‘BORDER CONSCIOUSNESS’ AND THE RE-IMAGINATION OF NATION
IN THE FILMS OF AKIN, DRESEN AND PETZOLD
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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By KATHLEEN J. SCLAFANI

In my dissertation I explore the role that borders play in the construction of German identity through the films of Fatih Akin, Andreas Dresen and Christian Petzold. Despite the insistence of conservatives that Germany is not an “immigration country,” I argue that the historical fluctuation of borders and the movement of populations into and out of Germany have resulted in a heightened awareness of borders and their significance that contributes to a sense of ambivalence about national identity. This heightened awareness can be seen as a type of “border consciousness,” a term that originated in Chicano/a studies and has been used to analyze exilic and diasporic cinema but which I reconsider in the context of German film. By examining tropes of borders and border crossings, as well as representations of liminality in the work of German filmmakers from various backgrounds, I argue that in these works, border consciousness can be seen as a function of a relationship to national boundaries rooted in histories of displacement, but not necessarily limited to the experiences of migrants and minorities. Drawing upon the work of literary scholars Leslie Adelson and Andreas Huyssen and film scholar Hamid Naficy, I contend that the films I discuss provide evidence for the emergence of new national narratives that could potentially link Germans from
minority groups to a broader national imaginary and offer an alternative to the language of divisiveness currently dominating public discourse. In addition, I question how this development can be seen in the context of changes in the European film industry that have begun to redefine ‘national’ cinema, encouraging the embrace of filmmakers who figuratively extend the boundaries of the nation.
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Introduction

The end of the Cold War and an increasingly global economy has compelled a reevaluation of the nature and significance of national borders. This is especially true in post-Wall Germany, which has experienced not only the dismantling of the border between two formerly sovereign states, but an influx of immigrants from the defunct Eastern bloc nations as well as Africa and the Middle East. As a result, there have been heated controversies over the high cost of integrating former East Germans, and proposed changes in citizenship and asylum laws have some Germans worried that Germany is becoming an ‘immigration nation.’ Yet as historians Jarausch and Geyer maintain, shifting borders and populations were integral to the experience of Germans long before the upheavals of the twentieth century, and even precede the inception of the nation-state in 1871 (22). Stemming from this experience, a heightened awareness of borders and the landscape of emotions this awareness engenders has become part of the national imaginary. However reluctant some may be to admit it, these notions connect ‘non-minority’ Germans with the immigrants and ethnic minority groups they are often unwilling to claim as part of their own.

My dissertation explores this heightened awareness, or what I term ‘border consciousness,’ as expressed in the work of three contemporary German filmmakers, and questions whether it may provide an opening for a new understanding of German national identity. In order to work through this argument, I first examine the relationship between cinema and nation, discussing the extent to which cinema both reinforces and subverts national borders and how it has
responded to recent changes in the understanding and experience of national identity, particularly in Europe. The second section of the chapter outlines the reasons a focus on borders is particularly appropriate as the basis for an exploration of German national identity, and I consider both German history and culture as well as the importance of Germany in the evolving process of European self-definition. Finally, I discuss the various ways ‘border consciousness’ has been defined by other scholars, explain how it fits into the analysis of German cinema, and introduce the filmmakers whose work I will analyze in the dissertation.

I. Cinema and National Borders

Alan Williams, in his introduction to *Film and Nationalism*, explains the connection between cinema and nation when he notes that the narrative space of classic fiction film can provide the conditions necessary for the formation of an “imagined community,” which requires, according to Benedict Anderson, “homogeneous, empty” space and time in which a group of people can construct the narrative of their history and define their commonalities (Anderson 7-26). These concepts, articulated particularly effectively in the 19th century European novel, are even more appropriately embodied in classical narrative film (Williams 2), which tells stories that progress in a more or less linear fashion within a defined historical and spatial context. Though these stories are obviously not restricted to narrative spaces that exist within national borders, the model provided by narrative film in which characters from a particular time and place move in an apparently predestined manner towards a resolution of issues brought up in the plot mirrors a
way of thinking about a people’s movement through history that Anderson sees as prerequisite to the development of nationalism.

At the same time, narrative film can provide more than just a model for the homogenous, empty time and the space necessary for national identity to form - it can also contribute to the construction of a specific national community, helping to define its limits by drawing borders around both the space of the nation and the people it ‘properly’ incorporates. First, cinema can reinforce national boundaries through a process of mapping, which includes the use of spectacle specifically identifiable as ‘national’ and the representation of movement through a particular space. In an article comparing the visual evocation of national identity in history painting and cinema, Anthony Smith effectively demonstrates the way spectacle can work by outlining the similarities between tableaux, scenes that are part of a longer sequence of events that were used in 18th and 19th century painting to epitomize an entire historical episode, and scenes in films like Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky*. Eugene Delacroix’s *Massacre of Chios* (1824), for example, which depicted the drama of national awakening as well as “the ethnic contrast between the noble, suffering Greeks, revealed through their beautiful ‘classical’ bodies, and the savage, merciless, scimitar-bearing Turkish horsemen,” can be seen as a spiritual precursor to the scene in Eisenstein’s film of the invasion of Psokov by the Teutonic Knights (53). In addition, film is especially effective in the representation of “ethnoscapes,” the “poetic landscape of distinctive ethnic communities” where “the territory mirrors the ethnic community and is historicized by the communal events and processes whose relics and monuments dot the landscape, so that the land comes to belong to
the people in the same way that the people belong to a particular land…” (55). In the construction of such ethnoscapes, cinema follows in the tradition of landscape paintings such as John Martin’s biblical dramas and Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s magnificent depictions of Roman festivals and rituals (55). Painstaking attention to period detail and archeological verisimilitude in films such as Ben Hur and Ivan the Terrible are significant not because they ‘correctly’ portray a people’s history and environment but because they seem ethically and morally authentic, evoking the spirit of a people and its attachment to its homeland.

Another way cinema can provide a psychological map that contributes to the definition of nation is by the representation of movement through space. A contemporary example of this is evident in the post-Wall German road movies of the 1990s, which were inspired by the new spacial and social configuration of unified Germany (Hake, German National Cinema 185). Figuratively marking a desire to construct a more inclusive national self-image, the movement of characters, often thrown together by circumstance, from cities to provincial towns and countrysides where they encountered various “others” provided the nation with fantasmatic images of their new homeland where all differences could be surmounted (185). In several of these films, the former GDR served as both a focus of nostalgia for ‘simpler’ times and as a region in need of colonization by the ‘wiser’ West. For example, in Go Trabi, Go (Timm 1991), an East German Trabi automobile, the brunt of jokes on both sides of the former border, is restored by an Afro-German after having been badly damaged by neo-Nazis. The Trabi showcased in the film provides its former East German owners with the means to travel, finally experiencing the
‘freedom’ of the West and navigating the borders of their new nation at the same time (Naughton 166, 178).

Secondly, cinema can limit the imaginary composition of the nation, most importantly through the denial or repression of difference within its borders. As Anderson maintains, one of the essential characteristics of nationalism’s imagined community is its insistence on limits regarding who is and is not included. Andrew Higson, in his article “The Concept of National Cinema,” adds that in order to analyze what is “national” about a cinema, one must examine not only the content of films and their take on generic conventions, the worldview the cinema expresses, and any unique formal attributes associated with a particular tradition but also how the cinema contributes to the achievement of cultural hegemony in which one definition of the nation becomes standardized. He describes this as a myth-making process that involves both the generation of certain meanings and the containment of others (54). Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy provide an example of this process in an article on what they term “deep nation” as articulated in Turkish cinema culture. “Deep nation” refers to the most fundamental level of belonging in any group, founded on an act of symbolic violence (as in Freud’s mythological murder of the father) that binds the nation together. One of the resulting “binding mechanisms” is the “point of silence” (Sibony), in which the group refuses to recognize the arbitrary nature of its original act of formation, necessarily involving the exclusion of certain groups and the denial of difference in a heterogeneous society (Robins and Aksoy 205). In Turkey the imaginary reality of deep nationalism has had to confront the “embodied reality” of a multicultural society. The history of Turkish cinema has reflected this
confrontation, as government censors refused to allow any films that questioned an ideal image of the state and nation as defined by the Kemalist regime. This included not only implicit criticisms of government policies regarding minority groups and the exposure of class differences but also portrayals of Anatolian peasants as “backward” (212-213). The authors argue further that even movements against censorship among filmmakers, expressed in film magazines such as Ulusal Sinema (modern Turkish for “national cinema”) and Milli Sinema (Ottoman Turkish for “national cinema”) simply reflected an attempt to redefine deep nationalism in different terms. The latter movement, for example, supported efforts to promote Islamic culture as the basis for Turkish national identity (214).

Robins and Aksoy’s article, focused largely on Turkish “art” cinema, provides an opportunity to emphasize another important point: the significance of cinema to the creation and reinforcement of national boundaries can be found not only in the manner in which it represents the nation to its imagined community but in the way the community projects itself to the rest of the world. Art cinema, as opposed to domestic commercial film, is produced largely for international consumption, and thus contributes to a nation’s image abroad. Higson refers to the semiotic principle of defining meaning through difference as the process through which national cinemas portray themselves internationally: “The task is to try to establish the identity of one national cinema by its relationship to and differentiation from other national cinemas: British cinema is what it is by virtue of what it is not – American cinema, or French cinema, or German cinema, etc....” (55). The attempt to construct an identity through difference is often seen as the motivation behind the effort of
many national cinemas, particularly in Europe, to define themselves and, by extension, their societies, in opposition to an Other, usually Hollywood and American culture. The problem is that for many from the first postwar generation of filmmakers, Hollywood also provided the site for their initial encounter with cinema, setting the stage for a complex process of identification with and rejection of their cinematic forebears. The directors associated with New German Cinema, for example, imagined a German identity by first embracing American culture through its cinema, AFN radio and Disney comics, “finding in them a liberation and refuge from the stultifying, repressed and dishonest atmosphere of the parental home during the Adenauer years” (Elsaesser European Cinema 304). At the same time, at the height of the New German Cinema in the 1970s, America was seen as acting aggressively outside its borders, and the directors responded to their ambivalence towards their “elective fathers” by constructing a national imaginary that stood between Weimar liberalism and Nazi totalitarianism (304).

The complexity of this process of identification and rejection in the relationship between Hollywood and national cinemas illustrates that while the effort to define a national community by drawing its borders, determining its composition and emphasizing its differences has been reinforced through the cinematic medium, cinema’s inherent transnationality may also invest it with the potential to offer new ways of thinking about national communities that can encompass the social, political and economic changes of the past two decades. This potential can be seen as both integral to the medium itself and a function of historical circumstance. First, considering the basic antagonism between the
cinematic medium and the development of a national cinema, Susan Hayward questions what “territory” national cinema occupies, when it is a basically a hybrid product:

It exists as a cultural miscegenation, a deeply uncertain product, therefore, as to its heritage – *patrimoine* as the French put it, makes the point more clearly. Who and where is the father? While it may matter to hegemony, it does not to cinema in and of itself. For it is a production whose reproducers are wide and scattered and not one – not a single maternal body, nor a lone patriarchal one. Its moreness, its hybridity challenges the deadliness of patriarchal (and modernist) binary thought. It is, in the end, as much about flux and difference as the human body (101).

By emphasizing the “hybridity” and “moreness” of the medium itself, Hayward points out the difficulty cinema has in reinforcing the “masquerade of unity” nationalism attempts to present. And it is not only in the production process that cinema violates the boundaries of the nationalist project. As Stephen Schindler and Lutz Koepnick note, the cinematic experience often transcends the narratives and agendas that are forced upon it. They ask whether we do not “invariably enter a world of global orientations and cosmopolitan deterritorialization whenever a film’s first image leads our senses to places never visited before as such, no matter whether or not our objects of pleasure seek to endorse sedentary homes and strictly bounded existences” (14). Second, since the social revolutions of the 1960s and 70s and the focus on the nation’s margins, it has become increasingly difficult, especially in the West, for cinema unproblematically to be co-opted into the promotion of a single national myth or ideology. As previously repressed or denied groups become ‘visible,’ partially through cinematic exposure, a paradox is created in which national cinema defies the idea of the nation as a unified identity (Hayward 94-95). Finally, since the advent of television, which has allowed cinematic tropes to be
played and replayed on the small screen, combined with postwar doubts about “grand narratives” and movements such as the French New Wave, films have become increasingly self-reflexive and ironic, so that any intended or unintended ‘message’ that might reinforce an exclusive national identity will now likely be interpreted far differently than in previous eras (Ray).

In addition, while classic narrative film can be compared to the novel in its capacity to reinforce the idea of a people’s movement through history within a particular set of boundaries, there has been a parallel tendency in postwar cinema to subvert this movement. National space, figured particularly in genres such as the historical and “heritage” film, has been ‘violated’ by representations of vague or ambiguous borders and the use of spectacle to interrogate rather than glorify a nation’s history. For example, Rosalind Galt has argued that changes in the geographical contours of Europe since the end of the Cold War have been reflected in the way spectacle is used in recent European cinema. Refusing to differentiate between “popular” genres, such as heritage films, and “art” cinema, Galt analyzes films from the 1990s that portray another period of border destabilization, the years immediately following World War II. In works such as Lars von Trier’s Zentropa (1991) and Cinema Paradiso (1988), both the refusal of spectacle and the spectacular image, respectively, are effective in mapping contemporary European histories and their concern with fluctuating borders and identities onto postwar instabilities, thus offering new ways of looking at both the past and present. Far from being apolitical, as cinemas of spectacle are often seen,¹ the films discussed by

¹ Galt cites Higson’s argument that spectacle distracts from any political content in
Galt use *la belle image* to question in particular the use of landscape both to define a nation and to whitewash or aestheticize its history.

Contemporary Europe also provides an example of the ways in which political, social and economic circumstances can impact the participation of cinema in the process of defining the nation. Since the 1980s, factors such as changes in the global film industry, the move towards European integration, and the reluctance on the part of many Western European governments to continue to fund unprofitable film projects whose only ‘value’ is their contribution to a nation’s cultural identity can all be seen as contributing, for good or ill, to a reduction in the significance of national borders as expressed and defined through national cinemas. After the GATT crisis in the 1980s, when European film companies lost their battle to include film among those industries permitted protection under the new treaty, Hollywood was more effectively able to eliminate competition in both distribution and exhibition, and to invest heavily in domestic European productions (Wayne 5-23). In Germany, this coincided with a movement towards conservative, pro-market politics and a desire to conform to trends in European funding (which provided subsidies to international co-productions), leading to a restructuring of both the national film subsidy board (*Filmförderungsanstalt*, created in the 1970s to support the production of quality films) and regional funding boards. Competitive bidding wars for national and European financing resulted in a pooling of subsidy programs and the coordination of regional resources, which placed an emphasis on projects that were commercially promising and not necessarily of high quality, with the narrative (8).
ultimate purpose of bringing jobs to a region rather than to promote national culture. Thus, as Marc Silberman explains, the new Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg encouraged its students to reject the auteur approach to filmmaking, with its highly individualistic expression and lack of regard for profit, in favor of commercially viable work more easily integrated into the modern entertainment industry (“Popular Cinema” 159), in which distribution and exhibition is largely in the hands of American multinationals.

On the one hand, these changes have been blamed (in the case of Germany) for the death of quality cinema and its replacement with a “cinema of consensus” (Rentschler) enamored only of profit margins and the ‘hipness’ of the image instead of a genuine engagement with ongoing social, political and national identity issues. Others have noted a growing commodification of the nation, in which the national serves only as a “minor accent” of the global language of Hollywood (Koepnick 205). Elsaesser uses the term “impersoNation” to describe this trend, as he discusses Danny Boyle’s *Trainspotting*, among other contemporary European films: “…the label ‘national’ in the cinema has come back in almost every European country as a form of branding, a marketing tool, signifying the local – maybe here, too, reinventing the national – for external, i.e. global use” (*European Cinema* 71). He compares Wenders’ “self-conscious assumption of his role as a German auteur” to *Trainspotting’s* “post-national Scottishness,” in which the latter uses “sarcastic” self-othering to appeal to international audiences who “play the role of the non-antagonistic other, against whom a national (or regional) cinema does not assert its identity in difference but to whom it presents itself as the impersoNation of
‘difference’" (72). Therefore, commodification and impersonation of the nation in
contemporary European film creates an identity that is imagined neither by and for
the whole community to whom it refers nor to promote a national cultural identity
abroad but in order to sell an easily swallowed version of a familiar ‘other.’

At the same time, the conceptualization of national cinema as stuck in a
binary relationship with an imaginary ‘other’ through which it defines itself is
premised upon an idea of the nation, defined by Anderson, as a “limited” entity, and
perhaps therein lies the problem. After his groundbreaking article “The Concept of
National Cinema” (1989), Andrew Higson reconsidered the subject in “The Limiting
Imagination of National Cinema” (1995). Noting that the nation’s public sphere and
its discourses of patriotism are bound up in a continuous battle to transform
heterogeneity and the experience of dislocation into notions of a rooted community,
he argues that while sometimes a focus on rootedness will predominate, at others
an emphasis on mobility and difference will prevail (65). It is often assumed,
moreover, that mass communication is central in converting diverse groups into a
community that shares the same values. Yet that community need not be national;
for example, the collective experience of Diana’s funeral was not necessarily shared
by all British citizens, though her fans worldwide may have formed a collectivity
that did have a similar experience. In terms of cinema, Higson points out that
audiences for national films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Shakespeare in
Love* also gather for Hollywood features, and that all equally play a potential role in
the construction of British cultural identity, though the “communities” that gather
for these common experiences are rarely unified but “contingent, complex,
fragmented and overlapping with other identities that have more to do with generation, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, politics or style than with nationality” (66). He suggests that understanding national cinema as a kind of branding or marketing tool used to support a domestic film industry need not be a negative thing, but that it should not be expected at the same time to embody an oppositional, anti-Hollywood style of filmmaking that reflects some sort of national character, since “the contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be either local or transnational than national” (73).

Perhaps also recognizing the problems inherent in understanding the nation as a unified entity with firm rather than fluctuating and permeable borders, in his more recent work Elsaesser has developed the concept of “double occupancy,” suggesting that “the mirror-relations and forms of ‘othering’ typical of the previous period (of European filmmaking) may be in the process of being superseded, as identity politics through boundary-drawing gives way to general recognition of co-habitation, mutual interference and mutual responsibility as necessary forms of new solidarity and sense of co-existence” (European Cinema 27-28). As an example of what he means by “double occupancy,” Elsaesser describes the film Amsterdam Global Village (Van der Keuken 1996), in which an elderly Jewish-Dutch woman visits the old flat where she and her family lived before they were deported by the Nazis. She shares her memories of exile and loss with the young Surinamese mother who is the current occupant. Though the space is completely changed, the two women make a connection across a mutual experience of dislocation that is not exactly comparable, yet that still allows them to create and sustain an emotional
bond. The film encourages the viewer to “ponder the possibility of putting space, time and place ‘under erasure’: to see it both yield, erase and keep a memory within a history, while making room for a narrative of double occupancy” (112).

Elsaesser provides another example which comes a bit closer to the goal of this project: an examination of the ways national borders, both physical and conceptual, past and present, leave their trace in the work of several contemporary German filmmakers. In the film *Goodbye Lenin* (Becker 2003), the GDR past is overlayed upon a unified present, as a young boy tries to prevent his mother, who has just awakened from a coma, from the unhealthy shock she would undoubtedly suffer upon realizing that her socialist country no longer exists. To this end he “interferes” in her perception of her surroundings, largely by simulating the nightly GDR news broadcast and using it to explain the changes she sees outside her window. Implicit in this story is the recognition that, although the West Germans have taken over the physical space of the former socialist state, the new office buildings and businesses co-exist with the memories, dreams and disappointments of former Easterners. Eventually, the son begins to believe in the fictional world he is creating for her as he recodes the Western news media’s images of the fall of the Wall, because, as Elsaesser notes, “...it allows that other – utopian – reality to co-exist with the new one...as if the ultimate addressee of his manipulation were not his mother, but he himself, and with it, his generation: double occupancy redeems a dream while not being in denial of reality. It is his own trauma/coma that he was able to narrativize and therapize” (128). The “impersoNation” the boy tries to enact expresses the desire for a chance to start over, for a “system re-boot” that would
allow the imagination of a future in which the historical sufferings, accomplishments and dreams of people on one side of the former border would not be willed away but incorporated into a common vision.

II. Borders in German and Contemporary European Culture

Historically, national borders have been reinforced, subverted, redefined and questioned through the cinematic medium. Yet an exploration of the treatment and representation of national borders in German cinema is especially important, since the history and culture of Germany is marked by a particular uncertainty and ambivalence about borders and their relationship to national and local identity, an uncertainty that resonates now throughout Europe as a whole. First, the question of who the “Germans” are and how the borders of their nation should be drawn has not only been at the root of much of the trauma suffered by Europe in the 20th century, but has given rise to a defensive position regarding national identity in Germany that refuses to recognize historical realities. Konrad Jarausch refers to a belief of many conservatives that their nation is “not an immigration country,” calling it an “extraordinary act of amnesia” that denies a long history of migrations in and out of the region (197). Instead of the exception, mobility has been the norm, yet there has been a failure to incorporate the fluctuation of borders and movement of populations into national narratives (197-198). Jarausch suggests several reasons for this, including the controversial “jus sanguinis” law of 1913, which accorded citizenship only to those with “German blood,” thus including members of German-
speaking communities in other parts of Europe and the United States but excluding Polish, and later Turkish, laborers living in Germany; the trauma associated with forced mobility during and after the First and Second World Wars; and the association of mobility with loss rather than, as in American discourse, with liberation (198-202).

The final reason noted above, the association of mobility with loss, stems from the importance of Heimat to identity in the German context, in which the term refers to, among other things, “...the site of one’s lost childhood, of family, and of identity; an unalienated, precapitalist mode of production; romantic ideals of the relationship between country dweller and nature; and ‘everything that is not distant and foreign’” (Kaes, qtd. in von Moltke 8). For those living in a region characterized by fluctuating borders and uprooted populations, attachment to Heimat provided a way of holding onto an inviolable, though imaginary and impossible, space. Peter Blickle, in his attempt to develop a critical theory of the term, refers to the explanation given by sociologist Norbert Elias, who argues that because German tribes were never protected by natural boundaries, they developed an uncertainty about borders that resulted in an equivalent uncertainty about identity (48). The concept of Heimat provided a geographically-bounded sense of security and an identity that was inextricably associated with place (48-50). As Blickle puts it, Heimat not only resembles identity, it is identity, “...a way of organizing space and time and a communally defined self in order to shape meaning. Heimat is identity manifested in a social, imagistic way” (67). This intense relationship between a “communally defined self” and a geographical place has led to an association of the
term with exclusionary politics; those people, places and ideas from ‘outside’ Heimat have been construed, at different points in German history, as a threatening ‘other.’ As Johannes von Moltke points out in his study of German Heimatfilme, this ‘other’ has been variously associated with ‘the foreign’ (die Fremde) as well as experiences of exile and homelessness (5). Thus, one who leaves the Heimat, whether by choice or not, is looked upon with pity, his or her identity collapsed with that of the foreigner, the wanderer, the “Jew” (Blickle 78).

However, the association of mobility and displacement with the negative experience of loss in German discourse has been complicated by other perspectives on the concept of Heimat. Rather than opposing in simple binary terms the ‘outside,’ or the ‘foreign,’ von Moltke argues that Heimat has also functioned in a dialectical relationship with otherness, and in fact helps not only to mediate between the known and the unknown but can even facilitate the penetration of the outside world into the insular community. An example of this relationship is apparent when one looks at the historical negotiations between Heimat and both the nation and modernity. Blickle notes that because it obtains its strength from the familiar and the spatially accessible, Heimat has often had an uncomfortable relationship with national identity, serving to counterbalance provincial ambivalence about being incorporated into an alien political entity, from the late 19th century through the recent unification of East and West Germany (47). Von Moltke, however, referring to studies by historian Celia Applegate and Alon Confino, argues that Heimat has also functioned as a mediator between the national and the local, reconciling the small, familiar place with a larger, more impersonal national
space, and even as a local metaphor for the nation itself, beginning with the imperial period (9). This reconciliation has even extended to the incorporation into *Heimat* of qualities considered anathema to it, including an acceptance of mobility and non-traditional ideas, through the experiences of the German expellees, or *Flüchtlinge*. Forced out of the lost territories of the Third Reich after the Second World War, large numbers of ethnic Germans had to resettle in the small towns and villages of Germany. As von Moltke maintains in his chapter on the portrayal of these refugees in the *Heimatfilme*, sociologists in postwar Germany saw the refugee as a “figure for new departures, explicitly ascribing to this figure some crucial modernizing impulses” (140). In films such as *Waldwinter* (Liebeneiner 1957), the Silesian refugees in their second Bavarian *Heimat* facilitate economic progress as they rebuild their new home, becoming a new national prototype for Germany in the midst of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (147). Their displacement allowed them to become representative of the social changes many felt were needed in postwar Germany, including a redefinition of traditional family structures and behavioral patterns. Infiltrating *Heimat*, these foreigners inspired sociologist Helmut Schelsky’s observation that “once migrations have exceeded a certain measure, it is no longer the nomad who adapts to his environment, but the environment that adapts to the nomad” (qtd. in von Moltke 142). The violation of the boundaries of *Heimat*, serving in this case as a projection of the German nation, by the foreign is seen as a progressive move contributing to Germany’s postwar modernization, suggesting that the flux and permeability historically characterizing its borders may not have been entirely undesirable at this historical juncture.
At the same time, it is important to note that the ‘foreigners’ populating the films discussed by von Moltke were still considered German according to the citizenship law of 1913, which continued to be in force at that time (it was not finally revised until 1998). This law held that only descendants of Germans could become German citizens, and although many of the Flüchtlinge had lost their citizenship as a result of being incorporated into another state, according to German law they could regain it as soon as they relocated to German territory (Wolff 40). In addition, according to the films von Moltke cites, the foreign ideas they brought with them, such as the importance of work and material gain to the detriment of family and communal life and a valorization of mobility above settled existence, which replaced class distinction as a “key social category” (Schelsky, cited in v. Moltke 141), were largely associated with American values. In the context of the burgeoning Cold War, the subtext of many of these films could be seen not only as a willingness to accept the foreign into the space of Heimat and, by extension, the new West German nation but also as an attempt to solidify ideologically the developing national borders between the socialist and the capitalist German states. Thus, the tension between the desire to incorporate all ‘ethnic Germans’ into a national self-concept and to align the new West German state firmly within the capitalist sphere, which necessitated a clear differentiation between the ‘real’ Germany and the socialist ‘puppet state,’ was mediated by the figure of the expellee from the East who became a ‘good capitalist.’ This tension remained at the root of Ostpolitik and the controversies surrounding the definition of Germany’s national borders up to and even beyond the 1970s, contributing to the ambiguity embodied by the Berlin Wall,
a symbol that, according to Edgar Reitz, "represented" Germany in the same way the White House represents the United States (cited in Morley and Robins, *Spaces of Identity* 97).

A second reason for the focus on national borders in this study of contemporary German film involves this idea of a wall as the German national symbol. From 1961 to 1989, the Berlin Wall was a physical manifestation of the Cold War, dividing a city geographically situated in the heart of socialist East Germany and representing the imposition of national borders on a country that had lost its right to self-definition. Even after 1989, its persistence in discourse regarding issues of German identity attests to its power. Referring to the psychological effects of almost fifty years of separate political, social and economic development on Germans from both sides of the Wall, West German writer Peter Schneider, in his 1983 novel *Der Mauerspringer (The Wall Jumper)*, presciently remarked that "it will take us longer to tear down the Wall in our heads (*Mauer im Kopf*) than any wrecking company will need for the Wall we can see" (119). This "*Mauer im Kopf*" now describes the lingering divisions between former East and West Germans noted by numerous scholars and journalists (including Berdahl, 1999, and Stevenson and Theobald, 2000, among many others). Berdahl, for example, in her ethnographic study of a former East German border village from 1989 - 1991, argues that these divisions are not only a remnant of years of separation but have been both maintained and reinforced by the representation of those living on both sides of the former border as "Other" (167). At least during the first years after unification, stories abounded regarding encounters with predatory
and abusive Westerners, which eventually led to a kind of resistance against the sense of “Nachholungsbedarf” (“need to catch up”) felt by many Easterners, who fought back by rejecting West German judgments and purchasing old East German goods. This developing East German consciousness, termed “Ostalgie” or “nostalgia for the East” involved the creation of a boundary between the two no longer physically divided Germanies that was not only spatial but temporal, aiding in the creation of a separation between before and after ‘the Fall’ (177). Theobald and Stevenson add that “cultural disunity” continued to characterize relations between the two groups on the level of communicative and discursive practices throughout the 1990s (1).

In addition to the lingering ‘wall’ between the former East and West Germany, Peter Schneider has more recently brought attention to the ‘wall’ that has been figuratively erected between Germans and their Muslim neighbors within Germany’s borders, largely Turks who were brought into the country as guest workers beginning in the early 1960s, and their wives, children and grandchildren. In a somewhat alarming article written for the New York Times Magazine in 2005, Schneider warns: “There is a new wall rising in the city of Berlin. To cross this wall you have to go to the city’s central and northern districts – to Kreuzberg, Neukölln, and Wedding – and you will find yourself in a world unknown to the majority of Berliners” (“The New Berlin Wall” 68). He explains that before 9/11, when many Muslims sent off bottle rockets in celebration of the event, Germans got along well with immigrants and their children, noting that the well-publicized racial attacks had occurred in former East German Brandenberg, with a foreign population of only
2%. Schneider goes on to discuss the “parallel Muslim world arising in [the German public’s] midst,” revealed by “three rebellious Muslim musketeers,” women authors who grew up in Germany and “speak better German than many Germans” and who wrote about their experiences with the oppressive Muslim patriarchy (68). At the root of this problem, he finds, lies Germany’s failure to turn Anatolian “peasants” into “city dwellers,” and he traces the growing conservatism of the Muslim community to the “guilt‐ridden tolerance of liberal multiculturalists” (71). While his purpose in the article is to urge Germany to protect these women’s rights and to call for a reform of Islam as it is practiced in the West that would encourage acculturation, his use of language participates in the reinforcement of the very “wall” he criticizes, for example by emphasizing the ‘otherness’ of the female authors through his praise of their German language skills (even though, as he notes, they were raised and educated in Germany). His final call to action is perhaps most revealing: “Islam needs something like an Enlightenment, and only by sticking hard to their own Enlightenment, with its separation of religion, can the Western democracies persuade their Muslim residents that human rights are universally valid. Perhaps this would lead to the reforms necessary for integration to succeed” (71; my emphasis). In this passage, Schneider distorts history (contact with the Muslim world contributed strongly to the European Enlightenment), ignores recent changes in German law that has allowed former guest workers and their children to become citizens, not simply “residents,” and conflates Muslim Turkish-German citizens with the “foreign” Muslim population. Through the wording of his argument if not its thrust, Schneider gives credence to the notion expressed by
Turkish-German author Zafer Senocak that in Germany, the Turk “is and remains a foreigner” (8).

In both of these examples, the idea of the wall as a metaphor for social and cultural divisions within German society connotes an impermeable barrier, a hardening of positions and a clear definition of identities. Besides lumping together whole categories of people that cross generational, class and gender lines on either side of a figurative solid line, this concept implies that there is an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside,’ especially considering the uneven distribution of power between each of the two groups. In order to analyze the potential impact of this metaphor, it is useful to consider David Morley's discussion of the significance of the abject in identity formation and the role of mass communication, including film, in the reinforcement of boundaries. He refers specifically to Sibley’s argument that “the determination of a border between inside and outside [proceeds] according to the ‘simple logic of excluding filth,’ as Kristeva puts it, or the imperative of distancing from disgust” (Sibley, qtd. in Morley “Bounded Realms” 161). From this perspective, metaphorical walls are erected to ensure the purity of social space, leading to a geography of exclusion and a policing of boundaries. Satellite television especially contributes to this process by allowing viewers to choose programs and films that help to enclose and protect their particular social space, and to exclude those that don’t. Morley points to the popularity of Australian soap operas in multicultural Britain, for example, in which the absence of non-whites “offers the solace of symbolic submersion in a lost world of settled homogeneity” (162). Abjection becomes a means of “border maintenance,” allowing the illusion of a fixed, essential
identity to remain unchallenged in the face of sometimes tremendous political and social change.

Various scholars of German culture have remarked upon the significance of abjection in relation to post-unification German identity formation (Halle; Elsaesser; Theobald; Flinn). In an article on the sudden increase in horror film production in Germany between 1989-2000, Randall Halle argues that the “monstrosity” underlying everyday life that is characteristic of this genre takes the form of the “disruption of once-stable borders” during this period. Director Christoph Schlingensrief in particular portrays the destabilization of political boundaries through narratives in which violent anti-social behavior occurs at national borders, with characters struggling desperately over who will be expelled. In *The German Chainsaw Massacre* (1990) the contest is between former East Germans and a psychotic butcher family from the West who tries to turn them into sausages, while in *Terror 2000* (1992) German citizens violently attack foreigners from Poland. Besides these literal engagements with the dismantled border in which the definition of the abject is at issue, Halle suggests that other films in this genre address the besieged subjectivity caused by unification and mark an attempt to reassert coherent borders in terms of the body. Referring to Kristeva’s observation that “the eroticization of abjection, and perhaps any abjection to the extent that it is already eroticized, is an attempt at stopping the hemorrhage [of subjectivity]” (Kristeva, qtd. in Halle “Unification Horror” 295), Halle discusses *Nekromantik 2* (Buttgereit, 1991), in which the main character’s strange perversion pushes subjectivity to its limits as she falls in love with a corpse, something completely
without desire that is in effect her total opposite. As a result of her passion for something incapable of responding to her, she becomes “pure desire” and is established as a “fully contained coherent self,” yet horrifying, a situation that Halle likens to the achievement of German unification:

Is it significant that at the point of unification such a contained self appears to horrify? This was the point of the emergence of the longed-for coherent German political body, a whole country, no longer defined by the dismemberment of East-West opposition. Instead of producing such coherency, however, the loss of the border reshuffled the possibilities of subjective unity and disunity. The subject position of the East German citizen became impossible; moreover, in fairly unexpected ways the West German subjects, who kept their citizenship, lost their state as well. The Berlin Republic appeared as designation of a Federal Republic new to all its citizens. Is it possible then that Nekromantik 2 and Unification Horror in general marked an attempt to stop the hemorrhage of subjectivity experienced at the point of unification? (296)

Halle then describes a scene in which the necrophiliac Monika figuratively reasserts her own borders in an effort to rebel against her fascination with the abject, a reaction with which the spectator can identify. When she first encounters the corpse and runs to the bathroom to vomit, Monika is attempting to reject her desire (and thus her own abject state) and reestablish the boundary between the internal and the external. Halle compares this to the experience of the audience as he concludes, “The process of abjection reaffirms Monika’s borders, leaves her self-contained, an absolute monadic subject. The abjection of the spectator of the film is similar. It is not the ‘gross out’ that is desired but the experience that ensues, the reassertion of subjective borders and coherency” (296). German viewers, he suggests, use these films as “cheap therapy” that “makes bearable the lack of the social body outside the film fantasy” (296).

While Halle sees the process of abjection in the films he categorizes as
“Unification Horror” as an expression of the fear that the newly coherent German national body masks a frightening loss of subjectivity brought about by the dismantling of previously well-defined borders, other analysts find examples in contemporary German film in which the state of abjection is transformed into a condition of possibility. In his discussion of Goodbye, Lenin, Elsaesser notes that the mother’s coma is such a state of abjection, and yet the son’s desire to draw her back into the German national narrative inspires him to rewrite recent history so that she can be incorporated into it. Elsaesser also comments upon the proliferation of what he terms “abject heroes” in contemporary German and European film. He argues that such characters, sometimes but not always members of minority groups but generally outsiders, are unable to enter into any kind of social exchange, even standing outside the usual paradigm of victim/victimizer or victim/savior. Instead they are left without the ability to define themselves, stripped of jobs, friends, family, culture and in some cases sanity and even memory. As subjects that are present but without a social function, they occupy a space that is without meaning. Yet their very state of ambiguity may offer an alternative to the binarism of inside/outside, as Elsaesser notes:

Abject heroes or heroines in European cinema are not only symptomatic for what they tell us about a society and subjectivity that no longer has a social contract about what count as the minimum conditions of value and use, labor and affective work in a given society or community. They may also tell us something about the conditions of possibility of what it means to be human, and thus they approach what I call the utopian dimension of my double-occupancy (European Cinema 125).

Using Fatih Akin’s Gegen die Wand (2004) as an example, Elsaesser maintains that the protagonists refuse to conform to the social structures of which they are a part
(family, the larger Turkish community) in order to create their own utopia, even though this experiment ultimately fails.

Caryl Flinn, in her article on depictions of Turkish-Germans in German films of the 1990s, makes a similar point. Using as an example Doris Dörrie’s *Happy Birthday, Türke* (1993), she argues that the motif of trash in films about Turkish-Germans often becomes more than just a representation of the treatment of minorities in Germany. Though as a liberal German filmmaker Dörrie attempts to give new value to trash in order to turn the tables on societal attitudes towards outsiders, the ambiguity of the category of garbage itself complicates her efforts. As Flinn points out, though Turks are constructed as out of place in three ways – they are in the wrong place, displaced and out of places to go, at the same time they occupy a large “place” in Germany, a fact which “disrupts traditional, conservative economies of waste that inform racist accounts” (153). The main character in Dörrie’s film, a Turkish-German detective, is able to move between white, Turkish, feminine and masculine spaces, and yet remains outside. This ability is less postmodern nomadism, Flinn argues, than an indication that he occupies a category similar to rubbish, from the perspective of anthropologist Michael Thompson. In his view, rubbish is meant to be kept out of sight, but when it is brought out into the open it becomes located within a liminal space that is not so much “devalued” as “without” value: “…instead of operating in the dyadic system of insider and outsider…it provides a third term between two principle social/economic categories that determine value (of goods, people, etc.): the durable and the transient” (153). A discarded sofa, for example, moves from used furniture (transient) to rubbish to
valuable antique (durable). Rubbish then becomes a neutral category, valued for its nonvalue, able to participate in an economy that normally separates the ‘good’ from the ‘bad.’ The freedom of movement of the film’s main character, then, reveals the instability of the terms “durable” and “transient” by bringing the normally concealed category of rubbish into the open and subverting conventional economies of waste (154). The potential of such a space to resist attempts to define it and to keep its occupants safely out of sight provides an alternative to the concept of the abject as unambiguously ‘outside.’ Thus in the case of Germany the image of a wall as a symbol for the nation, rather than providing clarity about its boundaries, is laden with ambivalence, suggesting that an obsessive concern with who is ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ can also evolve into a re-imagination of the categories themselves.

A third reason to examine the way borders work in contemporary German film is the significance of Germany in the ongoing process of identity formation in Europe, which is associated with changes in the nature and function of borders today. As Morley and Robins remark, the “German story” is at the same time a “symbolic condensation of many of the most problematic themes of the European past and a central issue in the contemporary Realpolitik of Europe” (Spaces of Identity 85). They see the German concept of Heimat as a metaphor for the reaction to recent changes in Europe’s cultural identity, brought on by the fall of the Iron Curtain. When the eastern boundary of Europe was no longer demarcated by the division between the communist and capitalist blocs, Mitteleuropa took on new significance: how was the new Europe to be understood, against what Other was it to be defined? Recently, there has been a debate over the re-establishment of the
ancient definition of Europe as “Christendom”, with Islam supplying the new eastern boundary (“No Place” 457). Especially since 9/11, the temptation has been to develop this conceptual boundary into the notion of a “Fortress Europe,” and to re-establish a protective and regressive notion of home as a bounded territory, whether regional, national or local. Yet just as the effectiveness of Heimat as a way to recreate a sense of wholeness is ultimately an illusion, the idea of a fixed and bounded Europe cannot be sustained. It must give way, the authors argue, to a new definition of home, not as Heimat or fortress but as a space open to the condition of homelessness, recognizing in itself not only the familiar but also the strange (473).

