



Review: Inga Scharf (2008) *Nation and Identity in the New German Cinema: Homeless at Home*. London and New York: Routledge.

Susanne Schmetkamp

University of Basel

What it means to be German

About two thirds of the films of the so-called New German Cinema between 1960 and 1989 are tragedies. Furthermore, the majority of them end with death – not exactly an optimistic view. Additionally, many of the films of NGC-directors like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and Edgar Reitz deal with self-image and identity as well as with the particular features of post-war West-German society. These facts among others lead to the question of what it actually meant and means to be German, or rather how this is represented in German films: what did and do German filmmakers think about their national identity, and furthermore, what does their way of storytelling and filmmaking – especially their pessimistic approach – reveal about their attitude towards their own nation and society?

Inga Scharf's book – a version of her doctoral thesis – contains not only an interesting but also a well-structured cultural studies investigation of the New German Cinema (NGC) between 1961 and 1989, i.e., between the construction of the Berlin Wall in Germany and its fall. Having grown up in the 1970s in West Germany near Kassel fifty kilometres from the German-German border and therefore confronted with a divided Germany, Scharf's opening question is 'What does it mean to be German?' (3). As she particularises, during studies in Germany and Great Britain her interest in national cinematic issues grew, and the construction of identities within the specific German context led her to take a closer look at films of the New

German Cinema. In this respect, her interest in German Identity in the post-war era is both personally and scientifically motivated.

Scharf divides her investigation into two parts: Part I is a kind of 'Setting the Scene'. Here, Scharf explores the historical and political background and, hence, the contextual parameters of the NGC: West Germany and its handling of the Holocaust, post-war identity, the Berlin Wall and the relationship between films and the socio-political developments as they are reflected in the NGC. Part II is dedicated to the analysis of eighty-eight productions of the NGC and might be regarded as the core of the whole study. This part contains three chapters, which all at once reflect the main thesis: it is space, time and society that frame both the analysis as such, and, beyond that, the constructions of national identity in West German films within the relevant period. The source of the investigation are films of national and international renowned directors of the New German Cinema like Fassbinder, Herzog, Reitz, Wenders, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Margarethe von Trotta, Paul Fleischmann and others.

In summary it can be stated, that Scharf provides an overview of new German films – which are important and somehow pioneering still today – from a cultural studies perspective. Moreover, she accomplishes in finding a common ground for all these films and its directors: their respective reflection of national identity, their arbitrary relationship towards Germany, and, last but not least, the consequential paradox of being 'homeless at home'. This investigation is informative and conclusive – for German as well as for non-German readers.

However, because of the need to find a common ground on which to base the films the study does not delve further into the respective differences between the particular films as such and between the different stages, that is between the films of the 1960s, the films of the 70s and finally those of the 80s. There is rather a tendency to generalise at the cost of the complexity of every particular film and filmmaker. Scharf does not investigate the specific conditions of film production and financing in West Germany: unlike other European cinema like the French Nouvelle Vague or the Italian Neorealism, the New German Cinema was primarily financed by the German Television.

Hence, the beginning and further history of the German Cinema is at the same time part of the history of the German TV.

Nevertheless, these omissions do not harm to the whole investigation. On the contrary, one would have gone beyond the scope of the essential question of national identity constructions if all other aspects of the New German Cinema had been considered. Thereby, this special cultural studies investigation is not only rewarding with regard to a particular era of films and filmmakers in (West) Germany and the questions of identity in this country in that period but it can also function as a point of departure for further studies, especially those of the contemporary German Cinema.

Following the two parts of the book and the unity of the three criteria mentioned above, I will take a closer look at the particular theses and arguments, and try to give some depictions of the analysed films.

