By the mid-1980s the New German Cinema was on its way to becoming a thing of the past. Not least, the untimely death of its enfant terrible, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and the radical reorientation of the West German film subsidy process signalled the beginning of the end for this internationally acclaimed cinema. The cinema that followed in its wake, and which came to typify film production in the remainder of the 1980s and the post-Wall landscape of the 1990s, might have offered an entertainment value that was economically more viable than the esoteric offerings from the likes of Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and Werner Herzog, but in terms of artistic merit and political engagement it was largely viewed as cinema of diminishing returns. In 2000, Eric Rentschler published a now-seminal essay addressing a “post-Wall cinema of consensus,” which, he argued, was all but “divested of the topical impetus and utopian resolve which once energised the New German Cinema” (260). However, in a striking turn of fortunes, German Cinema has experienced a revival in the decade since the publication of Rentschler’s essay, to the extent that it has once again captured the attention of an international audience.

The Collapse of the Conventional comprises fourteen chapters, which consider the landscape of German film production post-2000 as an arena that has once again become politically charged. This substantial volume brings together many of the leading names in the field of German film studies for a collection of essays that not only map the contours of the political in the post-Wall cinematic landscape, but also reassess aspects of the history of the New German Cinema and the post-Wall ‘consensus’ cinema of the 1990s. In this regard too, the editors’ introduction makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the shifts that have occurred within German film production over the last decade. Rather than just rehearsing well-worn arguments about the nature of the New German Cinema, Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager outline the political model that informed the predecessors of today’s German cinema with a precision that is both refreshing and vital. The editors also take the time in their introduction to offer a case study of the relationship between the legacy of the New German Cinema and a younger generation of filmmakers. A brief but nonetheless illuminating examination of Oskar Roehler’s Agnes and his Brothers and Fatih Akin’s œuvre (in particular, The Edge of Heaven) suggests a post-millennial evocation of Fassbinder’s style and politically charged content.

The majority of the volume examines films that reflect on history from a variety of directions. Jennifer M. Kapczynski focuses on the use of color, which, she notes, constitutes something of a blind spot in film studies, in Sönke Wortmann’s The Miracle of Bern. In a fascinating essay, Kapczynski suggests the film’s redeployment of the dominant West German color convention for the 1950s, known as “Agfacolor,” colludes with the film’s construction of masculinity and a normalizing impulse. Lutz Koepnick considers how another of Wortmann’s films, Germany: A Summer Fairy Tale, engages with national discourses whilst diverting attention from nationalist agendas of the past, while Elisabeth Krimmer revisits the much-discussed Downfall and the questions it poses about the balance of wartime victimhood, a topic also addressed
by Wilfred Wilms in a chapter exploring the made-for-television historical film Dresden. In the last chapter to explore legacies of National Socialism, Anna M. Parkinson considers the relationship between memory and feminist politics in Margarethe von Trotta’s Rosenstrasse.

In the following three chapters, the volume’s preoccupation with the weight of history continues, but that associated with the legacy of the German Democratic Republic. In a well-crafted essay, Johannes von Moltke argues that Roehler’s No Place to Go is “as much a postunification film about the Berlin Republic as it is a story of an individual’s helpless response to the fall of the Berlin Wall” (159), with the film’s protagonist registering the shocks of unification. Von Moltke also situates Roehler’s film in the tradition of the West German Autorenkino, but rather than just likening the director to Fassbinder, his reading offers Alexander KlUGE’s Yesterday Girl as a productive intertext. Fisher focuses on one of the most successful of the so-called ‘heritage films,’ The Lives of Others. Given the ubiquity of the term ‘heritage film’ in recent German film studies, Fisher’s detailed exploration of this expression is most welcome, as is his insightful appraisal of the film itself, in which he attends to the role of genre in shaping the film’s affective power. Michael D. Richardson considers the nostalgic deployment of consumer culture in filmic reconstructions of the GDR, such as Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin!, which, he argues, offers an idealized yet consciously artificial image of the past in order to “critique the present and its understanding of the GDR” and re-establish, in part, an East German identity (233). Concluding this run of essays is John E. Davidson, whose essay explores postunification aesthetics and notions of critique in light of the tradition of GDR realism.

The final part of the volume considers films that engage with the socio-political realities of the Berlin Republic. Two chapters address the cinema of what has been termed the Berlin School of filmmakers. Marco Abel discusses the output of one of the Berlin School’s best-known figures, Christian Petzold. He argues for Yella as an exemplification of Petzold’s belief “that art’s capacity for the political lies in its aesthetic nature rather than in its ability to communicate a message” (258). Abel also offers a very useful working definition of the “somewhat misleading” label ‘Berlin School’ (260). In the following essay, Kristin Kopp attempts to define Berlin School aesthetics before moving on to a ‘symbolic political’ reading of Christoph Hochhäusler’s This Very Moment (303). Roger F. Cook’s chapter assesses Hans Weingartner’s The Edukators, a film which adopts a more recognizably mainstream aesthetic approach to Germany’s legacy of 1968 and the terrorist aftershocks of the 1970s, whilst Barbara Mennel’s very original essay focuses on the transnational character of Ursula Biemann’s Remote Sensing. Prager’s individual contribution to and final chapter in the volume considers the re-emergence of a utopian longing, which energised the New German Cinema, in a younger generation of filmmakers.

The Collapse of the Conventional is a valuable resource; the range and quality of chapters not only reflects the variety and depth of recent German cinema, they also come together to form an excellent critical compendium for exploring this “politically charged polyvocal arena” of filmmaking (32). The Collapse of the Conventional offers new insights for film scholars and will doubtless prove an invaluable classroom tool for students studying contemporary German-language film. More generally, it is an infectious read.

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