This change in the notion of home is compelled by the redefinition of borders in the modern world. For example, new technologies, the dictates of the global economy, and political upheavals have transformed once concrete territorial boundaries into an “interface” (Virilio, qtd. in Morley and Robins, Spaces of Identity 75). Not only have global systems like information networks and satellite footprints undermined an older, local sense of community, but also the movement of people across boundaries has resulted in the formation of new communities that, though they may not exist on a border, instead “become borders” (Balibar 89). As James Clifford argues in his discussion of contemporary diasporas, terms like diaspora and border “bleed into each other,” since dispersed people “once separated from homelands...increasingly find themselves in border relations with the old country, thanks to a to and fro made possible by modern technologies” (247). These groups challenge notions of purity by their multiple attachments, redefining the local and subverting the nation-state. Rather than being associated exclusively with
transnationality and movement, modern diasporas should be seen as a form of settled community, which may share with indigenous groups an antagonism toward nationalist discourses. Clifford points out that local communities whose histories pre-date the nation-state in which they live often transgress national boundaries through their collective memories, in a way that can be compared to diasporic memory (252-253). At the same time, while the validity of indigenous memories is generally recognized by the nation-state (and often used to ‘authenticate’ it, as with Heimat), diasporic memory is “structurally excluded from national historiograph(ies) of memory” (Huysse, “Diaspora and Nation” 152). The question is whether a new definition of home can include the memories of those living “as a border,” whose various attachments may redefine national boundaries.

In his book Politics and the Other Scene, Etienne Balibar provides further evidence of the ambivalent nature of borders, which he describes as both “polysemic” and “ubiquitous.” They do not have the same meaning for everyone, even those who share nationality; though the state downplays difference in order to validate the idea of a national citizen, it uses borders as a means to discriminate between different classes while keeping intact the symbolism supporting its legitimacy (82). The rich pass through borders; the poor, for whom they serve as obstacles, “reside” there. Though this quality has characterized borders for some time, its impact as a means of social control is intensifying, as borders are now becoming ubiquitous. Economic, cultural and political boundaries are even less likely now than they have been since the development of the nation-state to coincide at a defined territorial point; some no longer exist at the border but are found
wherever institutions exert their control, such as the health or security check (84). These controls form a kind of ‘grid’ over social space, creating classes of people who are neither inside nor outside but are perpetually in transition, “engaged in a process of *negotiation* of their presence and their mode of presence (that is, their political, economic, cultural, religious and other rights) with one or more states” (90). The ambiguous position of Turks in Germany, not to mention more recent groups of immigrants and asylum-seekers, is similar to that of many others in Western Europe as borders become not obsolete but “thinned out and doubled” (92).

III. “Border Consciousness” and German Film

As I have outlined above, rooted in German history and culture is an uncertainty and ambivalence about national borders. This has resulted in a heightened awareness of their significance that I term “border consciousness.” Border consciousness is expressed cinematically through tropes of borders, border crossings, and liminal or abject characters, and can sometimes suggest new foundations upon which national identity might be built. In this study, I analyze border consciousness in the work of German filmmakers from both before and after the *Wende*, beginning with two seminal pre-unification films that use such tropes and figures to ‘re-write’ the myth of the nation. In my second, third and fourth chapters, I explore the articulation of border consciousness in films by Christian Petzold, Andreas Dresen and Fatih Akin, discussing how these post-unification
filmmakers question the self-definition of the new Germany.

By placing the work of West German director Christian Petzold alongside that of former East German filmmaker Andreas Dresen and Turkish-German director Fatih Akin, I mean to interrogate the concept of “accented” cinema put forth by Hamid Naficy in his groundbreaking work *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2002). According to Naficy, representations of borders, border crossings, and liminality in the work of exilic, diasporic and minority/identity filmmakers are evidence of what he terms an “accented style,” grounded in the artist’s geographical and/or cultural displacement. Part of my project is to evaluate the extent to which these representations in films by Dresen and Akin might fit Naficy’s description of accented cinema, or whether they are more profitably understood in the context of German cinema. Though he acknowledges that migrant cinema and national cinemas inform one another (206), by categorizing films in terms of a style that crosses national, cultural and ethnic borders, Naficy necessarily removes the work of accented filmmakers from the context of their specific localities. This may contribute to a kind of mischaracterization, as Yasemin Soysal points out regarding studies of diaspora. Such studies, she maintains, often become “ahistorical” by emphasizing “the presumed rootlessness of immigrant populations in the here and now of the diaspora, and their perpetual longing for then and there” (qtd. in Adelson 8). Such a

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2 Naficy includes in his description of “accented” filmmakers those forced from their countries or lured to the West by the failure of socialism and communism (10). In Chapter 3, I discuss whether or not the dismantling of the socialist state in East Germany might have resulted in a sense of displacement that could qualify some works by filmmakers from the former GDR as “accented.”
conceptualization ignores the “new topography and practices of citizenship” these groups actualize, as they effect changes upon and are simultaneously changed by their new local communities (Adelson 8).

With this issue in mind, I propose that border consciousness can provide a framework through which to consider how representations of borders, border crossings, and ‘borderline’ characters, as well as a focus on issues of exile (both literal and figurative) and home seeking might allow the work of minority and non-minority filmmakers to be read together in a German context. In so doing, I follow Leslie Adelson, Zafer Senocak and Sylvia Kratzer-Juilfs in their efforts to underline commonalities rather than differences between these groups, and to locate mutual engagements with issues that affect both. Adelson contends that the conventional understanding of migrants and their families as existing “between two worlds” mistakenly implies both that the homeland and the host country are essential entities and that the position of immigrant communities “between” the two cultures is static. Instead, in her study of Turkish migrant literature she argues that such works function as a “technology of localization,” and wonders how we can understand the significance of their incorporation into Germany’s culture of history, which has seen so many recent changes (9). In an effort to answer this question, she introduces the concept of “touching tales” as an alternative to the discourse of “betweenness” currently in use, in which certain affective qualities of Turkish-German literature are shown to reflect “German guilt, shame and resentment about the Nazi past, German fears of migration, national taboos in both countries, Turkish fears of victimization and Turkish perceptions of German fantasies” (20).
As an example, Adelson cites Turkish-German author Zafer Senoçak, whose work bears the mark of German as well as Turkish history. In his essay “Thoughts on May 8, 1995,” Senocak discusses his experience as a boy in Turkey of the Allied takeover of Germany in 1945, underscoring both the generational discourse of postwar Germany, in which guilty fathers were contrasted with innocent sons, and the often-troubled relationship to patriarchal legacies experienced by Turks of his age group (163). In this and other work, Senoçak “enters German time” by reflecting upon and expressing an emotional affinity to matters of German history, and through this engagement may possibly stake a claim to a future shared by both groups (169). Similarly, with regard to Turkish-German films of the 1970s and 80s (as well as other migrant cinema) Kratzer-Juifls proposes that although this cinema and New German Cinema were seen as separate, they not only informed one another, but films by migrants in Germany also sometimes offered a way out of difficult issues New German Cinema was unwilling or unable to confront (90). For instance, both groups express a dissatisfaction with their German home, yet the manner in which this home is represented in German migrant cinema offers a new perspective on the notion of Heimat that helps to distance it from its problematic past (184).

A focus on expressions of border consciousness similarly underscores the intersections between the works of contemporary German filmmakers from various backgrounds. Suggesting a sense of alienation and displacement, for example, border consciousness inspires an exploration of different meanings of “exile,” a

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3 I discuss this further in Chapter 4.
loaded word in the German context. Besides evoking the history of the forced exile of Jewish citizens during the Nazi period and the subsequent postwar migrations of ethnic Germans after the war, the word has also been used in reference to the experience of “inner exile” or “inner emigration.” This term originally referred to the survival strategy used by artists and intellectuals during the Third Reich who, despite the burning of their books and the prohibitions against their writings, chose to remain in Germany, sometimes working secretly, instead of emigrating (Scharf 34-35). Later, it was used to describe the reaction of East German artists and intellectuals to the repression they suffered under the GDR (Kratzer-Juilfs 3). In a quite different context, “inner emigration” has also been associated with the response of New German Cinema auteurs to their deep dissatisfaction with postwar Germany; as Inga Scharf notes, though Wenders, Herzog, Fassbinder and Syberberg often suggested that they might leave, they never moved away permanently, but instead “made their inner emigration public by making films about existential ‘homelessness’ in West Germany and programmatically positioning themselves outside of the national hegemonic realm” (35). However, in a figurative sense, the term “exile” can also be used to refer, as I do in this study, to social, political, economic and even emotional alienation and exclusion from the new Germany that elicits the home seeking journeys undertaken by many of the characters in the films I analyze. These journeys are often attempts by liminal or abject characters to move from outside to inside, or from “non-place” to “place” (Augé) that amount to an interrogation of the borders that necessarily must be crossed in the effort to find home.
In addition, by focusing on liminal places and characters my examination of border consciousness also reveals the way these films often construct spaces that permit the articulation of alternative imaginings of national identity. These spaces function as “Thirdspace,” a term Edward Soja, following Henri LeFebvre, uses for “spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginal positioning” (Soja 68). An example of Thirdspace is expressed by Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “Borderlands,” a concept that encompasses and goes beyond the physical border of the Tex-Mex area where she lives to include psychological, sexual and spiritual Borderlands that are “present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (qtd. in Soja 127). Though Thirdspace is still under the control of the dominant order, its libratory promise remains open through the imagination of artists, who can work to retain its “partial unknowability” (67), its potential to stay unfixed and to suggest, but not to define, alternatives to this order. In the films I discuss, such spaces appear in liminal places, like the pub situated “halfway up a staircase” in Dresen’s Halbe Treppe, the margins of the new Mitte in Berlin and the towns that make up the periphery of the Berlin Republic in Petzold’s work, and the utopian, ephemeral spaces Akin imagines, where Turkish-Germans can feel at ‘home.’ Just as Soja conceptualizes, these spaces are “vitally filled with politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of production, reproduction,
exploitation, domination and subjection” (68).

In my first chapter, I begin to define border consciousness through an analysis of two important works that highlight the significance of the city of Berlin to contemporary German national identity. The first, *Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt* (Ruttman 1927), portrays the Weimar-era city as a site of dislocation, filled with immigrants from the countryside and from foreign lands who flocked to Berlin just before and after the turn of the twentieth century. The border consciousness that permeates the film, at once jarring and exhilarating, is evidenced by Ruttman’s use of border tropes and border crossings in a manner that channels and controls the chaos of modernity. The second, *Himmel über Berlin* (Wenders, 1987), made just before the fall of the Wall by a director with a history of meditating upon the historical weight and impact of borders on the self-conception of Germans, narrates the story of an angel initially seen hovering in the Berlin skies who falls in love with a human trapeze artist. The still-present border dividing the city becomes a figure for the unrequited desire of the two lovers, as well as for the loneliness of other city-dwellers whose thoughts and feelings the angels can read but whose lives they are unable to touch. By transgressing both physical and metaphysical borders, Wenders’ characters enable both a new national narrative and a global epic of peace.

After focusing on two films that pre-date unification, with the second, third and fourth chapters I trace the articulation of border consciousness since the *Wende* through the work of Christian Petzold, Andreas Dresen, and Fatih Akin. Petzold is a director associated with the so-called *Berliner Schule*, a cinema characterized by its realism and formal rigor. Much of his work, particularly his “Trilogy of Ghosts,”
involves the physical and metaphysical crossing of borders. The film Yella is a ghost story about a woman from the former East German city of Wittenberg who attempts to escape her abusive husband by crossing the Elbe to Hanover, only to be killed in a car accident. In a flash-forward before she dies she imagines an entire life in the West, and at the end is so disappointed she decides her death is preferable to her ‘life’ in the future. Petzold’s films, described in an article in Sight and Sound as “essays in Germanness,” show Germany “as it is, in all its blandness and flatness, yet loaded with history” (Müller 42). In his work, as in Wenders’ Himmel über Berlin, the border becomes a transcendental space in which every kind of movement is possible, between time and place as well as states of being.

Andreas Dresen, a director from the former East who has found success in a new economic and political environment, has an acute sensitivity to those living on the margins of society. As a result, his films make particularly interesting use of liminal spaces; Halbe Treppe (2001), for example, takes place in Frankfurt/Oder on the German-Polish border, with bridges, empty highways and radio towers providing the setting for a story revolving around his characters’ search for freedom from unsatisfying relationships. In Nachtgestalten (1999), characters begin the film occupying Berlin’s “non-places” and transitional spaces, such as airports, train stations and makeshift shelters, then traverse the city on home seeking journeys that compel them to transcend the often unspoken and unseen barrier between inside and outside. In my chapter on Dresen, I discuss how the dissolution of the GDR may have informed his films, and consider whether or not Naficy’s theories might apply to his work.
Fatih Akin is a second generation Turkish-German whose films have received much attention in recent years. In 2004, *Gegen die Wand* was the first German film in eighteen years to win the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and was the first to address seriously the “wall” that exists between the Turkish-German and non-minority German communities. Yet it also chronicles the efforts of its characters to transcend this and other constraints on their freedom, and, like his other work, is about the transgression of borders. Akin is very clear, especially following the success of *Gegen die Wand*, that he doesn’t want to be seen as ‘representative’ of the Turkish-German community, yet at the same time, he has often been the director of choice to represent the ‘new’ Germany, at least internationally. His success at home and abroad raises, once again, the question of what is meant by ‘national cinema.’ If, as Halle, Elsaesser and others maintain, nations have been commodified in the global marketplace, what does it mean when Akin, whose work largely focuses on migrants and diasporans in Germany, becomes representative of German cinema? What remains to be seen is whether the global image of a ‘new’ Germany will change the way Germans themselves imagine their nation. By locating and examining a common feature Akin’s cinema shares with the work of other German filmmakers, I hope to contribute to the interrogation of the borders that have defined both the

4 “It’s not as though I’m living out a conflict and don’t know where I belong. I want to sample what I need from every culture...I’m not representing the Turkish minority, and nor is my film. I don’t want to be responsible for anything but me” (from an interview for the *Daily Telegraph* [London], February 11, 2005).

5 In a portmanteau entitled *Visions of Europe*, 25 directors, each from a different country, contributed a five-minute short on the European Union. Akin was chosen to represent Germany, and his segment uses the song “*Die alten, bösen Lieder,*” written originally by Heinrich Heine. Also, Akin’s film, *Auf der anderen Seite*, was Germany’s entry in the category of Best Foreign Film at the 2008 Academy Awards.
nation and national cinema and to suggest that articulations of border consciousness offer a means through which a new national imaginary can be understood.
Chapter 1

In a compilation of interviews and essays entitled “On Film”, Wim Wenders explains that only in Berlin could he “experience Germany,” because “history that elsewhere is suppressed is physically and emotionally present” in the German capital. For Wenders, it is more a “site” than a city, where one can “walk around with the invisible ghosts of the future and the past” (233). As a “site,” Berlin is most closely identified with the borders and “voids” that have served to outline the changing contours of German political identity since the beginning of the twentieth century (Huyssen “The Voids of Berlin”). In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the importance of Berlin as a nexus of the tensions surrounding borders and German identity described in Chapter 1. Next, I introduce two films about the city, *Himmel Über Berlin* *(Wings of Desire, Wenders 1987)* and Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt* *(Berlin: Symphony of the Big City 1927)* by situating them in the social, cultural and political context of their times in order to illustrate how Berlin as a site intersects with the aesthetic sensibilities of both modernism and postmodernism. Finally, I analyze the way depictions of the fragmentation and instability that characterize these periods work with representations of the borders, border crossings and voids of Berlin to provide an opening for the construction of a new national narrative.

I. Berlin, Borders and German Identity
As a city perhaps best known for its physical representation of the connection between national borders and German identity, Berlin serves as an ideal starting point for a discussion of border consciousness. Its history brings into play the three reasons outlined in Chapter 1 for the focus on borders in this study: the relationship between shifting borders and the concept of Heimat in the formation of German identity; the association of German national identity with the Berlin Wall and the idea of walls in general; and the impact of changes in the meaning of borders upon Germany’s engagement with otherness. First, the growth of Berlin from a Prussian garrison town to the world’s third largest city from 1871 to 1920 (Hake 19) was largely the result of mass migrations from the countryside. As Sabine Hake notes in her book, *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin*, by 1933 most Berliners were found to have originally come from elsewhere, predominantly the surrounding provinces (68). In contrast to London and Paris, which were large cities before industrialization (Kaes 185), the city of Berlin was born along with the German nation-state, and its evolution mapped Germany’s movement into modernity. As migrants poured in from the small towns and villages of their Heimat, their dominating presence as part of both the large working class and the burgeoning new class of white collar workers helped shape the debate over the manner in which Germany’s capital should embody a nation-state newly emerging as a capitalist democracy. Focusing on architecture as a means to this embodiment, Hake argues that far from adopting unquestioningly the tenets of the cosmopolitan modernism for which the period is best known, the architectural culture of Weimar Berlin provided a forum for debate over the way
German identity should be expressed through Berlin’s new building projects. This debate pitted *Großstadtkritik* with its “impassioned defense of traditional Kultur” marked by “idealized notions of Germanness and that uniquely German concept of *Heimat*” against proponents of a concept of the modern city as a place “no longer weighted down by history and tradition” that could “thus be reinvented as a site of constant self-transformation” (44). For example, in what became known as the *Dächerkrieg* in the Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf, architect Heinrich Tessenow, an advocate of the small town as “the foundation of German national character,” produced designs featuring pitched roofs that directly challenged the flat roof associated with the International Style, which was “held responsible by right-wing polemicists for the decline of national traditions and the destruction of indigenous organic *Gemeinschaft* (community) by the formal conventions and rational order of the *Gesellschaft* (society)” (49). This controversy suggests that the discourse in architecture about *Heimat* functioned in Weimar Berlin as a means through which larger questions regarding German identity could be framed and debated.

Second, as the site of the Berlin Wall marking the separation between the sovereign states of East and West Germany, and as the location of such dramatic showdowns between the capitalist and socialist blocs as the Berlin blockade, the identity of post-WWII Berlin as a symbol of division is clear. But as important to German identity as Berlin's borders are its voids, spaces left by repeated efforts to politically and culturally reinvent Germany and its place in the world. In an article entitled “The Voids of Berlin,” Huyssen cites Ernst Bloch’s 1935 description of life in Weimar Berlin as “functions in the void,” the result of a vacuum left by the collapse
of 19th century bourgeois culture, which was replaced by a “culture of distraction” characterized by Berlin’s movie palaces, 6-day bicycle races and modernist architecture. The creation of voids continued, Huysen notes, with the destruction of the center of Berlin by both Allied forces and Nazi ‘visionaries’ during the war, and by the urban renewal projects of the 1950s. After the fall of the Wall, Berlin’s voids were most memorably symbolized by the “17-acre wasteland” from the Brandenburg Gate to Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz, described as the “prairie of history” by Berliners, a “haunted space” used primarily for rock concerts (63-65).

Hake, focusing on the relationship between architecture and the social, political and cultural imaginations of the city during the Weimar period, discusses the void produced by the reconstruction of Alexanderplatz, a major traffic hub and commercial center for the working-class Eastern districts. She notes in particular Siegfried Kracauer’s portrayal of the construction project as representative of the destruction and violence that necessarily precede the advent of modernity. Describing his “discomfort” with its “torn up landscapes of stone” (qtd. on 168), Kracauer reveals an anxiety rooted in what Hake terms a “lack of clear perspectives and boundaries” (168) characteristic of a void.

Finally, as a site associated with Germany’s sometimes problematic relationship with otherness, Berlin is scarred by 20th century history, its changing façades and shifting borders mapping not only past but present struggles with this relationship that resonate throughout Europe as a whole. In an analysis of the film Walk on Water (Fox 2004), Nicholas Baer discusses the significance of modern Alexanderplatz, a location identified with foreigners and outsiders both before and
during the Weimar period, and with the division between the two Berlins after the war. Baer argues that the film engages with the nexus between national boundaries, body politics and ethnic difference when its diverse characters (Eyal, an Israeli whose parents were victims of the Holocaust; Axel, a German advocate for Turkish children; and a group of transvestites) confront neo-Nazis in the station’s tunnels, accentuating the permeability of borders that both the characters and the site represent:

Beyond representing a transformation in both Eyal’s identity and his relationship to Germany, the Alexanderplatz station complements the scene’s thematic of national and corporal boundaries, as well as its interest in unexpected linkages between and among various minority groups. As Eyal and Axel walk down the staircase of the Alexanderplatz station in this scene, they approach the track for the U8, a line that moves between East and West Berlin. During the years of Berlin’s division, the U8 track was separated from the rest of the Alexanderplatz station, and its access points were walled off; it thereby became one of Berlin’s so-called “Geisterbahnhöfe” [ghost stations] (19-20).

In Baer’s analysis, the choice of Alexanderplatz as the location of this confrontation helps to enact what Leslie Adelson terms “Berührung,” or “touching,” between Germans, both gay and straight, and minority groups that allows for movement across and through national, cultural and even corporal boundaries. In another example, Levant Soysal examines the way Berlin’s shifting borders impacted the discourse surrounding the neighborhood of Kreuzberg in the 1990s. Once a desolate and marginalized area next to the Wall, a home for Gastarbeiter that was associated with criminality and poverty, Kreuzberg now borders a newly

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As Baer notes, Adelson applies the term specifically to Turkish-German relations, and defines it as “historical and cultural entanglements to which the transnational labor migration of the 1950s and 1960s has given rise in Germany” (Adelson, qtd. in Baer, 2 [note]).
invigorated Mitte, which includes the rebuilt Potsdamer Platz and Reichstag. With the changing border, Kreuzberg became the “ceremonial ghetto” of the city, referred to in the 1992 youth guide Berlin for Young People as a multicultural district with “Turks living along with students, ‘alternatives,’ punks and perfectly normal Berlin families” (qtd. on 67). Soysal argues that more recently, the hipness and diversity with which Kreuzberg was identified has become associated with all of Berlin, and the “ghetto narrative” has been “normalized” (68). The recasting of a neighborhood negatively identified for years with the marginal and the foreign fell in line with the Berlin government’s attempts to change the conceptualization of the city, which has been “remapped in the image of a Hauptstadt of the unified Germany, Kulturstadt in a unified Europe, and Weltstadt in a cosmopolitan world” (67).7

I. Border Consciousness and the Fragmentation of Modern Life

The relationship between the shifting of borders in Berlin and the recasting of Kreuzberg illustrates the way borders can serve both to underline and to question established notions of national identity. The speed of the change in the characterization of the neighborhood from “marginal and foreign” to “multicultural

7 In contrast to this blatant use of otherness as a marketing tool, Huysen refers to the new Jewish Museum on the rebuilt Potsdamer Platz as an example of the way the intersection between Berlin’s geography and its troublesome history might be effectively engaged. While other building plans for Berlin’s reconstruction are driven by a desire to return the city to an “imaginary” 19th century past, or to move it towards an image-driven, 21st century “global metropolis,” thus erasing remnants of architecture associated with distasteful periods in the city’s history, Libeskind’s design attempts to “give architectural form to...the historical void left by the Nazi destruction of Berlin’s thriving Jewish life and culture” (75) by literally leaving a “void” (the term Libeskind uses for the space) in the center of the museum.
and hip” illustrates an important quality of today’s world, in which identity can be as fleeting and ephemeral as media images. The shifting of the identity of Kreuzberg along with the German border demonstrates that the function of borders is relative, that they work to question national identity as well as to define it. If groups once considered foreign suddenly become central to the self-conception of Germany, the border comes to represent this ambiguity. At the same time, the slipperiness of this identity can result in a desire to “stop the play of signification” through the reinforcement of existing borders or the drawing of new ones (Naficy 27). The border consciousness I trace in two films, both representative of periods in which change and uncertainty presented a particularly strong challenge to notions of identity, concerns the encounter between the instability of modern and postmodern life and the borders of Berlin, and the implications of this encounter for the construction of national identity.

Walther Ruttmann’s film Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt is considered a classic example of modernist filmmaking and can consequently be understood in the context of both the artistic sensibilities of the period and the social, political and cultural forces that informed them. As David Harvey writes, because the experience of modernity involved an “overwhelming sense of fragmentation, ephemerality and chaotic change” (11), the translation of this experience into art became the central concern of aesthetic modernism. At the same time, a belief in “the eternal and immutable”, the other “half” of art according to Baudelaire’s formulation, encouraged modernists to locate and express the unchanging in a profoundly insecure world (10). As a result, aesthetic modernists not only “provided ways to
absorb, reflect upon and codify these rapid changes” (23), but took a position regarding their underlying meaning, which lent the movement its diverse and often contradictory character. Not far from the surface, maintains Harvey, were “tensions between internationalism and nationalism, between globalism and ethnocentrism” (24), that modernists often failed to confront directly, partly due to a “fierce” belief in an “international avant-garde held in a fructifying relationship with a strong-felt sense of place” (Guilbaut, qtd. in Harvey 25). Therefore, depending upon the time and place of its expression, the prevailing social, political and environmental conditions placed a “distinctive stamp” on the modernist effort (25).

In Germany, because the onset of modernity was experienced with “exaggerated harshness” due to its relatively late political unification in 1871 (Silberman “What is German” 303), the “distinctive stamp” put on German modernism in the 1920s can be seen in the context of a particularly intense encounter with the tensions to which Harvey refers, for example, in the architectural debates outlined by Hake.

It is into this mix that Walther Ruttmann’s film was released in 1927, and in some ways it reflects the contradictory aspects of modernity and the aesthetic responses it evoked. First, as a film that highlights the speed and chaos of modernization in which Berlin plays the main character, it exemplifies the attempt to capture the “ephemeral and the fleeting” within the context of the strong sense of place characteristic of modernist works. As Karin Hamm-Ehsani notes, the film “challenges the spectator’s visual perception with 1000 frames in 61 minutes” (51), and introduces the city from within a moving train. Through a camera mounted on cars and subways, the constant movement with which passengers (and viewers) are
confronted is literally mimed by the cinematic apparatus (Hake 254). At the same time, Ruttmann chose well-known locations, activities and characters that the contemporary viewer could easily identify, and in his description of the filmmaking process personified the city, referring to the way it “drew away” from him with “endless insidiousness and prudishness” (74; my translation). In addition, it responds ambiguously to the question of whether a “rational” (i.e. according to the ideas of the Gesellschaft, with a belief in the utopian potential of machine-like order) or “organicist” (like the Gemeinschaft, a turn back to traditions rooted in place) society provides the best model for the future. As Derek Hillard argues, Ruttmann reveals his “Janus-faced view of modernity” through the juxtaposition of the mathematical, non-natural rhythms of the clock, the train and the musical score with an organic dusk-to-dawn structure in which the natural rhythms of darkness and light dominate the story, creating an unresolved tension (90). Hillard adds that this lack of resolution has particular implications for the way both scenes from the film and Ruttmann’s stylistic approach were later used in Third Reich cinema (92 n. 1).

Wim Wenders’ film Der Himmel über Berlin (1987) is in many ways similar to Ruttmann’s: it is a “visual poem” to the city of Berlin that highlights the tensions between the German, the universal and the local (Caldwell and Rea 47). The film depicts the kind of fragmentation and heterogeneity characteristic of postmodernism, as Fred Pfeil describes it, “different from the classic texts of high modernism precisely as it is not recontained or recuperated within an overarching mythic framework” (qtd. in Harvey 317). In postmodernity, the loss of such faith has resulted in the development of alternative strategies to counter the
overwhelming changes in the dimensions of time and space in today’s world, including a persistent and nostalgic turn towards history and a desperate effort to draw borders around personal and social spaces (Harvey 292). Huyssen argues that this concern with history, too often articulated through the discourse of personal memory and experience, should be re-grounded in place. Citing Berlin in particular, he notes that cities contain memories of what was there before as well as “imagined alternatives” to what there is (Present Pasts 7).

In Himme über Berlin, Wenders incorporates and provides an answer to these concerns. He chose the city of Berlin as the setting for his film because, as he comments, only Berlin has walls that are “readable,” like history books, where one can view the past, as well as gaps that allow stories to be told (Wenders 387 and 381). Yet this unique quality was already being lost at the time Wenders made his film, several years before the Wende. He notes that even as he filmed, structures and spaces filled with history and memory were in the process of being refilled or destroyed, and he felt the need to “look for locations that might disappear before too long”:

Another scene [in the film] comes to mind, on the Langenscheidt Bridge: a couple of months later, that was gone...They’ll put up a new bridge in its place, but it won’t cross anything. You’ll just drive over it without realizing it’s a bridge. The way bridges are now...(388).

This basically nostalgic perspective on the city’s built spaces, border crossings and voids, characteristic of postmodernism’s view of the past, is complemented by

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8 During the late 1980s, at the time Wenders’ film was made, both the “rewriting” of German history and the “redrawing” of German borders were controversial issues, motivating Roger F. Cook to term Wenders’ own attempt at myth making “inopportune” (181).
Wenders’ efforts in the film to depict the fragmentation of the postmodern world. His camera moves through the “gaps” the city provides, through the windows and walls of broken buildings, to reveal the lonely and the alienated fixed within their own private spaces. At the same time, during the course of the film Wenders attempts to counter the fragmentation and ephemerality of this world by calling for a new mythic framework that can structure and provide meaning to the chaos of human existence. The film tells the story of an angel who chooses to leave his eternal existence behind to enter the flow of human time, in order to join a trapeze artist with whom he has fallen in love. He is willing to become mortal so that the story of his love can have an impact on all of humanity; as an angel he is only able to record the arbitrary thoughts and actions of people without entering into their stories or creating a cohesive narrative out of these fragments. Using Berlin’s borders, border crossings and voids, Wenders maps the journeys of this angel, and makes the case for a “new story of Berlin and its epic past” (Cook 184).

III: The Function of Borders in Berlin: Sinfonie and Himmel Über Berlin

Ruttmann’s film reinforces the dominance of structure over the fragmentation and chaos of modernity through his depiction of the city as both “machine” and “body.” The former is associated with a modernist view of the city that emphasizes functionality and rational planning as a means to manage the urban masses, and was generally used to support progressive ideas, incorporating the utopian goal of the erasure of class differences and hierarchies through the leveling effects of mechanization. The latter, conversely, refers to the belief in the need to recreate
“organic” communities within the city, usually in the service of “conservative, nationalist and völkisch” ideologies (Hake 237). Contrasting the natural rhythms of the body with those of the machine, it formed part of the anti-urban discourse of the period (Cowan). Yet these contradictory perspectives, argues Hake, are incorporated into a representation of the city that emphasizes their combined ability to provide structure to modern life, and elides their differences. Beginning with sunrise and ending at night, the film depicts the journey of a train into the city, then uses music to integrate images of humans and machines as they progress through morning, afternoon and evening: “Whereas the narrative of a typical day evokes biological functions and cyclical processes, the ubiquitous machine imagery presents mechanical processes and rational decisions as necessary to the organization of modern life. As a result, the nature scenes end up naturalizing culture, with the machine wheel as the ultimate symbol of the innate productivity, generativity and life force of the modern metropolis” (263). In addition, I would argue, Ruttmann’s use of tropes of borders and border crossings works with both city as machine and as organism in an attempt to minimize the fragmentation and chaos of Berlin as well as the dislocation its growth entailed.

From the very opening of the film, tropes of borders and border crossings figure strongly in Ruttmann’s representation of the city. Their interaction with the concept of city as machine generally involves enabling the progress of vehicles such as trains and automobiles, and directing the movement of the symphony.\(^9\) As the

\(^9\) In “The Heart Machine: Rhythm and Body in Weimar Film”, Michael Cowan explains the attempt during the period to differentiate between “natural” and “man-made” rhythms, the latter being associated with the mechanization of daily life.
film begins, a shot of a body of water is followed by the image of a circle, which is crossed with horizontal lines that become crossing gates. A train appears, initiating the journey from the countryside to the city. Citing the migration of peasants, this journey is the only part that stands outside the “day in the life” framework of the film, suggesting its special significance. As the train travels across the countryside, passing telephone wires and bridge supports fragment views of pastoral scenes, shot from inside the moving train. The violation of the space of *Heimat* through these broken images, in which people and animals are absent, is downplayed by the focus on the train’s movement. The absence of people in the scene, which also serves to repress the violence of dislocation, strengthens this effect. When the train arrives at the Anhalter Bahnhof, the building is darkened so that only the large, stained-glass windows are visible. This cathedral-like image, combined with the sunrise and water at the beginning, seems to lend a spiritual quality to the journey, whose end is punctuated by a blackened screen with the single word “Berlin” and the end of the first movement of the symphony. The integration of the music and the movement of a train empty of people, framed by the railroad crossings at the beginning and the end, create a powerful impression of a confluence of forces at work to contain and suppress the turmoil of displacement. This effect is reinforced throughout the film by images of moving automobiles and trams, their smooth flow enabled by “Schupos,” or traffic cops, whose presence also emphasizes the importance of maintaining control of social borders through their juxtaposition with shots of the disorderly and the disaffected. In Act III, for example, Alexanderplatz is depicted with all of its poverty and anarchy, through the images of a poor woman
begging, agitators giving speeches, and a casket being carried across the street.

These scenes are broken up by shots of moving traffic and a Schupo at work, which are again interrupted by a man picking up a cigarette off the street, and immediately followed by more traffic and more police.

Border crossings interact as well with the concept of city as body, directing and controlling its ‘circulatory system’ of waterways. In Act I, for example, a shot of a clock, referencing the contemporary debate opposing man-made to natural rhythms, is followed by the cross-section view of a sewer underneath the city, with the ground and the buildings above it visible. By highlighting the border between the space below and above the earth, and juxtaposing the sewer with the clock, Ruttmann validates the idea of the city body alongside that of the city machine. More ambiguous, however, is the sequence of shots of the Landwehrkanal flowing underneath a bridge in Act IV and its relationship to the rest of segment. At the beginning of the act, the biological functions of the humans and the animals in the city are emphasized as the city stops for lunch. Images of both rich and poor as they rest in cafés, cafeterias, restaurants and on the street are interspersed with shots of animals at the zoo, dogs, and cats eating. The lunch sequence ends with a series of shots of a boat on a canal, guided by a man with a pole, moving back and forth beneath the bridge. This scene is viewed from several different angles and at different times of the day (in one shot only one woman stands on the bridge, in another there are many people bustling across). The position of this series, following the lunch sequence, seems initially to tie the ‘flow’ of the canal to the

10 The additional association of the sewer with a contemporary campaign for the regulation of prostitution is pointed out by von Ankum (215).
biological processes previously depicted. Yet the lingering look of the camera, which focuses on the scene for almost a full minute, suggests that the images of the boat, the bridge and the canal might serve another purpose. Following the bridge sequence, there is a transition to a series of images of urban poverty: a cripple, a beggar, a poor woman with two children. Three bearded men, apparently Jews, and two women hanging out of a window (Hake speculates that they may be prostitutes, 249) precede the quickening pace of the city returning to work and newspapers rolling off the press. As the music reaches a crescendo, several scenes follow which disrupt the overall impression of the city as a “...body/machine that appears to run without purpose” (249).

Through trick photography, newspaper headlines begin to fade as isolated words fill the screen: “crisis,” “murder,” “stock market,” “marriage,” then “money” several times. An animated spiral from a shop window punctuates shots of train tracks, revolving doors and roller coaster tracks. Images of the wind blowing hats, leaves, and a skirt are followed by a shot of a woman’s face as she hangs over a bridge. The camera alternates from her wide-open eyes to the swirling water below, then to spectators on the bridge, who appear to gasp at a splash in the water (though no body is in view), until the water regains its equilibrium in a slow ripple. This suicide is followed by shots of animals fighting, people opening umbrellas in the sudden rain, then a traffic cop, and finally a crossing sign that turns and stops, accompanied by the end of the rain, a dog shaking off and the slowing of both the machines and the music as work ends and afternoon leisure activities begin.

From one perspective, the incorporation of the woman’s suicide in this
segment into the flow of images that makes up the day amounts to a “formalized response to experiences of conflict, crisis and trauma” (Hake 252) that is rooted in the style of the film. Berlin is considered by most to be representative of the stylistic innovations of Neue Sachlichkeit, characterized by a fascination with machines and the “surface sheen and appearance” of objects, and opposed on that basis by leftists as conforming with a rationalized social order that ignored class differences. Beginning with Siegfried Kracauer in the 1920s, critics have accused Ruttmann of eliding difference through his privileging of rhythm and form as the focus of the film over social and political issues, as well as his use of cross-section, in which images of people are organized according to types (Hake Topographies of Class; Hillard). Other critics have pointed out that the focus on surface phenomena and the use of montage and collage have the effect of controlling heterogeneity and absorbing otherness (Strathausen). Hake summarizes this perspective by describing Ruttmann’s style as one in which “the camera records everything with indifferent attentiveness” (249). Commenting on suicide scene described above, for example, she maintains that its purpose is simply to emphasize “briefly” the violent aspects of the forces of modernization before the camera returns to its detachment (250). In contrast, though I agree that the woman’s suicide is reabsorbed into the flow of images that follow, I believe that her death not only disrupts Ruttmann’s depiction of the city as body and machine, but also has broader implications regarding both (gendered) modernity and national identity.

The effect of the segment beginning with the first bridge and ending after the

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11 Though Macrae makes a persuasive argument against this, maintaining that Ruttmann’s film is basically impressionistic (254).
suicide is to question the health of the city body and the rationality of the city machine. While the series of shots of the first bridge reinforces the perception of the equilibrium of the city’s circulatory system by lingering on the gentle flow of the water, the ease with which the boat is guided and the graceful curve of the bridge, the second bridge is depicted quite differently. Rather than emphasizing its continuity, the camera fragments the bridge through a series of close-ups and extreme close-ups of the suicide victim and the spectators. The bridge itself is filmed at an angle, with its steps creating the skewed lines reminiscent of expressionist films. The water below is shown from the perspective of the woman, who sees only a swirling confusion. Interspersed with shots of the roller coaster tracks and the spiraling toy, the water is no longer ‘life blood’ but a vortex. The sense of vertigo the woman experiences is recreated for the viewer in the whirling of the camera, apparently attached to another amusement park ride. In this way, the integrity of the city body is shown to be susceptible to sickness, an impression reinforced by accompanying shots of nature out of control: the blowing wind, swirling leaves, fighting dogs and pacing zoo animals indicating that the structure provided by the concept of city as body has been deeply disturbed. This effect is strengthened by the disturbance in the city machine as well. After the suicide, machines seem to go off course, for example, with the image of a train followed by the tracks of the roller coaster. Railroad and streetcar crossings are thrown into turmoil, with arrows and gates spinning and losing direction. The bell from a fire engine rings urgently, though the truck is not shown moving forward. Finally, the Schupo appears, returning the city to order. A train is once again on its tracks, and
the crossing signal lowers to “stop.” Though the city regains its equilibrium, the preceding scenes leave their trace, having exposed the weakness in both the city body and the city machine.

The ability of the city to weather this traumatic episode suggests that the figure of the suicide can be seen as a sacrifice to this cyborgian view of urban modernity, with implications for national identity that Ruttmann’s later work ultimately reinforces. First, as Katarina von Ankum points out in her convincing case for Ruttmann’s gendered approach to the film, the scene with the suicide “once again provides a female figure as a projection screen for male anxieties of modernity...The attribution of complete nervous exhaustion to the suicidal woman may have allowed the contemporary male spectator to project his fears and anxieties onto a female figure of identification as a way of coming to grips with the defamiliarized urban environment” (219). Thus taking upon herself the anxieties associated with modernization, the suicide enables the survival of the city body/machine, as evidenced in the manner in which her death is reabsorbed into the movement of the symphony. In addition, the association between her suicide and the impoverished, disaffected and foreign inhabitants in the previous scenes clears the air, allowing the city’s more fortunate citizens to enjoy their leisure and nighttime activities, absent of such images of the excluded. Finally, the association of the woman with symbols of the countryside, including a body of water unframed by the tunnels and canals that make up the circulatory system of the city, as well as the circular patterns that open the film, suggests her connection to Heimat. As Peter Ruttmann’s later work on Blut und Boden (1933) with Leni Riefenstahl supported the anti-urban ideology of the Nazis (Hake 252).
Blickle notes in his historical study of the concept, *Heimat* is “a symbol of preserving, motherly or at least feminine forces...[which] participates in the historical idealization of the feminine and the maternal and thus, in the limitation of opportunities for self-realization in women” (83). Therefore, her suicide could figuratively embody the loss of *Heimat* brought about by urbanization and modernization, as well as provide a means to ‘punish’ the modern woman, whose appearance on the streets and in the workplace created tremendous social anxiety, particularly among anti-urban conservatives (Hake 81). The contradictory meanings of her suicide not only reinforce the ambivalence otherwise evident in the film, but also suggest that her death helped to enable the veiling of the conflict between organicist and rationalist visions of society. This politically ambivalent position was soon to be embodied by the Nazis, whose emphasis on machine-like uniformity was complemented by a commitment to *Blut und Boden* (Strathausen 34).

