

German Life and Letters 59:2 April 2006  
0016-8777 (print); 1468-0483 (online)

## POST-1990 SCREEN MEMORIES: HOW EAST AND WEST GERMAN CINEMA REMEMBERS THE THIRD REICH AND THE HOLOCAUST

DANIELA BERGHAHN

### ABSTRACT

The following article examines the contribution of German feature films about the Third Reich and the Holocaust to memory discourse in the wake of German unification. A comparison between East and West German films made since the 1990s reveals some startling asymmetries and polarities. While East German film-makers, if they continued to work in Germany's reunified film industry at all, made very few films about the Third Reich, West German directors took advantage of the recent memory boom. Whereas films made by East German directors, such as *Erster Verlust* and *Der Fall Ö*, suggest, in liberating contradiction to the anti-fascist interpretation of history, that East Germany shared the burden of guilt, West German productions subscribe to the normalisation discourse that has gained ideological hegemony in the East-West-German memory contest since unification. Films such as *Aimée & Jaguar* and *Rosenstraße* construct a memory of the past that is no longer encumbered by guilt, principally because the relationship between Germans and Jews is re-imagined as one of solidarity. As post-memory films, they take liberties with the traumatic memory of the past and, by following the generic conventions of melodrama, family saga and European heritage cinema, even lend it popular appeal.

### I. FROM DIVIDED MEMORY TO COMMON MEMORY

Many people anticipated that German reunification would result in a new era of forgetfulness and that a line would be drawn once and for all under the darkest chapter of German history – the Third Reich and the Holocaust. But in fact the very opposite was the case. The restoration of the German nation after more than four decades of division placed National Socialism and the Holocaust at the centre of the quest for a new and shared German identity. Until reunification, the Nazi era had been interpreted in two entirely different ways in the East and the West, making the memory of the Third Reich highly ambiguous. One was a straightforward narrative of victory over fascism, the other a complex narrative of guilt and collective shame – a narrative that has been continuously rewritten over the past five decades.

In the GDR the Nazi past had been universalised into the quintessential form of fascism and was interpreted as the logical consequence and culmination of monopoly capitalism. The anti-Semitic aspect of Nazism was largely excluded or at least downplayed. Official memory in the GDR instrumentalised the past by constructing the anti-fascist myth of the state's origin, according to which the founders and leaders of the new socialist state were both the victims of and the heroic victors over Hitler fascism. By invoking the anti-fascist myth of origin, the GDR's leaders legitimised their

state as the 'better Germany' and allowed East Germans to enjoy a guilt-free 'memory' of the Third Reich. Not only had the GDR's founders and leaders been on the side of anti-fascist resistance, GDR citizens in general had also been exonerated from their complicity with the Nazis, simply by identifying themselves 'with the former heroes and victims, and [by cutting] their ties with the villains'.<sup>1</sup>

In response to international pressure, the Federal Republic of Germany, by contrast, was obliged to accept in the public realm the image of itself as the successor state of the Third Reich. This involved public recognition, on the domestic and international stage, of the new state's liability for the crimes and consequences of the Nazi past. West Germany had, as Siobhan Kattago suggests, 'internalised' the Nazi legacy by accepting liability for Germany's exceptionally burdened past.<sup>2</sup> This was reflected by a political culture in which the memory of the Holocaust 'became a central concept of moral reflection about National Socialism', and which manifested itself in the debates about Germany's 'moral *Sonderweg*', questioning what it means to be German after Hitler.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing engagement with the Nazi legacy resulted in a succession of shifting models of West German identity, comprising what Kattago terms 'a guilty pariah identity in the 1950s, a therapeutic [mourning] model in the 1960s and 1970s, and a normalization one [since] the 1980s'.<sup>4</sup> The normalisation model aims to construct a collective memory of the German past that is no longer encumbered by guilt and that allows Germans to take a more positive approach to their national identity.

In the GDR, however, where official memory could not be examined critically and contested openly, due to the absence of a public sphere in the Western sense,<sup>5</sup> the state-endorsed anti-fascist myth was essentially upheld until the demise of the GDR. Admittedly, there were some subtle revisions of official historiography, for example, when East German historians and state officials re-appraised German history during the 1980s, appropriating, amongst other things, certain aspects of German-Jewish history. Similarly, from the 1970s onwards writers and other intellectuals were beginning to deconstruct the anti-fascist myth of origin, and in the 1980s political dissidents openly refuted the orthodox position, which placed the burden of guilt exclusively on the West Germans.<sup>6</sup> It was not until 12 April

<sup>1</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*, Cambridge 1999, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Siobhan Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity*, Westport, Conn./London 2001, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> See David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*, Lincoln, Neb./London 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, Cambridge, Mass./London 1997, p. 363.

