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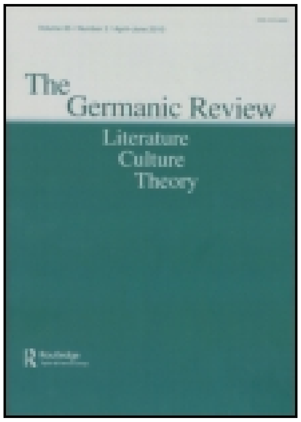

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Political Nostalgia and Local Memory: The Kreuzberg of the 1980s in Contemporary German Film

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THE GERMANIC REVIEW

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Political Nostalgia and Local Memory: The Kreuzberg of the 1980s in Contemporary German Film

BARBARA MENNEL

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes two post-Wall German films, Gregor Schnitzler's *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* (2002) and Leander Haußmann's *Herr Lehmann* (2003) in the context of their staging of Kreuzberg, the southeastern section of former West Berlin. The article argues that the films engage in contradictory memory politics about the radical politics associated with the space of Kreuzberg in the 1980s. The radical politics of the time period are endowed with cinematic pleasure but are also discredited as immature. The narratives therefore focus on belated coming-of-age stories of male heroes. The essay argues that these memories are simultaneously reified and appropriated but also point to the lack of utopia in contemporary Germany. The article negotiates the films' local memory politics with the global production and circulation of contemporary cinema.

Keywords: *German film, global,* Herr Lehmann*, Leander Haußmann, Kreuzberg, local, memory, nostalgia, politics, Gregor Schnitzler,* Was tun, wenn's brennt?

> "Türken, Anarchisten, Hausbesetzer und diese Mischung macht es so. . . so. . .na, so einmalig, so originell, so authentisch. So was gibt es kein zweites Mal in Deutschland!" Dabei strahlte er, als wäre er der erste, der die Türken entdeckte. Obwohl sie seit über dreißig Jahren hier lebten. "Das ist ein melting pot!" fuhr er fort. "Es hat alles: a) Türken, b) Ausländer, c) Autonome, d) Zündstoff. Es ist filmreif." (Kara 239–40)

This reaction by the fictitious German filmmaker Wolf to a tour of Kreuzberg, the southeastern section of former West Berlin, given by Hasan, the main character of Yadé Kara's 2003 novel *Selam Berlin*, ironizes the cinematic fetishization of Kreuzberg. Hasan has just received a stereotypical role as a Turkish drug dealer in Wolf's next film, when he takes Wolf on an ethnographic tour of Kreuzberg so that the director can scout the neighborhood for locations. Hasan's own description of the former SO 36 interprets the "Kreuzberg mix" ("die Kreuzberger Mischung"[1]) differently than Wolf:

> Hier wohnten Autonome, Ayslanten, Studenten, Türken, Wehrdienstverweigerer, Punks. Hier trugen türkische Frauen immer noch Kopftuch, auch nach zwanzig Jahren Deutschland. Deutsche Männer trugen immer noch Irokesenschnitt, auch nach zwölf Jahren Sex Pistols. Es war ein Reservat. (Kara 238)

Kara identifies contemporary Kreuzberg as a signpost for arrested development of punks and Turks alike, a place where time stands still, which Wolf mistakes for authenticity. In contrast, Kara identifies the "real Kreuzberger" as the cosmopolitan and creative second generation of Turkish-Germans, to whom the actual space of Kreuzberg has become a place of the past, thus detaching the idea of Kreuzberg from its reified location. Kara's novel ironically reflects on the memory politics that mythologize the past of the 1980s and the space of Kreuzberg.

A set of recent German films casts just such a nostalgic gaze back toward Berlin's Kreuzberg in the 1980s, recalling it as a time and place of radical utopian possibilities: utopian living arrangements, free love, nonnormative gender identities, anarchic film production, and the alternative distribution of wealth beyond the state's institutional reach and interpellation into productive labor and its military apparatus. Yet despite their nostalgic recollections of Kreuzberg, these films ultimately discredit their central characters and the time and space they represent as sexually, politically, and aesthetically immature. Their narratives of delayed adulthood continue what Eric Rentschler labeled "Peter Pan narratives" engendered by the audience success of Doris Dörrie's comedy *Männer* (1985; "From New German Cinema" 273). Each of the texts shows its central male character as he learns to abandon his idealistic ways, and each concludes by delivering a "mature" subject to the doorstep of the new German nation. In the course of their narratives, the films negotiate past and present, memory and history, utopian and pragmatic politics, generic film conventions and independent cinematic styles, and former West Berlin and contemporary Berlin as the nation's capital. In conflicting ways, the films acknowledge, disavow, and commodify the changes that Kreuzberg, West Berlin, Germany, and its inhabitants have undergone in the course of the past two decades. Although the texts nostalgically romanticize Kreuzberg, they also strip the space of Kreuzberg and the era of the 1980s of its radical politics.

Two of the films in question, Gregor Schnitzler's *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* (2002) and Leander Haußmann's *Herr Lehmann* (2003), offer belated coming-of-age-stories. Each ends with the emergence of a male subject whose maturity is encoded as a desire for productive labor.[2] Kreuzberg and the 1980s represent a nostalgic attachment to a utopian politics that needs to be disavowed by the characters and the narrative to participate in the pragmatic *Realpolitik* of the nation. In the end, the texts' spatio-temporal matrix positions their mature characters at important, symbolic Berlin locales: *Was tun, wenn's brennt* concludes as the film's cast of old friends reunite at the Museumsinsel in 2000, whereas *Herr Lehmann* closes with the fall of the Wall on 9 November 1989, when the protagonist turns thirty. The films map biographical moments onto decisive historical dates and symbolically laden locations of Berlin's topography. They inscribe cinematic maturity—expressed as technical and narrative perfection—into the present by projecting immaturity—technical and aesthetic imperfection—into the 1980s, mimicking activist filmmaking in *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* and showing failed installation art in *Herr Lehmann*. By making the characters and the nation constitutive of each other, the nation and its capital are accorded a belated maturity. These films thus project an anthropomorphic development from the local site of Kreuzberg to the unified Berlin as the nation's capital, and in so doing, displace East German history, on the one hand, and disavow the global context of contemporary Germany on the other.