In the opening scene of *Himmel über Berlin*, Wenders introduces his story with a disembodied hand writing in ink on paper about a time “when the child was a child,” when “all souls were one.” This phrase, reminiscent of myth, is followed by the credits (white ink scratched on black), then images of clouds in the sky, an aerial view of a city, and an angel (Bruno Ganz) standing on top of a building. As the camera follows his look down to the people on the street below, he is recognized by several children, who are the only ones to perceive his presence. As they look up, it is revealed that the angel is standing on the ruins of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche in Berlin. The progression of this scene ties together the two
stories the film seeks to tell: one in the realm of a ‘universal’ myth and the other specifically German. The fragmentation and loss of meaning in postmodernity is emphasized by the alienation of the various people shown walking, lost in their individual thoughts with no connection to others, with the exception of the children who recognize and smile at the angel. By beginning the film with the opening sentences of what could become a myth, Wenders suggests the possibility of a transcendence of all boundaries that would open the way for an “epic of peace.” Yet at the same time, the film evidences the desire for a new national narrative, one that cites specifically issues relating to Germany’s difficult past. These two somewhat contradictory tendencies have problematic implications for the dual myths the film proposes.

The borders, bridges and walls that figure so prominently in the film can be seen as the physical embodiment of the loneliness and alienation of the humans. As a result, “the fragments of everyday life represented in Himmel über Berlin share in an acute preoccupation with the trespassing and overcoming of boundaries, barriers, demarcations of all sorts.” At the same time, by using the city of Berlin as a setting, all of these borders become “metonymies of the Berlin Wall” (Casarino179), thus emphasizing that the fantasy is not as much to overcome communication problems between individuals or even communities but is even more ambitious, to create a world without (national) borders. The dream of creating a borderless world is enacted foremost through the use of angels as main characters, whose perspective the viewer shares. Angels are, as Casarino notes, the only precedent for an aerial view of the city before the modern era, reminiscent of a time before the
rise of nation-states, when medieval and Renaissance painters represented the city from a perspective that “no eye had yet enjoyed” (de Certeau, qtd. on 174).

Besides being endowed with an expansive, unrestricted perspective on the urban space (from which, in the opening scene, the Wall is conspicuously absent) through their ability to move through the air, the angels are able to cross the walls and bridges of the city, their passage given a spiritual meaning that the movement of humans lacks. In this way, the physical space of the city becomes a transcendental space, representative of universal hopes, not limited to a particular historical context. For example, as Damiel crosses a bridge to comfort a dying man, the bridge is suddenly no longer a merely a concrete and steel structure but a passage between the natural and the supernatural, life and death. This is emphasized in the scene immediately following, in which Homer, an old storyteller played by the Weimar-era actor Curt Bois, looks down at a model of the universe like a god, seeking a way to tell the story of humanity. The most powerful evocation of the dream of a world without borders is, of course, when Damiel's transformation from angel to human occurs as he crosses the Berlin Wall. His exhilaration at ‘crossing the ford’ and entering the flow of time makes the city (and the world) suddenly seem “less fragmented and more coherent” (Harvey 319).

In addition, the two privileged spaces in the film that hold forth the possibility of constructing this new myth, the library and the circus (Harvey 317), do not recognize national borders. The former, a modern “cathedral” where angels now live, is filled with people of all backgrounds, speaking many different languages. The library is also the home of the storyteller, Homer, whose goal is to reach all people
with his tale of peace. The space, whose openness the circular movements of the camera emphasizes, evokes the “Bachelardian ‘immensity within’” (Caltredt par 16), including all the sufferings of humanity. Homer’s dilemma is his effort to compose his narrative of peace within such a space, though the solution the film ultimately offers is foreshadowed by a shot of Damiel sitting in a corner, his arms held out in the form of a cross. Like Christ, Damiel will come to earth in order to bring his myth of redemption to humanity. The second space, a travelling circus, is by its nature rootless. It is a home to foreigners, including Marion (Solveig Dommartin), the trapeze artist with whom the angel Damiel falls in love. Occupying an empty lot in the former East Berlin, the site was chosen “because of its isolation, because it was a place that brought different things together and there were changes underway” (Wenders 387). When the circus closes, Marion feels herself “without roots, without history, without country.” Yet even in this state of ‘exile,’ Marion holds onto the hope that she can transform herself: “I can become the world” (Harvey 318). The importance of such spaces of rootlessness to the dream of a universal myth is emphasized by their significance throughout the film. The Imbissbude, also located in a desolate place, is where Damiel meets Peter Falk and learns that he is an angel come to earth, and when the two lovers first come together in a dream, it is in Marion’s trailer.

On the other hand, there is much to indicate that the film is calling for a narrative that is specifically German. As Wenders has remarked, “the inhabitants of the country (Germany) can’t define that country, don’t know where it is or where their place in it is, and end up not defending their territory so much as struggling to
be let into it...we are all of us still foreigners, trying to settle an unknown country by the name of Germany” (436). The attempt to provide a story for this “unknown country” is evidenced first by the choice of setting, the “only place” Wenders could “experience Germanness” (233). The importance of the physical space of the city as a context for the telling of a ‘true’ German story is brought out by its contrast with the representation of German history in the film within a film subplot. Damiel and Cassiel (Otto Sander) make repeated visits to a movie set, in which Peter Falk stars as an American detective looking for a German’s lost son. The constructed quality of the ‘story’ of Germany’s past told in this film is revealed by the behind the scenes views of the set and the extras, dressed variously as Nazi soldiers and concentration camp inmates, waiting mostly silently and dispassionately for their scenes as if they had no identity outside of the role they were playing. In addition, Wenders’ use of key landmarks, all significant to Berlin’s fractured past (the Siegessäule, the Gedächtniskirche, and of course, the Wall, which becomes part of the film as Damiel begins to consider becoming human), frame and provide reference points, both geographically and historically, for the diegesis. Both the Siegessäule and the Gedächtniskirche are memorials to German victories in war; Kaiser Wilhelm II built the latter in honor of his grandfather, Kaiser Wilhelm I, unifier of the German nation, and the former commemorates Prussian victories against the Danish, the French and the Austrians that made this unification possible. Both the ruins of the Gedächtniskirche and the Siegessäule figure prominently in the beginning of the film, and it is with those two important sites in the background that the angel Damiel is first introduced. Though it could be argued that the use of these two
structures and their juxtaposition with the angel is a reflection on war in general, for German viewers the associations are particularly pointed and emotionally loaded.

Among the many intertextual references Wenders makes in this film that have special resonance for Germans are those in the opening scene, in which he suggests that the film will offer a new way of ‘looking’ that could impact German identity. First, Wenders begins with images of clouds and an open eye, then an aerial view of Berlin that becomes immediately connected to the figure of Bruno Ganz as an angel standing atop the Gedächtniskirche, looking down at the people below. It becomes apparent that his unique perspective is accompanied by an ability to read the thoughts of passersby, and that only children can see him. In the next segment, Wenders makes reference to two well-known films that include aerial views of the city that differ from this angelic one: *Triumph des Willens* and *Berlin: Sinfonie.*

Wenders’ “entfesselte Kamera,” in a technique associated with both Riefenstahl and Ruttmann but most prominently with Murnau (*Der letzte Mann/ The Last Laugh, 1924*), soars through the sky and down into Berlin as a plane flies through the air. Lines of traffic seen from the air are reminiscent of the lines of brown shirts marching into Nuremberg in Riefenstahl’s film. Yet unlike Riefenstahl’s portrayal of the triumphant entry of Hitler into Nuremberg in 1936, Wenders shows us the inside of the plane, the homes and the cars of his subjects. The plane this time is filled not only with Germans but people from all over the world; one in particular, Peter Falk, has only vague notions of the place he is about to visit. While most people ignore the camera as it scans the passengers, a girl looks directly at it, and in

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13 Thanks to Fatima Naqvi for pointing this out.
a reverse shot we see that the angel is now on board the plane, looking at her. At this point it is made clear that the camera has the angels’ unique power, a point that is emphasized when the camera enters rooms and passes through walls, entering the private spaces of lonely individuals and children - some foreign, some disabled, mostly poor – who recognize this special ‘look.’ Thus, the film juxtaposes two ways of seeing, one associated with Neue Sachlichkeit and Nazi propaganda, and the other introduced by Wenders; while the former has been accused of instrumentalizing its subjects, seeing them as mere cogs in the machine working toward a purpose that is greater than the sum of its parts, the latter, though only fragmentarily, provides insights into their personal stories. These two different attitudes towards the objects of the camera’s look suggest the possibility of the camera’s ‘redemption’ from its checkered past through its ability to tell a new German story. Yet at the same time, despite having greater respect and sensitivity, the inability of the angels/camera to have any effect on the lives of the people under their gaze exposes the weakness of this new look, and implies that it alone is insufficient.

Finally, the characters’ search for home in the film taps into the specifically German discourse of Heimat. In response to an interviewer’s remark that there is a sense in the film of “wanting-to-be-at-home-but-belonging-elsewhere,” Wenders describes home in a way reminiscent of the classic opposition between Heimweh and Fernweh: as a “centrifugal force,” a “center” from which he runs away only to be pulled back (316). He adds that with Himmel and his return to Berlin, it became clear to him that though he was not at first interested in those “contrary movements,” he realized that “returning is the whole point of going...to get distance
and perspective in order to see more clearly” (316). This contradictory desire to go away and to return, characteristic of border consciousness, is an important aspect of his films. As Nick Roddick notes, his early road movies are contained by the “palpable presence” of the border (30), juxtaposing the need to travel with the recognition that a clearer understanding of home is the underlying purpose of the journey. This is especially apparent in *Himmel*, as the angels’ freedom of movement exists alongside their desire to be home, part of the human family. Throughout the film, the movement between spaces of ‘exile’ and home is an integral part of the characters’ various quests. Damiel, in the beginning seen standing apart from humanity, seeks home by entering the flow of time and uniting with a woman; Marion, an itinerant performer who describes herself as coming from “nowhere, who has no country” and “insists on that” wants to find a home in a new kind of relationship; and Homer, wandering around the desolate fields of the old Potsdamer Platz, is literally seeking his long-gone home in order to find his epic of peace. All three visit places that are simultaneously ‘home’ and ‘away’: the trailer, the *Imbissbude*, the empty fields of Potsdamer Platz.

The movement between these literal and figurative spaces of home/exile occurs within the framework of the search for a new story for Germany that makes use of tropes of *Heimat*, in particular the woman as a figure for both home and nation (through the connection between the winged ‘angel’ Marion and the Siegessäule) and the child as representative of its ‘purity and innocence’ (as Ernst Bloch once described it, *Heimat* is “that which shines into everyone’s childhood” [qtd. in Kolker and Beichen 165]). The new vision required by the myth Wenders
seeks is that of the child, a point made clear by the poetic phrase repeated throughout the film (“Als das Kind Kind war...” /"When the child was a child..."), the unique ability of the children to see the angels, and Damiel’s childish delight in the world once he becomes human. And in the end, it appears Damiel has achieved that elusive dream of regaining Heimat when he states: “She came to take me home...once upon a time and forever.”

The tension between Heimweh and Fernweh is further emphasized by a figure that, as in Ruttmann’s film, is “sacrificed” to enable the birth of the new myth. The suicide scene occurs just after Damiel makes the decision to enter history, but before he falls to earth. In a montage sequence similar to the segment in Berlin: Sinfonie, an aerial view of the streets is followed by a shot of a flock of birds in flight, wind blowing, a newspaper caught in a grate. There is a brief cut to a scene with Falk on the set of the movie in which two stunt men ‘fall’ off a wall, then the montage sequence again, with the wind blowing leaves and the birds in the sky. Another cut to Homer on Potsdamer Platz, looking for Berlin’s “secret passageways” to begin his story, then a cut to a young man (Sigurd Rachman), mourning the loss of his girlfriend, on the top of a building with a large Mercedes sign in the background that apparently borders East Berlin. Though people behind a high fence are motioning for him to come down, he claims not to understand what they are doing, stating “Berlin means nothing to me.” As Cassiel touches and whispers to him, he decides to jump, though he doesn’t “know why.” After he drops, Cassiel screams “No!”, and suddenly the screen fills with color as we see the building from Falk’s hotel room, the Mercedes sign (and the East beyond it) far off in the distance. As the color once
again disappears there is a cut to Cassiel also falling, then a montage of images, almost too fast to comprehend: a couple fighting, a child crying, a homeless man on the streets, footage from World War II. The scene ends with Marion in her trailer on the last night of the circus, with Damiel gazing sympathetically at her.

Signifying the polarity of existence at the border, the suicide serves as Damiel's double, or "doppelgänger," the contrast between the two figures embodying the struggle between Heimweh and Fernweh that also reflects Wenders’ own experience. The boy complements Damiel’s search for home with his longing to fly away, and when he looks out over the vast city of East Berlin he acquires the angels’ point of view, seeing for the first time that “east is everywhere,” like a traveler climbing to the top of a mountain to gaze at an exotic land. Though he has a profound need to go, he doesn’t seem to know the place he is leaving, expressing his disinterest in Berlin and his ignorance of German geography (“Havel? Is it a river or a lake?”), a sentiment that reflects Wenders’ remarks that Germany is like an “unknown country” in which Germans remain “foreigners.” His desire to jump across the border seems to be rooted in this failure to understand where he is or where he is going, reflected in his failed love relationship, and emphasized by his refusal to rejoin the community of onlookers who urge him back into their midst. Thus the figure of the suicide, representing an inability to imagine a new national myth, advances Wenders’ project of ‘finding’ Germany by providing a negative contrast to Damiel’s vision. The loss of borders the boy experiences in death is complemented by the borders and limits Damiel gains as a human being after he falls to earth, enabling him to go ‘home’ with Marion and achieve the love that he and Marion hope
will be the basis for a new kind of community, a new *Heimat*.

The ambition to create an epic myth for all of humanity, figured in the transcendence of borders, and Wenders’ apparent desire to find an alternative story for Germany work together to a point but ultimately run into some difficulties. On the one hand, the spiritual marriage between an angel and a foreigner counters criticism that Wenders’ is proposing a new “master race” (Kolker and Beichen 159), and in fact represents a subversion of the Nazi ideal by envisioning a ‘child’ that is not mortal but a dream for the future of all. However, in addressing the need for a new national myth by citing representations of the old, both the new ‘real’ city of Berlin and the project of creating an epic myth for all of humanity become subsumed by the story of Germany’s past. As bell hooks notes in a scathing critique of the film, true otherness becomes a “colorful backdrop” for the story of white male redemption (166); though the modern city of Berlin is multicultural, characters from other backgrounds are absorbed into the general sense of fragmentation that requires a “visionary white (man)” to overcome. In addition, there is some tension between the use of spaces of rootlessness and places associated with Germany’s problematic past. On the one hand, the film generally privileges the former, thus emphasizing the importance of the transcendence of national borders in the construction of a universal myth as well as the significance of such spaces in opposing the nationalist *Blut und Boden* ideology. Yet at the same time, the final scene in an old Nazi gathering place, though apparently meant to reclaim the space for a new mythology both national and universal, comes dangerously close to replicating what it is trying to subvert. As Kolker and Beichen point out, Damiel and Marion become a “superior breed of lovers” (159) when they decide at the rundown
Hotel Esplanade to “incarnate something,” becoming the “new ancestors” for all of humanity. This final turn to romanticism, with the image of unity as the basis for both new mythologies is, as David Harvey points out, a bit too reminiscent of the preference for aesthetics over ethics that proved so problematic for Germany (and the world) in the past (322).

IV. Conclusion: Berlin and the Production of “Abject Heroes”

In Berlin: Sinfonie der Grosstadt and Himmel über Berlin, the two suicides, neither one part of the overall ‘narrative’14 of the film, can be seen as figures of border consciousness, liminal characters existing only momentarily before leaping to their deaths in an act that represents a decisive movement toward the construction of a new mythology with the potential to redefine German identity. As neither is shown actually falling, both are associated with the borders and border crossings upon which they briefly stand, ambiguous spaces that can be understood as a kind of void. As I suggested in the first chapter, located in this ambiguous space are characters that fit the description of what Kristeva terms the “abject”: neither self nor other, these figures represent “what disturbs identity, system, order…The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” heralding the “breaking down of a world that has erased its borders” (544). As both Andreas Huyssen and Sabine Hake point out, Berlin has a history of creating voids, and is thus a potential site for the production of such figures. Hake discusses, for example, one of the most well-

14 Though there is no “narrative” in Ruttmann’s film, it represents formally his interpretation of the “story” of Berlin’s movement into modernity.
known characters associated with the “torn-up landscapes of stone” that was Alexanderplatz during the 1920s: Franz Biberkopf, the hero of Alfred Döblin’s book *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which draws a parallel between the chaos and disorder of the construction project designed to reform the area and the subjectivity of his protagonist.\(^\text{15}\) An unemployed, sometimes criminal member of the “lumpenproletariat” from one of the working-class communities surrounding Alexanderplatz, Biberkopf fits Marx’s description of a man living outside the wage-labor system. As such, he can also be seen as a figure of abjection, located “at the boundary of what is assimilable” (Kristeva 552). Biberkopf’s efforts to get a job and lead a respectable life after his release from prison ultimately fail, his descent into madness signified and punctuated by the sounds of the pile drivers and jackhammers on the square. His agoraphobia, Hake remarks, is indicative of a “spatial estrangement” that provides a critical position from which to contest the imposition of the modern rational order as well as, potentially, the new national narrative about to be imposed upon Germany by the Nazis. However, like the young bulls at the *Zentral-Viehhof*, the local slaughterhouse, he must confront death so that he can become incorporated into the modern masses, and upon his return from the mental institution, as Biberkopf’s visual and auditory hallucinations end so does the potential for resistance offered by the spatial estrangement his existence in the

\(^{15}\) Fassbinder’s treatment of this work, broadcast as a 14-part television serial, is considered one of his best films. As Elsaesser notes, the film should be seen as an integral part of Fassbinder’s epic of modern Germany, which begins to unfold through earlier works such as *Lili Marleen*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, and *Veronika Voss*. In these narratives, self-destruction and self-sacrifice “become the peculiar entry-points of embattled subjectivity into (German) history” (*Fassbinder* 218).
liminal space of the void suggests (227).

Like Biberkopf, the suicide in Ruttmann’s film is ‘sacrificed’ to modernity, yet where the book examines its protagonist’s state of abjection, the film uses the death of the woman to achieve what Habermas terms in a discussion of aesthetic modernism as an “undefiled, an immaculate and stable present” (269; my emphasis) in the face of ephemerality and change. To this end, the woman, as the “thing that no longer matches” (Kristeva 544), must be eliminated through suicide. Though her character is complemented by other ambiguous and composite figures, including the cyborgian city itself as well as the many mannequins and mechanical dolls seen throughout the film, the jarring discontinuity the representation of the suicide entails, particularly the sudden, anomalous expressionist aesthetic with which she is drawn, clearly marks her as out of place. Her association with images of poverty and garbage (the children playing in the filth, the cats picking through trash), as well as their absence once she has died, indicates that she might be the “waste which drops so that I might live” (Kristeva 544), or that which must be left behind in Germany’s movement toward modernity. In addition, the swirling water that envelopes her (though we never see her body) connects her to the primordial element whence modernity emerges (depicted by the body of water at the beginning of the film), and suggests the “preserv[ation of] what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be...” (547) that characterizes abjection. The tension that defines border consciousness is located in the contradictory desire both to demarcate this figure (through her anomalous representation and the placement of
the suicide scene in the context of the film) and absorb her (as Hake notes, in the way her death is brushed aside in the machine-like eliding of difference).

In Wenders’ film, the young man can also be seen as an abject figure, connected to Damiel as his “doppelgänger” yet with a lack of vision (looking out from on top of the building, he claims that he can see only the ‘East’; in other words he cannot see not beyond the divisions that characterize Germany and the world) that stands in the way of the new national and universal narratives that the other characters hope to initiate. In addition, by creating such specific parallels between the suicide sequence in his film and the one in Ruttmann’s (both take place at ‘border crossings’: a bridge, a wall adjacent to the East; both are preceded by blowing winds and newspapers; both are associated with a montage sequence highlighting images of urban poverty and violence), Wenders seems to suggest that, like Berlin in the 1920s, the city in 1987 is burdened by the stress of modern life, represented by characters who, overwhelmed by this fragmentation and alienation, must be ‘sacrificed’ to make way for a new myth. At the same time, he contrasts the woman’s suicide with that of the young man, as the former is quickly left behind in the forward march of modernity while the latter serves as a harbinger of change. Just as Damiel will soon experience the world in color, his new ability to participate in history figured in the disappearance of his monochromatic vision, the young man’s suicide is also followed by a scene shot in color, allowing the viewer to anticipate the import of the changes Damiel’s story will bring about. And while the woman in Ruttmann’s film jumps from an unspecified bridge, the young man crosses from West to East, transcending the division between nations that Homer
with his epic of peace hopes to bridge. Wenders also emphasizes the helplessness of the angels in his montage sequence just as Ruttmann depicts humanity’s inability to stop ‘progress’; in Himmel it is Cassiel who is bombarded with images of poverty and chaos against which he is powerless, as opposed to the suicide on the bridge in Ruttmann’s Berlin. By creating such specific contrasts, Wenders is able to highlight the differences between the function of the abject in his film and the woman’s role in Ruttmann’s, which distinguish the new myths he is seeking from the discredited promises of the earlier era.

The city of Berlin is a site haunted by such figures, the invisible ghosts of the future and the past. It bears the scars of shifting borders and the voids left behind, spaces containing the possibility of new narratives. Both Berlin: Sinfonie and Himmel über Berlin depict such spaces, and include characters that inhabit them as a means to enable or initiate these narratives. Though both films are part of aesthetic movements attempting to respond to an altered experience of time and space and a corresponding change in the understanding of borders and their functions, their differences represent a shift in the meaning of border consciousness. The representations of borders and border crossings in Ruttmann’s film are an attempt to control the chaos and dislocation of modernity by aiding in the construction of the city as both body and machine, a construction that allows neither physical sickness nor mechanical breakdown. Though recognizing implicitly the weakness in this construction through the figure of the female suicide, in his desire to compose a ‘symphony’ to which all parts of the modern city contribute, Ruttmann tries to control and to veil its essential heterogeneity. As that which ‘doesn’t fit’, the suicide
is a reminder of this heterogeneity, subverting the director’s cyborgian visions that helped contribute to the “totalitarian eradication of difference” of the following era (Strathausen 34). In his film, Wenders responds directly to this failure, and in his representations of borders and border crossings his camera seeks the gaps rather than the surfaces of the city, finding in them the other, the disregarded, those whom history has ignored, and tries to write a story with the potential to include them all. Yet in his effort to make amends for the transgressions of Germany’s past, he ultimately fails to take into account its present. The new narrative, when it is written, must necessarily go beyond a romantic attempt to redeem the sins of the “white male,” allowing the voices of those whose presence his camera acknowledges to contribute to its composition.
Chapter 2

In a special issue of *The Germanic Review* on the “imaginary landscapes” of the Berlin Republic, Johannes von Moltke and Julia Hell note that in a country for which anniversaries are “symbolically fraught,” 1999 had special significance: the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Wall also marked fifty years since the formation of the two separate German states in 1949, and sixty since the invasion of Poland in 1939. At that time, von Moltke and Hell began to take note of what they term the “Unification Effect,” the “shifting ground on which cultural and political interventions have taken place” since the establishment of the new German state. Included among these shifts, the authors cite continuing debates over “normalization” and historical memory, the relationship between the former East and West and their respective histories, the issue of how to integrate into the Republic a new German-Jewish relationship (and, I would add, a new attitude toward former “guest workers” and other immigrant groups), the lingering presence of “Ostalgie” and other forms of nostalgia, and the (more recent) “obsession” with the RAF and its legacy (81). In the decade since von Moltke and Hell began their observations of the Unification Effect, cinema has emerged as one of the most important “cultural interventions” to which they refer, with its unique ability to depict the spatial aspects of a developing national identity (91).

In the following chapters, I examine the work of three contemporary German filmmakers who contribute to the creation of “imaginary landscapes” central to the ongoing construction and/or interrogation of German national identity in the new
century. As with the earlier films discussed in Chapter 2, the ambivalence regarding national identity seen in contemporary historical and cultural debates is reflected in these later works through the use of borders, border tropes, and transitory spaces as well as through the movements and emotional states of the characters. However, whereas in the previous chapter a concentration on Berlin as a particularly resonant site allowed an examination of border consciousness across two very disparate time periods, liminal spaces throughout reunified Germany (and beyond) provide the context for the remainder of this study.

In an article written in 2001 for *Film-Dienst*, one of two major German film magazines, Olaf Möller describes what has become known as the “Berlin School,” a group of students from the Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie whom many see as the core of a new “young German cinema.” As opposed to the post-unification films of the 1990s, most of which fall into the category of what Eric Rentschler termed the “cinema of consensus,” the work of these filmmakers does not seek any kind of normalcy by avoiding an uncomfortable confrontation with the difficult historical and social issues confronting Germany today. Instead, as Möller notes, through a “cinema of observation,” the Berlin School represents “ein Kino, daß nicht nur von Deutschland spricht, sondern sich auch für Deutschland interessiert,” placing Germany “als Ort von Geschichten wieder in den Mittelpunkt.”

Common to many of these films are elements significant to the study of border consciousness, including a focus on liminal spaces, such as the border between Germany and

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16 “A cinema that not only speaks about Germany but is also interested in it, placing Germany once more at the center of the story” (16; unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine).
Poland and the social and emotional boundary lines often highlighted in Christian Petzold’s city films, as well as a thematization of the tension between a desire or compulsion to move and the experience of stasis. As Marcus Abel points out, these elements are reinforced by a style that places the viewer in a middle position between identification with the characters (as in conventional dramas) and a Brechtian alienation from them, encouraging a look, like that of a stranger, that is somewhat distanced yet still sympathetic, producing a freshness of perspective from which the characters and their situations can be examined.

Central to this group, which includes Thomas Arslan, Angela Schalenec and Michel Freerix, is Christian Petzold, whom one critic characterizes as the director who tries the hardest to depict “die Jetztzeit” of the Berlin Republic (Reinecke 27), particularly its sense of insecurity, through characters who struggle to recover when the order structuring their lives breaks down. In an interview, Petzold describes an early scene in his film Wolfsburg (2003), when a man returns home after having accidentally struck and killed a child with his car: “Er fährt nach Hause in seinen Bungalow, er legt den Autoschlüssel dorthin, wo er ihn schon immer hingelegt hat, aber in der Wohnung ist er schon ein Fremdkörper. Das Leben beginnt schon, ihn auszuscheiden” (qtd. in Reinecke 27). He then explains his use of Wolfsburg as a setting and the title of his film: “ich (kenne) keine andere Stadt, in der die Geschichte der Bundesrepublik so verdichtet an der Peripherie zu finden ist: die spuren der Nazis, die Modernität, und im Zentrum VW” (27). By choosing places

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17 “He drives home in his car, puts the car keys down where he always does, but in his house he is already a foreign body. Soon life begins to cut him out.”
18 “I don’t know any other city in which the history of the BRD is so concentrated on
like Wolfsburg, Petzold underscores not only the significance of the spatial aspects of a new historical imaginary, but also the place of contemporary Germany in the context of global capitalism at a time when the iconic German automobile, the Volkswagen, is largely manufactured outside of Germany.19 His characters, most of whom life has somehow “cut out,” move through these spaces but have lost (if they ever had) the ability to comfortably occupy them. In the first part of this chapter I will discuss the relationship between border consciousness and the historical imaginary Hell and von Moltke outline, as played out in the three films that comprise what Petzold terms his “Ghost Trilogy,” in which the ‘spectral’ protagonists’ attempts to cross spatio-temporal boundaries are hindered by the weight of the past as well as the anonymous spaces of postmodern capitalism. I then examine the characters themselves, finding evidence of border consciousness in their ambivalent qualites, represented in part through the metaphor of the vampire, whose combination of danger and allure is reminiscent of both Kristeva’s abject and Zizek’s “Thing.” Finally, I analyze the depiction of these two aspects of border consciousness in Yella, concentrating on the interaction between the title character and the spaces through which she moves. Unlike the suicides in Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt and Himmel über Berlin, these characters have not ‘sacrificed themselves’ to make way for a new national narrative, but remain to trouble the borders of the newly unified German state.

the periphery: traces of the Nazis, modernity and, in the middle of it all, Volkswagen.”
19 According to the company website, the Volkswagen Group operates 61 production plants in 15 European countries and 6 countries outside of Europe (www.volkswagenag.com).
I. Border Consciousness (1): The German Historical Imaginary and Liminal Spaces in the Ghost Trilogy

Like “Gespenster mitten unter Menschen...irgendwie nicht von dieser Welt und doch Archetypen unserer Zeit”20 (Hinrichsen 6), the borderline characters in the Ghost Trilogy spend much of their lives in transitory spaces and in what Augé terms the “non-places” of supermodernity (such as hotels, non-descript corporate offices and shopping malls). At the same time, they are also distinctly German, serving as figures for the issues underlying von Moltke and Hell’s “Unification Effect,” and attesting to the ongoing presence of these issues by refusing to die. In Die innere Sicherheit, a husband and wife (Barbara Auer and Richy Müller) who were former terrorists are forced to return to Germany with their teenage daughter (Julia Hummer) when the money they were planning to use to escape to Brazil is stolen. The support they hoped to find from their old leftist colleagues at home, however, is not forthcoming, as one former associate is now part of the establishment and the other, unable to accommodate himself to the movement’s failure, has become an alcoholic. Meanwhile Jeanne, their daughter, is tiring of life in the underground, and longs to free herself from her parents’ isolation. When she falls in love with a German boy (Bilge Bingul) who has his own fantasies of escape, she ultimately chooses to risk the well-being of her family ‘cell’ to be with him, a decision that results in the death of her parents when the car they are driving

20 “…ghosts in the midst of the living...somehow not of this world and yet archetypes of our time.”
crashes as they are pursued by the police.

As many analysts have pointed out, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in the Red Army Faction, the German terrorist organization from the 1970s responsible for a series of kidnapings and murders that culminated in the “German Autumn” of 1977 with the liberation of a hijacked airliner, the deaths in prison of the leaders of the RAF, and the murder of kidnapped German industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer. The interest in the RAF and its legacy began to build as the twentieth anniversary of these events approached in 1997, closely followed by the thirtieth anniversary of 1968, all commemorated by TV docudramas, academic conferences, and popular press coverage (Trnka 2), and arose again in 2001 when Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a Green Party member and former leftist, was accused of beating a policeman at a rally in 1973 and throwing Molotov cocktails in 1976. As Hell and von Moltke note, though “seemingly peripheral,” the issue of West German terrorism continues to function as a “central irritant in the cultural landscape of the Berlin Republic,” reappearing in works of art such as Gerhard Richter’s Zyklus RAF and in films like Die innere Sicherheit, Volker Schlöndorf’s Legends of Rita (1999/2000), Andres Veil’s documentary Black Box BRD (2001) and Christopher Roth’s Baader (2002). These films differ from earlier representations of the RAF in the work of directors associated with New German Cinema (especially Deutschland im Herbst [Germany in August; Fassbinder, Kluge, et. al. 1978], and Die bleierne Zeit [Marianne and Juliane; von Trotta 1981]) in that they do not focus on the events themselves. Rather, they are characterized by a “decentering of the standard tropes, time lines and topoi of terrorism,” choosing instead to “grapple
with real and fictionalized figures from the third generation, as well as previously ignored sites of struggle, such as Frankfurt am Main” (3). In so doing, they raise the question of how and why this generation continues to be impacted by the actions of a relatively small, disbanded and largely discredited radical group whose ideals have been out of favor for years.

There have been several suggestions as to why the issue of West German terrorism is experiencing such a strong afterlife, including its function as a reminder of both the failure of West German democracy to overcome the cycle of violence that began with National Socialism (Homewood 121) and the sense of loss experienced by the German Left when the fall of the Wall destroyed its view of the GDR as an ideal state (Hell and von Moltke 84). However, Petzold is less interested in the reasons for its lingering presence than in the fact of its legacy and what it might mean for members of the so-called “third generation,” those who may not remember the harrowing events of the 1970s but who are nonetheless affected by its continuing resonance. As a result the film depicts the interaction between German society and the ‘virus’ (the terrorist cell re-imagined as a ‘typical family’) that it wishes to eliminate, how that ‘infected’ cell manages to survive, at least for a time, and how it is finally overcome. In a commentary regarding his use of the term “innere Sicherheit” in the title of his film, Petzold explains, “Wenn man den Begriff der ‘inneren Sicherheit’ ernst nimmt, ist in diesem Staatsbegriff ja ein Moment der Körperhygiene enthalten: Ein Körper bekämpft die Viren, die ihn befallen haben”
In the film, this encounter is enacted in two separate scenes, in which black cars representing the outside society surround the white Volvo carrying the family. In the first scene, which ends up being a ‘false alarm,’ the father Hans jumps from the car, gun in hand, ready to protect his tiny “Familienzelle” (family cell). Though the couple is finally caught by the police, daughter Jeanne remains a ghostly presence, neither ‘virus’ nor ‘antibody’. In the final shot, the viewer is left with the image of Jeanne, who has emerged from her parents’ wrecked auto with her face bruised and cut, staring into the distance, a sad reminder of the opening scene in which she gazes longingly at a group of teenagers and dreams of a future when she can join them. Though at the end she is apparently free from her parents and their burdensome past, in part through her own actions, it is not at all clear how she will fit into a society that has not created a space for her. The question of how to refill the gap left by the elimination of discredited belief systems, ideals once shared by the members of a generation whose countries no longer exist, is not addressed. Instead we are confronted with the realization that, as Petzold puts it, “am Ende schaut (das Mädchen) in die Leere, in das Nichts” (“Am Ende steht die Leere” 44).

Like Jeanne, the protagonists of Gespenster lurk on society’s periphery, unseen except when they transgress social and legal boundaries. Nina (Julia Hummer) is a Berlin teenager living in a Heim (institution) who works picking up

21 “If one takes the term “internal security” seriously, there is in this term an sense of bodily hygiene; the body fights off the virus that has invaded it”. With this comment, Petzold seems to be making a subtle reference to the Nazi ideology, in which ‘bodily hygiene’ became a metaphor for the need for ‘social’ cleansing (thanks to Fatima Naqvi for this observation).

22 “In the end the girl looks into emptiness, nothingness”.

(“Im Hinterland” 12).
the garbage in the Tiergarten. There she helps Toni (Sabine Timoteo), a young homeless woman, to escape an attack by some men. When Toni is caught in her room, Nina runs away from the Heim, and the two wander the streets of Berlin, shoplifting from the ubiquitous global clothing chain H & M. As she dashes through the open plazas of Berlin Mitte with her contraband, Nina encounters an older, affluent French woman (Marianne Basler) who claims that Nina is her child, kidnapped years ago while the woman was on a visit to the city. Toni, appearing suddenly, insists that the woman is crazy and the two walk away, stealing her wallet in the process. When Françoise, the French woman, returns to her hotel room it becomes apparent that she has done this before, and that her husband (Aurélien Recoing) has come to Berlin to pick her up from a mental institution where she was taken after a previous attempt to accost a young girl. Meanwhile, Nina and Toni audition for a role in a film by describing how they met, and Nina’s elaborate fantasy intrigues and excites the director (Benno Fürmann), who invites them to a party at the set, an old abandoned mansion in a park. Looked upon with disdain by the other guests, including the director’s wife (Anna Schudt), the two dance together, and Toni disappears. Nina searches for her, distraught, and finds her in a room alone with the director. There they dance again as he watches, and when Nina wakes up Toni is again gone – but this time, as the wife brutally informs Nina, she is “fucking” the director. Nina leaves, then meets with Françoise and informs her that she has the same scar as Marie, the missing child. However as the ‘mother and daughter’ have breakfast at the hotel, Françoise’s husband once again comes to collect her, sadly gives money to the confused Nina, and tells her that she can’t be Marie because
“Marie is dead.” In the last scene, retrieving Françoise’s wallet Nina compares her own photo to an age-progression shot of the kidnapped girl – they are truly alike – then tosses both into the trash and walks away.

Gespenster, like Die innere Sicherheit, similarly thematizes “die Leere,” this time found at the heart of the newly reconstructed Berlin. Unlike the city in Wenders’ and Ruttmann’s films discussed in the previous chapter, the Berlin of Gespenster is hardly recognizable, its Mitte seen only from glass doorways at the Arkaden mall and across paved walkways that seem to go nowhere in particular. Though the Siegesäule and Potsdamer Platz are listed as filming locations, they are difficult to identify, a far cry from the central part they played in the two earlier films. This non-descript shell of a city, its streets almost devoid of people, is the antithesis of the capital the architects of the Berlin Republic hoped to create, having staked “its histories, its present, and its millennial futures on the power of architectonic images” to aid in the construction of a new national identity (Hell and von Moltke 78). Yet subjected for years to outside control and defined by Cold War antagonisms, Berlin, like Nina, is haunted by an identity imposed upon it by foreigners, at its core a horrific crime. The emptiness of the city is complemented by the film’s ‘ghostly’ characters, girls who must invent a past and only become ‘visible’ to the public as the shadowy images on the surveillance cameras at the mall, like the televised pictures of victims of war, who seem, as Judith Butler remarked, neither living nor dead (ref. in Hinrichsen 6). Or they exist solely as the projections of others, as the object of male fantasy or the reincarnation of a dead child. In the same way that Petzold reveals the vacant, indistinguishable spaces of Berlin hidden
behind the “compensatory vistas of illusory plenitude” (Hell and von Moltke 78) created by its new façade, he turns his camera on the spectral figures that reside unseen at the margins of the Berlin Republic.

Yella (2007), the third film in the trilogy, contains the ‘ghosts’ of the GDR, imagined as the persistence of the economic, social and psychological gap between the two Germanies that exists, paradoxically, alongside their mutual subjection to the whims of global capitalism. Yella Fichte (Nina Hoss) is a young woman from the former industrial East German town of Wittenberg who finds a job across the Elbe in Hannover, in part to escape her emotionally unstable ex-husband Ben (Hinnerk Schönemann). Upon taking leave of her father (Christian Redl), Yella finds Ben waiting for her on the street to take her to her train. Initially resistant, she agrees to go with him. In the car, they argue over their separation and Ben tries to convince her to come back, but she refuses. Then suddenly turning the wheel, he sends the car plummeting through the guardrail into the Elbe as Yella screams and struggles with him. The two are washed upon the shore, and Yella appears to wake up, fetch her wet suitcase and catch the train to Hannover. Upon arrival, however, she finds there is no job waiting – the company has gone out of business. Returning to her hotel Yella meets Phillip (Devid Striesow), a venture capitalist, who asks her to help him by playing the role of his bookkeeper in some upcoming negotiations. She finds she is remarkably adept at the cutthroat business, with a facility for taking advantage of a company’s weaknesses in order to maximize profits for Phillip. However, she continues to be stalked by the ‘ghost’ of her ex-husband, who has accused her of leaving him because his business failed in the East. To escape she
runs into the arms of Phillip, and in her desire to help him goes too far, causing the suicide of a man she has pressured into financing his company’s takeover with his insurance policy. Afterwards, Yella at first appears to be riding in the back of a taxi, crying, but the shot suddenly alters into a repeat of the drive across the Elbe with Ben. Yet in the replay, when Ben turns the wheel she does not try to stop him. In the final scene, the two are again shown washed upon the riverbank, this time as corpses being covered with a blanket.

While the ghosts in Petzold’s first two films are more tangentially connected to issues of contemporary German identity, Yella is identified specifically through her name with both the crossing of borders and German nationalism. According to Petzold, Yella takes her name from the actress Yella Rottländer, who played the young Alice in Wim Wenders’ film Alice in den Städten (1974), in which the girl travels from city to city across Europe in search of her grandmother (Weber 18). The director does not mention, however, the significance of her surname, “Fichte,” a clear reference to the 19th century German idealist philosopher and ‘father’ of German nationalism, Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Fichte was an early proponent of the idea of Kulturnation, arguing that Germans were unique in that they did not emigrate but remained close to the “ursprüngliche...Wohnsitze...des Stammvolks” (Reden an die deutsche Nation, 4th Address, par 4), their physical separation from others less important than their internal borders (“innere Grenzen”): “Was dieselbe Sprache redet, das ist schon vor aller menschlichen Kunst vorher durch die bloße Natur mit einer Menge von unsichtbaren Banden an einandergeknüpft... es gehört

23 “original domiciles of the Volk”
zusammen und ist natürlich eins und ein unzertrennliches Ganzes” (13th Address, par 2). On the other hand, in Fichte’s conception the “foreign” brings death to a culture, and when people give up their own language for another they become “possessed by ghosts” (Cheah 123). By reinforcing its internal borders, Fichte believed that a nation could actually overcome the border between life and death, allowing the individual to unite with the eternal and divine (Cheah 127). Petzold’s film provides an ironic commentary on this idea, as Yella must ‘die’ to be ‘reborn’ in the western part of Germany, the former physical border creating a boundary insurmountable except through death. Yella’s visions of the ghost of her former husband attests to her immersion in what is essentially another world, in which she becomes an “Ungeheuer wider Willen” (a “monster” against her will), as one critic comments (Hinrichsen 6). Yet at the same time, Petzold draws a parallel between Wittenberg in the East and Hannover in the West. Shot at the former Expo 2000 grounds, now abandoned, the western city looks as desolate as Wittenberg, which was rapidly de-industrialized after the Wende. By creating such a parallel, Petzold emphasizes the extent to which all places, East and West, are at the mercy of the passing impulses of global capitalism, whose official language of business and finance is foreign to all, becoming a variant of Fichte’s death-dealing force.

