

## NEW GERMAN CINEMA

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[Revised for 4th edition, website publication]

### Introduction

New German Cinema is the term usually applied to a loose grouping of films that were made in West Germany (**FRG**) during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. Although grouped together, these films resist clear generic delineation and are in fact marked by their stylistic and thematic diversity. Nevertheless, critics have identified three common elements that unite them. Firstly, all the directors were born around the time of the Second World War, grew up in a divided Germany, and can therefore be characterised as a generation. Secondly, due to funding criteria and opportunities, the ‘new cinema’ was based on an artisanal mode of production which facilitated close collaborations and a high degree of experimentation. And thirdly, the films shared a concern with contemporary West German reality on the one hand and a search for audiences and markets on the other.

Internationally, the New German Cinema was heralded as the most promising development in German cinema since German Expressionism, and a handful of its directors – especially Wim Wenders (born 1945), Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-82), Werner Herzog (born 1942), and more recently Edgar Reitz (born 1932) – have won international reputations. In Britain and the US awareness of the New German Cinema began to grow during the mid-1970s via various magazine and television reports.<sup>i</sup> These early accounts tended to suggest that this new phase in the history of German cinema had been brought into being solely through the endeavours of a small number of talented and dedicated young directors. Consequently many observers focused on the personalities of the new directors, discussing them as creative geniuses, ‘artists with something to say’ (Eidsvik 1979b: 174), and examined the films almost exclusively in terms of their directors’ personal visions. Thus, in Britain and America the New German Cinema was initially discussed predominantly as a ‘**cinéma des auteurs**’.<sup>ii</sup>

As subsequent studies have shown, however, an **auteurist** approach gives only a partial understanding of how and why particular cinema movements come into being and flourish at particular times. The work of, for instance, Timothy Corrigan (1983, 1994), Eric Rentschler (1984, 1986), Thomas Elsaesser (1989), Anton Kaes (1989), Richard W. McCormick (1991),

Julia Knight (1992, 2004), Sandra Frieden et al (1993) and Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey and Ingeborg von Zadow (1998) explores how a whole range of historical, cultural, social, political, economic, institutional and gender-related factors also helped shape the New German Cinema. And a number of these studies also contextualise some of the New German Cinema films within wider historical, cultural and political traditions. Drawing on this literature, this chapter will explore some of the more significant factors that helped bring about the birth of and shape a new **national cinema** in West Germany, discuss the significance of its films and outline the reasons for the cinema's demise.

## **The American legacy**

### **West German cinema in the 1950s**

Although the New German Cinema directors were undoubtedly highly talented, there were a number of historically specific factors which set up some essential pre-conditions for the emergence of the new cinema. Of particular importance was the way in which the Allies handled the fledgling West German film industry in the years immediately after the Second World War.

At the end of the war the western Allies had felt it was vital to 're-educate' the German people in order both to 'denazify' Germany and to build up the western zones of Germany as a buffer to the Soviet influence in eastern Europe; and American films were quickly identified as an effective way of disseminating western notions of freedom, democracy and capitalist enterprise.<sup>iii</sup> Before the American distributors agreed to send their films to the FRG for this purpose, however, they insisted they should be allowed to transfer any profits made in Germany back to America. Since the German market had been closed to America during the war, once this condition had been met, Hollywood had an enormous backlog of films which had already gone into profit and could be made available at prices that undercut any European competitors. This in turn enabled American companies to achieve a position of economic dominance in Germany by the beginning of the 1950s.

The American film industry was keen to protect this lucrative new market. Measures were therefore taken to prevent the imposition of an import quota on American films<sup>iv</sup> and American companies remained free to flood the German market with Hollywood films. The Allies also dismantled the remnants of the Nazi film industry which had been centralised and state controlled through a giant conglomerate, **UFA**. Decartelisation laws were passed which broke up UFA and separated out the various production, distribution and exhibition branches of the

industry, and only small independent production companies were licensed. The aim was to permit an indigenous film industry to develop while ensuring it remained on a small scale – making it unable to threaten America’s monopoly of the German market.

This pursuit by the Americans of their own political and economic interests had significant consequences for the new West German film industry. As the German industry was forced to remain small-scale, it failed to attract any substantial investment. In countries like Britain and France, American distributors became investors in indigenous film production as their profits had to remain in those countries. But in West Germany, as American companies could transfer their profits back to the US, they had little incentive to invest in West German production.

This overall lack of investment meant that German films had to be produced relatively cheaply, making them unable to compete with the expensively produced Hollywood spectacle. As a result, indigenous production was quickly directed towards catering expressly for German audiences and mostly comprised **Heimatfilme** or homeland films which depicted simple country life in a rural Germany, adventure films based on popular German novels, historical films set in imperial Austria, together with romantic adventures and comedies set in picturesque locations. However, this overwhelming orientation towards the home market rendered German films on the whole unsuitable for export. This meant that films had to try and break even on national box-office receipts alone, which ensured production remained low-budget and resulted in a national cinema marked by correspondingly low production values. Compared with the Hollywood product German films looked decidedly provincial and did little for the reputation of West German cinema abroad. Some commentators also noted the cinema’s preference for ‘escapist’ films and one foreign critic was moved to observe that the ‘events of the Thirties and Forties are either ignored or treated as something remote, regrettable, and faintly unmentionable’ (quoted in Sandford 1980: 156).

That 1950s German cinema can be characterised by its orientation towards ‘escapist’ entertainment is hardly surprising. Under the Nazi regime the film industry had been tightly controlled by the Ministry for Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment. Its head, Joseph Goebbels, had quickly identified the propaganda potential of cinema and had informed the industry that he wanted film to be used in support of the new regime. Gradually all film companies came under state control and by 1942 the whole industry had been centralised via

UFA. Consequently, for many the cinema had been tainted by Nazism, and this bred a distrust of all but the most innocuous seeming German films.

At the same time, given the traumas and upheaval of the war, followed by the division of Germany which exiled many people from their families and former homes, the 'escapism' of such films proved extremely popular with German audiences and in fact precipitated a brief boom for the industry during the mid-1950s.

Furthermore, although UFA was dismantled, most of the directors, writers, actors, cameramen and technicians who had worked in the Nazi industry were re-employed after the war. This was partly because those directors who had opposed the Nazi regime – such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Ernst Lubitsch and Douglas Sirk – had fled the country when the Nazis came to power. But with the escalation of the Cold War, the recruitment of ex-Nazis was also considered preferable to the risk of communist infiltration. Consequently, the new FRG film industry was effectively run by the old UFA generation, limiting any chance of the German cinema experiencing a cultural rebirth in the West after the war.

### **The fight for survival**

There were a few notable exceptions to the general 'escapist' trend,<sup>v</sup> but they could not prevent what became a steady decline in the international standing of West German film. As the 1950s progressed and television gained ground, production figures and box-office receipts also began to decline, and gradually cinemas started to close.

Thus, by the end of the 1950s the Allies' handling of the film industry in Germany had left West German cinema economically vulnerable and artistically impoverished. It had become apparent even in the mid-1950s that, if the German cinema was to survive this American legacy, government intervention would be necessary. Representatives from the industry began to lobby parliament and by the end of the 1950s criticism of West German cinema was being voiced from a number of quarters. In 1959 two young filmmakers, Haro Senft and Ferdinand Khittl, campaigned to highlight the need to improve the quality of films and to provide grant aid for film projects. Two years later film critic Joe Hembus condemned the industry's 'factory-like production system where standardised models are turned out on an assembly-line' (quoted in Johnston 1979-80: 72). And in 1961 the organisers of the Venice Film Festival rejected all the FRG entries, while at home the Federal Film Prize given annually by the Federal Ministry of the

Interior (**BMI**) went unawarded for best feature film, best director and best screenplay because none were deemed of sufficient quality.<sup>vi</sup>

In 1962 a group of twenty-six filmmakers, writers and artists, spearheaded by Alexander Kluge (born 1932) and including Khittl, Senft and Edgar Reitz, added their voices to this escalating condemnation of West German film. They drew up and published the **Oberhausen Manifesto**, in which they argued that given the opportunity they could create a new kind of film which would revive the dying German cinema:

The collapse of the conventional German film finally removes the economic justification from a mentality which we reject. The new German film thereby has a chance of coming to life.

