David N. Coury and Frank Pilipp

Post-Wall German Road Movies: Renegotiations of National Identity?

If road movies are above all about journeys of self-discovery and about conceptions of self and the nation, this would beg the question whether recent German entries in this genre can live up to that claim. This article attempts to chart the extent to which post-reunification road movies transcend a dominant cinematic culture of consensus and conformity and advocate cultural plurality. Looking at a number of recent road films, the authors examine how these films explore routes by which greater cultural openness and tolerance can be embraced and differences accepted instead of rejected, thereby infusing multiculturalism into the desire for a new normalcy.

Negotiations about the conception of German nationhood and identity in the 21st century have been reflected in intellectual debates and the cultural production of this century. This has also had an influence upon the cinematic productions since reunification – a cinema that has been termed a ‘cinema of consensus’ because it displays an intrinsic desire for normalcy.¹ Central to these debates are the relationships between Germany and other nations and between Germans and the Other, both of which are crucial in defining self-conceptions and national identity. To that end, this article will explore identity negotiations in contemporary (post-Wall) German cinema, focusing in particular on the genre of the road movie, and use select recent examples to elucidate various themes and tropes found in these films which contribute to the project of identity construction. In examining these films, three concepts that have informed much of the debates on contemporary German cultural studies appear relevant: first Stuart Taberner’s work on the move toward a ‘normalization’ of German cultural and intellectual discourse in the current era; second Eric Rentschler’s concept of a post-Wall ‘cinema of consensus’; and finally the absence of minority representation and discourses on multiculturalism that would underscore and help define the new nation in the 21st century.

Cinema of the 1990s and Beyond: a Cinema of Consensus

By the mid 1980s, the much heralded New German Cinema (NGC) and ‘Autorenkino’ were clearly on the decline. Critics and filmmakers themselves had begun lamenting its death as well as the lack of any
meaningful ‘wave’ or movement within the German film industry that might take its place. This situation was not limited to the cinema, rather the German cultural landscape as a whole had become, in Habermas’ words, ‘a desert of banality and bewilderment.’ Particularly after the fall of the Wall, the more venerable, canonical writers and filmmakers seemed at a loss to create political and socially engaging works of art. At the same time, a new wave of popular literature and film, the so-called ‘Popliteratur’ and its cinematic cousin, the New German Comedy, supplanted these established artists and in doing so created a commercially successful literary and cinematic scene. In 2000, at the start of the new millennium, Eric Rentschler published a stock-taking of German film in the post-New German Cinema era. As an admitted ‘friend’ of the NGC, he mourned the end of an alternative cinema and in particular noted that journalists, cineastes and intellectuals at large have frequently rebuked [current] German filmmakers for ignoring the nation’s social problems and political debates. Contemporary productions, they tell us, studiously and systematically skirt the ‘large’ topics and hot issues: the messy complications of post-Wall reality, thematics like right-wing radicalism, chronic unemployment, or the uneasy integration of the former GDR into the Federal Republic. Further, Rentschler sets off the ‘crude,’ ‘formulaic,’ ‘bland’ and ‘infantile’ comedies of the 1990s against the ‘rich,’ ‘challenging’ and ‘diverse’ films of the New German Cinema. He faults directors like Doris Dörrie, Sönke Wortmann and Dominik Graf for wanting to transform cinema into a ‘site of mass diversion’ instead of maintaining a cinema that can be ‘a moral institution or a political forum.’ The most prominent and successful of these directors ‘aim to please,’ and have, he argues, created in the process a ‘cinema of consensus.’

This, of course, begs the question, consensus about what? Most of these directors, especially the practitioners of the romantic comedies of the 1990s, embraced genre cinema, with its traditional narratives and commercial appeal, and rejected both the thematics and aesthetics of the NGC. In doing so, they sought to bring ‘normality’ to German cinematic production by turning to Hollywood as a cultural referent instead of carrying on the traditions of the NGC. Filmmakers were not alone in this search for normalcy, as there was in the literary sphere a concomitant debate over ‘Unterhaltung’ and ‘Lesbarkeit’ on the one hand and traditional German aesthetics on the other. Critics like Uwe Wittstock called for a more entertaining, readable German