From stressed utopias to pervasive anxiety

Post-catastrophic dystopia in 1970s West German television

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Three films imagining post-apocalyptic dystopias – *Smog* (Petersen Germany 1973), *Operation Ganymed* (Erler Germany 1977) and *Die Hamburger Krankheit* (Fleischmann Germany 1979) – concretise and dramatise environmental, political and social stresses on the West German national imaginary during the 1970s. Articulating cultural motifs hitherto associated with national success within the conventions of the disaster film, the films would exacerbate cultural stress throughout the decade by gradually uncoupling it from its historically specific sources and rendering it as a diffuse yet inescapable national mood. Taken together and read in sequence, the three films show how dystopian thinking takes hold while its specific causes grow less clear and obvious, expressing fundamental doubts about 'post-war' utopian aspirations.

Keywords: dystopia, West Germany, television, utopia, disaster film

Introduction: a nervous and unhappy decade

If the urgency and frequency with which dystopian narratives occur in popular culture is any indication of economic, political and social stresses imposed upon a given society, then the 1970s must have been an unusually stressful decade in West Germany. To great critical acclaim at home, yet virtually unknown outside of Germany, three films from that decade – two made for television and one for theatrical release – testify to this fact as they map contemporary anxieties onto narratives about national catastrophe and the high cost of survival. Early in the decade, Wolfgang Petersen's mockumentary *Smog* (Germany 1973) describes, in increasingly apocalyptic tones, four days during which air pollution and adverse weather conditions combine into a deadly brew over West Germany's industrial heartland. A few years later, Rainer Erler's *Operation Ganymed* (Germany 1977) expands *Smog*'s tight thematic focus to address broader fears by stranding an international crew of astronauts upon their return from one of the moons of Jupiter in a depopulated, post-catastrophic desert from which

they must make their way back toward civilisation. Rounding out the decade is Peter Fleischmann's *Die Hamburger Krankheit* (*The Hamburg Syndrome*; Germany 1979), which imagines a nationwide viral outbreak negotiated by a dwindling group of survivors travelling south from the film's eponymous Ground Zero in a futile search for a safe haven.

The emphatically pessimistic grimness with which the three films imagine national catastrophe and dystopian aftermath is striking; perhaps all the more so since West German attitudes up to this point had been largely forward-looking and optimistic. Granted, the experience of the Third Reich had endowed most West Germans with a healthy scepticism toward any utopian rhetoric. As a corollary, any dystopian equivalent with the thunderous gloom and doom of Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung* might have met with the same scepticism.[1] A critical public would debate the inevitable problems, crises and downturns in post-war history, but would do so in a tone of 'decidedly unemotional anti-intensity', as historian Frank Biess points out (23). The lack of emotional intensity and hyperbole driving both utopian and dystopian discourse also manifests itself in few, if any, canonical films or television productions with overtly apocalyptic themes. The cinema of the Weimar years had produced notable scenarios of apocalyptic dystopia – palpable, for example, in the systemic unease of societies teetering on the edge of the abyss in Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (Germany 1922) and *Metropolis* (Germany 1927). But that dystopian imagination would make only the most anodyne comeback in the nostalgic post-war remakes of the Mabuse films (e.g. Lang's own *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (Germany 1960) or the series of campy Edgar Wallace thrillers starting in 1959). With sf being relatively marginal in the post-war West German media landscape, apocalyptic dystopias would creep into genres like the mystery, the thriller or the social problem film, but rarely make an appearance in the one genre with perhaps the greatest affinity for the subject matter.

Hence, the arrival of three films about disasters and their dystopian aftermath during the 1970s constitutes a turning-point well worth examining. As these three films simultaneously define and respond to ideas about national identity and the collective self, they reveal a confluence of circumstances that aid in the rising prominence of dystopian discourse. In contrast to long-standing literary and cinematic traditions in, for example, the UK and the US, that discourse

1. In his history of German post-war anxieties, Frank Biess has laid out in detail the causal nexus behind this notable shift in tone across public debates, arguing for a 'steadily present, permanently changing, dynamic recollection of a catastrophic past, triggering a fearful and at times apocalyptic anticipation of the future' (Biess 19). All translations from German, including this one, are mine.

had never taken hold in German culture, especially not in the years after the Second World War. But marking the 1970s as the decade in which post-war West German culture discovers and embraces post-apocalyptic dystopia is not just a matter of identifying the specific anxieties that run through each individual film. Taken together and read in sequence, the three films also show that dystopian thinking takes hold while its specific causes grow less clear. As anxieties in *The Hamburg Syndrome*, released at the very end of the decade, appear largely divorced from the nation's acute woes of the moment, German culture seems to have turned a corner and moved into a period that is no longer 'post-war' in its embrace of utopian optimism.

