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A "Nouvelle Vague Allemande"? Thomas Arslan's films in the context of the Berlin School

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Abstract. Since the beginning of the 1990s the directors Christian Petzold, Angela Schanelec and Thomas Arslan tried to break new ground within the German cinema by telling simple stories from everyday life with very little dramatic emphasis. Other filmmakers like Christoph Hochhäusler, Benjamin Heisenberg or Valeska Grisebach continued to follow that path and searched for new cinematic means to depict contemporary everyday life. Film criticism labelled this group of young German directors with the term "Berlin School" ("Berliner Schule"). The filmmakers of the Berlin School don't pursue a naïve notion of realism, their films rather try to detect the core of reality. One important source of inspiration for them is the movements of auteur filmmaking, somehow founded by the directors of the *Nouvelle Vague*. It is no coincidence that the Berlin School is called "*Nouvelle Vague Allemande*" in France. In my article I try to show some characteristic features and stylistic innovations of the Berlin School by analyzing Thomas Arslan's work more closely. His films like *Dealer* (1999) or *A fine Day* (*Der schöne Tag*, 2001) show an extraordinary formal rigour and a special relationship towards contemporary German reality. In my analysis of Arslan's movies I especially try to shed some light on the questions which special stylistic means he employs, how he manages it to produce an impression of realism, although using highly stylized filmic devices, and which relations to French filmmakers and auteur filmmaking may be discernable.

During the last decade a kind of "renaissance" of the German cinema took place. Caroline Link's *Nowhere in Africa* (*Nirgendwo in Africa*, 2001) and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006) won the Oscar for "Best Foreign Language Film." Other German films like *The Downfall* (*Der Untergang*, 2004) directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel or Marc Rothemund's *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (*Sophie Scholl – die letzten Tage*, 2005) were nominated for this probably most prestigious international film award.

What almost all of these award-winning German movies have in common is, that they do not deal with Germany's present, but focus on topics regarding its history. Additionally, they manage to present these serious topics in an entertaining manner and communicate a special view on German history, which seems to be appealing for an international audience.

Generally speaking German cinema seems to become internationally successful again – beyond the well known films from the New German Cinema during the seventies and eighties by directors like Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder or Edgar Reitz – and simultaneously preserve the claim to be artistically demanding.

But aside from the directors mentioned above, there are also some young German filmmakers who are much more radical in their ways of making films and their thinking about film as art. During the nineties, Angela Schanelec, Christian Petzold and Thomas Arslan studied together at the Berlin Film and Televison Academy "dffb" and made their first movies, such as *Das Glück meiner Schwester* (Angela Schanelec, 1995), *The State I am In* (*Die innere Sicherheit,* Christian Petzold, 2000) or *Siblings* (*Geschwister – Kardesler,* Thomas Arslan, 1997). Later on they were considered to be the founders of the so called "Berliner Schule" – "Berlin School."

The term "Berlin School" was invented in 2001 by the film reviewer Rainer Gansera in his article about Thomas Arslan's *A Fine Day* (*Der schöne Tag*, 2001).[1] He writes: "More and more clearly something like a Berlin School emerges, to which Thomas Arslan, Angela Schanelec and Christian Petzold belong. Right now, as the three begin to develop their peculiarities, also their similarities become more and more visible."[2] (Gansera 2001.) Later on filmmakers like Christoph Hochhäusler, Benjamin Heisenberg, Henner Winckler or Valeska Grisebach were associated with the Berlin School although most of them have not studied in Berlin.

