

# “Amerika gibt’s überhaupt nicht”: Notes on the German Heritage Film

*Lutz Koepnick*

The mid-1980s saw the emergence of what Andrew Higson has called the British heritage film, a cycle of period pieces whose central pleasures lay in “the artful and spectacular projection of an elite, conservative vision of the national past.”<sup>1</sup> As defined by Higson, the heritage film avoided the stylistic signatures of the European art film yet often explored literary sources and domestic cultural traditions as marks of authenticity. Heritage films privileged *mise-en-scène* over narrative development, fluid camera moves over fast cutting, self-conscious panorama shots over close-ups. Concerned with character, place, and atmospheric detail rather than goal-oriented action, the British heritage films of the 1980s reproduced English history as a museal object of identification, consumption, and exportability. In the United States, these films—e.g., *Another Country* (1984), *A Room with a View* (1985), *A Passage to India* (1985), and *Little Dorrit* (1987)—were shown primarily in art house theaters. In their European context, however, they represented a new cinema of high production values and popular appeal that aspired to supplement, rather than challenge, the dominant role of Hollywood on the global market.

However conservative in outlook, the British heritage film evidenced a dialectic of reification and utopia that Fredric Jameson locates in all works of modern mass culture, namely, the fact that even when their function lies in the legitimation of the present order these works “cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter’s service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice.”<sup>2</sup> British heritage films of the 1980s served as both a complement and a corrective to Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal call for universal entrepreneurship. In converting national history

into a viable commodity, heritage films on the one hand echoed and capitalized on Thatcher's celebratory view of the marketplace. Carefully crafted, their mise-en-scène reconstructed the past as a profitable showcase of sights and sounds. On the other hand, however, at the level of narrative development, the heritage cycle often confronted Thatcher's economic policies with memories of a past in which liberal-humanist values triumphed over the logic of the market. Though rigorously commodifying the past, the employment of national history in these films could only succeed because it, in so many ways, defied Thatcher's credo of competitive individualism and instrumental reason. The national thus emerged as a site of striking ambivalence, becoming an imaginary in which different modes of identification and consumption competed with each other.

Shell-shocked by the demise of New German Cinema, a climate of cultural stagnation, and a radical transformation of the domestic media landscape, the German cinema of the 1980s offered little that matched the historicist fantasies of British cinema. A few exceptions proving the rule, it was in fact not until the second half of the 1990s that German cinema set out to develop its own version of the heritage genre. The last years of the old and the first year of the new millennium saw the sudden rise of sweeping historical melodramas that reproduced the national past, including that of the Nazi period, as a source of nostalgic pleasures and positive identifications. Similar to what a number of British directors produced in the mid-1980s, German feature productions such as *Comedian Harmonists* (1997, Joseph Vilsmaier); *Aimée & Jaguar* (1999, Max Färberböck); *Viehjud Levi* (1999, Didi Danquart); *Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod—Gloomy Sunday* (1999, Rolf Schübel); *Marlene* (2000, Joseph Vilsmaier); and *Gripsholm* (2000, Xavier Koller) turned the nation's past into a space for the spectacular display of heritage properties, whether material or symbolic in nature. And yet, due to a fundamentally different political, social, economic, and cultural context, German cinema's turn to the past diverged from its British forerunner in both aesthetic and ideological terms. First, whereas the British heritage film displaced the experience of a multicultural present with pastoral images of upper-class imperial grandeur, most of the new German melodramas aspire nothing less than to reclaim sites of social consensus against the grain of historical trauma. Unlike the British heritage film, which reconstructed national history through the eyes of the past's social elite, the German model by and large pictures political elites (i.e., the Nazis) as the true nemesis of the nation's (multicultural) story. Second, in con-

trast to the prominent role of highbrow literary material in the British heritage film, recent German melodramas are eager to parade the textures and traditions of the popular. They index German mass culture as a site of authenticity that once provided powerful alternatives to Hollywood. In some cases, these films even reinscribe the popular as the nation's most viable common ground—one that dissolved under the historical pressure of Nazi politics but that German filmmakers ought to recuperate for the present. Third, and finally, whereas the British heritage cycle relied on a visual style reminiscent of early cinema's aesthetics of attraction, German historical melodramas spend considerable time staging the past as a sonic spectacle of first rank. Recalling the extent to which German cinema since the early 1930s was bound up with sound and film music, German heritage films around 2000 produce the acoustical domain as the primary site at which national identity comes into being and can be consumed most pleasurably.