The characters in the Ghost Trilogy, existing at the margins of contemporary German society but at the same time figures for its past, illustrate Huysssen’s

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24 “Those who speak the same language are joined to each other through a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself, long before any human art begins; they understand each other and have the power of continuing to make themselves understood more and more clearly; they belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole” (trans. www.sammustafa.com/Resources/Fichte.pdf).

25 A reminder, for example, of the deadly border crossings during the Cold War.
observation that history has become part of an ever-expanding present, with different pasts (for example, those of East and West Germany, post-WWII and post-unification) bound up with contemporary issues (ref. in Hell and von Moltke 78). This superimposition of the German past on its present is represented in spatial terms through films like *Die Unberührbare* (Roehler 2000), in which the filmmaker tells the story of his mother, West German leftist writer Gisela Elsner, from her decision to commit suicide in the beginning of the film through her last days. He follows her “somnambulistic” ramblings across the voids of East Berlin just after the fall of the Wall, her nostalgic longing for a lost pre-unification fantasmatic identity with the former GDR mirrored by her son’s Orphic search for her (Hell and von Moltke 84). The border consciousness evinced in this film is similarly depicted in the attempted movements of Petzold’s characters across the spatio-temporal borders of present-day Germany. However, the characters’ physical movements are countered by an emotional and psychological stasis, a kind of immobility within mobility, creating a tension that is reinforced through Petzold’s filmmaking strategies.

Though the spatio-temporal quality of the borders in the Trilogie support Hell and von Moltke’s contention that the “new” (post-unification) German historical imaginary is “characterized by a logic of return in which spatial aspects now figure more prominently” (91), the frustrated attempts of the protagonists to successfully cross these borders suggest that such returns may be ultimately impossible. In *Die

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26 Petzold uses a similar phrase in an interview with Marcus Abel, when he refers to airports as places that all look alike, producing a kind of “immobile mobility” that is a characteristic of modern life (“The Cinema of Identification”, n. pag.).
innere Sicherheit, as they cross the German border the family returns not to the Germany they left more than twenty years earlier but to a country grown even further away from its ideals. The inhospitable environment they are about to enter is signified at the border crossing, as Jeanne and her parents emerge shivering from the car, unused to the sudden cold. Upon crossing, Hans returns to a spot where he buried money years before, only to discover the Deutsche Marks are now outdated and useless. Stranded in such an unwelcoming place the family begins to unravel, as Jeanne is lured by material goods and her parents find their old friends no longer sympathetic, until the Familienzelle is finally destroyed by representatives of the new Germany. In Gespenster the return of the French couple to the site in Berlin where their daughter was kidnapped years before, evincing the transgression of a spatio-temporal boundary between France and Germany that resonates with the memories of lost children in World War II and the subsequent division of the city into zones of occupation, is complemented by the imaginary crossing of national borders in Nina and Toni’s invention of a false past set on a lake in Holland. In both cases, the return is futile; the child of the French couple is ‘dead’, and Nina and Toni’s ‘past’ is exposed as pure fabrication. Finally, the border between the former East and West Germany in Yella, the Elbe river, clearly functions as a boundary line that is temporal as well as spatial. As Petzold remarks in an interview, by crossing the river Yella moves from ”one century to another” (Interview with Jason Wood, 42). Once she crosses, however, she is pulled back towards her Heimat through her own repressed desires and the weight of her past, though return to the East has now

27 Though as Fatima Naqvi points out, this is only according to Françoise’s husband, and is left unclear by the ending.
become as impossible as her ability to accept what she must become to adjust to life in the West.

The inability of the protagonists to return to the space of the past suggests an unrequited desire for home, whether a physical place or an emotional state of wholeness represented by an intact family. Discussing his belief that most great narratives are about journeys, Petzold explains that in his view, “such narratives only pretend that people set out on a journey into the foreign. In the end it’s all a version of Homer’s Odyssey: mostly such narratives are about getting home” (“The Cinema of Identification”, n.pag.). The films in the Trilogy suggest that this desire for home becomes intensified in the context of the pressure constantly to move according to the dictates of modern capitalism; yet although people are forced to move they don’t know where to go, and “end up in transitional spaces, transit zones where nothingness looms on one side and the impossibility of returning to what existed in the past on the other” (n. pag.), resulting in a kind of paralysis. Petzold depicts this inner stasis in the many scenes that take place inside moving vehicles, illustrating this idea of immobility within transitional spaces by focusing on the characters and their actions and interactions, with the outside world held at an indistinct distance. As Nina sits in the car with Françoise, for example, Petzold divides the two in profile, in two separate shots, and it is as if the car has changed direction, reflecting the conflicting emotional trajectories of the characters (Hinrichsen 8). In addition, the characters seem to get ‘stuck’ at ‘in-between’ places that are meant to be moved through, not occupied. The most obvious example is Yella’s inability to cross the bridge over the Elbe alive, but she is also unable to leave
her ‘temporary’ abode at the hotel. Both Heinrich, Jeanne’s boyfriend from Die innere Sicherheit, and Nina live in Heime, not “homes”. The family in Die inner Sicherheit turns the pattern around: they live in places that are supposed to be homes (apartments, houses) but they are never there for long; though they move constantly, they are never able to ‘move on’. The frustration this inability to move produces is figured strongly through images, used in all three of the films, of the characters standing in front of rivers and other bodies of water, insuperable barriers that become, as Naficy terms it, “cathedected with desire.”

II. Border Consciousness (2): “Borderline” Characters in the Trilogy

As people without a ‘place’ in society, Petzold’s ‘ghosts’, like the characters in Chapter 2, occupy a liminal space. In one sense they can be likened to foreigners, those kept outside society’s boundaries in order to provide a sense of security, or even ‘ontological stability’ to those within. David Morley uses as an example the ancient Greeks’ perception of themselves as center, and the further away from this center the stranger the creatures encountered. In modern society, according to Sibley’s idea of the “purification of space,” such boundaries are drawn to prevent the mixing of unlike categories. Whether it threatens to invade the social body like a virus, or is merely out of place (like dirty shoes which are acceptable in certain areas but not others [Douglass 1966; ref in Morley Home Territories 142]), that which is

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28 The German term “Heime”, though literally translated as “homes”, refers instead to institutions such as youth homes, or orphanages. The irony of the term is played up in Petzold’s films through the many references to such Heime.
'foreign’ must be kept separate. According to Mary Douglas’ renowned study of exclusion in small-scale, traditional societies, Morley maintains, “the key problems always pertain to elements, objects or persons which lack the virtue of clarity of belonging” (143). He adds that strangers are likewise “unclassifiable” because they are physically close at the same time that they are culturally far away; thus in much contemporary discourse, the immigrant has replaced the demons and witches of traditional folklore in their transgression of society’s sacred space (143).

In the Ghost Trilogy, though the main protagonists are not foreign but German, they are in some ways associated with the foreign: Nina is the imagined daughter of a French woman, for example, and Yella aligns herself with the Americans in an effort to extort money from a German CEO. In *Die innere Sicherheit* there is one very telling scene in which the family stops at a restaurant near the border of Germany. Inside, Jeanne is temporarily separated from her family and finds herself in a crowd of illegal immigrants. Petzold films her surrounded by this group, whose members are chattering in another language as she tries to move through. Ironically, the police come to arrest the immigrants, allowing the former terrorists to slip by unnoticed. Yet the difference here is significant; the family, though hated enemies of the state, is not ‘other.’ Instead, it is closer to Judith Butler’s description of the abject, those located in the “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life,” zones that demarcate the “site of dreaded identity” against which the subject, as a social entity, defines itself (3). While Morley fails to differentiate between the abject and the other, for Butler, the abject is different from the other in that it not only plays the part of an ‘outside’ to the subject but actually constitutes it.
By repelling the abject, the subject creates itself - - it is its own “founding repudiation.” For the Berlin Republic, both the leftist terrorism embraced by the RAF and the hatred of foreigners associated with the Nazi period serve as such founding repudiations, yet like all abjection, they continue to haunt because they always “threaten to expose the presumptions of the subject” (3), in this case that with unification, a history of political violence and authoritarianism (conveniently projected onto the now-defunct East) was successfully put to rest.

Therefore, though associated with the stranger, the foreign other, which must be kept out in order for the nation to define itself, Petzold’s characters are at the same time representative of that part of the national self which has been cast away or denied. Butler’s understanding of abjection as a process of repudiation integral to the formation of the social (or in this case, national) subject draws on the psychoanalytical work of Julia Kristeva, who locates the abject in the workings of the unconscious (see preceding chapter). Kristeva argues on the one hand that as part of the body that has been expelled so that the subject can survive, the abject is associated with defilement, waste and bodily secretions, and is a reminder of the thin line between life and death (Powers of Horror 2-3). As abject figures the protagonists in the Trilogy are repeatedly linked with garbage and excrement. When Jeanne, for example, complains to her parents about moving, they remark that she always thought Portugal was “shit,” to which she responds, “I am used to the shit now!” Their former colleague in Germany claims to want nothing more to do with “that shit,” the radical politics of his past (he then indicates how far the family has been ‘othered’ by continuing, “What are you going to do with your daughter, bring
her to Yemen to get circumcised?”) In Gespenster, both Nina and Toni are associated with garbage: Nina lives in a “Scheissheim,” as Toni puts it, and picks up trash in the park, and the mother of Toni’s former boyfriend has thrown her possessions in the trash “where they belong.” Most tellingly, at the end of the film Nina, retrieving the photo of Françoise’ daughter from her wallet which the two girls had tossed in the garbage, throws it and her own back in after establishing her resemblance to the dead child. Both Yella and her ex-husband Ben, as former East Germans, refer to themselves as “garbage”; before they drive over the bridge, Ben complains about “sitting at home on his rubbish heap” while Yella moves on to a new life, and when Phillip, noticing that Yella is packing her clothes to leave, refers to a joke about a man taking out the “trash,” Yella pointedly looks at Phillip before replying, “Yes, I am taking out the trash”.

On the other hand, Kristeva insists that although it can be compared to the elimination of waste from the body, the process of abjection is more ambiguous than that analogy implies because abjection fails to fully separate the subject from the abject. Quoting Bataille, she notes that “abjection...is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundation of collective existence)” (58). The ambiguity of abjection has its origins in the trauma of birth; just as a child must separate from its mother in order to live independently, the subject must cast off the abject to enter what Lacan terms the Symbolic order, the social universe of signs and laws and the realm of the “Law” that regulates desire. At the same time, the abject exerts a pull on the subject, beckoning it to return to the “forbidden pleasure” of its unity with the mother, and
serving as a constant reminder of the vulnerability of the Symbolic. Kristeva argues that the precarious nature of this border is what ties the abject to that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules,” in other words, to figures that are composite, ambiguous or in-between (4).

Societies have historically dealt with the threat posed by the abject through religious rituals of purification, such as rites of defilement in paganism, dietary restrictions or taboos in monotheistic religions, and with self-defilement in Christianity (16-17; Creed 45). In the Trilogy, Petzold connects his characters to the abject not only by associating them with waste, but by highlighting their ambiguity, the combination of danger and allure which society recognizes and attempts to control, through his use of the metaphor of the vampire.

The vampire-like quality of Petzold’s characters, particularly those in Die innere Sicherheit, has been remarked upon both by Petzold himself and by other commentators (“Schwebezustande” 44; Hinrichsen 7; Homewood 124). In one interview, the director compares his protagonists to beings that penetrate civil society like something “excluded and displaced” (“ausgegrenzt und verdrängt”), further noting that “...Derjenige, der die Stadt in Auflösung bringt ist ein unendlich Einsamer, ein Liebender, eine sich nach Liebe verzehrende Figur” (“Schwebezustande” 44).29 He cites as one of his inspirations for Die innere Sicherheit the Kathryn Bigelow film Near Dark (1987), about a vampire family that roams the American West searching for victims (44). In Petzold’s film, the family members similarly drive around in their own “coffin”, this time a white Volvo

29 “The one that brings destruction to the city is an eternal loner, a lover, a figure that longs for love”
instead of a van as in Bigelow’s film, and are not literal vampires but only figurative. But the analogy is all the more intriguing for this reason, especially as the trope is carried throughout the trilogy. Besides the character of Françoise in Gespenster, who latches onto Nina as she had other girls as substitutes for her lost daughter, Petzold makes subtle references to superstitions about the vampire in connection to his other characters. For example, both Jeanne, Nina and Toni tend to enter and exit through windows, and are often filmed from the inside of buildings, standing outside as they wait to be ‘let in.’ At one point, after Nina makes up a story about why she has left work, the director of the home where she lives asks her what sudden “illness” overcame her boss (who, incidentally, had been harassing her), and Nina replies, “Blutvergiftung” (blood poisoning). There are similar references in Yella as well, in addition to the fact that the title character is, of course, an ‘animated corpse,’ enacting through her cold-hearted business transactions the stereotype of the capitalist as ‘vampire.’

Petzold’s use of the metaphor of the vampire to express the borderline quality of his characters serves first as a means both to criticize society’s attempts to demarcate and control the abject and to suggest the hidden power of the marginal. As a ‘monster,’ the figure of the vampire highlights the border between the abject and the Symbolic, and is often used to initiate an encounter between the two (Creed 49). Through his treatment of the regime of the look, by which society attempts to

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30 As Sutherland points out, in the 19th century the vampire was used in legal battles as an image for corporate greed (147), and Tobias further notes its association with “capitalist extraction” in opposition to the worker, who has traditionally been symbolized by the “cyborg” (159).
re-establish control of the ‘monstrous,’ Petzold interrogates this encounter. In all	hree films, the protagonists are seen through surveillance cameras as they
transgress society’s laws, shoplifting, robbing banks, and stealing money. This ties
them to images on the nightly news of those wanted for rape and murder, and even
to the horrible kidnapping depicted on another camera that lurks in Françoise’s
memory. But whereas these images add to the sense of their invisibility and lack of
physical presence (they are seen by the public only this way, otherwise, as abject
figures and especially as ‘vampires’ they are not ‘recognized’), their corporeality and
seductiveness is emphasized through the look of the camera. The first and last
images of Jeanne, for example, highlight the beauty and vulnerability of her face as
she gazes longingly into the distance, an expression that first draws Heinrich to her.
Yella’s vulnerability and allure is similarly depicted, both through the extreme close-
ups of her face as she sits in the car with Ben and in the images of her undressing
frantically in the train, her blouse wet and clinging. In Gespenster, the questionable
gaze of the camera is directly interrogated, both in the scenes in the Berlin
Tiergarten tying the film to Antonioni’s Blow Up (1966)\textsuperscript{31} and through the character
of the director, whose attraction to the girls is grounded in the ‘aberrant’ sexuality
he imagines they embody as he watches them dance together. The protagonists are
thus seen as, on the one hand, indistinct black and white figures on a monitor
screen, dangerous ‘criminals’ under the controlling gaze of surveillance cameras,
and on the other, similarly subject to the more sympathetic yet no less objectifying

\textsuperscript{31} Nina’s observations of Toni in the park, followed by Petzold’s camera, are
reminiscent of Antonioni’s depiction of the photographer’s voyeuristic gaze at a
couple in a similar setting, in which the film camera is also implicated.
look of the camera. In both cases, the intensity of their objectification is tied to a perception of their threat to society, a perception that Petzold, through the juxtaposition of these images, effectively underlines.

At the same time, the vampire metaphor has another dimension. In addition to its function as a representation of the danger and desire embodied by abject characters, the vampire can also be understood as a figure for what Slavoj Zizek terms the “Thing,” after the Lacanian “Ding,” the “substance of enjoyment” around which society is formed (For They Know Not What They Do 221). In his discussion of the applicability of Freudian psychoanalysis to moral law, Lacan maintains that the radical step taken by Freud was to show that the mother, or the “forbidden good” (das Ding), is located in the place of the “Sovereign Good” as the foundation of human society, whose establishment is only made possible through the prohibition of incest (Lacan 70). Because it is both forbidden and desired, das Ding “...has to be posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that is impossible to forget – the Other whose primacy of position Freud affirms in the form of something entfremdet, something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me, something that on the level of the unconscious only a representation can represent” (Lacan 71). Zizek argues that the Thing is the “foreign body” located at the heart of the social self, its ambiguity stemming from the fact that it is both foreign, even monstrous, but at the same time functions as “what 'holds together' the social edifice by means of guaranteeing its fantasmatic consistency” (Enjoy Your Symptom 140). He traces our understanding of the Thing from modernism, where it exists at the margins of society as a subversive element, a symptom of repressed truths that need only to be
unmasked for the oppressive force of the Symbolic to be undermined, to
postmodernism, where it becomes the center, society’s “traumatic kernel” that it
attempts to symbolize and “neutralize” but that persists as the core of our social
existence. Postmodernism, he maintains, is characterized by an obsession with this
Thing, as evidenced by the effort expended to represent it in various forms, from
monstrous women to “paranoiac vision(s) of social totality itself as the ultimate
fascinating Thing, a vampire-like specter which marks even the most idyllic everyday
surface with signs of latent corruption” (140; my emphasis).32

Zizek uses the vampire and the undead in general as a metaphor for the
presence of the Thing in contemporary society, clearly seen in modern-day
incarnations of both capitalism and nationalism, forces with powerful appeal that
nevertheless have a dangerous potential to infect the social fabric. Capitalism,
“today more than ever…the Thing par excellence,” is “…a chimeric apparition which,
although it can nowhere be spotted as a positive, clearly delimited entity,
nonetheless functions as the ultimate Thing regulating our lives” (Enjoy Your
Symptom 140). Like Creed, Zizek sees the borderline quality of the monster as
indicative of a structural imbalance, in this case that created by capitalism. Yet
whereas in other epochs the monster this imbalance engenders emerged in the form
of Frankenstein (marking the rise of capitalism) or later, the Phantom of the Opera
and the Elephant Man (with the onset of imperialism), in postindustrial society the
monster appears in the aspect of the “living dead” (160), a form that suggests the

32 The example occurs to me of the popularity of such films as The Matrix, in which
the entire world is an illusion generated by a monstrous machine ‘mother’ that feeds
images of reality into human ‘infants’ in exchange for the energy their bodies emit to
keep her alive.
presence of the Thing within, something that appears outwardly like ‘us’ but remains entfremdet. As Fiona Peters notes in her discussion of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, “…The Thing is, then, not the body, not Lucy as she was in life, before becoming a vampire, it’s the Thing, in the psychoanalytic sense, that was in the body but has been driven out. Zizek calls this a ‘substance of enjoyment’…It is too much, too threatening because it reminds us in its uncanny dimension of what we cannot be…” (182). Modern consumer capitalism is like the undead in that, in its permeation of every aspect of daily life, it becomes the ‘monster’ within ourselves, the focus of an irresistible attraction towards what is ultimately unattainable, and a “terrifying force of ‘deterritorialization’ which dissolves all traditional (‘substantial’) symbolic links” (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 160).

At the same time, the Thing can also be seen in connection to nationalism, a movement that, according to Gellner, took the place vacated by religion as the underwriter of state legitimacy in the post-Enlightenment period (Miles 198). Yet from Zizek’s perspective, that alone is not enough to explain the intensity of its appeal. He holds that the bond that links together a national community is a shared relationship towards the “Nation qua Thing,” as Enjoyment (*jouissance*) incarnated, not a set of specific values or beliefs but a vague sense of what is uniquely “our” way of life. This Enjoyment is nevertheless fraught with ambiguity; it is something that only “we” can understand and others cannot grasp, yet it is constantly threatened by “them,” the others, whom we perceive as wanting to steal it, and whose own “enjoyment” we resent and suspect (*Tarrying with the Negative* 201). However, the relationship between others and ourselves cannot be understood simply as fear of
the “foreign” wanting to invade us, to intrude upon our Thing. Instead, this “threat” is actually the projection of our desire for the Thing onto the Other: “Does not the Other’s enjoyment exert such a powerful fascination because in it we represent to ourselves our own innermost relationship towards enjoyment? And, conversely, is the anti-Semitic capitalist’s hatred of the Jew not the hatred of the excess that pertains to capitalism itself? [Rather than a threat to our identity – K.S.] the fascinating image of the Other gives body to our innermost split, to what is ‘in us more than ourselves’ and thus prevents us from achieving full identity with ourselves. *The hatred of the Other is the hatred of our own excess of enjoyment*” (206).

In the Ghost Trilogy, this aspect of the vampire metaphor is made manifest through characters who serve as figures for and victims of the insidious workings of the Thing *qua* (as Zizek would put it) “Nation” and “Capital” in contemporary Germany. As terrorists, the family in *Die innere Sicherheit* reveals the excess lurking behind the national Thing, suggesting the extremes of both Nazism and leftist fanaticism, an excess that is made specific through its projection onto the “Other” (as in the subtle link made by their former colleague between their status as outsiders and that of the Muslims [read ‘terrorists’] in Yemen) who has “stolen” this Enjoyment. And as part of a family of idealists who have supposedly rejected the allure of materialism, Jeanne highlights the ambiguity and excess of capitalism through her encounters with it; she is ‘noticed’ as either one who violates the system’s thorough permeation of everyday life by wearing outdated clothes (according to the comments of Heinrich and the teenage daughter of their former
colleague) or as the Other who succumbs to its appeal and brings upon herself the full force of society's (self) hatred, as she flees the department store's alarms and surveillance cameras. The relationship between Nina and Françoise in Gespenster likewise indicates the presence of the ‘foreign’ within the self through their mother/daughter charade, demonstrating the manner in which the inequities of the capitalist system serve to infect and to deform interpersonal relationships. This is revealed with particular impact in the scene in which the two drive through the dark streets of Berlin in Françoise’ Mercedes, a ‘coffin’ that protects them from the outside world and allows the wealthy Frenchwoman to indulge her fantasies, luring the impoverished girl with false hopes. And in Yella, the title character herself is an ‘Undead’ who moves from the former East, through its evocation of a lost Heimat associated with past versions of the German national imaginary, to the capitalist West, where she transforms into a vampiric “Ungeheuer.” Subject to the lure of both Nation and Capital, she ultimately rejects both, instead choosing to ‘rest’ in the liminal space of the former border.

III. Border Consciousness in Yella

In an interview, Petzold comments that he premised his film Yella on the idea of dreamwork (“The Cinema of Identification”), Freud’s notion that dreams are essentially attempts to work through our unconscious desires and a means to fulfill our innermost wishes. Yella’s dream is an articulation of the wish to overcome her ambivalence between the desire to succeed in a new capitalist economy and her
equally strong reluctance to leave her *Heimat*, the place of her birth. As a context for the film, Petzold refers to traditional German stories about women and men who leave home to search for luck, yet “part of their body wants to stay and wants to go back to mother...to lay down and sleep and get relief there,” though they realize that this is the same as “death” (interview, *Yella*). Interestingly, he later uses as a more contemporary example of Yella’s predicament the women who moved from the countryside to the cities in the 1920s and 30s to work in offices, a phenomenon that provides part of the backdrop to Ruttmann’s *Berlin Sinfonie* (”The Cinema of Identification”). In *Yella*, the title character is similarly drawn to what is portrayed as the ‘modern world,’ the former West, in an effort both to escape a failed relationship and to begin a new life, yet she is deeply reluctant to leave home; consequently when she “lies down to sleep” she attempts to resolve these contradictory desires by dreaming of a ‘double’ who goes on to play out her fantasy life in the West after she is murdered by her husband, and in her “dreamwork” condensing the male characters in her life at home into an imaginary lover that can help her achieve economic success and establish a new *Heimat* in Hannover. As her name Yella “Fichte” suggests, she is not only a woman who longs for a better life, but also one who figuratively bears the burden of the nationalist dream of a truly unified Germany. Petzold depicts Yella’s contradictory desires and her need to integrate them through her movements between the spaces of *Heimat* and the “non-places” of modern capitalism, though it is the liminal space of the Elbe, the border crossing, where her dilemmas are ultimately resolved.

The significance of Yella’s emotional co-existence in two separate ‘worlds’ is
apparent from the opening scene of the film, as Yella returns to Wittenberg from a successful job interview in Hannover. Before any image appears, the sound of a moving train is heard, then the passing countryside is seen through the windows of the train. A close-up of Yella’s face looking out (thus apparently establishing her point of view as that of the camera) is followed by her movement toward the window to close the curtains, and she begins to remove her red blouse. The curtain-closing is odd; it doesn’t seem clear why she needs to do it, since there is no one to see her. The next shot is again of the countryside through the window, now theoretically impossible from Yella’s point of view since the curtain is closed. This scene, especially since it is essentially repeated after Yella’s ‘accident,’ emphasizes the importance of the train as a transitional space, as well as Yella’s ambivalence about her return; she doesn’t want to see her passing Heimat, though the camera emphasizes it. Her clothes changing is the first indication of her perception of the vast difference between her homeland and the former West, as well as an intimation of her impending transformation. As the film progresses, it becomes apparent that Yella’s movement between the two former ‘states’ is to be understood metaphorically as well, as is her choice of the color red, which comes to be associated with death, to signify her move to the West.

Though she appears in the beginning of the film to be confident and committed to her move (as Ben puts it, he can tell she has a “good job” by the way she “walks”), her inner conflict is soon revealed. She is obviously attached to her (apparently single) father, though she is eager to be free of her unstable ex-husband, who stalks her. Petzold emphasizes the intensity of her conflicting desires by
making it unclear exactly when her 'dream' begins, possibly intimating that Yella, like the heroes and heroines of German folktales, would prefer to sleep rather than choose between her Heimat and her new life in Hannover. Though on first viewing one is left with the impression that it is the car crash that initiates the dream sequence, there is much to suggest that even the crash is part of her dream, strengthening the sense that her death at the hands of her ex-husband as they cross the Elbe is subconsciously desired. When her alarm goes off on the morning she is to leave for her new job in Hannover, she is filmed through a red filter, lying asleep. Her father must wake her up to go, and when she hears what she thinks is a taxi outside, Ben is standing in a black suit, waiting beside his car, also red. He offers her a ride, and before she makes her decision a loud sound, like the sonic boom of a jet, startles them. Similar loud sounds are repeated throughout the film, particularly at decisive moments. The dreamlike quality of this sequence is evoked both by this sound, the red filter at the beginning of the scene, the odd appearance of Ben in his undertaker's suit, and Yella's even odder decision to accept his offer of a ride, when she had previously refused even to share the same sidewalk with him. If, as this scene suggests, Yella subconsciously wishes for her death, her equally intense desire to begin a new life in the former West is manifested through her dream creation of a double who emerges from her 'grave' at the bottom of the Elbe to attempt to resolve Yella's conflict between her reluctance to leave and her need to go.

According to Freud, in children and primitive groups the double serves as "eine Versicherung gegen den Untergang des Ichs, eine 'energische Dementierung der Macht des Todes' (O.Rank), und wahrscheinlich war die ‘unsterbliche Seele’ der
erste Doppelgänger des Leibes” (*Das Unheimliche* 63).\(^{33}\) Yella’s double functions in this way, as an aspect of dreamwork satisfying her wish to overcome her death. The first indication that the figure that emerges from the river is actually Yella’s dream double is her repetition of Yella’s act of clothes changing in the train to Hannover. As in the first scene, Yella closes the curtains to remove her red blouse, yet this time she does not change into other clothes but sits shivering and sobbing in her wet underwear, the confidence of her first trip replaced by vulnerability. The fear she suppresses in her return from Hannover is revealed here, along with her awareness of being in a transitional space, as she sits undressed, eventually falling asleep. At the same time, the intensity of her desire to escape death is dramatized through the view from her window, this time a frantic blur of green rather than a steadily passing countryside. Once in Hannover, Yella’s double begins her efforts to resolve the opposing pull of Yella’s attachment to her Heimat while she tries to establish a new home, all the while combating the urge to return to ‘sleep,’ largely through the transformation of the two men from her life in Wittenberg into her new lover, Phillip.

While the ‘archaic mother,’ in her death aspect, calls Yella back to the grave, in her dream Yella attempts to counteract this through the construction of “composite figures,” Freud’s term for the effort made by the dreamer to express an unconscious wish by displacing character traits of significant individuals into the form of an apparent stranger (*The Dream-Work* 293). In Yella’s dream, her father, a

\(^{33}\) …an insurance against the extinction of the self, or as Rank puts it, an ‘energetic denial’ of its power, and it seems likely that the immortal soul was the first double of the body (trans. McLintock 142).
strong, quiet man who takes care of her, providing her with a roll of carefully saved bills to help her in her new home, and her ex-husband Ben, an ambitious but so far unsuccessful entrepreneur with a propensity for violence, are combined to create Phillip, who is also ambitious yet at first appears successful, able and willing to provide for her. The suggestion that Phillip is a vehicle for Yella’s wish fulfillment is made apparent through details such as his red car, his physical similarity to Ben, and certain personal qualities he shares with her father; at one point, there is a close-up of Phillip peeling an orange precisely as Yella’s father did earlier in the film. The composition of these characters allows Yella to have both her Heimat, through her father, the sense of security provided by home and family, and the power and material success capitalism offers.

Yet beyond its personal function, the composite figure Yella constructs also has a symbolic dimension that applies to contemporary Germany. As pointed out previously, in many of Petzold’s films women are the means through which various forms of power dynamics are signified and critiqued. In Yella, the female protagonist becomes the site of the struggle between the German nationalist tradition, figured through “Herr Fichte,” her father, and the modern capitalist present, characterized by Phillip. Ben embodies the tragic and self-destructive compulsion of the East to conform to a new, capitalist national imaginary. Significantly, all three are male; even Heimat, usually gendered female, is represented not in feminine opposition to the male Vaterland but as its equivalent. The only option provided Yella to this masculine composite is death, or the return to ‘mother earth.’ The blending of the three male characters in Yella’s fantasy life is a
response to the pressures exerted upon her, and by extension, Germany, by the need to reconcile the desire for a new national mythology with the necessity for Germany to integrate into the global capitalist system. Though, in essence, her ‘dream’ is of a truly ‘unified’ Germany, Yella instead becomes a vehicle for the expression of these contradictory desires, and a victim of her failure to resolve them.

As Kristeva maintains, the abject arises during moments of crisis in the Symbolic ("Approaching Abjection" 552), and Yella’s appearance as an ‘Undead’ Easterner in the western city of Hannover illustrates this. Just as the ghosts and abject figures from the Gothic period in English literature can be understood as representations of the ‘remnants’ left over from the replacement of dynastic legitimacy and divine ordination with nationalism in the 19th century (Miles 47-70), Yella’s ghostly double functions not only as a figure for the attempt to forge a new order but in part as a reminder of a past one. A woman from the former East, her abject status as a remnant of the old communist order is emphasized through her lack of material possessions, particularly clothing, and a functioning credit card, which almost causes her to lose her reservation at the hotel. The cold disregard she receives from the hotel clerk is mirrored by the lack of respect she encounters from her boss at the now-defunct firm that hired her. When he suggestively lays his hand on her leg in an unspoken request for sex in exchange for his help in finding her a new job, it becomes clear that in this new environment, she must have something to sell. In recognition of her changed circumstances she begins to compose Phillip, who resolves not only the difficulty arising from the differences between her Heimat and the West, but offers her the opportunity to become empowered by learning how
to succeed in her new world, allowing her to accompany him to his negotiations as a venture capitalist and to prove her true capabilities.

The various dimensions of Yella’s otherness and the intimation of her eventual transformation are effectively depicted in her first brief encounter with the wife of the man whose suicide she will later cause. In the scene, Yella is walking from the train in Hannover with her wet clothes and bags, her hair a mess, when her attention is inexplicably drawn to a family across the street emerging from a green Jaguar, about to enter their obviously expensive home. She is startled by the sound of birds squawking and the wind blowing through the trees. When she again looks across at the family, the mother, whom from a distance Yella remarkably resembles, is staring back at her. Though she appears to be sensing Yella’s supernatural qualities, it is also important to note that the figure of Yella at this moment is clearly abject in more mundane ways: she is disheveled, wears plain clothes and is without a car, in other words, she is the “Other” of the wealthy Westerner, the “foreigner” that is out to “steal” the comfortable German’s “enjoyment,” as she literally attempts to do later when she is pictured on the post office surveillance screen about to mail Phillip’s money to Ben. At the same time, as a former East German Yella is part of the national self whose abject state must be denied so that she may be incorporated into the new national order. Yella’s transformation into a capitalist ‘monster’ is a manifestation of this contradiction, as she becomes an “Other” who is at the same time the horrifying image of the self.

34 This is apparently a common representation of the approach of something supernatural, as we have seen it in both Berlin Sinfonie and Himmel über Berlin. It is taken directly, however, from the film upon which Yella is based, Herk Harvey’s Carnival of Souls (1962; thanks to Fatima Naqvi for this observation).
This transformation is traced through Yella’s movements between the spaces of *Heimat* and the “non-places” of postmodern capitalism. As Naficy notes, in exilic and diasporic films “homeland” is often represented as a “chronotope” (Bakhtin), a “place” that also exists as a particular “time,” in this case as a past that cannot be recuperated. Its depiction in such films is characterized by an emphasis on the natural beauty and wide-open spaces of pre-modernity, and evokes a sense of longing and nostalgia (154-187). Since Petzold's portrayal of Yella is, in many ways, that of an exile forced by circumstance to leave her *Heimat*, he uses many of the same conventions to depict Yella’s home: the rolling hills and green pastures, the sparsely populated landscape. Her father’s home is tiny, with small rooms filled with old furniture and traditional sayings on the wall, a place that seemingly could only exist in the past. Upon her arrival in Hannover, however, she is immediately cast into a ‘modern world’ in which she is clearly out of place; not only is she almost thrown out of the hotel but she has been misled into taking a job at a bankrupt firm. In order to survive she must learn to properly ‘occupy’ the non-places of modern capitalism, from the hotel to the empty office buildings in which the negotiations of the venture capitalists take place. In contrast to the space of *Heimat*, the offices are completely modern, totally impersonal, and seemingly unused. (Interestingly, both Herr Fichte’s house and the offices are actually casualties of changing economic times; as Petzold notes, the scenes at the house were filmed in the former homes of East German railroad workers, and as previously mentioned the offices were part of the defunct Hannover Expo).

As Augé explains, the “non-place” is in opposition to the idea of
“anthropological place”, associated with Marcel Mauss and the ethnological tradition, as culture localized in time and space (34); opposed, in other words, to Heimat. Instead of a place where individual identity, social relations and history all converge, non-places are transit points and temporary abodes that, though occupied, are defined by their transitory nature and formed in relation to certain ends, for example, the negotiations that take place in the film. In non-places, people are “temporarily relieved” of their identities, allowed to create new ones specific to interactions that occur within this transitional space; Augé gives the example of the traveler who has checked in at the airport, his identity registered and confirmed, and now has the “freedom” to become something different (103). At the negotiating table with Phillip, Yella begins to experience such a transformation as she wills herself (in her dreamwork) to become a new person. The ‘memory’ of her final conversation with Ben before the accident about the money he lost in the sale of his assets, triggered by a falling glass of water and the sound of wind blowing, provides her with the insight that leads to her first moment of success. She soon shows herself willing to participate in the calculated dissection of people’s failures, and to profit from it. This endears her to Phillip, who is extorting extra money from the businessmen to finance his own personal venture, the purchase of a company with that makes drill bits for ‘extracting’ oil (in perhaps another of Petzold’s subtle nods to vampirism). When Phillip’s illegal activities are discovered and he loses his job, to solidify their budding romantic relationship Yella visits the house of a man whose company has failed, the house she saw when she first arrived in Hannover, in order to extort from him the extra money Phillip needs. At this point, Yella moves from
the “non-places” she has occupied since arriving in the city, the anonymous hotel
rooms and offices, to a “place,” a family home.

Petzold describes the home of the man Yella visits as something from a “fairy
tale,” a house in the woods in the middle of a city (interview, Yella, DVD extra). Her
first encounter with the house and the wife whom Yella resembles suggests that this
is Yella’s ‘dream home’, her hopes for a new Heimat in the west. Yet when Yella
visits, it is as an enemy; the wife, sensing the danger she brings, at first refuses to let
her in. It is here that Petzold highlights Yella’s vampiric qualities, her
transformation into the “Thing” who, in opposition to the ‘woman of the house,’
threatens to destroy the family and the Symbolic order it represents. As Petzold
remarks, the story of Yella is reminiscent of those by E.T.A. Hoffmann, in which
supernatural beings, as in English Gothic literature, accompany the death of a social
class (“The Cinema of Identification”); in this case, the monster that Yella becomes is
the product of Germany’s failure to properly integrate, rather than consume, the
former East. In addition Hoffmann’s stories are characterized by the presence of
female vampires, many of whom are mothers associated with the destruction of the
family (see Barkhoff, Gustafson). Yet what differentiates Yella is specifically her
failure to become a mother, to achieve her goal of creating a new family, and instead
to become a capitalist “Thing.”

However, the opposition between the space of Heimat as the house in the
woods and Yella as the foreign invader is more ambiguous than it first appears. The
connection between Yella and the wife, first established in the scene in front of the
house, suggests that the two characters may be reflections of one another. Though
their exchange of looks is momentary, it is clear that when she sees Yella the woman experiences a sense of the “uncanny” (das Unheimliche), which Freud describes as “wirklich nichts Neues oder Fremdes, son dern etwas dem Seelenleben von Altes her Vertrautes, daß ihm nur durch den Prozeß der Verdrängung entfremdet worden ist” (Das Unheimliche 70). In other words, not “foreign” but merely “estranged,” Yella represents something the woman recognizes at some level but does not wish to acknowledge. If so, she can be seen as an aspect of the wife, like the vampiric mothers in Hoffmann’s stories a figure for the unrecognized “traumatic kernel” at the core of the family. As a capitalist Ungeheuer, her invasion of the comfortable home is merely the revelation of something already there, and her association with the maternal, the heart of the home, strengthens the impression that her abjection is actually a projection of Western guilt, its “hatred” of its own enjoyment. Therefore when the wife and husband ‘let her in’ (another reference to the vampire trope) they are acknowledging their complicity in what she has become, and the choice forced upon the husband between his life and his wife’s home is Yella’s brutal retribution for the choice she was forced to make, her claim upon what should have been ‘hers’ -- though she comes to regret it deeply.

The difficulty of Yella’s efforts to recreate in Hannover the emotional security of her home in Wittenberg is figured not only in the contrast between “places” and “non-places” but in the liminal space between the former German states. This space, depicted both in the train journey and the river crossing, like the other spaces in the

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35 …in reality nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (trans. McLintock 148).
film has a metaphysical dimension that reflects its significance to Yella’s desire and to larger questions of German national identity. The impression that these are more than just former geographical boundaries but are liminal in the anthropological sense of being transformative is first suggested in the clothes changing scene on the train from Hannover to Wittenberg, when Yella’s compartment within the train is separated, through the closing of the curtains, from the passing countryside, a separation emphasized by the shot of the landscape from outside the curtained window. Yella’s transition from a job seeker in a modern city, wearing her red ‘power’ blouse to help her appear confident, to just another resident of Wittenberg in a sweater and jeans, is given another level of meaning when she wears the same blouse on her attempt to return to Hannover. The difference between the two places, subtly suggested in the first trip from west to east, becomes a metaphysical gap upon the second, ‘unintentional’ crossing of the Elbe, her red blouse and dripping wet body as she emerges from the river signifying death and ‘rebirth.’