Smog: farewell to the economic miracle

To understand Petersen's environmental dystopia in its historical context, it is useful to read it as a direct response to a crisis that is all the more surprising for the success story leading up to it. That success story, and with it the formative moment of West Germany's national imaginary, begins with the less than auspicious collapse of the Third Reich and the mythical 'Stunde Null' (Zero Hour) in 1945. Forced by the necessities of survival in the ruins and aided by the Western Allies' political and economic need for European stability, economic recovery would quickly replace the need for a retrospective historical reckoning in the focus of national attention. Framing the collective task of restoring the nation primarily *as an economic project* would be all the more compelling for the astonishing success of this specific aspect of reconstruction, a success bordering on the miraculous (hence 'Wirtschaftswunder': the economic miracle). Declaring economics the sole paradigm of reconstruction would steer clear of potentially problematic psychological and social aspects and help avoid political paralysis arising from morose dwelling on past trauma.[2] The assertive and the repressive power inherent in this paradigm inscribed into the nation's foundational myth would be considerable. It would not only set clear goals of individual and collective efforts, establish career goals, define living standards and

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2. The key text in this regard is Alexander und Margarete Mitscherlich's *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (*The Inability to Mourn: The Basis of Collective Behavior*. 1967). Later, W.G. Sebald would make a similar argument, pointing toward Germany's eagerness to overwrite urban spaces after the devastation of the war, as an objective correlative of the nation's mental landscape (see Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (*On The Natural History of Destruction*, 1999)).

regulate social relations – even expressively and emphatically so. It would also curtail the agenda for public debate, deciding what was and what was not up for discussion as part of the national post-war agenda. In this regard, the billowing clouds of pollution rising from industrial smokestacks would only prove the fact that Germany was booming. They would constitute a sign of economic well-being and social stability and the promise of the nation's gradual reintegration into the global economic post-war order – a sign of optimism rewarded and confidence regained.

Despite a series of inevitable cycles of boom and bust in the West German economy until the end of the 1960s, the 1970s brought a more decisive downturn that was also shared by other Western industrial nations. 'The years of the German economic miracle were years of uninterrupted economic strength with rates of growth up to twelve per cent', journalist Stefan Schweiger points out. And yet, by 1966 'the German economic miracle was coming to an end; for the first time since 1949, growth began to crumble' (Schweiger n.p.). Against the background of this economic downturn, the connotations of those industrial smokestacks still belching out dark clouds of pollution would have to change as well. Without the guarantee that there would be an equitable payoff in affluence and stability in exchange for tolerating the pollution, the paradigm that had for so long organised public debate about reconstruction ('It's the economy, stupid!', as James Carville might have told the Germans) would lose its monolithic dominance and make room for the ascendant paradigm of environmentalism.

Produced by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in 1973, Petersen's made-for-television film *Smog* imagines four days of an environmental disaster covering the megalopolis of the Ruhrgebiet.[3] With its opening shot of massive industrial installations belching out grey clouds of pollution, cheek to jowl with the grimy working-class houses huddling in its shadow, the film zeroes in immediately on the perpetrators and victims of rising air pollution. Segmented neatly into the four days of the crisis, the film distributes its narrative perspective across a wide variety of incidents and characters, most of them nameless and limited to a single appearance. Menge combines a documentary aesthetic in his coverage of 'man on the street' interviews and television reporting with a kitchen-sink realism. Two families eventually emerge as focal points of the narrative – the working-class Rykallas and the Grobecks,

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3. Though Wolfgang Petersen would go on to become a director with considerable name recognition after the massive international success of his film *Das Boot* (Germany 1981), German television, like its international counterparts, was considered a producers' medium. In this function, and in that of writer, Wolfgang Menge is often credited with being the creative force behind the film.

the upper-class family headed by the director of the industrial conglomerate Grobag. Among the more panoramic elements, the Rykallas and the Grobecks provide a sense of linear development and continuity.