The two films' use of central male characters as embodiment of the nation also indicates a substantial shift from New German Cinema's staging of history, which, according to Rentschler, relied on a "fixation on Germany as a nation of victims and martyrs" and "the figuration of German history as woman" ("Remembering" 38). John Davidson describes a related "rhetorical appropriation of a 'colonized' position" by the filmmakers of New German Cinema (10), which he views as part of the "construction of the German-as-other within the West" (15). This construction of a "'minor discourse,'" according to him, "*also* serves dominant demands" (52; emphasis in original). Thus, the normative masculine embodiment of the nation implies that unified Germany has overcome the status of "other within the West." Marginalization is projected into the past of the 1980s and territorialized in

Kreuzberg.[3] At the same time, *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* and *Herr Lehmann* ignore the ethnic dimension of the Kreuzberg mix that has been part and parcel of its real and mythical quality. Their nostalgic cinematic gaze back toward a Kreuzberg of the 1980s is devoid of minority characters, creating an ideological fantasy of Kreuzberg emptied out of Turks.[4] This conservative return to the male and ethnic German hero as embodiment of the unified nation parallels the inherent conservatism of the films' narratives, which equate maturity with a movement from idealism to pragmatism, even as the pleasure of the films lies with their nostalgic return to a past that appears radical, unproductive, liberated, and just plainly more exciting.

For the filmmakers and writers of the texts under discussion here, the 1980s coincide with their own twenties. Born between 1959 and 1967, they belong to what Stuart Taberner calls the "generation of '78" (10). Matthias Politycki characterizes this generation as situated between the "good old 68ers," who were "carrying the state" when these films were produced, and the "Neon-kids of the generation of '89" (19). This generation experienced New German Cinema as the established German cinema during their teens—the sort of "Papa's Kino" against which the filmmakers of New German Cinema rebelled.[5] New German Cinema's expression of left-wing politics appeared already entrenched, in part because of its institutional state funding, which allowed its films to be screened on television and to be distributed even if individual films did not appeal to a great number of viewers. Thus, the nostalgia for a leftist West German past does not reference 1968, but instead the lesser-known, anarchist, and creative alternative scene of West Berlin's 1980s. The directors and writers mentioned here share the birthright of a generation, even if their diverse birthplaces include East and West Germany and Turkey. The two films reduce history to the conscious memories of their protagonists who share the authors' generational affiliation.

Kreuzberg's geopolitical location and history lends it particularly well to nostalgic appropriation. The southeastern neighborhood of West Berlin, Kreuzberg in the 1980s consisted of two sections, referred to in shorthand by their postal codes SO 36 and SO 61, respectively. SO 36 had a higher density of Turks and squatters because of the lack of investment in this area adjacent to the wall, whereas SO 61 made up the slightly more upscale Kreuzberg. After the fall of the Wall, many inhabitants of Kreuzberg moved into Prenzlauer Berg, the former alternative East Berlin neighborhood. Kreuzberg did not play a key role in Berlin's self-fashioning as the new capital, and unlike Berlin Mitte or Potsdamer Platz, it did not surface in the numerous architecture debates of the past decades (for example, Alsop, McLean, and Störmer; Lampugnani and Schneider). Precisely the quality of being forgotten, of not being incorporated into the discourse about the new capital, enables the projection of ideological fantasies onto the space of Kreuzberg.

Herr Lehmann takes place entirely in pre-*Wende* Kreuzberg. The film begins as Herr Lehmann comes home drunk to Kreuzberg in the morning and encounters a dog that ultimately will accompany him on his journey into the new, unified Germany. The rest of the film shows Lehmann's everyday life in the period leading up to the *Wende*: bartending, hanging out with friends, eating at the local market restaurant (Markthalle), going swimming, falling in love, and drinking. The film ends with Lehmann sitting at the bar Zum Elefanten on Heinrich-Heine-Platz in SO 36. When the fall of the Wall is televised, Herr Lehmann heads out to join the crowd. There he encounters his friends, decides to give up bartending, and walks away from the camera with the dog from the opening scene. It is his thirtieth birthday.

The film adaptation of *Herr Lehmann* casts a melancholic gaze onto the ever-immature main character, Herr Lehmann, who embodies anticonsumerist and antiestablishment politics through apathy. Lehmann's immaturity is shown through his infatuation with Katrin and his fear of his parents. When the latter visit unexpectedly, for example, he panics and instigates an elaborate charade to convince them that he is manager of the local market restaurant rather than a bartender. Whereas Lehmann has not found success according to bourgeois standards, he is a hero in the alternative value system of his friends: "Wenn Kreuzberg Indien wäre, wäre Herr Lehmann ein Guru."

Herr Lehmann is set entirely in Kreuzberg, with the title character moving back and forth between the former SO 36 and SO 61. A shot of street signs situates him at the corner of Wrangelstraße and Eisenbahnstraße, just two blocks south and west of the Wall. Other featured locations include the public pool Prinzenbad, the "Mirir Carsisi" Döner close to the subway station at Kottbusser Tor, and several recognizable bars. The narrative of Herr Lehmann's belated coming-of-age story—he is, after all, twenty-nine—coincides with the period immediately prior to the fall of the Wall. Lacking political or personal direction, Herr Lehmann is made to stand in for the generation of young German males who escaped military duty by moving to West Berlin until they were thirty-two and who formed the foundation of West Berlin's alternative culture.

That alternative culture, however, is primarily articulated in *Herr Lehmann* in beer brands, which are visually foregrounded in numerous shots as well as emphasized in the dialogue. The beer of choice is Becks, and those who choose other brands receive nicknames according to the kind of beer they prefer ("Kristall Rainer" and "Lager Jürgen"). The Becks brand is intended to authenticate time and place, as Sven Regener, author of the novel and the film script, points out on the DVD commentary: "Es war einfach so. Es wurde einfach damals überwiegend überall nur Becks Bier getrunken in diesen Kneipen. Später kam Jever und Flensburger. Aber damals war Becks das Bier der Wahl." The film is ironic and self-referential about branding, as when Herr Lehmann has his first vision of Katrin bearing him triplets, each with a small bottle of Becks, or when the rolling credits at the end of the film announce "Von Becks gab's nichts, scheiß der Hund drauf . . . Geringwertige Sachleistungen ausgenommen. Der Hausjurist."