As seen from the vantage point of ideology criticism, the new German heritage film no doubt serves urgent political needs and functions. The cycle's retrospective images of Jewish-German reconciliation, as well as its juxtaposition of pleasurable privacy and violent publicness, feed directly into formative discourses of the self-proclaimed Berlin Republic. Many of these films glorify successful moments of German-Jewish cooperation prior to or even during the Nazi period in order to reconstruct the nation's narrative and reintegrate German Jews into hegemonic definitions of German cultural identity. As they frequently play out the seemingly authentic textures of the popular against the disintegrating force of the political, these films clear historical debts so as to open a path for a normal German future. But to understand the rise of the German-Jewish heritage film merely in terms of ideological opportunism misses the point. For the heritage film's self-confident reinscription of the historical and the national, at the same time, reflects a radical transformation of German film production and consumption caused by new government subsidy policies on both the federal and the regional level; by greater influence of television officials on film boards and funding decisions; by new arrangements between film academies, television stations, and commercial producers; by technological revolutions in the exhibition sector; and last, but not least, by significant investments of prominent American distributors in a select number of German film productions.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the German auteurs of the 1970s and early 1980s, this new cinema of heritage properties is clearly guided by Hollywood standards of industrial filmmaking and

box-office success. It embraces the national not in defiance of Hollywood but in a conscious effort to inhabit certain niches left uninhabited by Hollywood's transnational drive. The rediscovery of national history thus emerges as an integral moment of globalization itself, not as its other. It illustrates the fact that globalization, far from leveling local differences, has produced new desires for localization, that is, a global resurgence of demarcated group identities predicated on often narrowly defined markers of ethnic, regional, or religious belonging.

Breaking with the dissident designs of New German Cinema, German heritage films circa 2000—unwittingly—exhibit the national as a thoroughly globalized category. They crisscross former territorializations of culture, yet at the same time they re-vision the nation as bounded and distinctive. In doing so, these films not only challenge the ways in which previous generations of German filmmakers sought to define German national cinema in critical opposition to and conversation with American filmmaking. They also urge us (1) to question whether, in face of today's global flows of sounds, images, technologies, moneys, and meanings, concepts such as Americanism and Hollywoodization are still persuasive; and (2) to rethink whether we still can or should uphold one of the principal tropes of modernist film discourse, namely, the grounding of cultural diversity and critical film practice in the normative concept of national cinema. It is to these two questions that I shall turn in the following pages, reading the rise of the German heritage film during the late 1990s not as a return of nineteenth-century inventions of national identity but, on the contrary, as a symptomatic and theoretically challenging expression of postmodern globalization.

THE NARRATIVE OF German-American film relations between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s has often been told. Curiously combining Americanist and anti-Americanist stances, the auteurs of New German Cinema viewed Hollywood cinema simultaneously as a legitimate alternative to German popular filmmaking and as a harbinger of cultural imperialism. In most cases, they embraced America not as a tangible space but as a playground for the imagination, an imaginary where tormented German subjects could realize identity by experiencing themselves as others.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Elsaesser has separated New German Cinema's projective fantasies about America into three different scenarios.<sup>5</sup> In the perspective of one group of filmmakers, postwar American cultural imperialism simply continued the Nazi destruction of authentic German culture. In a gesture of Oedipal revolt, German

cinema's task was to contest Germany's colonization and, by exploring the darkest chapters of German history, find new forms of national authenticity (Syberberg, Herzog). Represented by directors such as Wenders or Fassbinder, the second strategy was that of a discriminating exploration of Hollywood cinema as a source of possible identifications. It entailed the orphan's search for alternative father figures (Ford, Ray, Sirk) who would not trigger neurotic dependencies. The third prototype, finally, focused on the painful formation of German subjectivity, though with the conspicuous omission of any reference to American popular culture or Hollywood at all. Mother-daughter bonds in this paradigm became the primary trope of recalling the ruptures of twentieth-century German history and of recapturing a lost sense of expressive authenticity (Sanders-Brahms, Brückner).

However projective it may have been, the image of America and Hollywood allowed German filmmakers of the 1970s to reject certain institutional practices at home and to build a critical cinema of formal experimentation and social commentary. A reverse image that German auteurs loved to hate, Hollywood demonstrated the need for a German cinema in which government subsidies could allow for the possibility of cultural diversity, political awareness, and modernist innovation. New German Cinema's struggle against Hollywood thus clearly affirmed Paul Willemen's argument that we should not equate discourses about cinema's national specificity with nationalist ideology, that is, with the invention of national identity as homogenous, unified, and primordial.<sup>6</sup> Defining their own aesthetic practices against the backdrop of both Hollywood filmmaking and Nazi coordination, the filmmakers of the 1970s considered the nation not only as something that could be reinvented and reappropriated by historically situated actors but also as a space of internal diversification and contestation, a space of fractured identifications, heterogeneous traditions, and embattled hegemonies. Shaped by the experience of the 1960s revolutions, filmmakers such as Wenders and Fassbinder were far from envisaging the national as a site of unproblematic consensus and archaic belonging, a site free of dispute, difference, or pluralistic possibility.

