

Localizing the *Milljöh* in Gerhard Lamprecht's *Irgendwo in Berlin* (1946)

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After WWII, film production in Germany resumed in 1946, first in the Soviet occupied sector of Berlin, where the newly founded Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft DEFA began its work with a series of newsreels and three feature films. Gerhard Lamprecht's *Irgendwo in Berlin* was DEFA's third feature, following Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* and Milo Harbich's *Freies Land*. Lamprecht's children's film tells the story of eleven-year-old Gustav Iller and his friend Willi who grow up in the rubble of Berlin. Much of their pastime is spent playing war with other children, shooting fireworks at each other in the destroyed buildings. Things change when Gustav's father, a former prisoner of war, returns home. The war veteran becomes depressed when he sees his car garage business destroyed, and he is too weak after the long prison sentence to rebuild it. Gustav and Willi are trying to help, so Willi steals food. Both kids get in trouble, and Willi runs away from home. When the other kids call Willi chicken, he accepts a dare, and climbs up a narrow side wall of a destroyed building, but loses his balance, falls, and dies a few days later as a result of the fall. The other kids are shocked, and they stop playing war games after they have experienced a death of one of their own first-hand. Instead, they gather to help Gustav's father. The film closes showing dozens of children starting to clear the rubble of the garages to begin the reconstruction.

Set and filmed in the rubble, *Irgendwo in Berlin* is generally referred to as a Trümmerfilm, as it depicts life in the middle of Germany in ruins. For instance, Bob Shandley has focused on the status of interpersonal relationships among the film's protagonists that have been necessitated by the rubble. Shandley introduces the premise of an ideological subtext in *Irgendwo in Berlin* as he analyzes the image of the traumatized soldier, the juxtaposition of the body and the rubble, and the goal of reconstructing patriarchy. In a different interpretation, Anke Pinkert approached the film as visual space for grief and mourning. By looking at the psychological condition of the protagonists in *Irgendwo in Berlin*, Pinkert establishes a pathology of postwar Germany with film as potential remedy to put the past behind the spectators. In my paper today, I propose a different reading of *Irgendwo in Berlin* in the tradition of Weimar *Milljöh*-films Gerhard Lamprecht directed as well.

Lamprecht, born in 1897, is considered one of the central people in German cinema. He sold his first screenplay at the age of seventeen, and directed his first film, *Es bleibt in der Familie* in 1920. During the 1920s, Lamprecht had been well known for "social dramas with a critical agenda" (Hake 39¹), as Sabine Hake described his visual oeuvre. *Die Verrufenen* (1925), *Menschen untereinander* (1926), *Die Unehelichen* (1926), and to some extent also *Emil und die Detektive* (1931) are a few of his films that showed authentic stories of the working class. Hake referred to Lamprecht's Weimar films as "critical *Zeitfilm*" that engaged "with contemporary problems, [...] offered sympathetic accounts of working-class life but rarely moved beyond a naturalist depiction of milieu" (46).

¹ German National Cinema, Second edition.

When we hear *Milljöh*, (spelled M-I-L-L-J-O umlaut-H in Berlin's vernacular), we are reminded of the graphic artist Heinrich Zille. Born in 1858, Zille became known for his caricatures depicting life of Berlin's working class in a humorous way. His drawings that appeared in the three leading magazines published in Berlin at the turn of the century, *Simplicissimus*, *Die Jugend*, and *Der liebe Augustin*, appealed to all levels of society. In fact, Zille's works were so influential that since that time, Zille's name has frequently been evoked as a synonym to describe the *Milljöh*--the everyday life conditions in the mostly proletarian districts of Berlin. A *Milljöh*-film, by my definition, does precisely that - depict working class life in Berlin's blue-collar districts, and I will show that many of the genre elements used in these films reappear twenty years later in *Irgendwo in Berlin*, suggesting a continuation, or perhaps a rediscovery of Weimar cinema with considerable impact on the immediate post-war German cinema.

The film is demonstratively set in the blue-collar districts of Berlin, suggesting that the respective milieu played an essential role in the film. Unlike in the two previous DEFA's *Trümmerfilme* that could have taken place anywhere, as indicated by their titles *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (the Germans) and *Freies Land* (Germany), Lamprecht's film title clearly situates the story in Berlin. The place modifier *Irgendwo* generalizes the location, yet as the title appears on the screen for the first time, it does so in front of a map showing Berlin-Mitte. The combination of the film title and this very particular location on the map then modifies and limits the *Irgendwo in Berlin* to an *Irgendwo* in these districts. The Nikolaiviertel, location of Zille's stories and Lamprecht's Weimar *Milljöh*-films, is part of this map, and the

establishing shot shows the Berliner Dom in the background of the rubble. [clip 1, 45 seconds]. This combination insinuates that “Somewhere in Berlin” is not to be taken literally in the sense of a random location, but that it should be understood in the sense of social strata, i.e. anywhere the proletariat has its home. By linking the on-screen title with the map, and following up with shots of a very particular working-class Kiez, Lamprecht brings together the plot, the rubble, and the milieu he deemed important for his stories. In an interview with the Berlin newspaper Sonntag, Lamprecht emphasized the centrality of the milieu when he stated the following about the casting of his child actors: “Von der Voraussetzung ausgehend, daß das Milieu den Menschen formt, habe ich für die Besetzung dieser Rollen Jungen gewählt, deren wirkliche Umwelt der erdachten des Films ähnelt.” To Lamprecht, the milieu was essential for an authentic story, in Weimar and in the DEFA film.

