

Images of Berlin in Film

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*'What we read in the field – that field of the city in all its bizarre mixture of culture and nature – is bound to determine, to some non-fictional extent, what we know of it, what we imagine it to be, what we fear it may be, or become.'*¹

Our images of cities are strongly influenced by their appearance and presentation in the media. Since its invention, cinema has always tried to describe real places, starting with the projection of Paris by the Lumière brothers in 1895.²

Since 1945 the cinematic industry has put special emphasis on screening a city's developments, in historical as well as in optical terms.³ Inversely a city itself can air a certain cinematic quality which can be experienced in everyday life. Especially those cities meant to be culture-capitals⁴ and attracting various international artists and intellectuals are apparently equipped with such qualities.

However, the ways in which cities are shown can be categorized in different ways. There are two main tendencies in projecting a city: The director can either try to create a realistic portrait of the city or reject this by setting up a fictional image. Nevertheless particularly the myths and individual secrets of a city have ever since fascinated film makers.⁵

¹ Mary Ann Caws, *City images: Perspectives from literature, philosophy, and film* (New York/London: Gordon and Breach, 2001), p. 1.

² Shiel/Fitzmaurice, *Cinema and the city: Film and urban societies in a global context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 1.

³ Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities* (London: Reaktion, 2002), p. 8.

⁴ Malcolm Bradbury, *Modernism 1890-1930* (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 96.

⁵ Guntram Vogt, *Die Stadt im Film: Deutsche Spielfilme 1900-2000* (Marburg: Schueren, 2001).

Moreover, the city itself can serve as a character in a movie. This might happen in several ways, for example, if we see a human character travelling, i.e. if there is a lack of domestic areas. Another way in which the city may assume this role is the use of weak and insecure characters. The city can also be present when it causes particular circumstances that force or influence a character to do something he normally would not have done at all. And, of course, the city happens to be a character as soon as it is actually a real city. Therefore, it need not only be huge and well-known, but must be rich of cultural and historical aspects so that it is not considered as a 'neutral' place any more.⁶ In this case – whenever the city is given an acting function – the term cinematic city can be employed. If a city is projected more in a documentary way, as being done by Walter Ruttmann in *Berlin – Symphony of a Big City* (1927) a film is usually categorised as a city film (German: Stadtfilm).⁷ Moreover, the city can help define characters. Wim Wenders, for instance, stated that once a certain building helped him to clarify his protagonist's role.⁸

Specifically looking at Berlin means looking at a city that has undergone dramatic changes over the last 100 years: an emperor was sent to exile and a new republic was born and failed, being followed by a dictatorship ending up in a country's division which has been overcome, but, of course, had left its scars.⁹ Additionally, capitals and their self-perception are of enormous importance to a nation's identity, which is especially true for Berlin, a city owning the status of a 'full-blown metropolis, unlike any other German city'.¹⁰

Regarding different images of postwar Berlin throughout the last thirty years, the essay will take into consideration three different movies (*We Children from Bahnhof Zoo* (1981); *Run, Lola, Run* (1998) and finally *Goodbye Lenin* (2003)) and discuss the following main question: How is Berlin presented and which effect does this cause?

The film *We Children from Bahnhof Zoo* is based on the successful eponymous novel and was released in 1981. As a ten million US-Dollar success within the first 30 days of its release, it was not praised by critics but allured and fascinated a large audience within Germany, but also

⁶ Caws, 2001, p. 74.

⁷ Vogt, 2001, pp 26f.

⁸ Vogt, 2001, p. 28.

⁹ Brian Ladd, *The ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German history in the urban landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 1.

¹⁰ David Clarke, *German cinema: Since unification* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 151.

abroad.¹¹

The director Ulrich Edel reported that while realizing the movie it was difficult or even impossible to get shooting permissions at the “real” locations where Christiane's story took place. The drug topic was still a taboo and the responsible officials did not want any public and well-known places to appear in a bad light. Especially in Bahnhof Zoo, controlled by the East German Government, Edel was forced to use hidden camera techniques.¹² Most scenes are set in and around Zoo Station, metro funnels or public toilets. That means dirty and cold places, dominated by white tiles can be seen.

