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## GERMANY'S COUNTER-CINEMAS

**T**HE GERMAN ECONOMY is primarily export-driven and in some important respects, the country's film industry follows suit. Since the millennium, the most successful German films for international audiences have neatly repackaged the most troubled episodes of the national past for external consumption. While the domestic box office is dominated by multicultural feel-good comedies like *Fack Ju Göhte* (2013), international awards have been showered on films about Nazism, the Stasi, the fall of the GDR or the Red Army Faction—*Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), *Der Untergang* (Downfall, 2004), *Sophie Scholl* (2005), *Das Leben der Anderen* (Lives of Others, 2006), *Baader Meinhof Complex* (2009), *13 Minutes* (2015), *Der Staat gegen Fritz Bauer* (The People vs Fritz Bauer, 2015)—all represented by conventional, Hollywood-style cinematographical narratives which confirm standard perceptions of German history and show that, as a mature member of the 'international community', the country has come to terms with its past.

This 'heritage' cinema has been caustically received by the more trenchant film writers. Harvard Germanist Eric Rentschler classified it as a continuation of the 'cinema of consensus' that dominated the Kohl era, 'agreeable fantasies that allow for a sense of closure'.<sup>1</sup> Yet though films such as *Das Leben der Anderen* and *Der Untergang* take their formal cues from Hollywood, their production and distribution are dependent on a different kind of apparatus. Though designed for international box-office success, they are in large part state funded, not least through the public TV channels.<sup>2</sup> This funding structure has shaped German film culture in ways that have barely been registered by critics outside the

country. Yet internally, the mechanics and trajectory of the state-funding system—and its representations of history—have been the subject of heated debate. Mainstream film critics have charged that the boom in historical drama has gone hand-in-hand with a shift towards commercialized productions, and away from risky or challenging films. Funding has increasingly gone to films that ‘stay inside a corset of conventional narrative’, wrote *taz* film critic Cristina Nord. ‘The subjects can be controversial, not the form.’ The result, claimed veteran cultural commentator Georg Seeßlen in *Die Zeit*, was ‘cineastic low-fat quark’.<sup>3</sup>

### *Machinery of consensus*

This was not always the case. In 1962, a group of twenty-six young filmmakers at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival launched a manifesto calling for the freedoms to create a new German cinema: ‘Freedom from industry conventions. Freedom from the influence of commercial partners. Freedom from the paternalism of interest groups.’<sup>4</sup> Three years after the Oberhausen Manifesto, the Erhard government, learning from France, set up a fund for films of ‘cultural value’. In 1967, the Film Funding Act established a framework for state funding, which included a levy from TV channels, distributors and cinemas.<sup>5</sup> Public broadcasters—the national ZDF and the regional-state network, ARD—provided backing for early films by Fassbinder, Reitz, Kluge, Farocki and others. In the 1970s and early 80s, experimental work enjoyed stable if relatively small-scale funding and a ready-built system of distribution.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Rentschler, *The Use and Abuse of Cinema: German Legacies from the Weimar Era to the Present*, New York 2015, pp. 317–20.

<sup>2</sup> For example, *Das Leben der Anderen* was funded by four different regional and state institutions as well as the national Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA), and co-produced by two public TV channels: see *Blickpunkt Film* website.

<sup>3</sup> Cristina Nord, ‘Genie, Wahnsinn, Konsens’, *taz*, 24 March 2006; Georg Seeßlen, ‘Genug vom Cineastischen Magerquark’, *Die Zeit*, 10 September 2020; see also Andreas Busche, ‘Qualitätskino statt Blockbuster’, *Tagesspiegel*, 7 March 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Among the Oberhausen Manifesto signatories were Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, Ferdinand Khittel, Peter Schamoni, Haro Senft and other members of the Munich School. See Ulrich Gregor, ‘Die Freiheit, die sie meinten’, *Tagesspiegel*, 27 February 2012.

<sup>5</sup> The Oberhausen radicals were not impressed. At the 1968 festival, Hellmuth Costard’s 10-minute *Besonders wertvoll* (Of Special Merit) featured a talking penis, caressed by a female hand, that climaxes as it recites the morality clause of the Film Funding Act. ‘Of special merit’ was one of the federal film authority’s categories.

Over the years, however, while the amount of money grew, the determinants of the funding system began to change. With the advent of commercial television, which exploded in the 1990s after German unification, the ZDF and regional ARD bureaucracies grew more averse to any risk of alienating the audience; instead of aiming for cultural prestige, they were now competing for viewing figures. At the same time, their position within the film-funding system grew more salient; regional-state funds now often required a TV channel as co-producer before they would agree to contribute. This gave TV executives a great deal of power over the films that were produced, mitigating against more experimental or challenging work that was deemed ‘unsuitable’ for television audiences. Importantly, the *Filmfördergesetz* guidelines stipulate that, in addition to cultural and aesthetic criteria, potential commercial success and promoting the ‘positive development of the industry’ should be key factors in the allocation of funds, without defining the relation between these dimensions.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, state-television channels are mandated by the Interstate Broadcasting Agreement to provide ‘education, information, advice and entertainment’, the latter complying with *einem öffentlich-rechtlichen Angebotsprofil*—a public-interest service remit.<sup>7</sup>

The upshot has been a film-funding mechanism largely designed to produce a palatable cinema for a mainstream audience, which inherently excludes the freedoms of the Oberhausen Manifesto, even as it keeps German cinema alive. Usually, in the financing of a German film with a modest budget of between 1 and 2 million euros, there are two national funding institutions and three to four regional funding institutions involved, as well as two television entities. If it is an

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<sup>6</sup> See the website of the *Staatsministerium für Kultur und Medien*. The pretence that German film funding is subsidizing an ‘industry’ can have absurd consequences: blockbuster Hollywood productions can be funded with German taxpayers’ money, so long as it is spent in the FRG; Tom Cruise’s 2008 vehicle, *Valkyrie*, received nearly €5 million in public funding. For a while, it came with so few restrictions that ‘stupid German money’ became a stock phrase among Hollywood producers. See ‘Deutsche Millionen für Cruise-Film’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 July 2007; Thomas Kniebe, ‘Schluss mit “Stupid German Money”’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 May 2010.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Ihre Angebote haben der Bildung, Information, Beratung und Unterhaltung zu dienen. Sie haben Beiträge insbesondere zur Kultur anzubieten. Auch Unterhaltung soll einem öffentlich-rechtlichen Angebotsprofil entsprechen’: *Staatsvertrag zur Modernisierung der Medienordnung in Deutschland*, 7 November 2020.

