

## Historical “Truth,” Constructed Memory: Restaging Germany’s Reunification in Thomas Berger’s Television Melodrama *Wir sind das Volk. Liebe kennt keine Grenzen* (We are the people. Love without limits) (2008)

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### Abstract

*Film and television are popular media for the (re)presentation of history and the depiction of momentous past events. Germany’s reunification is no exception. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany has witnessed a proliferation of media production that endeavors to historicize and aestheticize the past. This coincides with the need to forge a post-Wall identity of the new Germany. My discussion of Thomas Berger’s award winning television drama *Wir sind das Volk. Liebe kennt keine Grenzen* (2008) examines how reunification is presented in a mixture of fictitious elements and authentic historical reconstruction based on shared memories of this past. Following a melodramatic trajectory, the film aims at the reconciliation of German society as a people twenty years after reunification.*

**Keywords:** German reunification, historical truth, constructed memory, melodrama, historical agency, reconciliation between East and West Germans



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# Historical “Truth,” Constructed Memory: Restaging Germany’s Reunification in Thomas Berger’s Television Melodrama *Wir sind das Volk. Liebe kennt keine Grenzen* (We are the people. Love without limits) (2008)

## I. Historical “Truth,” Constructed Memory

Restaging Germany’s Reunification in Thomas Berger’s Television Melodrama *Wir sind das Volk. Liebe kennt keine Grenzen* (We are the people. Love without limits) (2008).

Despite or in alliance with the fact that film production in Germany and Europe is becoming more and more a transnational affair, film scholar Sabine Hake argues for a “growing significance of German film and media culture to the self-representation of the Berlin Republic.” [footnote 1 here] Especially the years after Germany’s reunification reshaped not only the conditions of post-1990 film production, distribution, and aesthetic form. These years were also crucial for the reaffirmation and commodification of a national identity. [footnote 2 here] Accordingly, Germany’s media landscape, and especially German television production, has since presented itself as a popular and commercially viable force, which can be measured “by the re-emergence of the star system and the promotion of a new generation of celebrities on television.” [footnote 3 here]

Hake’s observation on the immediate post-wall era still proves to be valid for Germany’s media landscape of the first decade of the new millennium. The revival of popular film and television productions, the aspect of star power, as well as the urge to continually create images of the new Germany, the Berlin Republic, all coincide with the persistent necessity to visually confront Germany’s past. Having now overcome Cold War partition, Germany’s cinema and television productions participate vividly in the process of renegotiating visions and filmic depictions of 20th century German history. Films such as Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist* (2002), Marc Rothemund’s *Sophie Scholl. The Last Days* (2005), Oliver Hirschbiegel’s *The Downfall* (2004), von Donnersmarck’s *The Lives of Others* (2006), Stephan Daldry’s *The Reader* (2008), and Uli Edel’s *The Baader Meinhof Komplex* (2009) all dealt with different topics from Germany’s recent past and were all major box office successes.

In addition to cinema productions, German television productions also engage more and more in the processes of creating images of the past and has confirmed the strong tendency to contribute to renegotiations and (re)constructions of the broader concepts of identity, nation, and history. Unlike earlier attempts to visually confront the past not in spectacular ways, but in a more pedestrian and realistic fashion, [footnote 4 here] we witness nowadays a sentimental and overly dramatized depiction of the past. Although many German television productions claim to depict authentic history and to deal with real past events, the reconstructions of that past in visual images mostly follow a melodramatic trajectory that stresses the “cinema of feelings” over historical accuracy. Already the blurbs on DVD covers are suspiciously close to the Rankian claim of the 19th century (empirical) historicism to present history *wie es gewesen*, “as it were,” however in an emotionally-charged fashion. Accordingly, both a sentimental approach to the past and the claim of authenticity or even historical “truth” seem to be a well-flourishing style across a range of narrative formats, with television specializing in fact-based genres but also, as Hake states, competing with the cinema in the production of epic formats and visual spectacles. [footnote 5 here]

The television drama under discussion in this paper exemplifies this trend. Thomas Berger’s *Wir sind das Volk. Liebe kennt keine Grenzen* (We are the people. Love without limits) from 2008 claims to restage

Germany's reunification with authenticity, while being highly entertaining and emotionally gripping. The film was broadcasted in two episodes on a private Germany television station *sat.1* and had over 4.4 million viewers (14.6% of the viewership market). Certainly, the all-star cast of the film (Heiner Lauterbach, Hans-Werner Mayer, Anja Kling) attracted a large German audience. Also, the scriptwriter, former West-German Silke Zertz, is well known for her conventionally heart-warming style. But what won the jury of the *Deutsche Fernsehpreis 2009* (German television award 2009) over was the film's impressive depiction of German history with fictitious facets, remembering the miracle of Germany's reunification. [footnote 6 here] The laudation at the award ceremony not only acknowledges the significance of a television production for Germany's engagement with its troublesome history. The jury's verdict also reflects and praises the notion of recent television productions as being a mixture of fictitious elements and alleged authentic reconstructions of a past event. The film seems to draw an image of post-Wall Germany that was well received among the German audience and the jury alike.