1990, however, that the GDR's first freely elected government publicly acknowledged the joint responsibility of the GDR for the 'burden of German history', asking for forgiveness in particular 'for the humiliation, expulsion, and murder of Jewish women, men and children'.<sup>7</sup>

Since unification, the process of a shared 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' and the quest for a shared national identity have resulted in an intensified reappraisal of National Socialism and the Holocaust that is reflected in a rapid succession of public debates, including the controversy around the Neue Wache and the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, the Walsler-Bubis debate and the Goldhagen debate, to mention but a few. Paradoxical though it may seem, the obsessive engagement with the past signifies a form of remembering that in fact approaches forgetting. This is particularly true of German 'Gedenkkultur', which commemorates the suffering of Nazi victims by seeking to establish 'a national community, a "wir", das die entlastende Identifikation mit den Opfern sucht'.<sup>8</sup>

The German nation's 'mnemonic fever'<sup>9</sup> cannot, however, be exclusively seen as a consequence of reunification. Of equal significance is the fact that reunification coincided with a generational shift. The generation that actually experienced the Third Reich or participated in its power structures is dying, and, in tandem with this biological shift, the 'members of the Flakhelfer, BDM and Hitler Youth generation are increasingly writing their memoirs'.<sup>10</sup> A further complexity is clear in the position and commemorative activities of the third generation. In contrast to their grandparents' personal memories of the past, the third generation's access to the memory of the Third Reich is refracted and mediated in multiple ways, resulting in the construction of fictionalised accounts of the past. The growing historical and generational distance has thus led to a pluralisation of memory. With rapidly diminishing access to authentic experiences of the Third Reich, memory is being replaced by post-memory, a form of memory that, in the words of Marianne Hirsch, is

mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. [...] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Helmut Schmitz, 'Introduction', *German Culture and the Uncomfortable Past: Representations of National Socialism in Contemporary Germanic Literature*, ed. Helmut Schmitz, Aldershot 2001, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, London/New York 1995, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Helmut Schmitz, 'Introduction' (note 8 above), pp. 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge, Mass./London 1997, pp. 22.

## II. ADMISSIONS OF SHARED GUILT

Even a cursory glance at feature films about the Third Reich made by East and West German film-makers after unification reveals some startling imbalances and differences with regard to themes and styles. The memory boom here has been overwhelmingly dominated by films made by film-makers who grew up and worked in the West. The situation has evolved in this manner mainly because only a few filmmakers who worked for DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft), the GDR's state-owned and controlled film production and distribution company, had the opportunity to continue making films after reunification. When DEFA was privatised in 1992, only a handful of DEFA's old guard of directors and scriptwriters were able to adjust to hitherto unknown conditions of film production, where they had to compete for funding and struggle for recognition because their artistic credentials had little currency.<sup>12</sup> With their departure one of DEFA's most important film genres, the anti-fascist film, also disappeared.

Anti-fascist films had always been DEFA's lifeline. Between 1946 and 1992 around one hundred anti-fascist films were made. This is the equivalent of 13 per cent of the entire feature film production. Organised communist resistance is the most common thematic angle taken in these films, but despite the fact that the Holocaust and anti-Semitism were suppressed in the GDR's official memory, DEFA also made a number of highly acclaimed anti-fascist films depicting the suffering and the persecution of Jews during the Third Reich.<sup>13</sup>

The small number of East German feature films about the Third Reich made during the early 1990s continues a trend that emerged during the 1980s, when some anti-fascist films began to question the myth of heroic anti-fascist resistance and acknowledged that East Germans, too, were not free from guilt. Paradigmatic films made or released during the late 1980s which deviate from official memory in this way include Ulrich Weiss's *Dein unbekannter Bruder* (1982), Frank Beyer's *Der Aufenthalt* (1982) and Heiner Carow's *Die Russen kommen* (1987).

Frank Beyer's cinematic adaptation of Hermann Kant's novel *Der Aufenthalt* (1977) tells the story of nineteen-year-old Mark Niebuhr, who is mistakenly arrested and put into a Warsaw POW camp in 1945. It proposes that even those proven innocent share in the collective guilt of the Germans. Ulrich Weiss's *Dein unbekannter Bruder* deconstructs the anti-fascist genre in its traditional form. Instead of celebrating acts of heroic

<sup>12</sup> On this issue see Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany*, Manchester 2005, pp. 212–56.

<sup>13</sup> On this issue see *ibid.*, pp. 55–97; Christiane Mückenberger 'The anti-fascist past in DEFA films', in Seán Allan and John Sandford (eds), *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946–1992*, New York/Oxford 1999, pp. 58–76.

communist resistance, the film provides a highly subjective account of the psychological conflict experienced by the resistance fighter Arnold Classen. Arnold is a member of the communist resistance, but he is a far cry from the brave and self-sacrificing heroes featured in anti-fascist films of earlier decades; he is tormented and paralysed by fear, and his relationship with other members of the resistance group is characterised by suspicion and mistrust. In fact, one of the communist resistance fighters changes sides and betrays his former comrades to the Gestapo.