international co-production, the number of institutions increases. That makes for a lot of people who all want to have a say about what the film should look like. As a result, screenplays may languish between different committees for six or seven years and, while there is rarely overt political interference, the regional bodies impose certain territorial considerations; as Seeßlen puts it, your film has a better chance of getting a grant from Kleinkleckersdorf if you include a scene shot in front of Kleinkleckersdorf's medieval clocktower, a local tourist attraction. At the ideological level, the system had grown into a 'truth machine' that not only prohibits certain kinds of claims, but generates an entire cinematic grammar, shaping narratives and aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> It has become, in Angela Merkel's famous coinage, a 'market-conforming' bureaucracy. There is a sense that films often secure funding because they appeal to the lowest common denominator—a 'dictatorship of mediocrity', according to Lars Henrik Gass, current director of the Oberhausen Festival.<sup>9</sup> These conditions also help to explain why German film-funding institutions and public TV channels are drawn to historical narratives, which offer an ideal combination of their two otherwise often contradictory goals: on the one hand, to educate their audience, on the other, to increase their market share through commercially successful entertainment.

'State cultural-promotion bodies love films that "wrap" political enlightenment in history', director Ulrich Köhler complained.<sup>10</sup> Television series like *Babylon Berlin* (2017), set in the Weimar Republic just before the Nazis' seizure of power, or *Deutschland 83/86/89* (2015–20), on the last years of the GDR, serve up this menu for an international audience. On national TV as well, mini-series after mini-series has been eagerly consumed. The end result of this mining of German history is on display in *Eldorado KaDeWe: Jetzt ist unsere Zeit* (2021), a six-part series directed by Julia von Heinz which tells the heavily fictionalized story of Germany's most prestigious department store, founded and run by a Jewish family until the Nazis came to power. Like many of these series, *Eldorado KaDeWe* is in fact rather uninterested in the era it is depicting; its narratives of sexual liberation, deprivation and excess might as well be set in the here and now. But projecting these images onto the past

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<sup>8</sup> Seeßlen, 'Genug vom Cineastischen Magerquark', borrowing Foucault's use of 'truth machine'.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion between Lars Henrik Gass and producer Martin Hagemann, 'Die Filmförderung vor der Implosion', *critic.de*, 24 January 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Köhler, 'Warum ich keine politischen Filme mache', *New Filmkritik*, 23 April 2007.

provides the comforting feeling that, despite everything, we are better off now than people used to be.

### *Berlin School and after*

But these made-for-export genres have never exhausted the possibilities of contemporary German cinema. Just as the work of Fassbinder, Kluge, Reitz or von Trotta—‘overtly political, stylistically radical and experimental, mindful of developments in other arts and other countries, at times, unabashedly intellectual’<sup>11</sup>—challenged the self-image of the German economic miracle in the 1970s and 80s, so the Berlin School has been invoked as a counter example to the ‘corseted’ narratives of the 1990s and early 2000s. After a dry spell for independent German cinema, critics were all too eager to identify a movement when films by Angela Schanelec, Christian Petzold and Thomas Arslan began to make waves on the festival circuit. They had studied together at the DFFB film school in Berlin in the early 90s, making it easier to see parallels between them. In 2001 *Die Zeit*’s film critic introduced the ‘Berlin School’ label in a review of Schanelec’s *Mein langsames Leben* (Passing Summer, 2001), noting its similarities to Petzold’s *Die innere Sicherheit* (The State I Am In, 2000) and Arslan’s *Der schöne Tag* (A Fine Day, 2001): a liking for ellipsis and for keeping a distance; a similar way of dealing with space and time; the same diffuse bright light. Most important, ‘all assertion has gone, replaced by observation’; in a country whose filmmakers were ‘diligently learning streamlined storyboarding’, this was a blessing.<sup>12</sup>

The Berlin School’s work has been read as a reaction against—and rejection of—the aesthetic categories promoted by the German film-funding bureaucracy, as to the production of historical spectacle. It has taken the form of an avowedly presentist cinema, resisting the psychological realism, conventional dramatic structure and well-worn political tropes favoured by the system, and exploring forms of realism—or *ver-isme*, in one account<sup>13</sup>—that defy mimetic-realist conventions and seek instead to capture, as Marco Abel puts it in his indispensable study, *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*, ‘a sensation of the reality of the

<sup>11</sup> Rentschler, *The Use and Abuse of Cinema*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Merten Worthmann, ‘Mit Vorsicht genießen’, in *Die Zeit*, 27 September 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Baute, Ekkehard Knörer, Volker Pantenburg, Stefan Pethke, Simon Rothöhler, ‘“Berliner Schule”—eine Collage’, in *Kolik. Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 6 October 2006.

present'. These are films unmistakably set 'in the here and now of unified Germany.'<sup>14</sup> Presentism came with two advantages. It allowed these young filmmakers to operate with low budgets and, partly because of that, the projects were relatively easy for funders and TV executives to accept, as they sounded harmless enough on paper, with little to affront the average viewer; the alienation effects of the Berlin School were quite subtle—in Petzold's early work, for example, the featureless architecture of a business park could be fraught with tension.

Yet the cinema of the Berlin School was of its moment, the immediate decade or so after German unification. At the apex of its international reception, the 2013 MOMA exhibition, *Films from the Berliner Schule*, one of the group's practitioner-theorists, Christoph Hochhäusler, had already announced its demise in his catalogue essay.<sup>15</sup> By then a second generation of filmmakers—Hochhäusler himself, Valeska Grisebach, Benjamin Heisenberg, Maren Ade, Ulrich Köhler among them—had become loosely associated with the 'school' of Petzold, Schanelec and Arslan: almost a dozen directors, with nearly fifty films between them. Nevertheless, Hochhäusler was right. The original filmmakers have diverged in style and interests, and new cohorts have emerged with different, sometimes opposing perspectives. In what follows, I examine this 'Post-Berlin' cinema of the 2010s and 20s, including recent films by the School's founding members. If this body of work is too varied to be identified as a movement, it still forms a strong contrast to the official tropes of Hollywood-style historical drama. On that basis, it can be seen as a new counter-cinema which attempts, with varying degrees of success, to resist the prerogatives of Germany's film bureaucracy, even as the directors parlay and negotiate within it. Certain trends can be identified, extending across filmmakers of different generations and outlooks. Two in particular will be identified here.

The first trend is an outward turn. Maren Ade sets *Toni Erdmann* (2016) in a Romania colonized by multinational corporations bent on sacking

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<sup>14</sup> Marco Abel, *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*, New York 2013, p.13.