A review in the German magazine *Spiegel* described Berlin in this movie as a nightly 'neon jungle', thwarted by snakes (the metro). In this jungle the nightclub *Sound* seems to serve as a cave, a place to seek shelter.¹³

Throughout the whole film the audience experiences the city either in very grey tones or in a bluish light, for example, when Christiane and her friends can be seen on top of the Europe Centre. Sitting there, leaned against the concrete, they represent the 'lost children' of Berlin. They do not even seem to realize the sunset. It just passes by, without any further meaning: neither to them, nor to the city itself.

As in *Goodbye Lenin*, some scenes were shot on rooftops. The spectator sees the kids overlooking the city and normally we would interpret this as a sign of their teenage freedom. But in *Christiane F.* it only emphasizes that they are cut off from the rest of Berlin's society, isolated in their fateful circle of drugs and prostitution.¹⁴

Berlin and its streets are presented as vicious places. Furthermore, Edel refused to use panoramas or long shots, stressing the narrowness of the German capital, especially for young people like Christiane, who grew up in Gropiusstadt, a satellite town and social flashpoint.¹⁵

But despite all its negative connotations, the film itself seemed to fascinate at least parts of the audience. Particularly the appearance of David Bowie and his music, of course, inspired and fascinated the younger generation who came to see the movie.¹⁶

Wolfgang Heckmann, drug commissioner in West Berlin, deplored:

¹¹ DVD production notes.

¹² DVD production notes and Vogt, 2001, p. 640.

¹³ Vogt, 2001, p. 642.

¹⁴ Vogt, 2001, p. 645.

¹⁵ Vogt, 2001, pp 645f.

¹⁶ Vogt, 2001, p. 642.

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*'The book and film have increased interest in drugs in this city. Kids who come to visit used to ask to see the Berlin Wall. Now they want to see the Zoo Station.'*¹⁷

The film uses both science fiction (neon lights) as well as horror elements. The city itself incorporates a horror scenario for the thirteen year old Christiane, a downward spiral that seems to be endless.¹⁸

Until 1981 there had already been a couple of films about Hamburg and its well-known quarter St. Pauli, well-known for its drug and prostitution scene. With *We Children from Bahnhof Zoo* Berlin is presented similarly: the city as a dangerous and morally rotten location in contradiction to the countryside. This image is stressed at the end of the movie when the audience gets to know that Christiane is now living in a small village and that she has finally been rescued.¹⁹ While hearing the voice of Christiane, the spectator is confronted with the picture of a snowy, peaceful village.²⁰

The movie *Goodbye Lenin* by Wolfgang Becker was a one million pound box office success in the UK and won several European prizes.²¹

Shot in 2003, it is set in East-Berlin in 1989/90. It projects the changes that Berlin is undergoing during the process of reunification. The 'Wind of Change' is rapidly altering the image of the city. The speed of the famous *Weltzeituhr* on the *Alexanderplatz* which is presented at the film's beginning recalls the fact that time is never standing still in Berlin during these times.²² The removal of the Lenin statue from the square that is now called *United Nations Square* is probably the movie's most famous image.

Especially the Westernization of East Berlin seems striking. The advertising that is shown throughout the movie reminds us of the phenomenon that Billy Wilder once called the 'Coca-Colonialization'.²³

Furthermore, the already mentioned Alexanderplatz can be seen and the *Neue Wache*, which since 1993 has been serving as a 'Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany to the victims of War and Tyranny'.²⁴ It

¹⁷ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,954753,00.html> (3/11/2007).

¹⁸ Vogt, 2001, p. 644.

¹⁹ Hanno Möbius, *Drehort Stadt. Das Thema „Großstadt“ im deutschen Film* (Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1990), p. 77.

²⁰ Vogt, 2001, p. 644.

²¹ <http://www.moviefans.de/a-z/g/good-bye-lenin/index.html> (7/11/2007).

²² Clarke, 2006, p. 121.

²³ Michael Wilmington, Movie Review: Goodbye Lenin, in: http://metromix.chicagotribune.com/movies/mmx-040325-movies-review-mw-lenin,0,1878981.story?coll=mmx-movies_top_heds (7/11/2007).

