



The Berliner Schule as a Recent New Wave in German Cinema

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Abstract. The *Berliner Schule* can be called a minor new wave of German cinema. Minor since the impact of more recent “waves” does not reach the scope of the “waves” of the 1960s and 70s, most notably, *la Nouvelle Vague* in France and *Das Neue Kino* in Germany. And still, it has most of the features associated with the earlier “waves:” it emerged in a turbulent period of time (late 1980s – early 1990s), and in many ways in opposition to the current mainstream cinema. The *Berliner Schule* has its aesthetic programme expressed on the pages of *Revolver* magazine, emphasizing the importance of creating a platform for exchange of ideas over academic-style theorizing. It cannot be called a movement in a strict sense, as the current range of filmmakers associated with the *Berliner Schule* is diverse enough to disagree upon many points expressed in *Revolver* or each other’s films. There are two “generations” commonly associated with the *Berliner Schule*. The first generation mainly includes three directors, namely Christian Petzold, Angela Schanelec and Thomas Arslan. Directors such as Valeska Grisebach, Matthias Luthardt, Maria Speth, Benjamin Heisenberg, Christoph Hochhäusler, Ulrich Köhler, Henner Wickler, Maren Ade, Elke Hauk, Sylke Enders and some others are associated with the second generation. Films made by these directors feature a lot of elements associated with the “waves,” such as use of long shots, casting non-professional actors, and attention to the issues of history and memory. Yet, the notion of *auteur* is revised, and team work gains more importance than it did in the earlier relevant films. The *Berliner Schule* appears to be a vivid example of how the ideas grounded in the 1960s are manifested and transformed in today’s cinema.

The term “*Berliner Schule*” may be currently familiar to the film festival going public in Europe and beyond. This umbrella term is used in reference to a group of young German film directors, and it has recently come to include a very diverse range of names of filmmakers that are now hard to be called a group. Film critic Rainer Gansera was the first to use the term in his article “Glücks-Pickpocket” in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2001 (cf. Gansera 2001) when he spoke about films of

Christian Petzold, Angela Schanelec and Thomas Arslan, all graduates of Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB). Even earlier, the group received critical acclaim in France and became known under the name “La nouvelle vague allemande” – allegedly, first used by *Cahiers du cinéma*, and followed by *Le Monde*, *La Libération*, and *Positif*. There is a circle of film critics at major German publications who have pioneered the movement as an influx of fresh creativity into the mainstream post-reunification German cinema which was earlier condemned as the “cinema of consensus” (Rentschler 2000). These days the circle of filmmakers associated with the *Berliner Schule* has broadened and diversified. Although the directors themselves say that no single style exists among them, it is obvious that their films characterized by minimalist aesthetic and long takes, with melancholic slow narratives set in modern-day Germany, are different enough from the other cinema produced nowadays in Germany, and close enough to each other in the message and aesthetics, to be seen as a movement. The triple minimalism of aesthetics, dramaturgy and technique; the national subject matter with an international appeal, and the overall politically charged visual message all fit quite comfortably within what we traditionally call waves and what has more recently grown into the “world cinema”. In the case with the *Berliner Schule* it appears more relevant to look for similarities rather than for differences, i.e. similarities with film historical movements and national “waves” rather than what makes them stand out among the other contemporary German films, particularly the ones known internationally (with *Sophie Scholl: The Last Days* and *The Life of Others* as the most famous examples).

The roots of *Berliner Schule* films can easily be traced back to the 1960s and 70s. In fact, any history of the *Berliner Schule* begins with DFFB – Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin, founded in 1966.

1. DFFB (German Academy of Film and Television Berlin)

DFFB was the first film school in West Germany whose opening followed the Oberhausen Manifesto subscribed by Alexander Kluge and a group of German filmmakers who wished to draw German cinema out of the post-World War II crisis and stagnation. As Heinz Rathsack, the first director of the school put it in his speech at the opening ceremony, DFFB was to become a “Bauhaus of Film” (Peitz 1996).

Among the first DFFB students (between 1966 and 1968) was Harun Farocki, one of the most noticeable German experimental filmmakers of the last three decades, whose work in film and television questions the ways of seeing aesthetically as well

as politically (*Die Sprache der Revolution*, 1972, *Wie man sieht*, 1984, *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik*, 1995). Hartmut Bitomsky, an important documentary filmmaker and current director of DFFB, also began his studies in the same year.