Although Germany witnesses a proliferation of media production that endeavors to historicize and aestheticize a certain reading of past events, there is by no means an agreement about the nature, form or genre, and overall approach of molding the past into present aesthetic form. My discussion of *Wir sind das Volk* thus pays special attention to these aesthetic and filmic choices. Since the film about the fall of the wall in 1989 attracted a large audience and was crowned with one of Germany's most prestigious media awards, it will be important to ask why this mixture of fictitious elements and original historical footage of the fall of the wall embedded in a melodramatic context resonated so well with both the audience and critics.

The combination of different genres – historical (melo)drama and historical documentary – requires further examination. We need to ask what problems such a representation of the past bears since the film attempts to draw historically “correct” and “authentic” pictures of Germany's reunification. To acknowledge the constraints of artistic representation of some event in the past, as Jacques Rancière puts it, requires the awareness that it is impossible to make the essential character of something present before our eyes. [footnote 7 here] Certainly, the film does not claim to function as a material manifestation of the event's irreducible singularity and essence. However, the film simplifies complex historical processes in order to present the topic in a highly entertaining fashion, thereby reproducing images of the event that bespeak and reveal how contemporary Germany understands and attempts to historicize the reunification process.

Thus, I argue that the film is so successful because it provides an aesthetic space in which a compelling fictitious narrative is conflated with memorable historical footage from Germany's reunification. In doing so, the film communicates a sense of history that draws on affectivity and the internalization of the past, without neglecting the importance of authenticity and the notion of empirical “truth” about Germany's reunification. The immense use of actual media footage in the film from the days before the wall came down thus provides an indexical system of mnemonic signs for both former East and West Germans. These famous media images function as commonplaces since they came to stand in for the event of Germany's reunification. These images shaped the collective memory of the highly emotional events in late 1989.

In the film, the reappropriation of the historical images from 1989 folds into fictitious elements, which structure the representation of the “actual” past in a narrative form that adheres to the narrative strategy of a touching melodrama. As such, *Wir sind das Volk* facilitates the identification with the past event even more and reaffirms the notion of a seemingly unbelievable achievement of the people, the so-called Velvet Revolution in November 1989. Thus, the film lends itself to a teleologically-driven narrative of history. The happy outcome of the Velvet Revolution thus seems to conform with and reaffirm the memories of the time. The film instrumentalizes collective memory by imposing indelible images of the past on the imagination of the viewing public.

Accordingly, it is not enough to simply describe how the film historicizes reunification and relies on the nature of personal memory as fragmentary, telescopic, and affective. The filmic strategies, which correspond to a sentimental and yet heroic recollection of a time in which the people, the German *Volk*, seemingly took history into its own hands, restages history for a contemporary purpose. The film revives and rehearses the feeling of togetherness and collective German achievement despite the still lingering political, social, and ideological obstacles. Thus, Thomas Berger's *Wir sind das Volk* occupies a reconciliatory position in Germany's contemporary socio-political landscape of discontent. The political and social climate is shaken by austerity, resulting frequently in a negative (re)evaluation of Germany's reunification and in the resurfacing of inner-German suspicions of the respective "other" from the former east or west.

The plot of the film is delivered from a super-historical point of view. It is not a personal story of some individuals, but the story of a people, with which former East and West Germans respectively can easily identify. Since the events of 1989 were an all-German and highly emotional experience on both sides of the wall, the film relies on the reiteration of these positive feelings. It stresses the achievement of the entire German nation; an achievement of world historical importance. Although the film's title reads *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people), its overall message is rather *Wir sind ein Volk* (We are a people).

## II. A Brief Overview Of The Plot

Before we enter the discussion about the film's use of historical "truth" and constructed memory in melodramatic form in order to fulfill the contemporary need for reconciliation between former East and West Germans, a brief plot description is in order. *Wir sind das Volk* is set in East Berlin in the Orwellian year of 1984, at a time when many East Germans attempted to escape to the West either directly from East Germany or through some other East European country. The plot revolves primarily around a couple, Katja and Andreas, who are separated after Andreas' flight to West Berlin, which he undertakes together with Katja's brother Matthias. The viewer knows little about their motives for the escape. Andreas only briefly mentions that he wants to avoid another imprisonment by the Ministry of State Security (the Stasi), for he is secretly involved in an anti-socialist media campaign against the GDR. Only Andreas makes it over the border. In the attempt to climb the Wall, Matthias is shot multiple times and dies right at the border strip. At his funeral, we learn that Katja expects a child from Andreas.