In recent years German short films by young authors, directors and producers have received a large number of prizes at international festivals and have won international critical acclaim. These works and their success shows that the future of the German film lies with those who have demonstrated that they speak a new film language.

In Germany, as in other countries, the short film has become a training ground and arena of experimentation for the feature film.

We declare our right to create the new German feature film.

This new film needs new freedoms. Freedom from the usual conventions of the industry. Freedom from the influence of commercial partners. Freedom from the tutelage of other groups with vested interests.

We have concrete ideas about the production of the new German film with regard to its intellectual, formal and economic aspects. We are collectively prepared to take economic risks.

The old film is dead. We believe in the new.

Eventually the government responded to this mounting criticism by setting up the first film subsidy agency, the **Kuratorium junger deutscher Film** (Board of Young German Film). Launched in 1965 by the BMI, the Kuratorium was given a brief to promote the kind of filmmaking demanded by the Oberhausen Manifesto signatories and to 'stimulate a renewal of the German film in a manner exclusively and directly beneficial to the community' (quoted in Dawson 1981: 16). Kuratorium funding took the form of interest-free production loans for *first* feature films only, which meant that for the first time young, new filmmakers who had been

unable to gain access to the commercial film industry had a real chance to break into feature film production.

Initially the Kuratorium was very successful in fulfilling its brief. Within two years twenty-five films had been produced with Kuratorium funding. Four of these were the first features of Oberhausen signatories Alexander Kluge (*Abschied von gestern/Yesterday Girl*, 1965-66), Hans Jürgen Pohland (*Katz und Maus/Cat and Mouse*, 1966), Edgar Reitz (*Mahlzeiten/Mealtimes*, 1966), and Haro Senft (*Der sanfte Lauf/The Gentle Course*, 1967); and a further two were produced by signatory Rob Houwer. In direct contrast to the commercial industry, the contractual arrangements governing the Kuratorium loans allowed filmmakers to retain total artistic control, and as a result most of these films broke with the conventions of mainstream cinema, varying from episodic and experimental narratives to highly avant-garde pieces.

Some of these films also enjoyed unprecedented critical acclaim. Kluge's *Yesterday Girl* won several awards including the Special Jury Prize at the 1966 Venice Film Festival and was nominated for its Gold Lion award, while the following year Reitz's *Mealtimes* received the Best First Feature Award. This success also seemed to mark the beginning of a new phase in West German cinema generally. Non-Kuratorium financed films by other new directors were well received at Cannes in 1966, especially Ulrich Schamoni's *Es/It* (1965), Volker Schlöndorff's *Der junge Törless/Young Törless* (1966), and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Nicht Versöhnt/Not Reconciled* (1965). Back in Germany Peter Schamoni's *Schonzeit für Füchse/Closed Season for Foxes* (1966) won a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival; and between 1967 and 1969 three Kuratorium films and three further films by new young directors also won Federal Film Prizes.

Not only did these films offer a radical departure from mainstream cinema at a formal level, they also dealt with contemporary concerns in a way that contrasted sharply and refreshingly with the 'escapist' nature of 1950s German cinema. For instance, *It* by Schamoni (born 1939) addressed the question of abortion at a time when it was still illegal in Germany, while *Young Törless* by Schlöndorff (born 1939) used the story – adapted from a Robert Musil novel originally published in 1906 – of a young boy's experience of two fellow pupils at a boarding school torturing a Jewish boy to raise questions about the Nazi past. According to Reitz, 'The press was unbelievably positive. And when the first films came out, there was a degree of public interest which has never been matched since' (quoted in Dawson 1981: 17).

Consequently, the setting up of the Kuratorium and this first batch of critically acclaimed films appeared to many observers to have brought about ‘a renewal of the German film’ – and this point is often taken to mark the start of what was initially termed Young German Film and later became the New German Cinema. While this may be true in one sense – since that was when the first films were made – the fact that it was possible for those films to be made at all was largely a result of the growing body of criticism that was being directed at West German cinema in the late 1950s and early 1960s. And the origins of this criticism stemmed from the Allies’ handling of the film industry after the Second World War which was motivated by political and economic self-interest.

## **The development of the film subsidy system**

### **Production funding: problems and solutions**

However, this renewal of the German film was almost extremely short-lived. Having made their first feature films, the new directors became ineligible for further Kuratorium funding and were faced with limited possibilities for financing subsequent films. If they had failed to win a Federal Film Prize which carried a cash award for future production work, they had to turn to the diminishing commercial sources. Furthermore, the Kuratorium was dependent on the repayment of its loans from box-office receipts to provide the financing for further film projects. Although the first batch of films had been well received, they did not do well enough in the cinemas to fully repay their loans, leaving the subsidy agency with rapidly diminishing funds.

At the same time the commercial sector viewed Kuratorium-funded films as unfair competition. In a market where it was increasingly difficult to produce films on a commercial basis, young filmmakers were being given money to make whatever films they liked. The film industry started to lobby the German government, demanding that any film subsidies should be directed towards revitalising the commercial sector, and was successful in bringing about a more commercially orientated revision of film policy. In December 1967 a new Film Development Act (**FFG**) was passed which raised a levy on every cinema ticket sold in the FRG to provide funding for film production, and the Film Development Board (**FFA**) was set up to administer these funds. In complete contrast to the Kuratorium’s promotion of first-time feature film directors, FFA funding was awarded to any film project as long as the producer’s *previous* film had grossed a certain amount at the box-office during the first two years of its release. Consequently, first-time

directors were not eligible for FFA funding, and most of the new films had not done well enough at the box-office to trigger the FFA funding mechanism. Distributors also started to withdraw films by the new directors and replace them with industry products, so that the commercial sector could monopolise the new subsidy money.

As a result, by the beginning of the 1970s Germany's promising new cinema appeared to have almost disappeared. It also quickly became apparent that the FFG was actually failing to stimulate the economic revival of the industry. The retroactive nature of the FFA funding encouraged the production of tried and tested formula films which gave rise to a cinema of 'unparalleled mediocrity' (Phillips 1984: xviii), consisting primarily of sex films and low-brow classroom comedies. This drove significant segments of the cinema audience away, resulting in further cinema closures.

Ironically, it was television that initially ensured the continuing existence of the new German film. In West Germany there were ten broadcasting companies – nine regional ones which constituted the national network of the first channel (ARD) and the regional networks of the third channel, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) which broadcast the second national channel. These were public corporations and produced relatively few programmes themselves, commissioning commercial companies or freelance independents to produce the rest – providing in fact the model for Channel 4 in Britain when it was launched in 1982. Consequently, television represented an enormous source of potential funding for the new directors, and by the early 1970s they were increasingly turning to television companies to finance their film projects. Moreover, the corporations had a constitutional commitment to promoting cultural 'quality' and were likely to provide a more sympathetic producer than the commercial film industry.

Initially filmmakers were commissioned on a fairly arbitrary and ad hoc basis, but in 1974 the role of television within West German cinema was formalised via a **Film and Television Agreement**. This was drawn up between the FFA and the ARD and ZDF television networks, and committed the television corporations to providing DM34 million over a five-year period for film production. Productions funded by this scheme were guaranteed a theatrical release before being broadcast on television, and further funds were given to the FFA to fund the development of film projects.



As the 1970s progressed the film subsidy system was also expanded and developed, gradually improving the funding options available. As the shortcomings of the FFG became apparent, the act underwent successive revisions which, for instance, ensured that pornographic and low-quality films could not qualify for subsidies and permitted the FFA to make discretionary cash awards to 'good entertainment films' which had fulfilled certain audience attendance criteria. The Board also introduced project funding which could be awarded to any project that seemed likely 'to improve the quality and profitability of the German film' (quoted in Pflaum and Prinzler 1983: 99), irrespective of a producer's previous work. In 1977 the Länder (federal states) who had taken over responsibility for the Kuratorium agreed to increase its funding. And in the same year the city of Berlin pioneered the idea of regional funding, which was designed both to encourage filmmakers to bring work to that region and to promote productions of particular cultural and political interest to the city. Over the next four years Bavaria, Hamburg and North Rhine-Westphalia also introduced regional funding schemes.