²⁴ Roger Hillman, "Goodbye Lenin (2003): History in the subjunctive", in: *Rethinking History* 10:2 (2006), p. 229.

was very well-known among tourists during the German separation, not for its function as a memorial, but for the changing of East German guards that attracted visitors.²⁵

As I have already pointed out, Berlin and its historical buildings from different periods of time have evoked films like *Goodbye Lenin*, because the city itself is representing a 'historical flux'. After 1989 Berlin became known as the world's biggest construction site.²⁶

As a contrast to the panel flats (German: *Plattenbauten*) in East Berlin, Berlin-Wannsee, for example, with its huge mansions, where Alex's father is living with his new family, is portrayed as a rather luxurious area.

In *Goodbye Lenin* the city clearly serves as a character and among the three movies in the essay it does so in the most definite way. It changes the premises of life for all its inhabitants. While Alex is rearranging the GDR as he wishes it would have been, his sister totally adapts to her new westernised life. Alex's elder neighbours on the other hand cannot really handle their new lives adequately, as they are feeling useless. They enjoy spending time in the presence of Alex's mother, Christiane, as it makes them feel as if still living in the GDR.²⁷ And, of course, no other city in the former socialist republic could be found changing as rapidly and profoundly as Berlin after 1989. The high speed of these developments is especially emphasised by the scenes that were shot on rooftops. Standing up there, overlooking the city, Alex throws all the worthless banknotes into the dark night. Everything that was important yesterday does not count any more today.

Especially for those parts of the audience who have little or no knowledge at all of the life in the GDR, Becker's movie emphasises the unique experience of it and also reveals what David Clarke calls 'identity under construction' with the audience is witnessing this process.²⁸

Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* was shot and is set in the late 90s in Berlin. As one of the most successful German movies abroad, it made 476.066 pounds in the United Kingdom.²⁹ The plot was copied several times, especially by well-known American TV series like *The Simpsons* in the episode 'Trilogy of Error' and therefore had an undeniable influence on popular culture in the English-speaking world and beyond.³⁰

²⁵ Ladd, 1997, p. 217.

²⁶ Hillman, 2006, p. 229.

²⁷ Clarke, 2006, p. 121.

²⁸ Clarke, 2006, p. 152.

²⁹ <http://www.moviefans.de/a-z/g/good-bye-lenin/index.html> (7/11/2007).

³⁰ <http://www.horn-netz.de/seminare/postmoderne/folien-simpsons.pdf> (7/11/2007).

Throughout the movie Lola can be seen running through the streets of Berlin on a summer's day in order to save her boyfriend Manni. Therefore, she is trying to find the most efficient routes. Striking similarities to a computer game let the city appear as her playground. Mainly deserted streets and squares are shown giving the setting an artificial appearance.³¹

Due to the enormous restructuring of Berlin since 1989, Tykwer sensed the city to be like this in the late nineties. The *Friedrichstrasse*, for example, had just been completed when the shooting started. And it was so new that it had not been adopted as well as revitalized by the inhabitants of Berlin yet. Hence it appears as a dream world instead of a crowded urban city. In a historical context the presentation of Berlin in Tykwer's movie could be considered as that of a city in between two time periods.³²

The routes Lola is following are fictional, as it would be impossible to reach all these places within 20 minutes, so that Tykwer presents a 'collage of Berlin'³³, which is in fact similar to what Ruttmann did when he used the new montage techniques in 1927.³⁴ The whole plot is pervaded by coincidences and the impression is conveyed that in an urban city like Berlin anything can happen, even your whole life can change within seconds. Tykwer himself stated that one of his concerns was to show a new side of Berlin, without screening Zoo Station or the *Gedaechtniskirche*. Instead he put his emphasis on those places which might not necessarily catch attention at first sight.³⁵

Amongst others the audience sees Lola crossing *Friedrichstrasse*, *Unter den Linden*, *Gendarmenmarkt*, passing *Oberbaumbruecke* (East Berlin), *Humboldt University*, entering the *Zeughaus* (instead of the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* it hosts the casino!) and finally reaching Prenzlauer Berg.³⁶ As said before these routes are geographically incorrect so that Berlin appears like a puzzle, put together by the director himself. Eighty per cent of the scenes are shot on the streets and since Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* the international audience has not seen that much of Berlin.