Heiner Carow's *Die Russen kommen*, originally made in 1968 but censored, was eventually released in 1987, at a time when the anti-fascist myth was beginning to crumble. *Die Russen kommen* challenged the GDR's official historiography by asserting that the Russians were not perceived as the eagerly awaited liberators but instead as the 'Bolshevik menace' or simply the enemy. Moreover, the film's adolescent protagonist, Günter, is anything but a communist hero; he becomes complicit in the murder of a Russian foreign worker and is even awarded the Iron Cross for this heroic deed. In an attempt to achieve the final victory, he joins the Wehrmacht shortly before the war is over. But when the Russians are approaching it is no longer opportune to wear a Nazi uniform, let alone to have assisted in the killing of a Soviet foreign worker. In a highly subjective sequence of dream images and memories, we witness Günter trying to come to terms with a guilt that eventually drives him to insanity. Not surprisingly, this – by East German standards – unorthodox account of German history was banned in the late 1960s for assuming the vantage point of a Hitler Youth member. The film was further accused of denying historical truth, denigrating the anti-fascist cause and adopting modernist aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

Films continuing the anti-fascist tradition after German unification are few and far between. They include films for children, such as *Die Sprungdeckeluhr* (Gunther Friedrich, 1991) and *Krücke* (Jörg Grünler, co-production with WDR, 1994) as well as reappraisals of state-ordained anti-fascism such as *Erster Verlust* (Maxim Dessau, 1990) and *Der Fall Ö* (Rainer Simon, co-production with ZDF). Based on literary sources which reflect the experience of a generation which lived through the war, such as Brigitte Reimann's story 'Die Frau am Pranger' (1956) and Franz Fühmann's 'König Ödipus' (1966), Dessau's and Simon's films are curiously out of step with the German memory discourse of the 1990s.

Dessau's debut film *Erster Verlust*, one of the last East German films still completed with state funding after unification, tells the story of two peasant women who are assigned a Soviet POW to help them manage the farm while the men are fighting in the war. Yet in spite of being admonished to treat the forced labourer like a Bolshevik 'Untermensch', the women

<sup>14</sup> Bundesarchiv Film, HV Film 42 A/B, 'Stellungnahme zu *Die Russen kommen*', 13 January 1969; Erika Richter 'Die Verbotsfilme der DEFA', in Fritz Raimund (ed.), *Der geteilte Himmel: Höhepunkte des DEFA-Kinos 1946–1992*, Vienna 2001, II, pp. 49–62.

begin to care for him and one of them even tries to embark on a sexual relationship with him. Whereas Reimann's story is essentially an account of a bitter-sweet, forbidden love between a Russian POW and a German woman, Dessau's film largely omits the love interest, highlighting instead the disdain with which Germans looked down upon 'the Bolsheviks'. Such a perspective ran, of course, counter to the GDR's official memory, which preferred to depict the Soviets as the eagerly awaited liberators from fascism and also as communist comrades in the fight against fascism. While Dessau's cinematic re-interpretation of Reimann's story, which spoke of a true love between a Russian and a German woman, might have sparked some controversy had the film been released in the fifties or sixties, in 1990 *Erster Verlust* had no topical relevance whatsoever and contributed nothing to the debates on Germany's shared past which dominated the public sphere in the wake of German reunification.

Similarly, Simon's film *Der Fall Ö* is rather too abstract a reflection upon the failure of German humanism in the face of evil. When Fühmann's 'König Ödipus' was first published in the GDR in 1966, it voiced a concern that preoccupied an entire generation: had the ideals of German humanism failed because they had been unable to prevent Auschwitz? But when Ulrich Plenzdorf wrote the script for Simon's film some twenty years later, this question had been fully explored. The crimes committed by the GDR's own totalitarian dictatorship provided ample proof that promoting abstract humanism through cultural and educational policies was by no means an antidote to evil. The film tells the story of a German Wehrmacht officer, stationed in Greece during the summer of 1944. Together with other soldiers and some Greek lay actors, the officer, in civilian life a professor of philology, stages and films the play *King Oedipus*. But try as he may, in the end he cannot stay out of the historical process; when Greek partisans attack he becomes complicit in the death of the Greek lay actors and, unable to live with this guilt, commits suicide. Though some reviewers interpreted Simon's film as a parable about the ineluctable guilt of the individual in the historical process – and thus implicitly as an attempt to exonerate the GDR's intellectuals after reunification – ultimately the timeless myth of guilt and fate, which Fühmann had used to articulate his own experience of the Second World War, was wearing thin when employed in the context of yet another burdensome past.<sup>15</sup>

### III. RE-IMAGINING THE PAST IN POPULAR HERITAGE FILMS

West German screen memories of the Third Reich after unification, by contrast, tell an entirely different story and reflect many aspects of the