Given the explicitly educational mission German television had given itself from the outset, it is hardly surprising that the film is didactic in its approach.[4] Its polyphonic voices allow it to articulate the clash of basic positions toward the increasing environmental concerns of post-war West Germany: the balancing act between economic growth and environmental protection, the tension between proponents and critics of industry, the ambivalence between individual freedom and collective responsibility. Around these positions, laid out with heavy-handed sincerity, the film sets up a series of images and situations that translate abstract political issues into personal experiences. Housewives in a supermarket begin to notice that their nylons are disintegrating in the increasingly toxic air. Drivers cause accidents as they collapse behind the wheel from heart attacks brought on by respiratory stress. Traffic jams are followed by eerily empty streets as emergency measures begin to take hold. As the crisis tightens its grip, the country begins to grow unrecognisable, eerie, weird and uncanny.

Beyond the didactic function of these scenes, the montage sequences of empty streets bathed in the greyish dead light of 'darkness at noon' reveal the more broadly dystopian dimension of the crisis.[5] Just as Petersen's low-angle helicopter shots and wide shots of deserted urban spaces dissolve concrete political positions and specific causal relations into a less tangible though no less potent miasma, the film's perspective grows more systemic. It privileges the organisational meshing of institutions (industry, politics, science, mass media) over the individual lives of the citizens. Only in the very end does it dramatically narrow its scope to the death of a single infant and the inconsolable family. The eponymous disaster may well be ubiquitous and systemic, but the deaths it causes are specific and concrete.

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4. In his historical overview of German television, Knut Hickethier cites Gerhard Prager, in charge of the film production division of the network ZDF since 1967, as framing television in general as 'a technical instrument' for 'helping people to navigate their world' and the made-for-TV movie in particular as a means for 'orienting themselves within reality' (Hickethier 250).

5. The term 'dystopia', here and elsewhere in the argument, is used not so much to refer to the meticulous and systematic laying out of a fictional political system – as most textbook definitions would have it – and more for its use to distinguish those post-catastrophic scenarios that see disaster as a fortuitous necessity for cleaning the slate from those that posit a culture's inability to recover and reconstitute itself after disaster strikes, descending permanently into austerity, hardship and savagery. See Graham Murphy, 'Dystopia'; or Brian Stableford, 'Science Fiction and Ecology', especially the section on 'Ecocatastrophes in Science Fiction', 137–40.

As the crisis begins to grow more serious, Petersen draws unsettling parallels between the state of emergency superimposed upon the population by West Germany's bureaucratic state apparatus and the last time this population was compelled to subject itself to forms of intrusive marshalling. The grandfather of the Rykalla family (Heinz Schacht) digs up his old gas mask from storage in the basement. Those recruited to serve as members of the *Hilfsdienst* (aid workers) wear armbands on which their status is marked in the antiquated *Frakturschrift* (Gothic print) associated with official publications under the Third Reich. As first impressions go, the siren we hear in the film's opening shot registers either as an early warning of the coming ecological disaster, or as the steel mill's signal for the end of a shift. More importantly, however, it evokes the air raid sirens warning the civilian population of Allied bomber squadrons approaching for yet another devastating raid during the Second World War. Scenes that show the mass exodus of women and children from the Ruhrgebiet by the trainload evoke similar memories of mass evacuations amidst aerial bombardment. To some extent, these references to Nazi Germany and the Second World War are a default setting by which a hitherto unprecedented ecological crisis is coded as a uniquely German catastrophe.[6] Playing on a shared national imagery of death and devastation, they serve more to evoke 'bad times' than caution against an early version of what Naomi Klein would come to call 'disaster capitalism'.[7]

More uncomfortable, however, is the power of this imagery to reveal the state's regimentation of the population required to achieve Germany's economic miracle itself. In this regard, the public emergency measures are not the mark of a state of emergency or exception. Rather, they are an intensification or extension of the industrial discipline that was required to organise disciplined industrial labour within the confines of the national economy. We see the sudden concrete manifestation of the otherwise invisible hand of the state overruling individual liberty and self-determination in the film's unease about the emergent social crisis.[8]

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6. The DVD edition of the film features liner notes that include the following as part of the plot summary: 'One day in January, a weather system turns the Ruhrgebiet into a gas chamber.' The wording of this phrase makes the reference to the Second World War more, and more problematically, explicit than the film ever does.

7. It is hardly a coincidence that in her historical mapping of 'disaster capitalism', Klein traces the emergence of the first wave of neoliberalism in the 1980s (Reagan in the US, Thatcher in the UK) to the stresses of the 1970s, from the OPEC oil embargo to half a decade of 'stagflation'.