Besides Lola and Manni the city itself is the only main character so that *Run Lola Run* can be categorized as a city-movie-story (Stadt-Film-Geschichte).³⁷

³¹ TomTykwer, *Lola rennt* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1998), p. 135.

³² Vogt, 2001, pp 734f.

³³ Clarke, 2006, p. 162.

³⁴ Anthony McElligott, "Walter Ruttmanns 'Berlin: Symphony of a City': Traffic-mindedness and the city in interwar Germany", in: Gee/Kirk/Steward, *The city in Central Europe: Culture and society from 1800 to the present* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), p. 209.

³⁵ Vogt, 2001, p. 734.

³⁶ <http://www.movie-locations.com> (7/11/2007).

³⁷ Vogt, 2001, pp 736ff.

A question that is especially raised in *Run Lola Run* is the following: 'What are our possibilities in life?'³⁸ And, of course, this issue is significant for *Christiane F.* and *Goodbye Lenin* as well. To what extent does the city we live in determine our lives? In *Christiane F.*, particularly young people struggle with their lives in the urban area of Berlin. Widely isolated from the rest of society, they get lost in the streets of Berlin that are characterised as dangerous, sinful, but simultaneously exciting places. In *Goodbye Lenin* the elder people have to cope with the premises dictated by the irresistible development of the city. They are isolated as well, as they cannot adapt to the new situation as easily as everyone else in the reunited Berlin seems to be able to. All of a sudden their whole former life in the GDR becomes worthless and besides isolation we can see rootlessness as a characteristic of urban life. This rootlessness and isolation can be rediscovered in *Run Lola Run*. The love between Lola and Manni seems to be the last anchor of identity. However, the film has a more neutral viewpoint by saying that anything can happen in a city like Berlin. The variety of options offered is the distinct element of Berlin in the late 90s.³⁹

Up to the first half of the last century, cities represented modernity and future, whereas villages and the countryside as such stood for the past and a traditional way of life.⁴⁰ The German sociologist Toennies argued that urban spaces are affected by isolation, as the way of life requires that people tend to have a negative attitude towards each other, whereas the countryside is dominated by strong communities. This attitude can especially be seen in *Christiane F.* as described above. Moreover film in general used to screen the city as a place where 'death, memory and dissolution'⁴¹ are always present and the three chosen films clearly underline this tendency. But as ambivalent as a city can be in real life, it can be on the screen, too. Not only buildings and squares define the image of a city, but, as can be seen in the above discussed movies, it is the people who equally define it. And therefore those culture capitals like Berlin provide an unlimited amount of images and impressions. Each film, no matter how realistic it claims to be, can only present a 'mosaic' image of a city and screen certain moments in people's lives living in this city by mentioning certain aspects and leaving out others. By using modern montage techniques film-makers moreover can create an illusive closeness between projected city and audience.⁴²

³⁸ Ingeborg Major O'Sickey, "Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets (Or Does She?): Time and Desire in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*", in: *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 19:2 (2002), p. 124.

³⁹ Robert Lauer, "Run Lola Run at the dawn of postmodernity", in: *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 3:1 (2003).

⁴⁰ Barber, 2002, p. 306.

⁴¹ Barber, 2002, p. 185.

⁴² Wolfgang Jacobsen, *Die Stadt. Die Menschen. Berlin im Film* (Berlin: Argon, 1998), p. 7.

In his book 'Modernism' Bradbury states that culture capitals are generating change as well as representing certain continuities.⁴³ Big cities have ever since been characterized by their extremes. And so are their cinematic representations: alienation and familiarity, utopia, break-ups, despair and hope can be sensed to mention only a selection of elements displayed in the above presented movies. Berlin and its cinematic presentations appear to be a never ending story.⁴⁴

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⁴³ Bradbury, 1976, pp 97f.

⁴⁴ Jacobsen, 1998, p. 8.

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