Since the invention of the term "Berlin School" there have been numerous discussions about this labelling of certain German films and their directors. In their article in *Sight & Sound* Olaf Möller and Jason Wood try to summarize these

[1] There are some discussions about the question who coined the phrase "Berlin School." In an additional note to the online-version of the article *"Berliner Schule" – Eine Collage* (cf. Baute et al.), which initially appeared in the Austrian film-magazine *kolik.film*, Rüdiger Suchsland points out that Merten Worthmann used the term "Berlin School" in his review of Angela Schanelec's *Passing Summer (Mein langsames Leben,* 2001) (cf. Worthmann 2001) a few weeks before Gansera. Nevertheless most writers about the Berlin School assign the invention of this term to Gansera. And without a doubt, beginning with the year 2001, in the feuilletons of German newspapers the term "Berlin School" became an important label to characterize certain filmmakers.

[2] "Immer deutlicher zeichnet sich so etwas wie eine Berliner Schule ab, der Thomas Arslan, Angela Schanelec und Christian Petzold zugehören. Gerade jetzt, wo die drei dabei sind, ihre Eigenheiten auszuformulieren, werden auch ihre Gemeinsamkeiten deutlicher sichtbar." (Translation T. S.)

discussions: "Petzold is probably the Berlin School's most prominent member – though of course no one quite knows what the Berlin School is. But if even the origin of the name is a matter of dispute, at least everyone has a pretty good idea of what it signifies: a low-key cinema, devoted to the real as well as to realism, of a rare formal rigour and a stubborn tenderness." (Möller and Wood 2007, 40.)

Möller and Wood already mention two crucial common features of the Berlin School's movies: their special relationship towards realism and reality and their formal rigour. Marco Abel further specifies the special stylistic characteristics of these movies: "Many, though not all, Berlin School films are dominated by long takes, long shots, clinically precise framing, a certain deliberateness of pacing, sparse usage of non-diegetic music, poetic use of diegetic sound, and, frequently, the reliance on unknown or even non-professional actors who appear to be chosen for who they 'are' rather than for whom they could be" (Abel 2008).

These quotes already indicate that the Berlin School's filmmakers do not pursue a "naïve" concept of realism. They do not simply apply well-known markers of realism like wiggly camera movement or try to represent reality "as it is." In contrast, according to the formal rigour mentioned above, they often overtly display to the viewer that she is watching a movie by using unconventional, highly stylized filmic devices. They deviate from the spectators' expectations regarding conventional forms of filmic storytelling and challenge their viewing habits and everyday perception.

This also means that the directors assigned to the Berlin School try to capture the core of reality instead of a mere reproduction of actual events. So the filmmakers usually do not conceal from the audience that they deliver an individual, very personal view of reality by the means of their films. They simply tell stories from everyday life, often dealing with alienation and isolation in contemporary society.

This special approach to reality is, amongst others, rooted in the Berlin School's directors' effort to distinguish themselves from the commercial successful German comedies of the 1980s and 1990s by directors like Katja von Garnier or Sönke Wortmann, as well as from directors like Tom Tykwer or Wolfgang Becker, who successfully managed to "fuse art and commercial concerns" as Nick James puts it alluding to Tom Tykwer.[3] (James 2006, 27; see also Baute et al.). This means, as

[3] This fusion of artistic demands with (international) box office success is especially noticeable in the case of the movies of the production company "X Filme Creative Pool," founded in 1994 by the directors Tom Tykwer, Wolfgang Becker and Dani Levy together with the producer Stefan Arndt. This company was in charge of films like *Run Lola Run* (*Lola rennt*, Tom Tykwer, 1998) or *Goodbye Lenin* (*Good Bye Lenin!*, Wolfgang Becker, 2003) which found international critical acclaim for their innovative film style and simultaneously attracted a wide audience.

Marco Abel points out, that the Berlin School forms a kind of "counter-cinema:" "The films associated with this school distinguish themselves from other post-wall German films primarily in that they constitute the first significant (collective) attempt at advancing the *esthetics* of cinema within German narrative filmmaking since the New German Cinema […]." (Abel 2008) Instead of following economical considerations, filmmaking is a deeply personal issue for the directors of the Berlin School. They want to direct films beyond big box office successes, only committed to film as art and as a means of individual expression.

