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*Movement and Performance in Berlin School Cinema* by Olivia Landry (review)

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German Studies Review, Volume 43, Number 1, February 2020, pp. 210-212  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2020.0031>



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different media in such a way that shows a “newfound openness to visual media” (150). His assemblage of narratives is, as Miller notes, a radically different kind of modern German epic. While Weiss and Johnson provide cohesive narratives conveyed by autodiegetic narrators, *Chronik der Gefühle* challenges readers: “Kluge’s literary mediation of destruction orchestrates destructive literary forms to prevent the neutralizations or transfigurations of history” (155). His choice of form is not simply an attempt to dismantle a novelistic harmonization of reality, but is also, as Miller and other critics argue, rooted in his experience of the Halberstadt bombing in April 1945. Kluge’s project is ultimately aimed at readers’ “emancipation” through his ambitious scope and by means of counternarratives that undercut the glossy media images that smooth over the destructive edges of capitalist society.

Whereas studies on twentieth-century German novels also offer insights into the ramifications of catastrophe, they frequently focus on trauma in the private realm of family, love, and memory. By contrast, Miller is intrigued by epic works because they address human experience on a broader level. In essence, Miller is arguing for the epics’ social and aesthetic role in reestablishing the value of prose in fraught times. As “living archives” (113), Weiss’s, Johnson’s, and Kluge’s texts offer glimpses of what Miller terms “emancipation,” and what one could also call education, maturation, or development of individual and community. In this way, *The German Epic in the Cold War* makes readers aware of paths or possibilities in addressing a hyperstimulated and accelerated world. As Miller argues, what connects these very different authors is that each provides a profound way of reinventing writing in the face of historical caesuras and failures, modes of constructing literary spaces—virtual worlds anchored in prose—that sharpen readers’ critical sensibilities.

*The German Epic* is an intellectually rewarding study that will appeal to scholars in German literary and film studies, both those examining the interrelations of narrative and media and those specifically interested in Weiss’s, Johnson’s, or Kluge’s writing. Despite publishers’ understandable desire to streamline book lengths, it would have been helpful to include a separate bibliography. Overall, Miller’s monograph offers a thought-provoking approach to postwar literature that is engaging not least because of the author’s nuanced writing.

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*Movement and Performance in Berlin School Cinema.* By Olivia Landry.  
Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 215. Paper \$32.00.  
ISBN 978-0253038036.

Olivia Landry’s first book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Germany’s most important filmmaking movement of the postunification era. Following on the

heels of several foundational books on the group—the coedited *Berlin School Glossary: An ABC of the New Wave in German Cinema*, the Museum of Modern Art's *The Berlin School: Films from the Berliner Schule*, Jaimey Fisher's *Christian Petzold*, and my own *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*, all of which appeared in 2013—Landry's intervention in the ongoing scholarly conversation is the first book in English that responds to the accomplishments of those works and pushes our thinking about films by directors such as Christian Petzold, Angela Schanelec, Valeska Grisebach, and Christoph Hochhäusler in a fundamentally new direction.

Drawing on phenomenology, affect studies, and the performance turn in film, Landry argues that Berlin School films may best be regarded as seizing “modes of live performance to occasion relational experiences of *being-there* and *being-with*” (5). Contesting the cliché that the Berlin School makes unexciting films that lack vitality, Landry's nuanced analyses of several important facets of these films repeatedly show that they “possess a vitalism” (181) precisely because of *how* they rely on performance. Such performance, she argues, always occurs “through movement” and is thus a matter of “kinetic force” (181). Crucially, Landry insists that mere on-screen movement does not rise to the level of performance; rather, performance is that which gives movement “form and a figuration” (181). Her book is an extended essay, covering twenty-five films by eleven different filmmakers, including Maria Speth and Jan Krüger (who have thus far received little attention in the relevant literature), that delineates how these films form and figure movement.

The upshot of Landry's intervention is not least also a polemical one: that critics' and scholars' tendency to consider Berlin School cinema as partaking in “contemplative” or “slow cinema” is a mistake. In Landry's view, the Berlin School is “a cinema against stasis” (5) that stages its movement *for the viewer*, which makes it a “mode of performance” (6): it performs for its audience, which is why the films' formal aspects—they prefer medium and long shots while often eschewing establishing shots and postproduction modifications—ultimately emphasize the actors' diegetic bodies' being-there-ness and being-with-us-ness. Landry calls our attention to how in Berlin School films human and nonhuman bodies are spectacular. These films, she holds, create a “spectacle of the body . . . that invites relationality” (6): precisely because of how these films presence their bodies, they ultimately draw their “spectators in to partake of [their] motion” (181), allowing viewers to experience the phenomenological sensation of being-there and being-with—a sensation that, for Landry, is shot through with the kind of ethical and political import that José Esteban Muñoz, on whose work she occasionally draws, attributes to utopian queer performance.

The book's five main chapters investigate how Berlin School films interact with photographs and surveillance camera footage (chapter 1) in order to enhance film's “ontological drive to liveness” (10), use dance scenes (chapter 2) and cinematically foreground acts of walking and biking (chapter 3) to “engender a presencing

effect” (11), and mobilize the car as “a space for unrestricted and accelerated looking” (13) as well as a vehicle for bringing about death and destruction (chapter 4). In her final chapter, Landry offers an intriguing study of the acting of Nina Hoss, who is arguably the face of the Berlin School. (Not coincidentally, she features, in shadow and with her back turned to the camera, on the book’s cover, in an image taken from her stage performance in Petzold’s only theater work, *Der einsame Weg* [2009].) A synecdoche of sorts for the Berlin School *tout court*, Hoss’s “fugitive performance,” as Landry calls it, is “representative of a figure perpetually seeking to escape something or someone (even herself)” (15). It is this body in flight that through its liveness makes present to the viewer a pursuit of freedom—a sensation of resistance to the very cultural, social, economic, and political constraints that the Berlin School as a cinema of, and explicitly responding to, the forces of neoliberalism renders sensible. It is, of course, this affective sensation of constraints experienced by viewers that is arguably responsible for the mistaken belief that Berlin School films constitute a cinema of stasis, one lacking movement. Landry is not quite correct, however, in characterizing other scholars’ arguments about the Berlin School as holding that these films *lack* movement: arguing that these films are slow or contemplative is not to say that movement is absent, just that their movement is of a specific kind that not only helps to simultaneously distinguish them from mainstream cinema and situate them within a larger contemporary global cinematic phenomenon but also lends them a particular affective force that is precisely the transformative force of performance that Landry incisively maps out with the help of her elegantly deployed theoretical toolbox.

Indeed, Landry astutely emphasizes these films’ affirmative qualities, not in the sense that they might somehow be affirmative of the present neoliberal status quo but in that they are “edging on the utopian” (186). Landry’s own critical investments in the Berlin School films clearly partake in their movement on the edge of the utopian, as is frequently palpable in her prose, which is always lucid and often refreshingly passionate and, as she writes, “full of energy and optimism” (9), even if she occasionally may be too anxious to rhetorically demarcate her arguments from and position them against those of her predecessors. Quibbles notwithstanding, Landry’s study is persuasive in demonstrating that the concept of performance offers “a new kind of vitality to film and film studies” (9), which is to say, not just to the study of the Berlin School or German cinema but also moving images in general. Landry’s book should therefore be of great interest to both scholars of German film history and those who are invested in thinking of moving images from a theoretically rigorous perspective as primarily material forces (rather than signs to be interpreted) that can effect change in viewers’ apperceptions and thus intervene in the world.

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