The understanding of the difference between the former East and West as a gap insurmountable except by means of a figurative or, in this case possibly literal, death is an idea reinforced by Petzold’s commentary on the film and the symbolic weight he has given to water in his work in general. He describes, for example, driving through the area of Wittenberg with his actors during filming as “oscillat(ing) between the two extremes of being in a mythical landscape and immersing...in the process of venture capital negotiations” (“The Cinema of

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36 As Victor Turner explains, “Liminality is the term used by the Belgian folklorist van Gennep to denominate the second of three stages in what he called a ‘rite of passage’... margin or limen (meaning threshold)...[is]...when the subjects of ritual fall into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence” (466-67).
Identification”). This supports the impression, also suggested by his manner of filming Yella’s *Heimat*, that the director sees the former East as separate from Hannover not only spatially but also temporally. This spatio-temporal gap becomes metaphysical through Petzold’s use of the river trope as a metaphor, based on its association with death and rebirth. As Steven Walker points out, to be confronted with the “crossing of the ford” archetype implies that a life-changing decision is imminent (7); thus the choice not to “cross” is to be unwilling or unable to take decisive action. Yella, on the other hand, exists partially in the liminal space of the river while her ‘double’ lives out her fantasy life, because she remains unsure of whether she either can or should fully commit to the transformation required of her to live in the West. Neither dead nor alive, she is ‘trapped’ in this space, her ambivalence signaled by her failure in Hannover to change the clothes she was wearing when she was ‘drowned’ in the Elbe. Water, as a symbol for the archaic mother and a representation of both birth and death, is the contradictory force that pulls Yella in opposing directions throughout the film, signifying on the one hand her desire to recreate herself in Hannover, and on the other, her longing to ‘lay down and sleep’ in her watery grave.

The appearances of Yella’s ex-husband Ben signal this state of indecision, his character, having tried and failed to adapt to the economic changes brought about by the Wende, serving as a figure for the gap between the former East and West. He makes his first reappearance after she has her initial success at negotiating and has been paid for her efforts by Phillip; believing she has seen him outside her hotel window she follows him down to a small pond, where he attempts to drag her into
the water with him. After her second success, while she is on the phone with her father telling him of her plans to accompany Phillip on a business trip, he startles her by suddenly appearing in the corner of her room, asking if she has “fucked” Phillip yet. Apologizing, he blames their breakup on his “shit company,” offering to give up his efforts at entrepreneurship, become a simple electrician, and buy them a small apartment in Wittenberg. When she refuses he slaps her and she runs into the arms of Phillip for the first time. On both occasions, Yella’s vision of Ben has occurred after she has morally compromised herself by knowingly participating in Phillip’s parasitic activities as a venture capitalist; the second time, he suggests as an alternative to the choices she is making a rejection of capitalism altogether, and a nostalgic return to a more ‘authentic’ and satisfying lifestyle recalling the outdated and discarded East German economic system.

Yet his appearances at these moments have implications beyond the ostensible purpose of expressing Yella’s moral reservations about what she is doing. Throughout the film, moral and sexual transgressions are collapsed, a pattern that can be traced to Yella’s conversation in the car with Ben before the crash, in which he accuses her of showing off her “pretty legs” to get her job in Hannover. At some point most of the male characters in Yella’s dream, from her boss to Phillip and then Ben, imply that she should trade or has traded sex for professional gain, even though it is her abilities that have apparently led to her success. The equation of sexual with moral ‘prostitution’ in her new environment explains why Petzold may have chosen the vampire metaphor to signify her “seduction” by capitalism through the character of Phillip, and why Yella’s feelings of guilt over her business dealings
might be expressed by the reappearance of her jealous ex-husband while she is on
the phone with her father. Yella’s position in relation to these male characters
suggests both the western male’s perception of the easterner as a sexualized Other
ripe for ‘conquest’, a perception that she has apparently internalized, and the extent
to which the lure of *Heimat*, in this case specifically gendered male and tied to a 19th
century patriarchal version of nationalism, also threatens to absorb her.

The possibility of figuratively closing the gap between her *Heimat* and the
city by means of condensing her father and her ex-husband into a ‘dream husband’
ends, though Yella doesn’t yet realize it, with the scene on the western bank of the
Elbe. Driving near her former *Heimat* on a business trip with Phillip, she takes a
detour toward Wittenberg in the hope of visiting her father. Realizing what she has
done, Phillip reacts violently, refusing to cross the bridge to the former East. As they
sit on the western bank of the river, he tells her that he does not want a home,
family and a “green Jaguar,” but instead is intent upon succeeding in his business
venture. It is at this point that Yella decides to help him, and Petzold emphasizes the
significance of this decision by filming the river with a wide-angle lens, highlighting
its expansiveness, and focusing on the (now undamaged) bridge. Her decision to
commit to Phillip and to venture capitalism indicates the extent to which she has
been seduced by both; like the vampire’s victim, she initially submits for love but
soon finds herself ‘infected,’ and after Phillip loses his job, she completes her own
transformation into a capitalist ‘vampire’ when she infiltrates the home of Phillip’s
client and behaves even more brutally than Phillip himself. Afterwards, as they wait
for the man to come to the meeting, Phillip and Yella seal their relationship by
kissing and holding hands in the barren non-space of the negotiating room. When Yella again has a vision that confronts her with what she has become, it is not Ben she sees but this man, whose corpse has emerged, as she once did, from the water. Her dream has spun out of control, and she now realizes that the ‘unity’ she believes she has achieved through her relationship with Phillip is an illusion.

Yella’s journey from Wittenberg to Hannover, representing a figurative attempt to successfully bridge the gap between the former East and West, instead ends with her ‘infection’ by capitalism, depicted as force destructive of both interpersonal relationships and national identity that plays a crucial role in the replacement of “place” with “non-place” in postmodern society. Yet as a woman Yella functions not only as a victim of and ultimately a figure for the allure of capitalism through her relationship with Phillip, but is also subject to domination by the other elements that make up her composite lover, representing the past and present dream of a unified Germany and signified by Herr Fichte and Ben. Though her final decision to return to her ‘grave’ can be seen primarily as a refusal to participate in a capitalist system that destroys home and family, in which business negotiations are sexualized and gender relations become a ‘business,’ it is also a refusal of the conflicting demands of the composite male figure she has constructed and a means to re-establish control over her own life. Consequently her initial willingness to figuratively aid in reinforcing the new unity between the former East and West by crossing the old borders and creating a new Heimat in the West ends in

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37 Nina Hoss remarks on the “sexual atmosphere” of the venture capitalist negotiations seen in Harun Farocki’s 2004 documentary Nothing Ventured, a film Petzold used as a model for the negotiations depicted in Yella (interview, Yella).
disappointment with both capitalism and the national project, a disillusionment to which her final return to the liminal space of the border attests.

V. Conclusion

As Marco Abel remarks, Petzold’s films center on the “immanent borderscapes of late capitalist Germany” (Cineaste). In other words, the director is particularly interested in the ubiquity of borders and their spatial qualities, a focus that makes his work especially applicable to the study of border consciousness. Balibar argues that national borders today are simultaneously “everywhere and nowhere,” no longer purely external realities but, more importantly, invisible and internalized, yet at the same time “equivocal”: not only do they mean different things to different people (for example, rich and poor), but they have different meanings in different places (78-83). In post-Wall German culture, even borders no longer present, such as the boundary between the former East and West, or those whose meanings have changed, like the borders between Germany and the rest of Europe, impact a national imaginary in which the past, understood spatially, is overlaid on the present. The lingering presence of past borders, manifesting the “logic of return” to which Hell and von Moltke refer, as well as the liminal figures and structures of feeling characteristic of border consciousness, are evident in Petzold’s Ghost Trilogy. By directing attention to such in-between spaces and characters that at the same time are representative of Germany today, these films reveal an ambivalence towards national identity that has the potential to change the
terms currently used to define it.

First, by choosing the ontologically ambiguous figure of the vampire and the liminal places in which it resides as a way to characterize both his contemporary German protagonists and the spaces of modern Germany, Petzold challenges the conventional understanding and acceptance of the nation as having definite borders, outside of which people are defined as ‘other,’ that is represented by landscapes and monuments identifying it as a “place” integrated with history and mythology (Augé 45-66). Focusing on transitory and non-places, he both downplays the defining features of ‘German’ spaces, such as the architectural highlights of Berlin’s Mitte, and questions the historical role of such iconic places, as he does in Yella through the association of images of Heimat with the ominous discourse of 19th century German nationalism. In addition, by using the vampire analogy he emphasizes the displacement of his characters, many of whom are either metaphorically (Yella) or literally (Hans and Clara) from another place and time that has not been integrated into the national narrative. Though they are German, through an awareness of their own abjection the characters call attention to their role as the “constitutive outside” (Butler) of the nation, and thus to others that likewise play this role, as Petzold expresses so powerfully in the scene at the rest stop in Die innere Sicherheit.

Furthermore, this ambivalence towards national identity is suggested through the films’ depiction of the feeling structures associated with border consciousness, particularly the conflict between Heimweh and Fernweh, or the concurrent desire for home and for far-away places. Unlike the heroes of traditional German stories, who are torn between the dream of starting a new life in a new
place and the desire to return home (with both 'home' and 'away' clearly defined), the characters in Petzold’s films either lack a distinct picture of 'home' or have the sense that home lies beyond spatio-temporal borders whose geographical location is uncertain or which, as in Yella, they cannot traverse. Petzold illustrates this feeling through images of the characters gazing across bodies of water that, though sometimes functioning as borders or former borders (like the Elbe in Yella or the Rhine in Die innere Sicherheit) at other times do not (for example, the ocean that attracts Jeanne, or the Spree in Berlin, where Nina and Toni dream of their invented past). The ambiguity surrounding the concept of home, in which Heimweh and Fernweh, in a sense, collapse into a vague feeling of unrequited desire, allows for the possibility of its re-imagination, illustrated by Nina and Toni’s fantasy as well as Francoise and Jeanne’s. However, it also explains both the characters’ lack of ability to ‘move forward’ and their vulnerability to capitalism as the “ultimate Thing” (Zizek 140), “satisfying” both Heimweh and Fernweh in its ability to provide them with a feeling of security from the outside world and to encourage the perception that they can reinvent themselves through the acquisition of material goods, such as the clothing that Jeanne, Toni and Nina steal, and the green Jaguar that beckons Yella.

By focusing on Germany’s liminal rather than its iconic spaces and on characters, likewise ‘borderline,’ that are defined by their unrequited longing for a home only vaguely imagined, Petzold’s films suggest that German national identity is as yet undefined, that these spaces and characters, rather than the images and narratives promoted by the new Berlin Republic, more accurately represent Germany’s sense of itself. This indefiniteness highlights the potential of the border;
through its association with transitions it serves as a reminder of a moment of uncertainty that can work to break the hold of the Nation as Thing. John Theobald points out that after East Germans voted to abolish their state, the new leadership made an effort to rewrite history and change the collective self-image of the former nation, “casting out the previous versions as if they were linguistic poison” (132). As a result of this “diskursive Anschluss,” groups like the Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte (1986-89), which advocated reform of the socialist state and had no sense of ethnic or national identification with West Germans (140), became what Frederic Jameson terms “vanishing mediators”, catalysts of change whose existence is covered up by the representatives of the new order (Zizek, Tarrying 227). As Zizek explains, such “detonators” literally “became invisible once the new system established itself and therewith its own myth of origins” (228). Though these catalysts have been “buried”, their place is held by those, like Petzold, who can still maintain a critical distance from the new ideology, those who, by reminding us of “possible but failed alternative histories...point towards the system’s antagonistic character and thus ‘estrange’ us from the self-evidence of its established identity.” (231).

Petzold is able to accomplish this estrangement first by using his camera to create an in-between space that allows viewers neither to identify too strongly with his characters nor to remain distant, “holding us suspended in middle space that’s akin to the characters’ own subjectivity/subject position” (Director Benjamin Heisenberg, qtd. in Abel). For example, he minimizes both close-ups and shot reverse shots during emotional scenes, such as Yella’s visit to her father before she
leaves home, focusing on Yella rather than the two figures as a couple and distancing the viewers from the man. After a close-up of their embrace at the restaurant where her father works, the camera quickly cuts back to a medium shot of the pair from behind the back of the father, then cuts to Yella waking up on the morning of her departure. With the camera focused on Yella, we hear her father’s voice but are only given momentary images of his face as he prepares breakfast, seeing instead his body and his hands offering her a roll of money to help in her transition. We are clearly meant to observe Yella, and by keeping us distant from the men in her life we are better able to stand back from her as she is slowly infected by her dreams, allowing us to evaluate the forces pulling her in conflicting directions. Second, by thematizing the act of watching, Petzold encourages the viewer to see contemporary Germany from the perspective of an outsider, yet at the same time critiques this look, in particular through the role played in his films by surveillance cameras. We are meant to differentiate between critical observation, prompted by Petzold’s lingering camera and designed to reveal what is behind the image, and the gaze of the surveillance camera, cold, anonymous, concerned only with the surface of the image and most importantly owned and controlled by the dual forces of capitalism and the state. By making a distinction between these two forms of looking, Petzold suggests that the liminal spaces and abject characters upon which he focuses are contested sites with the potential to provide an antidote to the understanding of Germany promoted by those dual forces.

In this sense, the spatio-temporal borders in Petzold’s films are a kind of Thirdspace, continuing to impact German identity while also providing a means to
redefine it. Though the lingering presence of past borders can produce dangerous nostalgias, represented in his Ghost Trilogy by vampiric mothers and ghostly ex-husbands, that encourage immobility and stasis, they can also keep open the possibilities of Thirdspace by reminding us of the mutability of borders and their changing meanings. Petzold reinforces this alternative understanding through his depiction of the characters that attempt to cross these borders, most of whom, like Jeanne, Nina, Toni and Yella, remain ‘unformed,’ ambiguous, with a quality that is both ethereal and very much grounded in the space and time of contemporary Germany. As ‘vampires’ they also lend a certain unknowability to the places they occupy, providing the malls, Heime, hotels and offices with an aura of mystery that adds to the viewer’s sense of estrangement from these familiar and ubiquitous places and suggests that they too should be understood in their liminal aspect, as sites that function as an interface between the individual and the Symbolic and thus expose its workings.

However strongly his films suggest an ambivalence towards national identity, as he reveals in Yella Petzold is still susceptible to a certain romanticization of Heimat, an attitude rooted in what Zizek terms the “fissure between ‘Gemeinschaft’ and ‘Gesellschaft’” that is reminiscent of the architectural debates in Weimar Germany discussed in the last chapter, which also characterized the viewpoint of many nationalist movements in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism (Tarrying 211). From this perspective, an “organic” community, seen as somehow authentic, is opposed to an “alienated” society that dissolves the natural links between people. In Eastern Europe the Gesellschaft was represented
by communism, seen as an ‘alien body’ that corrupted the national community which then looked to capitalism “cum Gemeinschaft” to counter its effects, an “impossible desire” resulting in racist attacks (211). Though Petzold instead finds the source of this alienation in the effects of global capital, and clearly questions the substitution of “capitalism as Thing” with the “Nation-Thing” through his references to 19th century nationalist ideology, his visual depictions of the former East and his description of the landscape as “mythical” contribute to the troublesome association of the former East with the fantasy of a lost Heimat. Though he seems to oppose its patriarchal connotations, the idea of Heimat appears in the film to be positioned as a counterbalance to capitalism, and even though Yella chooses in the end not to return but to remain in the liminal space of the river, the ‘authenticity’ of Heimat is presented as preferable to the cutthroat and impersonal West. This depiction of the former East threatens to feed into stereotypes that have the unfortunate effect of strengthening the often-lamented “Mauer im Kopf.” In the next chapter I discuss the work of Andreas Dresen, a filmmaker from Saxony trained through the now-defunct DEFA system, who offers another perspective on the former German state and whose work reveals yet another facet of border consciousness.
Chapter 3

In his first feature film *Stilles Land* (1992), Andreas Dresen tells the story of a troupe of actors from a small town in the GDR just before the Wende whose new director, an idealist from Berlin, attempts to stage a production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* at the local theater. The director is frustrated by the small-mindedness of the townspeople and his actors’ unwillingness to cooperate, as well as their lack of focus. Yet in his desire to “enunciate” for the people, which was the role of the artist in the socialist state, the director loses sight of the fact that the actors are trying to make the play their “own.” Filmed on location with an emphasis on local landscape features, *Stilles Land* both questions the GDR’s authoritarian approach to cultural production and creates an analogy between the notion of *Heimat* as a “provincial idyll…a space of immobility and timelessness” (Blickle 6) and the inability of the socialist government to respond effectively to historical change or to initiate needed reforms. In one scene, an actor cries out in frustration over the moral collapse of socialism, “Das Land ist still!”, which is followed by a cut to a view of the “silent” fields (Locatelli 215). This story of someone from the ‘outside’ who attempts to impose his vision on provincial people can also be seen as a critique of the unification process, just beginning as the film was made, in which the West would not only direct the trajectory of political and social change in the former GDR, but would dominate discourse surrounding the East, in part by designating it as a ‘lost’ *Heimat* and celebrating nostalgically its ‘authenticity’ and fairytale-like quaintness (Naughton 137-138). The issues addressed in *Stilles Land*, which suggest that there may be an “Eastern perspective” at work in the film’s representation of the
fundamental concepts that inform border consciousness (in this case the relationship of *Heimat* to national identity), help bring to light the central issue addressed in this chapter: Is the border consciousness expressed in Dresen’s films grounded primarily in his experiences as an East German? Or is it more productively understood in the larger context of German history and culture, as in the work of the filmmakers discussed in the first two chapters?

Born in Saxony in 1963, Dresen has spent about half his life as an East German citizen, a percentage he notes will become increasingly smaller. And though he protests his characterization as an “East German” director (“Where are the ‘West German’ directors?”) he readily admits that the unusual experience of living under two entirely different ideological systems has been “invaluable” to him, both professionally and personally (interviews, *Stilles Land*; “‘There is No Authenticity in the Cinema!’”). Dresen began making films in 1979 at the age of 16, then worked as an assistant director at DEFA Studios until he was permitted to enter the Konrad Wolf Academy of Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg from 1986-1991, during which time he made several short films. The unification of Germany and the collapse of DEFA, which followed the completion of his studies in 1991, caused turmoil in his professional career. As he noted in an interview with *Film und Fernsehen* in 1997, he was faced with an “unfamiliar” situation after the Wende: “Ich war bei dem Studium mit der Perspektive angetreten, daß man irgendwann ins DEFA-Studio ging, dort sein Jahre also Assistent machte und, wenn man Glück hätte und es die Chefetage wollte, mit Mitte Dreissig oder später seinen ersten Film drehte...Nach der Wende war plötzlich viel möglich, aber das war zugleich ein
Gefahr, weil die Sachen ganz schnell rausgeschossen wurden, ohne daß sie ausgereift waren” (“Mit dem Regisseur” 8-9).

This same sense of displacement can be seen in his work through the depiction of characters who, as he describes the two couples in *Halbe Treppe*, have had the “ground pulled out from under them” (interview, “Ein Raum vom Freiheit” 11) and must engage in a quest to find a new ‘home,’ a quest enacted through movements across both literal and figurative borders from positions of ‘exile.’ In both *Nachgestalten* (1999) and *Halbe Treppe* (2002), these movements articulate an experience that, it could be argued, is connected to Dresen’s background both as an East German citizen and as a DEFA-trained filmmaker, after the Wende essentially forced to adapt as a ‘foreigner’ in a new land. However, this perspective removes Dresen’s films from the context of what I have argued is a German tradition of border consciousness, understood as a heightened awareness of borders grounded in Germany’s particular history and culture. It is an expression of an ambivalence about national identity that is seen, for example, in the relationship between *Heimat* and ‘Germanness,’ the idea of the Wall as a national symbol and a representation of Germany’s problematic relationship with otherness, and the concern about the position of Germany in the context of Europe as a whole. Its cinematic articulation, through the depiction of borders and border crossings as well as other liminal spaces and characters, also connects Dresen’s work to that of

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38 “I entered into my studies with the assumption that after a few years at DEFA, you would work as an assistant, and then, if you were lucky and the studio bosses allowed it, at around mid-thirty you could make your first film...after the Wende suddenly much was possible, but there was also a danger, since things were thrown out on the market before they had a chance to be fully developed...”
the other filmmakers I have discussed.

To determine how to situate Dresen with regard to these two positions, I will first address the question of East German ‘difference’ by exploring how the former East has been discursively constructed since unification, discussing in particular the idea that East Germany was essentially “colonized” by the West (Cooke), and consider whether a sense of displacement on the part of Easterners might be expressed through an “accented style” (Naficy) that includes tropes and themes similar to those characteristic of border consciousness. I will then analyze the theme of exile and home seeking, as well as representations of borders, border crossings and liminality in two of Dresen’s early films, Nachtgestalten (1999) and Halbe Treppe (2002), and consider to what extent they may be viewed as an expression of an “accented” subjectivity. Finally I will discuss how instead they may be understood in the context of a shared German tradition of border consciousness, though perhaps with an ‘Eastern’ inflection.

I. After the Wende: East Germany as “Postcolonial”?

After the Wende, the Heimatfilm reappeared as a framework to articulate a new concept of nation, though ironically the former GDR was cast as the star in a new, Western-driven reincarnation of a genre it had largely disregarded. As Leonie Naughton notes, in many of the 1990s comedies made in the former Federal Republic, the East was depicted as a “lost” Heimat, replete with unspoiled landscapes and innocent villagers, that provided the West with a “mythical vision of
its own past – simple, rustic, pristine” (128). To the Western protagonists that travelled there, the East offered a sanctuary from the problems of modern life. Ignoring the abandoned factories, endemic unemployment and industrial waste that plagued the Eastern provinces, these representations imagined a state of harmony and well-being that masked a profound anxiety about the future of the nation, much as the Heimatfilme of the 1950s. Paul Cooke adds that the popular so-called “Trabi Comedies” (including Timm’s 1991 feature Go Trabi Go and Büld/Klooss’ Das war der wilde Osten/That Was the Wild East, 1992), as well as Detlev Buck’s Wir können auch anders/No More Mr. Nice Guy (1993), present the east as “a repository for a more authentic notion of Germanness, where old-fashioned German values, as well as an indefatigable German spirit, are alive and well” (107-8). Filmmakers from the former GDR, on the other hand, did not use Heimat tropes and narrative structures to depict their homeland. Rather than idealizing its quaintness, the first post-unification feature films, including Dresen’s Stilles Land, critiqued and re-appraised the former Socialist state. Rarely highlighting its rural aspect, Eastern filmmakers instead focused on the “de-industrialized wasteland” that the former GDR had become and the profound difficulties its population faced. As Naughton concludes:

In a specific sense eastern and western-backed productions addressing life in the new Germany present irreconcilable visions of the eastern states. Throughout the 1990s, almost without exception, eastern productions that address the consequences of unification do not subscribe to the western formulation of the east as Heimat...The country-city opposition ...(as well as)...the polarization of tradition and progress, evident in West German Heimat films of the 1950s and in 1990s generic variants, has no place in eastern productions....(229-230).

These “irreconcilable visions”, however, were not equally accessible to the public;
due to their small budgets and limited distribution the Eastern post-unification films were not widely viewed (239), leaving the popular Western productions and their depictions of the East to dominate in the public imagination.

The ability of the West German film industry to project such images to the general public contributes to charges that the West, by controlling the discourse surrounding the new federal states, has shown signs of an “orientalist” attitude toward the East. Reviewing arguments over the use of the term “post-colonial” to describe the former GDR,39 Paul Cooke concludes that whether or not East Germany is truly the victim of economic and social colonization by the West, “what matters is the widespread perception that a process of colonization has taken place, and how this perception has entered culture, both implicitly and explicitly” (11). He therefore defends the use of postcolonial theory to examine the relationship between the former states. According to Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial studies, asymmetrical power relations during the 18th and 19th centuries allowed Western nations to construct the “Orient” in its own terms, depicting it as “both outsider and...incorporated weak partner” (208), a feminized space where Western (male) fantasies of domination and escape from conventionality could be played out (103, 207). Though in a much different context, some have argued that this also characterizes German discourse about the former East. Ingrid Sharp, for example, notes the gender-inflected terms often used to describe the unification process, a “Cinderella”-like story that featured a fairy-tale Prince (the West) rescuing a

39 If the “post” in “postcolonial” is understood as the “post-” in “post-Soviet” (David Chioni Moore, ref. in Cooke 10), East Germany can be seen as emerging, along with other European countries, from a period of Soviet domination (10).
helpless damsel from a life of servitude; Cooke reinforces this image by pointing out that the treaty uniting the two Germanies was not a “union of equals but an eastern accession to the west” (Cooke 12).

According to Barton Byg, the East has not only been feminized, but has come to stand for the “archaic and repressed” part of the German self, and as a result has acquired the force of myth associated with other manifestations of the alien within, such as blacks and other minorities. He points out that many post-unification films, including (but not exclusively) *Keiner liebt mich* (Dörrie 1994), *Herzsprung* (Misselwitz 1992) and even Dresen’s *Mein unbekannter Ehemann* (1994) feature romantic relationships between black men and Eastern white women (another possible indication of the “feminization” of the East). Because the GDR has no continuing history and its former citizens are seen as German victims of a repressive state, “it can represent an innocent childhood to the post-unification ‘adult’ Germans. As such, the representation of the GDR as ‘other’ (an Other within the self) is parallel to the otherness encoded in romanticized images of women, people of color, homosexuals and lesbians, and all other ‘Others’ who are seen as separate from the dominant culture...This perpetual childhood state as a defiance against the demands of German adulthood is at once a Romantic utopia and a stereotypical trap” (71-2). Such representation separates Easterners from the dominant culture, similar to the way they are immobilized in a lost yet eternal *Heimat*. And though this relieves them from responsibility, it also denies them control over the future of the new nation, a condition Byg compares to the situation faced by Turkish-Germans and other minorities (72).
Another important feature of the asymmetrical power relationship that characterizes orientalism is the inability of the weaker group to communicate its perspective to the dominant audience. As pointed out with regard to post-unification film, the Eastern point of view is generally not well-represented on the media landscape. Even before DEFA was dismantled and sold to the French company CIP (a subsidiary of Vivendi) in 1992, former director Gert Golde worried about the ramifications of adjusting to a new system controlled by a profit-driven Western industry, but promised “Wir werden den kulturellen Wert DEFA mit allen Mitteln verteidigen; es ist ein gefährdeter Wert”\(^{40}\) (Voigt 14). Unfortunately, Golde faced formidable challenges. First, the market for East German films did not warrant large investment; not only had DEFA films never been very popular, even under the GDR (Kramer 131), but box office receipts in the Eastern provinces also amounted to only a small fraction of the intake from the old federal states (Byg Parameters 65). East German small town cinemas had closed down as a result of privatization, and the change in ownership had a tremendous effect on what was shown in the ones that remained; not only was there no central government to ensure the exhibition of DEFA films, but the need for profits increased the reliance on Hollywood (Berghahn 217). In addition, the new artistic director of the revamped Babelsberg Studios, West German director Volker Schlöndorff, was notoriously dismissive of East German film, which he described as “terrible” (www.dw-world.de), though according to DEFA director Gunter Reisch he was unfamiliar with it (38). Even local television, which had provided an important

\(^{40}\) “We will defend the cultural value of DEFA in every way possible; it is an endangered value.”
vehicle for the expression of East German perspectives as well as an arena for the
exhibition of DEFA films, had been incorporated into the federal system of the West
German public service network (Berghahn 218).

The association of the East with an irrevocable past, another characteristic of
orientalism (Said 58), has also made it a prime setting for the enactment of nostalgia
for pre-Wende Germany. Cooke maintains that in Western films like Roehler’s Die
Unberührbare and Becker’s Goodbye Lenin, rather than a geographical location the
East becomes representative of a values system lost with the dismantling of the
West German social welfare state in the 1990s. In the former, the son re-imagines
his mother, part of the postwar generation that fought for economic and political
equity within a capitalist society, as a “Cassandra-like” figure who, though flawed, is
rehabilitated in hindsight by her ideals (127). Similarly, Becker’s film also expresses
nostalgia for a more socially conscious West Germany through his tongue-in-cheek
treatment of the former East. Yet in his film, the loss of both the former West and
East is accepted at the end, signified by the mother’s funeral, which expresses hope
that differences between the two former states can ultimately be reconciled (135).
Goodbye Lenin, though directed by a Westerener, highlights as well the phenomenon
of Ostalgie, seen as a response to orientalist attitudes. Ostalgie expresses the
tendency of many East Germans to combat the denigration of their culture and
history through consumption and other social practices. In her study of an East
German border village just after the Wende, Daphne Berdahl describes the “East
German consciousness” that developed as a response to the negative judgments of
Westerners. Proudly buying East German consumer goods became an “oppositional
practice” that contributed to the construction of an imaginary East Germany:

Stripped from their original historical context of an economy of scarcity or an oppressive regime, these products also recall an East Germany that never existed. Thus, while there may be nothing new in the strategic use of consumption as oppositional practice, what is unique in this context is the way in which memory shapes, and is being shaped by, the consumption and reappropriation of things. These products have, in a sense, become mnemonics, signifiers of a period of time that differentiates Ossis (177).

These behaviors can be seen as contributing to the invention and maintenance of a boundary between East and West that is both spatial and temporal. Just as the residents of Kella have taken to strolling along the site of the former border in the evenings (182), the consumption of goods associated with the GDR reinforces their sense of ‘uniqueness’ and counters the total absorption they fear.

The perception on both sides of an asymmetrical power relationship and the lingering effects of a 40 year long attempt to construct vastly different national identities have reinforced and maintained the divide between East and West Germans, popularly referred to as the “Mauer im Kopf” (“Wall in the head”). Because of this division, themes of home seeking, tropes of borders, border crossings, and liminality as well as representations of Heimat may have meanings in the films of former East Germans that are specific to the history and fate of the GDR rather than expressive of border consciousness as I have defined it. As put forward above, references to Heimat may suggest something entirely different in a film by an Easterner concerned with the misrepresentation of his former homeland than in a 1990s West German comedy. In addition, two other issues that mark German ambivalence towards national identity, the symbolic importance of the Wall as a national symbol as well as a metaphor for Germany’s problems with otherness, and
the relationship of Germany to the rest of Europe, might very well look different to
those born in a state with an anti-fascist founding mythology, whose political and
ideological orientation was turned to the East rather than the West.

In addition to reflecting East Germany’s unique history, the use of tropes and
themes associated with border consciousness in the films of former East Germans
could also be motivated by a sense of disorientation resulting from the traumatic
disruption of their personal and professional lives and the lives of other Easterners
in the wake of unification. From this perspective, the framework developed by
Hamid Naficy in his study of exilic, diasporic and minority filmmakers⁴¹ might be
useful in the analysis of these motifs. As noted previously, Naficy maintains that
representations of the homeland, as well as borders, border crossings, and liminality
in the work of these filmmakers are evidence of what he terms an “accented style”,
rooted in the artist’s geographical and/or cultural displacement. Though East
German filmmakers were not necessarily physically displaced, one could argue that
the extent of the change to which they were forced to adjust, as well as the
dismantling of the political, economic, social and artistic frameworks that had
structured their lives under the GDR makes them similar in some ways to exiles and
minorities.

Among the many characteristics of the accented style is the representation of
borders, often grounded in the filmmaker’s awareness of his or her own liminality.
Naficy argues that this awareness could encourage a tolerance of multiple
perspectives and an opposition to binarism, though it could also involve the

⁴¹ He includes in his description of “accented” filmmakers those forced from their
countries or lured to the West by the failure of socialism and communism (10).
recognition of the “open wounds,” or unresolved tensions, unequal power relations and incompatible identities that national borders often represent. In such works the filmmaker’s liminal position sometimes motivates an attempt to “claim” the space of the border, and consequently these films are accented by “strategies of translation,” where gaps in communication are often bridged by characters able to move fluently between both sides (31-32). In addition to borders, the accented style highlights “border places,” such as airports, seaports and railroad stations, that are “charged with intense emotions,” from devastation to euphoria (238). Another feature of this style is the theme of journeys, including those of home seeking, homelessness and homecoming. In exilic films, the desire to return home makes homecoming journeys particularly well-represented, though often the return is not as triumphant as imagined.\(^2\) Journeys of homelessness, on the other hand, are often transformative, as in Wenders’ *Paris, Texas* (1984) and Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979). In these films, the wanderings of the characters, reflecting, in Naficy’s view, the restlessness and mobility of the filmmakers themselves, are resolved in the end through reunions that, in the case of *Stalker*, “compensate for the sense of failure and despair that might otherwise permeate the film” (Johnson and Petrie, qtd. in Naficy 229).

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\(^2\) When return becomes impossible, these filmmakers often focus on the icons and natural features of their homeland, which then become fetishized (33). For example, in Atom Egoyan’s *Calendar* (1993), the camera focuses repeatedly on a wall calendar with photographs taken on a trip to Armenia with the protagonist’s estranged wife. These pictures serve as a substitute for his lost love as well as his lost homeland, to which he returns, through the photos, again and again. The homeseeking journeys of accented filmmakers are often "structured as a loss, in the same way that the westward journeys of Third World populations...are also structured as a loss”. In Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), for example, the South is depicted as full of life, connected through memories and ritual to the motherland, Africa (224).
Naficy’s reference to Wenders brings up an important point regarding the usefulness of his framework for this study. Unlike the role the representations of borders, border crossings, liminality and journeys of home seeking play in the articulation of border consciousness as I have outlined, in Naficy’s formulation they are an expression of the displaced status of the filmmaker alone (39). In his discussion of these motifs, he does not consider whether they may articulate as well the experiences of the group of which the filmmaker is a part. He also brackets other influences that may motivate such representations, such as artistic trends. For example, he uses Wenders, one of the most prominent representatives of New German Cinema, as an example of an “exilic” filmmaker, implying that the journey of homelessness depicted in his film Paris, Texas may be connected to his displaced status as a German living and working in the United States (227-228). Thus it is not clear whether the journey Wenders depicts is rooted in the artistic and political influences of New German Cinema or Wenders’ own personal experience of displacement. In either event, the example illustrates that categorizing certain stylistic features as evidence of an “accented” subjectivity can limit the reading of a filmmaker’s work. Therefore, in my analysis I will examine the themes of exile and home seeking and the tropes of borders, border crossings and liminality in Dresen’s films, then consider how they might carry the imprint of Dresen’s “displacement” as well as the displacement of other East Germans before I weigh the extent to which

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43 Another example of this can be found in his treatment of Tarkovsky. Noting that the filmmaker used the “house-as-a-ruin” metaphor long before he left the Soviet Union, Naficy calls his Soviet-era films “proto-exilic” (175), a designation that seems to undermine his argument.
they can be viewed in the larger context of what I have identified as the German
tradition of border consciousness.

II. Exile and Home Seeking in *Nachtgestalten* and *Halbe Treppe*

Dresen’s second feature film was inspired by stories he had heard about
young children from Third World countries who come to the West, then return.
*Nachtgestalten* (1999) begins when a young homeless woman (Myriam Abbas)
sitting on the street is distracted momentarily by a plane flying overhead. When
she looks down again she notices that someone has tossed a 100 euro note into her
hat. She returns to her makeshift camp on a bank above the railroad tracks to tell
her boyfriend (Dominique Horwitz), and they set out to treat themselves to a warm
room for the night. At the same time, a provincial farmer (Oliver Breite) arrives at
the train station with his bag, which is promptly stolen. After unsuccessfully giving
chase to the thief, he begins the search that has brought him to the city: he is in
town to look for female “companionship,” a desire he has difficulty expressing until
a good-hearted taxi driver (Horst Krause) helps him out. Soon he encounters Patty
(Susanne Bormann), a drug-addicted young girl who notices the large roll of bills he
has hidden in his coat and decides to seduce and rob him. The last of the three
narrative strands that comprise the story involves a late middle-aged employee of a
large firm (Michael Gwisdek) who has been sent to meet some Japanese clients at
the airport. Their flight is delayed, and the man, Peschke, makes the acquaintance of
a young African boy (Ricardo Valentim) who is apparently waiting for someone to
pick him up. When Peschke realizes his wallet is missing, he accuses the boy, only to have the waitress from the snack bar where he left it return it to him. His guilty conscience motivates Peschke to help the boy find his “uncle” (Ade Sapara), who, unbeknownst to Peschke and the boy, has been involved in a minor car accident in his rush to the airport. The six characters spend the rest of the night searching for a place to stay, all from different positions of “homelessness” and figurative exile, their stories held together by the ubiquitous image of the Pope whose visit to the city coincides with their journeys. Though the couple living in the makeshift tent establishes the motif, the other characters’ quests can be seen as variations on it: after Jochen, the farmer, rejects the “Stundenhotel” where Patty first takes him, they wander from place to place in the bowels of Berlin’s drug and night club scene, while Peschke and Feliz, the boy, spend the night trying to find Feliz’ “uncle,” Ricardo, who has agreed to take him in. By morning the characters have met with mixed success, but through their journeys have revealed the multitude of ways “home” and “exile” can be understood.

Dresen’s next film, Halbe Treppe (2002), was in part inspired by a scene in Nachtgestalten that Dresen found particularly effective (Director’s audiocommentary, Nachtgestalten). In it, Hanna and Victor, the homeless couple, are being interrogated by a police officer played by Axel Prahl. Dresen first had the actors follow the script, then asked them to improvise the scene so that they could get a better sense of how their characters might act in such a situation. He was so pleased with the result that he included the improvisation in the final cut, omitting the scripted dialogue. For his next feature, Dresen decided to use the same strategy
for the entire film; there was no script at all (though he kept his scriptwriter on “standby” in case the project fell through), only a title for each scene. In most cases, the cameraman and the actors determined how the scene would unfold, and Dresen would then attempt to give it “form.” In the end Dresen had 70 hours of footage, which he then pieced together with the members of his team to construct the narrative. Though this approach forced him to use a digital camera (35mm film would have been too expensive), this technology was also particularly appropriate for his story, filmed on location largely in small pubs, apartments and hotels in both Frankfurt/Oder and its neighboring city across the Polish border, Slubice.

The loss of “grounding” encouraged in the actors and the director by the way Halbe Treppe was constructed is repeated in the film itself through various tropes and strategies that express the state of “exile” in which each character is found. The film opens with a slide of a photograph taken by one of the four main characters while on vacation with his wife. There is no sound, no music, only a view of the yellow desert at sunset, a camel and a palm tree. As the slide show continues, the voices of the people watching are heard, but their faces remain unseen as they make comments about the pictures on the screen. One of the two couples, Uwe (Axel Prahl) and Ellen (Steffi Kühnert), is first introduced through these mostly off-center and unflattering photos. In this way, Dresen begins a film about characters who are emotionally displaced by locating them in an “exotic” country and allowing the spectator access only through Uwe and Ellen’s narration, as they argue about what the photos depict. After this initial scene the characters are seen the next day following daily routines that highlight their alienation. Each is located in a place
spatially disconnected both from the others in their foursome and from the community in which they live: Chris (Thorsten Merten), a disc jockey, sits in a dark studio with headphones and announces his name, “Magic Chris,” into the microphone, then answers the telephone but finds no one on the other end; Uwe walks alone down the empty aisles of a grocery store, throwing supplies into his basket; Katrin (Gabriela Maria Schmeide) is at a toll booth, also in the dark, her face visible only in the mirrors of the trucks that stop to pay; and Ellen cleans the apartment, her own personal space of “exile.” From these scattered locations an attempt at communication is made - a cell phone rings. However, the call is a mistake: Chris is trying to reach Katrin, but she has left her cell at Ellen and Uwe’s place. The series of “morning routines” establishing each character’s particular place of exile ends at the Halbe Treppe, Uwe’s small diner located “half-way up a staircase” within sight of Chris’ radio tower. Climbing the steps to work, Uwe encounters a musician with bagpipes, playing a loud and, to Uwe, irritating tune. Though he is at work in his own restaurant, Uwe finds himself in a strange and uncomfortable place, surrounded by ‘outsiders’ playing music he neither likes nor understands. From this point, all four characters begin figurative and sometimes literal journeys that can be considered a form of home seeking, and in the process succeed, like the characters in Nachtgestalten, in redefining the concept of home itself.