<sup>15</sup> Christoph Hochhäusler, 'On Whose Shoulders: The Question of Aesthetic Indebtedness', in Rajendra Roy, Anke Leweke, eds, *The Berlin School: Films from the Berliner Schule*, New York 2013, p. 28. In 1998 Hochhäusler was one of the founder-editors of *Revolver*, a film magazine dedicated to organizing 'a theory of practice', which publishes probing interviews with filmmakers alongside essays and manifestos; see Marcus Seibert, *Revolver—Kino muss gefährlich sein*, Frankfurt am Main 2006. Hochhäusler's pre-2013 films include *I Am Guilty* (2005) and *The City Below* (2010).

local employees from the assets they acquire. In Valeska Grisebach's *Western* (2017), German construction workers pitch camp in the Bulgarian hills, causing frictions with the villagers. Petzold's *Transit* (2018), set in Marseille, overlays the experience of 1940s refugees with those of today. Lisa Bierwirth's *Le Prince* (2021) brings together a white woman from the German art world and an African businessman from the DRC. Anna Sophie Hartmann's *Giraffe* (2022), a German-Danish co-production, records the disappearance of the old insular life on a Danish island as Polish building workers construct a tunnel link to Germany. The second trend is a historical turn, experimenting with new aesthetic strategies for the representation of the past. Petzold's *Barbara* (2012) is set in the GDR of the early 1980s; *Phoenix* (2014) in post-war Berlin. His most recent film, *Undine* (2020), traces connections between present-day Berlin and the world of Romantic mythology. The action in Julian Radlmaier's *Blutsauger* (Bloodsuckers, 2022) takes place in 1928. Arslan's *Gold* (2013) tracks a German party's journey to the Klondike of the 1890s. To these we might add Dominik Graf's *Fabian* (2021), based on the 1931 Erich Kästner novel, and Edgar Reitz's *Die Andere Heimat* (Home Away from Home, 2013), set in the hungry 1840s, with Rhinelanders as economic emigrants. Ulrich Köhler's *In My Room* (2018) takes us instead into the future, but one that resembles the primitive state of an imaginary distant past.

Before going on to explore some of these works, it may be useful to contrast the contexts, concerns and signature motifs of the new counter-cinema to those of the Berlin School, from which it partially emerged. Again, Abel's systematic account of the latter provides a series of helpful benchmarks. The context for the original Berlin School directors, he argued, was the sense of social malaise and paralysis that characterized post-unification Germany, amid high unemployment, after the euphoria of 1989; disappointment, stasis, an intangible sense of loss belied the official doxa of 'becoming a normal country by coming to terms with the past'. In works such as Arslan's *Der schöne Tag*, Grisebach's *Sehnsucht* (Longing, 2006), Petzold's *Die innere Sicherheit* and *Yella* (2007), these filmmakers did not seek to avoid this reality but sharpened their examination of it. Their 'overriding concern' was the problem of present-day Germany, which they probed from the estranging vantage point of the future: 'What Germany will have been?' Key motifs, for Abel, were mobility and stasis: travelling without getting anywhere, as in *Yella*; or, as in *Die innere Sicherheit*, being permanently on the run. Stylistically, though they didn't eschew narrative, the Berlin School directors aimed

at an unsettling visual-audial intensification of normality—the ‘eerie clarity’ of the rustling trees and gurgling water in *Yella*—with ‘clinically precise framing’, long shots, few cuts and sparse extra-diegetic music, to get German viewers to see their country anew.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, the context for the new counter-cinema has been the expansionist Germany of the 2010s and 20s; the country emerging as the predominant economic power in Europe, determining the outcomes of the Eurozone’s financial meltdown and the migration crisis—at the price of heightened neoliberal competition and conservative reaction. In place of the paralysis of the 1990s, there are the stresses of stepped-up capitalist competition, uncertainty and precariousness. Perhaps the main concern of this cinema is an interrogation of German expansionism; both the outward turn and new forms of historical enquiry involve encounters with ‘the other’—as migrants and colonizers or, as in Petzold’s *Undine*, myth and the unconscious. While many of these films have abandoned the purist aesthetics of the Berlin School, for the most part they have not settled for conventional realism. There is often an improvised aesthetic, the camera uncomfortably poised ‘in between’ long-shot and close-up, as if filmmaking itself had become provisional. In other films, we find an aesthetic of precise framing and narrative construction, which nevertheless calls attention to the conditions of its production. The heterogeneity of German counter-cinema over the past decade defies rigid categorization, even in terms of its oppositional stance. What follows examines work by Grisebach, Ade, Petzold, Graf and Radlmaier, as they explore alternative strategies to those of the export-led cinema of consensus.

### *Outward turns*

Valeska Grisebach’s move from *Sehnsucht*, in the early 2000s, to *Western*, eleven years later, exemplifies the new cinema’s broader shift in concerns. Born in Bremen in 1968, Grisebach grew up in West Berlin and studied literature and philosophy in Berlin, Munich and Vienna. She entered the Vienna Film Academy in 1993 and graduated with *Mein Stern* (Be My Star, 2001), an attentive study of a teenage relationship, filmed in Berlin. *Sehnsucht*, two years in the making, was set in a village outside Berlin, an area heavily affected by the disappointment that followed German reuni-

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<sup>16</sup> Abel, *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*, pp. 17, 19, 4, 22, 14–16



fiction, and tells the story of a marriage coming apart. With *Western*, Grisebach turned to focus on Europe's Balkan frontier. A German construction company is building a hydroelectric plant in southern Bulgaria, close to the Greek border—an area of partisan activity during the War.

The film engages with the tropes of the Western genre in several senses. It is about masculinity, outsiders, conquering new territory, a clash between the 'civilized' newcomers and the autochthonous inhabitants of the region; the battle over water rights is a staple of the movies of the American settler-colonial frontier. Yet this Western is actually an 'Eastern', in which the indigenous people are Europeans, too. The title indicates a strong meta-filmic aspect at play here. That the basic conflicts of the American Western remain so elegantly intact is a strong statement about the nature of Germany's economic activity in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. But while it is a film about tensions and inequalities, *Western* is also about tentative commonalities and attempts to communicate on a basic human level—shaped, of course, by linguistic difficulties, prejudices on both sides and, most importantly, by the extractive and exploitative nature of the new arrivals' approach to the land. Shortly after their arrival, the men hoist a German flag above their camp, which henceforth flutters against the backdrop of wooded hills and clear blue sky, while the workers exchange verbal barbs, flexing their masculinity.