The setting in the rubble of Berlin also continues the approach Lamprecht’s milieu films took in the 1920s. At a time in Weimar cinema when directors such as Fritz Lang shot in the artificial settings of the studio to create the illusion of the fantastic and futuristic, the milieu films did the opposite and left the studios for the street, the factory floor, and the cramped, dark, and crowded tenement buildings. The depiction of everyday life in its natural setting became an important aspect, and while the stories were fictional, the actors and their surroundings were not. By setting *Irgendwo in Berlin* not only in the rubble of Berlin, as was the case in the first German rubble film, Wolfgang Staudte’s *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, but also by adding sequences of rebuilt or even undamaged facades Gerhard Lamprecht furthers the naturalism of the milieu. At times, turning around the corner reveals

almost idyllic settings [series of screenshots], and when the plot moves inside of buildings we even see Biedermeier-type living rooms of the bourgeoisie. Those images stand in stark contrast to the rubble as the living environment for the working class. If the rubble in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* served the purpose of visually enhancing the mental disarray of the protagonists, Lamprecht repurposes it in *Irgendwo in Berlin* to serve as replacement for the dark tenement building in Weimar. The rubble is then the signifier for the milieu and a big living room for the proletariat, giving meaning to the *Irgendwo* of the film title. When Walter Lennig wrote in his 1946 review in the *Berliner Zeitung*: “Der Bombenkrieg hat sich als gründlicher Gleichmacher betätigt,” he overlooked the discrepancy between the well-furnished, clean, and safe living rooms and the dangerous piles of rubble. Lamprecht juxtaposes these images with each other to show that even in a destroyed city that appears to have eliminated class distinction, the impact of the milieu can be felt rather ubiquitously.

Arguably the most obvious depiction of the milieu’s role in *Irgendwo in Berlin* can be found by looking at the role of children. We will hear more about the maturation of the children and about this film as a children’s film in the two papers to follow, but allow me to explain briefly why Lamprecht’s *Milljöh* film was made a film about children and for children. Lamprecht had already directed one of the most popular children’s films of Weimar, *Emil und die Detektive*. *Irgendwo in Berlin* replays some of the moments in which children take charge and accomplish change by way of solidarity. Even as a group presumably without rights in the world of the adults, the children in *Emil und die Detektive* accomplish their goal working

together. In *Irgendwo in Berlin*, the children do the same in the closing scene, when they start the rebuilding process [clip 2, final scene of the film]. Even though, or perhaps because they were influenced by the milieu, they went on the wrong path playing war with fireworks, and still, the right attitude of the working class helps them understand the value and reasons of work. Here, we see repeated what Sabine Hake explained as “sympathetic account[s] of working class life” (Hake 46) in the context of the Weimar milieu film. The question remains why Lamprecht selected children for this milieu film? As a possible answer I suggest that the environment of 1946 demanded this. For a milieu film in the tradition of Weimar, two elements were missing--work and the working class. With thousands of men of the working class either dead, imprisoned, or unable to work due to a war disability, and a general lack of work in a war-devastated country just starting to rebuild itself, Lamprecht solved this problem by transposing these issues onto the level and into the realm of children. He restages conflicts between the past and the present and situates those in children’s play. Doing so allows Lamprecht to raise pressing questions of the day, such as the success of denazification, the question of authority (or, as Jaimie Fisher put it, “Who watches the Rubble kids?”), or the role of work and the working class in postwar Germany. If we stay within the idea of the milieu film, *Irgendwo in Berlin* shows that not the children but their parents are to blame for the past, and that hope, and a new beginning for Germany are only possible if adults help the children.

Situating *Irgendwo in Berlin* in the tradition of the *Milljöh-Film* challenges the idea of the rubble films as paradigms of a “zero hour” in German cinema. Genre

traditions and personnel continued the Weimar period. Re-reading other post-war films might help us to further our understanding of the continuities between post-war German cinema and German cinematic traditions and genres before *Gleichschaltung* limited artistic freedom. In the case of DEFA film in the 1940s and 1950s, we might want to take a close look at more of these similarities to understand better how even in East German cinema no hard break with the past took place, and that a completely new beginning remained only a myth.