

2-15-2006

German Film of the New Millennium: Innovation vs. Nostalgia

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Strawser, Amy Kepple, "German Film of the New Millennium: Innovation vs. Nostalgia" (2006). *Modern Languages & Cultures Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 4.

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German Film of the New Millennium: Innovation versus Nostalgia

Two eminent examples of recent German film display little or no innovation in terms of their cinematic technique and narrative structure, while portraying different types of historical remembrance, or potentially nostalgia, for the pre-World War II era or the pre-*Wende* German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. (By the term *Wende*, I am referring to the German word used for the pivotal turning point in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the subsequent collapse of the GDR, and the resulting unification of the two Germanies in 1990.) The critical and box office success both here and in German-speaking countries of *Nowhere in Africa* (2003) and *Good Bye Lenin!* (2004) reveals, and satisfies a longing for, traditional story-telling as well as straightforward historical fictionalizations, characteristics quite at odds with those of these films' immediate and highly popular predecessor, *Run Lola Run*, Tom Tykwer's 1999 hit, with its multiple narrative layers and inventive cinematic techniques.

In contrast, another example of contemporary German cinema, Fatin Akin's 2004 *Head-On*, goes against this trend and offers viewers an inside look at the conflicts and beauty within the Turkish-German sub-culture. The story line and cinematic form of this film appear relatively conventional and the narrative structure is linear and without overt experimentation. However, several characteristics make this film exemplary of the best features of German cinema today: the complex relationship between the two main characters; their difficulties in building a relationship together; their personal and emotional issues grounded in two very diverse cultures; and the portrayal of the struggles of everyday life in the Turkish-German community.

Let's begin by looking at the opening sequences of the two films with conventional narration. In both *Nowhere in Africa* and *Good Bye Lenin!* we see the main character grounding the film's action in childhood memories about how Germany used to be for them, albeit in vastly different ways. In both cases, the narrators relay reminiscences about how life once was, and how much has changed in the present time of the film's narration. To be sure, the scenarios contrast sharply. In the first example, the child of Jewish German immigrants to Africa during the Third Reich describes the painful realities of growing up during the rise of the National Socialist regime. In the second, the child of East German citizens demonstrates how the intrusion of East German agents into his family's private sphere helped precipitate the subsequent breakup of his parents' marriage. Yet despite the conflicts and estrangement created in the characters' lives during their formative years, in both opening sequences one senses a palpable longing for the simplicity of childhood and the coveted memories of that time, never to be fully recovered. Obviously there are drastic differences between the historical realities of the persecution of the Jews under Hitler and the repression of the East Germans in the German Democratic Republic. On the other hand, the characters both react as innocent children when their parents are confronted with harsh treatment at the hands of their fellow citizens or invasive authorities.

We will now view the opening sequences of both films, in which voiceovers set the stage for the narration to follow and paint a portrait of a lost time, with memories both happy and sad. The films present the rest of their story lines as a straightforward chain of events, realistically and in an objective manner. One caveat: *Good Bye Lenin!* makes a fantastical distorting of reality by the main character Alex real and believable, when he

concocts an elaborate plan to conceal German unification from his mother, who spent the time of the change in a coma, in order to prevent her from suffering a further heart attack.

Nowhere in Africa

Good Bye Lenin!

A third recent movie from Germany, *Downfall* (2005), portrays the final days of Adolf Hitler in his bunker at the end of World War II, and reveals a forthright view into the inner workings of the dictator's life and relationships during this time. This film has been controversial based on its subject matter and opinions about the portrayal of the infamous German leader from two opposing viewpoints: Hitler has been said to appear here as **either** overly sympathetic and humanized **or** as a raving lunatic. My view is somewhere between these two extreme perspectives. Due to its subject matter, this film cannot be taken lightly or possibly even considered entertainment. I would not recommend *Downfall* to most people because of its extreme brutality and content; yet this film must satisfy, in some, a desire to know more about the most notorious criminal of the 20th Century and the mastermind behind the Holocaust and the loss of six million Jews and countless others. I have decided against showing a clip of this film at this time.

Now, let us view the opening sequence of the now cult classic experimental German film *Run Lola Run*. Like *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Nowhere in Africa*, this film also begins with a voiceover, yet not by one of the main characters, and not as a grounding of the plot and action per se, but rather as a philosophical starting point for what is to come. Often compared to the frenetic pacing of MTV and other contemporary films or TV shows with fast-action techniques, *Run Lola Run* offers the viewer a roller coaster ride of events and images AND the added bonus of three possible endings to choose from.

Appropriately, and perhaps not surprisingly, the third and final chain of events provides the film with the happy Hollywood-type ending that fulfills our desire for neatly resolved and cathartic outcomes. How one chooses to explain the various plot strands is up to each individual, however, and I don't want to spoil the ending or pre-empt an exploration of the movie's potential interpretation here. Let's watch the beginning of the film with an eye toward the cinematic innovations and nuances presented:

Run Lola Run

Precisely because of its cinematic innovations and captivating plot and characters, *Run Lola Run* stands out as a stellar production of recent German film.

Last, I want to show you the opening of *Head-On*, which in my view is exceptional in its innovative synthesis of both the Turkish and German languages and cultures. Although this film does not include a standard voiceover at the beginning like the opening sequences from the other films we've seen today, *Head-On* does contain a different form of exposition at the outset which is also interspersed throughout the remainder of the movie. The first scene does not directly introduce the film's action or characters, but rather presents a traditional Turkish band with a female singer who grounds the story through song with the theme of troubled individuals and relationships. In my view, these lyrics and their delivery function as a classical Greek chorus, commenting on the action and predisposing our interpretation of what is about to unfold.

Head-On

What does unfold is a compelling tale of the unlikely friendship and love between Cahit and Sibel, two Turkish-Germans caught between the constraints of their former culture and the relative permissiveness of contemporary German society in Hamburg.

Later in the film, the scenes move between Istanbul and Hamburg, just as the main characters alternate between the use of Turkish and German language with each other, family members and friends. The film successfully gets across the sense of uprootedness and dislocation experienced by Cahit and Sibel, who are neither fully at home in Germany nor in their native Turkey. For this reason, and for its delivery of a convincing story of two lost souls who find in each other a safe haven amidst the chaos of modern urban life, I believe *Head-On* leads the pack of new releases in recent German cinema and stands out as an outstanding example of the cross-cultural direction more films ought to take.

Thank you.

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