Aesthetically, however, the film often undermines the expectations established by the title. For the most part, the unobtrusive hand-held camera in *Western* draws little attention to the act of framing and showing—which distinguishes it not only from, for example, John Ford, but also from Petzold and Hochhäusler. Grisebach underlines the importance of research that precedes production, as well as of collaboration with the actors on the dialogue. She also says that her goal is to stay open to what happens on set, confirming the impression of spontaneity and an almost documentary approach.<sup>17</sup> Scenes and dialogue tend to start *in media res*, without the Western's typical insistence on timing as a formal aspect of the drama. Nevertheless, the wide-angle shots with men in the foreground of the landscape, or moving through it in the depth of the image, bear an unmissable resemblance to the filmic language of the Western. Here, however, the Bulgarian landscape, with its

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<sup>17</sup> See "'It's Good to Lose Control": An Interview with Valeska Grisebach', *Senses of Cinema* 90, March 2019.

forested hillsides and bright sunlight, represents not the American prairies, as in so many European Westerns—Sergio Leone filming *Fistful of Dollars* in Andalusia, and so on—but itself. The filmic space is at once a specific place and a commentary on traditions of representation within the genre, and therefore opens a whole new dimension of associations and interpretations.

The same is true for the acting. The non-professionals who feature in *Western* were chosen from among hundreds in a long process of research and street casting. Their identity as skilled manual workers is visible in the ways they move, set about tasks, or carry their tools. When they assert their presumed superiority over the Bulgarian villagers, they justify it with reference to their skills. It is crucial to the film that the workers are played by people with bodies shaped by the work they do. This prioritization of physicality over psychology unites Grisebach with other filmmakers from the Berlin School. The tension between these carefully chosen concrete elements of pre-filmic reality and the cinematic tropes explored lends *Western* its depth and complexity. This tension is never resolved. The unexpected jolts and plot turns of the pre-filmic remain visible, while also integrated into the work, making for the sense that there is something more to see here, outside the frame. These trans-border encounters point to a broader context, vital for an understanding of the present, that will take us more time to grasp.

Maren Ade has chosen a contrary approach. Born in Karlsruhe in 1976, Ade studied at Munich's renowned film and TV school, HFF. In 1999, while still a student, she co-founded the Berlin-based Komplizen Film production company, through which she released *Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen* (The Forest for the Trees, 2003) and *Alle Anderen* (Everyone Else, 2009), and which has backed many of the new-generation German filmmakers, including Grisebach. In *Toni Erdmann*, Ade analyses the effects of international capitalism on human relationships through a semi-comedy about a father-daughter relationship. Ines (Sandra Hüller), the daughter, works for a multinational consulting firm in Bucharest and most of the film is set in her world, as she struggles to make her way in the relentlessly competitive domain of corporate capitalism, desperately fighting to be transferred from Romania to Shanghai. Bucharest figures as an outpost, where a consulting firm can profit from outsourcing the labour of an oil firm.

While *Western* is interested in the connections between manual work and masculinity, *Toni Erdmann* examines managerial-level social stress and the highly gendered world of white-collar immaterial work. In a film about internal tensions and pressures that manifest themselves through interpersonal encounters, it seems appropriate that Ade has chosen professional actors to perform these interactions, which are often at once familiar and absurd. The arrival of Ines's father Winfried (Peter Simonischek), a sixties bohemian with a taste for cheesy jokes that typically involve bad wigs and fake teeth, fails to disrupt the proceedings. Introducing himself to Ines's circle as life coach Toni Erdmann, Winfried is invited to the corporate reception. We watch Ines as she slowly but surely loses her composure, while still coping with the relentless put-downs and sexist demands of her superiors—wedding-present shopping with her boss's new Russian wife, and so forth—as well as her father's interventions and a badly injured toe. It soon becomes clear that her position was fragile from the start. Yet Ines keeps battling for success; instead of surrendering, she fights back by pushing the absurd normalcy of her work interactions to the extreme. As the guests appear for her birthday party, she welcomes them naked, assuring her boss this is a great idea for team building. Father and daughter are reconciled at the end of the film, but corporate capitalism's drive is unappeased; Ines is off to work for McKinsey in Singapore.

Unlike *Western*, *Toni Erdmann's* camera rarely deviates from a medium shot. Ade is more interested in the subtle subtexts and disruptions of personal-professional interactions than in the space itself—which, for the most part is generic: the conference rooms, hotel lobbies, restaurants, night clubs and impersonal apartments of the international corporate elite. At one point Ines glances out of the C-suite window and catches a glimpse of a Roma grandmother and child in a shack ten floors below. Only once do Ines and her father leave town to inspect the actual production site, where workers tap oil without protective equipment, and Winfried's protest only results in getting one of them fired. In Ade's film, as in Grisebach's, the plot is open to what are seemingly side paths, extending the films' themes in unexpected directions, without moving to any narrative resolution. And Ade too, sticks to the Berlin School's unwritten agreement to avoid psychology as causality. In *Toni Erdmann*, the protagonists' behaviour is not entirely comprehensible, and can never be reduced to simple reaction. The persistence of Ade's

observation, while pushing her protagonists to test the boundaries of the normal, may be the most radical defining aspect of her work, which, in terms of its aesthetics, remains far more conventional.

### *Re-framing past and present*

If the early Berlin School was known for its focus on the present, against the veritable flood of historical mainstream films from the early 2000s, recent work by Petzold, Arslan and others has broken with this dichotomy. In Petzold's case, this may come as no surprise. Born in 1960, brought up in a small industrial town near Dusseldorf, Petzold moved to West Berlin to study literature and theatre at the Freie Universität in the early 80s, enrolling in the DFFB from 1988–94, where he began an enduring collaboration with his teacher, Harun Farocki.<sup>18</sup> Petzold's interest in the connections between past and present was already apparent in his first feature film, *Die innere Sicherheit*, co-scripted with Farocki. This fraught drama about an ex-Red Army Faction-style couple, still on the run with their teenage daughter, doesn't use a single flashback to narrate their past. The tension apparent in every frame speaks of the unseen state forces whose 'domestic security' was—and remains—their mortal opponent. With *Gespenster* (Ghosts, 2005) and *Yella*, these early films became known as Petzold's 'Ghost Trilogy', their protagonists caught between legality and illegality, life and death. They are haunted by a past that does not fully reveal itself, but is still present in what we see.