Five years later, in the summer before the fall of the wall, Katja and her now five-year old son Sven prepare for an escape to West Germany in the guise of a vacation to Hungary. Leaving a camping site at night and being chased by Hungarian border patrolmen, Katja slips and faints, while Sven makes it over the Hungarian-Austrian border together with an unrelated couple. At this point, the film divides into three narrative strands that persistently intersect and overlap throughout the film. Katja is locked up in East Germany's infamous State Security prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, where she is interrogated and psychologically tortured by the Stasi in order to get more information about Andreas' anti-socialist media activities in West Berlin. Andreas, on the other hand, has become a respectable journalist at the West Berlin media station *HI*. His work concerns itself with media coverage of the East German state and the German-German relationship. While preparing for Katja and Sven's arrival, Andreas learns about her imprisonment from the Austrian public authorities, handing over the recovered Sven to him.

The third narrative revolves around two male adults in East Berlin, one of whom is Katja's younger brother Micha. Micha and his friend Dirk secretly work for and together with Andreas. Andreas supports them regularly with film cameras and other film material from the West. Their film footage, which captures the political life of the East German state without extenuations (and most importantly the growing protests against the state in

Leipzig and other East German cities in 1989), finds its way back to Andreas and into his news reports on the GDR. Andreas' hope is to show both East and West Germans that the GDR state is on the brink of a political turnover by the people. What will become key for the discussion later is the film's treatment of this footage. *Wir sind das Volk* celebrates these allegedly undistorted news reports for both West and East television audiences as one of the driving forces behind Germany's reunification. The film transfers the agency of the historical events onto the German people, who became a people of a united Germany.

A third character, Jule, is introduced to the viewer as a friend of Katja, Micha, and Dirk. Jule and her family provide an example in the film for an East German family that is torn apart by opposing opinions about the GDR state. The family conflict reaches its peak when her father, a high ranking officer in the state ministry, and brother, a member of the National People's Police, catch her when she gets arrested with others at one of the violent street protests. Jule meets another protester, Lutz, and falls in love with him. Lutz seems to be supportive of the anti-socialist movement, but we learn at the end of film that in reality he works for the *Stasi*. He often jeopardizes Micha and Dirk's film shootings, but can never prevent them. The film reaches its climax on November 9, 1989 with the depiction of the fall of the Wall and the resolution of all conflicts built up in the film. In the final scene, we see Katja, Andreas, and Sven tearfully reunited as a family. The film closes with Andreas' words: "The Wall is gone. It is over." [footnote 8 here]

### III. Historical "Truth" And Constructed Memory In The Melodrama

Melodrama, as film scholar Marcia Landy states, is not unique to cinema but is deeply rooted in Western culture since the 18th century in prose fiction and in the theater. [footnote 9 here] Melodramatic narratives have gradually been transferred to television, mainly in the form of soap operas. In the US, one of the first staples of television were soap operas and, most importantly, became a common genre that is respected (to a certain degree) for its potential to negotiate in complex ways its relationship to the world and its audience. In Europe, soap operas conquered the market in the 1960s and have since been an appreciated form of daily entertainment.

The film under discussion takes on different nuances and styles that defy the notion of a static and fixed genre. *Wir sind das Volk* does not fit entirely into the category melodrama, but it shows certain aspects that adhere to the genre of melodrama. It puts strong emphasis on affect and emotions and its plot is driven by familial conflict, embedded in the overall political and social changes of the year 1989. The way in which these historical changes are presented as dramatic fiction leads the viewer to believe that the characters – both East and West Germans – are active agents of history. The protagonists seem to direct history according to their wills and desires. The original footage is inserted in the storyline in a way that lends high probability to the fictitious plot and seems to tell a true and authentic story of the actual events in 1989. The film is the heroic story of the people from both East and West Germany, who conjointly brought down the wall and made history as a people. In doing so, the film omits any other reading of the historical events, for instance, the tendencies within the GDR to reform the state and not to bring down the SED government and to cause the state to collapse.