<sup>15</sup> Frank Junghänel, 'Das ewige Drama um Schuld und Sühne', *Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 April 1991; Oksana Bulgakowa, 'Ödipus für die Volkshochschule', *taz*, 15 April 1991.

normalisation discourse that has dominated the public sphere since the 1980s. This discourse was precipitated by unification, when 'notions of the German *Sonderweg* and exceptionalism' were readily replaced by the inviting prospect of a 'return to normal nationhood' and 'a German national identity unencumbered and unburdened by a Nazi past'.<sup>16</sup> The unburdening led to an intensified reappraisal of National Socialism and the Holocaust and, on screen, to a fascination with the past that was re-imagined rather than remembered.<sup>17</sup> Compared with the stark black and white images, the desolate landscape and sense of wartime deprivation of *Erster Verlust* that together lend the film a sense of historical authenticity, the wave of screen memories made by West German film-makers during the 1990s lays claim to authenticity only in so far as several are based on historical events or figures. At the same time, the aesthetic and narrative strategies of these films deflect from the trauma of past suffering. They are examples of what Robert and Carol Reimer defined as 'Nazi-retro cinema' even before it made its fully-fledged appearance in films such as Joseph Vilsmaier's musical period film *Comedian Harmonists* (1998), Max Färberböck's lesbian love story *Aimée & Jaguar* (1999), or Rolf Schübel's *Gloomy Sunday – Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod* (1999), a film about a fateful love triangle and a fatal song:

Nazi-retro [...] films have a morbid fascination for a time and place that scarred a nation's psyche [...] The term employs exploitation and trivialization for commercial purposes of the suffering caused by fascism. Furthermore, it points to the nostalgic allure of the past for those who lived through it and for the post-war generations who did not. It suggests history shot through a coloured lens, showing the period not as it was but as the audience would like to remember it.<sup>18</sup>

While Reimer and Reimer's assessment of Nazi-retro films suggests that these films exploit and falsify the past without contributing valid new insights to the memory discourse on the silver screen, Lutz Koepnick considers these films in the context of post-memory and persuasively argues that the use of mainstream cinema techniques does not necessarily imply trivialisation. In his article 'Reframing the past: Heritage cinema and the Holocaust in the 1990s' he places what Reimer and Reimer call Nazi-retro films in the larger context of European heritage cinema.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory* (note 2 above), pp. 138 and 49.

<sup>17</sup> Lutz Koepnick, 'Reframing the past: Heritage cinema and the Holocaust in the 1990s', *New German Critique*, 87 (2002), 47–82.

<sup>18</sup> Robert C. and Carol J. Reimer, *Nazi-Retro Film: How German Narrative Cinema Remembers the Past*, New York 1992, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Koepnick, 'Reframing the past'. The main difference between retro films and heritage films is that retro films are generally considered to depict a more recent past than heritage films. See Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (eds), *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, London 2002; Paul Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film*, Manchester 2003.

European heritage cinema is a popular genre that first emerged in Britain and subsequently in other European countries during the 1980s. Heritage films typically have high production values and cast recognisable stars who have become associated with the genre and who add to its popular appeal. Heritage cinema creates nostalgic fantasies about the past, or rather specific national pasts. Some scholars who have investigated the critical framework of heritage cinema have proposed that despite their historical subject matter, heritage films lack historicity since they eschew any critical perspective on the past, displaying instead a self-indulgent fascination with décor and period costumes, rendering the past as a postmodern pastiche, 'where the reference point is not the past itself, but other images, other texts'.<sup>20</sup> Other scholars, by contrast, have suggested that in spite of its museum approach to history 'this mode of filmmaking has often been used in order to revise dominant views of history and recuperate past worlds in which certain people were mocked, despised, and persecuted'.<sup>21</sup> Thus Koepnick turns Reimer and Reimer's appraisal of popular memory films about the Third Reich on its head, arguing instead that heritage films do not simply transform history into a consumable commodity, but that 'despite their overt nostalgia, these films actively reinterpret the past according to a changing view of history, memory, gender, and ethnicity within the bounds of what we must understand as a self-confident mode of European popular filmmaking'.<sup>22</sup>

What distinguishes German heritage cinema from its British or French counterparts is that the latter usually focus on the glorious moments of their nation's history, whereas German heritage cinema dwells on the most traumatic moment of its national history. Arguably, one of the reasons for this focus is that films concerned with the Third Reich and the Holocaust promise the greatest international visibility and even the slim chance of winning an Oscar. In fact, the only two German films ever to win an Oscar are films set during the Nazi regime: *Die Blechtrommel* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1979) and *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (Caroline Link, 2002).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the ostensible disparity between the historical focus of German heritage films and other European heritage films can be easily resolved if we consider that German heritage films take great liberties with the past. They are

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film', *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started*, London 1993, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> Koepnick, 'Reframing the past', p. 56; also see Richard Dyer, 'Nice young men who sell antiques – gay men in heritage cinema', in Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*, London 2001, pp. 43–8; Claire Monk, 'The British heritage film debate revisited', in Monk and Sargeant (eds), *British Historical Cinema*, pp. 176–98.