Thus, it was perhaps no surprise when Petzold broke with the presentism that had seemed a core component of the Berlin School. His first explicitly historical film *Barbara* (2012), again co-scripted with Farocki, appeared to adopt the themes and narrative form of the 'cinema of consensus' beloved of the film-funding bureaucracy: repression of social dissent by the police state of the GDR, represented as realist costume-drama. A doctor (Nina Hoss) has been relocated to an isolated hospital near the Baltic coast, as punishment for having filed an application to emigrate to West Germany; systematically harassed and humiliated by the local Stasi, she continues to plan her escape. Petzold's film, however, contains scenes that deflect the official German narrative about the repressive regime in subtle ways; a fellow doctor, André (Ronald Zehrfeld), accommodates

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<sup>18</sup> For an illuminating account of Petzold's formation as a filmmaker, see 'The Cinema of Identification Gets on My Nerves: An Interview with Christian Petzold', *Cineaste Magazine*, vol. 33, no. 3, Summer 2008.

himself without illusion to doing what good he can within the system, growing an apothecary's garden of herbs in his backyard. Discussing the print of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* that hangs in his clinic, André suggests it is about sympathy for the body on the table, rather than the textbook at which the students stare. The film questions this, closing in on the one Rembrandt figure who looks straight out of the picture, challenging the viewer. Despite their similarities in other respects, this layer of reflection is completely absent in the canonical 'cinema of consensus' Stasi movie, *Das Leben der Anderen*, to which *Barbara*'s meticulous recreation of GDR interiors has repeatedly been compared.<sup>19</sup>

Petzold's next film, *Phoenix* (2014), left concerns about accuracy behind. It tells the tale of a Jewish woman (Hoss) who returns to the ruins of Berlin after surviving Auschwitz but is—strangely—not recognized by the husband who had betrayed her to the Nazis and now hopes to exploit her as a look-alike stand-in to obtain compensation. The absurdity of the plot does not entirely diminish the existential questions the film poses, its *mise en abyme* of the denial of identity and responsibility. Expertly made, with perfectly poised photography and strong performances, *Phoenix* and *Barbara* nevertheless lacked the cinematographic tension that made Petzold's Ghost Trilogy so compelling. The change of perspective in his subsequent films, *Transit* and *Undine*, indicates a certain urgency in finding new ways of relating past and present that go beyond naturalistic representation.

To adapt *Transit*, Anna Seghers's 1944 novel about refugees fleeing the Nazis via Marseille, by transposing its story into the EU's present, may seem a somewhat heavy-handed move. But Petzold's use of temporal ambiguity creates a surprising and complex *Verfremdungseffekt*. The story opens as a fast-paced *film noir*. Georg (Franz Rogowski) is on the run, as the security forces of the new regime scour the streets of Paris. But knowledge of the 1940s context immediately gives the sound of sirens in the streets a different meaning. *Transit* builds on Seghers's plot devices: Georg is asked to deliver a letter to a writer, Weidel, but discovers he has committed suicide, leaving behind a manuscript and papers for an exit

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<sup>19</sup> Petzold has said he took Polanski's *Chinatown* as an example of a film in which historical experience was not sealed off from the present, as per Kracauer's criticism in *Theory of Film*, but made palpable in 'heat, drought, sweat': Brad Prager, 'No Time like the Present: The Edges of the World in Christian Petzold's *Barbara*', *Senses of Cinema* 84, September 2017. See also 'Christian Petzold über *Barbara*: Ich wollte dass die DDR Farben hat', *taz*, 11 February 2012.

visa; Weidel's wife is waiting for her husband in Marseille, hoping they can flee to Mexico together. Once Georg has escaped Paris, its narrow streets and abandoned factory courtyards, the film slows down under the bright sun of Marseille. Georg takes on Weidel's identity to collect the visa. He moves between his cheap hotel and a neighbourhood pizzeria, joining the queues at the Mexican and US consulates—transitory spaces crammed with refugees.

Although there are indications—the cars, the uniforms—that the pre-filmic world is our present, there are many sequences where the setting is ambiguous. The lamps and furnishings could be historical *art nouveau* or modern reproductions. These subtleties of set design provoke a feeling of familiarity and estrangement, at the same time. Which world is this, and what does it mean? The epoch the story evokes fades in and out, and so does the present. We are trapped in between, floating in history. Establishing shots of Marseille are framed in wide angle, drawing an image of the city, the buildings and streets that the film visits repeatedly. But they are narrow enough to minimize the distractions. A residential block might be from the 60s or 70s, yet could still be taken for a housing project built in the 1930s. Restaurant signs and advertisements retain the ambiguity. Costumes have a classic simplicity. Only towards the end of the film does this artificial cosmos, which can't be tied to any specific era, open up: on the point of the protagonists' supposed departure, we suddenly see the contemporary cruise ships and skyscrapers of modern Marseille. Just as the film is about to end, it takes us to what, from the protagonists' perspective, is the future, in which their story is doomed to be repeated.

It is through this carefully constructed ambiguity that *Transit* escapes the pitfall of drawing simple historical analogies. Instead, it evokes a diffuse sense of a world where the past and the present coexist and reference each other. The other side of the coin is the absence of specificity. Inevitably, this refugee story becomes the story of all refugees: those whose lives are suspended, spent in in-between places, in hotel rooms and crowded lobbies, waiting for pieces of paper admitted or denied by opaque bureaucratic decisions. Marseille becomes a city like any other, where everybody passes through, where nobody is at home. Georg is another one of Petzold's ghosts—a man without past or future. For all the precision of its plot and choreography, the feeling *Transit* leaves behind is unsettled. The film seems to claim some kind of universality

for the experience of people forced to spend their lives in transit by creating a non-time, an era that is neither past nor present, yet haunted by both. *Transit* tries to find a form for the repetition of history, an abstract concept. The price of such abstraction is that we learn nothing about specific experiences. With *Transit*, Petzold has pushed his meta-cinema to a point where it risks losing touch with reality.

*Undine*, set resolutely in present-day Berlin, co-exists instead with the realm of myth. Petzold has said that after the Nazi appropriation of German mythology, it disappeared from cinema; *Undine* can be understood as an attempt to bring it back in new, self-reflexive ways. The eponymous protagonist (Paula Beer) is committed to the rational; she has a PhD in history and gives talks on the city's architecture at the Berlin Stadtmuseum that are eloquent and precise. But 'Undine' is also the name of a water nymph who, according to legend, can become human through the love of a man; should he betray her, he will have to die. Petzold has said that the inspiration for the film was Ingeborg Bachmann's 1961 story, 'Undine geht', written from the perspective of the nymph.<sup>20</sup> But the feminist reversal of the myth seems less important for Petzold's film than the protagonist's precarious existence: Undine rents a one-bedroom studio flat in the fragmented landscape of the city centre and works on a short-term contract at the museum. She is caught between spheres—and, in that sense, is another of Petzold's ghostly figures.