### **Distribution and exhibition**

It became apparent very early on that if 'a renewal of the German film' was to take place, it was not enough simply to address the production sector: the distribution and exhibition sectors of the industry also needed subsidy support. Since the distribution sector was largely under American control,<sup>vii</sup> the new directors had no guarantee that their films would get taken into distribution and hence into cinemas.<sup>viii</sup> Thus, as the film subsidy system developed, increasing attention was paid to these areas, with the BMI, the FFA and the Kuratorium all channelling some of their funding into distribution and exhibition from 1970 onwards.

For example, in April 1970 the BMI started offering subsidies to cinemas which had screened a so-called 'suitable quota' of 'good' German films. And from December 1976 it introduced awards for companies that had released quality rated or state subsidised German films.

Kuratorium funding enabled a small production company called Basis-Film to take on the distribution of their first film, *Liebe Mutter, mir geht es gut/Dear Mother, I'm OK* (1972), when no existing distributor showed any interest in releasing the film. Made by Christian Ziewer (born 1941) and the first in a series of *Arbeiterfilme* (worker films), the film is about a mechanic who through losing his job gradually comes to understand the social and political conditions that prevent workers like himself from improving their situation. Filmed in a very detached, static and analytical style, the film proved too demanding for commercial distributors and cinemas.

Their experience with this film made Basis recognise the need for a company that specialised in distributing the less commercially orientated, more socially critical films that many of the new young directors were making. They set up their own distribution wing, Basis-Film Verleih, in order to help build up audiences for such films – often among trade union organisations, factories and educational institutions – and frequently supplied background material, as well as arranging for directors to attend screenings.

At the same time a group of thirteen filmmakers also took their own initiative – among them Wenders and Fassbinder – and founded Filmverlag der Autoren (Film Publishing House of the Auteurs). Filmverlag was also originally set up as a production company, but it quickly moved into and prioritised distribution. However, in contrast to Basis, Filmverlag identified a need to actively promote the new German films to national and international cinema audiences, and implemented American-style marketing campaigns.

Despite such initiatives few of the films were in fact box-office successes, a fact that elicited some criticism at home. In 1977, for instance, Eckart Schmidt declared: ‘Filmmakers like Kluge, Herzog, Geissendörfer and Fassbinder, all of whom have collected subsidies more than once, and who despite such public funding are incapable of directing a success, should in future be barred from receiving subsidies’ (quoted in Elsaesser 1989: 37). With the dominance of television, the demise of the traditional family audience and the politicisation of the student movement in the late 1960s, cinema audiences were highly fragmented: cinema was looked to for both blockbuster spectacles and cult films, as well as for information and education. This, combined with a lack of interest from commercial exhibitors (despite subsidy incentives), the continuing dominance of American distributors and the absence of a developed film culture in Germany (outside ‘centres’ like Berlin, Hamburg and Munich), meant that the new German film found it difficult to win a national audience.

### **A coming of age**

Nevertheless, as revisions to the film subsidy system during the 1970s began to substantially improve production opportunities and make some inroads into the distribution and exhibition sectors, the New German Cinema began to reassert itself. To counter the hostility of their critics at home, the new directors also became more concerned with making films that related to the experiences of viewers and offered credible identificatory figures. Elsaesser suggests that it is this move towards addressing a clearly identified spectator that in part marks the shift from

Young German Film to New German Cinema (1989:154). By 1977-78 half of the feature films being made were deemed to belong to the new cinema and were winning renewed international acclaim for German cinema. Among those that attracted particular attention were Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta's *Die verlorene Ehre der Katherina Blum/The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum* (1975), Wenders's *Im Lauf der Zeit/Kings of the Road* (1976), *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages/The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1977) by von Trotta (born 1942), Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun/The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), and Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel/The Tin Drum* (1979). When *The Tin Drum* won the highly coveted American Oscar for the best foreign film in 1980, one British critic was moved to comment that the New German Cinema was 'one of the most remarkable, enduring, and promising developments in the cinema of the 1970s' (Sandford 1980: 6).

Thus, the criticism of the West German cinema in the late 1950s and early 1960s eventually precipitated the development of a whole system of public subsidies which *in turn* facilitated the emergence of a critically acclaimed new cinema by the end of the 1970s. Although the country undoubtedly produced some very talented filmmakers, their work would not have been possible without the financial support offered by the various subsidy agencies. And taken together, this complex network of film subsidies can be understood as a much needed institutional initiative that was designed to promote and develop a national cinema – even if it wasn't entirely successful in this aim – that was both culturally motivated and economically viable.

### **The artisanal mode of production**

The film subsidy agencies were clearly concerned with promoting the economic revival of German cinema. But in order to stimulate a cinema that was culturally motivated as well, the philosophy behind much of the subsidy system deliberately promoted a mode of production that is more usually associated with the arts, i.e. one that recognises *individual* authorship and creativity. Many of the ideas informing the network of subsidies were most clearly articulated and theorised by Oberhausen Manifesto signatory Alexander Kluge.

In his writings and campaigning work, Kluge developed and promoted the notion of an *Autorenkino*, which roughly translated means 'cinema of *auteurs*'. Although the German concept of *Autor* differs slightly from the French *auteur*,<sup>ix</sup> both terms identify the director as a film's creator and regard a film as an expression of that creator's personality. This approach to

cinema was already evident in the Oberhausen Manifesto: since the signatories insisted on freedom from economic and vested interests, they were basically opposing industrial modes of production and demanding the freedom of expression normally associated with ‘artistic’ production. In subsequent writings, Kluge developed the idea of the director as *Autor* by contrasting the new German film with what he termed a *Zutatenfilm* (recipe film). The ‘recipe film’ was a typical industry product, made up of ingredients such as stars, ideas, directors, technicians and scriptwriters which the producer simply went out and purchased according to requirements (Johnston 1979-80: 72). In contrast, the new directors would bring something personal to their films, making the new German film more than just the sum of its parts.

During the 1960s Kluge developed these ideas, together with Edgar Reitz, into a coherent education programme at a private college in Ulm. They developed a course which offered filmmakers an all-round film education, familiarising them with all areas of production. Instead of becoming specialists trained in a particular area, such as camera, editing or direction in readiness for an industrial context, students would become *Filmautoren* – that is, directors who exercised a far greater degree of authorial control than industrial production methods normally permitted and who could consequently use film as a medium for personal expression.

The lobbying efforts of Kluge and others helped ensure that the concept of an *Autorenkino* informed the framework of the Kuratorium. In his account of its work, Norbert Kückelmann explains that ‘according to the fundamental Oberhausen principle the filmmaker was to have autonomy in giving shape to his film idea ... he was to retain control over the direction and entire production process’ (quoted in Knight 1992: 55). Thus the Kuratorium clearly identified the director as a film’s author and endeavoured to guarantee his or her independence, implying that filmmaking is an act of personal expression and hence an art form.

However, the institutional sanctioning of the *Autorenkino* principle was not due solely to the efforts of Kluge and his colleagues. Their campaigning coincided with ‘a political will to see film acquire the status of “Kultur”’ (Elsaesser 1989: 28) and the desire to use film as a means for promoting German culture as a ‘manifestation of national identity’ (quoted in Elsaesser 1989: 29), both at home and abroad. Although the film subsidy system was undeniably shaped by economic considerations, it was equally determined by an institutional belief that just like the fine arts, literature and music, film should also be regarded as an art form. And as the subsidy system evolved most of the agencies identified the director as a film’s author.

The concrete result of this was that the contractual arrangements between the funding bodies and directors encouraged filmmakers to take on more than just a directorial role, resulting in filmmakers often becoming their own scriptwriters and/or producers as well as taking many of the artistic, casting, editing and organisational decisions. Hence, filmmakers were not only given institutional recognition as ‘artists’, but were usually in a position to exercise a large degree of creative control over their films. This, of course, meant that the cinema could be readily discussed as a ‘cinéma des auteurs’, which in turn helped obscure the other factors that had contributed to bringing it into existence.

At the same time, the subsidy system and the resultant **artisanal mode of production** encouraged the development of a small, team-based ‘cottage industry’. Compared to the size of investment normally associated with film production in the commercial sector or even the ‘quality’ art-house cinema, the loans and subsidies granted by the various film promotion agencies were usually extremely small. During the 1970s filmmakers were often producing feature films for between DM80,000 and DM200,000 while Italian or French directors might be working with a budget of at least DM800,000. When it was first set up, the *maximum* loan the Kuratorium could offer was DM300,000. As a contemporary writer observed: ‘It is like trying to build a Rolls-Royce with money that is just enough to put together a bicycle’ (quoted in Elsaesser 1989: 25).

