

City Spaces and National Identity

by KATRINA SARK

In the streets and spaces of Berlin, the past is said to be part of the present.¹ Moreover, to take Andreas Huyssen's argument even further, Berlin's past has been mediated to the global spectator through cinematic representations of its topography. Certain images and scenes remain in our collective cinematic memory: Homer and Cassiel walking through the voids of the no-man's-land around *Potsdamer Platz* in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987). Wenders focused on the West-Berlin topography of division due to the fact that he could not obtain the permission of East-German officials to film in East Berlin at the time. Another "cinephiliac moment"² would be Lola running over the re-opened *Oberbaumbrücke* (the bridge that used to connect East and West Berlin, and which remained non-operational during the years of division) in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998) – one of the first cinematic endeavours in reunited Berlin to transgress between East and West. Another well-remembered example would be a computer-generated statue of Lenin, carried by a helicopter above the *Karl-Marx-Allee* to the astonishment of Christiane Kerner, who missed the German Reunification while lying in a coma, in Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003). And finally, the global spectator is well familiar with the image of the former STASI (GDR secret police) officer, Gert Wiesler, delivering advertisement brochures to mailboxes along the post-wall *Karl-Marx-Allee* in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006), the first German film to address the GDR past in a non-satiric form.

Through these cinematic narratives, a new, virtual city map can be drawn. Not only do we perceive the streets, buildings and spaces of Berlin in their historical dimension, we can add a fictionalized cinematic dimension which nonetheless communicates the complexity of the city's psyche. But what does it mean to perceive Berlin through a cinematic dimension? We take pleasure in precisely this kind of crossing of fictionalized and historicized topographies because it allows a more fluid narrative and thus a more subjective and immediate engagement with space. Through such identification, we personalize what is otherwise foreign or abstract space. As the aforementioned iconic images enter our cultural memory,³ they align themselves next to historical images and become a part of our subjective visual culture. Thus, factual history does not exist in a hierarchical relationship with cinematic history. Rather, the two complement each other, as one flows into the other, and they exist as merged streams of dialogues. The individual's engagement with the city, facilitated by multiple perceptions of space, gains more meaning in light of Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics," by which he means that artistic practices establish relations between

Wings of Desire



people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.⁴ I would argue that film, much like art, is also capable of facilitating relational engagement with space. In this paper, I am interested in examining what implications this cinematic dimension of Berlin has on contemporary questions of German identity. Recent films set in Berlin and engaging with Berlin topography and history shift the camera focus, perhaps not surprisingly, towards the East. Streets and locations in these films reflect the changes in the city's fabric. So, what do these films say implicitly by locating their narratives in the East, and more specifically around the *Karl-Marx-Allee*? And how do viewers identify with the spaces portrayed?

Perhaps one might view this focus on former East Berlin as a wish to examine, capture, and ultimately preserve a portrayal of streets and spaces, like the *Karl-Marx-Allee*, within the new discourse and landscape of post-reunification. Thus, streets and urban spaces situate the narratives of division and identity. Rather than looking at "postmodern interchangeability"⁵ and fragmentation of urban space in Berlin, I am interested in the ways in which urban space is inscribed with specific cultural and historical meanings, and thus assumes an active role in current identity discourses. According to Clarke, Berlin films of the 1990s portrayed the Deleuzian concept of 'any-space-whatever' (which is a way of seeing postmodern landscape as an impersonal, interchangeable, capitalist and dehumanizing space). Clarke interpreted the concept to mean that the city spaces were divided from their social and historical context, and could not serve as means of identification and places of belonging for the film's protagonists.⁶ I believe this argument no longer applies to the more recent Berlin films, which could perhaps be explained by the changing role of Berlin itself. Throughout the 1990s Berlin was better known as the largest construction site in Europe. By the late 1990s, with the gradual completion of the government buildings and the official move from Bonn, Berlin began to function as a capital. One of the obvious challenges it faced was finding a way to make the inhabitants of its former divided parts feel like citizens of one nation. A massive gentrification project is still sweeping through the streets of Berlin (from West to East), restoring its centre and adjacent districts to their pre-war glories. It is perhaps not surprising that since *Goodbye Lenin!* in 2003 (or perhaps even since *Run Lola Run* in 1998), Berlin films try to capture glimpses of the city's eastern topography in a way that re-introduces questions of cultural identity, while breaking with the anonymity and emptiness of spaces interpreted in the Berlin films of the 1990s. By looking at the portrayal of *Karl-Marx-Allee* in *Goodbye Lenin!* and *The Lives of Others*, I will demonstrate how this particular space is shown in a historical transition through the narratives of division and reunification.