The film contrasts the museum's plywood models of Berlin to the lake where Christoph (Franz Rogowski) works as an industrial diver, doing underwater repairs on an old dam. The lake is the transition to another dimension, that of the mythical—captured in almost dreamlike underwater sequences. Christoph and Undine's love emerges from this dimension, catalyzed by a collision with an aquarium that bathes them both in water. The tenderness of their affair, beautifully suggested by Beer and Rogowski, forms the heart of the movie. But even as it creates these imaginary spaces, beyond the realm of the rational, the film establishes a different representation of place. At the museum, Undine explains the different models of the city. One of them shows the buildings constructed since Germany's unification, or still in the planning stage. Another displays 'the idealized self-image of the socialist state'. In her flat, wrapped in a duvet, she recites for Christoph her forthcoming talk on contending

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<sup>20</sup> 'Christian Petzold über seinen Film "Undine": Der Mensch geht ans Wasser', *taz am wochenende*, 26 July 2020.

plans for the so-called Stadtschloss, the former imperial palace at the heart of the city. One of the models represents the outlook of a regime which, instead of rebuilding the bombed Prussian palace, levelled its ruins and built a socialist one instead. The other model shows the GDR's modernist Palace of the Republic eliminated and a replica of Frederick I's façade erected in its place, the interior serving as a cultural forum. 'Form follows function', Undine drily comments; what sort of regime would produce a museum built in the twenty-first century in the form of an eighteenth-century ruler's palace? The film distinguishes between the romance of true love, which it affirms, and the false romanticism exemplified by the reconstruction of the confounded Stadtschloss.

In some respects, *Undine* goes further than *Transit* in creating a distance from the immediacy of the present. The use of the city models reminds us that none of this is real. But there is also an opposite drive. The models simulate the overview that Petzold's compositions of space usually refuse. One could say that, along with Undine's talks, the plywood models anchor the events of the film in a specific place, the Berlin of the early 2020s, and in the real, objective history of the city as an ongoing process. Finally, it is the sensuality between the two lovers, the closeness of their bodies, that gives *Undine* a feeling of concreteness compared to *Transit*'s abstraction. For a while, the ghostly nymph becomes as human as can be. When she disappears under the water—at least, such is the suggestion of a last lingering shot of the woods and sky from the lake's surface, her point of view—she seems to have dissolved entirely. Her apartment is occupied by new short-term renters. What remains is a stain of red wine on the wall, which only has a meaning for those who know its history. The tension between immersion and contemplation, being and seeing, experience and understanding, is always present in Petzold's films. But in *Undine*, it is at the core. We are obliged to confront the tensions between history and the present, love and loss, the real and the mythical. But despite these repeated encounters, the film refuses any narrative causality. The loose ends of history remain hanging.

### *Fractured epochs*

Dominik Graf's cinematic approach is in many respects the polar opposite of Petzold's. His films do not share the discomfort with the 'cinema of identification' that is so deeply inscribed in Petzold's work. Graf's cinema likes to seduce. As someone who embraced the possibilities that



the television industry provided him and made the subversion of existing genres his mission, he is often cast as an outsider among German directors. Born in Munich in 1952, he was drawn to the French *nouvelle vague* as a film student at the HFF in the early 1970s, but never identified with the films of the New German Cinema. Graf's idea of a career as a filmmaker, he reported, was to make as many films as possible inside the system. His inspirations were American genre films. He wanted to bring 'sex, suspense, crime and vice' into German commercial cinema, hoping to make more challenging but also well-crafted films.<sup>21</sup> 'Why must the avant-garde be so *avantgardistisch*?' asks Jakob Fabian, the protagonist of his latest work. His love for popular genres, his ambition to make really good television entertainment, is still tangible today; his status grants him the maximum freedom that anyone in the German television industry can enjoy. Despite their differences of outlook, he shares with the Berlin School an interest in discussion. Indeed, Petzold and Hochhäusler established a personal connection with Graf in order to exchange ideas and opinions; published in *Revolver* magazine, their debates led to a collaboration on *Dreileben* (Three Lives, 2011), a trilogy of films each telling the story of a sex offender who escapes from prison—from different perspectives, using the same actors.<sup>22</sup>

Graf's latest film, *Fabian oder Der Gang vor die Hunde*, is an adaptation of Erich Kästner's Weimar-era novel.<sup>23</sup> Jakob Fabian (Tom Schilling) works as a copy writer for a Berlin cigarette company, strolling round the nightclubs after hours. On one of these nocturnal sojourns he meets the aspiring actress Cornelia (Saskia Rosendahl). Just as the young man starts to realize that he may be willing to invest in a life that makes him an acceptable partner for this ambitious woman, she leaves him, knowing that her career will demand sacrifices that would make a happy relationship impossible. As usual, Graf's strategy is one of immersion, rather than critical reflection. At the same time, *Fabian* is much less air-tight than *Transit* or *Undine*. There is a sense that there is never just one way to go, that different possibilities are open—in the plot as well as in its form.

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<sup>21</sup> Ekkehard Knörer und Simon Rothöhler, 'Fighter im System: Dominik Graf im Gespräch', *cargo-film.de*, 11 December 2008.

<sup>22</sup> See 'Mailwechsel "Berliner Schule": Graf, Petzold, Hochhäusler', in *Revolver* 16, 1 May 2007.

<sup>23</sup> *Fabian oder der Gang vor die Hunde* is the reconstructed original version of the Weimar-era novel by Erich Käster. A shortened version, in which several scenes that were sexually explicit or contained political commentary were censored, was published in 1931 with the title *Fabian. Die Geschichte eines Moralisten*.

The framings of Hanno Lentz's hand-held camera are a stark contrast to Hans Fromm's unwavering precision in Petzold's films. The camera does not seem to anticipate what's coming and has a hard time keeping up with the actors, snatching at clues on either side. It often seems undecided about what to film, as well as how to film it. It staggers through the night, overwhelmed by impressions, distracted by details. The interior night shots are so dark that the shaky images can be almost abstract. While the use of a hand-held camera creates a sense of immediacy, any construction of authenticity is counteracted by the montage that combines heterogenous aesthetics and perspectives, trusting in the viewer's capacity and willingness to integrate these. Here, too, Graf's cinema is the exact opposite of Petzold's purism. Where Petzold's cinema stares at the world until it stares back, Graf only allows a glance, then counter-cuts with a new impression. The montage is too fast to be sure of anything. Images become volatile, associative, like in a stream of consciousness.