Given the inadequate levels of funding and since the funding agencies actively encouraged filmmakers to take on a greater degree of responsibility, directors were more or less forced to work in small teams – without the luxury of, say, a production manager, or extra people for props, costumes and make-up – if they were to realise their projects. However, working in small teams allows the development of much closer collaboration, and filmmakers frequently worked with the same people time and again. Wenders often collaborated with writer Peter Handke and cameraman Robby Müller, Fassbinder with actress Hanna Schygulla, and Herzog with editor Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, while Margarethe von Trotta either co-wrote, co-directed and/or acted in many films made by her then husband Volker Schlöndorff.

Although filmmakers argued they needed larger subsidies if they were to produce a ‘quality’ national cinema, the artisanal and team-based mode of production allowed a far greater degree of experimentation to take place than would have been possible in a conventional commercial context. And this freedom to experiment has, of course, contributed to the enormous stylistic

and thematic diversity of the New German Cinema films. But that said, the mode of production – as dictated by the subsidy agencies – nevertheless gave the cinema a clearly identifiable character.

## **The quest for alternative images and counter-representations**

### **Formal experimentation and contemporary issues**

In the early years of the New German Cinema, much of the experimentation that took place was at an extreme formal level. For instance, Straub and Huillet's *Not Reconciled* (1965), which is based on a Heinrich Böll novel entitled *Billiards at Half Past Nine*, completely does away with the book's chronology and instead intermeshes simultaneously the present, the Nazi era and that of the First World War. Indeed, some of the early films have been characterised by the way they seem to operate 'outside any recognisable tradition of film-making either commercial or avant-garde' (Elsaesser 1989: 25). To a certain extent, this kind of experimentation can be viewed as arising out of necessity: small budgets meant it was impossible to make feature films according to the conventions of commercial cinema. Therefore, rather than trying to produce pale imitations, filmmakers were forced to try and find completely different ways of working. But as the Oberhausen Manifesto openly declared, many filmmakers also *wanted* to break with the 'old cinema' and to develop a new film language in order to inject the German cinema with new life.

Kluge's approach to filmmaking, for instance, can probably be best described as 'Brechtian' (and his films have also been compared to those of French new wave director Jean-Luc Godard). Like Brecht's epic theatre, Kluge's films are designed to discourage viewers from identifying with the fictional characters, to challenge people's usual forms of perception, and to stimulate a questioning attitude towards their surroundings rather than provide reassurance. This is very evident in his first feature film, *Yesterday Girl* (1965-66).

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### **CASE STUDY 1: *Yesterday Girl***

This was filmed in black and white and based on the real-life story of a young Jewish woman, Anita G, who comes to West Germany from what was then the GDR (East Germany) in an attempt to make a new life for herself. In a highly episodic and impressionistic narrative, the film follows Anita through a number of unsuccessful jobs, a couple of attempts to steal, and a series

of unhappy affairs which end with her becoming pregnant. Unable to support herself, she wanders the streets with her suitcase and finally turns herself over to the police.

In order to break up the narrative, Kluge incorporates intertitles to subdivide the film and comment on events. Verbal commentary, direct address to camera by characters and old photos are also intercut to illustrate and invite reflection upon the narrative sequences. And the events that constitute the narrative are only shown obliquely – we see only the court proceedings against Anita that result from a theft, not the theft itself, nor where it took place or its discovery; we are given only a brief indication that Anita is having an affair, never how or why it started. These filmic devices give the film a very disjointed feel, something that is compounded by the use of music on the soundtrack which is often inappropriate to the visual images it accompanies. This means the viewer has to take a very active role in constructing the film's meaning and can precipitate a more analytical consideration of the issues and ideas raised by *Yesterday Girl*.

Since the filmic devices employed by Kluge discourage us from identifying with Anita as a psychologically-rounded individual, she becomes a powerful signifying element. As a Jew who leaves the GDR, she acts as a reminder both of the Nazi persecution of the Jews and of the communist rejection of capitalism. Thus, through the character of Anita the film links together questions of German history and the contemporary situation of postwar divided Germany, suggesting the inseparability of past and present. Although Anita tries to escape her personal history by moving to West Germany, she fails miserably to make a new life for herself. Just as she would have failed to fit into Nazi Germany and has failed to fit into East Germany, so she fails to integrate into the FRG. In terms of both her past and present, Anita is 'an unwanted outsider' (Sandford 1989: 21) – that is, she cannot escape her past. Her specific situation is, however, peculiarly German, and thus Kluge's film can be understood as a film about Germany, one that suggests that while people may wish to forget the Nazi past, it nevertheless is and will remain an essential precondition of the present socio-political situation.



**Plate 1** Gunther Mack and Alexandra Kluge in a scene from *Yesterday Girl*  
(Alexander Kluge, 1966)

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As is evident from this analysis of *Yesterday Girl*, the desire to develop a new film language extended beyond pure formal experimentation to include questions of content as well. As already discussed, 1950s German cinema had been characterised by its ‘escapism’, especially in its refusal to address recent history and contemporary concerns. So, for instance, a classic *Heimatfilm* from the mid-1950s, Harald Reinl’s *Die Fischerin vom Bodensee/The Fisherwoman from Lake Constance* (1956), shows people living in harmony with their surroundings with no evidence of war damage or postwar reconstruction. For the new generation of filmmakers who were all born around the time of the Second World War and grew up in a postwar divided Germany, such films were a blatant denial of the realities of contemporary German life. If there was to be a renewal of German cinema, then its films had necessarily to tackle contemporary issues or demonstrate at least some contemporary relevance.

As the new cinema developed filmmakers addressed many issues of contemporary relevance via a number of different styles and genres. Although it is not possible to undertake a comprehensive study here, the films can be characterised as an endeavour to represent a reality that had previously been largely excluded from German cinema – rather than through any shared aesthetic concerns or stylistic similarities. Thus they have been described as ‘the quest for alternative images and counter-representations’ (Rentschler 1984: 4) and as articulating a series of ‘counter-myths about “being German” in the post-war era’ (Knight 2004: 91). And it is



possible to argue that it is this engagement with contemporary West German reality that made the New German Cinema films so significant.

### **The *Gastarbeiter***

Both Fassbinder and Helma Sanders-Brahms address the presence of *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) in West Germany in a number of their films: Fassbinder in *Katzelmacher* (1969), *Wildwechsel/Wild Game* (1972) and *Angst essen Seele auf/Fear Eats the Soul* (1973), and Sanders-Brahms in *Die industrielle Reservearmee/The Industrial Reserve Army* (1971) and *Shirins Hochzeit/Shirin's Wedding* (1975).

When the FRG started to enjoy economic prosperity in the 1950s it became necessary to import foreign labour – mostly from Turkey, although also from the former Yugoslavia, Italy and Greece – in order to sustain its industries. These *Gastarbeiter* were regarded by successive German governments as temporary labour and in theory could be sent home if unemployment amongst Germans ever became acute. However, due to the lack of a comprehensively formulated policy, many *Gastarbeiter* remained in West Germany, often establishing their families and raising their children there. Once West Germany's 'economic miracle' began to wane in the 1960s, however, the country was faced with a growing, semi-permanent non-German population who needed education, housing and other resources, but were themselves no longer needed by their host society and thus increasingly prone to racist attack.

The above-mentioned films tackle the *Gastarbeiter* issue in different ways, but they all draw attention to their presence in the FRG. Sanders-Brahms *Shirin's Wedding*, for example, is the moving story of a young Turkish woman who goes to Germany in search of the man she is betrothed to. By focusing on Shirin's attempts and ultimate inability to survive in the FRG, the film acts as an observation on the meeting of two alien cultures. In contrast, Fassbinder's films are less concerned with exploring the experiences of the *Gastarbeiter* themselves, tending instead to concentrate on exposing the roots of some of the attitudes towards them.