8. Despite a few scenes in which Menge and Petersen show the collapse of civil society (e.g. a woman lifeless on the ground near a tram station with pedestrians carelessly walking away from her), the film is clearly more worried about governmental overreach than the collapse of civil society. Unlike

Smog moves even further into dystopian territory in its handling of the aftermath of the crisis. Initially, the film makes it clear that the crisis is caused by a confluence of human-made and natural factors. This means that neither its causes nor the failures amidst institutional responses are fully to blame on human activity. The film occasionally flirts with the idea that this crisis is a visitation, a test of humanity, a tragic but inevitable side effect of living in an advanced industrial civilisation. After all, this position is taken and defended by bureaucrats, industrialists and some members of the public in the film itself. In its final moments, however, this form of exoneration becomes untenable. For one, there is the grim death of the baby in the Rykalla family, a funeral scene in which the film, for a few moments, sheds any satirical aloofness and panoramic distance in favour of unvarnished sentimentality. The scene is followed by a montage sequence marking the return of normality, which shows airplanes, cars and industrial smokestacks blithely blowing fumes into the air as if nothing has happened. As efficiently as the institutional, bureaucratic and civil machinery has worked in the course of the crisis – which is not to say that it has 'mastered' the crisis in any significant sense of the word – its ability to learn remains limited to maximising its own internal processes alongside events already set in motion. Just as it has no jurisdiction over the causes of the crisis, it is incapable of extending it to these causes in the future as a consequence of having learned from its failures and shortcomings. Nonetheless, as crises like these are doomed to repeat themselves, the film seems to suggest that we will grow used to them. Similarly, bureaucratic impositions and governmental overreach at the expense of civil rights and individual self-determination will become routine. As life goes back to 'normal', the film reminds the audience, crises like the one we just witnessed, as well as their unwelcome political and social side effects, will become part of this normality. The nation's economic welfare and industrial progress come at the expense of the population now having to accept and endure a permanent state of ecological, social and political dystopia.

What is most striking in the context of a larger argument about post-war West German dystopias is how specific *Smog* is as to the causes and the nature of the crisis that initiate what threatens to grow into a permanent dystopian state. Although it would take another six years before 'the SMOG emergency would be officially declared' in the Ruhrgebiet, as the liner notes to the

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some British dystopias (e.g. *The War Game* (Watkins UK 1966)), post-war Germany seems to have greater trust in a sense of discipline being so thoroughly internalised that even the crisis is unlikely to shatter its restraints and turn the crowd into a mob.

film's DVD release tell us, it would not take long for environmental policy to grow into an effective issue for mobilising voters. The first political candidates anticipating the rise of the Green Party would enter regional elections in 1977.[9]

Operation Ganymed: no heroes in outer space

Four years after Petersen's environmental dystopia, Erler's film tells a very different story, this one about an international team of astronauts returning to what appears to be a post-apocalyptic Earth. Although West Germany had been one of the founding members of the European Space Agency (ESA) in 1975, space exploration itself, and especially manned space flight, was hardly a realistic item on the country's political and economic agenda. More utopian ambition than actuality, space travel, therefore, functions as an extension of the same forward-looking attitude driving the industrial boom that was to lead up to the environmental dystopia in *Smog*. If post-war optimism was inspiring the astronauts on their journey to the moons of Jupiter, however, the course of this mission, plagued by disaster along the way and greeted with ominous silence upon return, charts a downward trajectory. The film's first half hour is spent anxiously in orbit after four and a half years of travel time and 900 days without contact. Then the remaining five members of the crew, all male, make their landing in a reconfigured cargo module. Since the film opens with a television broadcast about Earth giving up on the mission after its disappearance behind Jupiter, we already know what the crew does not – that they have been given up on and forgotten. But we do not know what happened on Earth during these last two years of their absence.[10]

The crew's journey toward an answer to this question takes them across a desert, more North African than Mediterranean in its extreme aridity and barrenness. Though they eventually come across signs of human habitation – an abandoned village, its wells poisonous – their discoveries remain open to interpretation. A Super Constellation straight out of J.G. Ballard parked

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9. For more details about the formative period of the Green Party in West German politics, see https://www.gruene.de/unsere-gruene-geschichte.