Wolfgang Becker used the *Karl-Marx-Allee* as a primary location for his *Goodbye Lenin!* To protect his fragile mother, Christiane Kerner, from a fatal shock after a long coma; her son, Alex Kerner must keep her from learning that her beloved nation of East Germany as she knew it has disappeared. The apartment building, in which the Kerner family lives is located (at *Berliner Str.* 21) right behind the *Karl-Marx-Allee*. We see documentary footage of a military parade celebrating the 40th anniversary of GDR (on October 7th, 1989) along *Karl-Marx-Allee*—East Berlin's most prominent street. In his film, Becker

explores the possibility of a different historical unfolding. The use of documentary footage from the years 1989-90 allows the audience to re-live and reconstruct the events of German reunification, while simultaneously contemplating current identity conflicts caused by the new political and social reality in reunified Germany. The film is ultimately about the possibilities of new constructions of identity. *Karl-Marx-Allee* (the "first socialist street of East Germany," built in Stalinist-neoclassical style) is where Becker locates his discourse of unification. The street stands for the transition between the socialist past and the post-reunification future. As we move from the parading socialist tanks to the capitalist helicopter transporting the dismantled Lenin statue, we see political and social change sweep across the street that was meant to monumentalize social realism in everyday life. By locating the story of the Kerner family in close proximity to *Karl-Marx-Allee*, Becker draws our attention not only to the street's significance to East Berlin before reunification, but also to the city's relationship with change. Becker makes extensive use of fast-forwarded frame speed to signify how quickly changes occurred in the city during the first months of reunification. One can also argue that despite being set in 1990, the film has a strong present-day concern with changes sweeping through the city. Just as the changes become increasingly apparent all around *Alexanderplatz*, *Karl-Marx-Allee* is also bound to be repopulated with large hotels, restaurants and retail chains. In the face of this eventuality, capturing the street on film can perhaps be seen as an attempt to virtually preserve it.

In *The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck presents the street as a transitional space that connects the private and the public. It is a symbolic space: it appears as the no-man's-land between the home and the state. Set in 1984 East Berlin, and ending with the opening of the *Stasi* (secret police) archives to the public after the fall of the Wall, *The Lives of Others* tells the story of a playwright, Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and his relationship with the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck) who are placed under state surveillance when the Minister of Culture decides to frame Dreyman as an enemy of the state in order to win Christa-Maria for himself. The man put in charge of the spying operation is a *Stasi* officer, Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), who, once left alone to witness the lives of the artists, develops, perhaps for the first time, his own aesthetic and liberal consciousness, expressed by longing for a different kind of existence, and decides to betray his state. The film is a sober and realistic portrayal of the GDR state apparatus and it casts urban space as a stage.

Throughout the film, we see an inversion of private and public spaces: *Treptower Park* appears safer than the apartments of the artists and intellectuals to discuss publication plans, and Wiesler stands in the shadow of Dreyman's street, recording the times he arrives and leaves his apartment. At the end of the film, we see Wiesler walk along *Karl-Marx-Allee*, exposed for all (and especially for Dreyman) to see. Most of the locations chosen in the film (*Karl-Marx-Allee*, and the *Stasi* headquarters) express power and authority. Political spaces in a totalitarian city are always well defined. Yet, the home, supposedly an intimate space, becomes politicized through surveillance and state manipulation, which in turn forces the protagonists into opposition. So a question begs to be asked: Why show Berlin as a

totalitarian city now? Perhaps, because in many ways, Berlin is still divided today; because *that* past still exists in Berlin's present. As Berlin changes, we need to be reminded of the (hi)stories of its buildings and spaces. By showing GDR history to the world with a particular emphasis on the city's public spaces, the film searches for the human in the totalitarian. For instance, we first see the *Karl-Marx-Allee* at night as the route Wiesler takes home after leaving Dreyman's attic—it is presented as a lonely, bleak, dark space, devoid of human life. That shot is repeated throughout the film; as we watch Wiesler's daily routine, we begin to notice his emotional transformation. Later, we see Dreyman get out of a cab at *Frankfurter Tor* (this time in the early evening) and watch Wiesler walking along *Karl-Marx-Allee* (now full of graffiti—which signals post-reunification space). While the street is more alive with traffic, we do not see other people on the street. And finally, in the closing scene, when Wiesler walks past the *Karl Marx Bookstore* (in broad daylight), we see other people walking along the street and strolling through the bookstore. The film shows us that regimes change but the buildings and streets remain. How, then, is space rendered meaningful, and what is the role of contemporary film in this signification? Meaning attached to the cinematic urban spaces is constructed by layering multiple fields of vision:

