

## Forum: German Film Studies

The forum section in this issue focuses on German film and is presented here as a snapshot of the state of German film studies in the Anglo-American context. It follows papers from a 2012 GSA panel about the *Dreileben* project put together by Christina Gerhardt and includes a version of the talk on “Art Cinema Now” given by Lutz Koepnick at the 2013 MLA and 2103 SCMS conferences; both are supplemented by my own, more general remarks on the field.

### Contemporary German Film Studies in Ten Points

German film studies has seen a remarkable growth over the past three decades, a growth that can be measured by the number of scholarly publications and presentations at conferences, and that is most obvious in the full integration of film in the teaching and research agenda of German departments in North America and Great Britain. Moreover, German film studies continues to expand and redefine its field and mode of inquiry. In the last years, scholars have turned attention to film sound and space and explored the intersections with music, architecture, and television. Some have remapped German film as a hyphenated or transnational cinema, and some have introduced philosophical and aesthetic questions. Others have shifted attention to documentary and experimental formats, and yet others returned attention to questions of authorship, genre, and film form.

However, the whole is not always greater than the sum of its parts. In spite of the impressive quantity and indisputable quality of current scholarship, the field remains beholden to its disciplinary origins in *Germanistik* and exhibits signs of what I would describe as growing narrowness, conformity, and insularity. These problems are not unique to German film studies and can also be found in its French and Italian equivalents. But because of a stronger commitment to the project of cultural studies, German film studies is also uniquely positioned to respond to the challenges of studying a national cinema in the shifting terrain marked by contemporary media and/or screen studies and to develop a program of (inter)disciplinary inquiry that is at once rigorous and speculative, expansive and thorough, and equally committed to film history and theory.

My comments may be read as a follow-up to Anton Kaes’s “German Cultural History and the Study of Film: Ten Theses and a Postscript,” published in *New German Critique* 65 (Spring/Summer 1995): 47–58. This piece was published after the demise

of New German cinema as the prototypical art cinema that, together with Weimar cinema, established German film studies as an academic discipline during the 1970s. These genealogies, in turn, are inseparable from the debate about film and literature in the emerging field of German studies more generally, the great significance of Siegfried Kracauer in providing a model of film history as cultural history, and the hopes attached to other theoretical paradigms (at the time: Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, Stephen Greenblatt) in sustaining this critical momentum through inspiration from other disciplines. Just as New German cinema served as a reference point for many of the questions outlined by Kaes, the intense interest in the Berlin School today speaks to productive continuities in the attention to German film as art film, though not necessarily in the sense meant by Koepnick.

In this larger context, rereading Kaes's piece means recognizing the yet unfulfilled promise of active engagement with—that is, not merely selective appropriation of—new research areas and methodologies in film and media studies and beyond. As the following ten points suggest, these promises can only be realized through the kind of theoretically and historically informed work on film/cinema that is cognizant of its dual status as art and commodity, text and event, aware of the constitutive tensions between image and sound, narrative and spectacle, informed by the dynamics of the national, international, and transnational as mutually constitutive categories, and attentive to the profound effects of media convergence, whether in the context of inter- and multimediality or as part of new screen media and digital technologies.

1. Despite legitimate concerns about the shortcomings of national cinema as a critical category, German film studies continues to be defined by the demarcating effects of the national in terms of its self-understanding and self-presentation. And despite the ascendancy of cultural studies as the dominant model of transdisciplinary allegiance, most publications continue to privilege philological categories beholden to the author and the text. Under these conditions, critical self-reflection on the material conditions of scholarly inquiry appears as an elusive goal or, worse, an unnecessary exercise. Once playing a prominent role in the momentous transformation of *Germanistik* during the 1970s and 1980s, German film studies seems to have settled in comfortably as one of several subfields of a multidisciplinary German studies continuously updated by successive semiotic, visual, spatial, and affective turns but also still haunted by the aftereffects of the theory wars and increasingly troubled by the centrifugal effects of specialization on the humanities.

On the one hand, recent studies on contemporary cinema, postnationalism, and cosmopolitanism (e.g., in studies on Turkish-German cinema) align filmmaking with dreams of a unified Europe and an aesthetic of hybridity and migration. On the other hand, the current work on the Berlin School, with its tendency toward close textual analysis, and the continuing preoccupation with questions of national identity,

memory, and history reinscribe the national as a structuring presence/absence in definitions of audiovisual style, affective mode, and social relevance. The resultant contradictions can only be resolved through increased attention to the long history of European cinema as transnational cinema and greater awareness of the specific function of art, history, and memory discourses as part of changing economic and political configurations in a unified Europe and a globalized film and media culture. Even more important, these conceptual tensions within German film studies can only be addressed through a materialist analysis of its institutional and disciplinary location.

2. To begin with the first obstacle to such a project, the insularity of German film studies is evident in its marginality in contemporary film and media studies both in its established specializations and new areas of inquiry. Notwithstanding the regular panels on German topics at SCMS (Society for Cinema and Media Studies) and NECS (European Network for Cinema and Media Studies), there has been a steady drop in the number of articles on German films and filmmakers in well-known film journals such as *Cinema Journal* or *Screen*. This represents a marked departure from the 1970s when German, French, and Italian scholars played a key role in the institutionalization of film studies through the discovery of the film auteur, the promotion of the art film, and the validation of artistic alternatives associated with national cinema traditions to the classical studio system.