And yet, the point I would like to make here is that this reinvention of the nation as a space of difference and multiplicity in large measures rested on a binary and often essentializing reading of Hollywood filmmaking and its relation to the category of national cinema. Eager to establish frameworks for critical authorship, the auteurs of New German Cinema understood the concept of national cinema mostly in terms of a cinema's geographical base of production. National cine-

mas, according to this view, entailed distinct sets of artistic signatures, production strategies, and state policies territorializing cultural expressions within the demarcated space of the nation-state. In their thinking about national cinema, the filmmakers of the 1970s were, on the other hand, much less concerned about the viewer's productivity of consumption and how German audiences might produce differential articulations of non-German films within local contexts. This production-oriented reading of national cinema was then projected back onto Hollywood; it instigated a reifying definition of Hollywood filmmaking as American national cinema. Time after time, the auteurs of the 1970s reduced Hollywood to a mere tool implanting American values, meanings, and styles of expression in the world's subconscious. They did not see Hollywood as a, however ideological, lingua franca of international film production and consumption, nor did they recognize Hollywood's constitutive ability to negotiate between different cultural and ethnic constituencies; to open its doors to foreign talent, themes, and styles; and to cater to worldwide markets with products that may yield many, locally specific appropriations. Determined to reconstruct "a legitimate film culture in Germany again,"<sup>7</sup> New German Cinema often denied possible tensions in Hollywood's simultaneous role as a capitalist industry and as a fantastic country of the mind.<sup>8</sup> It obscured Hollywood's own narrative of cross-cultural barter and imaginary dislocation and, thereby, obscured the fundamental ambiguity of Hollywood filmmaking regarding the issue of national identity.

Any critical account of film history, writes Douglas Gomery, must begin with Hollywood, "not because the cinema industry based in the United States has produced the best films (by some criteria) but because it has forced all other national cinemas to begin by dealing with the power of Hollywood as an industry."<sup>9</sup> Whether we like it or not, Hollywood always precedes any thinking about cinema in national terms, for any labeling of cinemas as national today reacts to the already established rule of Hollywood transnationalism. Itself unthinkable without a long history of migration, exile, and cultural give-and-take, Hollywood is best understood as a supraterritorial language in which—or at the margins of which—other cinemas set up the national as a minor language. Though we may laud their vision of German cinema as a critical space of identity *and* difference, of questioning hegemonic ideology and the marketplace, German filmmakers of the 1970s often failed to recognize the curious belatedness and relational nature of national cinemas. Instead of understanding Hollywood as a global industry forcing different film industries to define themselves as

national in the first place, New German Cinema secretly hoped for nothing less than the impossible: to restore German national cinema as an originary presence, a self-regulatory space of authentic expressiveness independent from anything beyond its institutional demarcations.

AT FIRST SIGHT one might easily assume that German heritage films around 2000 directly continue the anti-American strands of postwar German culture, including the anti-American tirades of such filmmakers as Werner Herzog and Hans Jürgen Syberberg. German heritage films abound with stereotypes about American culture as inauthentic. The stereotype, which—according to Homi Bhabha—is a discursive strategy that “vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated,”<sup>10</sup> here serves the ideological construction and demarcation of a negative other. In Joseph Vilsmaier’s *Comedian Harmonists*, the act of translating American musical models—The Revelers—into German expression is shown as an act of setting the foreign straight and replacing it with homemade objects of greater cultural depth.<sup>11</sup> When the Dietrich character in Vilsmaier’s *Marlene* returns to Germany after shooting *Morocco*, she laments: “The Americans are meshuga. No culture. Goethe, Schiller—they’re unheard of. Mozart, Brahms, Schubert—what’s that? And the food—ugh.” Vilsmaier’s America is a full-fledged society of the spectacle. Anxiously repeating what German discourses on modern America seem to have known all along, Vilsmaier’s stereotypical America privileges superficial distraction over interpretation, appearance over essence. Accordingly, American culture overwhelms individual minds and generates artificial emotions. Sensory bombardments produce either narcotic intoxication or endless stupor, while mass cultural technologies displace the real and leave no space for lived experience.