Accordingly, the films of the Berlin School often remain difficult to access and have only a small and a very special kind of audience. The viewers must be willing to accept the unconventional form, to invest some effort in watching the movies and to appreciate the special artistic design of the works.

After this brief overview I will now try to illustrate some of the characteristics mentioned above using the example of Thomas Arslan's work. Arslan is counted among the founders of the Berlin School. He is the son of a German-Turkish couple, born and grown up in Germany, except for some years during elementary school, when his father was doing his military service in Turkey. Hence, it is not surprising that Arslan's first movies, the so-called "migrant trilogy" consisting of *Siblings, Dealer* (1999) and *A Fine Day*, deal with the everyday life of young Turks, born and living in Germany. But even though the main characters in this trilogy are people of Turkish descent, the problems they are facing are not necessarily rooted in their origin.[4] This means that Arslan's films are not mere studies of the social environments young German-born Turks live in. Ekkehard Knörer observes that a kind of development is discernable in Arslan's films: "Thomas Arslan has moved from the Turkish-German Berlin-Kreuzberg settings of his first films *Siblings* (1997) and *Dealer* (1999) towards more general explorations of private and familial relations in today's society in *A Fine Day* and *Vacation*." (Knörer 2009). In *Vacation* (*Ferien*, 2007), his first film after the migrant trilogy, Arslan turns away from the German-Turkish living environment and tells the story of a reunion of a German family in the countryside close to Berlin. He focuses on the relations and conflicts between different generations, partly arising from the social circumstances they live in. Nevertheless, not only *Vacation* but all his movies also reflect the problems of contemporary German society in general, like many other films of the Berlin School.

[4] Without a doubt it must not be neglected that Arslan is a German-Turkish filmmaker and deals with the problems of German-born Turks in a special way in his migrant trilogy. But in my article I will focus on the features of the Berlin School that are discernible in Arslan's work. For the special depiction of young Turks living in Germany in Arslan's *Dealer* see for example Halle 2008, 146-156 or Dehn 1999.

To depict these problems in a very special and at first glance unobtrusive way Arslan and his Berlin School's colleagues use various means. First of all, most movies of the Berlin School deviate from patterns of classical narration. Regarding classical narration David Bordwell points out: "The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals. The principal causal agency is thus the character […]." (Bordwell 1985, 157) This means that films narrated in a classical way are dominated by external conflicts between characters or caused by "external circumstances." These external conflicts advance the plot and serve as starting points for the characters to act and to solve these conflicts caused by their environment. They also contribute to establish a coherent cause-and-effect chain, which is also characteristic of classical narration. Internal conflicts, this means conflicts arising within the psychology of the characters, for the most part only support and advance these external conflicts.

From my point of view in most films of the Berlin School a shift from external to mainly internal conflicts becomes apparent, which counteracts classical narrational patterns, that is to say how these filmmakers deal with conflicts in their movies is very characteristic for their work: Berlin School's movies avoid a classical construction in terms of conflicts.

Let me try to illustrate this by Arslan's film *Dealer*. It tells the story of Can, who earns his money by dealing drugs on the streets of Berlin. He is the father of a three-year-old girl and his girlfriend Jale wants him to stop his criminal activities. She is afraid that he will get caught by the police. Can promises her to change his life, but all his attempts, such as working as a kitchen help, fail. He is not able to quit selling drugs. Finally the police put a stop to his game and he is sentenced to prison for four years.