It is telling that the film at hand does not allow for the attempt to compartmentalize its application of melodramatic narrative and documentary elements. *Wir sind das Volk* is instead invested in an "authentic" representation of history and places the events that allegedly led to Germany's reunification in a melodramatic context, thereby conflating what Robert A. Rosenstone calls "history as drama" and "history as document." [footnote 10 here] The mixture of melodramatic and documentary material provides, as Rosenstone points out, "a

window into two worlds” [footnote 11 here] and thus obscures a rigid classification of the film as a melodramatic film text. Rosenstone’s notion of a window into two worlds indicates the construction of a historical world in a filmic text that is neither devoted to the representation of a historical “truth” nor to the creation of an antithetical and monolithical form of escapism, implying the complete removal from “reality.” [footnote 12 here]

For analytical purposes, I propose to examine both melodramatic and documentary elements separately in order to accentuate their function in *Wir sind das Volk*. It goes without saying, though, that both elements are interwoven and fold into each other as they constitute integrative images of historical “truth” in melodramatic form. In her article “History as Melodrama: German Division and Unification in Two Recent Films,” Kristie Foell states that Germany’s reunification is best suited for a representation in melodramatic fashion since the ready-made “television events” of 1989/90 provided a drama and suspense that were effective in the moment but become somehow difficult to tell with the same effect later. She sees the reason for these difficulties in the nature of the event: “[T]he main ‘character’ in the events 1989/90 was a collective, ‘the people.’... [U]sing ‘the people’ as anything but a backdrop for a more personalized story has always presented dramaturgical difficulties.” [footnote 13 here] While it is true that creating a compelling storyline for an entire nation proves to be difficult, Foell ignores the fact that in the aftermath of the fall of the wall the media focused exclusively on the people as the main characters and depicted the event itself as the climax of a willful and unified effort; an effort that had a “telos” right from the start and resulted in a happy ending. Thus, the media depiction of the events leading to the fall of the wall contributed in a major way to a simplified and condensed understanding of a process far more complicated and uncertain in its outcome. *Wir sind das Volk* operates along the lines of simplifying and dramatizing historical “truth.” The film meets the difficulties that Foell points out by personalizing historical events and thereby reducing the complexity of a historical given to a manageable degree. Specifically, the film corresponds to the preexisting topoi of melodrama, especially the genre of family melodrama, and produces an interpersonal domain as the loci in which past socio-political conflicts reside. For instance, the separation of Katja, Sven, and Andreas draws on the notion of the family as the core of society and hence appears relevant to a broad spectrum of society. Furthermore, Katja and Andreas’ son Sven embodies the connection between his parents and signifies the division of blood in the historical moment of the erection of the wall. The inevitability of the fall of the wall, the film suggests, is almost a biological determinacy and consequently Germany’s reunification a foreseeable historical must.

On a larger historical scale, the separation of the family is an apt metaphor for the entire Cold War era. The vulnerability of the family is not only instantly recognizable but further emotionalizes and dramatizes this past reality. The audience can easily identify with these three characters and thus follows them empathetically throughout the film. Their opposition to the seemingly distant and overpowering political events, which seem to suffocate them, comes to a close when the family is happily reunited at the end of the film. The viewer can now breathe a sigh of relief. The film leaves no doubt that the reunification of the family stands as the metaphor for the reunification of the two German states, signaling the inevitability and righteousness of the historical events in 1989 that leave no room for alternatives.

In “Observations on the Family Melodrama,” Thomas Elseasser traces the genre of family melodrama back to the 18th century bourgeois tragedies. He argues that we find depictions of certain external constraints and pressures bearing upon the characters already present in these early literary forms. [footnote 14 here] The emphasis on the individual who is subjected to these external constraints communicates a broader critique of intense social and ideological crises. The film adheres precisely to this pattern. As a prisoner of the *Stasi*, Katja’s character in the film signifies the wrongdoings of the GDR regime, which exercises totalitarian violence over the female body. Further meaning is bestowed on the loaded image of the female body when Katja is forced to morally betray both her lover and her mother, when she surrenders to the pressure and releases damaging

information about them. Similar to the bourgeois tragedies that Elseasser identified as conceptual precursors to the family melodrama (for example, G. E. Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* or Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*), Katja's attempted suicide derives its dramatic force from the conflict between an extreme and highly individualized form of moral idealism. The betrayal of this moral idealism, which is forced upon the heroine from the exterior, leaves her no other way than to commit suicide. [footnote 15 here] Consequently, the film does not require any additional instance to further discredit the totalitarian GDR regime and its infamous State Security system. Both Katja's suicide attempt and the empty gaze of her personal interrogator in the moment of her breakdown mark a condemning moment in the film, which is not taken any further. This very limited moment of human suffering comes to stand in for the film's acknowledgement of the regime's crimes and explains its rapid collapse in a nutshell. However, this acknowledgment cannot be carried too far since the film aims for reconciliation, which neither allows for a Manichean inflation of good and evil nor for finger-pointing at the perpetrators. Accordingly, the main focus is on those who attempted to overcome this regime in a joint effort of ordinary people from East and West. This notion of togetherness, devotedness, and agreement – the film maintains – is the fundament for a new Germany.