Nothing would be more wrong, however, than to think that in its effort to capitalize on the national the heritage film would simply reiterate New German Cinema’s dream of cinematic nation building. Supplying postwar Germany with a chimera of national normalcy, the German heritage film in fact reveals a thinking about nation, national cinema, and Hollywood filmmaking that differs greatly from the films of the 1970s. Unlike New German Cinema, heritage films want to be user-friendly and easy to digest. Their visual surfaces look like designer products, their narrative shapes are powered by melodramatic formulae. Mellifluous editing replaces the elongated, pensive takes of New German Cinema. Self-contained stories and special effects gloss over

what looked fractured and artisanal more than twenty years earlier. The German heritage film's foregrounding of national themes thus no longer results in a formal challenge of Hollywood cinema, but it instead relies on a straightforward adoption of Hollywood modes of production and storytelling. It is not the audience's but rather the critic's toes on which this newest German cinema seeks to step. Whatever we may consider national about it, this cinema achieves its status because it understands how to gratify audiences for whom Hollywood filmmaking represents a native idiom, a major language. Whatever this cinema may do in order to reorder the paths of German national history, it does so by abandoning the oppositional stance of New German Cinema. That in spite of such fundamental differences the heritage film, at the level of textual enunciation, repeats some of the anti-American stereotypes of New German Cinema might be puzzling at first. As I will argue in a moment, however, the anti-Americanist tropes of the heritage film serve dramatically different functions from those during the 1970s. Whereas the figure of anti-Americanism, for the auteurs of the 1970s, was meant to produce national identity through demarcating external difference and emphasizing internal diversification, the postwall heritage film enlists anti-Americanism in order to mask what it knows all too well, namely, the fact that in a world of global flows national belonging is an effect of the transnational rather than a primordial essence.

German heritage films circa 2000 document the extent to which in today's world touristic self-representations have become one of the dominant ways of articulating collective belonging. They actively produce nationality and locality on the basis of what David Harvey has called the postmodern rule of flexible accumulation: a regime of capitalist reproduction that places dissimilar meanings, traditions, images, sounds, and experiences on a single plane of instant availability.<sup>12</sup> Heritage identity emerges as a property, as something one can stick in one's pocket and take along. It withstands geographical border crossings, cultural crossovers, and "the inevitability of fantasy."<sup>13</sup> While for the authors of New German Cinema identity resulted from encountering and leaving behind the American other, the heritage film pictures the self as originary and authentic. Heritage identity can do without passing through states of otherness. Rather than emulating, mimicking, or inverting the other, the German self is shown as a given. It is firmly anchored in the semantic inventories of banal nationalism—the circulation of national symbols in everyday life, the seemingly trivial evocation of the nation in sporting events, news broadcasts, or musical

performances.<sup>14</sup> Heritage films reinvent the national past with the help of an excessive accumulation of visual and sonic signifiers. Their image of Germany provides what foreign tourists expect to see when traveling to exotic locales: the pleasures of uncontaminated and perennial locality. Heritage films nourish fantasies of contiguity powerful enough to mend the decentering of home, identity, and body in modern history; but they do so by placing the nation's subjects outside of their own culture, asking them to look at their own lives like tourists who typify different cultures as sites of radical—and, hence, pleasurable—alterity.

Nowhere perhaps does the German heritage film's reconstruction of the national as a global tourist attraction become clearer than in Joseph Vilsmaier's two-hour opus *Marlene* (2000). Ever since his first successful feature film, *Herbstmilch* (1988), Vilsmaier (born in 1939) has occupied the role of a German Merchant-Ivory: a producer, director, screenwriter, and cinematographer of historical melodramas transforming the national past into a decorative figure that is designed to fascinate. However, unlike his Indian-American counterparts, whose most well-known films have reviewed British history through the eyes of high-literary sources, Vilsmaier has dedicated his films to recuperating the popular as a site of national coherence and self-representation. The popular, in Vilsmaier's films, opposes the disruptive violence of public history and enables liminal spaces of authenticity and self-expression. It bridges local particularity and sutures what is different into a unified whole, including the dissimilar fates of Jews and Germans as suggested in the 1997 *Comedian Harmonists*.