The 1970s at DFFB were marked by predominance of documentary filmmaking, particularly *Arbeiterfilme* (workers' films), where stories were narrated as seen by the eyes of working-class protagonists. Some of the best known films are *The Long Lament* (*Der lange Jammer*, 1973) by Max Willutzki and *Dear Mother, I'm All Right* (*Liebe Mutter, mir geht es gut*, 1972) by Christian Ziewer. These filmmakers are considered to be a part of the historical "Berlin School" – a term that largely implied opposition to the "Munich Sensibilists," the wing of the New German Cinema whose method lay in construction of the multilayered model of society in personal, often melodramatic stories (as did Ingemo Engström, Rüdiger Nüchtern, Gerhard Theuring, Matthias Weiss, Wim Wenders or Rainer Werner Fassbinder).

Fiction film did not play any significant role at DFFB until the 1980s. One event probably gave an impetus to the development of fiction film at DFFB, namely the closing of the *Filmkritik* magazine, the main vehicle of the ideas of the New German Cinema. As a result, the majority of its critical forces (represented by Peter Nau, Manfred Blank, Helmut Färber and, again, Hartmut Bitomsky and Harun Farocki) joined the DFFB faculty. These were filmmakers interested in fiction film who frequently blended fiction and documentary in their works. It was largely due to their influence that fiction film began to gain importance at the Academy.

2. From Autorenfilm to the Cinema of Consensus

The transformations that occurred at DFFB in the 1980s overlapped with the change of financing of German cinema around the same time, which changed its content dramatically. This shift occurred with the appointment, as the Minister of the Interior, of the conservative Friedrich Zimmermann in 1982, who declared war on *Autorenfilm* in the name of "entertainment." The viewpoint of his cabinet was that the "continued existence of the *Autorenfilm*... had been mainly a function of narcissistic artists, credulous subsidy boards, indulgent television editors, and leftist film reviewers... [and that] this cinema had been kept alive artificially by a state welfare system" (Rentschler 2000, 266). The priority was given to the development of the commercial cinema, and consequently, the cultural subsidy was transformed into an almost exclusively economic one. This transformation included television that had been an important support for the New German Cinema: now in the '80s TV programming priorities, rather than

such considerations as artistic merit and support of the first-time filmmakers, influenced subsidy decisions. Consequently, experimentation in film was discouraged. Filmmaking began to be understood as a craft, and film schools laid significantly less emphasis on theory and history than technical skills.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder died in the same year, 1982, suddenly and unexpectedly, and this meant a loss of a centre, a certain spiritual link that united the diverse branches of the New German Cinema. Coupled with adverse condition in film production, these events in many ways meant the end of the New German Cinema. The mainstream-oriented cinema that came to succeed the *Autorenfilm* had a certain ideology based on the inclination of making user-friendly films as opposed to the “intellectual pompousness” of *Autorenfilm*. One of the early responses to this new vision of the role of cinema was Doris Dörrie’s remarriage comedy *Männer*, where the protagonist Paula, tired of her twelve-year marriage to a successful professional from the advertising industry, begins a relationship with a hippie to discover later that he is her husband’s *Doppelgänger* despite his rebellious attitude. The film fit well into Zimmermann’s paradigm, satisfied critics, and won multiple awards. “Dörrie herself maintained that she had inadvertently hit a resonant chord of the *Zeitgeist*” (Rentschler 2000, 272). This chord consisted in the departure from the liberal ideas of 1968, or rather, adaptation of the freedom of expression to the free market. Eric Rentschler, one of the most avid adversaries of this cinema, notes upon its subject matter: “In a procession of movies about people who are typically graphic artists in the advertising branch or individuals employed as disc jockeys, film-makers, actors, musicians and models, the Cinema of Consensus has replicated – and demonstrated – the workings of a German culture industry that probes every possible way to gain an edge and advantage” (Rentschler 2000, 274).

Within the paradigm described by Rentschler, the films of such directors as Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold and Angela Schanelec must have looked rather unspectacular with their long shots, slow motion, and frequent use of non-professional actors.

3. Berliner Schule: Aesthetics, Approaches, Collaborations

In Christian Petzold’s film *Wolfsburg* (2003) it is hard to say whether the main characters are people or cars. The world of the automobiles penetrates the film as a contrapuntal motif. According to Petzold, “the car is turning into a fully individualized living space. It separates the driver from the outside: inside am I,

outside is a film. This is what *Wolfsburg* is about: “a man who opens a car door and must acknowledge that the windshield is not a screen, and the soundtrack from a CD-player is not a real one” (Reinecke). The choice of Wolfsburg out of all provincial towns where such a story could be set, is important in itself, “because I don’t know any other town where the history of the Federal Republic [of Germany] can be found so condensed on the periphery: the traces of Nazis, modernity, and Volkswagen in the centre” (Reinecke).