Instead, German film scholars today publish primarily in anthologies and book series edited by German scholars, present their work at conferences organized by German departments, and attend workshops almost entirely made up of participants with a German-centric research agenda. Few film and media scholars outside German departments deal with German topics, with the only exceptions found among historians working on the Third Reich (and more generally: film and propaganda) and early cinema specialists committed to a transnational media archeology. The result is a noticeable absence from the most interesting debates in film studies today, including the incorporation of film into screen cultures and its impact on artistic practices and forms of cultural consumption. Even more disconcerting is the continued lack of sustained engagement with the hegemonic aesthetic, institutional, and economic practices associated with both classic and global Hollywood and the corresponding research on film industry, technology, and the star system that could provide some much needed corrective to the continued preference for text-centered analyses. The fact that some German faculty teach in film and media programs has not substantially changed this situation.

3. A similar kind of disinterest and/or disconnect informs the relationship between German film studies in Anglo-American and German-speaking contexts, creating a divide that resonates in university-, museum-, as well as archive-based settings.

German-language scholars rarely reference English-language scholars working on German films, and vice versa—a fact that can hardly be explained through lacking language proficiency or the relative scarcity of translations into German. As noted earlier, film played a key role in reforming what is sometimes referred to as *Auslandsgermanistik*, especially in the United States. By contrast, German universities integrated the study of film much more slowly, and then primarily in departments of modern German literature, theater arts, and art history; some of the most interesting teaching in fact today can be found on the margins of the traditional university system, including in art academies. For the most part, German academics have practiced film studies largely in a transnational framework that developed in dialogue with semiotics, (post)structuralism, and feminist film theory and that, through the work of Friedrich Kittler and others, gave rise to contemporary media theory. Unsurprisingly, it is in *Publizistik* with its more empiricist approach to the history of media (film, radio, television) that the national framework still prevails in recognition of the close connection between German media and the nation state. A slightly different situation can be observed in Austria and Switzerland—two national cinemas beyond the scope of this discussion—where film studies is much more established as an academic discipline and the study of the national film heritage supported by a (government-funded) research agenda inside and outside the university.

Meanwhile, the German film heritage is being attended to by museums and archives in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich whose publications reflect the institutional investment in preservation and documentation. A similar emphasis on film history constitutes the organizing principle behind the publications, festivals, and Internet platforms managed by CineGraph and its various initiatives in Hamburg, which at once celebrate film as part of local culture and locate German cinema within European cinema. Unfortunately, any productive cooperation among German universities, museums, and archives is made difficult by an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and contempt that, beyond the different epistemological paradigms (empirical vs. theoretical, archival vs. archeological), seems to reproduce older professional hierarchies. Accordingly, university-based film scholars rarely draw on the publications produced outside university settings, using their authors primarily as service providers rather than equal interlocutors. The inevitable consequences include entrenchment within disciplinary and institutional boundaries and limited scholarly exchange between very different kinds of film history and analysis.

4. Closely linked to the previous two points, we can observe a steady narrowing of the range of topics found under the label “German film studies.” Given the current fascination with the transnational, where are the truly comparative studies that situate German film in a European funding and production context or take full account of its embeddedness in local cultures and regional traditions? Despite recurring

appeals to cinema as a popular entertainment and integral part of everyday life, why is there so little research on film and fashion, film and tourism, film advertising, DVD marketing, cult films, commodity tie-ins, and so forth? Where is the kind of work that fully reflects the continued American dominance of European markets, whether in studies on film distribution or forms of adaptation and translation (i.e., dubbing and subtitling)? And what about the powerful influence of the institutions of high and low culture, from public and private television to a vibrant book culture and diverse theater landscape, in privileging certain representational formats and performative regimes? In light of the increase in coproductions and changes in funding practices, where are the detail-rich studies of film studios (beyond Ufa and DEFA) and producers (beyond Erich Pommer and Bernd Eichinger) that make up such a large part of the grand narratives of Hollywood? And given the ascendancy of digital media, what accounts for the continued neglect of German television, the all-important film-television interface, and the unique role of Internet discussion groups in the making of fan communities?

Within a framework that remains firmly committed to close textual analysis and its underlying notions of authorship and textuality, such narrowness is bound to have a homogenizing effect—a trend made worse by the particularism that haunts the humanities after the poststructuralist critique of universalism. The result? Research communities that sustain themselves through revisionist readings of the classics, the rise and fall of “hot” periods and “sexy” topics, and the concentration of much attention on the few filmic “love objects” that satisfy both cinephile desire and theoretical ambition and provide a ready-made framework for ever more publications, conferences, and retrospectives.