*Katzelmacher* – a Bavarian term of abuse for immigrant workers – for instance, revolves around a group of directionless young couples who live in a suburban block of flats. With little to interest or motivate them, the arrival of a Greek *Gastarbeiter*, Jorgos, unleashes what critics saw at the time as the fascist tendencies that were still latent in West German society. As the women gradually become curious about Jorgos it arouses the jealousies of their respective male partners.

The situation starts to become antagonistic, with the men getting increasingly violent towards ‘their’ women and eventually beating up Jorgos. A very stylised film, *Katzelmacher* thereby suggests that any perception that the *Gastarbeiter* were unwelcome in West Germany had as much, if not more, to do with attitudes that already existed within German society as with the economic situation that developed after their arrival.

## **Terrorism**

During the 1970s a number of filmmakers also turned their attention on the increasing terrorist activity that was disrupting German life. The origins of West German terrorism stem largely from the country’s political situation in the late 1960s. In 1966 the FRG’s two main political parties had been forced to govern by coalition. The conservative nature of this coalition and the fact that it possessed an overwhelming majority in parliament led to the growth of an extra-parliamentary opposition movement (**APO**). This opposition movement found its most ardent supporters among left-wing students who were disappointed at how little social change had been effected since the end of the war. They were, for instance, extremely critical of the fact that ex-Nazis, such as the then Chancellor, Georg Kiesinger, had been able to attain prominent positions in the new Federal Republic. Student protest of this kind was not confined to Germany, but swept across Europe and America in 1968, opposing in particular America’s involvement in Vietnam.

As the 1960s came to a close, however, the student movement in Germany collapsed and a small number of left-wing extremists turned to violence in order to try and bring about concrete changes. Sporadic terrorist acts such as bombings, bank robberies and arson attacks started in 1968. A couple of years later terrorist Andreas Baader met the journalist Ulrike Meinhof, and together they set up the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group which later became known as the **Red Army Faction** (RAF). Although Baader and Meinhof were both arrested in 1972 – together with fellow terrorist Gudrun Ensslin – other RAF members escalated terrorist attacks throughout the 1970s. The government took increasingly repressive actions to try and curb the attacks, but largely without success. Events came to a head in autumn 1977 when, after a spate of terrorist activity involving the kidnapping and killing of prominent industrialist and former Nazi Hans Martin Schleyer, and an airplane hi-jacking, three imprisoned terrorists (Baader, Ensslin and Carl Raspe) were found dead in their prison cells.

Several films were made which directly or indirectly addressed the issues raised by the terrorist activity and the state's response to it. The combined incidents of autumn 1977 in particular had a profound effect on the new generation of filmmakers, and Fassbinder, Kluge, Reitz, Schlöndorff and a few others decided to produce a collectively made film about these events, *Deutschland im Herbst/Germany in Autumn* (1978). Each contributing director made a segment which presented his or her response to the events, and the film is introduced by a short text which states: 'Once atrocity has reached a certain point, it does not matter who committed it, it should just stop.' In his contribution Fassbinder, for instance, reflects on the events in a staged conversation with his mother; Schlöndorff collaborated with writer Heinrich Böll to produce a short drama about the cancellation of a television broadcast of Sophocles' *Antigone* because its themes of violence and resistance would be too inflammatory; while Kluge invented history teacher Gabi Teichert, who uses a spade to literally dig for the roots of German history.

Margarethe von Trotta has also repeatedly returned to terrorist-related themes in her films. In *Die verlorene Ehre der Katherina Blum/The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum* (1975), co-directed with Schlöndorff and based on a Heinrich Böll novel of the same name, she explores what happens to a young woman at the hands of the authorities and the press after she unwittingly becomes involved with a man wanted by the police. Her next feature film, *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages/The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1977) is based on the true-life story of a woman who robbed a bank to try and keep open a child-care centre threatened with closure. And the director made *Die bleierne Zeit/The German Sisters* (1981) after she met Christiane Ensslin, the sister of dead terrorist Gudrun Ensslin. The film focuses on the relationship between two sisters, Marianne and Juliane, who are loosely based on the Ensslin sisters. Although we see nothing of Marianne's actual terrorist activities, through the eyes of Juliane we learn how Marianne has left her family to join a terrorist group, is eventually arrested and finally dies in prison. Initially Juliane is unsympathetic to her sister's politics, but on witnessing the inhumane way Marianne is treated in prison and by remembering their childhood together she increasingly comes to understand her sister's actions.

### **Feminism**

The work of Margarethe von Trotta is also part of a vibrant women's cinema that emerged as part of the New German Cinema. In Germany women's filmmaking was closely connected with the development of the contemporary women's movement, and the main impetus for the movement came from the student protest movement discussed above. Although the student

movement was concerned with bringing about social change, its male leaders failed to acknowledge the oppression of women. Eventually, student filmmaker Helke Sander (born 1937) delivered a stinging attack on her male colleagues during the 1968 Socialist German Students Union annual conference, and in the wake of her speech women's groups began to be set up throughout the country to campaign for women's rights. Although it took several years to gain momentum, the growing women's movement gradually raised awareness of such issues as child-care, abortion, violence against women, and discrimination in the workplace.

Some feminist activists also drew attention to the way in which women are so often excluded from the public domain, and thus their stories are rarely told, their experiences rarely acknowledged. Although relatively few women filmmakers actively participated in the women's movement, its consciousness-raising aims fostered a new women's cinema that was concerned with representing the authentic experiences of women. The majority of films that made up this cinema explored or were based on the lives of actual women. Several filmmakers simply turned their cameras on women in their own circle of friends and acquaintances to produce imaginative and experimental documentaries. For example, in her film *Ein gar und ganz verwahrlostes Mädchen/A Thoroughly Demoralized Girl* (1977), Jutta Brückner (born 1941) documents a day in the life of her friend Rita Rischak and her attempts to improve herself, while Elfi Mikesch (born 1940) made *Ich denke oft an Hawaii/I Often Think of Hawaii* (1978) about her neighbour Ruth, a deserted wife and mother of two. Other films – such as those of von Trotta mentioned above – were based on the documented lives of actual women.

However, some directors turned to their own experiences and produced autobiographical feature films. Among these are Helke Sander's *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit/The All-round Reduced Personality – Redupers* (1977), Helma Sanders-Brahms' *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter/Germany, Pale Mother* (1979-80), Jutta Brückner's *Hungerjahre/Years of Hunger* (1980), Jeanine Meerapfel's *Malou* (1980) and Marianne Rosenbaum's *Peppermint Frieden/Peppermint Freedom* (1983). Although each film adopts a different approach to its subject matter, in many of them the directors look back to their childhoods, their experiences of growing up in the 1950s and the lives of their parents. Others are more contemporary. In *Redupers*, for instance, Sander explores her own experiences of being a working single mother through the fictional character of Edda Chiemnyjewski, a free-lance photographer who desperately tries to balance her commitments as a mother with her need to earn a living.

An important dimension of these films is the desire to put on screen those particular aspects of women's lives that have usually been marginalised by or excluded from mainstream cinema. In the opening scenes of *Redupers*, therefore, we see Edda picking up her young daughter to say goodbye before she leaves for work. The girl clings on to Edda's scarf and refuses to let go. In despair Edda takes off the scarf and rushes out of the flat. This 'tug-of-war' between mother and daughter confronts the viewer with what is so frequently ignored – the difficulties that many women face in trying to combine a career and motherhood.

### **American imperialism and popular culture**

A number of other contemporary issues have been addressed within the New German Cinema, but what the cinema has probably become most well-known for outside Germany has been its exploration of America's role in postwar Germany and its 'remembering' of the Nazi past. As US armed forces took up occupation of West Germany after the war, they brought with them American culture in all shapes and forms. The trappings of American life became so commonplace that filmmaker Wim Wenders and others have referred to the 'Americanisation' of West Germany (Sandford 1980: 104). Indeed, in his film *Im Lauf der Zeit/Kings of the Road* (1976) Wenders has one of the characters observe: 'The Yanks have colonized our subconscious'.

Initially this seemed to be welcomed by many Germans – when Hollywood films reappeared in the cinemas, for instance, Germans literally *flocked* to see what they had been missing. Although hardly surprising, Wenders has argued that the reason Germans embraced American culture so readily had more to do with trying to blot out the unpleasant memory of Nazism: 'The need to forget 20 years created a hole, and people tried to cover this ... by assimilating American culture' (quoted in Sandford 1980: 104). But in a postwar *divided* Germany, many Germans also simply lacked any clear sense of what it meant to be German which compounded the embracing of American culture.