Within these narratives of exile and home seeking, representations of liminality, marginality and otherness, along with tropes of borders, border crossings, and Heimat all figure prominently. First, in both films there is a
connection between exile as expressed spatially and the emotional, social and/or political situation of the characters. In Nachtgestalten, the homeless couple’s lives above the railroad tracks are punctuated by the sound and lights of trains moving into and out of the city, from which point they begin their journeys from homelessness to shelter. Jochen is first encountered as he climbs off a train from the countryside, seeking relief from his loneliness and dissatisfaction. In a sense, he is also ‘homeless,’ having left his Heimat like other wanderers in the German tradition, beset by Fernweh. Peschke, waiting at the airport for clients from Japan who never arrive, as Augé maintains, ‘exiled’ in one of the non-places of supermodernity. He is a self-described “failure,” unable either to fit comfortably into the model of efficiency expected by the firm or to remake himself, leaving such expectations behind. The characters in Halbe Treppe, similarly situated at the outset in borderline places that are neither here nor there, are also emotionally ‘exiled,’ both in their personal relationships and from the larger community. While Uwe must contend with the strange group of musicians outside his doorstep, Katrin’s day consists of a series of brief encounters with truck drivers, most speaking foreign languages, who pass by her booth. Chris answers calls from listeners interested only in what his persona, “Magic Chris,” can provide them: hit music “24 hours a day” along with their daily horoscope. And though Ellen, a clerk at a department store, performs the intimate task of selling perfume, it is only to harried customers hardly interested in the dreams the scents evoke for her. The alienation of the characters is reinforced through an interesting addition to the narrative, a technique Dresen hoped would “open up the space of the film” (“Ein Raum...” 11). Periodically,
the director interviews the actors, allowing them to express their characters’ most profound dissatisfactions and desires. This strategy not only deepens the spectators’ understanding of the characters, but by removing the characters momentarily from the diegesis also increases the sense of their ‘exile.’

In addition to the various forms of exile experienced by his characters, Dresen emphasizes their liminality by creating each as one half of a pair, a doubling that is also figured in the geographical settings of the two films. In Nachtgestalten, the three characters highlighted in the opening scenes each introduce another character that accompanies them out of exile, with one member of the pair a figure for ‘otherness,’ Hanna, the homeless woman, has dark skin and a fiery disposition, while her boyfriend, mild and rule-abiding, is fair. Peschke is ‘paired’ with the African boy, while Jochen, the straight-laced farmer, is with Patty, the heroine addicted prostitute. Even the two taxi drivers whose travels intersect with the characters’, one typically German and the other an African immigrant, follow this pattern. In addition the setting of the film, post-unification Berlin, still evokes the division whose physical traces have been erased. Halbe Treppe takes place in another liminal space, the city of Frankfurt/Oder, whose “sister city,” Slubice, lies in Poland just across the river. In this film the doubling is figured through the two couples, whose spatial locations at the beginning of the film (Chris is high in the “Power Tower” while Katrin sits at the German/Polish border; Uwe is in his kitchen at the Halbe Treppe as Ellen is in hers at the apartment) establish an equilibrium that is broken when the Katrin’s cell phone rings, initiating the affair between Chris and Ellen. The doubling motif in the two films creates a division between the
characters in each pair that suggests the kinds of borders that must be crossed in the course of their journeys out of exile.

The borders the characters in *Nachtgestalten* must transcend in their journeys are, like the former division between the two Berlins, invisible yet undeniably present. No longer physical, they are instead socio-economic, cultural, and sexual, and they are figured through divisions that separate the pairs of characters from each other and from the “home” they seek. In each case the “German” male is guided through encounters with these barriers by his partner, coded as ‘other,’ and his journey is facilitated by another German male, the taxi driver whose unsentimental kindness and level-headed acceptance of his passengers helps them to move through the labyrinthine city. The pairing between the German and the ‘other’ is established by the central relationship of Peschke and the African boy Feliz. When Peschke finds out that Feliz’ uncle lives in Hellersdorf, he exclaims, “He might as well live in Bavaria!” Peschke must then travel into parts of the city where he had never before ventured, forced to engage with those living on society’s margins: illegal immigrants, alcoholics, the poor. In the middle of the quest, his car, which had provided him with some “protection” from this strange world and its inhabitants, is stolen by a band of teenagers. In one of Peschke’s encounters with this “underworld,” he must also confront in a profound form the racism he expresses so casually. On the elevator up to the uncle’s apartment, Peschke and Feliz meet two skinheads (actual skinheads Dresen and his crew recruited for the role), who glare at the boy throughout the ride. This scene serves to underline the cultural and racial significance of the pairing of Pescke and Feliz, in
particular when the skinheads exit the elevator into the hallway. Hanging behind them is the striking picture of an alpine scene, a stereotypical image of the German *Heimat*, whose integrity is “threatened” by the African boy. This encounter serves to strengthen the bond between the Peschke and the boy, creating a contrast between the businessman’s mild form of racism and the skinheads’ more serious version, and emphasizing that Peschke’s way out of his emotional estrangement is dependent upon Feliz.

The other two couples are separated primarily by the two males’ conventional notions of home, and the woman’s role in it. The challenge that Hanna and Patty pose to social conventions evokes a violent response from their respective partners, allowing Dresen to depict the way these tensions are often played out on women’s bodies. As Hanna and Victor stop at various hotels in search of a room, Hanna refuses to accept the judgments the desk clerks inevitably pass on their appearance and their relationship to each other. Victor becomes increasingly impatient with Hanna’s belligerence, until at one point, after they have been thrown out of a Christian hotel because Hanna has told the clerk that they are unmarried, he shouts at her, accusing her of “ruining everything.” When Hanna retorts that she will never have a child with him (revealing for the first time that she is pregnant), he beats her in a dramatic scene filmed on a bridge in the pouring rain. Jochen and Patty have a violent confrontation as well when he discovers her injecting heroine in the filthy bathroom of a squatters’ flat she shares with other homeless youth. Slapping her, he tells her, “I didn’t give you my money for this!” and she, like Hanna, shouts back, “I do what I want with my money!” The desire of the men to control the
women is grounded in their perception that the women are keeping them from their ideal of “home”: Victor simply wants to share a room and eventually a household with Hanna, and Jochen would like to take Patty home to his farm and nurture her like one of his animals. Though the men offer to accept the women on their terms in order to gain a momentary respite from their homelessness, it remains unclear whether they will ever let go of their misguided fantasies.

The violence that accompanies the confrontation with the barriers between the members of each pair (a violence that is interestingly evaded in the case of Peschke and Feliz) is mirrored by the pain and/or hostility the characters encounter as their search for home compels them to move from “outside” to “inside” (McGee 44). In the film, these spaces are both figurative and literal. Feliz is subjected to threatening looks from the skinheads as soon as he moves from outside to inside the apartment building, and Peschke, implicitly recognizing the performance he must stage in order to go inside a bar in a rough neighborhood, pulls down his tie and messes his hair before he enters from the outside so that he will blend in with the clientele. Hanna is beaten for challenging the police who arrest her for entering the subway without her identification card, and Patty for approaching Jochen’s taxi and violating a pimp’s territory. As Laura McGee notes, being ‘outside’ also expresses emotional exposure; it is outside in the rain that Jochen admits to Patty his problems with women, Pescke his frustration with his life, and Hanna and Victor their unhappiness with each other (44). Though all of the characters eventually move ‘inside,’ they find only temporary relief from their states of exile. Peschke momentarily overcomes his loneliness when Feliz hugs him before he leaves with
Ricardo, and Feliz will presumably find only temporary shelter in Germany before he will have to return to Africa. Patty accepts Jochen’s offering of affection for the night, but throws his number away when he leaves. And Hanna and Victor will return to the streets, both alcoholics, Hanna still without her child and Victor unemployed. At the same time they have experienced a sense of exuberance (or at least peace) at their momentary success in crossing the barriers they have faced, a satisfaction figured in the final scene. The teenagers who stole Pescke’s car drive out of the city to the Baltic Sea, and we receive the first glimpse of the sky since Hanna’s glance upward at the plane in the opening scene. As they set the car on fire in a dramatic act of rebellion, one girl dances wildly on the roof to the last bit of music from the car radio, the sea behind her.

In Halbe Treppe, the spatial boundaries the characters must cross are also figures for other kinds of borders, yet instead of moving from inside to outside they journey back and forth from the margins of the city to the center, finally becoming comfortable with the liminal space of their home in border city of Frankfurt/Oder. Chris and Ellen initiate their journey out of ‘exile’ when Ellen visits Chris at his radio station at the top of the Power Tower,” ostensibly to return Katrin’s cell phone. Gazing out of the window at Poland in the distance, she comments, “You have a nice view.” She longs to cross such borders in her own life, and the elevator ride down from the tower with Chris, bringing him down from his place of exile, provides a hint of their future relationship. The movement down from the tower, from margin to center, is reversed when Ellen walks exuberantly across the Pedestrian Bridge to meet Chris at a hotel in Poland, which Dresen captures in a long take, emphasizing
her energy and new-found confidence. Uwe and Katrin, on the other hand, initially remain in their spaces of exile. Katrin cannot physically make the journey out; when her moped breaks down at her workplace on the remote toll plaza, Chris comes to pick her up but refuses to lend her his car, since he needs it to keep his date with Ellen. Uwe is trapped at the “Halbe Treppe” (literally, “half a staircase,” the name of the diner emphasizing its liminality), forced to spend most of his time away from his family. When he is at home, to Ellen’s horror he leaves sides of pork in the bathtub, and his noxious cigar smoke compels her to open the windows, driving out the pet bird.

By the end of the film, however, all of the characters find a ‘home’ in the liminal space of their own city that reflects the transformations they have experienced through their journeys of homelessness. As in Nachtgestalten, these journeys never actually take them anywhere (even Feliz and Jochen begin and end their journeys of homelessness in Berlin), as emphasized through the relative uselessness of vehicles of transportation in both films; though cars, trucks and trains abound, the characters cannot seem to make use of them because they are either broken, stolen or otherwise inaccessible. Instead, their journeys from the city’s margins to its center and back again involve the transgression of social boundaries, with the characters becoming increasingly comfortable in both spaces. At the end of the film, Katrin, refusing to return once again to her empty apartment, shares a cup of soup and a conversation with a Russian truck driver, her facility with languages allowing her to develop interpersonal relationships that others cannot (Halle 84-85). Chris, for his part, has been able to transcend the limitations of his pop music
playlist beyond “Brittany Spears.” He succeeds in truly communicating over the airwaves with the woman he loves by personalizing her horoscope in a manner that is later credited with predicting a major blackout in the city, and the community recognizes him as a ‘seer.’ Ellen leaves her kitchen, for her a space that signifies the unhappiness of her marriage, and finds a new apartment. But it is Uwe who has the farthest distance to travel, and at the end he is finally able to accept the odd group of musicians (played by the band 17 Hippies) whose sound, a unique blend of folk music from around the world, represents an otherness at his doorstep that Uwe has denied throughout the film. At the end of the film he invites them from the cold into the Halbe Treppe to entertain the customers, whose laughter and camaraderie light up the dreary pub, transforming it from a marginal space to the center of a new community.

Represented by various motifs throughout the two films, the concept of Heimat plays an ambivalent role, reinforced by the manner in which Fernweh is thematized from the opening scene of Halbe Treppe. It signifies the sense of exile the characters are experiencing and reinforces interpersonal boundaries, but its tropes are also used to express a desire to overcome these boundaries. The picture of the mountainous countryside in Nachtgestalten, visually associated with the two skinheads standing underneath it, contrasts with the verbal images Jochen creates as he lies in bed with Patty after their confrontation in the bathroom. Watching the Pope speak on TV about resolving the divisions between people, Patty expresses her belief that she will go to hell rather than heaven when she dies. Jochen then asks whether Patty wants him to “take her out of here,” and begins dreamingly to
describe life on his farm. He tells her in particular about the animals, how each has its own personality, and explains the way a calf is born. For Jochen, the ‘purity’ of *Heimat* presents an opportunity for redemption, and he offers Patty the chance to be ‘reborn’ in the warmth of his *Heimat*. Though its potential as a space of reconciliation is suggested in this scene, Patty’s rejection of her role in Jochen’s fantasy underlines the limits of *Heimat*’s ability to resolve problems and smooth out differences, especially given its problematic meaning for women.44

Dresen continues to explore the potential of *Heimat* to be transformed into a liberatory space in *Halbe Treppe*. At the beginning of the film, the characters’ alienation from their families and their communities is figured in part through *Heimat* motifs, including, most importantly, the kitchen (according to Blickle, the “heart” of *Heimat* [84-85]), which evolves from a place of exile to represent the start of new lives and the rebirth of community. At the beginning of the film, all of the characters express their dissatisfaction with their lives through the kitchen, particularly, as previously noted, Ellen. When she is unsuccessful in ridding hers of Uwe’s smell, she attempts to buy a new one at the mall, where its position at the heart of the home has become just another selling point. The appropriation of the kitchen as a mere commodity is underlined by Uwe and Ellen’s exhausting visit, as they are filmed through the windows of the mall at fast forward speed, pushed past a multitude of shiny and unrecognizable objects until Uwe collapses and Ellen pauses to stare out the window. Chris and Katrin’s kitchen features a large wall map

44 According to Elisabeth Butfering, a German historian, *Heimat* is a “male-centered” concept, rooted in the exclusion of women from the “line of ownership and control” of family farmsteads (Blickle 83).
of the world, and in a revealing interview Chris sits underneath it, expressing his feelings of imprisonment in his marriage. Katrin is pushed out of her kitchen by her intrusive stepdaughter and the stepdaughter’s boyfriend, who, despite Katrin’s protestations, take her food without asking. And Uwe’s unhappiness at the Halbe Treppe becomes apparent as he stands in his kitchen, grumbling about his customers, his wife and his children. Yet by the end of the film, this space becomes the site of resistance to the limitations of borders, both personal and social as well as cultural. Ellen finally leaves the kitchen that represents her failed relationship with her husband to establish her own space, yet in the meantime Uwe has remodeled it, signifying his newly found sensitivity. The map in Chris and Katrin’s kitchen takes on new meaning, as the couple speed off together on Katrin’s moped, perhaps to travel to the places they have dreamed about. The most important transformation, however, occurs in the kitchen of the Halbe Treppe. Its evolution begins when Katrin, tired of waiting around for Chris to come home, suddenly shows up one night. Uwe’s reaction to her visit reveals his sense of the pub as a place of exile: “What are you doing in these climes? Are you lost? With a backpack, even...”. However, welcoming her into his kitchen the two begin to drink, joke and laugh, transforming the Halbe Treppe into a refuge for the female wanderer.

The re-imagination of Heimat signified by the evolution of the kitchen is reinforced by the contrast between two scenes representing folk traditions, one early in the film and one at the end. In the first we see the four main characters dressed for Fasching, a celebration in which participants wear costumes, sing, dance and drink before the advent of Lent. In Halbe Treppe, this night of partying and
fellowship becomes an ironic comment on the falsehoods and deception upon which their friendship is based. The singing and rocking only serves to underscore the true divisions between them, and the fact that these divisions are emphasized in the context of a false celebration of tradition is further evidence of the connection between personal alienation and exile from the community. The second scene has the opposite effect. At the end of the film the beer drinking and singing mark the rebirth of a new, more inclusive community feeling among those gathered at the Halbe Treppe, whose catalyst has been Uwe’s invitation to the musicians standing outside to finally come in and play. By doing this Uwe has initiated a new relationship between inside and outside, margins and center, a difficult move within the context of Heimat and one that may signify an attempt at its redefinition. The music of the band, rooted in folk traditions from all over Europe, is both ‘foreign’ and ‘local’ at the same time, and motivates Uwe to revive his own lost sense of home. With the band’s inclusion, the community becomes part of a new Heimat, one with a man in the kitchen and strange songs to accompany the traditional toasts.

In some ways, the theme of exile and home seeking and the representation of borders, border crossings and liminal subjectivities make Nachtgestalten and Halbe Treppe thematically similar to accented films, suggesting that they could be read as articulations of the displacement experienced by Dresen and other East Germans. First, the narratives are structured by the concepts of exile and home seeking, and might therefore be understood in the context of the rather sudden dissolution of the socialist state. The expression of exile in spatial terms, in which the characters are placed physically in marginal or transitional places, is possibly a reflection of the
literal disappearance of the GDR and the loss of grounding felt by its citizens. This is
mirrored by the characters’ emotional distance, both from the people around them
and, most importantly, from the community as a whole. Though emotional distance
in itself is not unique to the experience of the displaced, its juxtaposition with
geographical or spatial exile suggests that the alienation of the characters, like that
experienced by former East Germans, may be connected to the loss of ‘their’ space.

In addition, the characters are ‘lost’ in the impersonality of the modern
metropolis and disoriented by the forces of global capitalism. Like former
Easterners forced to adjust to the destruction of the belief system that structured
their lives, the characters in the two films search for something to guide them in
their journeys through unfamiliar terrain, whether it is Magic Chris, the
disembodied image of the Pope, or, as Hanna suggests, Mother Theresa. The
characters’ home seeking quests also involve travels that can be compared to the
physical and/or psychological migration necessitated by the Wende. The attempted
movements of the characters in Nachtgestalten from outside to inside, for example,
parallel efforts by East Germans to break down socio-economic and cultural barriers
to get ‘inside’ the new capitalist system, as illustrated by Dresen’s adventures in
obtaining financing for his films.45 As they move from the margins to the center and
back again, the characters in Halbe Treppe are like the accented filmmakers
described by Naficy, who cannot exist comfortably in either their homes or their

45 Like the characters in his film, Dresen had the “ground pulled out from under
him” when DEFA reneged on its promise to provide partial funding for his first
feature a mere two weeks before filming was to begin. It would soon declare
bankruptcy, and Dresen was forced to turn to private financing from a West German
producer (“Mit dem Regisseur” 9-10).
places of exile and must make peace with their liminal space. The difficulties many East Germans have had adjusting to their new place in a new country is in many ways similar, often requiring a willingness to accept a position that is ‘not quite’ the same as the one they were trained for under the socialist system.46

Dresen’s representation of liminal subjectivities can also be seen in the context of Naficy’s framework. Both the pairing of characters and their occupation of borderline spaces can be understood to express a sense of displacement. First, the divisions between the members of each pair and their spatial juxtapositions and movements might be read as an expression of a ‘split’ identity rooted in the disruptions caused by unification. If so, the resulting sense of fragmentation and desire for wholeness is figured through the borders the characters must cross. If Nachtgestalten is seen as an accented film, Feliz’ pairing with Peschke, for example, might be understood to embody the fragmentation felt by Dresen and other former East Germans. From this perspective, the necessity for Peschke to transcend the cultural and racial boundaries that separate him from Feliz, as well as his desire to protect the vulnerable foreign child, could be an articulation of the need to overcome inner feelings of insecurity.

Second, the borderline spaces in the films are used to express both the difficulties faced by those who occupy such spaces and the potential that this liminal position offers. As Naficy points out, just as real geopolitical borders are characterized by tensions as well as opportunities for those able successfully to

46 A case in point is the experience of renowned DEFA filmmakers Frank Beyer and Heiner Carow, who began working exclusively in television after the Wende (Berghahn, Hollywood 221).
negotiate between sides (32), for exiles and minorities figurative borders have the same multiplicity of meanings. One major source of tension is the problem of communication. In the two films, encounters at the borders between inside and outside as well as between margin and center are marked by the inability of the characters to communicate with each other and with others around them. As McGee notes, it is when the characters in Nachtgestalten leave their “rhetorical territory” (Augé) and find themselves unable to be understood that the significance of the borders they are faced with become clear. One such border between inside and outside is represented by the reception desks at the various hotels Hanna and Victor visit. Hanna’s efforts at communication are useless, as the couple is repeatedly turned away. Though all of the pairs experience difficulties at the border between inside and outside, the African characters, unwanted exiles in a strange country, provide the underlying model. In Halbe Treppe, Uwe’s inability to understand others and to make himself understood leave him exiled, a condition reflected in the borderline space in which he exists. If Halbe Treppe is read as an accented film, Uwe’s ‘otherness,’ reflecting the displacement of Dresen and other East Germans, is figured through the ‘gypsy’ band that he tries to exclude from the sidewalk in front of the Halbe Treppe at the beginning of the film.

These borderline spaces can be seen as embodying the “Mauer im Kopf,” characterized in large part by the “discursive disunity” (Stevenson and Theobald) between East and West Germans that is illustrated by the difficulties Easterners have had in speaking the proper ‘language’ required to be successful in a capitalist society. However, the same spaces can also highlight the ability of the characters, as
liminal subjects, to contest the idea of the border as an impenetrable divide and
instead to embrace its potential as an inclusive site, where tolerance of a multiplicity
of perspectives predominates (Naficy 31). The evolution of the Halbe Treppe is one
example of this, as is the toll plaza where Katrin chats with truck drivers from across
the world. Likewise, the former East Germans living in the border city of
Frankfurt/Oder, for many years the ‘gateway’ to the East, are better positioned than
their Western counterparts to understand and embrace capitalist Europe’s new
Eastern European partners.

III. *Nachtgestalten, Halbe Treppe* and Border Consciousness

Though the theme of exile and home seeking, along with the representations
of borders, border crossings, and other liminal spaces and characters in the two
films may in part be an expression of the unique sense of displacement experienced
by Easterners, there is an important difference between the emotional resonance of
the films Naficy discusses and Dresen’s that make his work perhaps better
understood in the context of border consciousness. The preoccupation with home
and home seeking, an essential characteristic of these films, is also an important
aspect of *Nachtgestalten* and *Halbe Treppe*. However in exilic films especially,
homeland and its images and motifs provide a means to express the trauma of
displacement and the feelings of loss experienced by the exile. Dresen’s use of these
motifs, however, is far different, and is closer to the way *Heimat* images and motifs
have been used by filmmakers both in the former GDR and the West: as a vehicle
through which to criticize German politics and society, to translate social, cultural and political change, and to offer alternatives to traditional conceptions of identity. In addition, the border tropes and liminal characters in Dresen’s films operate similarly to the way they function in the films of Petzold, Wenders and Ruttmann. As in the work of these filmmakers, Nachtgestalten and Halbe Treppe address the relationship of the abject and the other to national identity, as well as the significance of borders and borderline spaces that define and re-define the nation as they highlight its fractures and divisions.

In Dresen’s work, otherness is often thematized; many of his films, including his early shorts, feature close relationships between Germans and racial or ethnic minorities and immigrants (i.e. So schnell es geht nach Istanbul [Short Cut to Istanbul 1991], Mein unbekannter Ehemann [My Unknown Husband 1994], Jenseits von Klein Wanzleben [Far from Klein Wanzleben 1989], and Die Polizistin [The Policewoman 2000]). These relationships tend to have a redemptive potential, or to highlight the redemptive value of relationships with the other, as in Jenseits von Klein Wanzleben, a documentary about a group of East Germans who live among the Africans to teach them socialist values, and who end up learning more about themselves. The underlying theme of redemption is signified in Nachtgestalten, for example, by the figure of the Pope, who ‘blesses’ the journeys of the ‘German’ characters and their developing relationships with the ‘others’ with whom they are paired. In Halbe Treppe, Uwe’s path to self-realization through his acceptance of the motley band outside his pub is the culminating event of the film and a metaphor for Germany’s need to become more open to alterity as the basis for its new national identity.
this sense it can be compared to *Himmel über Berlin*, where Damiel’s quest for a new narrative of peace that will ‘redeem’ Germany’s problematic past is figured through his attempts to reach out to those victimized and disregarded by history. As noted in the second chapter, the circus, as the site where the angel’s path to redemption begins, is a space of rootlessness, occupied by foreigners, and it is through his relationship with a woman who speaks French yet aligns herself with no country that he is able to begin his new narrative. Bell hooks’ pointed critique of *Himmel*, in which she complains about the way Wenders’ focus on the white man’s redemption relegates the ‘other’ to a mere backdrop in the story, is particularly relevant here. Though this tendency is not uncommon, particularly in Hollywood film but also in European cinema, I would argue that in the case of *Himmel* as well as several of Dresen’s films, including *Nachtgestalten* and *Halbe Treppe*, it is directly related to issues of German national identity. As several analysts have noted, the theme of redemption through identification with otherness is not limited to these two filmmakers but is part of German discourse dating back as far as the 18th century that has as its complement a darker form of displacement. At its core is a fractured sense of national identity, and it has been expressed in various ways.

According to Susanne Zantop, the German tendency to identify with the “victim” in colonial and imperialistic relationships can be traced to Herder who, in his critique of European colonialism in the late 18th century, compares the Germans to the colonized Indians and Africans in their “childlike innocence and weakness” as they faced the threat of France (194). Through a process of triangulation, this type of discourse ignored the “internal colonizing” that was an unspoken part of the “self-
“liberating” process of German unification (195). After the establishment of the German state, Germany’s inability to ‘catch up’ to the other Western colonial powers both created the anger and resentment that helped to fuel expansionist rhetoric in the 1920s and 30s and allowed Germany to assume the role of critical bystander to the atrocities committed by others. This also conveniently drew attention away from Germany’s own worsening treatment of its Jewish citizens. Zantop concludes that these “two moments of triangulation” served common purposes: to associate Germans with a victimhood status they could either feel justified in redressing and/or use to support their position as “moral arbiters,” and to divert attention from the oppression taking place within their own borders. After the war, the rhetoric was subsumed into the competition between East and West Germany, with the East Germans assuming the role of champion to those subjugated by Western European and American colonialism and racism as a facet of its anti-fascist founding mythology, and the West Germans disregarding the imperialist label as part of the polemics of a socialist government engaged in a campaign of internal repression (198–99). In both cases, the displacement of German guilt onto others (or the ‘other Germany’) and the alignment of one’s own side with historical victims of racism, colonialism and imperialism suggest that the split involved in the process of triangulation is masking a deep ambivalence about the meaning of ‘Germanness.’

An example of how these triangular relationships were played out in popular culture is illustrated by the East and West German versions of the American Western. In his study of East German Indianerfilme, Gemünden (“Between Karl May and Karl Marx”) maintains that the remarkable popularity of these DEFA “Westerns”
stems from a strong German imaginary relationship with the American West reflected in the 19th century novels of Karl May. Though the SED officially held this “bourgeois” writer in disregard (believing that his stories paved the way for Hitler’s imperialist “Blut und Boden” ideology), his tales were given a socialist inflection. While Karl May’s novels are characterized by a strong underlying theme of Christian redemption, the Indianerfilme feature the struggles of a pre-capitalist minority against American imperialism. Yet they share with the Western version a desire to shape the history of Native Americans to conform to a German agenda. In the West German series, the Indian chief, who refuses to hold the “bad whites” responsible for the actions of the “good,” “register(s) postwar (West) Germans’ fantasies of absolution and restitution: to be forgiven for the horrors perpetrated and to render them undone” (Sieg 303). For East Germans, the “Indian” hero of many of the Indianerfilme, played by the Yugoslav actor Gojko Mitic, embodied the ideal anti-fascist in his role as a resistance fighter. By supporting the anti-fascist founding mythology of the GDR, these films repress the implication of East Germans in the Nazi atrocities. In addition, Mitic, whose father was a Yugoslav partisan and who chose to live in the East, incorporated “the model German, the Native American tribal hero, the displaced Jew...” (Gemünden 35) who also happened to be one of ‘us.’

In the post-unification period, triangulation has taken on a new form. Anke Pinkert maintains that a “racialized border” has developed to replace the physical divide between East and West (26). As previously noted, Barton Byg has outlined some of the implications of the border, which characterizes Easterners as “blacks”
and Westerners as “whites.” Pinkert argues that this metaphor has been accepted in part because it fits into the self-concept of Easterners, who were raised to consider anti-colonial African freedom fighters and African American leftists such as Angela Davis their ideological compatriots. Yet this self-concept, as Pinkert puts it, “should not be confused with an acceptance and tolerance of racial difference” (23). When the ‘other’ is forced into the matrix of East/West relations, race is often used to negotiate the position of Easterners in a new social, economic and political environment. As an example, the author refers to a story about an East German, Raffael, whose taxi business, established after the Wende, is now failing. One of his drivers, an Afro-Cuban, is stabbed and Raffael must let him go. Though Orlando, the Cuban, tries to get Raffael to change his mind, the debt-ridden owner fantasizes about how much easier it would be to be unemployed but ‘free’ like the immigrant. His failure to succeed in the new economic system leads him to identify with someone lower in the social hierarchy. Pinkert concludes: “At a moment of economic failure and symbolic crisis...[the owner – K.S.] mobilizes a narrative of identification familiar from the past. But it is also precisely this narrative which reveals that even if most East Germans occupy a subordinate place within the new economy they still occupy a dominant position within the imagined and real racial hierarchies” (24). Though East Germans may be like blacks in many respects, the “national subject” has still been imagined as “white, Christian, heterosexual and male” (Mosse, cited in Pinkert 25), and in the absence of public discourse on the different meanings of triangular communicative patterns for Easterners and Westerners the racialized border will remain in place (25).
Another kind of triangulation connecting German national identity to otherness stems from the historical tendency to ground this identity, which has always lacked a “clearly defined content,” on the threat of an internal enemy (Huysen 80). Citing Zizek, Huysen maintains that the two postwar German states blamed the “other Germany” for “stealing” its potential identity, intensifying the hostilities between them. Since unification, the perception of “theft” has been displaced onto the racial and ethnic other as part of a “xenophobic triangle” inside Germany, and can be seen as factor contributing to the violent attacks of the early post-unification period (81). As Pinkert has pointed out, this process has also worked in reverse and East Germans have become the foreign other, this time within the self-defined German body, who has stolen the well-being of the former Western state. The scene from Yella in which the woman with the house and the green jaguar stares at Yella when she has just come off the train in Frankfurt, bedraggled and dripping wet from her near-drowning, exemplifies this form of triangulation. For a moment, Yella and the woman, Easterner and Westerner, appear to see themselves in each other, but Yella is the ‘threat,’ the abject other who is at the same time part of the German ‘self.’

The process of triangulation, reflecting the fractured and ambivalent sense of national identity at the core of border consciousness, is evident in its ‘redemptive’ form in Nachtgestalten and Halbe Treppe through the pairing of the main characters. In Nachtgestalten, the central story of the African boy and the German man is similar in some respects to the story Pinkert relates. Peschke, recognizably Eastern as he is played by well-known East German actor and director Michael Gwisdek, is a
‘failure’ in life, yet he is ‘redeemed’ through his relationship with Feliz, just as the East German who has had difficulty adjusting to life in the West and whose identity has been lost can take pride in his former state’s strong stand in support of the Third World ‘other.’ By identifying with Feliz, he resumes the position of moral arbiter so comfortably occupied by the former GDR, and at the same time makes himself the savior of one whose social position is even more precarious than his own. In Halbe Treppe, the exiled German couples, whose emotional separation is figured spatially, can be seen as a metaphor for the still-divided nation. Their search for a way out of exile towards a new home is mirrored by the movement of the band into the Halbe Treppe at the end. In this way, the East/West division is projected onto the ‘other,’ implying that the sense of wholeness achieved by the characters at the end, like the success of German unification, is dependent upon the acceptance of otherness.

Another way ambivalence towards national identity ties Dresen to the other filmmakers discussed is through his depiction of borders, border crossings and borderline spaces. As in the work of Petzold, Wenders and even Ruttman, these spaces are used to highlight and to interrogate the line between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that some may not cross. In Nachtgestalten, though each pair is composed of a ‘German’ and an ‘other’ who must come to terms in order to reach ‘home,’ all are alienated from the center of German society. Again, the African boy provides the model, but the other characters are also abject in various degrees: the homeless couple, the drug-addicted teenager, the businessman who describes himself as a “zero” and the farmer, clearly a misfit and an anachronism in modern-day Berlin.
Dresen has observed that the characters in this film are unusual in that they are “dropped” at the end; there is no hint of what the future may hold for them, and they essentially disappear (“There is No Authenticity”). This adds another level of meaning to his title and ties it in particular to Petzold’s Gespenster, whose characters also simply fade away at the end of the film. Yet these figures are not just alienated from society; their abject status is tied to German identity through the specific quality of the borderline spaces they move through and occupy.

When a policeman in Nachgestalten responds to Ricardo’s fears about his nephew with the comment, “Don’t worry, no one gets lost in Germany,” Dresen might be making a subtle reference to a similar remark by Peter Falk in Himmel: “No one gets lost in Berlin; you always end up at the Wall.” The irony in both cases is that the characters are indeed “lost,” and that their journeys through the city amount to an interrogation of German identity. By setting his allegory of contemporary Germany in the once-divided capital city, Dresen places his film in the tradition of “Berlin films” dating back to the work of Ruttmann and others in the 1920s, and continuing in the East with such DEFA classics as Berlin, Ecke Schönhauser (Berlin – Schönhauser Corner Klein 1957), Berlin um die Ecke (Berlin Around the Corner Klein 1965), and Der geteilte Himmel (The Divided Heaven Wolf 1964). In the post-unification period, Nachgestalten joins Tykwer’s Lola rennt (Run Lola Run 1998), Das Leben ist eine Baustelle (Life Is All You Get Becker 1997), and Petzold’s Gespenster (2005). In these films (as well as Himmel), the city has traditionally served as diagnostic mirror for protagonists and for the state of German society, and through its association with the German nation has provided an
opportunity to reflect upon national identity as well. In the GDR, the Berlin film often gauged the delicate balance between cinema and the state, and particularly in the case of Wolf’s Der geteilte Himmel, signaled when that balance had shifted.47

Dresen inserts Nachtgestalten into this tradition by the references he makes to two of these films. The opening of the film features a low-angle shot of feet walking through the city streets, criss-crossing each other and going in no particular direction. This motif directly cites Ruttmann’s Sinfonie, with its images of legs entering and exiting subway stations, and its narrative of Berlin as perceived by the urban flâneur (Simon 312). Yet instead of the dominating authorial vision of the “kino-eye,” the story of the city is composed, as Dresen puts it (Director’s audiocommentary, Nachtgestalten), through the individual characters as they make their way through the urban labyrinth, the “camera-eye” different for each (314). The two films share, however, the use of the woman as a means to express anxieties about the nation (318). Just as fears about the nexus of the metropolis, modernity and Germany’s place in it are figured through the female suicide in Sinfonie, the character of Hanna triggers anxiety over the place of the abject, the foreign ‘other’ and challenges to social convention in the Berlin Republic. In both films, pivotal scenes take place on a bridge, and in Nachtgestalten male fears are directly played out in this scene as Victor brutally beats Hanna when she challenges his masculinity, significantly through her threat to abort “his” child. But while the woman in Ruttmann’s film jumps off the bridge so that a new national narrative can be

47 Wolf’s film, released in 1964, was only exhibited for a few weeks before it was withdrawn from the cinemas, an early indication of the fate of the politically challenging Kaninchenfilme of 1965.
realized, Hanna is gently taken off by a repentant Victor, and they both cross from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’ the room Victor has finally secured for them.

In the opening scene, Nachtgestalten also cites Wenders’ film. Hanna’s glance upward is reminiscent of the beginning of Himmel, when the children of Berlin look upward at the angel. However, instead of the angel Hanna sees a plane before looking down to notice the 100-euro note in her bowl. This seemingly supernatural event, like the presence of the angel in Wenders’ film, sets an almost mythical tone, carried throughout the characters’ journeys in the same way the resonance of myth accompanies Daniel’s travels. At the same time, it is important that Hanna does not ‘see’ an angel and is instead left to speculate whether a guilty citizen or “Mother Theresa” was the source of the money. This emphasizes another difference between the two films; while the camera accompanies the plane in Himmel, looking down at the city in a shot that pointedly cites Riefenstahl’s infamous Nazi film, in Nachtgestalten it remains on the ground with Hanna. This difference underlines Dresen’s stated purpose: to make a film from the “Ratten-perspektive” (the perspective of “rats” [Schenk 6]) rather than angels. He is not attempting, like Wenders, to create a new national myth but simply to find his characters a temporary home. Consequently, though the border crossings of his protagonists as they move from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’ are, like Daniel’s crossing from heaven to earth, marked by a sense of euphoria, in Nachtgestalten we are aware that this victory will only be short-lived. Though their journeys may be ‘blessed’ there is no underlying vision, just a defiant statement against the borders they confront and have momentarily transcended, encapsulated in the closing scene as the punk teenager
Mila Ganeva argues that post-unification Berlin films have been “stripped of the political pathos” that characterized earlier city films, both from the East and the West (262). She maintains that unlike Wenders, the filmmakers do not use the city to stage grand aesthetic or political statements, and instead avoid landmarks, choosing to tell the story of the city from the perspective of its more desolate margins and least visible inhabitants. Following the work of Britain’s Ken Loach, they choose to make socially critical films that center on the present lives of protagonists, with less focus on the historical weight of the city they live in (268). However I would suggest that through his specific references to some of these earlier films, Dresen engages in a dialogue with their vision of national identity. For example, both Sinfonie and Himmel end at recognizable Berlin landmarks that connect the city to a particular national narrative. In Ruttmann’s film, the glow of the radio tower at the end of the day is the man-made complement to the sunrise motifs at the opening of the film. As the culmination of the 24-hour sequence that structures the film, this view of the tower effectively naturalizes Germany’s progression into modernity. The scene in Himmel at the Hotel Esplanade, when Damiel and Marion embark on their crusade to create a new ‘founding mythology’ for Germany and for humankind, is a direct contestation of the mythology that culminated in Nazism.

The final sequence of Nachtgestalten, on the other hand, takes place at the Baltic Sea, a short drive outside of Berlin. By escaping the confines of the city, it carries the story of Germany to another venue, one with particular significance for
East Germans. As Alexandra Ludewig notes, the Baltic Sea has been the site of the final scene in many films by former East Germans, including *Burning Life* (Welz 1994) and *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* (Larry 1992).\(^4\) Heavily guarded during the Cold War, the Baltic Sea was a popular resort for the Party elite and inaccessible to the public during the communist era. However, as part of the Hanseatic League during the Middle Ages, it also represents cross-cultural exchange, a vehicle for contact with the rest of northern Europe (note 182). Signifying both confinement and freedom, the Sea functions in Dresen’s film as testimony to the possibilities and the limitations inherent in the liminal spaces in which his characters reside. Like the insuperable bodies of water in Petzold’s films, it signifies their frustrated longings, offering hope yet failing to provide a clear vision of the future.

At the same time, by moving away from the city, the ending shifts focus from Berlin as the iconic site through which German identity is articulated, suggesting that other borderline places may have more significance today. Like Petzold, Dresen looks to other borders as a means to interrogate national identity, such as the city of Frankfurt/Oder in *Halbe Treppe*. In an article on the representation of the German-Polish border in the film, Randall Halle notes that this border has been the site of international anxieties that were renewed with the end of the Warsaw Pact. In 1992, the European Union turned the Oder-Neisse into the border between the EU and the non-EU east, until Poland entered the Union in 2002 and the meaning of the boundary once again changed. Once marking the border between East and West, the city has again become the important crossroad it was during the Middle Ages,\(^4\) Incidentally, it is also the entire setting of Dresen’s most recent film, *Whisky mit Wodka* (2009).
like the Baltic Sea a key transit point in the Hanseatic League, characterized by its multiculturalism (78). Dresen’s choice of this locale, like Petzold’s choice of Wittenberg in Yella, suggests that his film is also exploring the ambivalences surrounding German identity, but this time by looking eastward. According to Halle, forays across the border into Poland traditionally have been “tragic” in German fiction film, bringing “loss” to the German traveler, whereas trips to Italy have been beneficial (79). In Halbe Treppe, on the other hand, the movement east is accompanied by a sense of euphoria, beautifully captured in the scene with Ellen crossing over the pedestrian bridge to meet her lover. This alternative perspective on the German-Polish border captures the recent changes in its meaning for Germany and the rest of Western Europe. Though both Nachtgestalten and Halbe Treppe center on the problem of finding ‘home’ from positions of social, emotional and cultural ‘exile,’ the shift eastward from Berlin to Frankfurt/Oder opens up a set of possibilities for the characters in Halbe Treppe only suggested in the final scene of Nachtgestalten. As Gabrielle Mueller points out, by situating his narrative on the former border between Eastern and Western Europe, Dresen seems to offer a counter model to the Berlin discourse, constructing German identity as explicitly middle European rather than distinctly German (117).

Finally, Nachtgestalten and Halbe Treppe, along with Himmel and Petzold’s Ghost Trilogy, evince a deep dissatisfaction with home, the characters’ emotional exile intimately connected to the places in which they are situated. In all of these films a loss of identity initiates or facilitates the protagonists’ home seeking quests; in the case of both Yella and Damiel the change is even ontological. This allows the
characters to begin anew, desiring, if not achieving, the loosening of the bonds that
tie them to their home or place of origin. Beset by Fernweh they leave, and along the
way their journeys feature transitional spaces, false homes and non-places that
signify their outsider status. In Himmel, transitional spaces are most prominent,
reflecting Damiel’s growing realization that he must transform himself in order to
find a home, and include the Imbissbude where Damiel meets the former angel who
convinces him to come to earth, and Marion’s circus trailer. Petzold’s characters are
instead trapped in false homes, such as the Heime and the many hotel rooms and
temporary living quarters where his liminal characters reside. For Petzold as well
as Dresen, these false homes also include the emblems of capitalist success, the
Audis and the BMWs that lure the protagonists with their promises of protection
from the outside world.