10. Similarities between Erler's script and that of *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner US 1968) in regard to this location are certainly not coincidental. More importantly, however, Erler was to revisit some of these locations in a later project (*Die Letzten Ferien*, Germany 1975) that was explicitly geared toward West Germany's touristic imagination in its intersection with the countercultural movement in the late 1960s and its dream of 'dropping out' and retreat to such liminal European zones.

in the middle of the desert is weirdly out of place. And the highway leading to the Mexican border lies buried under pristine sand dunes. As members of the crew are left by the roadside, falling prey to the harsh climatic conditions and, eventually, to infighting over more or less trivial matters, the last of the astronauts finally catches a glimpse of a city (presumably San Diego, though this is never explicitly confirmed). As he stumbles into the slums on its outskirts, curious onlookers and playing children pay little attention to him, clearly unaware of, or indifferent to, the grand scientific and humanitarian ambitions symbolised by the tattered and broken figure.

What allows viewers to place the film in the context of the dystopian post-catastrophe narrative is Erler's deliberate withholding of information about the setting. Early on, one of the crew members refers to the place as 'this planet', suggesting, albeit obliquely, the possibility that this may, after all, not even be Earth.[11] As the crew grows more despondent about the emptiness of the landscape, the alarming decline in their own physical well-being and the silence in response to any of their attempts at communication leads them to consider the possibility that a nuclear war – or some other nuclear disaster – may have occurred, killing off civilisation and now slowly poisoning all of them as well. However, none of these explanatory models are ultimately verified. At best, we are thrown back to the film's opening gambit and assume that humanity simply gave up on the mission, dismantled its technological infrastructure and forgot about it.

Since Erler's world-building remains deliberately vague, we are left to supply concrete topical referents for the film's dystopian pessimism. For one, there are the landscapes foregrounded so relentlessly. Shot on location in the Canary Islands (Fuerteventura, Lanzarote and Gran Canaria), these landscapes may stand in for an unspecified inhospitable environment somewhere in North America. For the West German audience, however, they are likely to register as beloved travel destinations since the 1960s, when German tourists would find the range of their European sojourns expanded by the availability of affordable airline travel. As representations of West Germany's favourite holiday destinations, these images would be immediately recognisable. While these landscapes might have been attractive to tourists exactly for their alien harshness, to see them de-exoticised and reinterpreted as post-apocalyptic ruins in the context of nuclear war or

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11. As in some of its other aspects, the film is reminiscent of *Planet of the Apes*. The ending of *Operation Ganymed*, with the last survivor discovering a place that settles the question where we have been all along, performs a gesture of disambiguation similar to that film's finale.

the failure of nuclear power is disorienting. It marks the departure from a discourse that links tourism with affluence, privilege and economic recovery and strength. Their recontextualisation within a discourse of catastrophe followed by permanent dystopian sterility and austerity could not be more striking. Erler's strategy is similar to what Petersen does to the icons of West Germany's industrial recovery in *Smog*: turning a marker of affluence into one of technological devastation.

A similar act of dystopian reframing also occurs in the film's take on European and American collaboration. At first glance, using an Americanised shorthand for all character names (Mac, Don, Steve, 'Dug') might merely be a concession to the film's viability in foreign markets. Still, space exploration as an American prerogative is written into the film's conception of an international crew (itself a concession to space exploration as a form of political show business, as one character bitterly remarks) under the leadership of an American captain (Horst Frank).[12] This Captain's ultimate failure and obsolescence speaks to the disillusionment of Germany as a US ally in the context of the Cold War and, more importantly, in the wake of the Vietnam War. By the 1970s, the target audience for a film announcing itself explicitly as sf would no longer be recruited from the generation associating the US with the Marshall Plan, the Berlin air lift and John F. Kennedy assuring an adoring German crowd, 'Ich bin ein Berliner'. Instead, the audience would more likely have been politicised by the American involvement in the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Iran and its brutal conduct in the Vietnam War.[13] What had been another foundational myth of West Germany – the mutually beneficial contract between West Germany and the US – and therefore a guarantor of the larger utopian conception of West Germany's integration into the global order, is in decline in *Operation Ganymed*, making way for a more sceptical assessment of the US and its influence on German affairs.