Thus, for the new generation of directors who had all grown up in postwar Germany, American culture was very much part of everyday life. And unsurprisingly a number of their films explore the experience of being caught between two cultures. Different filmmakers have focused on different aspects of this experience, but several have highlighted the influence of Hollywood cinema by drawing on the conventions of American films while dealing with specifically German subject matter. Fassbinder, for instance, made three films which are all set in the criminal underworld of Munich but which also play with the conventions and plots of the Hollywood gangster genre: *Liebe ist kälter als der Tod/Love is Colder Than Death* (1969), *Götter der*

*Pest/Gods of the Plague* (1970), *Der amerikanische Soldat/The American Soldier* (1970). Later, he also turned his attention to Hollywood melodramas, especially those directed by Douglas Sirk, such as *Written on the Wind* (1956) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). Sirk's films attracted critical praise in the 1970s for the way in which they exposed the underlying tensions present in 1950s American society. During the late 1970s and early 1980s Fassbinder made a number of films, such as *Lili Marleen* (1980) and *Lola* (1981) which drew on the style of Sirk's films and the conventions of melodrama to explore German society.

Although the Americans had been greeted as saviours in 1945, by the time Wenders, Fassbinder and others were starting to make films attitudes towards the American presence in West Germany – particularly among the younger generation – were becoming more ambivalent. As the student movement protested against America's involvement in Vietnam it highlighted what many now began to perceive as America's equally imperialist role in the FRG. This ambivalence towards the 'Americanisation' of West Germany is particularly evident in many of Wenders' films, such as *Der amerikanische Freund/The American Friend* (1976-77).

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### **CASE STUDY 2: *The American Friend***

Based on the Patricia Highsmith novel *Ripley's Game*, the film centres on a friendship that develops between Ripley, a crooked American art-dealer – played by Dennis Hopper – living in Hamburg, and Jonathan, a German picture framer suffering from a terminal illness. When Ripley and Jonathan meet for the first time, Jonathan's clear contempt for him offends Ripley. In retaliation, Ripley suggests Jonathan to a French underworld contact who is looking for an assassin. Initially reluctant, Jonathan is tricked into carrying out two murders in return for a sizeable payment so that he can leave his family well provided for after his death. His wife, however, wants nothing to do with the money, and due to the stress of his 'adventures' Jonathan dies prematurely.

The ambivalence towards America is expressed narratively in the relationship that develops between Ripley and Jonathan. The latter's dislike of Ripley and his shady dealings results in Ripley tricking Jonathan into thinking his illness is much worse than it is and that he will die in the near future. In order to provide for his family, Jonathan agrees to undertake the two assassinations. This can be read symbolically as signifying an antagonistic relationship between their respective countries. And Ripley's treatment of Jonathan, leading him into a life of crime and to an early death, implies any German dislike of America is totally justified. Other narrative

details also suggests a deep mistrust of America's motives for remaining in Europe. Ripley is only in Hamburg in order to use the German art market to circulate forged paintings, and there is a suggestion that the Americans are making money out of the German porn industry. Yet a bond develops between Ripley and Jonathan, to the exclusion of the latter's wife. This is especially evident during the second murder which takes place on a train and with which Ripley unexpectedly helps out. But even when Jonathan eventually finds out why Ripley tricked him he is amused rather than angry and continues to enjoy Ripley's company.

The film also clearly owes much to Hollywood cinema. Ripley dresses, behaves and even talks like the hero from a latter-day Western; in addition to the casting of Dennis Hopper, American directors Samuel Fuller and Nicholas Ray both have cameo roles; and the second murder recalls scenes from two Hitchcock films, *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *North by Northwest* (1959). All these factors suggest a fascination on Wenders' part with American films. Yet again an ambivalence is apparent. The film makes it clear that both Ripley as 'a cowboy in Hamburg' and Jonathan as the reluctant assassin are acting out roles, roles that are amusing at times, but also ludicrous at others, and that have serious consequences for Jonathan and his family. Thus at a number of levels, the film can be viewed as giving expression to a love-hate relationship with the American role in West German life.



**Plate 2** *Der amerikanische Freund* (*The American Friend*, Wim Wenders 1977)

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### **German history**

The New German Cinema directors also participated in the country's so-called 'remembering' of its Nazi past. As already mentioned, after the war there had been a desire to forget the Nazi past, and during the 1950s it had simply not been a subject for public discussion. As Margarethe von Trotta has observed: 'We felt that there was a past of which we were guilty as a nation but we weren't told about in school. If you asked questions, you didn't get answers' (quoted in Knight 1992: 141). During the late 1970s, however, for a number of reasons – especially the

events of autumn 1977 and the broadcast of the American television series *Holocaust* on West German television in 1979 – the Germans finally began to ‘remember’ and deal with their recent history. Unsurprisingly, this act of ‘remembering’ had an impact on all areas of culture, including cinema, and by the early 1980s a number of directors had endeavoured to explore the Nazi past in a way that had not been attempted before.

Some of the films that have been singled out for attention in this connection are *Hitler – ein Film aus Deutschland/Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977) by Hans Jürgen Syberberg (born 1935), Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun/The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), Alexander Kluge’s *Die Patriotin/The Patriot* (1979), Helma Sanders-Brahms’ *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter/Germany, Pale Mother* (1979-80) and Edgar Reitz’s sixteen-hour television epic *Heimat/Homeland* (1984). Rather than being about historical events, these stylistically very different films tried to explore how the German people had experienced the Hitler era as a lived reality.

To do this the films tend to concentrate on the telling of personal stories. For instance, Fassbinder’s film follows one woman’s struggle to survive during the immediate post-war period when her husband at first fails to return from the war and then ends up in prison for murder, while Reitz’s *Heimat* traces the lives and fortunes of two families in a small isolated rural village from 1919 to 1982. However, since the films focus on *personal* stories, political events become more of a backdrop to or an intrusive element in people’s private lives, or in some cases are virtually excluded. The village in *Heimat*, for instance, seems far removed from the political realities of the twentieth century and in the episodes that deal with the Nazi era the persecution of the Jews is barely mentioned. This approach to the representation of German history is particularly evident in the film by Sanders-Brahms (born 1940), *Germany, Pale Mother*.

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### **CASE STUDY 3: *Germany, Pale Mother***

Filmed using the conventions of art-house realism, *Germany, Pale Mother* looks back to the director’s own childhood, the lives of her parents and their experiences of the 1950s.

Predominantly narrative-based, the film shows her parents (Hans and Lene) meeting in the 1930s, her father’s experiences as a drafted soldier during the Second World War, how she and Lene survive on the home front, and the difficulties the family face settling down to a post-war existence. Unable to adjust to peace-time life, Hans becomes increasingly brutal, while Lene develops a facial paralysis and tries to commit suicide.



Although Sanders-Brahms drew on the experiences of other women who lived through the period to develop the film, it is clearly (semi-)autobiographical. Its status as a ‘personal story’ is also emphasised by the use of an intermittent directorial voice-over. At the beginning of the film, for instance, the director in voice-over describes her parents’ love story as ‘happy, perfectly normal’, but adds, ‘Only it happened at this particular time and in this country’. Although the Nazi regime under which they live is in evidence – via flags, uniformed officers, references to the ‘Führer’ – it is represented as something in which the young couple have no interest and over which they have no control. Their personal experiences are shaped by historical events but they are not represented as taking part in them.

This is apparent both at the narrative level and in the mise-en-scene. At the narrative level, for instance, the young couple’s domestic bliss is torn apart when Hans receives his call-up papers because he is not a party member, while his friend who is a party member is allowed to remain on the home front. In a similar vein, Lene finds herself unable to buy embroidery thread because the local Jewish-owned haberdashery store has been closed down. At the level of the mise-en-scene, an extremely large Nazi flag forms the backdrop at the dance where Hans and Lene meet, but Hans literally only has eyes for Lene and appears oblivious to the political regime under which he lives. Lene’s experiences on the home front are also occasionally intercut with archive newsreel footage. The difference in film stock is, however, very noticeable and has the effect of suggesting that Lene is not part of the war. She experiences the effects of war – when, for instance, her house is destroyed in an air-raid – but the mise-en-scene positions her as separate from historical events.