IV. Conclusion

Dresen’s films Nachtgestalten and Halbe Treppe share with the films of exilic
and minority filmmakers a preoccupation with home seeking, borders, border
crossings and liminal subjectivities, reflecting in many ways the displaced status of
East Germans after the Wende. Having ‘lost’ their home, forced to negotiate a place
for themselves in the Berlin Republic, they are like Dresen’s characters, attempting
to occupy the liminal space between what they had been before and what they were
expected to become as part of a capitalist society. Though Nachtgestalen and Halbe
Treppe figuratively depict such home seeking quests, unlike accented films they are
not driven by nostalgia for a lost homeland. Instead, they are concerned with the
many kinds of divisions, including the lingering “Wall” between East and West, that characterize contemporary German society, and how national identity might be redefined in the context of these divisions. In this way, they continue the East German tradition of socially relevant cinema, characterized by its grounding in a certain kind of humanism that reflects the lives of the people (Berghahn, *Hollywood* 51).

This same quality, however, characterizes the work of Westerners like Petzold and Wenders. Concerned with social, racial and cultural inequalities, they explore borders, borderline spaces and liminal/abject characters as a way to open up the space of Germany, to offer alternative concepts of national identity. Like Petzold, Dresen and Wenders imagine this space as a kind of Thirdspace, a place from which to contest and interrogate traditional concepts of nation. Such spaces, like the borderline and transitional places that signify border consciousness, offer an alternative to the dialectics of inside and outside described by Bachelard (211-232). In Petzold, the dominated space of the margins is recast as a dangerous site, occupied by “vampires” who challenge their subordinate position and whose transitory living spaces encourage a re-evaluation of conventional notions of home.

Wenders in turn reworks spaces like the Hotel Esplanade, infusing this site,

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49 Berghahn quotes Dresen: “Es lässt sich im Herangehen an die Themen etwas finden, was vielleicht markant ist, aber nicht nur für DEFA, sondern für die osteuropäische Filmkultur insgesamt, nämlich ein bestimmtes humanistisches Menschenbild, was sich im Film manifestiert. Die Filme sind meistens sozial gesetzt. Da ist keine Flucht in die Ästhetik, sondern sie finden auf einem sozialen Bodensatz statt (qtd. on 38) (“Maybe there is something distinctive in the way in which certain themes are approached, not just with regard to DEFA, but in the entire film culture of Eastern Europe: there is a certain humanism in the way people are portrayed. Most of these films have a social relevance. They don’t offer an escape into pure aestheticism but are grounded in society”).
historically associated with an ideology that suppresses and denies otherness, with the possibility of an alternative national narrative. Both filmmakers, as well as Dresen, are able to illuminate the margins through the creative use of the camera, contesting the dominating “kino-eye” of modernists like Ruttmann by citing his techniques while presenting another perspective.

However, Petzold and Wenders, in their reconceptions of national identity, are unable entirely to escape the limitations of nationalist discourse. While Petzold romanticizes Heimat through his descriptions of the former East as the site of Germany’s ‘mythical past,’ depicted in Yella with visual images of its open landscapes, Wenders comes dangerously close to a similar romanticization of the redemptive power of myth. This has partly to do with the tendency of critical West German filmmakers to feel compelled to confront the burdens of Germany’s problematic history, signified in Wenders and Petzold by their focus on the ‘ghosts’ and ‘angels’ that haunt its borders. Dresen, however, is less weighed down by these compulsions. As Byg astutely observes, the anti-fascist founding mythology of East Germany encouraged a feeling of “guiltlessness” that permitted the preservation of certain signifiers of nation considered taboo in the West (“DEFA and the Traditions of International Cinema” 24). This allows Dresen to imagine Heimat not as a “de-politicized” space, as was the tendency in the West, but as Thirdspace, the site of a potential new national identity. Rather than relegating it to a romanticized past,

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50 After the war, Heimat was used as a depoliticized alternative to the excessive nationalism of the previous era, permitting the transfer of energy onto the task of building a new economy. Its traditional innocence also served as a way for Germans to relieve themselves of the burden of their Nazi heritage and ease their guilty feelings (Applegate 240).
Dresen reworks it, creating a new, inclusive space and in the process re-imagining a Germany where, as Zafer Senoçak once remarked, the idea of a homogeneous, “unbroken” national identity is replaced by one with “gaps through which what is different and foreign could come and go” (5).

At the same time, there is a troublesome tendency in Dresen’s work, particularly in Nachtgestalten, to reinforce the triangulated relationship with otherness that has characterized German cultural output in the past. Peschke’s brief friendship with Feliz is made difficult by the boy’s supposed inability to communicate, which the businessman tries to obscure by his constant talking. As Dresen describes it, the original script had the boy speaking throughout, contributing to the misunderstandings. However, the filmmaker found that keeping him “silent” gave him a “certain sovereignty” that Dresen liked (Director’s audiocommentary, Nachtgestalten). The superior moral position attributed to the figure of Feliz, however, also transforms him into a projection of an important aspect of the East German self-concept, a ‘moral superiority’ over the West based on the GDR’s historic support of Third World people. Just as the West Germans have been accused of projecting their fantasies of a lost mythical past onto the former East, characters like Peschke and Feliz embody an imaginary identification that masks the violent history of racism the GDR chose to efface. In addition, it reinforces the “racialized border” between East and West, preventing the development of a new national identity that recognizes both the “shared and divergent histories” of the two former states and permits a true engagement with the “real” ethnic and cultural others within Germany’s borders (Pinkert 29). The
work of Fatih Akin, discussed in Chapter 4, provides an alternative to this long-standing German tendency, and the border consciousness his films reveal brings both non-minority and minority Germans together in the ongoing effort to redefine the nation.
Chapter 4

Essential difference allows those who rely on it to rest reassuringly on its gamut of fixed notions. Any mutation in identity, in essence, in regularity, and even in physical place poses a problem, if not a threat, in terms of classification and control. If you can’t locate the other, how are you to locate your-self?


Fatih Akin’s 2004 film *Gegen die Wand* opens with what is apparently a traditional Turkish band playing in front of the beautiful Bosporus River. A woman in a red dress stands in the center, singing a love song, accompanied by men on either side sitting in black suits with their instruments. At the end of the song there is an abrupt cut to a black screen, then suddenly fluorescent lights slam on, illuminating the blackness. It is soon apparent that these lights belong to Der Fabrik, a Hamburg concert venue where the film’s protagonist, Çahit Tomruk, is employed cleaning up bottles whose remnants he periodically swills. Though his Turkish background is eventually revealed, his staggering gait and bedraggled appearance make him more readily identifiable as an alcoholic *Penner* (bum) than a ‘typical’ Turk. In these two scenes, Akin disrupts the audience’s desire to “locate the other,” as Trinh puts it, first by composing and then harshly interrupting a suspiciously pleasant tableau of otherness, and next introducing a character that violates the stereotype of the traditional, hard-working *Gastarbeiter*. The other protagonist in this violent love story is Sibel, a Turkish-German girl who begs Çahit to enter into a sham marriage with her so that she can escape her traditional family
and be free to “fuck”, not just “one guy, but many.” As outsiders in their respective communities, Çahit and Sibel are prevented from being perceived as representative, effectively challenging the concept of essential identities. With the suddenness of his cut between the first two scenes, Akin also literally dislocates the ‘other’, shifting the setting from sunny Istanbul to a dark nightclub in Hamburg, visually highlighting the difference between the two places while eliminating their spatial separation, and in the process questioning the meaning of the border for contemporary Turkish-Germans.

Akin, himself of Turkish descent, can clearly be seen as an “accented” filmmaker, yet his films evince a border consciousness that works towards the dissolution of such categories and insists upon the involvement of the “accented” in the ongoing process of German redefinition. Gegen die Wand, as well as his next film, Auf der anderen Seite (2007), shares with the work of the other filmmakers in this study an emphasis on the importance of liminal characters to the interrogation of the borders of Germany. Like Wenders’ Himmel, Petzold’s Ghost Trilogy and to a certain extent Dresen’s Nachtgestalten, Akin’s films give this exploration a transcendental, mythical overtone. By suggesting the possibility of developing a “transnational” myth that can help redefine German identity, his narratives also offer a means to break free of the tendency toward regressive triangulated relationships and outdated notions of Heimat that have hindered other such efforts. In order to evaluate the significance of Akin’s demonstration of border consciousness, in the first part of this chapter I discuss the unique “accent” of Turkish-German filmmaking over the past several decades, how it has developed,
and how Akin fits into this history. Next, I demonstrate the ways Akin’s engagements with borders through the formal construction of his films and his focus on liminal characters opens the space of the nation without naively celebrating its obsolescence. Instead, he emphasizes both the extent and the limits of its power by connecting it to the death and rebirth, sacrifice and redemption of his characters. In the concluding section, I assess Akin’s films alongside the work of the other filmmakers in this study and how they address some of the issues associated with border consciousness, including Germany’s problematic relationship to otherness and the importance of Heimat to German self-understanding.

I. Turks in Germany and the Evolution of Turkish-German Filmmaking

Zafer Senocak, a well-known Turkish-German intellectual who has been writing for years about the relationship between the two groups in the context of German national identity, was initially optimistic about the potential for unification to change the consciousness of Turks and Germans alike. In a 1991 essay, Senocak expressed the hope that the presence of a historical, cultural and religious minority could prove to be an “important corrective in the process of discovering a new German national feeling” (7). At the same time, Turks must be willing to share in the resolution of Germany’s historical problems with national identity, so that the two groups can develop a “third language” through which concepts like “inside and outside” become “non-sensical” (Adelson xxiii). Standing in the way of the
development of such a language is not only the focus on citizenship laws, which still emphasize the “biological” aspect of belonging to the exclusion of the political and emotional (Konzett 57), but also the attitudes of “xenophiles” who believe they must accept every “archaic custom” of the other, whom they admire for their “quaintness” but don’t see as part of themselves (Senocak 4).

By the middle of the decade, Senocak was disappointed to see that the “wall of symbolic bricks” (xxii) between Germans and Turks had remained. In fact, Senocak wrote that at the time his book Atlas of a Tropical Germany was published in 2000, there had been a turn away from the cosmopolitan focus of the Federal Republic, and that, even among liberals, an old-style nationalism rather than an all-inclusive constitutional patriotism51 was being embraced as the basis for national identity. Helmut Schmidt, for example, famously commented that Turkish culture is “totally different” from European, since its “Heimat” is in Asia and Africa (Konzett 47-48). Part of the problem, indeed, may be the conventional understanding of the notion of Heimat. As Elke Segelke points out, the German basis for civil identity has historically been cultural identity, as opposed to that of neighbors such as France whose notion of “civilization” is more cosmopolitan, paternalistically embracing the ‘other.’ Instead, “Germanness” only “absorbs if it can dissolve that which is foreign” (167). On the Turkish side, this corresponds to what Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy term “deep nation” in relation to the tendency of Turkish culture to deny diversity.

51 In the 1980s, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas popularized the idea that political attachment should center on the values, norms and procedures of a liberal democratic constitution rather than be rooted solely in ethnic, historical or cultural commonalities (Gordon, “Constitutional Patriotism”, www.foreignaffairs.com, May/June 2008).
As with the idea of *Heimat*, in “deep nationalism” there is a disavowal of internal differences, and those who expose these differences are threatened with exclusion from the group. The authors maintain, as I have discussed in the introduction, that this tendency has been expressed through the harsh policies of censorship that plague the Turkish media (211).

As a result, second generation Turkish-Germans have found themselves caught in a discourse of “betweenness.” Describing Senocak’s position on the subject, Leslie Adelson remarks that the author’s emphasis on the need to develop a historical sense of the “Orient and Occident touching each other” (Senocak, qtd. in Adelson, xxvi) is undermined by the notion of “betweenness” as a “place of ambiguity surrounded by places that [are] themselves not ambiguously fluid but thoroughly settled” (xxvi). Feeling forced to choose between two unyielding identities, young Turks born in Germany even have difficulty attaching a name to themselves; rejecting the common term “ausländische/türkische Mitbürger” (or “foreign/Turkish citizens,” which has recently replaced the derogatory term *Gastarbeiter*), perhaps because it makes them feel less than real citizens, they prefer to associate themselves with a locality, calling themselves “Berliner-Türke” rather than either German Turks or Turkish Germans (Yalcin-Heckmann 312). Lale Yalcin-Heckmann also points out that their performance of hybrid identities through, for example, music and dress are often aimed at differentiating themselves from their parents, who have become the “intimate other,” rather than an expression of a connection to German society. This in turn reinforces the reification of traditional Turkish culture that may be an unwanted by-product of discourses of hybridity, by
emphasizing how these “essential” identities are being transgressed (314).

At the same time there is evidence that the phenomenon of “betweenness,”
the assumption that young Turks in Germany are ‘caught between two cultures,’
may be overstated. Instead, through their writing and their music many young
Turkish-German artists express their connectedness to cultural influences outside
the binaries established by the concept of diaspora, with its emphasis on the
position of migrants solely vis-à-vis their ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries. Levent Soysal
argues, for example, that there has been an overemphasis on the “diasporic
connections” in migrant hiphop, often understood as a form of resistance to
mainstream German culture, which obscures an affinity for non-national spaces in
favor of the host/home dichotomy. Instead of an expression of foreignness, it should
be seen as an attempt by young minority artists to connect to the world at large,
since hiphop is not only part of American ghetto culture but is “everywhere at once”
in the world (72). In addition, far from being born of an attitude of resistance, the
migrant hiphop movement in Berlin, the focus of Soysal’s article, was underwritten
by the government as part of a program to promote music as an alternative to
violence in the wake of the racist attacks of the early 1990s (69-70).

In an effort to subvert the conventional representation of the relationship
between Turks and Germans as binary, in his 1994 book Kanak Sprak author
Feridun Zaimoglu created a pseudo-ethnicity called “Kanak,” with a language based
on the speech of Turkish hiphop artists and composed of hiphop slang, German, and
a mish-mash of terms and expressions from other languages that make it almost
incomprehensible to mainstream German and Turkish speakers. His strategy, to
“explode the idea that any normative culture exists,” was designed to “disrupt the state-sanctioned dialogue between ‘Germans’ and ‘Turks’” in which the Turk would inevitably be the abject partner for his inability to speak “proper” German (Cheesman, “Talking Kanak”, 83-86). In 1997, Zaimoglu’s position inspired the formation of Kanak Attak, a multi-ethnic group of activists committed to the subversion of identity politics and the controversial notion of “Leitkultur”.

In his description of the group, Zaimoglu claimed: “die Kanaken suchen keine kulturelle Verankerung. Sie möchten sich weder im Supermarkt der Identität bedienen, noch in einer egalitären Herde von Heimatvertriebenen aufgehen” (qtd. in Fachinger 244). More recently, according to Petra Fachinger, in a “self-confident re-writing” of the meaning of Germanness itself Zaimoglu has redefined his position from that of a subversive cultural warrior to what he terms an “orientalischer deutscher” (244).

Zaimoglu’s new self-description reflects a growing sense, among some writers and social commentators, that rather than being forced to choose between assimilation into a “German” Leitkultur or ghettoization in the Parallelgesellschaft (parallel society) of multiculturalism, second and third generation Turkish-Germans and the children of other migrant groups should lay claim to their Germanness, both for their own sake and the future of the nation as a whole. In an essay published in the Sunday section of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung entitled “Warum die

52 A term originally designed as an alternative to the controversial, exclusionary term Kulturnation, and referring simply to the values associated with democracy and the Enlightenment. However, this meaning has been undermined by politicians who have called for immigrants to conform to what they call “die deutsche Leitkultur” (Cheesman 84).
53 “The Kanaks are not looking for a cultural anchor. They do not want to serve in a supermarket of identity, nor do they wish to be part of an egalitarian herd of refugees.”
deutschen Türken nicht nur unsere Wirtschaft retten können, sondern auch unsere Kultur”,\textsuperscript{54} Georg Diez writes that for the first time since the end of the Second World War, people are questioning the foundations of postwar Germany, giving the nation the opportunity to consider Turkish-Germans a means to reinvigorate a stale and stagnant society: “Die Welt verändert sich, und der Widerhall dieser Veränderungen dringt aus den Ritzen und Sprüngen der deutschen Gesellschaft, der deutschen Wirtschaft, des deutschen Systems, das da kracht und splittert und bricht. Es sind diese Sprünge, diese Risse, die interessant sind in solchen Zeiten – und niemand verkörpert diese Risse, die die Gesellschaft durch die erst Neues eindringen kann, so gut wie die jungen deutschen Türken” (254).\textsuperscript{55} Diez argues that Turkish-German youth, embodying a “pioneer spirit” that Germany lacks, provide the energy of the immigrant that has long profited countries like Britain and the United States (255). According to one of its members, “die dritte Ethnie” (the “third ethnicity”, with the “first” being Germans and the “second” first-generation immigrants), which includes young Turkish-Germans and other children of immigrants, is not interested in the past of their parents’ homeland or in becoming like other non-minority Germans but prefer “als Nichtdeutscher Deutscher zu sein” ("to be ‘German’ as non-Germans"). This sensibility ties together disparate ethnic groups, making their language fresh and helping them provide “electroshock therapy” to a “comatose society” (Biller 268).

\textsuperscript{54} “Why the German Turks Can Not Only Save Our Economy, But Also Our Culture”.
\textsuperscript{55} “The world is changing, and the echo of these changes rings out of the cracks and crevices of the German society, the German economy, the German system, that splits and splinters and breaks. It is these cracks, these rips, that are interesting in these times – and no one embodies these cracks, through which the new can enter into society, better than the young German Turks.”
Turkish-German cinema has evolved to reflect these various perceptions and self-understandings. According to Rob Burns, a “cinema of the affected” grew out of efforts beginning in the 1980s to promote migrant literature, encouraging minorities to write in German about their experiences, with the ultimate goal of “building bridges” between cultures (4). In order to receive funding from public broadcasting and regional film boards, minority filmmakers were also expected to make films about ‘their people’; most readily financed were those concerning the problems Turkish residents faced assimilating to German society (Goktürk, German Fright 182). In Tevfik Baser's 40m2 Deutschland (1986), for example, a man locks his Turkish bride in his apartment as soon as she arrives in Germany, and she is only able to escape when he suddenly dies. In another Baser film, Abschied vom falschen Paradies (Farewell to a False Paradise, 1988), a woman jailed for killing her husband ironically finds a certain freedom in prison, where she has developed ties with the other German inmates. Fearful of reprisals from her family upon her release, she is finally able to leave when she transforms herself into a man by cutting her hair and putting on men’s clothing (Naficy 193). Though films such as these have exposed problems faced by Turkish women in both societies, some critics have objected to the predominance of this kind of “miserablist” portrayal, reinforced by the ‘sympathetic’ depictions of the travails of Turks by non-minority German filmmakers. In Ganz Unten (Gfrörer 1986), a documentary about a German who goes undercover as a Gastarbeiter, and Yasemin (Bohm 1988), which tells the story of a Turkish-German girl who is ‘rescued’ from her patriarchal family by a German boy, Turks are depicted as “intrinsically downtrodden” and impossibly imprisoned by
their archaic beliefs (Burns 5). As Göktürk remarks, rather than fostering transcultural understanding, these films reconfirm the superiority of German culture (ref. in Burns 7).

The growing opposition to the dominant discourse of binarism, along with German unification and changes in the film industry during the 1990s helped contribute to a movement away from these kind of cinematic representations. First, Senoçak’s hope that unification might bring about a more open attitude towards the acceptance of immigrant groups in Germany is expressed in films such as Berlin in Berlin (Çetin 1993) and Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh (Kutlucan 1998), in which the post-unification reconstruction of Berlin’s Mitte, like that of 1920s Alexanderplatz in Döblin’s novel, provides a backdrop for narratives of social change. In the first, a German engineer working at a construction site falls in love with a Turkish girl, whose brother he accidentally kills in a confrontation over the German’s attentions to her. Fleeing her angry brother-in-law, the engineer seeks refuge in the girl’s apartment, where her grandmother provides him sanctuary according to the Muslim code of hospitality. The ironic role reversal of the German as “asylum-seeker,” a “foreigner” in his own country, draws attention to the city as a “displaced space” undergoing redefinition in the film’s background (Fenner 137). In the second, an Armenian refugee seeks work at a building site on Potsdamer Platz, the prospective home of the new German government. As a place where “territorial rights are being negotiated” between old and new immigrants (Göktürk, “Role Play” 114), the site reflects the film’s focus on hierarchies not only between Germans and Turks but also between different groups of immigrants. The attitude of the film, however, rather
than miserablist is satirical, mocking the discourse of multicultural differentiation (112), most comically by a shot in which the cap of a praying Muslim is conflated with the new ‘hat’ of the Reichstag building’s cupola (115). The role-reversals and self-mocking spirit of these comedies, against the background of a Germany in the process of reconstruction, were joined by films such as Akin’s *Im Juli* (2000) that made room for what Göktürk calls the “pleasures of hybridity” (“German Fright” 178). This film, in which a German schoolteacher follows a young Turkish woman to Istanbul, plays self-consciously with orientalist notions of the exotic East, reversing the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman by empowering her with the freedom and mobility she lacks in the “cinema of the affected.”

Such developments cannot be seen outside the context of the vast changes in the film industry that have taken place since 1989. Just as the nation-state was constructed through the spread of print culture, Randall Halle argues, transnationalism is being defined by the audio-visual media, which is redrawing the “ideational borders” of the nation-state through new production, distribution and screening policies. For example, in Germany the move away from state-subsidized filmmaking and toward the production of cinema for entertainment and profit has deepened its transnational connections (*German Film After Germany* 6-7), affecting the film product itself and, as I have discussed in the introduction, contributing to a commodification of the nation. This development has resulted in a Hegelian “Aufhebung,” in which the local and the communal are conserved, not destroyed, by cinematic representations that have lifted them into the transnational arena and simply resignified them within this new context (20). The “Aufhebung” has affected
both migrant and mainstream German productions, prompting Halle to contend that the term “transnational” should not be reserved uniquely for migrant or “marginal” cinemas, which implies that European national cultures are organic wholes while Europe’s others are in-between (8), but should be recognized as applying to all cinema that has been impacted by transnational politics and institutions, as well as the global marketplace (5-6).

With regard to German-Turkish cinema, this has meant that the “self-othering” that Elsaesser discusses in reference to European national cinema (see Ch. 1), has also affected productions by minorities who, in an effort to reach a wider audience, cloak the communal in stories with universal themes. This kind of self-othering can be seen in Arslan’s Dealer (1999) and Akin’s Kurz und Schmerzlos (1998), both of which represent Turks and other German minorities as gangsters and criminals. The latter film was clearly influenced by Akin’s admiration for Scorcese and Coppola, and is indicative of Akin’s sense of connection to ethnic American filmmakers (Gemünden, “Hollywood in Altona” 186) and his desire to develop an aesthetic with international appeal. However more recently, especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Turkish-German filmmakers have been moving away from such self-representations. Attempting to counterbalance media images of the patriarchal and/or criminal Muslim male who threatens the values of liberal democracy, these directors have instead begun making films featuring “enlightened” Turks whose ethnic background is not the main focus. Ayse Polat’s Tour Abroad, for example, centers on a male Turkish drag artist, left in charge of an abandoned young girl, who proves to be a better caretaker than the girl’s biological parents (Berghahn,
“Greengrocer” 62). Akin’s later films, especially *Gegen die Wand* and *Auf der anderen Seite*, have also challenged such stereotypes, depicting Turkish men who are atheistic ‘bums,’ devoted, non-traditional fathers and university *Germanistik* professors.

When Akin’s film *Gegen die Wand* was released in 2004 and became the first German film in 18 years to win the Golden Bear at the Berlinale, it was widely perceived as marking a new milestone in Turkish-German cinema. The prize was the most internationally prestigious ever to have been won by a Turkish-German director, and it altered not only the self-perception of Turks in Germany but also the attitude of many non-minority Germans towards their fellow citizens. As Jörg Lau wrote in February of that year for *Die Zeit*, never had the image of Turks in Germany changed so much so quickly; in a matter of several weeks, there had been more forward movement than in decades of debates and intervention programs (227). It represents, in many ways, the coming of age of “die dritte Ethnie,” the young members of German minority groups that are beginning, as Akin insists they must, to “endlich lernen, sich selbst als Deutsche zu fühlen” (qtd. in Lau 228).56 According to Naficy, “ethnic and identity” directors like Akin often attempt to express themselves as a kind of “third term,” combining their identities as both “foreigners” and “natives” to create something entirely new (like Scorcese’s concept of the ITALIANAMERICAN; 16). While Akin’s film also participates in this project, its critical reception and the media attention it has generated have inspired hope that it and his other work will help to redefine not only the meaning of ‘Turkish-German’

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56 “‘To finally learn how to feel German’.
but of ‘German’ as well. As Huyssen maintains, the post-unification turn of even many German liberals away from Habermas’ constitutional patriotism is not surprising, since people have a basic need to identify with a nation that a “cosmopolitan” European identity cannot fulfill. Calling for a nation that is more open yet not “neutral and color blind,” he hopes that minorities can be integrated into a concept of national identity that includes the “cultural properties, traditions, memories and languages” of many different groups (qtd. in Cheesman, “S/ß” 48). This optimistic approach, however, has its skeptics, like Senocak and Tom Cheesman, who writes that “sympathetic calls for integration, like Huyssen’s, cannot surmount the invisible barriers that are already in place in loaded terminology” (like Schmidt’s comments) “concerning the imagined difference between Western and non-Western cultures” (Cheesman 49). It is exactly these “invisible barriers” that *Gegen die Wand*, along with the next feature in Akin’s trilogy, *Auf der anderen Seite*, attempt to penetrate.

II. *Gegen die Wand* and *Auf der anderen Seite* as “Transnational Myth”

The commercial success of *Gegen die Wand*, with 780,000 spectators in Germany alone, can in part be attributed to Akin’s effective use of the melodramatic form combined with a youth-oriented, MTV aesthetic and a compelling narrative. In the story, told in a series of chapters with musical interludes by the traditional ‘Turkish’ band (actually a Roma band led by the well-known clarinetist Selim Sesler), the sham marriage of Çahit and Sibel develops into a passionate yet
destructive love, known in Turkish culture as *kara sevda*, or ‘dark passion.’

Originally referring to a dark fluid produced by the body when one is sick, the term has come to signify an “overwhelming condition experienced almost like an incurable illness, from which the ‘victim’ can never recover and through which s/he will be forever transformed” (Suner 20).

Çahit (Birol Ünel) and Sibel (Sibel Kekilli) first meet in a psychiatric hospital where they are both committed for suicide attempts. Çahit, in despair over the loss of his first wife,\(^\text{57}\) has driven his car into a wall (inspiring the German title of the film) and Sibel has sliced her wrists in a final effort to free herself from the restrictions her family has placed on her. After she convinces Çahit to marry her, Sibel is able to go to bars and clubs, and to sleep with a variety of men. However, against her will she begins to fall in love with Çahit and he with her, but she refuses to sleep with him, claiming that if she does they will truly be married. When he kills one of Sibel’s former German lovers for insulting her, Çahit is sent to prison and Sibel must flee to Istanbul to escape her vengeful brother (Cem Akin). There she follows the self-destructive path originally taken by Çahit, drinking and using drugs in a fury of self-hatred, until she is raped and almost killed before being rescued by a taxi driver. When Çahit is released from prison he tries to find her in Istanbul, but she is in a relationship with the man who rescued her and has a young daughter. Nevertheless she agrees to meet him when her partner is away, and they are finally able to consummate their love; despite Çahit’s pleas to join him on his journey to his

\(^{57}\) Though this is never made explicit in the film, his violent response to Sibel’s interest in her, as well as his admission in the original screenplay that he feels responsible for her death, suggest that this may be reason (*Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film* 176).
birthplace, however, she remains in Istanbul with her new family.

Auf der anderen Seite, the second segment in Akin’s planned trilogy with the themes “love,” “death” and “evil,” is also organized into segments, each with an intertitle: “Yeters Tod,” “Lottes Tod” and “Auf der anderen Seite.” In this film Akin continues his exploration of sin and redemption, yet his focus this time is on death. The film opens with a wide-angle shot of an old, non-descript building. The camera pans slowly across to a gas station with a convenience store as a car drives up, and from the distance we see a man emerge from the car where he is greeted with the words “Happy Bayram”\textsuperscript{58} in Turkish, by the attendant. As the man enters the store the camera changes position, and is situated inside, following the man as he enters and orders a sandwich. He asks the owner about the music playing in the background, and the owner tells him the singer was well known in the area but recently died of cancer, though he was “young, like you.” The man pays and leaves the store, and the scene ends as he is filmed from inside the car, driving through tunnels.

The words “Yeters Tod” appear on a black screen to begin the narrative, which starts with a May Day parade in Bremen. With a lively backdrop of drums and red placards, an elderly Turkish man visits the red light district, and is drawn to a Turkish prostitute, Yeter (Nursel Köse), whom he later asks to live with him and his son Nejat (Baki Davrak), a German professor at the university. When the man, Ali (Tuncel Kurtiz), has a heart attack Yeter and Nejat try to nurse him back to

\textsuperscript{58} The term “Bayram” in Turkish applies to all holidays, religious and secular (similar to the word “holiday” in English). The holiday celebrated on this day, as we discover later, is Eid al-Adha, commemorating God’s willingness to allow Abraham to sacrifice a ram in the place of his son.
health, but after drinking heavily Ali strikes Yeter and kills her, and Nejat, disowning his father, travels to Turkey to try to find Yeter’s daughter Ayten (Nurgül Yesilçay). The second segment, which opens with the words “Lottes Tod,” also begins with a May 1st demonstration, this time on the streets of Istanbul. A woman who was involved in the demonstration takes a gun dropped by one of her comrades and is chased by police, but escapes after hiding the gun. Fleeing to Germany she attempts to locate her mother, Yeter from the first segment, but is unsuccessful. A university student named Lotte (Patrycia Ziolkowska) befriends Ayten and invites the girl, whom she knows as “Gül,” to stay in her home, where she fights with Lotte’s mother, Susanne (Hanna Schygulla). When Ayten is arrested and deported to Turkey, Lotte follows in an attempt to help free her from prison, and when her mother refuses to send her money ends up living with Nejat, whom she meets in the German bookstore he has purchased. Though they are looking for the same person, they never realize it; Lotte only knows Ayten as “Gül.” During a prison visit Ayten asks Lotte to get the gun, and in a tragic accident Lotte is killed. Grief stricken, Lotte’s mother Susanne travels to Turkey to find Ayten, and as she passes through the ticket counter she crosses paths with Ali, now released from prison, who has been deported to Turkey. In Istanbul Susanne meets Nejat and asks to rent the room her daughter stayed in. After visiting Ayten in prison and promising to help her, she discusses the Muslim holiday Eid al-Adhar with Nejat. Relating to her the story of Abraham and Isaac, which is the basis for the holiday, Nejat remembers his father’s devotion to him and decides to visit him in his hometown of Trabzon. At the end of the film the scene from the beginning is replayed, reinserted into its ‘correct’ place.
in the narrative, and Nejat continues on to Trabzon, where he learns that his father is out fishing but is expected to return soon, since the waters have become choppy. The film leaves him on the shore of the Black Sea, gazing out at the wide expanse of ocean and awaiting his father’s return.

Taken in conjunction, the titles of the two films, in English “against the wall” and “on the other side,” draw attention to their preoccupation with the confrontation and transgression of boundaries and borders of all kinds. The thrust of Akin’s project, a three-part engagement with the themes of love, death and evil, brings his stories into the realm of myth, but the multiplicity of meanings suggested by the two titles make it unclear what kind of myth Akin’s narratives offer. From one perspective, the first title inserts the film into the discourse of German national identity, conjuring up debates over the “Mauer im Kopf” and the corresponding ‘wall’ between Germans and Muslims, while the second holds out the possibility that this wall can be surmounted, that there may be an alternative to the idea of the German nation as presently understood. At the same time, Akin’s stories, in many ways, transcend nation, and in this sense might be seen as the kind of Aufhebung to which Halle refers, where national stories are resolved “not within the filiative national community but through the affiliative potential of the world community,” helping to construct “transnational myths” for a new Europe (“German Film, European Film” 259). In Akin’s films national borders are interrogated through both formal and narrative strategies, as well as through the construction of liminal characters whose transgressions and punishments, sacrifices and redemptions allow a “transnational myth” to be imagined, in which cross-border connections
form the basis for a new kind of national community.

The interrogation of national borders in *Gegen die Wand* occurs on a formal level through its use of both music and space to disrupt the integrity of the separation between Germany and Turkey and to question the perception of each as an intact, inviolable whole with an ‘essential’ identity. The film’s soundtrack, which Polona Petek refers to as its “principle mode of social critique, self-interrogation and, indeed, multicultural mobilization” (182), uses music to collapse these borders in a way that complements the breaking down of the emotional boundaries between the two main characters. At the beginning of the film, the Turkish and Western music each correspond to their accompanying visual images, the music of Sesler’s band alternating with the ‘80s punk tunes highlighted in the early Hamburg scenes. As the film progresses, however, and the two protagonists become closer, a gradual melding occurs; the clubs Sibel and Çahit frequent, for example, feature music that combines techno beats with “oriental” tunes, and the song playing in the background as the two finally admit their love is “Temple of Love,” a re-recording of a 1983 hit by the English band The Sisters of Mercy that features an Israeli vocalist (Petek 182-183). When Sibel flees to Istanbul, the same Depeche Mode song that accompanied Çahit’s suicide attempt marks the peak moment of her self-destruction and despair, tying together the two locales, Hamburg and Istanbul, through the characters’ emotional states. After the two separate in Turkey, however, the soundtrack returns entirely to “Eastern” sounds, apparently staging the failure of multiculturalism and reflecting the inability of the protagonists to find a home in Germany. However, Petek argues that during the moments in Germany and Turkey
when they “negotiate their identities,” the film offers “musical taste as the axis along which new forms of multicultural bonding [can emerge – K.S.], free of the burden of ethnic ‘heritage’” (184).

In addition, the references in the film to Roma culture and music complicate the notion of a clear dividing line between East and West, ‘Turkish’ and ‘German.’ As Göktürk points out, most social analysis is focused on helping immigrants assimilate into the parameters of the nation-state, seen as composed of “indigenous” people with organic ties to the land. However the Roma fall outside this definition; because they are an itinerant population, they “rarely figure in the nation-bound rhetoric about immigration, integration and multiculturalism” (“Sound Bridges” 166). By having Sesler and his band perform for an international film audience, many of whom are uninformed about Turkish culture, Akin subverts and ironizes his staging of ‘Turkishness.’ Besides the Roma band, the film includes another reference to Roma culture in one of its pivotal moments. After Çahit murders Nico (Stefan Gebelhoff), Sibel comes home and places a CD in her player, an act that is filmed in a deliberately slow sequence of shots, with a close-up of the CD’s title “Agir Roman.” The music that comes on, loudly, as she proceeds to the bathroom to slice her wrists is the song “Agla Sevdam” (“Cry My Love”), from the film Agir Roman (1997), a cult hit in Istanbul about the love of two gypsies from the neighborhood of Beyoglu where Sibel is later stabbed (“Sound Bridges” 161-162). Akin’s desire to feature this song so prominently is a clear comment on both the tragic nature of his narrative and the lives of his protagonists, who, like the Roma, in their border-crossings defy efforts to define and delimit them.
The sudden cuts between scenes of Sesler’s band playing on the Bosporus and film’s narrative provide a visual complement to Akin’s use of music to collapse borders. While the story takes place over the course of four years or more, judging by the movement of the sun the six segments of the band’s performance together constitute one day’s time (“Sound Bridges” 157). As a spectacle that disrupts and displaces the narrative, this performance allows the viewer to imaginatively travel back and forth from Germany to Turkey, and as a kind of Greek chorus it functions as a “bridge” between the viewer and the narrative.59 In addition, the band’s interruptions are reminiscent of 18th century French melodrama, originally defined as a romantic and sensational play interspersed with songs, in which the action is accompanied by music appropriate to various situations (155). The same interruptions, however, are also characteristic of Indian cinema, where the drama is disrupted by song and dance (159), and Akin credits these films with having influenced the style of Gegen die Wand (“’Heimat ist ein mentaler Zustand’” 36). This melding of European and Eastern forms that at the same time are not specifically German or Turkish further broadens the reach of the film, adding to its subversion of the conventional understanding of diasporic positioning as being “between” two cultures.

Another strategy Akin uses to transgress and subvert national borders in the film is the insertion of a place that functions as Thirdspace, part of neither Germany

59 In a similar way, the city of Istanbul is represented as a “bridge” between Europe and the East in Akin’s follow-up film, Crossing the Bridge: The Music of Istanbul (2005). Akin, however, undermines the discourse of “betweenness” by emphasizing the multiplicity of influences on the musical styles he investigates.
nor Turkey. When Çahit travels to Istanbul to find Sibel, the taxi driver, a Turk from Munich, recommends a cheap but “haunted” place to stay, the Grand Hotel London, an old 19th century European-style building. During his first night Çahit dreams of his car crash in reverse, and is awakened by a phone call from Sibel promising to come soon. The next day he sits down at the piano in an empty drawing room decorated with heavy drapes and furniture reminiscent of Britain’s colonial past, and begins to play a song by the band Talk Talk, “Life’s What You Make It,” that carries over into a montage of his activities over the next several days. When Sibel finally arrives they spend the next two days making love, and afterwards plan to meet at the bus station the next day and travel together to Mersin, Çahit’s birthplace. At the end of the visit, Sibel showers, washing her body with soap and water as Çahit watches, and leaves.

In this segment, the Grand Hotel London is removed from place and time both formally and narratively, and through it Akin creates a space for the couple’s ill-fated love to be consummated. As a ‘foreign’ space, haunted by the past, it is neither the modern Germany where the characters are from, nor is it integrated into the fabric of Istanbul; in fact, in every scene there, Çahit and Sibel appear to be the only guests.60 Not German, Turkish nor hybrid, it is different from other formal strategies in the film that work towards the collapsing of borders between the two cultures, like the soundtrack and the integration of the band sequences into the body of the film. At the same time, through its evocation of the British Empire,

60 This is a departure from the original screenplay, in which Sibel passes a film crew working on a historical soap about a pair of lovers meeting after a long separation (Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film 174).
which erased and redefined national and cultural borders, and by its quality as a foreign, ghostly place inserted into the space of Istanbul and constructed as the only place Sibel and Çahit can be together, it confirms the permeability and mutability of borders of all kinds, both temporal and spatial, and signifies the ability of love, especially kara sevda, to transgress these boundaries. However, in the end the borders of Thirdspace itself prove to be insuperable; Çahit and Sibel’s love cannot exist outside it, as Çahit, watching Sibel wash herself clean of her “dark passion,” understands.

In the next part of his trilogy, Auf der anderen Seite, Akin goes further in his destabilization of national borders first by structuring his film as a ‘diasporic’ text (in other words, with a conventional binary relationship between ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries), and then complicating it through parallel narratives that include non-minority German and Kurdish characters. First, as in Gegen die Wand, the opening scene is disconnected from the main narrative; from one place/time setting, an unknown town near the Black Sea in Turkey, the story suddenly shifts to another, a parade in Bremen. The exclusion of the first scene from the main body of the narrative is made clear by the chapter heading in between, “Yeters Tod”; yet the viewer expects that some time later in the film the connection will become apparent. This has the effect of both uniting distant places and motivating viewers to search for the German-Turkish connection that the juxtaposition of the first two scenes promises. In addition, the expectation that the scene will eventually be inserted into its proper place leaves the spectator with the understanding that the action will move to Turkey at some point in the film, setting up a circular structure that
becomes even more clear upon subsequent viewings. Before the opening credits there is the sound of waves crashing, the same diegetic sound that ends the film.

From one perspective, this circular structure and the displaced scene allows the film to be understood as a conventional diasporic text, in which the ‘there’ of the homeland is clearly separated both temporally and spatially from the ‘here’ of the host country, and Akin creates a desire in the spectator for the film’s ‘return’ to this scene that mimics diasporic longing. In addition, the scene itself features a discussion between Nejat, whom we will recognize later as the son of a Turkish immigrant in Bremen, and the gas station owner about a local song playing on the radio; as Naficy maintains, auditory and gustatory reminders of the homeland are an important element in accented film (28). The fact that the artist has died intensifies the nostalgic tone of the scene. As later becomes clear, the scene is also part of the journey of Nejat to his father’s birthplace on the Black Sea, a journey that structures the entire film; not only does it begin the story, but at the end of the first chapter there is a brief cut to several shots of Nejat driving through the Turkish countryside before the second narrative, “Lottes Tod,” begins, and the story culminates in Nejat’s arrival in the Black Sea village.