The film begins with a car accident: a car salesman Phillip played by Benno Fürmann runs down and kills a little boy, and then escapes from the site. From this moment on, everything Phillip does is passed through a prism of his guilty conscience. Petzold obviously has little interest in a conventional catastrophe film narrative modelled on the “normality – catastrophe – catharsis” scheme (Nord 2007). It is the yield lines penetrating one’s consciousness as a result of such an incident that he emphasizes instead. The crime and the culprit are known from the beginning. The death of the boy is the beginning of a love story between Phillip and Laura (played by Nina Hoss), the boy’s mother, who does not know that Phillip is guilty of her son’s death.

Melodramatic in substance, the story is rendered minimalistic in form. Typical of Petzold’s films, the actors rather underact, the pictures are sparse and economical, music is only used in one scene. It is a melodrama viewed from the distance, the distance that “allows a more complex form of compassion than therapeutic compassion that German films mostly produce” (Reinecke)

The idea to make a film set in Wolfsburg is going back to the time when Petzold worked as an assistant at Hartmut Bitomsky’s film *VW Komplex* (1989) when he was still a student at DFFB. In this film, Bitomsky presents series of consciously associative comments on the industrial giant, the factory building, people, and machines. The script was co-written with Harun Farocki. Petzold has always continued to stay in touch with Farocki and Bitomsky who set the general tone of filmmaking at DFFB. In a way, these two filmmakers bridge the *Berliner Schule*, at least its “first generation” (Petzold, Arslan and Schanelec), with the New German Cinema.

The editing in *Wolfsburg* was done by Bettina Böhler, also a DFFB graduate. In a way, Bettina Böhler may be called a connecting figure for the *Berliner Schule*: she edited all Christian Petzold’s films since 1996, all Angela Schanelec’s feature films, both features by Henner Winckler, and Valeska Grisebach’s *Sehnsucht* (2004–2006). Böhler approaches her work holistically, which means that she prefers to be largely unaware of directing and only hold on to the plotline in

general. She does not read the script when she edits; neither does she go to the shoots. Instead, she looks at the sequences and asks herself if they “tell her a story;” she looks at what works for her visually.

It may be understandable why Angela Schanelec, another film director associated with the so-called “first generation” of the *Berliner Schule*, likes to work with Bettina Böhler. The visual effect achieved by a sequence aptly put together is especially important in the cinema where the plot is almost eliminated, like that of Schanelec. Her films represent a mere translocation of foreign bodies. This approach can probably be explained by the fact that Angela Schanelec comes from the acting background – she came to film directing after a few years as a professional theatre actress. The way she directs actors (mostly professional) in her films corresponds with the so-called “Bresson’s system.” Robert Bresson (1901–1999) used non-professional actors (whom he called “models”) in his films and trained them for a particular part – it was filmmaking as a process of discovery out of what these “models” would reveal to him. The personality of the actor was as important as the personality of the character, or rather, their relation to one another was important to the construct of the film. Such a method was a result of Bresson’s total mistrust of psychological motives for a character’s actions (Pavelin 2002).

Schanelec likewise remains indifferent, almost hostile to psychology. The separation that we see between images in scenes, between the image and sound, works on the level of relationships between characters in that each of them is a *Fremdkörper* (“foreign body”) to one another. Their interaction is akin to choreography; no kind of relationship between them (friendship, romance, or maternal relationship) is shown to the viewer, and their motivations are never explained. This is how Schanelec describes her system of the corporeal: “I think it is extremely difficult that people touch each other in films. It became a totally normal thing. Godard, for example, said that to photograph a kiss is impossible. A film is a film, and not a reality. And because people constantly touch each other and sleep together does not mean that it should be shown in a film. Same when two people are shown to possibly begin to love each other. Certain things should be omitted and left to the spectator’s imagination” (Ganz 2001). While Schanelec refers to Godard, other references are also readable in this statement, in particular, Alexander Kluge’s notion of *Phantasie*, the viewer’s imagination as an active part of the film. In his film *Part-Time Work of a Domestic Slave (Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin, 1973)* Kluge inserts text and graphic still images in order to interrupt the narration, to let the viewer drift away from it for a few moments, and to remind her that a film is not “reality” in opposition to the alleged “reality”

of images poured by the media. The personal story of Roswitha Bronski, the film's protagonist, is simultaneously a conveyor of political and aesthetic ideas.