Setting the Scene

As a kind of a gimmick Scharf drafts her book like a screenplay: by entitling the first chapter 'Establishing Shot' she sets up the scene's setting, its location and protagonists. Here, she examines German history after 1945: the Allied occupation of Germany, the re-education and denazification policies and the division of West and East Germany. By referring to the work of German historians and Germanists like Gerd Knischewski and Mary Fulbrook, she points out that some of the special features of post-war German society were post-national sentiments and the favouring of substitute identities. On the contrary there was – especially among sons and daughters of the war generation – less national pride, a growing orientation towards Europe and a self-association with American values. Tightly but informatively enough, Scharf recounts the formation of reform movements in 1968, the student movement, the so-called *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* or APO (18) and finally the terrorist group RAF. Public debates were dominated by historical issues, above all the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which could be translated as 'past processing' (18, 206). But there were also present- and future-orientated attempts, for example the idea of the constitutional patriotism, a concept brought in by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. To

solve the problem of German identity he proposed to substitute the allegiance to Germany as an ethnic or cultural group to a nation-state with particular democratic values. 'This national consciousness rising under the primacy of the political not only helped to develop a positive self-image of West-Germany; it also set the latter ideologically apart from East Germany. Regarding the problematic question of 'what it means to be German', it offered a post-national/pro-constitutional alternative to the former exclusively national conceptions' (20).

It is this complex backdrop, which formed the conceptions of self and identity in the NGC. The authors and directors, especially Rainer Werner Fassbinder, probably one of the most important and influential people within the NGC next to Alexander Kluge, chose a rather pessimistic approach by narrating tragedies with fatal endings in order to show what is wrong in the German society and to effect a societal change. Hence, as Scharf points out, the NGC was not only an artistic but also a socio-political movement. Accordingly, Scharf categorises the films of the NGC as 'social interventions since they used the medium's capacity to make narratives for change and resistance discursively available to a mass audience' (22). Referring to the NGC's founding members Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt – they were one of 27 signatories to the 'Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962', which instigated the formation of the NGC – Scharf draws on the concept of *Gegenöffentlichkeit* or counter-public sphere, which contains a critique of the reigning public sphere. Thus, the NGC tried to break the silence of a society which was not able or not willing to face up to its Nazi past, and invited a dialogue within this society. In this regard, as Scharf suggests, the NGC had a democratic influence on West Germany 'as it contributed to a crucial national *Gegenöffentlichkeit* which prepared the ground for further changes' (31).

Scharf's depiction of the socio-political and intellectual scene in post-war West Germany in the first part of the book is very informative and interesting but the explanation of complex philosophical issues like those of Habermas, Kluge/Negt or even Paul Ricœur is a little on the short side. Yet

Scharf sketches out those aspects which are crucial for her next examination: the construction and reflection of national identity in the NGC.

Space, Time, and Society

The second and at the same time main part of the book contains the analysis of films of the NGC. However, the films are not differentiated in terms of particular stages of the New German Cinema, that is the 1960s, 70s and 80s. By the same token, Scharf does not distinguish the specific style or method of every particular director or author. Thus, Scharf considers the works not from a film studies perspective but instead – as a whole – from a cultural studies perspective. Obviously, this strategy cannot provide a differentiated and all-encompassing view. On the other hand, this method mirrors clearly the specific socio-political and intellectual climate within West Germany between the 1960s and the 1980s; it gives an overview of the artistic and intellectual answers towards the arbitrary concept of national identity; furthermore, it presents the socio-political strength of the NGC as a movement.

Scharf structures her analysis on the following key elements: 1. She examines the importance of ‘place’ and ‘space’ in the films. 2. She focuses on ‘time’, that means: past-, present- and future-representations within the films. 3. She considers films in their relationship to ‘society’ and its constitutive features.

In respect of place the author distinguishes: 1. The national place as such; the national ‘inside’, 2. National borders which mark its limits; the international zone, 3. Other national entities; the national outside (46). Scharf confronts conceptions of Home (*Heimat*) with those of Foreignness (*Fremde*). *Heimat* especially is a highly symbolic place in the German national imaginary and, respectively, *Heimat*-films must be regarded as an intrinsically West German phenomenon of the reconstruction era after WWII (49). In comparison, the directors of the NGC oppose a kind of *Anti-Heimat* with contrasting symbols and figures. Traditional *Heimat*-films symbolise life, warmth, happiness, purity and fulfilment, whereas the NGC films deal with death, loneliness, the absence of love and coldness, as Scharf