On the one hand several external conflicts are discernable in *Dealer*: the policeman Erdal pursues Can and wants to force him to betray his dealer-friends to the police, especially Hakan, who provides them with the drugs they sell. Can struggles through the external circumstances, tries to make his living and to solve his conflict with Hakan, who starts to lose his confidence in Can's reliability as a drug dealer, since he is often seen with the policeman Erdal. On the other hand Can's internal conflicts outrank the external ones. The film primarily centres on his inability to act and to make independent decisions. In an interview Arslan

states for his film: "I was not interested in a superficial kind of action. Rather in the description of a mental state. The main character finds himself in a state of confusion, which makes it impossible for him to make his choice."[5] (Holz 1999, 14.) This "mental state" of Can is closely related with the internal conflicts he has to deal with: he wants to take responsibility for his child and is eager to save his relationship with Jale, but he sees no possibilities for him to change his dangerous way of life. He is caught within his social environment, unable to pursue a goal independently, which would lead him out of his desperate situation. Instead, his restless mental state is supported by the experience of loneliness, helplessness and the lack of sound social relations, which at the same time mirrors the problems of the contemporary society. This experience is fostered by the external conflicts Can encounters. Thus, the classical relation between the types of conflicts is turned upside down: not the internal conflicts support the external ones, but the external ones support the internal conflicts.

The focus on the character's inner life, which can also be found in many other works of the Berlin School, for example in the films of Angela Schanelec, affects the overall narrative construction of the movies: they tend to present their stories in an episodic way. The classical cause-and-effect chain is neglected and an elliptical narration comes to the fore. This is also discernable in the construction of the characters. Like Can, they seem rather aimless compared to the goal-oriented characters of classical feature films. Instead of showing clear-cut motivations and goals for their actions, the characters act rather unintentionally, forced by the needs of their surroundings. The stories told in the movies do not end with a "decisive victory or defeat" or a "resolution of the problem" (Bordwell 1985, 157), instead most conflicts remain unsolved.

An additional consequence of the features described above is that the Berlin School's movies avoid classical suspense-structures and seem rather unspectacular. As a result, a lot of viewers are completely bored by them. These films refuse a passive consumer attitude but demand very active spectators instead who are willing to detect the deeper meaning concealed behind the restrained narrations. Ekkehard Knörer for example points out: "No wonder, then, that the works of the 'Berlin School' have been called cerebral, boring or, even worse, very French. A less superficial look, however, will reveal that this is filmmaking of the most meticulous and therefore rewardingly intense and rich kind: Every single image, every gesture, every cut and every camera movement counts and every

[5] „Ich dagegen war nicht an einer vordergründigen Art von Aktion interessiert. Eher an der Beschreibung eines mentalen Zustandes. Die Hauptfigur befindet sich in einem Zustand der Verwirrung, die es ihm unmöglich macht, eine eigenständige Wahl zu treffen." (Translation T. S.)

single element adds another layer of often ambiguous meaning to what at first sight seem simple plots and constellations" (Knörer 2009).

With this statement Knörer establishes that not only the narrative construction, but also the camerawork, editing or acting style are very specific to the Berlin School's movies. This can also be shown by the example of Thomas Arslan. The appeal of *A Fine Day* for example is, amongst others, based on the striking use of cinematic devices and its extraordinary formal rigour. The film tells the story of one day in the life of the young actress Deniz. During this day she strolls through Berlin, breaks up with her boyfriend, visits her mother, meets her sister, attends a casting for a job and gets to know Diego, an enigmatic Portuguese man living in Berlin.

In comparison with *Dealer*, the external conflicts and the orientation towards a pursued goal are even weaker in *A fine day*. Moving through Berlin Deniz seems to slip from one situation into the next, and although her destinations while wandering around the city are clearly defined, her personal aim and what she is searching for remains obscure. No "clear-cut problems" or "specific goals" of Deniz are discernable. The viewer has to detect by herself what she is searching for, for example a happy life and real love. These "goals" are not only communicated by the dialogues, but also and perhaps even more so by the stylistic construction of the movie.

