

When it opened in January 2006, the film *Sommer vorm Balkon* (*Summer in Berlin*, 2005) was received with unrestrained enthusiasm by both audiences and critics. It collected several prestigious international awards and remained in theaters for an unusually long period, almost a year.¹ Eventually, close to one million spectators saw it onscreen; the revenue totaled 1.8 million Euros, a remarkable commercial accomplishment for a small production that focused on the unspectacular everyday problems of regular women in an old, lower-class Berlin neighborhood.² At the same time, the critical and popular success of this particular film in Germany catapulted the director Andreas Dresen into the venerable status of *auteur*, as commentators attempted to distill those characteristics of his work that make it immediately recognizable.³ Symptomatic of the trend to treat Dresen as an *auteur* was also the fact that three years later, in June 2009, Berlin's program cinema "Babylon" staged a two-week retrospective ("Unfertig schön: Andreas Dresen, Filme und Gespräche") of the filmmaker's complete oeuvre thus far: from the short films he made as a student at the Konrad Wolf Academy of Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg in the late 1980s to his most recent, critically acclaimed feature film *Wolke 9* (2008), for which he was awarded the 2008 German Film Prize.⁴

Undoubtedly, much of the critical praise for *Sommer vorm Balkon* has been directed toward Dresen's specific brand of low-key, crowd-pleasing realism (characterized by some as "poetic realism"), which has marked most of his preceding work and culminates in this light

¹ Nadja Uhl and Inka Friedrich of *Sommer vorm Balkon* won the Silver Hugo Award at the Chicago International Film Festival for their performances in leading roles, Wolfgang Kohlhaas won the prize for best script at the San Sebastian Film Festival, and Andreas Dresen received the 2005 Bavarian film prize for best director.

² See Jörn Glasenapp, "Prenzlberger Nächte sind lang: Tragikomischer Alltag in Andreas Dresens *Sommer vorm Balkon*," *Die Filmkomödie der Gegenwart*, ed. Jörn Glasenapp, Claudia Lillge (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 290.

³ Glasenapp 290-291.

⁴ Thirteen full-length feature films and documentaries and five short films were shown; many of the screenings were followed by a discussion with Andreas Dresen himself. See <http://www.babylonberlin.de/andreasdresen09.htm> [visited July 13, 2009]. For another example of the trend to view Dresen as an *auteur*, see Thomas Binnoto, "Das Leben zum Heulen komisch: Porträt von und Gespräch mit Andreas Dresen," *Filmbulletin* 269:1 (2006): 16-30.

summer comedy.⁵ What reviewer after reviewer found noteworthy were the film's lack of pretense, its stylistic austerity, and peculiar post-unification mix of various generic elements.⁶ In a way, *Sommer vorm Balkon* presents a double romance. On the one hand, it depicts a short-lived love affair between the social worker Nike (Nadja Uhl) and the truck driver Ronald (Andreas Schmidt) that evolves from a chance encounter on the street; Katrin (Inka Friedrich), who causes the encounter by her careless jaywalking, becomes the miserable and unlucky third in the love triangle, as she continuously fails in her love life. The romantic entanglement is presented without sentimentality, and yet with sympathy for the characters and their human flaws; comedy and tragedy, lightheartedness and seriousness form a crowd-pleasing blend.

On the other hand, this film can be seen as a recent and most charming installment in German cinema's continuous infatuation with Berlin's cityscape, a romance shared and appreciated by many viewers. Soon after its release, as with other popular post-1989 Berlin films (most notably *Run Lola Run*, 1998), fan-driven projects emerged in which modern-day *flâneurs* started to investigate the filmed sites, compare them with actual city locations, and post their findings online or in newspapers.⁷ Berlin's daily newspapers *Der Tagesspiegel* and *taz* compiled a compendium of the authentic locales (parks, bridges, corners, courtyards, doorways and even the mailboxes from GDR times), and enthusiastically encouraged Berlin moviegoers to spot them onscreen or to mourn them, as some of the buildings had been fixed up beyond recognition in the months since the filming.⁸

⁵ Gustav Seibt, "Im Hintergrund: Der Filmautor Wolfgang Kohlhaase macht aus Berlin eine Abspielfläche für seinen poetischen Realismus," *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 February 2006.

⁶ See Christian Buß, "Wo der Mülltonnen-Duft vierfliegt," *Der Spiegel*, 3 January 2006.