The perfection of the film and the filmmaker's use of German post-*Wende* movie stars such as Detlev Buck contrasts with the art created in the film's narrative. Herr Lehmann's friend Karl constructs a large installation piece for a Charlottenburg Gallery in his basement. After a mental breakdown brought on by lack of sleep and overwork, he destroys his own artwork. When Herr Lehmann forces Karl to visit a doctor with him, the doctor diagnoses Karl's problem not as an individual one, but as the problem of a generation. He explains to Herr Lehmann:

> Ihr Freund hat eine Art Depression. So eine Mischung aus Depression und Nervenzusammenbruch. Das haben wir hier öfter. Sie haben gesagt, er ist Künstler. Aber er arbeitet seit zehn Jahren oder so in einer Kneipe. Aber nicht jeder kommt damit klar. Und dann diese Ausstellung. Das ist vielleicht die Stunde der Wahrheit. Da hat er Angst bekommen. Dass es alles zusammenbricht. Dass er versagt. Dann bricht alles zusammen. Es ist ein leichtes Leben hier in der Gegend, wenn man jung ist. Ein bißchen Arbeit, billige Wohnung, viel Spaß. Aber viele brauchen noch irgendetwas, um alles zu legitimieren.

The doctor frames the artist's lifestyle as a liability, worthy of scorn rather than social sanction. He reads Karl's breakdown as emblematic for the larger problems faced by a Kreuzberg community that persists in living a "leichtes Leben." Karl's anxiety-producing, self-destructive art stands in stark contrast to the film itself, which is marked by an unobtrusive, technically proficient use of narrative, cinematography, acting, editing, and style, and thereby confirms the doctor's opinion.

The narrative links Karl's destruction of his art and his subsequent collapse to the turning point in Herr Lehmann's life. As the doctor issues his diagnosis, he takes note of the date. It is 9 November 1989—Herr Lehmann's thirtieth birthday and, as a post-Wall German audience would recognize, ironically also the birthday of reconstituted Germany. The film concludes the character's and West Germany's overextended puberty with the fall of the Wall. Herr Lehmann is sitting in the real SO 36 bar Zum Elefanten when a drunken woman announces that the Wall has come down. Everyone at the bar, including Lehmann, then watches the fall of the Wall on the television inside the bar. The film crosscuts between shots of the TV and reverse shots of those sitting at the bar. In the background of the latter, fresh arrivals from the other side of the border pass by the bar, unbeknownst to those staring at the little black-and-white television screen. The bar's customers gradually come to understand the historical significance of what they are witnessing, and they decide to have a look, although not before finishing their drinks. The film's main characters meet at the Wall. Herr Lehmann announces that he has to change, grow up, and then moves away from the camera into an unknown place and future (see figure 1).

With the *Wende,* Lehmann's prolonged adolescence comes to end, and his personal coming-of-age provides the lens through which to capture the story of the German nation, implying that unification brought about national maturation. Thus, what seems at first sight like a subversive tale, undermining the grand national narrative, on closer

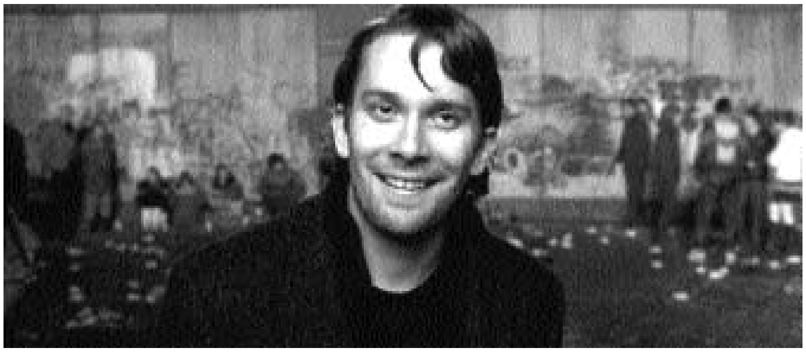

FIGURE 1. A scene from the end of *Herr Lehmann* (2003), directed by Leander Haußmann.

inspection turns out to be a narrative that sublimates the local to the national. This is particularly true in the final shot depicting the celebration at the Wall, which situates the neighborhood of Kreuzberg and Herr Lehmann's maturity in the larger context of Germany's unification. The film participates in the double-edged politics of nostalgia, remembering the past in Kreuzberg fondly by capturing its zeitgeist but at the same time disavowing its creative potential by casting it as immature, as a period that must be overcome.

The nostalgic turn in "popular cinema" also finds expression in the academic discussion of post-Wall cinema. Rentschler captures what amounts to a tectonic shift in postwar German filmmaking when he observes—with a self-confessed "ardent nostalgia" and "bitter sense of loss"—that "popular cinema" has replaced the New German Cinema ("From New German Cinema" 261). These changes that constitute the new "Cinema of Consensus," Rentschler suggests, result from a changed subsidy system and new media that turned film into an all-pervasive commodity ("From New German Cinema" 267–68). The account of the shift from the explicitly political New German Cinema to the contemporary "Cinema of Consensus" encapsulates the historical development of recent postwar cinema. Yet, the films at hand also point toward an understanding of contemporary cinema beyond the binary of political auteurism vis-à-vis consensus-driven mass entertainment.

Fredric Jameson proposes that the "reification" in mass culture and the "utopia" of political discourse are not mutually exclusive categories. Instead, he suggests that mass culture must bring up "genuine social and historical content" to give it "some initial expression if it is subsequently to be the object of successful manipulation and containment" (144). He makes the case that one "cannot fully do justice to the ideological function" of mass cultural products, such as films for mass consumption, "unless we are willing to concede the presence within them of a more positive function as well" because "they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated" (144). Jameson argues against an understanding of mass culture as "empty distraction" or "'mere' false consciousness" but instead sees it "as a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be 'managed' or repressed" (141). He suggests that mass culture processes the "genuine shred of content" through "narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony," which we see in the happy end of *Herr Lehmann*, particularly in its conjoining of Herr Lehmann's individual and the collective, national happy end (141). Jameson enables us to conceptualize *Herr Lehmann* and *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* as participating in a conservative national discourse, at the same time that the films' nostalgic longing also points to a desire for a political utopia prior to its cinematic reification.

Political nostalgia reifies utopian moments, even when the nostalgia signals conservative turns. In the discussion about the contemporary prevalence of nostalgia in the cultural production of Germany, *Ostalgie* is the privileged site of debate, brought to the forefront particularly by Wolfgang Becker's successful film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003). *Ostalgie* is viewed by its critics as either "a dangerous form of selective amnesia" (Cooke 104) or alternately by its defenders as an adaptation of "western stereotypes into positive attributes of 'easternness'" in the form of *Trotzidentität* ('identity of defiance'), *Ostalgie* ('nostalgia for the former GDR'), or an "'Ossi pride'" (Taberner 12). But as Paul Cooke has pointed out, *Ostalgie* is matched by the twin phenomenon of *Westalgie*. He quotes the 2000 Shell study that found "an open *Ostalgie*" in the east and "a more subtle form of "'*Westalgie* for the old Federal Republic'" (105). He sees *Westalgie* in such novels as "Matthias Politycki's *Weiberroman* (1997), Frank Goosen's *Liegen lernen* (2000), or Sven Regener's *Herr Lehmann* (2001)" (119).