5. For the same reasons, an active publishing scene does not necessarily translate into greater methodological diversity. Based on a quick survey of recent monographs, anthologies, and journal articles, we can note a clear preference for close or symptomatic readings within the author-text paradigm. These range from conventional analyses in the *explication de texte* tradition and case studies in a cultural studies mode to metadiscursive readings in which film functions primarily as a test case or projection screen for theoretical and philosophical inquiries. Narrative remains the unquestioned norm, even as narratological approaches have failed to have a significant impact and documentary practices have finally attracted more critical attention. Likewise, filmic representation continues to be defined within a realist framework, with facile conclusions about the referential quality of filmic images and the typical nature of stories, settings, and characters privileging readings that treat film as a reflection of social reality. While well established in German-language scholarship, comparative studies are the exception in the Anglo-American context; the same can be said about research on intertextuality, intermediality, and multimediality. The interplay of image

and sound has finally received the attention it deserves, but little work is being done on acting and camera styles or set and production design. And although notions of multimediality and related concepts of interactivity and performativity have informed recent work on the art-film interface, this conceptual shift has not yet resulted in a fundamental reassessment of predominant approaches to film reception, audiovisual perception, and aesthetic experience.

6. There is no doubt that these scholarly trends and their effect on German film studies must be evaluated within the larger transformations of the humanities in North America and the United Kingdom over the past two decades. This includes the pressure of professionalization and the trend toward specialization, the increase in administrative duties for faculty in departmental and university-wide contexts, and the corporatization of the university with its emphasis on assessments, outcomes, and total quality management. The publish-or-perish mentality that prevails despite disappearing publishing venues and declining book sales forces scholars to work efficiently and maximize their investments of time and energy. One way is to avoid archival-heavy research and data-driven empirical work in favor of thematic, hermeneutic, or theoretical analysis; another is to situate one's work firmly within established research paradigms and communities. Under such conditions, large-scale, comprehensive projects have become a liability, and work on unfashionable topics a guarantee of professional isolation. The declining number of available tenure-stream positions, coupled with the continuing output of PhDs by German graduate programs, has profoundly affected the conditions under which film scholars today pursue their research agendas and careers.

The double imperative to publish that "field-changing" book while becoming an accepted member of the scholarly community rehearses the structural tensions between dissent and consent in almost clichéd ways. The networks necessary for successful job searches, peer reviewed publications, fellowship and grant applications, and tenure and promotion decisions require both the most understated forms of conformity and the most marketable forms of originality. Similarly, the management of a career distinguished by national and international visibility presupposes that scholars challenge orthodoxies but do so in accepted ways, that they conform to conventions, including those that promise unconventionality, and that they actualize their roles as academics within the rules of performativity identified with an ever-changing but clearly defined academic habitus.

7. The narrowing in research topics and questions as well as theoretical and methodological approaches is most apparent in the lack of constructive engagement in Anglo-American German film studies with two closely related developments, the one pertaining to media studies in Germany, and the other to German studies in the United

States. In Germany, the burgeoning field of media studies has more or less overtaken efforts to establish film studies as an academic discipline; unlike its equivalent in the US, German media studies today has a decidedly speculative quality, making it at times indistinguishable from old-fashioned *Geistesgeschichte* and new-style media philosophy. Moving beyond claims about film as a distinct art form, German media studies has mapped a prehistory of film/cinema and established a vastly expanded field encompassing technologies of perception, communication, and entertainment; the tension between the positivistic orientation of communication studies (or *Publizistik*) with its origins in *Zeitungswissenschaft* of the 1930s and the speculative qualities of media theory in the tradition of Friedrich Kittler are an essential part of this contested discursive terrain.

In particular, the emphasis on media convergence in these contexts has privileged two important perspectives currently underrepresented in German film studies in the Anglo-American context: a multimedial approach to film within the long history of mass media and audiovisual technologies and, more prevalent in *Publizistik*, a greater awareness of the institutional frameworks and discursive networks in the ongoing negotiation of local, regional, national, and transnational practices. However, if the study of German film is to retain its relevance, greater attention to media studies in all of its forms is imperative for German film studies to reclaim its position as an integral part of current scholarly trends and debates.

8. The second development concerns a noticeable schism, which initially appeared in the study of German literature, between a theory/culture paradigm committed to ideology critique within broad definitions of popular/mass culture and a literature/aesthetics paradigm insistent on asserting the specificity of literary practices and aesthetic experiences in a high culture mode. To some degree explainable in generational terms, this constellation pits the representatives of an older cultural studies model influenced by the Frankfurt School and successive waves of identity politics against the younger proponents of an aesthetic turn who, influenced by various linguistic, visual, and spatial turns, reject the reduction of literature and film to questions of history, politics, and identity. To them, the critical potential of historical contextualization and symptomatic readings seems exhausted, with any claims about subversive potentials and emancipatory effects sounding increasingly hollow; here the aesthetic promises a long overdue engagement with pleasure, beauty, and the sublime. In ways that have not yet been fully acknowledged, the renewed appreciation for film as art sometimes resembles old-fashioned *textimmanente Kritik*, including its claims to interpretive authority (or license); at other times, the aesthetic turn allows for the selective appropriation of philosophical categories but not always with the attendant conceptual rigor. Yet in all cases, the reclamation of the aesthetic represents an important challenge that needs to be answered if German film studies is to remain

relevant to the ongoing debates on the nature of the aesthetic, including in digital and interactive formats.