⁷ See for example "Lolas Berlin" at <http://stud.fh-heilbronn.de/~ogerards/lollarennt/berlin.htm> or <http://german.about.com/library/bllolafotos.htm>. Journalist Stefan Ehlert has reconstructed Lola's Berlin marathon in an article for the *Berliner Zeitung*. See Stefan Ehlert, "Lolas Erfolgsjagd: Zickzack durch Berlin," *Berliner Zeitung*, 5/6 September 1998.

⁸ See Uwe Rada, "Mit anderen Augen: *Sommer vorm Balkon* zeigt einen anderen Helmholtzplatz als den, den wir kennen," *taz*, 7 Januar 2006; Silvia Hallensleben, "Unsaniert abgedreht," *Tagesspiegel*, 14 November 2005.

But in many ways, as a Berlin film, *Sommer vorm Balkon* is quite unlike its predecessors from the 1990s. While in *Run Lola Run* the German capital and its recognizable central sites are reduced to a series of largely empty, disconnected, postmodern spaces, through which the heroine moves “completely detached from her environment,” Dresen’s film roots the plot and the characters within a particular neighborhood (“Kiez”) off the city center;⁹ it portrays a real rather than hybrid location: the intersection of Raumerstraße and Dunckerstraße near Helmholtzplatz in Prenzlauer Berg. This intersection is in a clearly identifiable, historically distinct site in East Berlin, which at the same time is not a significant landmark (as is Kastanienallee, with its popular cafés and hangouts) and remains a rather unspectacular, gritty place, likely to stay off the beaten path of tourists, even after the success of the film. In other words, *Sommer vorm Balkon* transforms the city fringes into the definitive site of authenticity and thus counters some dominant twentieth-century Berlin discourses by looking at the city and its people from below, within a living environment.

The subtle dynamics between plot and setting, romance and realism in *Sommer vorm Balkon* should not be surprising, since the film resulted from the extraordinary collaboration between two filmmakers who have both demonstrated interest in the lasting tradition of the Berlin film: veteran screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase and director Andreas Dresen, who is some thirty years younger. Born in 1964, Dresen was trained as a filmmaker in the GDR and considered one of the successful members of the “last DEFA generation.”¹⁰ A few years after the start of his career, he placed himself prominently on the map of post-unification German cinema with *Willenbrock* (2005), *Halbe Treppe* (*Grill Point*, 2002), and what many critics saw as the

⁹ David Clarke, “In Search of Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin,” *German Cinema Since Unification*, ed. David Clarke (London: Continuum, 2006), 159.

¹⁰ Michael Hanisch, “Dresen und die anderen: Die letzte ‚DEFA-Generation‘ – Ankommen und/oder Scheitern,” *film-dienst* (October 2006): 22-25.

best Berlin film of the 1990s, *Nachtgestalten* (*Night Shapes*, 1999). Berlin native Kohlhaase, on the other hand, was born in 1931 and spent his formative years crisscrossing the four sectors of the divided city in the late 1940s. As one of the pioneers of the East German DEFA studios in the 1950s, he collaborated with directors Gerhard Klein and Konrad Wolf, and over several decades set the standards for the Berlin film by scripting *Berliner Romanze* (*Berlin Love Story*, 1956), *Berlin Ecke Schönhauser* (*Berlin Schönhauser Corner*, 1957), *Berlin um die Ecke* (*Berlin Around the Corner*, 1965), and *Solo Sunny* (1980).

In this paper, I would like to re-examine *Sommer vorm Balkon* within the venerable tradition of these earlier Berlin films written by Kohlhaase, a tradition that this latest work draws from and reinvents. Instead of looking at the film exclusively as an example of the work of *auteurs*, I analyze it as a case of creative intervention into the historical interplay of place and cinema. This collaboration between the representatives of two different generations of filmmakers consciously transforms the film into an archive of urban memories – buried memories from preceding decades, as well as memories that are now in the making. Furthermore, in the second decade after unification, the Kohlhaase/Dresen team redefines cinematic Berlin, to use Charlotte Brunson’s term, as a de-romanticized “biographical city.”¹¹ In contrast to popular stylized representations of Berlin as city of the *flâneur*, the leisured stroller who observes his urban environment with a certain aloofness, Berlin as a biographical city can be understood “from the point of view of the people who live in it,” whose journeys are banal, routine, and, more often than not, determined by necessity and labor.¹²

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¹¹ Charlotte Brunson, *London in Cinema: The Cinematic City since 1945* (London: bfi, 2007), 13.

¹² Brunson 14.