4. Turning to the Domain of the Personal as a Political Statement

The way in which *Berliner Schule* directors turn to the domain of the personal parallels the ways first proposed by Kluge as well as other directors of the New German Cinema and French New Wave. A recognizable set of conflicts can be traced within each of the *Berliner Schule* films. To understand these conflicts, we have to look back into the recent past, the re-unification of West and East Germany.

The re-unification was met with great enthusiasm in society, and the return to the historical borders also signified the increased role of Germany internationally, as one of the key members of the European Union with a leading role in the European integration along with France and Great Britain. Berlin became a vivid expression of this enthusiasm and an embodiment of mobility in the new society. In the '90s, many houses in East Berlin were abandoned after their former inhabitants moved to the West. These houses were occupied by squats, galleries and nightclubs. Artists who could not afford to have studios in Cologne or Munich moved to Berlin, where they could pursue their art without being troubled as to how to make their living. In a short time Berlin, with its booming techno scene, became the hippest destination in Europe, its last citadel of perky and young underground culture. The former working-class district of Prenzlauer Berg turned into a bohemian hot spot full of street cafés, galleries and designer shops. The critique of this lifestyle followed in the early 2000s: it gradually became too cute to be real. This critique came largely from the unofficial neoconservative movement known as *Die neue Bürgerlichkeit* (literally, "New Bourgeoisie"), which suggested that it was a time to return to forgotten traditional values such as family and firm national identity. The outspoken demographic decline in Germany and, subsequently, lean state coffer, they maintain, is the consequence of careerism, egoism, and "the lack of willingness to sacrifice" (Rickens 2006) in women. Other causes, such as immigration, are regarded as equally dangerous. The Hamburg-based journalist Christian Rickens in his book *Die neuen Spießherren* ("The New Babbits") upon the analysis of these polemics and some social data concludes that the arguments of the *Neuen Bürgerlichen* (the proponents of the *Neue Bürgerlichkeit*) are rather dictated by the fear of changes than contain any consistent criticism. He pointed out that these changes may affect society on

deeper levels, and may ultimately result in cultivation of certain features of character, such as dutifulness and diligence at the expense of free will and creativity, as it was in the 1950s.

The “cinema of consensus,” glossy in appearance, fails to be “modern” or “German” in the sense of addressing the aforementioned issues critically. The films that have garnered international prizes in the recent years and returned home as box-office hits once again have been dealing with historical subjects in a “safe” way, i.e. by providing the image of Germany that mainstream international audience expected to see. This is what such critics as Eric Rentschler or Georg Seeßlen warn against, connecting the “cinema of consensus” with the loss of capacity of reflection and intellectual submissiveness to the *Erzählmaschine* (“narration machine”) of the media (Seeßlen 2007).

The *Erzählmaschine* of the media is challenged by the films of the *Berliner Schule* by the analysis of the values that may lie in the core of this conflict, and by the increased attention to the domain of the personal, as has happened in the cinema before. The rarefied narratives in the films of the *Berliner Schule* operate at the level of micro-societies, and first of all, family. For instance, in such films as Ulrich Köhler’s *Windows on Monday* (*Montag kommen die Fenster*, 2006) or Christoph Hochhäusler’s *This Very Moment* (*Milchwald*, 2003), clearly urban families move away to the countryside where they build their homes. No comment as to the economic reasons or dissatisfaction with their life in the city is given in the film – the characters are already placed in these countryside settings that are not archaic, but constructed of recently built suburban homes. The family house in *This Very Moment* looks austere, with bare walls and masking tape on the floor, which make it look like a place in a state of transition, recalling the impetus for urban restoration in Berlin that is frequently called “Europe’s biggest construction site” with hundreds of cranes penetrating its skyline. As the historian Brian Ladd points out, “architecture in the post-Wall Berlin is struggling through the crisis of national identity. In post-Wall Berlin, each proposal for construction, demolition, preservation, or renovation ignites a battle over symbols of Berlin and of Germany. None of the pieces of the new Berlin will present an unambiguous statement about Berlin’s tradition or meaning, but most will nevertheless be attacked for doing so” (Ladd 1997, 234–235).

Just as Berlin appears to be uncertain of its identity at the level of the city, this search for identity is intrinsic for protagonists of *Berliner Schule* films. Importantly, their search occurs at the level of the family. Family is not used as a downscale model of society, as in the nineteenth-century novels – it is rather the

dimension of the private life that is important. The sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim observe “a new kind of social subjectivity [that] has grown up in which private and political issues are intermingled and augmented.” (Beck 1995, 42.) Individualization has resulted in the loosening of traditional bonds with consequent “profound loss of inner stability.” (Beck 1995, 46.)