9. The close connection between academic research and publishing brings the contradictions of the national cinema paradigm into even sharper focus. The last decade has seen a veritable explosion of survey texts on German cinema and film history, with editors struggling to at once disavow and reaffirm the “German” in the book titles and with publishers chasing the same elusive group of specialist readers and college teachers. What accounts for this insatiable need to define the “German” in conventional and nonconventional ways and, in so doing, to simultaneously destabilize and reaffirm the notion of national cinema? All books seem to be caught in the hermeneutic circle of destabilizing the very category that legitimates their shared project in the first place: national cinema. But by attempting this precarious balancing act precisely at a moment of retrenchment, do they not further contribute to the reification of an object of study with uncertain epistemological status and diminished critical currency?

The same questions could be asked about the growing number of publications on film in the context of language teaching and cultural literacy courses. This heightened competition among textbook publishers is inseparable from the declining demand for language instruction in colleges and universities. Notwithstanding their undisputed usefulness in advanced German classes or seminars on contemporary Germany, such publications invariably align German-language films with specific assumptions about German culture, history, and society, with Austrian and Swiss films included under the German category. As is to be expected, the critical approach in these books is instrumental, and their intended effect didactic and affirmative; likewise, the selection of films is predicated on the equation of filmic representation and social reality. As a result, these publications cannot help but work against the centrifugal forces and decentering effects of a transdisciplinary, transnational German film studies. The resulting tension manifests itself most clearly in the two competing forces present in German language and culture classrooms—the faculty’s desire to complicate and problematize Germanness as an essentializing category, and the students’ desire to discover and embrace Germanness as a category distinctly different from their own linguistic, geographic, cultural, and social location.

10. In response to these points, it would be easy to identify individual books or articles that could disprove any or all of them; but such examples would not invalidate the diagnosis of an underlying structural problem that has distinct disciplinary and institutional causes and effects. For that reason, we would be well advised to look at current research trends as part of the relatively brief history of this small subfield of German studies, its complicated relationship to film studies in Germany, and its equally pre-

carious connection to film and media studies in the Anglo-American context. Such critical self-reflection must involve a rethinking of the contested status of “German” cinema between the false binaries of the national and the postnational—or its alternate version, the local and the global—and finally open up the work on German cinema *as* European cinema to the entire range of research questions and methodologies available in film and media studies on both sides of the Atlantic. This project might even involve a remapping of the meaning of “Europe” in light of the noticeable shift from the European art film as the primary countermodel to the dominance of Hollywood to the cinemas of South Asia and East Asia as the focus on growing scholarly attention in film studies.

What does this mean concretely? I believe that German film studies could benefit tremendously from translating into new research agendas and initiatives what is already lived experience and professional reality: greater collaboration with colleagues from other foreign language and literature departments. Why not plan anthologies and special journal issues within a European framework, and with input from colleagues in area studies or communication studies? Why not write survey texts or case studies on European cinema, radio, and television and their national peculiarities and transnational connections? Why not reproduce the shift from monolingual to multilingual cinema on the level of research and reference more actively publications in languages other than English and German? And why not use excursions into other fields to gain a better understanding of the unspoken assumptions defining German film studies on both sides of the Atlantic? The existing connections between German and North-American film scholars would make it relatively easy to address the significant differences in scholarship in a more systematic and self-critical fashion. Last but not least, closer consideration of the material conditions of research and teaching in the North American academy will allow scholars of German cinema to better define their location between German studies and film/media studies and develop strategies for the future that overcome the problems of disciplinary insularity and protect against the dangers of both homogenization and particularism.

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### **German Art Cinema Now**

During the last five years, German film studies in North America has been preoccupied with the work of the Berlin School, i.e., Germany’s newest generation of noncommercial, critical, and formalistically rigorous filmmakers. Ironically, however, the peculiar drive of this scholarly embrace has the potential to relegate German film scholars to the sidelines of larger conversations about international art cinema

today. Film scholars have so far largely discussed the Berlin School's achievements within the frameworks of national cinema studies and more traditional production and exhibition strategies, whereas the true challenge today is to situate art cinema within an ever-expanding field of hybrid media practices and a multiplicity of inter- and transnational transactions. A polemical intervention, this essay's purpose is to engage German film studies in a debate about what I perceive as its risk of cultural, technological, and institutional provincialization—the risk of overlooking important contemporary developments precisely by constructing the Berlin School according to older notions of the national and of film art.

1. Up to the 1980s, it was quite clear where to find and what to expect from art cinema. At home in special theaters, local film clubs, and college screening venues, art cinema's signature was to challenge commercial templates of cinematic pleasure and storytelling. Expect the unexpected was written on its banner, whether it meant to explore psychologically complex and contradictory characters or deflate the narrative drive of mainstream cinema. Art cinema embodied everything Hollywood didn't. At times slow and pondering, at others erratic and unruly, art cinema was known as difficult and challenging, in need of viewers eager to activate what refused easy consumption. In the eyes of its devotees, art cinema energized minds and produced highly reflexive pleasures; in the view of its detractors, it often amounted to not much more than an effective sleeping pill.