In an interview soon after his award-winning film was released, Dresen explained his immediate reaction upon reading Kohlhaase's treatment: "I was convinced that this story needs to be told in a certain tempo, as if you walk down the street and peek in one of the windows in passing. You observe briefly what happens to the people in there and then you move on. If you have seen a piece of life that is touching, this is because you recognize yourself in it."¹³ The walk down the big-city street as a story-telling device, a figure that Dresen repeatedly mentions in other interviews, is indeed essential to the visual and narrative structure of *Sommer vorm Balkon* and invokes, at first glance, an association with the very productive German tradition of "street films" from the 1920s and 1930s. Inaugurated by Karl Grune's *Die Straße* (*The Street*, 1923), the historic sub-genre of melodramatic street films identifies the big-city boulevard with the then-new mythology of urban modernity as a space that emanates seduction and danger, irresistible pleasure and inevitable peril. Unlike its predecessors, however, where the street – with all its glamour, seductions and threats – is abstract, symbolic, and often put together in an UFA studio (see for example *Asphalt*, *Die Straße*, *Hintertreppe*, *Der letzte Mann*, and *M* from the Weimar era), *Sommer vorm Balkon* is set and filmed on real, not particularly pretty, but friendly streets, which serve as a convenient stage for everyday joys and travails.

The film consists of a series of interwoven, unadorned, candidly voyeuristic, but short and fleeting glances (what Dresen calls "das kurze Hinschauen") at the everyday lives of three generations in the same neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, glances cast as if through a street-level window.¹⁴ The story thus comes across as consisting of randomly selected episodes from the lives of these people, its drama is subdued, its tragedy mellowed by humor, its

¹³ Frank Arnold, "Dem Leben zuschauen: Ein Interview mit Regisseur Andreas Dresen und Autor Wolfgang Kohlhaase," *edp Film*, 1/2006, 32-33. For another interview, see Margret Köhler, "Angstfreies Klima: Interview mit Andreas Dresen zu 'Sommer vorm Balkon,'" *film-dienst* 1/2006, 14-15. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁴ Arnold 32.

trajectory marked by both pronounced circularity and hopeful open-endedness; the glimpses into the lives of Berliners go both ways across the window – from inside out and from outside in – thus blurring the sharp distinction between interiors and exteriors, observers and participants, losers and winners. The film's narrative is framed by tableau-like night scenes featuring the protagonists, Nike and Katrin, talking on a balcony, thus bringing us a full circle to the same location, perched over the street, neither in nor out, and in the same psychological state of in-between-ness. At the same time, as the yearnings and hopes of the two remain unfulfilled, the balcony becomes the spatial equivalent of the uncertain present, suspended between the past and future.



Figure 1

At the center of the story are these two single women in their thirties. Nike (played by Nadja Uhl) is a native East Berliner; employed by a social agency, she makes daily house calls as a caregiver for the elderly. Katrin (played by Inka Friedrich) is a transplanted West German from Freiburg and a single mother who is desperately looking for work as a display-window decorator. They live in the same apartment building on a corner near Helmholtzplatz, Katrin on the ground floor, Nike on the fourth. At night, they sit for hours on Nike's balcony overlooking a street corner, have drinks, chat, flirt with a pharmacist across the street, and have their occasional crises. During the day, we follow them -- literally, with a 16mm camera -- on their hectic daily itinerary (Nike) or in search of work (Katrin): the camera is aligned with their eye level, and we see the streets of Prenzlauer Berg as Nike rides her bike and Katrin rides the bus. The core topography of the environs is already established in the opening credit sequence, as the camera follows Nike on her usual work route. [See clip 1.] All major events in their lives are staged against the background of their neighborhood, or, as Berliners would put it, their *Kiez*. They often eat lunch in the local corner bar, and it is on the street across from their apartment building that Katrin is almost run over by a truck, and where they meet the macho Ronald for the first time; Ronald is to play a dramatic (albeit transient) role in the romantic lives of both women. Unlike the two women, whose everyday lives are firmly rooted in their neighborhood, Ronald, the truck driver, is constantly on the move, seemingly homeless, carrying all of his belongings in a plastic bag. Ultimately, after briefly moving in with Nike and after the end of their love affair, he is literally and symbolically locked out, to sleep overnight on the balcony, so that Nike and Katrin can resume chatting the night away on the balcony overlooking Helmholtzplatz.