Unlike *Transit*, *Fabian* uses historically accurate set designs and costumes from the early 1930s. Interiors, street signs and advertisements seem authentic. But the film disappoints any hope for a grand statement or a stringent analysis of the era that preceded Hitler's rise to power. *Fabian* is set on history's backstage. In contrast to the hit TV series *Babylon Berlin*, Graf avoids the iconic sites of the capital. Instead, his protagonists circulate through dingy underground clubs and cafés, quiet side streets and the decaying rented rooms of a bourgeois apartment whose owner 'used to not need the extra income'. Black-and-white documentary footage is integrated into the contemporary material, like sprinklings of the reality of the era: crowded streets, traffic, working people, neon signs. The slightly accelerated and faltering movements of the old film stock blend in with the restless montage; its importance lies in atmospheric effect rather than political analysis.

Yet at moments the film is charged with the political tensions of the time. As Fabian and Cornelia walk through darkened streets on the night of their first encounter, they evaluate the possibility of love in modern times. While the camera observes their approach, it is repeatedly distracted by the fliers glued to the walls: political propaganda, both socialist and Nazi. At a later moment, an SA patrol passes Fabian and his mother in rhythmic strides. The pair keep walking, and nothing more happens. There is no causal relationship to the development of the narrative; the historical reality is merely the backdrop for Fabian and Cornelia's story.

Yet amid the immersive pleasure and the myriad aesthetic impressions *Fabian* provides, there always remains a sense of constructedness, of unsoundness. Twice, explicit references to the temporality of the film's perspective wink at the viewer: in the opening sequence of the film, a tracking shot through a Weimar-era metro station shows it populated by people from the present; only when the camera emerges from the underground do we find ourselves in the 1920s. And later, a *Stolperstein* on the street reminds us of what lies ahead of these characters.<sup>24</sup>

Viewers are thus offered a perspective similar to that of Fabian, who positions himself in the role of a distant observer of the crazes of the era. Unlike his communist friend Stefan (Albrecht Schuch), he does not expect much from life. There is no reason to think that 'reason and power will ever wed', nor that the world has any 'talent for decency'. Without personal ambition, Fabian sees himself as too corrupted to be faithful—until Cornelia appears, and his mild irony crumbles. His indifference is only the façade of someone full of doubts, in an era that—like our own—is characterized by deep divides between left and right, poor and rich. The characters in *Fabian* are condemned to live through this present, to observe without understanding, as it is happening. And yet, even looking at Fabian from a distance, there is no reason for the viewer to feel superior. Things remain complicated. Graf refuses to take the enigmas of the past away. The film's form creates a sense that there is room for other possibilities; things could have gone differently. Graf and his co-screenwriter, Constantin Lieb, refuse to concede the causal inevitability that later generations have inscribed. If we were thrown back in time, we would not know any better. In fact, it is by its refusal to construct that causality, to draw straight lines or use the terror of Nazism for dramatic purposes, that Graf's approach becomes political. Instead of history lessons, *Fabian* aims to convey a sense of the tense and fractured atmosphere that Kästner captured.

### *Capital as a genre*

In formal terms, Julian Radlmaier's treatment of the past offers a radical contrast to both Graf and Petzold: overtly political and theoretical, with borrowings from expressionist-theatrical modes. The youngest

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<sup>24</sup> *Stolpersteine* (stumbling blocks, or stones) are part of an art project initiated by Gunter Demnig. Brass plates are installed on the ground in cities in remembrance of individual people murdered, deported, expelled or forced into suicide by the Nazis.

of the filmmakers considered here, Radlmaier was born in 1984, grew up in the Bavarian city of Nuremberg and studied film and art history in Berlin and Paris before training at the DFFB from 2009–16—a full quarter-century after the founders of the Berlin School. His graduation film, *Selbstkritik eines bürgerlichen Hundes* (Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog, 2017) already demonstrated this new approach, shared by others of his cohort, including Max Linz, Radlmaier's contemporary at the DFFB. Their work explores the boundaries of what is possible within the German funding system, making films with multiple references to theory and the history of cinema, explicit political analysis combined with comedy and slapstick, and a visual language that on many levels obstructs conventional realism. (In Linz's *L'État et moi* (2022), which reverses the coordinates of past, present and future, a time-travelling exile from the Paris Commune lives as a refugee in contemporary Berlin, where he appears as an extra in *Les Misérables*.)

As its subtitle reveals, Radlmaier's *Blutsauger, eine marxistische Vampirkomödie* (Bloodsuckers, a Marxist Vampire Comedy, 2021) is explicit about the theoretical and cinematographic framework on which it reflects and uses the past as a foil through which similarities and differences become comically visible. *Blutsauger* reveals its interest in theory upfront. It opens on a Baltic beach, where a group of young people sit in the sand dunes discussing *Das Kapital*. How seriously, one young man (Bruno Derksen) asks, should we take Marx's claim that capital is dead labour which, 'vampire-like', only lives by sucking living labour? *Blutsauger* takes it very seriously—and not at all. Bursting with colourful characters, absurdist details and a plot full of surprising turns and extensions, this fiction at the same time serves as a sharp analysis of class society. For Radlmaier, Eisenstein's *October* is not only a cinematographic reference but a central plot device. The action is explicitly set in 1928, the year *October* was finally released, on the Baltic estate of cosmetics heiress Octavia (Lilith Stangeberg). The drama is catalyzed by the arrival of an impoverished Russian refugee, the actor who had played Trotsky in Eisenstein's film, whose part was cut on Stalin's orders. Now posing as an exiled Russian baron, the actor hopes to start a new career in Hollywood.

The story develops as a triangular relationship between Octavia, who flirts with socialist ideas, her besotted young butler Jakob (Alexander Herbst) and Lyuvoschka, the actor/baron (played by the young Georgian director

Aleksandre Koberidze, another DFFB alumnus). Inspired by Lyuvoschka's stories of post-revolutionary Russia, Octavia offers to finance the vampire film he wants to shoot as a calling card for Hollywood. Meanwhile, the workers on Octavia's estate have been suffering from strange bites, officially dismissed as 'Chinese fleas'; but rumour spreads that vampires are at work. By now it is clear to the viewer that Octavia sucks young Jakob's blood; clearly, this vampire movie is not interested in suspense, nor in identification with the characters or immersion in the period in which the story is set. Historical authenticity is not in play; *Blutsauger* is interested in creating a representation of the past that is visibly influenced by the present. Indeed, whether through the presence of a kite surfer or a flashy Japanese motorbike, the present inscribes itself into every image. The costumes, too, are eclectic.