In addition to *Ostalgie*, Paul Betts focuses on the West German nostalgic reevaluation of the 1950s during the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s (182). Betts notes that this nostalgia differed significantly from prior instantiations: "it was not born of pain and exile, but gratitude and a newfound pride in a post-Nazi homeland" (191). Betts links the "West German conservative turn during the early 1980s (*Tendenzwende*)" with *Ostalgie* because "material objects rested at the heart of these cultural longings" (191). Yet, the nostalgia that motivates *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* and *Herr Lehmann* projects an ideological fantasy of a time and place devoid of commodification, celebrating the immaterial values of friendship, antibourgeois utopian living contexts, nonhierarchical working relationships, sexual liberation, and anticonsumerism. Whereas these values are disavowed as immature and appropriated for contemporary commodity culture, the nostalgia for a relational and affective politics nevertheless points to a lack of utopian politics in contemporary national culture.

Whereas *Herr Lehmann* is set entirely in the past, *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* makes the connection between past and present its explicit topic. The latter film begins with a film-within-a-film, set in Kreuzberg in 1987.[6] Six squatters, who call themselves the SO 36 Collective, fight with the police in the streets of Kreuzberg and teach the audience how to build a bomb, which they leave in a villa on the outskirts of Berlin. The bomb does not detonate, and the film then flashes forward to its main narrative, set in 2000, when the device explodes just as the villa is being shown to a potential buyer. Detective Manowsky identifies the bomb as a product of the 1980s, "als West Berlin noch eine Insel war." Thus tipped off, the police raid the squat, still inhabited by two members of the collective, Hotte and Tim, and confiscate their collection of old films—including the incriminating film with which the film opened. Tim and Hotte (the latter wheelchair-bound since the '80s, when he was run over by a water cannon at a demonstration and his friends abandoned him) go in search of their former friends, who are now a successful lawyer, a public relations manager, a single mother, and a restaurant owner. The six friends reunite to try to steal the damning footage from the police. Although Detective Manowsky knows "the scene" from the past, a federal agent is sent to supervise the case. Manowsky ultimately aligns himself with the former anarchists, privileging local over national affiliation: when, in the attempt to purloin the evidence, Hotte is locked in the basement of the police barracks, the detective helps the others liberate him. As the film concludes, Hotte resolves to embrace productive labor and decides to learn computer skills. The characters walk away from the camera into an unknown future, transporting Hotte in a shopping cart along the Museumsinsel in former East Berlin.

The opening sequence stages the "present past" in ways that are of such central importance to the topics under investigation in this essay that it warrants an extensive discussion here. Seemingly shot with a 16mm handheld camera, the opening film-within-a-film flickers, shows holes at the sides of the frame, slows down and speeds up, stops, and goes in and out of focus. *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* not only portrays the past but also reenacts a form of film that looks outdated. This retro look, however, is recognizable to a contemporary audience as an effect created in postproduction—and inscribes a simultaneous presence and dominance of perfection over imperfection. After the first scratches of the film, three credits appear: first "Deutsche Columbia Pictures Filmproduktion präsentiert," then "Eine Claussen und Wöbke Filmproduktion," and last, "Ein Film von Gregor Schnitzler."[7]

Masking its product as a homemade, low-budget, anarchist film, the transnational production company Deutsche Columbia Pictures contains any revolutionary potential through its announcement of ownership in these opening lines. At the same time, it implies a hierarchy in which the transnational trumps the national production company, which in turn trumps the authorial signature (see figure 2).

Following these credits, the audience sees only a black screen, accompanied by the sound of a film projector, evoking nostalgia for outdated cinematic technology, and an audio dialogue of several different voices, paradoxically revealing not spectators but creators of a film. The dialogue, which captures a film crew getting ready to film a scene, presents a literally and metaphorically invisible, nonhierarchical, and unorganized filmmaking collective, in contrast to the hierarchy inscribed into the contemporary film. The opening simultaneously claims the past and the present, whereas the credit sequence, which lies outside the narrative, privileges "German Columbia Pictures Film Production" over the dialogue of the fictitious filmmakers. The film's instantiating credit contains the discourse of radical politics. In Rentschler's account, the 1980s were a transitional phase, in which filmmakers "painstakingly duplicated Hollywood formulas in a studied attempt to craft popular German films" ("From New German Cinema" 266) and "only a handful of German films, almost without exception comedies featuring television stars [. . .] would become box-office hits" (262). By contrast, *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* references a highly marginalized film culture that was

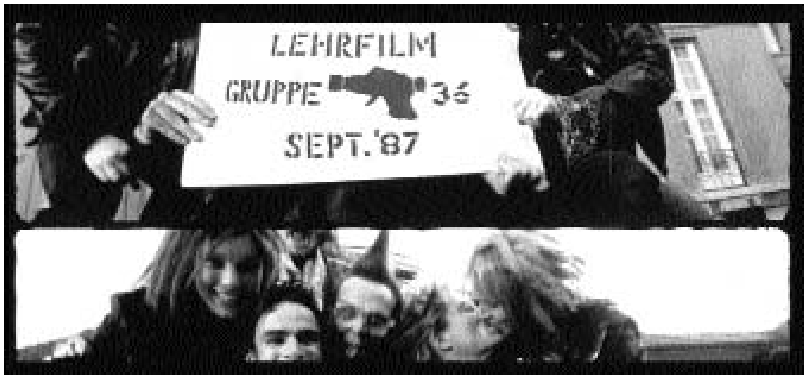

FIGURE 2. A scene from *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* (2002), directed by Gregor Schnitzler.

nevertheless recognizable enough to be referenced in mainstream film. The film offers the pleasure of recognition to those who lived through the period and are familiar with its alternative cultural products, on the one hand, and the fantasy of a distant past to those lacking such intimate knowledge of that culture, on the other. Simultaneously invoking nostalgia and disavowing the political position of the period as immature, the film addresses and integrates diverse audiences, as is the politics of mainstream film.