There are two additional narrative strands, also intricately connected to the street. One focuses on the generation of the fiercely independent 10- and 11-year-old children, the friends of

Katrin's son Max. The lives of these city kids, who for the most part are seen moving around the city unaccompanied by adults, are determined by their ability to successfully navigate the streets; that is where they form friendships and fall in love. Characteristically, the children are shown less inside the apartments with their families and more outside, in the company of peers, on top of buildings with views of the neighborhood or jogging the streets of their neighborhood. At one point, Max's romantic interest Charly, as if to demonstrate a self-assured familiarity with the city, recites her routine jogging itinerary: "I'd start toward the end of the street, then right on Sonnenburgerstraße, to Dänenstraße and at the Chinese restaurant we'll go across the long bridge over the tracks to Schwedter. We turn on Gleimstraße and then run back." As she then proceeds to jog, with Max by her side, the camera follows them, documenting the streetscape along the aforementioned route, as if to match the images of the locations they pass and the recited itinerary with documentary precision. [See clip 2.]

The children's unusual proficiency in the language of the city is also revealed in a short sequence in which Max shows Charly around his apartment. Prominent among the shabby pieces of furniture are his mother's paintings of neighborhood streets, sharp and sober cityscapes that she, as a newcomer in East Berlin, had once found "ostmäßig" and thus fascinating to paint. After an unsuccessful attempt to sell them to a gallery, Katrin has now leaned the pictures against the wall in her living room. As Max shows these oil paintings of old Berlin housing quarters ("Mietskasernen") to Charly, he explains that "this is what the neighborhood really looked like" – neglected for years, gray and gritty – before all the dilapidated old buildings were renovated and freshly painted in pastel colors. The few short glimpses at Katrin's paintings of Berlin houses within the film represent an indirect and understated commentary on the recent

processes of gentrification that transformed a unique urban location into a magnet for yuppies.



Figure 2

The street (as seen through the window or from a balcony) plays a significant albeit subdued role in another narrative line, namely in the static lives of the elderly people confined to their homes. The social worker Nike briefly stops by their apartments every day to perform a strictly regimented routine. She helps them wash, serves them breakfast, cleans and fixes their beds. Every time we enter their apartments along with Nike, however, the window of the room looms large in the background and lets the street scenes silently seep into the frozen world of the elderly. Continuously contrasting the outside and inside realms, the window reinforces the impression of captivity and isolation associated with old age. While the seniors have become confined to their homes and are sometimes even bed-ridden, the dynamic cityscape of Prenzlauer Berg – with the GDR-era housing projects, the old graffiti-covered tenement buildings, and the

brightly painted yellow trains of the S-Bahn – persistently re-asserts itself as the permanent setting for the limited lives and even deaths of these old Berliners.



Figure 3

The sense of intimate familiarity with a particular part of town, its streets and unspectacular sites permeates the cinematography of *Sommer vorm Balkon* in ways strongly reminiscent of earlier Berlin films scripted by Wolfgang Kohlhaase. In the 1950s, when the three DEFA films *Alarm in the Circus*, *Berlin Love Story*, and *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* came out in quick succession, they established the stylistic vocabulary of the popular Berlin film that was part of the new postwar East German context. Contrary to expectations, scriptwriter Kohlhaase and director Klein did not embrace doctrinaire socialist realism, but turned instead to Italian neo-realism as a major source of inspiration. This influence is evident in their attention to the petty vices and virtues of everyday people, and most of all in the immediacy and documentary freshness of their representation of the city. These films from Kohlhaase's earlier period (and

particularly *Berlin Schönhauser Corner*) are shot on location in the neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg; the cast includes a mixture of professional and amateur actors, and the dialogue relies heavily on colloquial speech and Berlin dialect. The streets along the central Schönhauser Allee, framed in intriguing long shots and filmed with low lighting, come to life as the authentic scene for the adventures of the young characters, who are not sure which way to go in life. The filmmakers demonstrate a preference for rooftops, street corners or the entrances to old tenement buildings – gritty, unadorned interstitial spaces where both private drama and public choices play out. The team of Klein and Kohlhaase, both native Berliners tapping into the personal experiences of their hometown, explores the possibilities of the camera and the real environment to achieve shots that corresponded to the sensual everyday experience of their contemporaries. In the words of one film critic, Klein and Kohlhaase “could show [the viewers] how a courtyard smells.”¹⁵