At first glance, the historiographical strategy of Radlmaier's *Blutsauger* is similar to that of Petzold's *Transit*, but the effect is quite different. *Transit* takes place in a non-defined time, an eternal limbo, with occasional invasions of the present. *Blutsauger*, on the other hand, creates a world characterized by eclecticism and willed anachronism: its elements blatantly refer to different periods; it seems to want them to clash, making us aware of our own particular historical moment. It also subtly allows the perspectives of the intervening periods, between 1928 and today, to come into their own right in the film. This examination of the past through the lens of a self-conscious present seems perfectly appropriate, as the film wants to question the adaptability of the theory it used as its starting point (Marxism) to the present age. This involves a certain tendency to nostalgia, which is also reflected in the locations. The drama unfolds amid empty white beaches, gentle green hills and the decadent setting of Octavia's mansion and its gardens. Long takes from fixed camera positions give these locations a hyperreal quality, which also extends to the expensive consumer goods; one could claim that the film demonstrates the fetishization of commodities that results from the alienation of the work which produces them.

At the same time, the film reminds the viewer not to fall for such illusions. When, for example, the supposed baron walks along the beach, thick white clouds of fog roll towards him—a beautiful image, reminiscent for a moment of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. But their source is prosaic: a man is burning seaweed to produce a healing cream against the Chinese fleas. Later, a flashback illustrating

Lyuvoschka's account of the past shows the set of *October*, where the smoke machine has broken, so three set workers are blowing their cigarette smoke into the frame. These switchbacks between enchantment and demystification are typical of *Blutsauger*, and an important source of its humour. The film expresses a deep ambivalence between, on the one hand, a fascination with the seductive power of the medium, its capacity to charge the most mundane objects with meaning and transcendence, and, on the other hand, its ability to shatter this illusion, mostly through the comic and ironic.

Instead of looking for universals, *Blutsauger* delineates specific structures, drawing parallels with today's to ask some pointed questions: what does the class society of the 1920s tell us about our own, and how useful is it to think this in Marx's terms? By signalling its historical representation as a contemporary fiction, Radlmaier's film reveals overlaps as well as discordances in the eclectic world it creates. One might suspect that the film does not take the questions it poses very seriously, that it likes to play with them too much, ridiculing those who profit in the same terms as those who suffer. But the fact that these questions permeate the film on every level, as well as the constant self-awareness of its own entanglement in capitalist structures, suggests that this is a serious attempt at understanding them.

### *Different voices*

These films all differ in important ways from the national and historical representations of Germany's 'cinema of consensus'. The peripheral encounters of Grisebach's and Ade's films raise disconcerting questions about the country's role in present-day inequalities, in Europe and beyond. The majority of the films of the 'historical turn' do not attempt a conventional realist reconstruction of the past; those that come closest to doing so—*Fabian*, *Barbara*, *Phoenix*—still work against the illusion of privileged retrospective superiority. The differences between these films of the 2010s and 20s, however, are just as significant—not only their aesthetic characteristics, but also their perspectives on the German past and present, and the origin of their respective desires to deal with their historical and transnational material.

If Abel is right that the key motifs of the early Berlin School involved stasis and mobility, it is striking that in these more recent films what

predominates is work—or, as in *Blutsauger*, the conjunctions of capital and labour. *Western* has prolonged scenes of its protagonists wrestling with the earth-moving machinery, while Ines talks business strategy non-stop in *Toni Erdmann*. Christoph is filmed welding an underwater turbine in *Undine*, while the title character is constantly on her feet, lanyard around her neck, explaining Berlin's history to the sightseers. Cornelia, working as a *barista* by night and as an intern in the legal department of a film production company by day, sacrifices her relationship with the now unemployed Fabian for her screen career. Work, it seems, becomes a defining condition for these films of the 2010s and 20s, across borders, classes and epochs. Even in its most exploitative forms, it gives the characters their purpose and direction, pushing them to extremes, sometimes at the cost of their relationships. It gives them a place in the remorseless system, which seems preferable to no place at all. Even Georg in *Transit*, prevented from working by his refugee status, finds a moment of meaning and fulfilment in mending a transistor radio. *Blutsauger* continues the theme: for the idle factory heiress Octavia it is easy to indulge in socialist ideals. For her 'personal assistant' Jakob, a revolt against his employer would mean the loss of his position and identity, while continuing to be exploited by her means bleeding to death. If the counter-cinema of the past decade has a common critical theme, it may lie here.

What relation, then, does this new cinema bear to the overall system? To some extent, the most interesting films produced over the past decade are testimony to the possibility of finding space for dissident filmmaking within the state-funding bureaucracy, although this has been notably uneven. For someone like Angela Schanelec, it was not at all obvious at the start that she would manage to find financial support within the system. Christian Petzold, on the other hand, made his first two films for television (*Pilotinnen*, 1994; *Cuba Libre*, 1996) and later went on to direct two episodes for the primetime detective series, *Polizeiruf 110*. Petzold has managed to produce a film roughly every two years, while some of the other directors have experienced long gaps between projects. Film-school training remains essential. The support of major film critics, a positive reception on the festival circuit and acclaim from France (*Cahiers du Cinema*, *Le Monde*, *Positif*) were vital for winning acceptance for the Berlin School directors within the German film and TV bureaucracies, which are now perhaps a shade more willing to consider the 'prestige' value of avant-garde work.

While the Berlin School as a 'school' may have come to an end, its network of collaboration and exchange continues to exist. For younger filmmakers, friendly personal connections—often formed in film schools according to liking, taste, aesthetic or political commitments—sometimes seem to offer hope as islands of resistance to the pressures of the system. However, as Lars Henrik Gass has pointed out, the system wants to maintain itself; politics, as well as those players who profit from it, ensures that those involved have an interest in avoiding any upsets.<sup>25</sup> From that viewpoint, dissident filmmaking, or work that resists aesthetically in one form or another, may play a role in shoring up the very funding apparatus within which they have to battle. While it is important to celebrate the achievements of individual filmmakers like Grisebach, Ade, Petzold, Graf, Radlmaier and others, it is hard to imagine a genuinely vital German cinema in the absence of another Oberhausen Manifesto.

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<sup>25</sup> Lars Henrik Gass, 'Abschied von Morgen', *filmdienst.de*, 18 May 2022.