A crucial element in the formation of academic film studies in the 1970s and 1980s, the initial concept of art cinema entertained reciprocal relationships with the idea of national cinema. According to this understanding, different cinemas constituted themselves as national cinemas to the extent to which they resisted the global push of Hollywood and prioritized aesthetic concerns over commercial entertainment. In the dominant perspectives of the time, art cinema was celebrated as pursuing seemingly universal artistic concerns and precisely thus territorializing cinema within the national, whereas Hollywood, as it aimed to sell mostly American stories to audiences worldwide, flattened the nuances of cultural and artistic specificity. Like the art of art cinema, the national in national cinema not only relied on normative frameworks that favored the active over the passive, the rough and difficult over the user-friendly; as importantly, it needed blanket terms such as “dominant” or “commercial” filmmaking, and the view of Hollywood as being situated outside of the national, to define the specificity of art and the national in the first place. To speak of national cinemas was no less than to express the hope for oppositional projects eager to mobilize art as a medium of differentiation against the homogenizing force of industrial filmmaking.

While the normative ideas of art cinema as a national project and of national cinema as a site of aesthetic opposition were of crucial importance to advance emerging fields such as German film studies as respectable endeavors within foreign literature

departments in North America, the shifting critical, institutional, and industrial landscapes of the late 1980s and 1990s deeply shattered the concept of art cinema: its place in the global topographies of filmmaking, its normative importance and self-evidence. Hollywood suddenly no longer looked as homogenous as it had once presumed to be; national cinemas turned out to be as familiar with popular idioms as classical studio filmmaking; and art, ever more drawn into the postindustrial integration of politics, economics, and culture, increasingly lost its claim for aesthetic resistance. With the rise of cultural studies and postcolonial theory, the normative concept of national cinema as art cinema in the last years of the twentieth century increasingly appeared, not simply as a specter from the past, but as precarious strategy to contain non-Western images within a predominantly white, male, and Eurocentric framework. Instead of endorsing critical alternatives to Hollywood, art cinema now found itself under suspicion to serve homogenizing agendas itself, i.e., the effort to remake the cinemas of the world in the image of an elitist European perspective.<sup>1</sup>

The position of North American German film studies within these more recent developments was ambivalent. On the one hand, beginning the late 1990s, scholarship on German cinema was quite eager to engage with the role of the popular in German film culture. The predominant focus was no longer on the good objects of New German Cinema or Weimar expressionism, but on the films of the Nazi era or the 1950s, the work of German exiles in Hollywood or the heritage and consensus films of the post-Wall era. Though some of these newer objects of study were often encountered with a certain aesthetic embarrassment, any attempt to hang on to the concept of (German) art cinema appeared even more embarrassing because it could peg one's work to the legacy of Adorno's Manichean juxtaposition of (good) aesthetic modernism and (bad) industrial mass culture. On the other hand, largely due to its location within institutionally beleaguered German departments, German film studies proved quite resilient to abandon former notions of the national, not least of all because reunification seemed to place the nexus between cinema and nation onto the academic front burner. In the early 2000s, art cinema was largely out in German film studies, whereas art cinema's former conceptual brother in arms, the notion of national cinema, continued to experience tremendous attention, much more so than in most other quarters of academic film scholarship.

No matter how loose its identity, Berlin School filmmaking was absorbed into American German film studies at exactly the moment when scholars had largely severed the normative ties between art and the national. Much of German film studies' enthusiastic reception of the Berlin School starting in the second half of the last decade, yet also some of the crucial blind spots of this encounter, resulted from how this newest iteration of German art cinema entered a field of academic criticism no longer reflecting on the concept of art cinema while at the same time continuously fixated on issues of the national. American-based scholars welcomed

the films of Christoph Hochhäusler, Christian Petzold, and Angela Schanelec as new good objects of academic study; a legitimate cinema refusing the formulaic and user-friendly products of the popular, American and German. Far from merely offering an intellectually and aesthetically challenging body of new work, the interventions of Berlin School filmmakers promised to do what New German Cinema had accomplished in the 1970s and 1980s, namely to invigorate the cultural respectability of academic film studies, to promote new interpretative paradigms, and precisely thus to strengthen the location of German film scholarship within German departments and the academy in general. While scholarly work was quick to discuss how Berlin School films engaged with the realities of neoliberal deregulation, the films themselves were largely greeted as part of a relatively self-enclosed and self-grown cultural project, in no real need to be situated in a larger international context. As a result, German film studies largely failed to place critical pressure not only on this cinema's relation to the shifting shapes of art cinema after the demise of the normative concept of national cinemas; but also on the place of the national within the international traffic of more experimental and aesthetically probing work with moving images today. As I argue in a later section of this essay, this failure threatens to sideline German film studies in terms of its ability to account for the wide range of locations and media that make up international art cinema today and that transcend the domain of the traditional filmic auditorium, projection, and screen. And as I argue in the next section, this lack of conceptual pressure at the same time runs the risk of isolating German film studies as it causes us not to engage thoroughly enough with filmic work echoing, impacting, and paralleling the work of Berlin School filmmakers beyond the horizon of German film history and culture today.