However, these characteristics are subverted by several factors. We are not sure, first of all, when the scene at the garage takes place, in the past or the future of the main narrative. This temporal confusion is at odds with most accented film, in which the chronotope of homeland, a ‘there and then,’ is contrasted with the ‘here and now’ of the host country.61 Also Nejat seems at best disconnected from the

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61 As Naficy points out, in accented film the chronotope of homeland tends to be
place and the owner’s story; instead of appearing moved or saddened by the singer’s
death he is distracted, looking through items in the store. In short, he doesn’t seem
to have much emotional investment in the homeland, probably the most important
defining factor in accented film. Most significantly, however, the binary relationship
between homeland and host country (in most diasporic texts, extended as well to
other communities in the diaspora), is complicated by the introduction of a parallel
narrative in the second part of the film in which the Turkish-Germans are joined in
their journeys and border crossings by characters not fully accepted as part of the
diaspora, and even by non-minority Germans.

The first chapter in the film, “Yeters Tod,” is an immigrant story; as in
Turkish-German cinema of an earlier era, the focus is on the first and second
generations, their successes and their problems. Ali, his son Nejat who has become
integrated into German society, and Yeter, another immigrant struggling to survive
in an unwelcoming environment, come together in an unusual family arrangement.
When Ali kills Yeter the nascent family is destroyed, and the chapter ends with
Nejat’s rejection of his father. The second chapter, “Lottes Tod,” returns to the May
1st date that began the first, information available only to viewers familiar with the
background of the yearly demonstration in Istanbul. The two events are tied
together visually through the predomination of the color red and the flags and
banners that mark the occasions. Ayten’s opposition to the pro-government
demonstrations makes it clear, again only to those with background information,

“uncontaminated by contemporary facts,” expressed by the predominance of images
of landscapes and monuments, while the presentation of life in the host country is
more focused on the present (152).
that she is a Kurd fighting for a separatist organization. When she flees to Germany, meets Lotte, and begins to search for Yeter, her mother, the fairly simple story of ‘Turkish-German’ immigrants becomes complicated, and the typical diasporic narrative, driven by the binary relationship between homeland and host country, is broadened not only by Yeter’s identity as part of an oppressed minority in Turkey, but also by the love that develops between Ayten and Lotte, implicating Lotte in Ayten’s border crossings.

The second segment, begun with a depiction of the friction between Turks and Kurds, is characterized by a continuation of the deterioration of family ties that marked the end of the first. Not only is Ayten unable to locate her mother, but Lotte also leaves hers and is killed, breaking up the two girls, who have become a couple. It is as if Nejat’s rejection of his father, which ended the first chapter, has somehow been the cause of the tragic events of the second, a conclusion that does not make sense in the temporal scheme of the story as a whole (the rejection occurs after Yeter has been killed, and in the second chapter she is shown riding on a bus, still very much alive) but does work in the context of Akin’s retelling. Akin’s reorganization of the story emphasizes the significance of such a rejection, connecting it to similar refusals to recognize as family those the nation perceives as other, from the Kurds in Turkey to the Turks in Germany and even, on a personal level, two female lovers. In the final chapter, “Auf der anderen Seite”, reconciliations and the replacement of family ties are enabled by the completion of Nejat’s journey back to his father, a quest that has structured the film and tied together the three parts. After the displaced sequence from the beginning is reinserted into its proper
place, the two narrative strands finally come together, with Susanne inviting her new ‘daughter’ Ayten to live with her and Nejat, who will finally (presumably) recognize her for Yeter’s daughter. Thus the intact family, all (seemingly, since it is not at first clear that Yeter is a Kurd) Turks and Turkish-Germans living in Bremen, will apparently be replaced, in Istanbul, with a new ‘family’ of Turks, Turkish-Germans, Kurds and Germans. The problem, of course, is that this does not happen within the space of the film, and the lack of resolution at the end, extending into and beyond the closing credits and even into the opening credits (if the film is viewed two times in sequence), leaves a gap in the story with some interesting implications.

In the same way that he complicates the conventional understanding of a border as a dividing line between two homogeneous entities by insisting on the heterogeneity of each space, Akin also de-emphasizes the differences between Germany and Turkey by associating border crossings between the two countries with metaphysical crossings, and by underlining their similarities through the parallel structure of the film. First, each passage across national borders is initiated by death: Ayten crosses over to Germany after being involved in an incident in which a man was beaten apparently to death at the May 1st demonstration, then is deported back to Turkey and Lotte comes to help her; both Nejat and Ali come to Turkey as a result of Yeter’s murder; and Susanne travels to Istanbul following Lotte’s death. The differences between the two places are made to seem insignificant - it is death that ties them together, a point Akin powerfully underlines with the dual shots of Yeter and Lotte’s coffins on the airport runway.\footnote{Another example of the way Akin plays with temporality. Though the coffins are}
reinforced by the film’s structure, beginning with the May 1st demonstrations. Not only are they visually very similar, as previously mentioned, but Akin’s depiction of the Istanbul march, filmed from an aerial perspective, is reminiscent of Riefenstahl’s approach to the Nazi rally in Nuremberg. By drawing attention to the similarities between the two demonstrations and eliding their differences (the Bremen march, as a May Day celebration, could, if anything, be seen as anti-nationalistic), Akin unites the two places.

In addition, as he does in Gegen die Wand Akin creates a kind of Thirdspace where the line between self and other becomes blurred. However, whereas the Thirdspace in his previous film, the Grand Hotel London, evokes a time and place far removed from both countries, the space he creates in this film, a German bookstore in the heart of Istanbul, is both Germany and Turkey combined. Originally owned by a German ex-patriot, the bookstore, with its German literature and çay, is purchased by Nejat once he decides to move to Istanbul. As the previous owner remarks, it is the perfect place for Nejat, a “türkische Germanistik Professor” in Istanbul. It is also the place that allows the meeting between Lotte and Nejat to occur, enabling the coming-together of the disparate members of the ‘family’ formed at the end of the film. And in the same way that this family destabilizes the diasporic relationship between homeland and host country, the German bookstore with its Turkish-German professor owner ‘pollutes’ the discourse of Leitkultur represented by the literary canon nestled within its walls. By creating this space and making it an transported at different times, they are made to appear to pass each other by the way Akin uses the same shot to depict each event, but in reverse.  

63 This reading is supported by Akin’s comments on the fascistic undertones of Turkish nationalism (Jaafar n.pag).
essential component of his transnational story about death and redemption, Akin emphasizes the power of the written word to transcend death and underlines the importance of re-writing the German national myth.

In many myths, liminal characters play a pivotal role in the negotiation of boundaries both universal and historical. Akin’s imagining of a new transnational mythology involves such characters, which help to interrogate the borders by which nations and ethnicities are defined. In both Gegen die Wand and Auf der anderen Seite Akin begins the process of contesting these boundaries through his choice of actors. He notes, for example, that the very non-traditional Turkish-German actor Birol Ünel inspired the character of Çahit (“Heimat ist ein mentaler Zustand” 35), and further remarks that Sibel Kekilli, who plays Sibel in the film, was one of the few actresses of Turkish descent willing to appear nude in front of the camera (36). In addition, as many observers have pointed out (Jaafar; Elsaesser “Ethical Calculus”), Akin’s selection of the iconic actress Hanna Schygulla, Fassbinder’s muse, and the Turkish actor Tencel Kurtiz, whom one critic calls “almost a national monument” (Elly 25), in Auf der anderen Seite is an obvious effort to collapse the boundaries between German and Turkish cinema.

Not only do many of the characters in the films break stereotypes, but also, like the characters in Wenders’ Himmel, Petzold’s Ghost Trilogy and Dresen’s Nachtgestalten, they are ‘borderline,’ some even abject in Kristeva’s sense of the

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64 Claude Levi-Strauss proposed this idea in his study of liminal figures in mythology, described in Structural Anthropology (1963; 207-230)
65 There was a media uproar over revelations that Kekilli was formerly featured in porno films, news that resulted in a falling-out between the actress and her family (Jennings 29 [note]).
term. The two protagonists in *Gegen die Wand* who cannot be absorbed by either the German or the immigrant Turkish social order are joined by other liminal characters in *Auf der anderen Seite*. Nejat, for example, is not only a Turkish professor of German, but has also been described by Akin as androgynous, representative of Akin’s “feminine” side (“Heimat ist ein mentaler Zustand”’ 29) through the almost maternal manner in which he cares for those around him. Yeter and Ayten are Kurds, their liminal status defined by the Turkish state, which doesn’t afford them full political and social equality. The ambiguous position of Ayten and Yeter is reinforced by Ayten’s involvement in a Kurdish separatist group, and by Yeter’s job as a prostitute, an abomination in the Muslim religion. And though Ali and Susanne are more stereotypically Turkish and German, the tendency to read them simplistically is complicated by the border-crossings suggested by the actors playing them.

In *Gegen die Wand*, the protagonists, like many mythical characters are subject to forces that both transcend their historical situation and provide a commentary on the social order under which they live. Çahit and Sibel each represent the opposing life and death drives that threaten the integrity of the social body, and that society must control in order to survive. At the same time, they violate the definition of ‘proper’ Turkishness as understood by contemporary German society as well as the migrant Turkish community within Germany. Çahit’s tendency toward self-destruction, the result of an unnatural and melancholy attachment to his dead wife, is complemented by a propensity for violence against

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66 Freud outlines this argument in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930).
others and against the laws of the state; in his intoxicated state, for example, he crashes into other cars and into parking meters, then beats up a man in the bar who has insulted him. His refusal to behave like a ‘proper’ Turk is exemplified not only by his lifestyle and his appearance but also by his sneering disregard for other “Kanaken,” his poor Turkish, and his contestation of Turkish traditions, particularly those involving male-female relationships. In addition, his first wife was not Turkish but German; although this fact is not remarked upon in the film, it serves to confirm Çahit’s alienation from the traditions of the community. Sibel, in turn, is beset by a narcissistic desire that, as Freud famously argued, threatens the survival of human society. It is also strictly prohibited, especially for women, by the traditional migrant Turkish community she lives in. Unable to live with their dangerous passions they attempt to commit suicide, and it is their failure to succeed that motivates them to find a way instead to evade society’s strictures.

As Kristeva points out, abjection is most apparent in the “sinister, scheming, and shady” (4), challenges to the Symbolic that, rather than flaunt their opposition, attempt to undermine it by sneakily violating its laws. Through their sham marriage, Sibel and Çahit attempt to save themselves by a false demonstration of acquiescence to the social order, Sibel so that she can escape her family yet still be accepted by them, and Çahit apparently in an effort to relieve his guilt and self-hatred. In the process of their role-playing, the couple’s transgressions are enacted on several levels, the irony often reinforced by the filmmaker. When Çahit proposes

67 In the most memorable of these incidents, Çahit almost comes to blows with his male in-laws over his suggestion that instead of visiting prostitutes, they “fuck” their wives.
to Sibel, for example, in a comical scene where his friend Seref (Güven Kiraç) pretends to be his uncle, he kisses his father-in-law's hand, which is followed by an abrupt cut to a close-up of his nude body on a filthy couch where he is shown sleeping off the effects of a night out. At the wedding, they are sent into a private room to eat the traditional meal and instead spend the time snorting cocaine, an offense that confirms their ‘uncleanliness’.68 Finally, when Çahit throws Sibel out of their apartment on their wedding night, it is in her white dress that she commits her first act of ‘adultery.’ However, like the tragic figures of Greek mythology Çahit and Sibel do not go unpunished for these transgressions. Their sham marriage amounts to a defilement of the sacred, and they are consequently afflicted with kara sevda. When Çahit’s passion for Sibel causes him to kill Nico, both are removed from German society, yet through their mutual exile and punishment (in Sibel’s case, self-punishment) they are redeemed for their ‘sins,’ cleansed of their ‘dark passion’ and reincorporated into society.

The mythical aspects of Akin’s film, including his use of a Greek chorus and his tale of lovers tragically afflicted by passions and forces beyond their control, ostensibly disconnect it from the historical time and place of its setting. In myth, characters’ liminal qualities allow the negotiation of universal boundaries, such as those between man and God, human and animal, the sacred and the profane. In Akin’s film, Çahit and Sibel’s abjection forces them to negotiate between their desire to give way to their passions and their need to find a place in society. By creating a story that transcends nation, Akin moves away from specific issues of national

68 In the Qu’ran, proper food is connected to moral cleanliness; especially forbidden are any form of intoxicants (5:90-91)
identity and belonging. Yet the specific quality of the characters’ liminality is still determined by their historical situation, as they push against the boundaries of what is ‘properly’ Turkish and German. This combination of the universal and the historical comes together most clearly through the characters’ choice to move east, to the homeland of their parents, and Akin’s story begins to take on the contours of a transnational myth.

The transformation of Çahit and Sibel necessitates the crossing of borders. Maha El Hissy, following Victor Turner, describes how the couple proceeds through a transitional phase that begins in Hamburg and ends in Istanbul, a gradual movement toward self-discovery culminating in their final acceptance of a new place in society. Throughout the phase, according to El Hissy, they become slowly more and more Turkish, cooking traditional meals, listening to Turkish music, and ultimately thinking of themselves as a Turkish couple, inadvertently preparing for their movement away from Germany (174). This analysis, however, unintentionally highlights the differences between Sibel and Çahit’s journey and the transitions discussed by Turner. While the liminars he studied were reincorporated into their society of origin, Akin’s protagonists are not. Their evolution is not actualized within the Turkish-German migrant community where they are from, but in Turkey, and the Turkishness they began to adopt in Hamburg is discredited through the tragic events that culminate in their expulsion.

The necessity for the couple to move east (and out of Germany) in order to complete their transformation and reintegration into society on their own terms suggests several things. First, it reinforces the universality of the story established
by the formal and narrative qualities discussed previously, with the narrative beginning in one place and ending in another. Second, it establishes Istanbul, a city characterized by its history as a “crossroads” between east and west, as a place where such transformations are possible, where its Turkish-German protagonists feel empowered. Finally, while the film’s celebration of the potential inherent in crossing and in some ways dissolving borders may mark the beginnings of a transnational mythology that can contribute to a re-imagination of German identity, however, in the end it seems to fall short. As a story about Turkish-Germans who must leave Germany in order to find a way to live “thirdly,” it can be seen as an expression of the need for second and third generation members of the diaspora to find their supposed roots rather than a call for all Germans (and Europeans) to incorporate into their own identity the cross-cultural experiences of “die dritte Ethnie.” In other words, despite all of the qualities of the film that work to break down the borders between the two countries and to question the categories of “Turkish” and “German,” it excludes non-immigrant Germans from its cross-border journeys of redemption.

The second film in Akin’s trilogy might be seen as an attempt to rectify this. Like Gegen die Wand, this story also involves sin and redemption, yet the ‘sacrifice of innocents,’ vaguely suggested in the first film, as a means to enable the transnational myth becomes more central. In Gegen die Wand Nico, a young German

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69 Istanbul is largely depicted as a light, airy space, with the characters overlooking the city from balconies and apartment and hotel windows. In Hamburg, on the other hand, Akin focuses on dingy apartments and bars, and never provides an open or panoramic view of the city. This aspect of the film ties it to Naficy’s description of accented film, in which the host country is characterized by closed, claustrophobic spaces and the homeland by more open landscapes (153).
bartender friendly with the couple, has fallen for Sibel after they spend a night together, but she abruptly dismisses him, insisting upon her sexual and emotional freedom. Though he later provokes Çahit’s attack, it is clear Nico doesn’t deserve to be killed; while not entirely innocent he is depicted as a generally good and likable character. It is this murder for which the couple must atone and that sets them on their border-crossing journeys of redemption. In Auf der anderen Seite, the sacrifice of innocents is highlighted and thematized, their deaths substituting for the death of the guilty, and the search for atonement motivates much of the cross-border travel in the film. In this story, however, both sin and redemption extend outside the Turkish-German community of the first film, deepening the story’s mythical impact.

As he does with Gegen die Wand, Akin constructs the story as myth to emphasize its universality as well as its historical particularity. He begins by using as a basis for the narrative the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, the reason for the holiday of Eid al-Adha referenced in the first scene. In the book of Genesis, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son, but at the last moment stays his hand and provides him with a ram to sacrifice instead. Because Abraham has proven himself willing, God promises “…in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (The Hebrew Bible in English, Gen. 22: 18). Significantly, the story of Abraham and Isaac is central to Jewish, Christian and Muslim beliefs; for Christians, it prefigures God’s willingness to sacrifice Christ as a substitute for a sinful humanity, while Muslims emphasize God’s generosity in providing a substitute for Isaac (Stone 58). In the first two chapters of Akin’s film, “Yeters Tod” and “Lottes Tod”, the narrative seems to be moving towards the death or punishment of one character but at the
end, it is another who is killed. Ali, a hard drinker who abuses Yeter, has a heart attack and it seems he might die. Yet upon his recovery he strikes Yeter, and it is she who dies instead. In the second chapter, Ayten’s involvement in a violent separatist group threatens to result in her death as well, yet her friend Lotte, while trying to help her, is killed by the gun Ayten has hidden. The two characters that survive represent, on the one hand, the sins of a patriarchal and misogynistic culture. Yeter only acquiesces to Ali’s request to live with him because she has been threatened by fundamentalists who oppose her work. On the other, Ayten’s support of violence as a political solution has resulted in the death of her friend. The other main characters in the film, Nejat and Susanne, are also guilty, having denied or disowned their family members. In the end, these characters all atone for their sins: Ali, having served his prison sentence, is shown weeping over a book given to him by Nejat, as he apparently begins to understand the pain endured by Muslim women like Yeter. Ayten has renounced violence and is willing to begin to build a relationship with a woman she once regarded as one of the ‘enemy’; Susanne has overcome her “typically German” close-mindedness (as Lotte once puts it), and through her embrace of Ayten returns to the openness of her youth. Finally, Nejat has forgiven his father.

The position of Yeter and Lotte as outsiders is significant to the meaning of

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70 One Jewish interpretation of the biblical text regarding Abraham and Isaac is that Abraham is being punished by God for disowning his first son, Ishmael (Spiegel 1967).
71 The book is Die Tochter des Schmieds by Akin’s friend, Selim Özdogon. In the film, the title is translated into Turkish, though the book was originally written in German, because Ali would have been unable to read it otherwise. It is the story of a Turkish woman who sacrifices her own happiness to help her sisters by marrying a man she doesn’t love and moving to Germany.
their sacrifice. Yeter, as an illegal immigrant and Turkish prostitute in Bremen, has allowed herself to become an abject figure to both the migrant Turkish community and the German state in order to help her daughter. She is a victim not only of a patriarchal culture but also of the inequities of a repressive state, whose murder of her husband forced her to flee Turkey, as well as German asylum laws that would not allow her to enter legally. Lotte is similarly forced to leave her home to help Ayten, once the same asylum laws deport her friend, and struggles to penetrate the Turkish bureaucracy and the institutions of an authoritarian state. In her fight she is aided neither by the German consulate, which tells her that the problems of a Turkish national is “none of their business,” nor by an aid organization in Turkey, whose representative treats her as a typical foreigner and advises her to help homeless Kurdish children instead of a political prisoner. The readiness of Yeter and Lotte to alienate themselves from family and homeland and eventually to die for their love can be seen as a comment on the biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac, the story that ties together Christians and Muslims, Turks, Kurds and Germans.

When Nejat explains the holiday to Susanne, he remembers that as a child the story upset him. His father reassured him by promising that rather than harm his son, he would “make an enemy of God”. It is this memory that inspires Nejat to undertake his journey of reconciliation. Similarly, it is the willingness of Yeter and Lotte to live as outsiders, to subject themselves to foreign bureaucracies and to bear rejection from family and community in order to save their loved ones, that motivates the other characters to overcome the physical and emotional borders that separate them.
As in *Gegen die Wand*, the transnational movement of the characters in this film is part of a larger search for home, a quest to replace lost or unsatisfying family relationships. In the process, the characters must be willing to cross borders and to leave their place of birth, to accept outsiders as members of their family. The transnational myth Akin offers is grounded in this openness; only through the acceptance of ‘substitutes’ is death transcended. In the scene at the garage that unites the two narrative strands, with its puzzling discussion of the local singer who has died of cancer, the singer’s song, part of the diegetic sound in the first segment, becomes nondiegetic when it is repeated in the last, and is sung by another artist. This suggests that, like the song that transcends the death of the singer, the bonds between father and son, ‘mother’ and daughter will survive the deaths of Yeter and Lotte, and that despite the substitution of an outsider, the relationship, the ‘song,’ remains the same. This kind of openness is partially represented by the German bookstore in Istanbul, where the national origin of the visitors is insignificant, cross-cultural exchange is facilitated, and all are welcome to participate in the Germanness it offers. But in the end, with its Bach and its Schiller it is like a museum, ultimately evoking in its German owner a desire to return to his *Heimat*. Instead, it is outside the bookstore where the new myth will be written, if only national communities can also broaden their understanding of family.

The last shot of Nejat gazing out to sea, extending beyond the ‘end’ of the film and into its ‘beginning,’ is a metaphor for the endless, eternal cycle of life. Yet it is also a representation of insuperable boundaries, as the son cannot reach his father but must wait for his return. The failure of the film to end with the reunion of the
culturally and nationally disparate ‘family’ it has brought together suggests that the transnational myth will remain incomplete. As Elsaesser remarks, the price for the bridges the characters build will have to be paid; Ayten will be targeted by her former comrades (“Ethical Calculus” 36), and will presumably, once they inevitably meet, find it hard to forgive Ali for killing her mother. Despite the liberating potential of the border crossings Akin imagines, as in Gegen die Wand obstacles remain in the form of social and political institutions that reinforce ethnocentrism, keep women bound by archaic customs, and forbid full equality to minority groups. Like Nejat, we are asked to look beyond the ending to hope for the fulfillment of the promise the film offers.

III. Beyond “Accented”: Akin and Border Consciousness

In the German newspaper Tagesspiegel, Akin referred to Gegen die Wand as “ein deutscher Film mit einer türkischen Seele” (Das Buch 244). This reflects his desire to insert into German cultural discourse work that expresses his Turkish roots, yet engages with German cinematic traditions. In his enthusiastic review of Gegen die Wand, Zaimoglu raves, “mit diesen grandiosen Liebespos [Akin hat] die deutsche Romantik wieder belebt, er hat sie entschlackt, ihr die hohl schwärmischen Moment entnommen und die orientalische Herzhitze eingebrannt” (213). As the writer implies, Akin’s passionate love story is serious melodrama,
and this quality has encouraged many critics to compare his work to Fassbinder’s; through its excess, like Fassbinder’s *Angst Essen Seele Auf* (Ali, *Fear Eats the Soul* 1974), *Gegen die Wand* inspires critical reflection. The first scene in the film, for example, is a reversal of the inside/outside motif that begins *Angst*. It opens on a rainy night, and Emmi, the German woman who falls in love with the *Gastarbeiter* Ali, enters a pub that is a gathering place for migrant workers. Fassbinder contrasts the damp nighttime streets with the warmth of the pub, where it is Emmi who is the ‘outsider.’ Akin instead opens his film in the bright sunlight of Istanbul, then cuts to the dark, littered interior of the concert hall. In both films, nothing is as it is ‘supposed’ to be; Ali transforms from a hostile-looking ‘foreigner’ to a gentleman, and Çahit fails to behave as a ‘typical’ Turk (Konzett 203-204). For Çahit, as for Emmi, neither ‘outside’ nor ‘inside,’ as represented in the opening scenes, seems a comfortable place, reflecting their ambivalent positioning in the films. In referencing Fassbinder, Akin hints that his film will also concern the pairing of social outcasts, and though the characters are very different, that he means to interrogate the definition of Germanness as well.

Akin, like Dresen and to an extent Petzold, cites New German Cinema to express a similar engagement with issues of belonging in German society. However, this quality of Akin’s work can also be seen as part of a tradition that began, as Sylvia Kratzer-Juilfs argues, with the “migrant cinema” or *Ausländerfilme* of the same period. In her study comparing what she terms “exile” German cinema with New

‘heat of the heart’ (emotional heat).” (Thanks to Fatima Naqvi for help with this translation – K.S.)
German Cinema between 1965 and 1982. Kratzer-Juilfs takes issue with the representation of migrant cinema as simply a ‘miserablist’ expression of immigrants’ feelings of alienation from German society. Instead, as noted in my introduction, she maintains that migrant cinema of this period was engaged with many of the same issues as NGC, “rewriting” some of the key concepts associated with it. For example, she discusses the similarities between the Heimweh apparent in films made by exiles and diasporans and the Fernweh that characterizes New German Cinema. Both concepts, she argues, are dominated by the sense of being unable to escape, of living in “prison” (78). However, while NGC was immobilized by its focus on reclaiming the past and the attempt to escape the “suffocating dystopia” of the homeland, the characters in exile cinema, by dealing with contemporary problems of living in a place that is both Heimat and Fremde, are often able to “set themselves free within the prison that surrounds them” (264). In Baser’s 40m2 Deutschland, for instance, despite being trapped in her apartment the female protagonist begins to make emotional connections with her neighbors through her window. She is able to imagine a home for herself in Germany, unlike her husband, who tries to create out of his apartment a piece of his lost “Heimat.” In the end, it is she who survives, and steps out onto the street into a life she has already begun to prepare for psychologically. Thus, Kratzer-Juilfs sees in these films a more successful attempt to renegotiate concepts such as Heimat than the NGC was able to offer.

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74 She includes in her use of this term exilic, diasporic and minority filmmakers, as well as some East German directors, whom she argues experienced “internal exile” (2; 185).
Part of the reason for this relative success may be grounded in the difference between the meaning of ‘home’ in the migrant (particularly Muslim) culture and in the German tradition. Kratzer-Juifs explains that for Muslims, the concepts of home and return, exile and migration are understood differently than they are in the West. Due to the religious obligation to travel to Mecca, journeying is often seen as a forward movement, part of the transformation of the soul from a state of corruption to one of purity. Rather than a fixed place, home can be the place one leaves behind or where one ultimately settles; when travelling away from one’s place of origin, a “mythical realm” is entered, where home is re-imagined and further travel inspired (169). For this reason, films by Turkish immigrants and diasporans often depict Germany and Turkey as both home and exile; what is significant is not the place itself but the inner transformation of the characters. For example, in Baser’s *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, the German prison becomes a space of liberation for the female protagonist, her self-confidence increasing through her relationships with other female inmates (167-182).

In the same way, Akin’s films are able to break free of traditional German notions of *Heimat*. Comparing the representation of home in *Gegen die Wand* and some of Akin’s earlier films to the German imagination of *Heimat* as depicted in *Heimatfilme*, Berghahn argues that while the latter is a “static idyll” that provides stability by allowing characters to strengthen their connection to the land and its seasons, in Akin’s films the chronotope of homeland is the “homecoming journey” rather than the place. Berghahn, like El Hissy, characterizes the protagonists’ movement toward Turkey as a “homecoming,” even though she concludes that Çahit
and Sibel are never able to “arrive” because, as she puts it, they are “deracinated, forever in some form of transit between two cultures” (“No Place Like Home” 156). While she is correct that for Akin, the chronotope of homeland is the journey, Berghahn’s characterization of this journey as a “homecoming” ignores the fact that the couple is from Germany, and that Turkey remains, for them, essentially a foreign land. Instead, the “homecoming” of Çahit and Sibel should be understood in a figurative sense, as the culmination of a journey of growth and transformation, and home, rather than a “culture,” as a private space where one feels at rest.75 For Akin, as for the filmmakers Kratzer-Juilfs discusses, Heimat is less a place than “ein mentaler Zustand” (“a state of mind”; “Heimat ist ein mentaler Zustand” 51).

Because homecoming seems to imply a return to a place of one’s origin, and most of Akin’s characters end up someplace different from where they started, the journeys the protagonists undertake in Gegen die Wand and Auf der anderen Seite are perhaps better understood as home seeking journeys. In this sense, Akin’s films can be compared to those of his non-Turkish German contemporaries, with some important differences. Though they are likewise seeking home, Petzold’s characters become stuck in in-between places, the transitional false homes and non-places of modern capitalist society. Their immobility is similar to that suffered by many of the protagonists of New German Cinema. Weighed down by the ballast of the past, which includes the problematic notion of Heimat, they have no clear concept of their destination. Dresen’s films, on the other hand, in their eastward movement are able

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75 This reading was informed by Federica Franzè’s discussion, drawn from Hobsbaum, of the difference between a public “home” (Heimat) and a private “home” (Heim) (114).
to offer an alternative to the traditional German concept of home, one that shakes off the weight of history. In Nachtgestalten, the protagonists have only found temporary respite from their home seeking in Berlin, yet by ending the film at the Baltic Sea, Dresen suggests that home might be better imagined further east. In his next film, Dresen continues this trajectory by creating from the border city of Frankfurt/Oder a home that is able to embrace outsiders. In some ways, Akin extends Dresen’s movement east, presenting Istanbul, with its mix of cultures from around the world, as this kind of home as well, though its potential is burdened by an authoritarian regime and its nationalistic, ethnocentric politics. At the same time, because he sees home as a “state of mind” rather than a place, through his transnational myth Akin is more interested in constructing an imaginary homeland where Germans and Turks, as well as Kurds and Turks, can come together.

Akin’s construction of a new transnational myth can also help to remedy the triangulating tendency in German culture, in which the other is appropriated and exists only in relation to German needs. As previously discussed, this tendency weakens the re-imagination of the German myth of nation in the work of both Dresen and Wenders. Though Akin also evokes the possibility of German redemption through contact with otherness, for him the other is more than merely a backdrop or a vehicle through which the sins of the past can be reconciled. By presenting characters who break stereotypes, Akin is engaging in what Kobena Mercer calls the “dialogic imagination,” in which homogeneous conceptions of the other are replaced by a “recognition of diverse qualities of people, entail(ing) the possibility of social change prefigured in the collective unconscious by the
multiplication of critical dialogues” (Bakhtin, cited in Mercer 254). Akin’s liminal and abject characters offer a ‘diversity within otherness’ that makes triangulation difficult, since they refuse to be victims for non-minority Germans to identify with or to save. Instead, the German characters in *Auf der anderen Seite* only achieve their redemptive relationships with the other after fully acknowledging and understanding them as individuals. For example, when they first meet Susanne expresses to Ayten the common German (and European) sentiment that “everything will be okay” in Turkey once it enters the European Union. Ayten immediately barks back, “Fuck the European Union!”, rejecting, in essence, Susanne’s self-congratulatory attitude. It is only when Susanne loses Lotte, travels to Istanbul and is forced to confront Ayten’s reality that she can truly redeem herself for her closed-mindedness. In addition, Akin’s transnational myth proposes that the need for redemption is not only a German problem; by involving his Turkish, Turkish-German and German characters equally in a search for forgiveness, and by widening the scope of his critique to include the Turkish state and the culture of patriarchy, he begins to break down the German understanding of itself as “a community of fate (*Schicksalgemeinschaft*)...to which Others have no access” (Senocak 53).

Finally, the transnational myths Akin offers can help to integrate the experiences, collective memories and diverse cultures of “die dritte Ethnie” into a new concept of German national identity. His imagination of how the transnational and the national can work together is articulated through the creation, in both *Gegen die Wand* and *Auf der anderen Seite*, of a mythical realm that protagonists enter in the course of their home seeking journeys. For Akin, this Thirdspace provides an
opportunity to re-think the national by allowing a unity of self and other that cannot be sustained in the real world, a space where dreams are realized and impossible connections made. As ‘European’ spaces in Istanbul, Akin’s fantasies can be understood as dream spaces for Turkish-Germans, allowing the integration of all aspects of their identities. In Gegen die Wand, the Grand Hotel London, with its balconies overlooking all of Istanbul and its interiors calling to mind a lost empire, is a place where borders have been eliminated. Yet by inserting into this space Çahit and Sibel, as ‘other’ to the Europe the Grand Hotel evokes, and making it the end point of their journey as a couple, Akin subverts its association with hegemony and highlights its inclusive potential. At one point in the segment, the camera steadily focuses on the couple making love under a painting of a forest scene reminiscent of the Heimat image in Nachtgestalten. Here, their Germanness is underlined; they belong here, Akin insists, in this ‘European’ space. Similarly, the German bookstore in Auf der anderen Seite, owned first by a German expatriate and then by a Turkish-German, represents the fantasy of integration, a time when immigrants and their descendents in Germany can participate in the joint ownership of German history and culture. It is also a place were transnational connections are made and where cross-cultural substitutions are legitimated; it is only when Susanne arrives in Istanbul to become surrogate mother to Ayten that Yeter’s photo is taken from the wall.\textsuperscript{76}

Yet the fact that these spaces are so peculiar, that they are not easily integrated into their settings despite the pivotal role they play in the films’

\textsuperscript{76} Thanks to Federica Franzè for this observation (151).
narratives, underscores Akin’s awareness that for Turkish-Germans, the new ‘transnational’ national myth is still a dream. In the end, though borders within Akin’s representations of Thirdspace have been erased, the boundaries between these spaces and the outside world stay in place. Unlike Dresen, Akin cannot imagine a Thirdspace like the Halbe Treppe, a place where otherness is unproblematically embraced in a home like Frankfurt/Oder. Home as a “state of mind” remains in tension with home as a place; if, as Berghahn argues, the chronotope of homeland for Akin’s characters is the journey, transit becomes their destiny. Although they have created a space where they can feel at home, the culmination of their emotional and physical cross-border travels, this space is precarious, threatened by the instability and unpredictability of the place where they actually live. It is not clear, for example, that Çahit and Sibel, outsiders and rebels, will ultimately fit in authoritarian Turkey, or that the diverse characters in Auf der anderen Seite will be able to remain together. Even more significantly, though he brings Germans, Turks and Turkish-Germans together into his imaginary space, Akin has not yet depicted in his films a German place that can, like Istanbul, become the site of a Thirdspace or even a temporary place of respite in his characters’ home seeking journeys.
In an essay entitled “Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts,” Andreas Huyssen argues that despite hopes that diasporic memory might offer an alternative to national memory, it suffers from many of the same problems. Like its national counterpart, diasporic memory is characterized by an emphasis on homogeneity, selective and purposeful forgettings, and exclusivity, often as a response to being excluded from the majority culture. Critics like Yasemin Soysal find that the concept of diaspora reinforces the model of the nation-state, constituting the alien within the national self and tying identity to territory and culture. For this reason, Soysal believes, it should be abandoned as a critical category, replaced instead by an emphasis on current practices of citizenship demonstrated by migrant communities that avoids the nostalgic tendencies of diasporic memory (Huyssen 150).

However, Huyssen contends that diasporic memory should not be dismissed altogether. It can provide an important corrective to national memory, from which it still profoundly differs:

Diaspora, as opposed to nation in the traditional sense, is based on geographic displacement, on migration, and on an absence which may be lamented or celebrated. National memory presents itself as natural, authentic, coherent and homogeneous. Diasporic memory in its traditional sense is by definition cut off, hybrid, displaced, split. This fact grounds the affinity of diasporic memory to the structure of memory itself which is always based on temporal displacent between the act of remembrance and the content of that which is remembered, an act of recherche rather than recuperation. Of course, this will not prevent diasporic memories from mimicking the identity fictions that energize nationhood. But structurally, diasporic consciousness comes closer to the structures of memory than national memory does. National memory veils its Nachträglichkeit.
Diasporic memory in the vital as opposed to its reified sense remains critically aware of it (152).

In Germany, two significant events have shaped national memory culture, both of which exclude immigrant populations and the immigrant experience from the German national imaginary: the *Zivilisationsbruch* created by the Second World War and the Holocaust, and the *Wende*. The former has fostered a German sense of responsibility for safeguarding cooperation between European nations, but an exclusive focus on the war as a founding event leaves out the millions of non-European immigrants living within its borders. The latter has inspired the creation and nurturing of a common national feeling that can bridge the gap between the formerly separate states, seen in the debates over the relocation and rebuilding of a new German capitol in Berlin. However, the construction of a new national narrative that finds in a common *Leitkultur* the basis for German identity ignores histories of migration, border fluctuations and the impact of the ‘foreign’ on this identity.

The ability of diasporic memory, as opposed to national memory, to incorporate the trauma of displacement into its history provides a structure that can admit to the influence of other cultures and recognize the gaps that allow an imagination of alternative histories. For this reason, Huyssen wonders whether national memory might not be able to learn from diasporic memory, and discusses a novel by Zafer Senocak, published in the same week in 1998 that novelist Martin Walser famously railed against the predominance of the Holocaust in the German media. *Gefährliche Verwandschaften* (*Dangerous Affinities*) tells the post-unification story of a man with German-Jewish and Turkish parents who attempts to come to
terms with the conflicting histories of victims and perpetrators that constitute his past. Huyssen maintains that Senocak’s examination of the “web of affinities” between Germans, Turks and Jews might have provided a starting point for German memory culture to begin to engage with diasporic memory and to “break through the repetition compulsions” of the German-Jewish relationship, introducing into the dialogue the memories and culture of a significant new minority. Unfortunately, the novel did not receive much attention from the public, though it was critically acclaimed in France and the United States (157-58).

I have argued that histories of displacement tying Germans to immigrant groups have been articulated through cinematic representations of spatio-temporal borders and the liminal characters that cross them, partially revealing a Nachträglichkeit that has been “veiled” by German national memory discourses. In Ruttmann’s film, border crossings representing the progression from an archaic past to a modern present are also reminders of the movement of migrants from the countryside and foreign lands to the Berlin metropolis, a trauma that was obscured by a national mythology that refused to incorporate heterogeneity. Later, Wenders presents German history from an angel’s perspective, tying the border between East and West Berlin to a meditation on the discord and rupture that marks all of human history. Damiel’s discovery of the ‘other’ in the in-between spaces of the city connects their exclusion to the East/West division and attempts to re-insert them into the German national narrative.

In the post-unification film analyzed here, contemporary dislocations experienced by both Germans and immigrants are also connected to those in
Germany’s past. Through the difficulties Yella faces in moving from East to West, Petzold ties the trauma of Cold War-era border crossings to contemporary divisions and displacements obscured by German ‘unification’. In *Die innere Sicherheit*, he compares the spatial and temporal dislocation of the terrorist family quite specifically to efforts by unwelcome ‘others’ to cross the borders of the present-day Berlin Republic. Dresen’s *Nachgestalten* contrasts the images of conformity that veil Weimar-era displacements in Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Sinfonie* with his own focus on those, both immigrant and German, that have been marginalized in the process of national identity construction in the new Germany. The itinerant musicians in *Halbe Treppe*, playing old folk tunes from across Eastern and Western Europe, are a reminder of a heterogeneity in Germany’s own past that highlights a failure to incorporate the foreign into its national imaginary. Yet though they succeed in partially uncovering German histories of displacement and tying them to figures of current cross-border migrations, these films lack the direct engagement with diasporic memories that might encourage a more inclusive national feeling.

In Senocak’s book, the protagonist is given a diary of his grandfather, a Turkish official involved in the deportation and extermination of Armenians in 1915. Unable to translate it completely, the grandson invents a passage explaining his grandfather’s death in which the man redeems himself for his crimes, first by saving an Armenian woman with whom he has fallen in love, then committing suicide. In this way the protagonist creates a reconciliation of sorts between the victims and victimizers, Germans, Turks and Jews that constitute his genealogical history. Similarly Akin, in *Auf der anderen Seite*, attempts through the theme of sin
and redemption to intertwine diasporic and national memories and to explore the impact of these memories on the lives of second and third generation Turkish-Germans as well as their young German contemporaries.

Integral to this process of *recherche* is the crossing of borders. In the diary entries Lotte writes after she goes to Istanbul, she speculates on her mother’s travels to India as a young girl, seeing evidence of an open-mindedness Susanne, apparently a member of the anti-establishment postwar generation, seems to have lost. Nejat’s journey to Trabzon, a trip that ties together the entire story, is an effort to reconcile his childhood memories of his father with the alcoholic who murdered Yeter. Diasporic memory is tied to national memory through these parallel narratives, implying that the “gap” that characterizes diasporic memory, a recognition of its essential incompleteness that allows the imagining of alternative histories, is a part of national memory as well. Significantly, the childrens’ search for their parents by retracing their cross-border travels is reciprocated, and Susanne and Ali must traverse the same borders in order to find their children. The spaces of reconciliation that Akin creates require not only that the young people attempt to understand their parents’ past, but also that older generations of immigrants and Germans move forward to accept the changes the future demands. Yet as Huyssen concludes, the incorporation of the memories and experiences of immigrants will be impossible as long as Germany’s memory culture remains stubbornly national, and Germans refuse to “discover the Turk in the mirror” (164). Perhaps the films discussed here, and the high profile afforded Turkish-German directors like Akin who have ascended to the global stage, are indications that such
a discovery is still possible.
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