Prenzlauer Berg returns as the scene of action in Konrad Wolf’s *Solo Sunny* (1980), for which Kohlhaase also authored the script. From the very beginning, when the credits roll down against the dilapidated grey façade of a tenement building, we know where we are going to be for the rest of the film: near and around Schönhauser Allee with its elevated train tracks, bare courtyards, the grim, rough-edged exteriors of old working-class housing, and the funky interiors that attracted “underground” figures and outsiders: artists, singers, and philosophers. By the late 1970s, Prenzlauer Berg had become the center of an alternative artistic sub-culture in the GDR. *Solo Sunny*, a film about a rock-band singer and her love and career travails, was shot on location, and we can see that by the 1980s, the buildings still looked as if they had just endured

¹⁵ Quoted in Horst Claus, “Rebels with a Cause: The Development of ‘Berlin-Filme’ by Gerhard Klein and Wolfgang Kohlhaase,” *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992*, ed. Sean Allen and John Sanford (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 93-116. For an overview of Kohlhaase’s career and his distinctive style as a filmmaker, see Michael Hanisch, “Authentizität und Genauigkeit: Der Filmautor Wolfgang Kohlhaase,” *Film-Dienst*, April 2006, 14-16.

the 1945 battle for Berlin; at the same time, the Prenzlauer Berg of this 1980s film has all the attributes of a *Kiez* that many Berliners – both in the East and West – cherished: comfort, familiarity and peacefulness in which the neighborhood is set against the “outside” of the city.¹⁶ That attitude is reflected in the film, which provocatively focuses on the uncompromising, individualistic, and intense personality of Sunny, rather than on any of the big political and ideological questions of the world around her. The presentation of both the character and her milieu (her “Kiez”) emphasizes a “notion of belonging which eschews any reference to anything resembling national identity.”¹⁷ Foregrounded in the film is the unadorned private realm of relationships, professional ambitions, and personal crises.

Sommer vorm Balkon continues the insightful lessons in filmic authenticity that started with *Berlin Schönhauser Corner* and *Solo Sunny*. Essential for the realism of the film is the fact that, for the most part, it is shot on location, rather than in a studio. The filmmakers again rely on amateur non-professional actors to play the roles of the shoe-shop assistant, job-search trainer, and emergency room physician. The filming itself took about 35 days in an old apartment building on the corner of Raumerstraße and Dunckerstraße with just the right balcony, a building that had been slated for renovation anyway and was already empty. The crew was small and used a hand-held camera, often without a crane and dolly.¹⁸ By the time the film entered the phase of post-production, the reconstruction of that building was underway; the house would soon succumb completely to the relentless efforts of developers and builders who would paint it in dazzling pastel colors. The sights of its previously gray, peeling facades, dark entrances and old balconies would cease to exist except in the archive of cinematic memory.

¹⁶ For an incisive account of the cultural status of the “Kiez” from the 1980s through the 1990s, see Peter Fritzsche, “A City of Strangers or a City of Neighbors: Berlin Confronts Metropolis,” *Berlin: The New Capital in the East, A Transatlantic Appraisal*, ed. Frank Trommler (Washington DC: AICGS, 2000), 23-35.

¹⁷ Fritzsche 32.

¹⁸ Arnold 33.



Figure 4

Kohlhaase and Dresen remain committed to subtlety, especially when it comes to addressing sensitive political issues of the time. Their judgment is shrouded in irony and expressed not in dialogue and language, but visually, in carefully constructed images in the background of the action. Such is the tradition established in the film *Berlin Schönhauser Corner*; for example, it has been pointed out that the contrast between two political systems (the East and West) is conveyed through lighting and spatial representation of the two parts of the city. West Berlin is shown flooded in light and in long shots of empty streets and large uninviting spaces visited for the purpose of commerce and entertainment. By contrast, East Berlin is seen predominantly through somewhat dim interiors or gritty but cozy public spaces like street corners where friends hang out. *Solo Sunny*, which takes place entirely in the East of the 1970s, subtly mocks the socialist state's enthusiasm for modern, impersonal and ugly pre-fab housing projects that are replacing the dilapidated familiar buildings of old Berlin. This attitude comes

out in a single odd shot of a five-story house being blown up near the elevated train station at Schönhauser Allee and collapsing, inexplicably, in a cloud of dust. This scene lasts just a few seconds and is observed from a distance, through a window at which the protagonists are having a conversation about the meaning of outsiders and death in society. [See clip 3.] There is no narrative connection between the two events – the conversation and the demolition – but the crosscutting suggests both a metaphoric interpretation of the romantic relationship that is soon to end dramatically and a restrained criticism of urban planning in the GDR, where old, long-neglected yet beloved city neighborhoods are unceremoniously torn down (rather than renovated) in order to make way for the mass housing of the future.¹⁹