<sup>22</sup> Koepnick, 'Reframing the past', p. 56.

<sup>23</sup> Made in the context of New German Cinema, *Die Blechtrommel* is generally not considered to be an example of heritage cinema, despite sharing numerous characteristics with it.



post-memory films which re-imagine the past in such a way that they convert 'bad history into a good story'.<sup>24</sup> In this way, they make an important contribution to the discourse of normalisation.

#### IV. NARRATIVES OF MIRACULOUS JEWISH SURVIVAL

Steven Spielberg's Holocaust film *Schindler's List* (USA, 1993) is the prototype of a narrative that conceals the trauma of Jewish persecution and genocide by focusing instead on rare success stories of survival. As David Bathrick demonstrates in his article 'Rescreening "The Holocaust"', Spielberg's fictionalised account of the Holocaust employs narrative strategies of classic Hollywood cinema which are entirely inappropriate for rendering the fate of Holocaust victims, because the notion of a single individual pursuing a specific goal and propelling the action forward is at odds with the lack of choice Jews had in determining their destiny. Moreover, *Schindler's List* lays 'claim to the status of "master narrative"' by suggesting that it tells the whole story, whereas in fact it is 'based on testimonies of people whose success story of survival is a total anomaly'.<sup>25</sup> Recent German Holocaust films such as *Hitlerjunge Salomon* (Agnieszka Holland, 1990), *Mutters Courage* (Michael Verhoeven, 1995), *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, German-French-British-Polish co-production, 2002), and *Rosenstraße* (Margarethe von Trotta, 2003) are, like *Schindler's List*, based on historically authentic stories or testimonies of Holocaust survivors, which re-imagine the trauma of Jewish suffering as 'Greuelmärchen' with a happy ending.<sup>26</sup> Although the majority of these films – in particular, Verhoeven's *Mutters Courage* – are, in terms of their representational strategies, more self-reflective than *Schindler's List* and address the difficulty of accessing memories of traumatic events, they none the less construct an ambiguous memory of Jewish suffering that allows us to forget while ostensibly inviting us to remember.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Koepnick, 'Reframing the past', p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> David Bathrick, 'Rescreening "The Holocaust": The Children's Stories', *New German Critique*, 80 (2000), 41–58, (here 47 and 48).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54–58 applies the term 'Gräuelmärchen', the sub-title of Brecht's allegory of Nazi anti-Semitism, *Rundköpfe und Spitzköpfe*, to films such as *Mutters Courage* and *La vita è bella* (Roberto Benigni, Italy 1997). Benigni's Oscar-winning Holocaust comedy about the miraculous survival of a Jewish boy in a concentration camp is one of the internationally best-known films about this theme. In the context of East German cinema, the best-known anti-fascist film dealing with the theme of Jewish survival is Frank Beyer's *Nacht unter Wölfen* (1963), which is based on Bruno Apitz's best-selling novel of the same title. Novel and film give a fictionalised account of the heroic resistance and alleged self-liberation of political prisoners in Buchenwald, who save the life of a Polish Jewish child. For a detailed account of the ambiguous ideological position of this film in the context of the GDR's official Holocaust discourse, see Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, pp. 87–9.

<sup>27</sup> *Mutters Courage* does not fit the aesthetic parameters of heritage cinema but it is mentioned here because of its thematic angle, miraculous Jewish survival.

*Mutters Courage*, based on the diaries of George Tabori's mother and mediated through her son's recollections and narrative voice-over in the film, is an ironic, seemingly light-hearted film that re-imagines Elsa Tabori's lucky escape from a deportation train to Auschwitz as a memorable adventure on a summer's day in the year 1944. In a similarly humorous vein, *Hitlerjunge Salomon* tells the unlikely but true story of the Jewish boy Solly (based on the biography of Solomon Perel) who is separated from his parents at the beginning of the Second World War. By means of his resourceful adaptation to shifting political constellations and his chameleon-like camouflage, alternatively as a German orphan in a Russian orphanage, as a Komsomol, as a Hitler Youth, and even as the racial prototype of a thoroughbred German, he survives, ironically, in the heart of the Nazi world. While these two films attribute the survival of the Jewish protagonists primarily to their courage and cunning, as well as to blind chance, *The Pianist* and *Rosenstraße* portray passive Jews who escape deportation or death chiefly thanks to the intervention of 'good Germans'.