Vilsmaier's *Marlene* attempts to reclaim Marlene Dietrich as a national icon whose popular appeal preceded Hollywood, undermined Nazi power, and therefore can retrospectively heal the open wounds of German history. A stylish 18 million deutsche mark production, *Marlene* presents the heroine's sights and sounds as a national heritage: a source of nostalgic identification and present-day regeneration. It is therefore no coincidence that it takes Vilsmaier almost an hour to have the protagonist arrive in southern California and start shooting on Paramount's sets. For Vilsmaier's project is not to explore the trade of European images and imaginaries as a constitutive element of Hollywood filmmaking during the 1930s and 1940s. Rather, what Vilsmaier's film wants to show is that Weimar Germany entertained a Hollywood of its own and that—in contrast to Hollywood—Weimar culture, by integrating industrial mass culture (the film industry) with preindustrial forms of entertainment (cabaret, theater, popular song and

dance), provided meanings and pleasures far superior to the Fordist products of American cinema. *Marlene* introduces Dietrich as a sensual, carefree pleasure seeker who prior to going to Hollywood galvanized the popular and the national, the industrial and the preindustrial, into timeless expressions. Josef von Sternberg may have recast her physical appearance in Hollywood, but Dietrich's success in America was made entirely in Germany. It was predicated on her Germanness, her intuitive grounding of modern mass culture in premodern legacies of the popular. Vilsmaier's Dietrich is an exemplary German, not because she revoked her German citizenship during the 1930s and worked for the United Service Organization (USO) and against the Nazis but because she offered something that bonds past and present and can unify Germans across divisions of ideology, generation, gender, and class.

The success of German émigré and exile actors in Hollywood during the Nazi era often relied on an excessive performance of ethnic clichés. In order to feed the New World's hunger for profitable images of the Old World, émigré actors had to turn their heritage into a brand name, a hyperreal signifier of exotic otherness. Vilsmaier's Dietrich, by way of contrast, is far from masquerading as a German. She temporarily camouflages herself as an American, but her heart continues to beat in Germany. Identity, for Vilsmaier, is that which exceeds the mandates of representation; it is incommensurable with any willful act of self-performance or masquerade. While Dietrich's American life is one of alienating make-believe, Dietrich's return to Europe during the last months of the war allows the diva to shed the spectacle and rediscover her inalienable German self. When Dietrich travels to the European battlefields, Vilsmaier offers the viewer a captivating open-air song number—"See What the Boys in the Backroom Will Have"—staged in front of a crowd of frenzied GIs. Yet it is not Marlene's performance for her American friends that interests Vilsmaier most but rather her encounter with a young German soldier who recognizes the diva as she visits a POW camp. "You know me?" she asks the dying soldier with melancholic surprise. While nondiegetic piano music produces a sonic image of simultaneous mourning and recovery, the camera cuts to a series of meditative close-ups of singer and soldier that convert a chance encounter into a national communion. Too young to have witnessed Dietrich during the Weimar era, the soldier testifies to the timeless power of Dietrich's stardom, an appeal untainted by Nazi cultural politics. Dietrich, in turn, recovers her Berlin accent, strips off her American facade, and bridges the gulf between enemies: "So, let's be

friends again, alright?" we hear her say right before the soldier dies. Finally returning to Europe, the legend consumes the real and opens the path for German reconciliation.

Vilsmaier's heritage films picture popular culture—not public history—as the primary scene at which national affiliation comes into being. In *Marlene* the popular heals the political rift between soldier and singer, the Nazi war machinery and the German emigrant. A product and producer of Weimar Germany, Vilsmaier's Dietrich returns to Europe in order to reexperience the national as a site of original plenitude. Minimizing the role of Hollywood in the making of the Dietrich persona, *Marlene* thus recalls the diva's biography as if ethnic identity was a nonrelational category preceding discourse and resilient to cultural transfer or dislocation. Accordingly, the film defines the specificity of German cultural expressions—contrary to the Americanist fantasies of New German Cinema—no longer in an ongoing conversation and confrontation with other cultures but rather as if this specificity existed independent of any other as a self-contained presence. In a sense, Vilsmaier recalls modern German culture as if a Germanified Hollywood had always been in existence—just better, more authentic, more modern, and more emancipated than in the United States. Unlike Los Angeles, Weimar Germany provides the Dietrich character with a perfect site to practice her mobile sexuality. In the opening minutes, the film makes a great effort to picture Dietrich as a bisexual libertine who consumes her life to the fullest. Whether involved in hetero- or homosexual relations, Dietrich appears as modernity incarnate: a woman easily transgressing the former threshold between public and private while playfully mocking the norms, values, and identity constructions of the past. Once in America, however, Dietrich is forced to leave her German liberties behind, even though the Hollywood film industry—hypocritically, as it were—capitalizes on her image as a vamp. Dietrich challenges conventional morality on screen, but the studio's public relation managers demand that she appear as ordinary mother and wife in front of press reporters. Whereas Vilsmaier reconstructs Weimar mass culture as a playground of spontaneity and unadulterated difference, he decries modern America as a fortress of conventional morality and normative heterosexuality. Unlike Weimar, where the popular withstands the homogenizing logic of the culture industry, America commodifies the female body and sacrifices (German) sensuality on the altar of the Protestant work ethic and its modern heir, the ruthless rule of capital.