demonstrates by analysing films of Herbert Achternbusch (*Servus Bayern / Bye Bye Bavaria*, 1977), Peter Fleischmann (*Jagdszenen aus Niederbayern / Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria*, 1968/9) and Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* (1984) series. The last especially gives weight to Scharf's idea of 'being homeless at home.' Reitz tells the story of a young soldier who returns traumatised from the First World War. Although being at home, that is in his village and with his family, he feels homeless. He leaves his village for America, because 'he realises that being "homeless" at home is more painful than being "homeless" in the *Fremde* where "homelessness" makes sense and, seemingly paradoxically, "belongs"' (62). Other films she investigates in regard of these aspects are Reinhard Hauff's *Der Mann auf der Mauer* (*The Man on the Wall*, 1982, and Wim Wenders's *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*, 1974). As Scharf concludes later on, the films of the NGC represent West Germany as a site of struggle over meaning, as a sensibility which includes, excludes and combines notions of *Heimat* and anti-*Heimat* as well as inside, border and outside (81).

The second important criterion is time: the films' reflections of past, presence and future. Scharf establishes a predominance of past-orientated approaches: 'the place called 'West-Germany' is in temporal terms largely represented as being stuck in the past' (137). Only a few of the films of the NGC go beyond accounts of temporal stasis by offering possible ways towards a positive presence and future. In this context, Scharf classifies the films of the NGC on the basis of the respective endings: She categorises eighty-eight NGC productions in terms of Happy Ending, Open Ending + (alluding to a happy ending), Happy Ending – (alluding to a disaster), and Tragedy/Death (123-133). The results reveal clearly the rather pessimistic traits of the New German Films between 1961 and 1989: Only 6% of them have Happy Endings, 12.5% have Open Endings, of which 6% end with an impending death. 69% or 61 of 88 films are tragedies of which 48% or 42 end with death (122-133). Those facts are illuminating in respect of the German cinema in general as well as of contemporary German films, insofar as the contemporary German cinema, i.e., the so-called Berliner Schule, is rather pessimistic, laconic and realistic at the same time. Representations of

Germanness and national identity might have changed after German-German reunification in 1989 and, furthermore, in a time of globalisation, but they do still exist. In this regard, Scharf's investigation can be regarded as a basis to which further examination (from a cultural studies or a film studies perspective) of the German and European cinema could relate. It would be very interesting to compare the constructions of national identity and present- or future-orientations of the NGC with those of the post-NGC, whose most renowned and important directors are Hans-Christian Schmid (*Storm*, 2009) and Fatih Akin (*Gegen die Wand / Head-On*, 2004). The German-Turkish filmmaker Akin represents the so called Second and Third Generation: sons and daughters of migrants which came to Germany in the 1950s and 60s. Akin's films address Germans from a multicultural view and, hence, thematise not only a new German identity but also an European identity.

A third key element of the analysis is 'society'. Besides place and time, a national way of being in the world has social dimensions. Scharf offers a discussion of the complex concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – community and society – in terms of the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. Scharf's film analyses focus on conceptions of Self and Otherness, of inclusion and exclusion as well as of I- and We-characters. One of the most important films in this regard is Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Fear eats the Soul*, 1974). This film is loosely connected to Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and deals with the taboo of love between generations as well as between members of different ethnic groups within a more or less homogenous and conservative society. Emmi, a sixty-year-old cleaning woman falls in love with Ali, a Moroccan guest worker. They are confronted with both prejudice and hate, which challenge their love. As Scharf points out convincingly the protagonists meet as 'two existentially "homeless" characters who have nothing left to lose except their life' (189). Emmi and Ali struggle to save themselves and one another through a love which will compensate for their lack and offer a new kind of home. However, both of them stay homeless: Ali is home sick in the *Fremde*, Emmi is homeless at home (191).

I have only given a short summary of this very complex, consistent, intelligent and readable study. In conclusion, the investigation sheds light on a part of German history and an important period of the German cinema. Its handling of the arbitrary concept of national identity from a cultural studies perspective is of particular interest. In this regard it could function as a supplement and enrichment to an investigation of the particular films from a film studies perspective.