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Helma Sanders-Brahms has stressed she wanted to make a film which dealt with those people like her parents who may not have voted for Hitler, but didn’t protest, resist or emigrate either. And the concentration on personal stories to the virtual exclusion of political events means that such films act as a powerful counter-balance to populist representations of German history – such as *Holocaust* – which usually deal *exclusively* with public figures, resistance fighters and the atrocities committed under the Nazi regime. Although such a balance is undoubtedly necessary, and while the films may be a more accurate representation of how many Germans did actually experience Hitler’s Third Reich, they conveniently avoid any exploration of who should bear responsibility for the Nazi atrocities. Thus the films have also been viewed as ‘revisionist’

– that is, it has been suggested that they also attempt to ‘rewrite’ German history in a manner that is more palatable to the Germans (Kaes 1989: x).

### **A question of German identity?**

As is evident, a consideration of the socio-political context within which the filmmakers were working is of crucial importance to an understanding of the films they made. This clearly marks the New German Cinema as a specifically *national* one – that is, one which was shaped as much, if not more so, by the nationally prevailing circumstances and conditions as it was by the creative talent of individual filmmakers. But the fact that a significant number of the films are effectively exploring the experience of being German in a postwar western society also suggests a deep concern with questions of national identity. Although film and television generally (among other things) help give us or express a sense of national identity, these films are also very much a product of the way in which concerns within West German society shifted during the 1970s from steadfastly denying the Nazi past, from consuming American culture and allowing others to represent German history for them, to trying to evolve a self-determined German identity.

### **Sponsorship or censorship?**

As the film subsidy system developed, it had quickly become apparent that the new directors were far from free of vested interests. Since the New German Cinema had not achieved wide commercial success, it had remained dependent on public money for its existence. State support may have helped produce an internationally acclaimed cinema, but it was also responsible for political and artistic censorship.

Although the funding agencies promoted film as an art form, the economic rationale underlying their guidelines often determined whether funds were awarded or not. In 1978 Wilhelm Roth of the FFA project commission observed that ‘the main discussion that takes place ... is always about whether or not the film will be successful at the box-office’ (quoted in Knight 1992: 37). Thus, the formal experimentation that characterised many of the early New German Cinema films gradually began to disappear and the cinema became predominantly one of narrative-based feature films.

Projects that addressed politically sensitive issues or were socially critical also often failed to find funding. In 1975, for instance, Fassbinder submitted a proposal to the FFA entitled *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod/The Garbage, The City and Death*. Based on a Gerhard Zwerenz novel, Fassbinder had originally written it as a play which examined some of the negative aspects of capitalism. However, he was accused of anti-semitism and the play never staged. The FFA felt that the racist implications persisted in the film project and refused funding. Kluge was even told that he would have to return his subsidy after making *Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin/Occasional Work of a Female Slave* (1973) because discrepancies were noticed between his original proposal and the finished film. It has been suggested that this was an attempt to censure the film's critical stance on the existing anti-abortion laws (*New German Critique* 1981-82: 23).

Furthermore, in the FRG representatives of the various political parties sat on the boards of all the television corporations and were therefore in a position to exercise censorship powers. In 1980, for instance, members of the right-wing CDU/CSU blacklisted *Der Kandidat/The Candidate*, a film about the CSU politician Franz-Josef Strauss made by a group of directors which included Kluge and Schlöndorff. The following year Helga Reidemeister (born 1940) reported that she had received rejections from nine television companies when she was trying to raise funding for a film about Carola Bloch, a Jewish political activist who joined the German Communist Party in the 1930s and lived in East Germany after the war. According to Reidemeister, 'the problem is Carola's past as a CP member, something I can't and don't want to conceal' (in Silberman 1982: 48).

Such censorship reached an unprecedented peak in the mid-late 1970s. As terrorist activity had escalated during the 1970s, it resulted in increasing intolerance of dissident viewpoints. Measures were introduced to prevent political extremists from entering the civil service and to prohibit the advocating or approval of criminal deeds in public. And leftist bookshops, printers and news services were subjected to repeated investigations, with arrests and confiscation of material not uncommon. Consequently, by 1977 many people felt West Germany had become a police state in which it was impossible to express oppositional viewpoints.

As a result film funding agencies became even more conservative, avoiding any projects that could be construed as politically radical, controversial or socially critical. This meant that if filmmakers wanted to directly address politically sensitive issues such as terrorism they had to

seek other sources of funding. And the collectively-made *Germany in Autumn* (1978) was in fact made through private investment.

The effects on state-subsidised filmmaking were two-fold. Firstly, it exacerbated a tendency for German filmmakers to draw on literary sources. Since funding agencies demanded that proposals be accompanied by finished scripts, the system already encouraged producers to undertake literature adaptations. However, in 1976-77 political conservatism produced a so-called 'literature adaptation crisis'. In those years there was not only an overwhelming number of literature-based films, but most were adaptations of nineteenth-century classics which appeared to have little or no contemporary relevance.

On the other hand, censorship gave rise to what has been described as a passion for 'oblique approaches and microcosmic case histories' (Dawson 1979: 243). This is particularly evident in films such as von Trotta's *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1977) and *The German Sisters* (1981). Although both films allude to terrorism, they do not overtly examine terrorist politics. Some critics have suggested that the approaches of such films are so oblique that they have little contemporary relevance. According to Charlotte Delormé, 'if *The German Sisters* were really what it purports to be, it would not have received any support, distribution or exhibition' (quoted in Knight 1992: 41). Others, however, have argued that it subtly explores the contemporary social problems and their connections to Germany's past through the experiences of individual protagonists.

Thus, developments during the 1970s appeared to threaten the existence of Germany's new cinema for a second time. Although the apparent crisis had passed by the end of the decade – and *The Tin Drum*'s success at the Oscars in 1980 seemed to mark a high point – many filmmakers came to view the film subsidy system as something of a mixed blessing. Without doubt it had played an absolutely crucial role in making the New German Cinema possible, but at the same time the subsidy system had limited the scope of that cinema. Not only had the funding agencies promoted one particular mode of production, they had also helped to shape the cinema's narrative-based style and to circumscribe its subject matter.

## **Conclusion**

Indeed, by the mid-1980s innumerable critics had pronounced the demise of the New German Cinema. This was partly due to the fact that many of the directors most closely associated with it had moved abroad. Herzog, Schlöndorff, von Trotta, Wenders, Straub and Huillet had either spent periods working in other countries or emigrated. Furthermore, Fassbinder, who was by far the most prolific of the cinema's directors, had died in 1982.

However, the same year also saw the end of seventeen years of Social Democrat rule when elections returned the right-wing CDU/CSU union to power. This had far-reaching consequences for the film sector since the ultra-conservative Friedrich Zimmermann became Minister of the Interior. Under his guidance film policy was revised to clearly favour commercial projects over any form of artistic experimentation. Within his own ministry Zimmermann assumed absolute control over how funds were administered, and much of the work that characterised the New German Cinema quickly became a casualty of his approach.

And although television had come to the rescue of the New German Cinema in its early years, in the wake of the 1974 Film and Television Agreement it became the major funder of such work and began to play an increasingly determining role in film production. If a project had been rejected by one or more television corporations, for instance, the other funding committees were likely to follow their lead. The closer working relationships between filmmakers and television commissioning editors fostered by the Agreement also resulted in a tendency for films to be tailored for broadcast on the small screen.

These developments also coincided with a shift back to more commercial and industrial modes of filmmaking. This was partly out of necessity as the sheer number of films being produced increased and from a need to keep pace with technological developments in the international film and television industries. But also as some of the new directors had achieved international success, it opened up possibilities for American distributors co-producing German films.

At the same time, the cost of producing films rose so dramatically during the 1980s that national funding initiatives alone were frequently inadequate. As a result filmmakers had to start turning to other countries to find co-funding or to apply to the new pan-European agencies to help meet the short-fall. In order to meet the criteria of such funders, however, film projects are often

required to demonstrate a broader European appeal. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to view the films funded in such a manner as part of a specifically national cinema. And of course, these changes have been exacerbated since the late 1980s by the emergence of media conglomerates, the growth of cable and satellite broadcasting the advent of digital technologies.