In imitation of the sort of alternative films produced by activists of the 1980s, a voice-over situates the narrative of the 16mm film in a specific time and place:

> Berlin im Sommer 87: Die alliierten Besatzungsmächte haben die Stadt fest im Griff. Nahezu alle besetzten Häuser sind geräumt. Nur ein kleiner Straßenzug im amerikanischen Sektor leistet noch immer Widerstand gegen die Räumungspläne des Berliner Senats, Machnowstreet, Postbezirk SO 36.

The framing of time and place evokes history and memory: the explicit history of Germany's division and Allied occupation gives context to the narrative. A hand-drawn map of Berlin, with exaggerated borders that emphasize Kreuzberg's location in the southeastern sector of West Berlin, accompanies the voice-over. The narrative and the drawing also reference the standard opening text of the *Asterix* comics, created by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, in which a minority of "indomitable Gauls" holds out against the Roman occupiers of France.[8] In addition, the map's free-form style recalls the alternative culture of the 1980s embodied by the work of artists such as Gerhard Seyfried, whose cartoons captured the Berlin alternative scene. These references again associate the political context with texts aimed at children and thus link imperfection and immaturity.

In line with the overall structure of the film, *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* narratively appropriates and discredits the political film movement of the 1980s but also acknowledges its existence and recirculates it, invoking the energy of the movement, as the opening (the-film-within-the-film) is the most dynamic section of the entire feature film. Whereas disparaging the film production of the squatters' movement, this opening film-within-a-film, however, also recalls the politics of "imperfect cinema," the 1970s film movement, which held that the technical perfection of commercial cinema led to superficiality and "passive consumption" (Chanan 305).[9] Like an imperfect film, the short embedded work does not cover the traces of its production: a hand with a magnifying glass points to the small house and sets the hand-drawn map on fire, only to reveal another hand-drawing of a house pinned to a wall of the squat in question, Machnowstreet. The repeated use of fire and burning references the alternative cinematic discourse of the period, in films made in the *Hausbesetzerszene*, such as *Züri brennt* (*Zurich Burns*, Videoladen Zürich, 1980) and *Schade, daß Beton nicht brennt* (*Too Bad that Cement Does Not Burn*, Novemberkollektiv, 1981). The brief film further shares the Brechtian didacticism of imperfect cinema. In juxtaposition with the narrative feature film, it calls itself a *Lehrfilm*, and the collective provides politically based, didactically organized, improvised instructions for an illegal activity: how to build a bomb. The *Autonome* movement was based on a post-Marxist mélange of anarchist, revolutionary, and feminist theories that advocated multiple decentralized, sometimes violent, sometimes playful actions. Its relationship to imperfect cinema represents but one connection between the political movements of the 1970s and 1980s that are generally understood as representing an absolute break between the political culture of the 1968 generation and the generation that Taberner calls the 1978ers. However, this connection is not reflected in the film, because the film fails to engage with the political tenets of the movement and instead reduces it to random acts referenced by slogans and style.[10]

After the introduction, the film cuts to a street scene in Kreuzberg, where *Autonome* fight with the police, accompanied by the soundtrack of Fehlfarben's song "Keine Atempause, Geschichte wird gemacht, es geht voran," a song identified as the "'squatters' hymn." The mise-en-scène identifies Kreuzberg of the 1980s by its rundown nineteenth-century architecture with homemade political banners hanging from windows and by its population of black-clad characters sporting punk hairstyles and carrying anarchist flags. Subsequent interior shots evoke the alternative culture of a squat, with posters for demonstrations, graffiti, and improvised furniture. Instead of stones, the anarchists throw cakes at the police, in a loose reference to the antics of the "Spass Guerrilla," whose members made headlines around 1984 for their inventive forms of protest.[11]

In a series of takes, the film imitates an imperfect style: the characters present handwritten signs outlining the five-step process to build a bomb, and then bring one such bomb to a villa at the outskirts of West Berlin. Another handwritten sign then marks the end of the short film-within-a-film. It reads “Lehrfilm Gruppe 36, September 87” and is accompanied by a voice-over: “Und am wichtigsten Leute, timing. Timing muß stimmen.” The narrative’s premise of *Was tun, wenn’s brennt?* is, however, the collective’s problem of timing, because the bomb does not go off as planned. The collective’s imperfect timing contrasts with the perfect timing of the feature film we are watching, which is produced in the present: the short film is edited in perfect sync with the music and concludes with the end of the song. Thus, *Was tun, wenn’s brennt?* implies a hierarchy of the perfection of the contemporary multinational film production over the past mode of imperfect filmmaking. The opening, however, also evokes nostalgic memories of imperfect local films strongly marked by the time and place of their production.

In contrast, current German national cinema functions in different configurations of transnational production, according to Randall Halle, which enables the “‘international’ flow of production” in three ensembles produced by “the free market, the closed trade zone, and the international federation” (8, 10). In Halle's account, filmic content, including its aesthetic and political dimensions, is produced by the configuration of its transnational funding structure. His explanatory model intends to leave behind methodological frameworks of national cinema but does not provide us with theoretical tools to engage with the meaning, effect, and affective dimensions of films beyond their funding and distribution structure. Curiously enough, a film, such as *Was tun, wenn’s brennt?* did not have a wide international circulation, even though it is produced by one of the “hybrid production companies” Halle lists. But economic accounts of market forces alone cannot account for how the two films addressed in this article negotiate national belonging, local attachment to place, and collective memory.

Paradoxically, Haußmann’s and Schnitzler’s films are part of globalized production networks, but their references are entirely local. Despite its transnational funding structure, *Was tun, wenn’s brennt?* was not internationally successful, and *Herr Lehmann*’s reception was characterized by a local audience attachment and cult following. National history “emerges as an integral moment of globalization itself, not as its other” explains Lutz Koepnick in his discussion of the heritage film, a similarly paradoxical genre couched in a national imaginary that emerged in the second half of the 1990s in the context of economic and cultural processes of globalization (194). Koepnick suggests that heritage film does not employ a national discourse against Hollywood but inhabits a niche in Hollywood's transnational drive. Tensions between the local and the global shape independent, nationally, and transnationally produced texts, but the categories of global and local are not absolutes. For example, the Kreuzberg of the 1980s exists now in the deterritorialized virtual space of Web archives.[12]