Vilsmaier's heritage films, including *Marlene*, rest on the twofold

proposition that (1) popular culture is the primary site at which national identity is constituted and maintained and that (2) Nazi Germany, by instrumentalizing cultural material for political purposes, not only drained the cohesive power of the popular but in doing so also betrayed the idea of the nation. National socialism, rather than embodying nationalism at its peak, undercut German nation building, and according to Vilsmaier it is the task of the filmmaker today to redeem the unpolitical heritage of domestic popular traditions and thereby recuperate what may allow Germans proudly to say “we” to each other again. Contrary to both New German Cinema and the British forerunner of the 1980s, the new German heritage film does not view the popular as a bad object, as a source of anxiety, contamination, or perverse pleasure. Neither the modernist dialectic of high and low nor the critical catchword of “Americanism” as cultural imperialism has any true bearing on this cinema. Whereas New German Cinema refuted the world of the fathers and worried about its American friends, Vilsmaier’s cinema showcases the heritage value of domestic legends and markets it to national and international audiences. It screens the legends of the past so as to transform myth into fact. Reviewed through the lenses of Hollywood-like filmmaking, domestic history here becomes German cinema’s international marketing label—a souvenir bartered on the stands of global cinematic tourism.

That German heritage films, in spite of their Hollywood-like design, nevertheless often recycle the rhetoric of anti-Americanism symptomatically expresses what I consider an act of double repression. On the one hand, the anti-American stereotype (badly) conceals the extent to which the heritage film’s reinvention of the national relies on the very process of globalization it seems to defy. The heritage film’s critique of America as inauthentic posits the idea of the German nation as mythic and primordial, while at the same time obscuring the fact that today’s interest in cultural specificity, diversity, and marginality is a result of, rather than an antidote to, processes of globalization. On the other hand, the heritage film’s anti-American stereotype simultaneously shows and conceals the degree to which this cinema is actively involved in reordering German national history. Unlike New German Cinema, whose anti-American anxieties expressed an often overdetermined battle against the burdens of German history, the heritage film enlists anti-American sentiments so as to reinscribe historical self-confidence and redefine the national consensus. New German Cinema’s anti-Americanism attempted to challenge the viewer’s perception and unsettle political hegemonies; it spoke for the nation by speaking against post-

war silence and consensus. Rhetorical anti-Americanism in the heritage film, by way of contrast, conveys the fact that the true other of postwar film culture is not Hollywood at all but rather the oppositional politics and disruptive designs of critical filmmaking, that is to say, the legacy of the 1968 generation and its hope to couple aesthetic innovation to political reform.

IN 1913 THE Austrian novelist and critic Robert Müller suggested that the notion of Americanism, far from describing any concrete process of development, should be seen as a figment of the imagination, a fiction rather than a reality. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Müller understood Americanism not as a logic of cultural homogenization or social modernization. Instead, he identified it as a way of seeing the world, an imaginary, a noncontiguous fantasy deeply affecting how people maneuvered their paths through the modern world. The real America, according to Müller, either was on the moon or—as he claimed polemically in one of his essays—didn't even exist.<sup>15</sup> Whatever one might see of it was mediated by modern machines of image production: a copy without original. America, for Müller, was a media construct, a wish fantasy, and projection screen, not an experiential reality.

Almost ninety years later, Müller's untimely insights have become part of the heritage film's political unconscious. Films such as *Marlene* and *Comedian Harmonists* might have their protagonists journey to America, but these films' images of the New World are nothing but projections, reverse images, virtual realities. They lack any sense of reference, context, and material texture. America, in the German heritage film, emerges as a specter—a site of seductive, albeit empty, forms and images. It initially teases the German visitor's senses, but due to its heavy reliance on visual representation America denies the possibility of sensual engagement and authentic experience. An intoxicating culture of display and mediation, America turns out to be anaesthetic. It numbs the traveler's sense perception and impedes his or her pleasure. Seemingly true to Müller's 1913 claim, the heritage film's America doesn't really exist.