12. Close viewing of the film also reveals that all dialogue has been dubbed in post-production, thereby expanding possibilities of overdubbing for international release in an English-speaking market.
13. It is revealing that roughly a decade earlier, a German sf programme like *Raumpatrouille* (1966) managed to articulate a moderate critique of official West German policy – in this case the military rearmament of the nation under NATO mandate – in far milder tones. Erler's dystopian pessimism shows that the film is addressing a youth culture that had been radicalising in opposition to US policy in the course of the 1960s. For a detailed analysis of *Raumpatrouille*, see Hantke, '*Raumpatrouille*: The Cold War, the "Citizen in Uniform", and West German Television' (2004).

Die Hamburger Krankheit: 'danse macabre'

Coming at the very end of the 1970s, Peter Fleischmann's *Die Hamburger Krankheit* provides ample evidence that these three films can be read as an ongoing narrative structured around the gradual entrenchment of a dystopian attitude in West German culture. Fleischmann does not come from the world of television like Petersen and Erler, but from the New German Cinema with its countercultural allegiances. Still, his film about the outbreak of a mysterious epidemic picks up many of the thematic and stylistic elements established by his predecessors working for television. Like Menge and Erler, Fleischmann uses the fictional crisis as an opportunity to examine the generational divide after the tumultuous 1960s as it aligns itself with the conflict between conservative and progressive politics. As he sends his characters on a journey across Germany, from Hamburg in the north down to Bavaria in the south, their encounters with marginal characters along the way bring out conservatives and progressives alike – one side questioning the military and corporate origins of the epidemic, the other arguing for the epidemic's ability to cleanse West Germany's post-'68 culture of its radical impulses and return it to civil stability so that the nation can get on with business.

The fact that Fleischmann is just as invested as his predecessors in deconstructing a West German utopianism – no matter whether it is based on economic growth, international alliances or the integrity of patriarchal authority figures – becomes clear in the film's formal qualities. The use of an ensemble cast rather than a single protagonist is reminiscent of the wide spectrum of voices and characters in *Smog*. But while *Smog* only coheres around two families set up in (social) contrast to each other, *Die Hamburger Krankheit* opens with a rather conventional protagonist. Epidemiologist Sebastian Ellerwein, played by the young, handsome, blond, blue-eyed Helmut Griem, fits the mould of the heroic saviour. While others around him flee heedlessly, he escapes from the chaos of the ravaged city of Hamburg to reach one of his colleagues in search for a cure. His heroic quest is offered as a device to structure the narrative. But then, half an hour into the film, Ellerwein dies of the disease. Like the Captain's death in *Operation Ganymed*, the film is left in search of a central character. That role is eventually filled by Ulrike (Carline Seiser), a young girl Ellerwein had picked up along the way. She has no destination of her own but merely tags along with our presumptive hero, offering the possibility for a romantic subplot that somehow fails to materialise. As the film tracks Ulrike's travels, from the moment of Ellerwein's death all the way to her final destination in the Bavarian Alps, her aimlessness becomes the

guiding principle of the film itself. Irreconcilable with the world of agency and adventure that had grounded Ellerwein, Ulrike is yet another element borrowed from Ballardian post-catastrophe, a character almost entirely introverted, oddly passive, masochistic in her relationship with the outside world in general and the epidemic in particular, and thus incapable of sustaining a clear linear narrative. Before the film eventually drops Ulrike into a Bavarian mountain idyll, a host of eccentric characters has entered and exited the film haphazardly, reappearing with little pretense at psychological verisimilitude or narrative consistency. The final scene is a tongue-in-cheek riff on Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*, as well as on the endless series of so-called *Heimatfilme* extolling the pleasures of country life for 1950s German audiences. As Ulrike is daydreaming moodily in a swing set in the company of a rustic grandfather figure (never mentioned before and thus probably not her actual grandfather), a menacing helicopter sweeps in and men in hazmat suits kidnap Ulrike to the dulcet tones of the old man yodelling lustily down into the valley.[14] The hills may be alive with the sound of music, but Ulrike's fate is more ominous as the helicopter whisks her away.