By analyzing a scene situated fairly at the beginning of the movie I will try to show this special stylistic construction. In this scene Deniz meets her boyfriend Jan in a café. Jan complains about her being late and that he has waited in the café for an hour. The scene continues with an everyday conversation about her clothing. Then the topic of the conversation suddenly changes. Jan talks about the very serious issue of quitting university. He sees no future for his studies and cannot stand his career-oriented fellow students. Deniz can't understand Jan's plans and accuses him of always giving up too fast in difficult situations. After this, the topic of the conversation suddenly changes again. Now the focus of the dialogue is on the discussion of their relationship. Deniz is jealous because she has seen Jan with another woman. She blames him for looking at other women who attract him. As a reaction, Jan hurts Deniz by stating that she would do everything to get ahead in her career as an actress. Deniz is annoyed and runs away. It becomes evident that they will end their relationship and Deniz will break up with Jan.

So which exceptional stylistic devices are discernible in this scene? First of all the camerawork and editing are striking. On the one hand they adhere to classical conventions by establishing time and space at the beginning of the scene. The viewer has no problems to recognize where and when the dialogue takes place.

On the other hand the classical shot – reverse shot pattern is violated twice in this the scene. Instead of a reverse shot a tracking shot is deployed which seems to revolve around the characters, the first time around the back of Jan, the second time around Deniz's back. Both times the tracking shot appears when Jan insists to stop talking about a topic, hence it serves as a kind of caesura or interruption of the dialogue. The first tracking shot ends the conversation about Jan's plans to quit his studies, the second one delivers only a moment of relaxation before the quarrel about their relationship continues. Although the motivation for the tracking shot can be explained by a close observation of the relation between the deployed stylistic device and the content of the dialogue, it is very salient that the established stylistic pattern of shot – reverse shot is neglected – as it is often the case in the works of Thomas Arslan.

Another deviation from well-known patterns of editing is also recognizable in the scene. Deniz and Jan talk about the waitress working at the café. Deniz asks Jan if he thinks the waitress is good-looking, but the editing denies the spectator an opportunity to glance at the person they are talking about, although this would be necessary for the viewer to form her own opinion about what the waitress looks like. Thus important information regarding the content of the dialogue is suppressed. The spectator, however, expects that she gets as much information as necessary to understand the dialogue or to judge if the quarrel about the good looking girls is justified.

Furthermore the acting style catches one's eye. Instead of acting emotionally and upset, the characters seem rather cold-hearted. The acting style shows only rudimentary signs of the characters' emotional state. Their faces are almost motionless and do not display much about their inner lives. Additionally, Deniz and Jan talk without vocal expression for the most parts of the dialogue. The voice intonation does not reflect their inner feelings and the speech rhythm appears hounded and restless. The presentation of the serious topics discussed in their conversation does not fit with the viewer's expectations of how such an emotional dialogue should be staged. Constructed in a classical way, the emotional movement of the characters would be mirrored in the acting style, stressing the emotions the characters are experiencing.

That is to say, Arslan's use of cinematic devices often contradicts established conventions of filmmaking and undermines the expectations of the audience. Amongst others, this facilitates and stimulates a new kind of perception on the viewer's side and is part of the special approach to realism the Berlin School stands for. Regarding the films of the Berlin School, Marco Abel writes: "It is,

however, just this esthetic abstraction from empirical reality that affords viewers an intensified encounter with their own social reality, as they find themselves confronted with the necessity to rethink the very relation between what and *how* they see. Put differently, the (hoped-for) effect of such esthetic intensification of the act of seeing is to bring about a momentary suspension of our habituated tendency to read images through the framework of representational realism. By affirming the image *as* image, the Berlin School films thus effectively transform reality, forcing viewers to engage the seemingly familiar as something unfamiliar while never alienating us from what we see." (Abel 2008.) In the scene described above Arslan shows an everyday conversation dealing with everyday problems in an unfamiliar way. He, as many other filmmakers of the Berlin School, delivers a very close but at the same time aloof observation of the presented situation, partly realized with unconventional stylistic structures. As a result, the spectator is less involved in the action, she is kept at a sort of distance. This supports a new way of seeing and forces the viewer to draw her own conclusions about the events revealed in the movie. The attention is directed to a deeper meaning behind the situation shown in the movie and behind the words spoken in the dialogue. For example, it should become clear that what is depicted in the scene is not only the relationship between Deniz and Jan, but also the question of living together, the ability to engage with relationships, loneliness, alienation or the search for happiness of Deniz and of our society altogether.