Thus, just as a set of historically specific circumstances and conditions had brought the New German Cinema into being, another set of historically specific circumstances meant that much of what made the cinema distinctive disappeared. So, far from being solely the product of a small number of creative geniuses, the New German Cinema has to be understood as a national and historically specific phenomenon. And in a sense, the reason it was able to establish itself so decisively on the international scene, especially in Britain and America, is equally historically specific. During the 1970s, the auteurist approach to cinema had gained enormous sway within the field of film studies on both sides of the Atlantic. Since the *Autorenkino* principle informing much of the subsidy system and the cinema's artisanal mode of production meant that the films readily lent themselves to being discussed as the work of creative geniuses, the New German Cinema was easily valued, if inadequately understood, as a 'cinéma des auteurs'.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> In February 1976, for instance, the US magazine *Newsweek* ran an article entitled 'The German Film Renaissance'; a few months later the BBC featured the new cinema in an Omnibus report called 'Vigorous Signs of Life'; and by 1978 *Time* magazine described it as 'the liveliest in Europe' (Clarke 1978).

<sup>ii</sup> See, for instance, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1979, Sandford 1980, Wide Angle 1980, Phillips 1984, and Franklin 1986.

<sup>iii</sup> In a famous speech Spyros Skouras, Head of Twentieth-Century Fox, declared that American films were a potential means of 'indoctrinating people into the free way of life and instil[ling] in them a compelling desire for freedom' (quoted in Knight 1992: 26).

<sup>iv</sup> Import quotas were introduced by other European countries after the war as a safeguard to protect their own film industries.

<sup>v</sup> Bernard Wicki's *Die Brücke/The Bridge* (1959), for instance, became a classic anti-war film, while Wolfgang Staudte's *Rosen für den Staatsanwalt/Roses for the Prosecutor* (1959) addressed the fact that former Nazi officers had obtained positions of power in the new Federal Republic of Germany.

<sup>vi</sup> In reality the Federal Film Prizes were often awarded to films exhibiting an anti-communist and pro-NATO stance, but they were also intended to celebrate 'quality'.

<sup>vii</sup> According to Elsaesser, by the early 1970s there was not a single commercial distributor which was not American controlled (1989: 15).

<sup>viii</sup> According to Rentschler, 'in April 1970 it was reported that nineteen Young German films could not find a distributor' (1984: 46).

<sup>ix</sup> For a discussion of this difference, see Johnston 1979-80: 67-78.

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## **Further Viewing**

In addition to the films mentioned/discussed in the chapter, the following may also be of interest:

*Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes/Aguirre, Wrath of God* (W. Herzog 1972)

*Alice in den Städten/Alice in the Cities* (W. Wenders 1973)

*Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter/The Goalie's Fear of the Penalty Kick* (W. Wenders 1971)

*Die Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: Ratlos/Artists at the Top of the Big Top: Disorientated* (A. Kluge 1967)

*Die Berührte/No Mercy No Future* (H. Sanders-Brahms 1981)

*Bildnis einer Trinkerin/Ticket of No Return* (U. Ottinger 1979)

*Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant/The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (R.W. Fassbinder 1972)

*Das Boot/The Boat* (W. Petersen 1981)

*Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach/Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (J.-M. Straub and D. Huillet 1968)

*Die dritte Generation/The Third Generation* (R.W. Fassbinder 1979)

*Fontane Effi Briest/Effi Briest* (R.W. Fassbinder 1974)

*Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire* (W. Wenders 1987)

*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle/The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (W. Herzog 1974)

*Ludwig – Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König/Ludwig – Requiem for a Virgin King* (H.J. Syberberg 1972)

*Schwestern oder die Balance des Glücks/Sisters of the Balance of Happiness* (M. von Trotta 1979)

*Stammheim* (R. Hauff 1986)

*Strohfeuer/A Free Woman* (V. Schlöndorff 1972)

*Stroszek* (W. Herzog 1976)

*Der subjektive Faktor/The Subjective Factor* (H. Sander 1980)

## **Resource Centres**

There are now a number of New German Cinema films available on DVD and video which can be obtained via [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk)

A range of films are also available for hire on 16mm from the British Film Institute in London ([www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk))

There are also Goethe Institutes in London, Manchester, Belfast and Glasgow ([www.goethe.de/ins/gb/enindex.htm](http://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/enindex.htm)). Their libraries have extensive book, DVD and video collections, together with newspapers and databases resources.

## **Key words**

**APO:** An abbreviation for ‘außerparlamentarische Oppositionsbewegung’, the extra-parliamentary opposition movement that emerged in Germany in the late 1960s in response to the overwhelming conservative nature of the elected parliament. The movement crystallised among left-wing students who were disenchanted with the lack of social change since the end of the Second World War.

**Arbeiterfilme:** A term used to describe a series of critically acclaimed ‘worker films’ produced by the television channel WDR in the 1970s. Made by a predominantly Berlin-based group of filmmakers (including Christian Ziewer, Erika Runge, Ingo Klier, Marianne Lüdcke and Fassbinder), the films focused on the lives and experiences of the contemporary German working class.

**artisanal mode of production:** A term used to describe the way in which most New German Cinema films were made with small budgets and minimal production teams that filmmaking was considered by some to be more like practising a craft than a technological process.

- auteurist:** A critical approach to the study of film which identifies the director as responsible for whatever the viewer finds of the stylistic or structural interest in a single film or across a body of work by one director.
- Autorenkino:** A concept, loosely translated as a ‘cinema of authors’, promoted by Alexander Kluge while campaigning for the funding and developing the film education necessary to produce a culturally motivated cinema. According to this concept the director is to be regarded as a film’s creator and the film can be regarded as an expression of that creator’s personality.
- BMI:** The Federal Ministry of the Interior which awards the annual Federal Film Prize and was initially responsible for funding Kuratorium junger deutscher Film.
- cinéma des auteurs:** A term evolved from the *Cahiers du Cinéma*’s approach to the study of French and Hollywood cinema in which attempted to identify directors who brought something personal to their films. It is used to describe particular types of filmmaking which are deemed to be characterised by the distinctive styles and visions of their directors.
- FFA:** An abbreviation for Filmförderungsanstalt, the Film Development Board which was set up to administer the funds raised.
- FFG:** An abbreviation for Filmförderungsgesetz, the Film Development Act which was passed in 1967 to raise a levy on every film sold in West Germany to provide funding for film production.
- Film and Television Agreement:** An agreement made in 1974 between the FFA and the first and second West German television stations which set up a film production fund.
- FRG:** Before the reunification of Germany in 1990, West Germany was officially known as the Federal Republic of Germany – FRG – (as the reunified Germany is today), while East Germany was called the German Democratic Republic (GDR).
- Gastarbeiter:** The term used for the foreign labour that the West German government started to import from Turkey and southern Italy in the 1950s to help sustain its industries. It is usually translated as ‘guest worker’.
- Heimatfilme:** A German term which can be loosely translated as ‘homeland films’ and was coined to delineate a film genre which depicts simple country life in a rural Germany.
- Kuratorium junger deutscher Film:** The Board of Young German Film which was the first film subsidy agency, set up by the state in 1965. Its brief was and remains to fund first feature films only.
- national cinema:** A term commonly used to describe the filmic output of a particular country and to distinguish it from Hollywood filmmaking. It has also developed as an approach within film studies to explore how films are shaped by nationally particular socio-political and economic conditions. This approach to the study of cinema leads on to understanding film as expressing and articulating a sense of national identity. However, defining a national cinema and adopting this approach can be problematic. For instance, rapidly changing national geographies, the increasing trend for pan-European funding for film projects and European productions make it increasingly difficult to clearly delineate a single country of origin.
- Oberhausen Manifesto:** A manifesto drawn up and signed by twenty-six filmmakers, writers and artists at the 1962 Oberhausen Festival to campaign for access to the means of feature film production.
- Red Army Faction:** A West German terrorist group set up by Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof in 1970.
- UFA:** An abbreviation for Universum Film AG, a large film company initially set up in 1917, consolidated and restructured in 1930 and taken over by and centralised under the Nazi regime in the 1930s.