The insistence on history as the story of individuals, as Rosenstones puts it, coincides with the film's treatment of the events in late 1989 as a teleologically-driven process. [footnote 16 here] However, the film does not portray German reunification as an event that simply happened to people. Rather, this notion of a teleologically-driven process emerges from individual forces actively making history. The cooperation between Andreas in West Berlin and Micha and Dirk in East Berlin on the one hand and the use of their film footage in the news on the other hand generates this notion of Germany's reunification as an inevitable moment in Germany's past. The film suggests that it was brought about by a personal investment in Germany's collective fate and an individual devotion to its cause.

Furthermore, the film seems to make it appear as if West Germans played an equal role in the downfall of the GDR. The film uses Micha's camera footage as a cinematic device to materialize the idea of history and historical time as being in the hands of individuals from both East and West. The famous chant *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people) of East Germans on their protest marches thorough the streets thus becomes what the Berlin Republic now stands for: *Wir sind ein Volk* (We are a people). Two scenes underscore this observation: The first scene starts with original media footage from September 11, 1989. The news report is about Hungary's decision to open the borders to the West, specifically to its neighbor-state Austria. We learn from the reporter that this decision is made without the approval of GDR officials and that many GDR citizens use the opportunity to leave the East. The camera cuts to the news station *HI* where we see Andreas in a medium close-up in front of his equipment. The spectator still hears the reporter's voice from the news report in the background without seeing the actual televised images. Suddenly, Andreas interrupts and the reporter's voice becomes silent. This moment of surprise indicates that this news report is being made right now while we are watching. The spectator is left at odds with the original film footage, since the film claims that it is actually Andreas who is in charge of this report. Andreas rewinds the footage and asks his reporter, who we now see reads from a script into a microphone, to be even more accentuated and provocative: "Why don't you say: 'The right to travel becomes a vital question for the GDR.'" [footnote 17 here]

Shortly after this scene, we see many reporters gathering around a television in the news station. The previous sequence introduced the viewer to the famous image of Günter Schabowski, a former official of the Socialist Unity Party of the GDR. Due to a misunderstanding, Schabowski famously announced that a new and less restrictive regulation concerning the travel of East Germans abroad was to take effect immediately. His announcement back then resulted in chaotic situations at the borders because this information was not handed

down to the border guards who eventually opened the gates. Without seeing the screen, we hear the famous jingle of the *ARD Tagesthemen* news (one of West Germany's public news stations) and then a report on Schabowski's unexpected announcement and speculation about the consequences of Schabowski's unclear statement. Andreas' boss declares that he too wants a report done on this matter, opening with the headline: "GDR lifts travel restrictions." [footnote 18 here] Andreas, however, standing in the background of the room and now appearing in the front of the screen, interrupts him: "No! Let's begin the report with: 'The Wall comes done!'" [footnote 19 here]

*Wir sind das Volk* certainly plays with the common fascination that Schabowski's uninformed announcement might have triggered one of the most emotional events in German history, the fall of the Berlin wall, by accident. However, it more emphatically highlights the importance of individuals who not only took advantage of the overall confusion in the GDR *Politbüro* (Central committee's political bureau) but also proved to be visionaries of their own time, which will later become history as we know it. In doing so, the film certainly provides a space for self-reflection on the aesthetic medium of film and its function as an image-producing and mediating vehicle for the perception of (historical) time. Hence in the film, Andreas is convinced that Micha's amateur film footage of the first protest wave in Leipzig is going to result in even more participants later: "Media is the eye of the world. Let the East German citizens see this. These images will double the number of participants." [footnote 20 here] *Wir sind das Volk* does not comment on this role of media images in any critical way. Rather, we see Andreas editing the footage in a way that will retrospectively prove him right, if we buy into the idea of having an objective view on the past. Having the advantage of looking back at the events that resulted in the fall of the wall provides the opportunity to artistically (re)create those historical moments in an intriguing way that appeals to a broad film audience. In these scenes, the film treats the past as "bite-sized," logical, and monolithical, thereby compartmentalizing (past) time in an artificial way for the sake of fabricating images that pass the test of historical "truth." The film fails to critically engage with questions revolving around aesthetic attempts to historicize the past and the general role of media in contemporary society. In positing Andreas as the "mastermind" behind the news on the GDR and thus in the forefront of the historical process, *Wir sind das Volk* further emphasizes its claim to truth about the linear direction of history, its meaning, and the equal investment of both East and West German citizens. The depiction of Andreas in his significant, almost prophetic role in the historical process of the GDR's gradual dissolution tips the scale towards the West German power of forging history. In doing so, the film not only blurs fiction and historical reality to a highly questionable degree. It also misses out on the opportunity to scrutinize the role of history as retrospectively created myth or what Michel Foucault calls the media's power to establish what could be called counter-memory of the events in 1989. Quite to the contrary, the film embraces the fetishization and legitimization of Western power over the East and discloses the chance to free the historical sense from the demand of a suprahistorical history." [footnote 21 here]