Thus the spectator might recognize that the Berlin School's movies do not merely tell boring stories about boring people. Instead, they want to deliver a deeper insight into the prevailing attitude towards life and the condition of our contemporary capitalist society without providing simple solutions to conflicts and problems. Georg Seeßlen states: "The films of the 'Berlin School' try to depict capitalism. As a living space and a lifetime of human beings, who do not merge into it and do not live up to it."[6] (Seeßlen 2007.)

All in all Arslan and other Berlin School's filmmakers' approach to realism is characterized by stylization and a special kind of alienation, which in my point of view have the potential to raise the awareness of prevalent social problems. Knörer summarizes their attitude towards realism: "The aesthetic concept underlying most of the 'Berlin School' films might be summed up as a realism intent on avoiding the pitfalls of naturalism. It is a realisms [sic!] that avoids all kinds of manipulative effects, ranging from plot point oriented storytelling to sound tracks heavy on

[6] „Die Filme der ‚Berliner Schule' versuchen, den Kapitalismus darzustellen. Als Lebensraum und als Lebenszeit von Menschen, die nicht in ihm aufgehen und ihn nicht erfüllen." (Translation T. S.)

music. It is an idea of realism that can to some degree, most conspicuously in Arslan's earlier films, go hand in hand with the defamiliarization found in a Bressonian scepticism towards the acting technique." (Knörer 2009.)

Knörer's reference to Bresson's reflections on acting in the context of Arslan's work is also recognizable in *A Fine Day*. Although some reviews state that the peculiar acting style of Serpil Turhan as Deniz already described above results from her missing acting skills (cf. Fizel 2001), I do not think that this is the case. From my point of view her acting style rather relies on Bresson's thoughts regarding the actor as a so-called "model" which should not act, but simply be itself (cf. Bresson 1999). For this reason Bresson preferred to work with non-professional actors, like Arslan does in his migrant trilogy similar to other Berlin School's filmmakers, for example Valeska Grisebach or Henner Winckler.

Arslan's admiration for Bresson is not only recognizable in the acting style, but also in the visual style and narrative construction of many of his movies. A scene at the beginning of *Dealer,* for example, looks like a kind of homage to Bresson's film *Pickpocket* (1959). In this scene Can and his dealer-friends are selling drugs. It is strongly reminiscent of the famous Gare de Lyon-scene in *Pickpocket*, where Michel, together with his "colleagues," steals the wallets of passengers in the train station. The crooks in both movies work in a team and support each other to be successful in their criminal activities. In addition, the focus on the hands is striking in both scenes. In *Dealer* drugs and money pass from one hand to another, like the stolen wallets in *Pickpocket*, followed by fluent camera movements, only interrupted by short stops and close ups on the hands. In *Dealer* Arslan also introduces a kind of framing of the story through the protagonist's voice-over narration, which can be found in Bresson's film, too.

But not only Bresson serves as a point of reference, also other auteur-filmmakers are cited in Arslan's movies. In *A Fine Day* Deniz for example works in a dubbing studio and dubs Rohmer's *A Summer's Tale* (*Conte d'été*, 1996). Arslan himself stresses these allusions to auteur-filmmakers in an interview about *A Fine Day*: "Within the movie there are more or less explicit references to movies that are important to me. The film that Deniz re-narrates from her subjective point of view in the casting-scene is Maurice Pialats 'A nos amours.' The works of Eustache, Pialat, Rohmer, Kiarostami (to name just a few) do not stop to accompany and to concern me."[7] (Seidel 2001.)