Whereas Petersen and Erler diagnose the tragic failure of previous utopian visions, Fleischmann's ironic refractions of the West German national imaginary speed along their dissolution. Though the menace of residual repressive institutional power never completely vanishes, the film revels in the colourful anarchic aftermath of the epidemic that sees old structures falling apart. Ellerwein's early death opens the door to a world in which patriarchal authority only returns gradually as a violent, repressive spasm, while all other boundaries have become porous. Traffic on the Autobahn suddenly goes in the wrong direction; an attractive woman (played by drag queen Romy Haag) being undressed after a fainting spell reveals that she has a penis (an event the film comments on with the briefest of shrugs) the owner of a food stand becomes a mastermind criminal, then a seller of snake oil remedies; a camping trailer is conscientiously delivered to a married couple running a butcher shop while civilisation is going to hell in a handcart around them. Fleischmann leaves no stone unturned to uncouple the events in the film from the didacticism of *Smog* and the existential tragedy of *Operation Ganymed*, liberating characters and viewers alike from the dictates of traditional storytelling. While keeping some of the satirical impulses of its two predecessors intact, the film never settles on

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14. Apart from the critical use of irony about the scene's reference to the very German cinematic genre of the *Heimatfilm*, Fleischmann may have also intended the scene as an intertextual reference to his own earlier film *Jagdszenen aus Niederbayern* (*Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria*, 1969). See Reimer, 320.

a consistent address to the audience. Instead, its fragments align in a version of the carnivalesque that tilts Bakhtin's anarchic liberating force of absurdity toward dystopian anxiety.[15]

While *Smog* has the dawning of environmental awareness as its driving force and *Operation Ganymed* can point to the institutionalisation of space exploration in the wake of the increasing disillusionment with the US as its motivation, *Die Hamburger Krankheit* has no such clear topical referent. Though there is a brief mention of the catastrophic flooding in the 1950s as an analogue to the fictional national emergency, the hint is historically out of place. West Germany's history of social panics caused by the fear of epidemics would only begin much later, with various influenza epidemics during the 1990s. Though winter flu shots might have been a seasonal reminder of the nation's medical vulnerability, systematic childhood vaccinations had virtually eradicated epidemics in West Germany by the 1970s. Unlike the air pollution in *Smog*, epidemics were simply not on West Germany's radar.[16]

Together with Fleischmann's systematic undercutting of the film's adherence to formal narrative verisimilitude, this lack of topical urgency renders its dystopian pessimism entirely abstract. Even if the epidemic does not kill everybody, the survivors remain in a precarious state of vulnerability, barely disguised by the kitschy remnants of national culture (from yodelling to Dirndl dresses and Lederhosen). Dystopian despair, all the more powerful and pervasive for having no discernible point of origin or reasonable expectation of termination, holds sway over both of these options – a rather sobering conclusion at the end of a decade that had started with Menge's cautionary environmental tale and progressed to Erler's trenchant critique of West Germany's technological ambitions in the context of uneasy Cold War alliances.

Conclusion: the social benefits of anxiety

Each one of the three film can provide good reasons for West Germany's turn from moderate yet sustained utopian hopefulness to a darker dystopian pessimism. And yet, the overarching story these films are telling when read

15. Formally, one might also see Brechtian 'alienation effects' at work here, as what begins as serious narrative labour turns gradually into self-conscious forms of play.
16. The panic surrounding the drug Contergan in the early 1960s, like the serious and widespread birth defects caused by Thalidomide elsewhere in the world, might have drawn attention to the shortcomings of modern medicine, but did not fall into the category of an epidemic (if the term was used, it would have been so only figuratively since the fear of contagion did not play a role here).

together is this: though fears caused by concrete historical circumstances decrease neither in frequency nor intensity, an amorphous anxiety, without specific causes and thus without concrete remedies, is on the rise in this period. Petersen's *Smog* is clearly driven by an emergent crisis so undeniable as to bring about sweeping changes in the political landscape only a few years later. In fact, *Smog* seems oddly prophetic about the environmental cost of economic growth and the readiness with which populations, from Beijing to Karachi, have come to accommodate themselves to dystopian environmental conditions as part of their ordinary daily lives. Similarly, *Operation Ganymed* is a direct response to the disenchantment with the nation's alliance with the US two years earlier. Though the film does not explicitly name this as the cause for its pervasive pessimism, its strong dystopian overtones still depend on this specific historical referent. Even though the fears that run through *Operation Ganymed* are already more abstract than those in *Smog*, they still refer back to a historical background against which they are immediately recognisable. Fleischmann's film finally severs the causal link between history and dystopian affect. *Die Hamburger Krankheit* never bothers to concretise the nature of its eponymous disease and therefore it remains unclear what urgent topical concerns may or may not drive its pessimism. As it shifts and oscillates among various themes, no single cause of its dystopian chagrin lasts long enough to take hold. Effective as *Smog* might have been as a cautionary tale, *Die Hamburger Krankheit*, for all its amplified craziness and apocalyptic glee, is poignantly useless as a diagnosis of West Germany's historical ailments.