Nevertheless, the film *Wir sind das Volk* is very successful in framing the events from 1989 in an accessible and highly entertaining way. On the surface, the dramatization and individualization of historical events does not seem to violate the viewer's historical consciousness or sensibility, at least not in any significant way. It seems that the film manages to find the right balance between historical "truth" and artistically constructed (hi)story. This certainly has to do with the melodramatic narrative that strikes a chord with people's general recollection of the events as being highly emotional, unexpected, and indeed unbelievable. In fact, the film draws on this notion of an unbelievable moment numerous times, describing the event as something not graspable for the mind: the German word *Wahnsinn* (something is unbelievable, it blows your mind, makes you crazy) became the most frequently used word to describe the events of 1989.

There is, however, another reason for the film's success, despite its tendency to sacrifice historical "truth" to drama and emotion. *Wir sind das Volk* is a mainstream film that instrumentalizes memory, and

specifically historical memory. Memory on the one hand is the human faculty to store information and images in order to reconstruct (often freely and creatively) what has been actively or passively recollected. Memory is on the other hand often leading to distortions and misrepresentations of the past as it reoccurs in the present. Drawing on this notion of memory as being shapeable, fragmentary, and in flux, director Thomas Berger picked original footage that is very well known to the German public. These documentary elements became historical images and are thus the most memorable to people. The media repeatedly used them to depict the most crucial moments before and after the fall of the wall. Accordingly, media gradually generated the sense that these images – and only these images – represent Germany’s reunification. Hence, the recollection of these images came to signify the event itself. The recurrent use of these well-known images has imposed indelible images of the past on the public imagination and ultimately on the collective memory. Both East and West Germans were equally exposed to these images and they soon acquired the power to stand in for Germany’s reunification. Thus, these images ultimately shaped the memory of the event in both the recollection of contemporaries from East and West, as well as those born after the event. Being confronted with these images in the film *Wir sind das Volk*, the viewers might read the historical fiction presented to them as representation of historical “truth.” The reason is that these images resemble what most viewers actually remember about Germany’s reunification twenty some years after the actual event. Mnemonic recollection and history conflate and become indistinguishable as they fold into each other.

We have multiple scenes in *Wir sind das Volk* to highlight this observation. The application of original film footage from one of Leipzig’s so-called Monday demonstrations shows thousands of people on the streets chanting: “We are the people.” The film appropriates these images and depicts Micha and Dirk catching the scene on tape, eventually delivering it secretly to Andreas in West Berlin at their own peril. The viewer is made to believe that the original news report of the Leipzig Monday demonstrations that follows this scene is a product of a West-East collaboration, the secret work of the three individuals Andreas, Micha, and Dirk.

Also, the film uses the famous footage of West Germany’s Foreign Minister and Vice chancellor Hans-Dietrich Genscher during his speech from the balcony of the German embassy in Prague on September 30, 1989. Thousands of East German citizens had assembled to escape to the West when Genscher announced that he had reached an agreement with the Communist Czechoslovakian government that the refugees could leave. The viewer hears Genscher’s famous words in the living room of Jule’s father, a high-ranking officer in the state ministry, who watches the news on television. Genscher’s famous sentence: “I have come to you to tell you that today your departure...” (after these words, the speech drowns in cheers) thus functions like a damning verdict over the rapidly dissolving GDR regime, depriving the regime of the right to further exist. It becomes apparent again that the film not only portrays West German politician Genscher as a man of historical importance (while ridiculing East German politician Schabowski as incompetent and confused a few scenes before). The film also transfers agency from the people of the GDR to more prominent West German figures, who seem to be deeply invested in Germany’s reunification. These two examples show that these famous images, which have shaped and constructed people’s memory, might have even replaced other images of German reunification; images that would have otherwise contributed to a different representation, reading, and understanding of the past. For example, the strong engagement of several liberal-minded politicians, intellectuals, and public activists to reform the socialist state rather than overcome it is long forgotten.