We see Wiesler walk by the *Karl-Marx Bookstore* at the end of the film. He catches a glimpse of Dreyman's picture in the display window and comes back to look at it more carefully. He sees the title of Dreyman's new book and decides to go into the bookstore. We see a wide angle shot from across the street of the whole store front and see Wiesler entering. This image of the bookstore functions like a snapshot of our constructed city topography, mediated to us through this film. If we then juxtapose or superimpose that cinematic image with a different image of the same space (such as a photograph of the same place but at a different time), we begin to see different dimensions of that space and how it exists in time, thereby contributing to the creation of meaning connected with that space. We construct a historical dimension: we imagine the bookstore as it was in 1984 in a totalitarian city (layer 1), we are shown the bookstore in the film after the fall of the Wall (layer 2), and we may see the bookstore in the photograph at a different time (layer 3). Unfortunately, the bookstore has now been emptied of books and is being used as office space, which in itself can function as another dimension of our perception of that space (layer 4). Because cinematically-mediated urban space is communicated to us by way of a narrative, which evokes emotional identification, that layer remains the strongest in our perception of space. Through this process of the superimposition of images we engage with spaces—and they become "relational spaces."⁷

In other words, cinema portrays a certain *space*, which in itself may only serve as urban background and be interchangeable or meaningless (as Clarke's argument about Berlin films from the 1990s attests). However, when we add our own layer to the image, it becomes a particular *place* because we can experience it and engage with it. Thus meaning is in the overlap between the mediated image, the historicized image, and our perception of them; the way we see them, understand them, and relate to them. The treatment of space in *The Lives of Others* can be read as what Joyce Davidson and Christine

Milligan call the "emotio-spatial hermeneutic," which states that "emotions are understandable—'sensible'—only in the context of particular places." Furthermore, "place must be *felt* to make sense. This leads to our feeling that meaningful senses of space emerge only via movements between people and places."⁸ In Donnersmarck's film, Berlin becomes a *place* as opposed to a *space*. Despite the fictional narrative, cinematic Berlin feels and looks real. It invites us to contemplate its topography, its history and its relationship to its people. Thus we perceive the city as a cumulative, multilayered, and fluid creation of many people over time, rather than a static urban landscape, structured and manipulated for our perception.

Cinematic streets and urban topography caught on film bring together multiple disciplines: film, history and geography. Since our relationship to the city is always subjective, it is perhaps interesting to ask, what kind of implications do our subjective readings of the city have on the city itself? On the people who live and work there? And on the people responsible for restructuring and recreating the city? Recent Berlin films engage in a discourse of German identity, precisely because of the city's unique status as a "palimpseste."⁹ Thus Berlin's urban and cinematic space is not a "blank and empty postmodern wasteland."¹⁰ Rather, the recent filmic representations of Berlin re-establish a cultural context and signification directly connected with the current identity crisis. Reunification has been painted in large strokes as something that needs to be overcome and swept away—so the sweeping continues (one street, one building at a time). But perhaps we need to take some time to understand the process, which is what the recent Berlin films all have in common. Once the spaces of division have been swept clean, what happens to the division? Where will it manifest itself? These films seem to remind us: we move through the city so quickly, that we no longer notice the changes. Certain films ask us to slow down—to stop briefly in front of the *Karl-Marx-Bookstore* (as Wiesler does in the film), just east of the apartment block where the Kerner family lived, and where the military parades took place prior to 1989, and to think, what do those spaces mean today?

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Notes

- 1 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: University Press, 2003), 1.
- 2 Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 30.
- 3 Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (Transl. by Rodney Livingstone, Stanford: University Press, 2006), 24.
- 4 Jorg Heiser, "Good Circulation," in *Frieze* (No. 90, April 2005), pp.79-83.
- 5 David Clarke, "In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin," in *German Cinema Since Unification* (London: Continuum, 2006), 163.
- 6 David Clarke, "In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin," in *German Cinema Since Unification* (London: Continuum, 2006), 165.
- 7 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Trans. by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, Mathieu Copeland. Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002).
- 8 Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan, "Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing emotional geographies," in *Social and Cultural Geography* (Vol. 5, No. 4, December 2004), 524.
- 9 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: University Press, 2003), 1.
- 10 David Clarke, "In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin," in