[7] „Es gibt innerhalb des Films mehr oder weniger deutliche Verweise auf Filme, die mir wichtig sind. Bei dem Film, den Deniz in der Casting-Szene auf subjektiv gefärbte Weise nacherzählt, handelt es sich um A nos amours von Maurice Pialat. Die Arbeiten von Eustache, Pialat, Rohmer, Kiarostami (um nur einige zu nennen) hören nicht auf, mich zu begleiten und zu beschäftigen." (Translation T.S.)

With all these references to French filmmaking and filmmakers somehow related to the *Nouvelle Vague* it is not surprising that French critics coined the phrase *Nouvelle Vague Allemande* for the films of the Berlin School. The *Cahiers du Cinéma* published a long article about this "New Wave" in German cinema and some of the Berlin School's movies have even been distributed in France, like *School Trip* (*Klassenfahrt*, Henner Winckler, 2002), *Marseille* (Angela Schanelec, 2004) or *This Very Moment* (*Milchwald*, Christoph Hochhäusler, 2003) (cf. Suchsland 2005). They received huge critical acclaim from the French reviewers which is especially remarkable because the films of the Berlin School had been among the first German movies that were noticed in France for quite a long time. Christoph Hochäusler's *Low Profile* (*Falscher Bekenner*, 2005) and Benjamin Heisenberg's *Sleeper* (*Schläfer*, 2005) for example premiered in France at the Cannes Film Festival in the context of the festival's section "Un Certain Regard" (cf. Suchsland 2005).

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the term "Berlin School" as well as *Nouvelle Vague Allemande* are inventions of film critics and the filmmakers themselves often even refuse to be subsumed under this label. They emphasize their individual originality and assert that it might be better to see what is called the Berlin School more as a loose network of filmmaking friends than as a clear-cut artistic movement. In an interview on the occasion of the world premiere of his movie *The Robber* (*Der Räuber,* 2010), Benjamin Heisenberg for example remarks: "The Berlin School as a term was never particularly inspiring for me because I do not think that we are a school. We are just filmmakers who have met in Berlin, but who come from very different academies. The Berlin School from my point of view is a conglomerate of filmmakers who know each other."[8] (Oßwald 2010.) But without a doubt the perception as a group of filmmakers facilitated to attract attention for their works in Germany, besides commercial successful big-budget, Oscar-nominated "mainstream" productions. And without a doubt it seems obvious that there are some contemporary German films and directors, sharing a common ground and some similarities, even though nothing like a "manifesto" exists. These similarities, as I have tried to show by Thomas Arslan's work, might be the way the films of the Berlin School deal with reality and their special kind of formal rigour. Although open criticism or political statements will rarely be found in their films, it is significant for them that they try to depict the problems of contemporary society. The accusation of loneliness and emptiness in a modern, capitalistic society always resonates in their movies.

[8] „Die Berliner Schule als Begriff hat mich nie besonders inspiriert, weil ich nicht finde, dass wir eine Schule sind. Wir sind einfach Filmemacher, die sich in Berlin getroffen haben, aber aus ganz unterschiedlichen Hochschulen stammen. Die Berliner Schule ist für mich ein Konglomerat von Filmemachern, die sich kennen." (Translation T. S.)

It might be overhasty to refer to these filmmakers as a genuine "New Wave" however. Dennis Lim writes: "French critics have called the Berlin School a 'Nouvelle Vague Allemande,' a German counterpart to the rabble-rousing French New Wave. Mr. Petzold prefers to think of the revolution in more modest – and more concrete – terms. 'With the Nouvelle Vague they set out to destroy what came before,' he said. 'In our case we thought we just had to reinvent something.'" (Lim 2009) But what did they reinvent? They reinvented to focus on filmmaking as art, on the filmmaker as auteur and not to be afraid to take risks in making films that do not fit within the commercial system of the film industry which is oriented towards the number of viewers or box-office success.

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