Obviously, the film defies the notion of history as something objectifiable, which allows for an evaluation from a retrospective distance and attempts to draw conclusions from the alleged “truth” of a past event. Rather, the film draws on memory that puts people in touch with the palpable traces of a past reality. In doing so, the film conflates what French historian Pierre Nora actually sees in opposition to each other: history and memory. Different in their phenomenological perspective on the past, history for Nora is the distant and analytical, a critical

reconstruction of the past. Memory, on the other hand, “being a phenomenon of emotion and magic,” is always embodied in the living and thus “unconscious to the distortion of which it is subject, vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and capable of lying dormant of the present.” [footnote 22 here] The way the film applies these images and sews them into the filmic fabric adheres to the very nature of memory as being subjective, fragmentary, eclectic, incomplete, and to some degree vulnerable to manipulation. The editing of original images and fictitious elements in *Wir sind das Volk* plays a crucial role in the film’s attempt to present historical images in a way that speaks to the people’s experience of Germany’s reunification as a joint effort of the people, supported and anticipated from both East and West Germans. This very experience and feeling of togetherness is located in their memory and thus shapes their historical knowledge of that past. The original footage used in the film is arranged according to an aesthetic logic. It relies on certain memorabilia, that is the familiarity with the most famous film images of Germany’s reunification, coherent with neither actual historical events of 1989 nor the complexities of the event. Consequently, the film capitalizes on this romantic and (melo)dramatic notion of German reunification as the achievement of ordinary people from both East and West, who came together and changed the course of history.

#### IV. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs has asserted that only an individual is capable of remembering. In order to understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought, Halbwachs suggests “to locate each [memory] within the thought of the corresponding group.” [footnote 23 here] Halbwachs’ study on collective memory brings to the fore that individual memory – such as individual recollection about the events in 1989 – can neither be separated from nor sustained without others who share similar memories about a past event. Visual media as a vehicle to create images that will later become *Bestand* (inventory) of people’s recollection thus contribute to the formation of collective memory formation. Accordingly, the media images produced in 1989 were instantly affiliated with Germany’s reunification and became commonplaces in people’s recollection about the past. As Rolf Bäuml points out: “[T]elevision images create the pictures of memory...that linger in our memory.” [footnote 24 here] The 1989 media coverage produced images that have become non-transparent symbols of Germany’s reunification. People largely remember in this way. The film *Wir sind das Volk* capitalizes on this mnemonic pattern, using media images from 1989 and implementing them into a dramatic story of the past. These filmic images correspond with the actual images that are collectively shared by many people. The symbolic nature of these original images materializes in concrete form. The images are being transferred to and conflated with a melodramatic narrative about the history of Germany’s reunification. In so doing, the film exclusively favors one possible reading of the past that simplifies the complexity of Germany’s reunification process. The film depicts both East and West German citizens (and to a lesser degree West German politicians) as visionaries of a future united nation. These citizens occupy the role of the most important agents behind Germany’s reunification. And although it is historically correct that the commitment of many people (mainly GDR citizens who wanted to change the society they live in) triggered and contributed to the rapid collapse of the SED-regime, the film focuses on this commitment and blows it out of proportion. In doing so, the film not only proposes that both West and East Germans came together to “tear down the wall,” but also narrates a dramatic story that moves towards a predetermined telos, that is Germany’s reunification. The film turns a blind eye on the fact that the majority of people envisioned reforms rather than the end of their state, let alone the reunification of the two German states.

The film title draws on the well-known chant *Wir sind das Volk*. It instantly strikes a cord with its audience that remembers the events of 1989 as a highly emotional, almost magical moment in Germany’s history; a history that has inflicted very many challenges on the German people. The film assembles, orchestrates, and

proliferates these very emotional and well-known images to both Easterners and Westerners in order to suggest the idea of *Wir sind ein Volk* (We are a nation). Every other important aspect of Germany's reunification process, its complexities, difficulties and also coincidences, ultimately fall by the wayside.

Being able to address a large audience that not only easily identifies with the *dramatis personae* in the melodramatic narrative but also with the (re)constructed images of the past enables the film to make a telling observation about Germany's contemporary political and social landscape. The application and fetishization of Germany's reunification, when people from both East and West came together to achieve something unimaginable, aims for reconciliation or – in Robert D. Levy and Richard McCormick's words – it aims for *Gegenwartsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the present). [footnote 25 here] Germany's contemporary political, economic, cultural, and societal disarray often results in the resurfacing of former East and West ideologies, which leads to the nearsighted assumption that reunification is one of the main causes for the nation's current austerity. [footnote 26 here] Fantasizing German history in a melodramatic film functions as a means (and as an aesthetic space) by which post-1990 Germany revisits past achievements, harmony, and the moment of a German "miracle" in monumentalistic form. As Paul Cooke convincingly shows, the need for reconciliation even harks back to the very unification treaty. As early as 1990, West Germany's Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble who negotiated the unification treaty made clear to the East Germans: "[W]hat is taking place here is the accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic, and not the other way around...We do not wish to ignore your wishes and interests. However, we are not seeing here the unification of two equal states." [footnote 27 here]