*The Pianist*, adapted from the 1946 memoirs of the Polish pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman, depicts the survival of a passive survivor who witnesses unspeakable atrocities in the Warsaw ghetto, including the deportation of his family. He is, however, saved by virtue of his unique artistic talent, which both the Jewish ghetto police and gentiles respect and want to preserve. The film's climactic moment depicts the confrontation of Szpilman, emaciated and unkempt after months of hiding amongst the ruins of Warsaw, and a Nazi officer for whom he plays Chopin on a piano in a derelict house. He plays for his life and, indeed, his beautiful performance saves him from being shot in the final round-up. Though the film nowhere intimates 'that there is any causal link between a nation or individual's love for music, and being humane or moral', the good German who saves the pianist's life is set apart from those Germans who commit the most barbaric atrocities, not just because he has a conscience but also because he is a cultured and educated German.<sup>28</sup> A similar equation of cultural values (in particular the love for music) with civil courage is made in *Rosenstraße*, a film which combines the theme of miraculous Jewish survival with a thematic concern that is even more prevalent in contemporary cinematic reappraisals of the past.

##### V. NARRATIVES OF GERMAN-JEWISH SOLIDARITY AND LOVE

Margarethe von Trotta's film *Rosenstraße* is one of several recent German films that celebrate rare moments of German-Jewish solidarity and that invite contemporary audiences to identify emotionally with the suffering of

<sup>28</sup> Leonard Quart, 'The Pianist', *Cineaste*, Summer 2003, 42–44 (here 44).

Jews and Germans.<sup>29</sup> *Rosenstraße* is a generic hybrid, incorporating aspects of the heritage genre, melodrama and family saga. The narrative spans three generations and approaches the trauma of the Holocaust from the perspective of the third generation through the character of Hannah, the granddaughter of a German Holocaust victim.

Drawing on historical fact, *Rosenstraße* gives a fictionalised and embellished account of an incident of successful resistance that took place in Rosenstrasse in Berlin's Jewish quarter in 1943. After thousands of Jews were rounded up from Berlin's factories, some two thousand of them – mainly men – were herded into a Jewish community centre in Rosenstrasse and interned under SS guard.<sup>30</sup> Since so-called 'inter-married' Jews were, at least temporarily, granted certain 'privileges' by Nazi law and were exempt from deportation, their German wives were outraged at their husbands' arrest and at the prospect of their deportation. For seven days and nights they staged a public protest, demanding the release of their husbands. Whether the interned men were eventually set free as a result of such 'resistance of the heart', whether Joseph Goebbels himself responded to the women's protest, or whether the inter-married men had never been destined to be deported remains uncertain and disputed.<sup>31</sup>

Von Trotta's film *Rosenstraße* begins with the funeral of Hannah's father in contemporary New York. Hannah's mother, Ruth, insists that the family strictly adhere to the traditional Jewish custom of shiva, a seven day period of mourning during which family and friends meet in the house of the deceased. Ruth's children are surprised at their mother's unprecedented orthodox Jewish behaviour. A series of flashbacks that represents Ruth's memories during shiva reveals that she mourns not so much the loss of her husband as the loss of her Jewish mother in Nazi Germany in 1943. However, since Ruth is unable to share her fragmented memories with her daughter, Hannah decides to embark on a journey into her mother's past. She travels to Berlin where she tracks down the German woman who saved Ruth's life while her mother was first held in Rosenstrasse and then deported to Auschwitz.<sup>32</sup> Hannah visits and interviews Lena Fischer, a former concert pianist who was married to the Jewish violinist Fabian. Posing as an American historian who is researching German-Jewish

<sup>29</sup> German film history provides numerous earlier examples of German-Jewish solidarity and love. Famous West German productions include Helmut Käutner's *In jenen Tagen* (1947) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen* (1981). The best-known DEFA films which depict German-Jewish solidarity as romantic love are Kurt Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten* (1947), Konrad Wolf's *Sterne* (1959) and Siegfried Kühn's *Die Schauspielerin* (1987). For a more comprehensive account see Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall*, pp. 55–97, Reimer and Reimer, *Nazi-Retro Films*, and Robert Shandley, *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich*, Philadelphia 2001.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed account of the Rosenstrasse protest see Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Inter-marriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany*, New York/London 1996.

<sup>31</sup> The phrase 'resistance of the heart' was coined by Nathan Stoltzfus (note 30 above).

<sup>32</sup> Ruth's mother was deported because her German gentile husband had divorced her and she, therefore, did not enjoy the 'privileged' status of inter-married Jews.

marriages during the Third Reich, Hannah engages Lena in a series of interviews, the real aim of which is to cast light upon her mother's past – a past too traumatic for her mother ever to have spoken of it. Lena proves a willing informant who, in contrast to Ruth, has apparently not forgotten her own personal history. 'Sie ist ihr so gegenwärtig als habe sie sie gerade erst erlebt.'<sup>33</sup> This is at least Hannah's initial impression, since Lena provides a vivid account of her own strength and courage during those trying events at Rosenstrasse. Yet when Hannah puts pressure on Lena to remember how the little girl Ruth, whom Lena had taken under her wing, reacted when her mother was not among those who were released from Rosenstrasse, Lena unexpectedly puts up a barrier. 'Die Vergangenheit kann sehr anstrengend sein', she responds, and sends Hannah away.<sup>34</sup> During subsequent visits, Hannah persists in probing the blind spots in Lena's account of the past until she eventually triggers a process of remembrance for Lena that enables her to face up to her own personal trauma – the separation from Ruth.