As I argued earlier, however, it would be utterly misleading to describe the heritage film's American imaginary as a direct continuation of modernist discourses on American mass culture. The modernist optic of Americanism—whether negative or affirmative—was based on the perception of American culture as something initially foreign and particular. It understood difference and alterity as the precondi-

tion of social critique and transformation, alternatively arguing either for more or for less American culture in order to rebuild modern Germany. Modernist discourses on America by and large relied on universalist pleas for cultural relativism and specificity. Far from homogenizing difference, universalism here implied the recognition of diversity and otherness—whether at home or abroad—as sources of cultural transfer, critical engagement, and self-transformation, of reframing the self in light of the other. The heritage film, by contrast, departs from the idea of cultural transmission as an unsettling process of reframing self and other, of critical introspection, experience, and emancipation. In spite of all its German “aboutness” at the level of narrative and *mise-en-scène*, the heritage cycle rests firmly on postindustrial modes of production, distribution, and exhibition not much different from Hollywood. Similar to mainstream Hollywood cinema, the heritage film is a product of the accelerated vertical and horizontal integration of media and entertainment industries during the last decade at the global level. Designed for the diverse channels of postindustrial consumption, the heritage film catalyzes fantasies of cultural particularity by putting an accent on the aesthetic surfaces and narrative arrangements of Hollywood cinema. However, instead of explicitly exploring the extent to which the national today has become an effect of or a supplement to the transnational, the German heritage film reintroduces essentializing images of the local through the global backdoor. That America, in *Marlene* and *Comedian Harmonists*, looks as spectral as it does is a symptom of these films’ paradoxical (and, ultimately, regressive) ambitions. Vilsmaier pictures America as anaesthetic because his films—in contrast to the modernist engagement with America—are eager to reconstruct cultural boundaries in such a way that symbolic transfers between here and there, or past and present, do not unsettle the reinscription of nationality as primordial. In the final analysis, the ghostly image of Vilsmaier’s America shows what the heritage narrative does not dare to say, namely, that in our present world of transnational flows Hollywood—in however indigenized form—has always already inhabited the home and structures our views of past, present, and future. Vilsmaier’s heritage optic is so steeped in Hollywood transnationalism that it lacks the means to picture Hollywood itself.

In closing, I would like to draw two conclusions from the millennial emergence of the German heritage film. First, contrary to its own rhetoric, the heritage film reveals the degree to which, under the sign of global media conglomerates and marketing strategies, critical concepts such as “Americanism” and “Hollywoodization” have lost their grasp.

To be sure, it would be cynical to deny the kind of asymmetries that structure the transnational transfer of images, technologies, meanings, and capital today. To speak of globalization cannot mean to ignore that "certain nationalisms, cultures, ideas and interpretations are more transnationally powerful, assertive, and successful than others."<sup>16</sup> However, by articulating and territorializing Germanness *within* the global language and economy of Hollywood cinema itself, the heritage film at least urges us to understand that bipolar models of influence, causation, and colonization are no longer adequate to map the sites of contemporary cinema. Although the heritage film often reverts to anti-American stereotypes, it documents the fact that "Hollywood" can mean very different things to global viewers, producers, and filmmakers. Unlike New German Cinema, for which Hollywood was mostly identical with American culture and for which both embodied cultural imperialism, the heritage film sees Hollywood as a global lingua franca that German cinema can put to local use. The heritage film thus indicates that, even under conditions of asymmetrical globalization, Hollywood can have local or minor accents—accents that stamp particular meanings and visions on the cinematic product and hence do not allow us to think of Hollywood as a unified and overpowering institution of cultural homogenization. Although it often toys with the image of a much simpler past, the heritage film demonstrates that modernist notions of Americanism have been consumed by the historical process, that these notions have become too simple to conceptualize the present moment. What we can learn from the heritage film is that Americanism no longer exists.

Second, the rise of the postwall heritage film asks us to revise the normative concept of national cinema as it informed film scholarship in particular prior to the 1980s. In this writing, the idea of national cinema was directly tied to the promotion of critical, non-Hollywood filmmaking. "Along with the name of the director-auteur, [the concept of national cinema] has served as a means by which non-Hollywood films—most commonly art films—have been labelled, distributed, and reviewed. As a marketing strategy, these national labels have promised varieties of 'otherness'—of what is culturally different from both Hollywood and the films of other importing countries."<sup>17</sup> To speak of national cinemas meant to support semi- or noncommercial film practice, to commend the critique or subversion of mainstream conventions, to privilege experimental, fragmented, or highly self-reflexive designs over narrative totalization and spectatorial identification. German cinema played a prominent role in this kind of writing. Primarily

focusing on the 1920s and 1970s, critics celebrated expressionist filmmaking and New German Cinema as heralds of oppositional meaning and cultural experimentation, as a national cinema whose insistence on product differentiation warranted cultural diversity and self-critique. In postwall Germany, by way of contrast, the idea of national cinema has ceased to catalyze counter-hegemonic film art. Although the national defines their topic, recent German heritage films illustrate Higson's claim that the limits of the national today are no longer "the most productive way of framing arguments about cultural diversity and cultural specificity."<sup>18</sup> There is surely no need to discard the category of national cinema as a heuristic device and epistemological tool, nor to disband the national out of some strange postcolonial embarrassment about cultural particularity. However, what the post-wall heritage film exemplifies is that national terms per se do little today to articulate a meaningful critical distance to Hollywood. Though obsessed with transforming national legends into contemporary cinema's selling point, the heritage film reveals that to argue for national cinemas in today's world does by no means mean to promote a more diverse and culturally specific film culture.