A quarter-century later, *Sommer vorm Balkon*, too, refrains from any overt political commentaries and judgments. Although set in Prenzlauer Berg again, the film – on both narrative and visual levels – steers clear of any clichés associated with this location. Since the late 1990s, the traditionally lower-class or alternative scenes in Prenzlauer Berg have been affected by gentrification and “yuppification.” Buildings that looked forlorn since the end of the Second World War have been renovated and painted in bright new pastels, new landlords have assumed ownership, and new rental contracts for trendy condominiums, often unaffordable for the locals, have arrived. While contemporary media bemoan the disappearance of the familiar old dilapidated parts of East Berlin, filmmakers Dresen and Kohlhaase seem uninterested in this issue.²⁰ Like other Berlin films, however, *Sommer vorm Balkon* indirectly strives to turn itself into a visual archive of cityscapes that will be overhauled by encroaching urban developments. Such a low-key, self-reflective moment in which the film records the changing city history can be glimpsed briefly toward the end of the film. Right before the final credits, in an

¹⁹ A similar scene recurs in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1973, dir. Heiner Carow), a DEFA film made before *Solo Sunny* and also set in East Berlin. I am grateful to Nicholas Baer for bringing this connection to my attention.

²⁰ See Henning Sussebach, “Bionade-Biedermeier,” *ZEITmagazin* 46, 8 November 2007.

impressionistic sequence of Prenzlauer Berg with its parks, dogs, people, and sidewalks, we catch sight of the same apartment building with the balcony where Katrin and Nike liked to chat, but this time it is enveloped in scaffolding.

Despite the lack of blatant political themes, *Sommer vorm Balkon* ultimately does become a film about unification (“ein echter deutscher Wiedervereinigungsfilm”) precisely because it does not address the topic explicitly.²¹ Rather than expressing *Ostalgie* or voicing explicit criticism of capitalism, the filmmakers offer humorous and humanistic treatment of unemployment, and of the consequences of personal and professional misfortune. Moreover, in certain ways, *Sommer vorm Balkon* even reverses the standard post-unification formula according to which Ossies are expected to be the losers and the Wessies the new colonialists. In the film, it is the East German woman and native Berliner, Nike, who is relatively successful in life and stable in her economic situation, while the displaced Katrin, from the West, is the disadvantaged one who is out of work, out of money, and often out of luck.

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The ways in which urban space has been carefully constructed in *Sommer vorm Balkon* seem to reflect both filmmakers’ particular concept of post-romance in the contemporary metropolis. As Kohlhaase and Dresen pay keen attention to marginal, yet real city locations in transition, and as they portray a precarious and porous threshold space between the private and the public, a space known as “the street” or “the street corner,” they transfer a similar sense of serendipity, ephemerality, and ambiguity to the romantic encounter at the center of the film. The love story, very much like its filmic *mise en scène*, involves unglamorous characters and places that are to be found away from significant historical and political developments. At the same

²¹ Buß 82.

time, the private space of romance and the public space of the city are not entirely stripped of serious social content: through its story and subtle visualization of space, the film addresses topics such as the everyday effects of unemployment, single parenthood, and aging in post-unification Germany. In that way, *Sommer vorm Balkon* may be a promising and long-awaited departure from romantic comedies associated with what Eric Rentschler has called the “cinema of consensus.”

I would like to end with an image of a window and its central function in the film as a porous borderline between the street and the home, the public exteriors and private interiors. Two of the most moving scenes are filmed through the window of Katrin’s street-level apartment. In the first one, she is looking through the window out at the street as her son leaves for school. This shot reverses the primary perspective of the film, which is that of someone walking down a street and peeking into the private lives of strangers, but it mirrors a reversal in the roles of mother and son at this particular moment. Just before he leaves for school, Max takes care of his mother, who is incapacitated by a hangover. The second scene also features a glance through this same window; this time Katrin, returning from a week-long rehabilitation after alcohol poisoning, announces her homecoming even before she has stepped over the threshold of her home: she greets Max from outside, through the open window.

The voyeurism of the shots through the window toward the street and from the outside looking in gives us the impression that we are no longer in Berlin, the city of *flâneurs*, but in Berlin as the “biographical city,” a filmic city in which the individual characters understand their lives partly topographically, through journeys that they take, cannot take, or aspire to take. The biographical city in this Berlin film is more banal than the city of the *flâneur*, and it includes journeys of necessity, habit, and labor. And therein lies the charm of its streets.



Figure 5

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