Like *Herr Lehmann*, *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* is curiously self-referential in regard to the reification of utopian politics, to use Jameson's terms. *Herr Lehmann* is ironically conscious of branding and thus complicates the intended effects of product placement. By contrast, in *Was tun, wenn's brennt?*, the superficially critical performance of processes of commodification functions to anticipate and avert the possibility of criticism being leveled against the film. Through the portrayal of the figure Maik (who has a Germanized American first name), the film thematizes and appears to problematize the appropriation of old political slogans for commercial use. When the catchphrases from the squat resurface in his public relations business, the film places them in a contemporary neoliberal context: his public relations firm abounds with large photographs of nude women with the anarchist symbol "A" across their bodies. Cooke diagnoses a similar phenomenon in the

> nostalgia for the 68ers in certain manifestations of 89er pop culture, seen, most obviously, in this generation's recycling of the symbols and insignia of the "Red Army Faction", or Baader-Meinhof terrorist group, which rose from the student movement's ashes. These West German urban guerrillas are recalled in a number of popular cultural phenomena, from the joke "solidarity" parties organized in Berlin for the "WAF" ("Wasser Armee Friedrichshain", whose posters replace the rifles of the RAF insignia with water pistols), to the "Prada Meinhof" clothes range. (120)

Was tun, wenn's brennt? also contrasts 1980s expressions, such as "Alle Macht der Fantasie," or "Macht kaputt, was euch kaputt macht" with Maik's neoliberal worldview, exemplified by his suggestion that the group "outsource" to steal their film back. Yet this apparent criticism of Maik's adoption of past slogans merely serves to shield the film from having the same charge brought against it. By using the short film-within-a-film as fictitious document of the 1980s Zeitgeist, *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* can articulate a position on political film culture that absolves the film of any guilt of co-opting this earlier political style. As one character says about the collective's old film, "Wir haben die Filme damals gemacht, damit wir unseren Kindern zeigen können, daß wir etwas gegen die Schweine gemacht haben. Kann ich was dafür, daß sich heute dafür niemand mehr interessiert?" Here, the character could also be voicing the position of the filmmakers of *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* Trying to avert any accusation of appropriation, they incorporate the answer to possible criticism into the film.

The shift from past to present in *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* is accompanied by a change from a masquerade of cinematic imperfection to the conventional aesthetics of a narrative feature film, emphasized by a shot that perfectly centers the imposing building in which the anarchists left their ticking bomb. Superimposed on the image of the villa, the film projects the sequence of the years 1987 to 2000, also perfectly centered at the bottom of the screen, and on the audio track, we hear snippets from news broadcasts that mark important events and changes from the late 1980s to 2000, referring to Germany in general and Berlin in particular: there are references to the census, the threat by the West Berlin senate to have all the squats removed, the "hostage drama of Gladbeck," the opening and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Kohl's promises of economic stability, Hoyerswerda, the wrapping of the Reichstag, the Red-Green coalition, and the introduction of the Euro. Motivated by the literal time bomb, the actual narrative begins to unfold in the year 2000.

Was tun, wenn's brennt? aligns memory with marginalized local politics, and culture and history with national culture, a move that it shares with *Herr Lehmann*. Importantly, the happy end in both texts consists of the conjoining of memory and history in the mature hero and in the iconic moments and spaces of the nation. *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* employs the mise-en-scène to shift from addressing individual spectatorial memories to referencing national symbols of history, as in the film's final shot when the characters walk past the familiar edifices of the Museumsinsel. They have not only moved from their marginal space of Kreuzberg to the central space of the nation now under construction (we see the traces of the renovation of Berlin in the final shot) but also from their association with their own illegal archive to that official archive of national culture, the museum. "Built urban space [. . .] represented the material traces of the historical past in the present" (1), whereas memory "was a topic for the poets" (2), writes Andreas Huyssen. He suggests that nineteenth-century nation-states monumentalized their national pasts to provide meaning to the present and enable an imaginary future, but that this model has run its course, and its current failure is linked to "a fundamental crisis in our imagination of alternative futures" (2). *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* is symptomatic of that contemporary crisis: once it has left behind localized political memory, it can only resort to the model embodied by national monuments. But as Huyssen points out, that model cannot offer a real avenue toward national, transnational, or local innovation.

Indeed, in both texts, the future is unclear but depends on the past. Yet, instead of engaging with the political positions of a previous period, these become coded as apathetic, disoriented, and localized subcultures. The film discredits the utopias of the 1980s as immature, while offering in their stead the economics of the globalized media economy, personal relationships that overlook political differences, and the return to nineteenth-century national museal culture as a maturely pragmatic, yet open-ended ideal. Huyssen is again useful here. He differentiates between past and contemporary conceptions of memory: whereas an earlier understanding of memory bound subjects "in some deep sense to times past, with melancholia being one of its liminal manifestations," he identifies a contemporary notion of memory "as a mode of re-presentation and as belonging ever more to the present" (3). *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* not only integrates both forms of memory but also narrates the shift from the former to the latter. This is most clear with the character of Hotte, who is sentimentally and melancholically attached to the past and thus a political romantic, as well as literally and metaphorically stuck in the past. His wheelchair is not just a consequence of police repression but also carries the symbolic function of arresting him in the past, in his house, immobilizing him. At the film's conclusion, he manages to leave his chair behind when his friends transport him from the police station in a shopping cart, symbolically staging his journey into the future of the new and unified Germany while also aligning that journey with a flexibility associated with consumption. Hotte, who was most associated with the reified past, is situated as a product. The film enacts the reification of utopian politics hyperbolically one more time.

At a late point in the narrative, it is revealed that a shared trauma motivates all six characters. Underlying the narrative of the friends' relationship is a secret guilt, created when the collective's other members abandoned Hotte after he was injured at a demonstration. The film implies that this event led to the dissolution of the collective, leaving both Hotte and Tim overattached to the past, while the others turn away, motivated not by a change in their political positions but by their guilt. This sense of responsibility prevents them from facing the past until they are able to replay the instance of their failure: when they rescue Hotte from the police station, they finally resolve their own guilt, while also enabling Hotte to leave the past behind as well. Such an underlying narrative about unspeakable guilt and the possibility of *Wiedergutmachung* might, in the context of cultural production in postwar Germany, be expected to evoke the Holocaust, and so it is all the more striking that the past explicitly referenced in this film only extends back into the 1980s and then reemerges as a history of unification. As Huyssen describes, the current memory discourse is shaped by personal narratives, be they "testimony, memoir, subjectivity, traumatic memory," organized around trauma, which haunts "neoliberal triumphalism" (8). Such a trauma plagues the characters in *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* in their successfully neoliberal, law-abiding, highly gender-conformative life of the early-twenty-first century. Their relationship to the past is shaped by what Huyssen sees as characteristic of trauma: "instability, transitoriness, and structures of repetition" (8). Hotte and Tim enjoy only impermanent relationships (except with each other); they live an unsettled existence and repeat actions from the past without proper context. In a process of reification emphasized by Jameson, the narrative explains the traumatic aspect of Hotte's injury not with state repression, but rather with the loss of friendship. The film rewrites the particular memory of the 1980s as a private trauma, just as it rewrites the political affiliations and experimental living contexts of the 1980s as private friendships.