2. Responding to how French critics in 2004 with some enthusiasm began to identify the signatures of a "nouvelle vague Allemande,"<sup>2</sup> the first wave of scholarly work on the Berlin School has largely sought to situate this cinema as a cinema of criticality within the larger trajectories of German film history and the particular dynamics of German culture after unification. One of the primary efforts has been to map the location of Berlin School filmmaking either vis-à-vis the burgeoning presence of commercially-oriented cinema in Germany—be it locally funded or not—since the 1990s, or in relation to the legacy of the New German Cinema of the 1960 and 1970s. In either case, the underlying aim of this kind of mapping has been to construct Berlin School filmmaking—its formal registers, stylistic interventions, and narrative economies; its disenchanting tales of affectless antiheroes, estranged couples, and roaming strangers; its pervasive long takes and strategies of rigid framing—as a welcome return to what New German auteurs called legitimate cinema. The Berlin School—so one guiding assumption—embraces its films' smallness and lack of shine as a means to expose

the way in which the phantasmagorias of neoliberal deregulation mask uneven and pathological processes of modernization. As they picture peripheral spaces in all their bleakness and metropolitan areas in all their vacuity, Berlin School filmmakers do to contemporary German (film) culture what New German Cinema did to the hypocrisies of postwar West German prosperity. They encourage us to read formal experiments as political interventions, aesthetic strategies of refusal as expressions of critical negativity, elusive narratives and difficult images as a medium to reflect on the dilemmas of both German history and film history.

In his superb introduction to the Berlin School, Marco Abel has described one central aspect of this new wave's cinematic aesthetic as follows: "Relentlessly focusing their camera on seemingly unremarkable events, these films exhibit a tendency to 'stare,' thus effecting an alteration of that which they stare at from *within* the act of seeing (and listening) itself."<sup>3</sup> Abel aptly describes what distinguishes the style of the Berlin School across a wide range of different projects. These films' often unrelenting stare, developed within a formal repertoire favoring long-take cinematography, static and therefore often seemingly disaffected framing, marks Berlin School films as a body of work eager to decelerate the speed and "intensified continuity"<sup>4</sup> of mainstream filmmaking, the way in which commercial cinema today seems to do everything at its disposal to manage the attention of audiences no longer willing to keep their eyes focused on one screen in the dark alone.

Yet nothing could be more wrong than to territorialize reflexive signatures such as the stare within the confines of German national cinema. Inviting viewers to see and sense the camera's own seeing, the Berlin School films' stare isn't merely reactive—an attempt to develop a specific formal language by inverting what is perceived as the given. Nor can we simply trace it back to the visionary gazers in Herzog's or the alienated onlookers in Wenders's films of the 1970. Abel's stare has been a common mark of international art house filmmaking since the mid-1980s and early 1990s, and it has witnessed its perhaps most remarkable formulation in the films of East Asian filmmakers working in different cultural contexts and for various global audiences throughout the last two decades. Think, for instance, of the films of Taiwanese Hou Hsiao-hsien, Malaysian Tsai Ming-liang, Korean Kim Ki-Duk, Thai Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and mainland Chinese Jia Zhangke, representing a transnational body of work in which extended shot durations and diegetic acts of prolonged looking have come to serve as marks of identification catering to the expectations of the global film festival circuits. Though set in quite different contexts, films such as *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2003), *Syndromes and a Century* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2006), and *Still Life* (Jia Zhangke 2006) certainly prefigure many formal and stylistic elements central to Berlin School filmmaking as well, including a certain glacial slowness, representation of pondering visuality, self-reflexive strategies of framing, and

a deliberate effort to deflate the drive of conventional storytelling. So much so, that it would be reckless not to consider these films and directors as important points of reference when exploring the contours of the Berlin School.

It is important to remind us in this context not to mistake the prolonged stares of East Asian art cinemas as a mere negative to the accelerated protocols of Asian mainstream filmmaking. As Jean Ma and others have argued,<sup>5</sup> East Asian art cinema's experiments with the durational qualities of the filmic image respond to larger processes of uneven globalization across various national, regional, and cultural divides. Yet rather than merely invite viewers to turn their back to the dramatic shrinkage of spatiotemporal horizons in a hypermobile present, the slowness of these films offers a means to face the ever-increasing copresence of multiple temporalities and speeds that structure our global Now. Art cinema has thus been reconstituted as a form of cinematic practice that inhabits a space no longer contained by the category of the national, nor as one eager to invent and invoke the national as a panacea to the unbound streams of commercial products. Art cinema instead has been redefined as a transnational and multilingual project whose principal aim is to probe the rhythms and speeds, the memories and anticipations, that make life tick under conditions of unbound mediation and fast-tracked scenarios of change. As the example of East Asian film cultures of the last few decades indicates, art cinema today comes to its own whenever it delays myths of automatic progress, makes us stare right into the face of contemporary processes of acceleration, and precisely thus pursues the production of moving images as means to probe what Laura Mulvey has called the "difficulty of understanding passing time" today.<sup>6</sup>

German film studies embrace of the Berlin School during the last few years has so far largely missed to situate the work of Petzold and others vis-à-vis larger international developments and transnational redefinitions of art cinema. In their efforts to offer an institutional home for rigorous discussions about the Berlin School, German film scholars have used the social and economic challenges of unified Germany, the trajectories of German film history, and the bad objects of popular film production in Germany as the primary points of critical reference, whereas very little work has been done to bring Berlin School films into productive conversations with the Tsais or Apichatpongs of global art cinema. While the good-object status of the Berlin School has no doubt helped energize American German film scholars and buttressed their position within their discipline, it has also inspired them to turn inward rather than outward, to pursue proven perspectives and channels of communication rather than to cross boundaries and make new connections. It is dire time, in other words, to look more closely and broadly at how contemporary German cinema explores the passing of time today so as to sync it up with the reconfiguration of the concept of art cinema beyond the older and ever-more limiting matrix of the national.