The three films are undergoing a process by which highly specific fears gradually yield to a broader and more nebulous miasmic experience of anxiety. In this sense, the third and most diffuse of the three films is no longer obliged to identify a specific source of dystopian unease. It is made (and understood) to bear the cumulative burden of all such concerns addressed in the previous films. While it is still possible to distinguish between concerns articulated on the surface of each film (environmental degradation, governmental overreach, etc.) and concerns articulated in the subtext (Germany's traumatic past, the loss of stabilising global alliances, etc.), the increasing vagueness thus finds its most fully realised form in Fleischmann's film at the end of the decade. That film can be said to address all of these concerns, or, paradoxically, none. Without a specific origin or a uniquely circumscribed space in which to unfold, dystopian pessimism comes from everywhere, takes place anywhere and permeates everything.

To the degree that the 1970s were a troubled decade for other industrialised nations as well, we might assume that Petersen, Erler and Fleischmann are

taking their cues from the conventions of the American disaster film that dominated the box office during the 1970s. For West German audiences increasingly politicised in critical opposition to American cultural imports, it might have been a unique irony that films like *Airport* (Seaton US 1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (Neame US 1972), *The Towering Inferno* (Guillermin US 1974) or *Earthquake* (Robson US 1974) would codify the conventions their own cinema would draw on. Though West German films would depart from these conventions in some regards (e.g. the German characters exercise little of the heroic agency displayed by the likes of Charlton Heston, Steve McQueen or Burt Lancaster), they would recognise and treat them increasingly *as* generic conventions as the decade marched on.

But even when in full compliance, the films' adherence to the conventions of the imported genre would take on new significance. As in their American counterparts, for example, the three West German films show characters whose lives before the disaster are far from perfect. What is violently disrupted by the disaster is not the state of perfection laid out in loving detail in utopian fiction, but a state of blessed normality, its small daily trials and tribulations retrospectively relativised by the disaster. In a post-war West German culture priding itself as having executed, in the words of Hans Peter Schwarz, a 'history of catastrophes that have failed to materialize' (qtd Biess 23), this normality is as close to utopia as one might get. All the more so, the catastrophic scenarios laid out in the three films exceed Schwarz's diagnosis of this peculiarly modest West German form of utopia. With these films, a new dystopian quality therefore enters the public debate.

As each film, in turn, increases the audience's competence in reading the conventions of post-apocalyptic dystopia as a genre, the need to refer back to topical concerns decreases. Conformity to convention increasingly suffices to legitimise the diegesis, freeing films to foster, confirm and spread free-floating anxieties rather than work through specific fears. Hence, the hyperbolic tone of *Die Hamburger Krankheit* stands in sharp contrast to the topical and formal discipline of *Smog*. Liberated from the demands of such discipline, Fleischmann's film can rely on an audience that understands conventions and thus can follow the film whenever it departs from them. The film's formal inventiveness might thus be a response to its generic conformity.

Considering the three films' historical specificity and topicality, it is inaccurate and unfair to say that they, like other popular culture alongside them at the same time, were weaning the West German audience off its post-war utopian optimism and teaching it instead to see doom and gloom everywhere. Taking this argument seriously in its singular thrust would mean attributing far too

much social power to cinema. Meanwhile, the films' formal and aesthetic qualities, as well as their evolutionary development toward dystopia as the mode most attuned to the genre of the disaster film, make it equally inaccurate and unfair to treat them merely as reflections of a larger trend within West German culture. Settling on this argument, in turn, would mean ignoring the primarily aesthetic means by which the films separate dystopian affect from historical context. Even to a viewer who is not alarmed by any specific historical event or trend, the films demonstrate compellingly how one *could* be (which is only a small step from how, perhaps, one even *should* be). Most likely, it is a dialectic relationship that ties the films into the larger social discourse on utopian hopes and dystopian anxieties. And within this larger social discourse, both aspects can be said to serve the same useful social function. If an initial utopian optimism throughout the years of the *Wirtschaftswunder* had affirmed newly acquired (or remembered) democratic ideals, against the trauma of the past and the difficulties of post-war reconstruction, then the emergent dystopian pessimism during the 1970s might, as Frank Biess puts it, just as well have served to sustain the 'heightened awareness of the fragility of modern democratic societies' (20). Each decade would have the mood it deserved, whether upbeat or down, with similar benefits for the nation at large.

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