While Hotte and Tim are arrested in the past, the other characters suffer from too much change. As Nele exclaims, "Ich bin so anders, ich würde mich ja selbst nicht wieder erkennen." Their individual metamorphoses parallel the transformation of Berlin, which in turn reflects the transformation of the nation. Having resolved their guilt and, by extension, Hotte's trauma, the six friends enter the space of the nation, signified by the Museumsinsel at the geographic center of unified Germany. As the film implies, Hotte and Tim have matured politically: they have left the past behind, and Hotte has expressed a desire to study computer technology, which will enable him to join the workforce and thus become a productive member of society. Their four friends have matured emotionally: they have confronted their guilt and have taken care of Hotte. All of them have integrated their pasts into the present, in a process paralleling the national effort, through the space of the museum, to incorporate Germany's history into the contemporary moment.

The film's nostalgia is not only expressed in narrative terms but also created through its aesthetics. To steal the filmic evidence of their old crime, the six friends build another bomb. A scene shows them working around the old kitchen table in the squat on Machnowstrasse, repeating their past action in the present. Fehlfarben's "hymn" again features on the soundtrack as the friends use a fire extinguisher to build the bomb. A slow-motion shot features the characters dancing in the snowlike soft flakes of the extinguisher, giving the scene a dreamlike quality that recalls a scene from Jean Vigo's *Zero de Conduite* (1933), which shows children in an authoritarian boarding school having a pillow fight at night. Likewise shot in slow motion, with feathers flying through the air, Vigo's dreamlike scene mobilizes an anti-authoritarian sense of utopian fantasy for the characters and, by extension, the audience.[13] In *Was tun, wenn's brennt?*, a slower song is playing on the soundtrack, and the scene fades back to the opening film-within-a-film, portraying the six friends fighting against the police in the street. Cutting back and forth between present and past, the sequence suggests that the characters are overcome by nostalgic memories: in the midst of this sentimental and romantic scene, for example, Tim and his old love interest, Flo, share a kiss. Here, the film uses a generic cinematic device, turning the drab location of the squat into a fantasmatic scene that evokes the happy past for the characters and the spectators, in marked contrast to the rough editing of the opening film-within-a-film.

Detective Manowsky, who disidentifies with the new nation-state because he is invested in local affiliations, also makes the film's happy ending possible. He values the bond between the anarchists because he has been disappointed by friends and aligns himself with the local over the national. Manowsky says: "Freundschaft wird überbewertet. Die Grenzen verlaufen nicht zwischen links und rechts, sondern zwischen denen, die etwas aus sich gemacht und denen, die zu ihren Idealen stehen. Ihr seid allein. Die letzten der schwarzen Front. Die letzten Mohikaner von Berlin." Although Manowsky criticizes the friends for their lonely, out-of-place existence, he also endorses their lifestyle by helping them. His action bespeaks his own nostalgic attachment to the past. The detective validates the friendship among our anarchist heroes, operating according to the logic of the past in a manner that makes him useless for the present power structure, which, according to the film, privileges public relations and state bureaucracy over individual action and investigation, as represented by the figure of the detective. Through the configuration of character relationships, the film confirms Manowsky's words while also legitimizing its own neoliberal ideology, according to which the political spectrum of left and right belongs to the past of political immaturity.

At the happy end, the characters find themselves at the new center of Berlin, having left behind Kreuzberg. This move reflects part, but not all, of the real story of the generation of squatters from the 1980s. In the development of unified Berlin, the unwritten history of the generation that squatted in Kreuzberg did not stop with the fall of the Wall. A great many of those involved in the alternative movement in Berlin left Kreuzberg after unification and moved to Prenzlauer Berg in the former East. By bypassing the 1990s, the film avoids confronting the role played by the former squatters, who displaced East Berlin working-class residents of Prenzlauer Berg and, through their departure, turned Kreuzberg into a neighborhood of primarily Turkish-Germans, branded by the media and politicians as "a Turkish ghetto."[14] The film elides the history of displacements and class differences created by the mass migration of upwardly mobile ethnic Germans from Kreuzberg to Prenzlauer Berg and the displacement of the now downwardly mobile East Germans in Prenzlauer Berg, and problematically suggests that the fissures created in these communities after the *Wende* might be overcome by friendship.

The main characters, representative of the nation, end up mature and single, if not alone, at central points in the new capital of the new Germany. Although critics of globalization often value such a resurgence of national discourse, particularly as the local asserts itself vis-à-vis the global, a reflection on the gender politics of the texts at hand should caution us from a premature celebration of this sort of resurrection. Whereas the emphasis on the local and national may serve to counteract the drive of globalization, we should be wary of returning to traditional notions of mature masculine subjectivity as the embodiment of the nation. The films I have addressed evince a lack of imagination about the future, hindered, as Huyssen suggests, by an "avalanche of memory discourses" and abetted by current economic and social restructuring in Germany—processes that, in turn, lead to a melancholic attachment and recuperation of the past now emptied of its political meaning (6). The two films perform a nostalgic attachment to the local past, fostering the sort of attachment that the novelist Kara depicts critically and ironically when she exposes the cinematic fetishization of Kreuzberg.

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NOTES

1. The term "Kreuzberg mix" ("Kreuzberger Mischung") refers back to the "Hobrechtsche" concept of a mix of upper- and working-class housing, as well as the typical nineteenth-century buildings for residential housing and businesses and factories. Historically, the Kreuzberg mix also referred to nineteenth-century workers who arrived in the city from the East. In the 1960s, families left Kreuzberg with its outdated buildings, which then offered cheap living space for the arriving "guest workers," students, teachers, and squatters. The term was then employed to describe the ethnic mix of Kreuzberg.