3. Throughout the last two decades, film and video installations have served as the perhaps single most theorized venues to exhibit time in space and probe the durational qualities of moving images.<sup>7</sup> At first, the peculiar institutional conditions of this “other cinema” (Bellour) may have little to do with art cinema’s traditional projection situation because a media work’s viewing time is largely contingent upon the itineraries of each individual viewer, no matter how much this work may seek to hold, stretch, or even overwhelm the viewer’s attention. Whether projected in a black box or in a gallery’s open space, whether displayed as an endless loop or as part of a scheduled medley of pieces, whether requiring single or multiple screens—video installation art today largely caters to itinerant viewers often unable or unwilling to take in the whole. Video and digital media may in theory facilitate unprecedented potentials of modulating and stretching the temporal. In actual practice, however, and in stark contrast to what has routinely been theorized as the practice of viewing in more traditional theatrical settings, the viewers of media installations often simply dip in and out of given spaces at random intervals, their temporal investments deviating from the particular demands of a work’s formal structure.

While there is no need to deny fundamental differences between theatrical and gallery-based forms of projection and reception, it would be equally foolish to ignore the increasing crossovers between art and filmmaking we have witnessed in recent years. Cinema and its history has figured as a major object of artistic work since the 1990s, whether we think of the narrative elements in the photographs of Jeff Wall or Gregory Crewdson, the reference to older forms of filmic technology in Tacita Dean’s *Film* (2011), or the reworking of film history in works such as Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and Christian Marclay’s *The Clock* (2010). As much as artists have turned to cinema to push time-based art toward new frontiers, many filmmakers at the same time have sought to expand their work and gain considerable presence in museums and art galleries, be it that they exhibit film stills as free standing art works, screen smaller or more experimental work in art and video galleries, or simply use museum auditoriums as sites to distribute narrative or non-narrative films. The surge in such recent transactions between art and cinema is certainly not accidental. It at once reflects and feeds into a cultural *a priori* in whose context screens and mediated expressions have become ubiquitous and moving images are ever-more often produced and consumed on the move. Once the prized monopoly of the movie theater, screens with pictures in motion have come to penetrate each and every aspect of advanced technological societies today, so much so that 1960s projects of expanded cinema now figure as the order of the day and no artistic effort to pursue contemporaneity can do without addressing the fact that many of us live most of our lives vis-à-vis more than one screen at once.<sup>8</sup>

“Screens,” Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener have recently reminded us, “are (semipermeable) membranes through which something might pass, but they

can also keep something out: they act as sieve and filter. They are rigid and solid, but they can also be movable and flexible. Screens are in effect something that stands between us and the world, something that simultaneously protects and opens up access.”<sup>9</sup> Art cinema happens today, I suggest, whenever image makers not only use various media, technological platforms, and institutional setting to probe how different screens structure our perception of sensible things in and across time, but actively investigate alternate forms of screenic mediation so as to disrupt the rhetoric of automatic progress and technological determinism that mostly surrounds the development of contemporary screenscapes. Art cinema approaches the ubiquity of screens in contemporary life as something that need not be taken for granted, their pasts as little as their futures. It gives us pause to ponder what is contingent about the quadrilateral solidity of screens today; it makes us rub against a screen’s function as narrative or sensory filter; it pierces protective layers or reroutes overwhelming flows in order to cause viewers to sense their seeing and see their sensing of the world on view. For art cinema today, the image streams of our global Now are far too pervasive in order to be solely probed within the confines of a classical theater screen; and the experience of moving images has become far too omnipresent, and too much part of our sense of mobility, in order to be understood as a mere optical phenomenon and exclusively investigated from a disembodied position of detached criticality. Art cinema today is necessarily hybrid in its use of different platforms and interfaces. It comes in the plural, not because celluloid projection no longer appears viable as a channel of communication, but because recent developments call on image makers to address the art and aesthetic of moving images across a wide range of media within and outside cinema’s traditional dark cube.