The film's narrative structure oscillates between the happy days of Lena's and Fabian's courtship in 1932, the events of Rosenstrasse in 1943, and Berlin and New York in the year 2001. The film traces Hannah's attempts to reconstruct her mother's past by accessing different sources of memory: the sites and memorials of Jewish suffering in contemporary Berlin, a photo of her mother as a child, memorabilia such as the ring that belonged to Ruth's mother, and most importantly, Lena's story. However, Lena's personal recollection is filtered through her own emotional investment in the past. Consequently Lena's narrative is less concerned with the traumatic loss experienced by Ruth than with the successful protest of the women of Rosenstrasse. Hannah approaches the memory of Jewish suffering from the vantage point of a good German who made large personal sacrifices to save the life of her Jewish husband and that of Ruth – but it is the memory of a German none the less.<sup>35</sup> Hence the genocide of the Jews is something that Lena, like most Germans, has tried to forget. Hannah is incredulous at learning that Lena never spoke to Ruth about what happened to her mother. Worse still for Ruth, Lena inflicted the trauma of loss a second time upon the little Jewish girl when she let her go to join relatives in America, and in so doing subjected Ruth to the loss of her foster-mother on top of the loss of her real mother. As Lena's reaction in this melodramatic scene reveals, the separation from Ruth has left a scar that has remained unhealed; she breaks down in tears when Hannah

<sup>33</sup> Dialogue transcript from Margarethe von Trotta, *Rosenstraße*, DVD Concorde Home Entertainment, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Lena's biggest personal sacrifice consists in sleeping with Goebbels in order to persuade him to release her husband from the Rosenstrasse camp.

pushes her to recall and talk about this event. Following the film's inherent logic, for Lena the trauma of losing Ruth, whom she loved as if she were her own child, parallels that of Ruth losing her mother. And she, not unlike Ruth, has repressed the memory of this loss until Hannah helps her to excavate it, thus paving the way for a German-Jewish reconciliation in the present.

Significantly, this moment of reconciliation involves the first and third generation. Hannah is no longer able to mask her emotional involvement in the events, and her tears reveal that she is not merely researching German-Jewish history but her mother's history. Lena recognises Hannah as Ruth's daughter – the child of the foster-daughter she had lost – and joyfully embraces the granddaughter she has now found. Hannah, who has come to understand the full extent of her mother's suffering, also understands Lena's suffering and forgives her the mistake she made when relinquishing Ruth to her American relatives. Upon her return to New York, Hannah acts as mediator by imparting this sense of understanding and forgiveness to her mother, whereupon Ruth is at last able to make peace with the past.

In *Rosenstraße*, von Trotta makes the case for German-Jewish reconciliation, firstly by focusing on a triumphant moment of German-Jewish solidarity that runs counter to the dominant narrative of German anti-Semitism. Secondly, the film subliminally assimilates Germans into a general sense of victimhood by suggesting that the trauma of loss – be it loss as a result of the genocide of Jews, be it loss as a result of Jewish exile or a general rift between German and Jewish cultures after the Holocaust – affected Germans and Jews in equal measure. Thirdly, the film scales down German-Jewish history by domesticating it in line with the narrative conventions of a family saga; the trauma of the past is overcome almost as easily as the rift between two hostile families. Following this logic, *Rosenstraße* ends with Hannah's marriage to a gentile, a union to which Ruth no longer objects for she has, at last, come to terms with the past.

Amongst the other films which celebrate moments of German-Jewish solidarity, including *Comedian Harmonists*, *Meschugge* (Dani Levy, 1998) and *Viehhud Levi* (Didi Danquart, 1999), *Aimée & Jaguar* deserves particular mention. The melodramatic love story at the centre of this film reaffirms the position of philo-Semitism that has been promoted by successive West German governments ever since the Adenauer era.<sup>36</sup> However, *Aimée & Jaguar* takes this inversion of anti-Semitism one step further, for in the film it is a Jewish woman, Felice alias Jaguar, who passionately pursues the

<sup>36</sup> Mary Fullbrook refers to a 'state-ordained "philo-semitism"' which was introduced by Adenauer and which took the form of financial restitution to Holocaust survivors, their relatives and the state of Israel. See Mary Fullbrook, *German National Identity*, pp. 65–7 (note 1 above). See also Herf, *Divided Memory*, p. 7, and pp. 267–333 (note 6 above).

prototype of the Aryan woman, Lilly alias Aimée.<sup>37</sup> To make this improbable, but in fact authentic, story even more incredible, Lilly, mother of four children, recipient of the 'Mutterschaftskreuz' and herself deeply prejudiced against Jews, sheds her heterosexual identity and discovers her lesbian true self in a passionate love relationship with a Jewish woman. Although Lilly never reflects upon or renounces her anti-Semitic beliefs, her actions suggest that her love for Felice runs deeper than Nazi ideology.