2. *Herr Lehmann* is based on a novel of the same title by Sven Regener. Regener was a singer in the band Element of Crime, founded in 1985 and associated with Kreuzberg in the late 1980s. Regener has written another novel about Lehmann's years prior to his move to West Berlin, *Neue Vahr Süd*. Curiously, Regener thus reenacts the temporal logic of the *Star Wars* film series, which moves backward in time instead of forward, a sequence that plays a central role in the film *Herr Lehmann*.

3. For a discussion of how two films associated with New German Cinema make use of Kreuzberg for a claim of marginalization, see Mennel.

4. There is one exception in both films: the character of Bülent, the owner of the squat on Machnowstreet, is marked as Turkish-German—a particularly questionable representation, given the conditions of renting in Kreuzberg and the lack of homeownership for Turkish-Germans in Berlin.

5. Gregor Schnitzler, director of *Was tun, wenn's brennt?*, was born in 1964, the writers Stefan Dähnert and Anne Wild in 1961 and 1967, respectively. Leander Haußmann, director of *Herr Lehmann*, was born in 1959 and Sven Regener, author of the book and script, in 1961. Although they are similar in age, they vary in place of birth. Only Schnitzler was born in West Berlin; excepting Haußmann, who grew up in East Germany, all of the others were born in West Germany. Yadé Kara was born 1965 in Turkey and grew up in West Berlin.

6. Although 1987 was relatively late in the squatters' movement, it was nevertheless a crucial year in terms of the escalation of violence. The CDU was in power, the census was announced, Ronald Reagan visited, and Berlin celebrated its 750th birthday. On 1 May, an office for anticensus activists was searched by the police and afterward violence broke out in Kreuzberg at the May 1 celebration. The violence destroyed the local Bolle supermarket and several other smaller stores. On 26 May, Norbert Kubat committed suicide in jail. On 11 June, 500,000 people demonstrated against Reagan on the Kurfürstendamm. On 12

June, of the same year, the police kept about 500 demonstrators in a so-called kettle (Kessel) on Tauentzien Street in Charlottenburg for about eight hours. During Reagan's visit on 12 June, traffic in and out of Kreuzberg was stopped. See "Chronik der Ereignisse in Berlin vom 1.5.1987 bis zum 18.6.1987" <http://squat.net/de/berlin/>. For documentation of the much earlier period, see Brandes and Schön. The film's reference to the year 1987 echoes actual history without claiming to document it, a method that evokes audience memories and is juxtaposed to, for example, Holocaust films that claim historical accuracy. At the same time, this method allows *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* to rewrite the content of such references to the past. For example, the title *Was tun, wenn es brennt?* (What to Do in Case of Fire?) is a phrase used by legal assistance, and their advice emphasizes de-escalation, in contrast to the film, in which the characters answer, "Let it burn." See "Was tun, wenn es brennt? Rechtshilfebroschüre der Roten Hilfe" <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/archiv/Politische Stroemungen/antirepression/rechtshilfe/>.

7. Rentschler lists Columbia as one of the five major American distributors in Germany, which are Warner, UIP, Columbia, Buena Vista, and Fox ("From New German Cinema" 269). According to Halle, the Japan-based Sony company owns Columbia Pictures. He describes Deutsche Columbia as one of the "new hybrid production companies" that "produce films at Babelsberg Studios in Potsdam" (22) and discusses Claussen and Wöbke as one of the newer German companies established in 1990 (44).

8. I thank Johannes von Moltke for this reference.

9. Imperfect cinema was initiated by Julio García-Espinosa's essay "Por un cinema imperfecto" ("For an Imperfect Cinema") originally published in *Cine Cubano* in Cuba in 1967 and translated and reprinted in *Jump Cut* in 1969. Imperfect cinema was a clearly defined film movement in temporal and geographic terms. It is important for me, however, to suggest this aesthetic connection because the movement associated with the 1980s and Kreuzberg is otherwise discredited as apolitical and disconnected. Thus, this aesthetic connection is both important in geographic terms as a connection across the first-world/third-world divide, as well as a historical connection between the 1970s and 1980s. Chanan sees similarities between imperfect cinema and "radical film culture in the metropolis since the late 1960s" (308). We can assume that Chanan's "radical film culture of the metropolis" does not refer to films made by the Autonomen in the 1980s, nor other fringe videos and 16mm films that emerged from the alternative media workshops (Medienwerkstätten) and alternative television and exhibition places that were created throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, but instead refers to such filmmakers as Jean-Marie Straub, Danielle Huillet, Chris Marker, and Alexander Kluge, who make up an earlier generation of political filmmakers now canonized in national European film histories. The kind of film referenced by the opening of *Was tun, wenn's brennt?* differs from their films and from New German Cinema in its intensive local ties, lack of production values, collective production and direction, lack of feature-length narratives, activist stance, and political exhibition context. One important example of alternative media production and distribution workshop was the media workshop (Medienwerk-

statt) Freiburg that collaborated with different squatting projects, documented them, and then showed the films in other cities such as Berlin. Videos were not always announced under individual titles but clustered by topics. See, for example, "Videofilme über Freiburg: Dreisameck und Schwarzwaldhof" documenting squats <http://autox.nadir.org/archive/haus/81_tuwat1_html>. Another important media center was the Medienpädagogikzentrum Hamburg e.V. in Hamburg. In the 1980s, it produced *Terrible Houses in Danger* (MPZ Hamburg, 1985), *Gewaltclip* (MPZ Hamburg, 1986), and *Die Augen schliessen um besser zu sehen* (MPZ Hamburg, 1986) all about the Hafenstrasse squats. Other well-known German-language examples of video work about squatting or alternative urban renewal produced by collectives attached to cities include *Schade, daß Beton nicht brennt*, and *Züri brennt*.

10. This position is articulated in the *Spiegel* article "Da packt dich irgendwann ne Wut." The title page included a shot out of a broken window of a group of young people throwing stones and the headlines: "West Berlin, Zürich, Amsterdam, Freiburg, Bremen, Hannover, Hamburg: Jugendkrawalle."

11. The Spass Guerrilla grew out of the frustration with the lack of progress from conventional forms of political protest, such as mass demonstrations, and instead used irony and impersonation in interactive performances as political theater. Examples include dressing up and attending press conferences where they performed sketches of exaggerated right-wing positions.

12. Examples of two representative extensive archives can be found at <http://autox.nadir.org/archiv/haus/index.html> and <http://www.squat.net/de/berlin>.

13. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this reference.

14. Kreuzberg's high number of Turks is primarily discussed in relationship to the migration of Turks into the neighborhood, not in regard to the migration of ethnic Germans out of Kreuzberg.

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