While men and women are *released* from traditional norms and can search for a ‘life of their own,’ they are *driven* into seeking happiness in a close relationship because their social bonds seem too tenuous or unreliable. The need to share your inner feelings with someone, as expressed in the ideal of marriage and bonding, is not a primary human need. It *grows* the more individual we all become and notice the losses which accompany the gains. (Cf. Beck 1995, 24.)

In *Berliner Schule* films, a good example of the search for identity within the family is embodied in Nina, the protagonist in *Montag kommen die Fenster*. She has just moved into a new house in the countryside with her family, and takes time off work to spend some time with her husband and daughter. Frieder, her husband, is busy laying tiles and waiting for the new windows that have to be delivered on Monday, and her little daughter is playing in her grandparents’ living room. As Nina comes to pick her up, she hesitates, then turns back and disappears for a few days. She does not do it out of some existential revolt or dissatisfaction (we can compare this to Paula’s reasons in Dorris Dörrie’s *Männer* already mentioned in this chapter), but because she does not know where she belongs. She wanders like a ghost in the muddy spring forest, and occasionally comes across the newly constructed and uninhabited concrete building of a hotel that precipitates its opening with a glamorous party with guests specially brought by bus to its unfinished settings. Nina is an alien among this instant gathering of people, but she neither escapes nor seeks any encounters – she wanders as a sleepwalker without a particular goal, and she still gravitates to her family, but cannot put the pieces back together as she cannot find herself. The problem does not receive resolution, as Nina’s dilemma is not in her inability to reconcile the outside world and the private circle of her family – cosy but restraining. It is rather her uncertainty of her own role within both of these worlds, or lack of firm sense of identity that does not allow her to adhere to some ready-made model. In a sense, Nina is a *tabula rasa*; she is able to look, perceive and react, but not evaluate or analyze by passing her sensations through any filters of familiar experiences. This is why the story of the few days of her “journey” through the woods and concrete is devoid of peaks and falls, and the drama of the disintegration of her family occurs quietly and casually, not followed by any catharsis.

A protagonist like Nina is the opposite of “the ideal image conveyed by the labour market,” the type described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim as “a completely mobile individual regarding him/herself as a functioning flexible work unit, competitive and ambitious, prepared to disregard the social commitments linked to his/her existence and identity. This perfect employee fits in with the job requirements, prepared to move on whenever necessary.” (Beck 1995, 6.)

Nina’s inadvertent resistance is to slow down, and the film, devoid of the points of acceleration such as the moments of excessive action, slows down with her. Life at high speed has been a frequent subject for Marxist critics, such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, ever since the 1930s. Eric Rentschler, similarly, criticizes the “Cinema of Consensus” for “favour[ing] velocity over repose” (Rentschler 2000, 270). Slowing down in cinema is achieved through the decrease of the flow of images – still-framed long shots serve the purpose.

The distrust of images was a common motif in the New German Cinema, from Alexander Kluge, who broke their flow with various graphic and textual insertions, to Wim Wenders who maintained that proliferation of images “is a particular catastrophe in Germany, a country that is highly susceptible to images and already almost totally engulfed in foreign images. Too many images cause a loss of reality – and this country that has had great difficulty in securing an identity for itself needs, above all, to be grounded in reality” (Wim Wenders quoted in Garwood 2002, 208). In this sense, all protagonists in the *Berliner Schule* are grounded in reality, both contemporary and historical. None of these films is set outside of the present-day, yet the awareness of the connection between the present and the past penetrates each of them.

Conclusions

The aesthetic and political revolt in *Berliner Schule* films strikingly resembles the conditions in which the New German Cinema evolved. First protesting against the so-called “Papas Kino” of the 1950s, it sought to deal not only with the social and political issues, but with the cultural realities that engendered them; not only with historical past, but with the way it is echoed and embedded in today’s realities. In these senses the *Berliner Schule* evolves around very similar patterns. Yet, the *Berliner Schule* is still far from being a robust film movement as the New German Cinema became in the 1970s, and yet farther from becoming a national cinema. It is easier to compare *Berliner Schule* directors with international names rather than seek analogies in contemporary German cinema. Jean-Pierre and Luc

Dardenne in Belgium, Abbas Kiarostami in Iran, Apichatpong Weerasethakul in Thailand – these names are associated with the minor cinematic “waves” in their own countries without making what we have traditionally called national cinemas. Today we speak of the “world cinema” that frequently finds its audience in the international film festival circuit as opposed to becoming a national cinema. It may largely be for this reason that the *Berliner Schule* has been able to develop from a small circle associated with the names of three directors into an identifiable film movement.

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