If we conceive of the film *Wir sind das Volk* as an attempt to self-represent the Berlin Republic, we can conclude that the film tries to defy any notion of inequalities between West and East Germany after reunification. We have seen throughout the discussion, however, that the film is inconsistent in its own approach. Many times, the film favors the understanding of Germany's reunification as inevitability of Western design and of East German acquiescence. Nonetheless, the film goes to great lengths to create a sense of equality, respect, and respective appreciation. For example: Only seconds after Micha and Dirk cross the East German border, Andreas is already waiting for them on the other side. A high-angle shot shows the three hugging each other and forming a unity. This scene functions as a metaphor for the (re)united nation-state and underscores once more that the fall of the wall came about because the people from both East and West united in order to "make history" on November 9, 1989.

However, the depiction of Germany's reunification in such monumentalistic images comes very close to what Nietzsche has called a monumental conception of the past. [footnote 28 here] In the film, the people who come to define a decisive moment in time personify the heroic figure Nietzsche alludes to. Nonetheless, the *Wir sind das Volk* looks back at this great moment in history not necessarily in a nostalgic way but certainly with the implication that something similar might be possible if the German nation stands together in brotherly unity. Becoming aware of the contrast between the "great past" and the dreary present, the film runs the risk of clinging on to a past that certainly deserves our acknowledgement but does not provide any solution to present problems other than the comforting memory of days when people seemingly hold history in their own hands.

## V. References

[footnote 1] Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema*, 2nd ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 193.

[footnote 2] Ibid. 194

[footnote 3] Ibid. 193.

[footnote 4] Especially films of the New German Cinema era, such as Edgar Reitz' *Heimat* (1984), in which the life of Maria Simon in the rural village of Schabbach, Germany provides a red thread to narrate a chronology of German history from 1990 until 1982.

[footnote 5] Ibid. 199.

[footnote 6] "Deutscher Fernsehpreis, Archiv, 2009, Bester Mehrteiler," accessed March 27, 2012, <http://www.deutscherfernsehpreis.de/content/view/667/52/>.

[footnote 7] Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*. Translated by Gregory Elliot. (London: Verso, 2009), 190.

[footnote 8] *Wir sind das Volk. Liebe kennt keine Grenzen*, directed by Thomas Berger. (München: Constantin Film, 2008), DVD.

[footnote 9] Marcia Landy, introduction to *Imitations of Life. A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 15.

[footnote 10] Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age," in: *The Historical Film. History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), 54.

[footnote 11] *ibid.*

[footnote 12] Landy, Introduction, 17.

[footnote 13] Kristie A. Foell, "History as Melodrama: German Division and Unification in Two Recent Films," in: *Textual Responses to German Unification: Processing Historical and Social Change in Literature and Film*, ed. Carol A. Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, and Kristie A. Foell (Berlin, New York: W. de Gruyter, 2001), 233.

[footnote 14] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in: *Imitations of Life. A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 70.

[footnote 15] *Ibid.*

[footnote 16] Rosenstone, "The Historical Film," 57.

[footnote 17] *Wir sind das Volk*, DVD.

[footnote 18] *Ibid.*

[footnote 19] *Ibid.*

[footnote 20] *Ibid.*

[footnote 21] Donald F. Bouchard, ed., *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 160.

[footnote 22] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflict and Division*. Vol.1, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

[footnote 23] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, translated by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 53.

[footnote 24] Rolf Bäumer, “1989 in the Media and the Documentary Film,” in: *Germany Reunified. A Five-and Fifty-Year Retrospective*, ed. Peter M. Daly et al. (New York, Washington, D.C.: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), 42.

[footnote 25] Robert D. Levy and Richard McCormick, “Mastering the Past and Present: Problems of Memory in Postwar and Post-Wende German Cinema,” in: *Textual Responses to German Reunification: Processing Historical and Social Change in Literature and Film*, ed. Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, and Kristie A. Foell (Berlin, New York: W. de Gruyter, 2001), 194.

[footnote 26] Tobias Kaiser, “Westdeutsche zufriedener als Ostdeutsche,” *Die Welt*, November 4, 2010.

[footnote 27] Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany Since Unification. From Colonization to Nostalgia* (New York: Berg, 2005), 4.

[footnote 28] Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in: *Untimely Meditations*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 68.