Though some filmmakers associated with the Berlin School such as Benjamin Heisenberg have actively participated in the medial crossovers of moving image exhibition today, German film scholarship of the last few years has largely failed to engage more expansive perspectives to accommodate the hybrid conditions of art cinema since the 1990s. It is tempting, in fact, to conceptualize this blind spot in even stronger and systematic terms. Rightly intrigued by the formal rigor and reflexive qualities of Berlin School films, German film scholars—somewhat fatigued from years of plowing the fields of the popular—have embraced the films of Petzold and others to resharpen their analytical tools vis-à-vis singular filmic texts. In their efforts to do justice to the Berlin School’s controlled visual style and deflated narratives, they have revitalized strategies of reading individual images, sounds, and narratives from earlier decades of auteur studies. Yet precisely in doing so, whether intentionally or not, this scholarship has brought itself in line with a more recent academic cultivation of cinephilia, i.e., a surge of writing considering the classical projection situation, the use of analogue film stock, and the indexical qualities of the photographic images as the sole conveyors of the cinematic. Eager to renew its own intellectual vibrancy

and cultural legitimacy, German film scholarship on the Berlin School has thus largely purchased its innovative stances by dramatically curtailing the medial sites and extensions of art cinema today. It has progressed by freezing its object of study and by occluding from view the multiplicity of screenic interventions we may want to count as representative of art cinema today. It has embraced new models of reading film, yet in order to do so it has suspended the need to develop new vocabularies to address the expanding landscapes and medial shapes of contemporary art cinema beyond the normative model of the dark cube.

4. In their groundbreaking writings of the 1920s and 1930s, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin famously conceived of cinema as a perceptual training ground, a site at which, in the mode of play, the modern subject could appropriate modern technology and explore different sensory responses to the speeds and shocks of urban life. Modernist filmmaking investigated this role reflexively, driven by modernism's heightened self-consciousness of the Now, its stress on experiencing the present as a watershed moment charged with the energy of newness, contingency, and change. Though unthinkable without such modernist sensibilities, what postwar generations came to call art cinema, on the other hand, more narrowly aspired to investigate the artistic merits and formal repertoires of how moving images could reshape the human sensorium; it turned its back to generic formulas and user-friendly structures of visual consumption so as to promote film as art and define art as a medium of resistance against the mind-numbing spectacles of the culture industry.

Scholars and critics today entertain considerable differences about both the contours of contemporary art cinema and the legacy of modernist criticality, its relevance, its promises and failures, its continued need and right to exist. Two modest proposals, however, might be able to unite various fronts. First: if we indeed want to continue the spirit of Kracauer's and Benjamin's conception of cinema as a space of sensory experimentation, we cannot but recognize the many sites of moving images today as contemporary culture's newest room for sensory play; and instead of mourning the advent of postcinematic conditions, we therefore would need to assess the extent to which newer technologies of recording, transmitting, displaying, and storing images today change our very concept of cinema. And second: if we indeed want to speak of cinema in its expanded contemporary plurality as being charged with the potential for aesthetic experience, we cannot but move beyond dated normative orthodoxies that simply pit art against commercial culture, active participation against passive consumption, critical distance against mindless absorption, aesthetic resistance against the spectacle's strategies of affective suture. Like contemporary art, art cinema today happens in various locations, relies on a host of different aesthetic strategies, and cuts across various platforms and media. To claim that any form of aesthetic experimentation and critical self-reflexivity today articulated dissident visions of the

future would be as naïve as to claim that all commercial products and media would automatically produce inattentive submissiveness.

Nothing appears more important for today's German film studies, in my view, than to revive a strong and self-confident concept of art cinema. As invigorating as the work of the Berlin School has been for scholars of German film, it has done very little to encourage German film studies to connect its itineraries to larger debates in international art cinema studies. Over the last few years, we have—with many good reasons indeed—discussed Berlin School filmmaking within monological, culturally restrictive, and technologically preservative concepts of art cinema. Perhaps, we may have even used the Berlin School as a vehicle to strengthen such concepts against the tidal waves of contemporary moving image culture. Yet as these pages advocate: German films studies cannot afford to ignore the many screens and practices of seeing art cinema today unless its aim was to provincialize German cinema in both cultural and technological terms, i.e., to freeze film in time and history and thus undo the very institutional basis of our scholarly existence.

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#### Notes

1. For more on recent reevaluations of the concept of art cinema, see Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. See Elisabeth Lequeret, "Allemagne: La Génération de l'Espace," *Cahiers du cinéma* 587 (2004): 47–51.
3. Marco Abel, "Intensifying Life: The Cinema of the 'Berlin School,'" *Cineaste* 33, no. 4 (2008), <http://www.cineaste.com/articles/the-berlin-school.htm>.
4. David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 121–38.
5. Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2010); Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations: Contemporary Chinese Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
6. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 31.
7. For some pathbreaking essays, see Raymond Bellour, "D'un Autre Cinéma," *Trafic* 24 (June 2000): 5–21; Dominique Païni, "The Return of the Flâneur," *Art Press* 255 (March 2000): 33–41; Peter Osborne, "Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology," *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video* (London: Tate, 2004), 66–83; Daniel Birnbaum, *Chronology* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005); Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Ursula Frohne and Lilian Haberer, eds., *Kinematographische Räume: Installationsästhetik in Film und Kunst* (Munich: Fink, 2012).
8. For more on the concept of expanded cinema, see A. L. Rees, Duncan White, Steven Ball, and David Curtis, *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film* (London: Tate, 2011). See also, Gabriele Pedulla, *In Broad Daylight: Movies and Spectators after Cinema* (London: Verso, 2012).
9. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 39.