Does this imply, then, that we must bury any hope for a future German cinema that could shatter dominant hegemonies and fracture cultural identities? Is there any space left for experimental, critical, and unpopular filmmaking, for cinematic diversity, in a world of transnational media conglomerates? This is clearly not the place to speculate about the prospects of oppositional film production and consumption in Germany. Let it be said, though, that critical filmmaking today has to develop a cinematic style capable of working through the often paradoxical disaggregation of space and time in our globalized world. Rather than fleeing from or fleeing into the transnational, this cinema would—as Naficy has suggested—"operate both within and astride the cracks and fissures of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies, and heterogeneity."<sup>19</sup> Critical filmmaking today is located at the intersection of the global and the local, and—unlike the heritage film—it actively explores the extent to which the most relevant questions of identity and belonging today are articulated either at the subnational or the transnational level. Projecting itself beyond and across national territorializations of culture, critical film practice is well aware of its own limitations, its temporariness, its imperfection, its deterritorialized outlook, its lack of shine. Rather than offering reified visions of self and other, it stresses the fundamental contingency, openness, and malleability of inside/outside distinctions.

Rather than recuperating the national as a self-referential space of authenticity, it elaborates on the fact that our notions of home, community, and identity are necessary fictions—transitory imaginaries that effectively allow us to negotiate the increasing disarticulation of space and time in global cyber culture. Paradoxical though it may seem, then, oppositional cinemas today on the one hand enable the viewer to recognize that things such as "Germany" and "America" do not really exist. On the other hand, however, they also emphasize that experiences of cultural difference remain essential to any attempt at challenging dominant templates of power and splintering the user-friendly consensuses of the day.

## NOTES

This essay continues a set of arguments raised in particular at the end of my *The Dark Mirror: German Cinema between Hitler and Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), as well as in my essay "Reforming the Past: Heritage Cinema and Holocaust in the 1990s," *New German Critique* 87 (fall 2002): 47–82. I am grateful to both publishers for allowing me to make use here of a very few previously published paragraphs.

1. Andrew Higson, "The Heritage Film and British Cinema," in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), 233. See also Andrew Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film," in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 109–29; and Ginette Vincendeau, "Issues in European Cinema," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 440–48.

2. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30.

3. Eric Rentschler, "From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus," in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (Routledge: London, 2000), 260–77.

4. Eric Rentschler, "How American Is It? The U.S. as Image and Imaginary in German Film," *Persistence of Vision* 2 (1985): 5–18.

5. Thomas Elsaesser, "German Postwar Cinema and Hollywood," in *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*, ed. David W. Ellwood and Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 283–302; see also Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

6. Paul Willemsen, "The National," *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 210.

7. Werner Herzog, "Tribute to Lotte Eisner (1982)," in *West German Film-*

*makers on Film: Visions and Voices*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 117.

8. Thomas Elsaesser, "To Be or Not to Be: Extra-territorial in Vienna—Berlin—Hollywood," *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 381.

9. Douglas Gomery, "Hollywood as Industry," in *Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 245.

10. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism," *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66.

11. For an expanded version of this argument, see Lutz Koepnick, "'Honor Your German Masters': History, Memory, and National Identity in Joseph Vilsmaier's *Comedian Harmonists* (1997)," in *Light Motives: Perspectives on Popular German Cinema*, ed. Margaret McCarthy and Randall Halle (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 349–75.

12. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

13. John Durham Peters, "Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon," in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 36.

14. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

15. Robert Müller, "Der Roman des Amerikanismus," *Saturn* 9 (September 1913): 253–58, quoted in Deniz Göktürk, *Künstler, Cowboys, Ingenieure: Kultur- und mediengeschichtliche Studien zu deutschen Amerika-Texten* (Munich: Fink, 1998), 211.

16. Ulf Hedetorf, "Contemporary Cinema: Between Globalisation and National Interpretation," in *Cinema and Nation*, 280.

17. Stephen Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinema," *Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, 385.

18. Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and Nation*, 73.

19. Hamid Naficy, "Between Rocks and Hard Places: The Interstitial Mode of Production in Exilic Cinema," in *Home, Exile, Homeland*, 134.