*.

building on the relatively unsung achievements of directors such as Klier and Stöhr, might yet be viewed as meaningful contributions to the coming together of both sides that was promised during the *Wende*, whilst simultaneously making international audiences more aware of contemporary issues in Germany.

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## **Biodata**

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