The film rewrites the racial hierarchies of Nazi race theory and stereotypical representations of Jews during the Nazi period by depicting the Aryan woman as devoid of self-love – and in many respects close to the Jewish stereotype of self-hatred – whose existence only becomes validated by the love of the Jewish woman.<sup>38</sup> In fact Lilly's low self-esteem partly stems from being German. Hence, in the crucial scene in which Felice reveals that she is Jewish, Lilly asks incredulously: 'Wie kannst Du mich lieben?'. The Jewish woman, on the other hand, is depicted as strong and courageous, and full of *joie de vivre* in spite of the imminent threat of deportation. The representation of Felice thus contrasts with the stereotype of the Jew as a passive victim which one finds in many early postwar cinematic representations of Jews in German cinema.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand the film continues the highly problematic discourse that assigns to the Jews at least a certain degree of responsibility for their death. In numerous East and West German films Jews are shown to commit suicide, a narrative strategy that implicitly holds Jews, instead of Germans, accountable for their death.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in *Aimée & Jaguar* Felice does not grasp the opportunity to go into exile, because she does not want to abandon Lilly. She loves Lilly more than her life, as she once confesses, and so she puts her life at risk and becomes, albeit unintentionally, an agent in her deportation and death. Thus *Aimée & Jaguar* goes beyond the position of philo-Semitism,

<sup>37</sup> See Julia Erhart, 'From Nazi whore to good German mother: revisiting resistance in the Holocaust film', *Screen*, 41:4 (2000), 388–403 (here 390), who discusses the BBC documentary *Love Story* (Catrine Clay, 1997) about Lilly and Felice. Also see Anna M. Parkinson, 'Of death, kitsch, and melancholia', in Helmut Schmitz (ed.), *German Culture and the Uncomfortable Past*, pp. 143–63 (note 8 above).

<sup>38</sup> As Anna Parkinson persuasively argues in her article 'Of death, kitsch, and melancholia', the film 'has been marketed primarily in terms of the lesbian relationship between the two women, with Felice's Jewishness forming a necessary and yet dangerous background to the love story' (p. 148). According to Parkinson, the foregrounding of the love story does not only result in using the anti-Semitic discourse as a 'dangerous backdrop to the Hollywood-like tendency of the film to prefer spectacular moments with a seductive touch [...] over and above a more complex examination of the interrelation of lesbian sexuality and Jewish identity' (p. 157).

<sup>39</sup> See Shandley, *Rubble Films*.

<sup>40</sup> Among the most prominent examples of Jews committing suicide are Nelly Dreyfuss in *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (Harald Braun, 1947), Ida in *In jenen Tagen* (Helmut Käutner, 1947) and Elisabeth in *Ehe im Schatten* (Kurt Maetzig, 1947). For a discussion of the narrative strategies employed to downplay German guilt, see Shandley, *Rubble Films*, pp. 47–76 and Gertrud Koch's illuminating reading of Konrad Wolf's film *Professor Mamlock* (1961), 'On the disappearance of the dead among the living: the Holocaust and the confusion of identities in the films of Konrad Wolf', *New German Critique*, 60 (1993), 57–75.

suggesting instead that German-Jewish love is mutual. One might argue that this is wishful thinking, but it is certainly indicative of an underlying desire for German-Jewish reconciliation.

#### VI. FROM DIVIDED MEMORY TO DOMINANT MEMORY

The discussion of East and West German cinematic representations of the Third Reich and the Holocaust since unification has revealed an interesting, but perhaps not surprising, polarity. While West German productions subscribe to the normalisation discourse, East German screen memories are eager to challenge the hitherto state-ordained anti-fascist interpretation of the past. The films considered here express the almost liberating admission of sharing Germany's burdened past, a position that was incompatible with the GDR's official memory. However, this critical reappraisal of the anti-fascist myth was not continued beyond the early 1990s, mainly because East German film-makers – in so far as they kept making films at all – were more interested in coming to terms with a more recent past, the legacy of the GDR's totalitarian regime. After unification the normalisation discourse, which developed in the Federal Republic during the 1980s, gained ideological hegemony, and the memory contest in German cinema was won by the West. Contemporary films about the Third Reich are post-memory texts, characterised by a creative investment in the past – that is why they can be about the Holocaust and yet have a happy end.