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Wall and Tunnel: The Spatial Metaphorics of Cold War Berlin

David L. Pike

Like all of the great modernist cities of Europe, Berlin had a venerable and highly developed underground infrastructure: sewers, service tunnels, subways. But unlike the Paris sewers, the London Tube, or the Roman catacombs, the German capital was not identified in any mythic or symbolic way with this infrastructure. Rather than based in a physical feature of its subterranean space, the reigning image of subterranean Berlin was metaphorical: the underworld of decadent Weimar culture, a subversive image reinforced during the 1920s by the political identity *das rote Berlin* (red Berlin). There are material grounds for this difference in underground identity, but in this essay I focus on the Wall that gave the city a metaphorics of space symbolizing the global divisions it embodied in a brutally physical manner and the tunnels that, in their very invisibility, were seen both to echo and to subvert that division.

  After a brief discussion of the forerunners to this spatial coupling in the spy tunnels under Vienna and Berlin in the immediate postwar period, I survey the use of tunnels as escape routes after the construction of the Wall in 1961 through their depiction in fiction, memoirs, history, and film. I pay particular attention to cinema, for the depiction of the tunnels between Robert Siodmak's 1962 Germano-Hollywood thriller *Escape from East Berlin* and Roland Suso Richter's epic 2001 TV drama *Der Tunnel* delineates both the unvarying contours of the metaphorics of Wall and tunnel and the changing uses to which those metaphorics have been put.

Wall and Tunnel in Space and Time

In the lived space of the city the Wall manifested the Cold War principle of a divided world, its irrevocable and absolute nature, whether the West's *Schandmauer* (wall of shame) or the East's *antifaschistischer Schutzwall* (bulwark against fascism). The Wall exemplifies what Henri Lefebvre terms a conceptualized space, a representation of space that nevertheless imposes its conception as a spatial reality.[1] It denied the contingency of the division it symbolized both physically, via its increasingly fortified and escape-resistant design and the shoot-to-kill orders of the border police, and psychologically, producing, in Peter Schneider's famous phrase, "die Mauer im Kopf (the Wall in the head)." As the American-born Fletcher Knebel cynically but accurately put it in his espionage novel, *Crossing in Berlin* (1981), at the end of a long list of the reasons the Wall was a useful construct, "the mass of voters in the Western democracies love it unconsciously because it hides the complexities of international politics and makes everything quite simple. . . . It's a prison wall, . . . and over there are all the bad prisoners and their keepers, and over here we are all the good chaps."[2]

Much as it presented itself as unprecedented and unique, the Wall was neither. It shared with its illustrious predecessor, the Great Wall of China, the distinction of being a manmade structure visible from space whose stated purpose was to protect its people from invasion. The difference, of course, is that there was a widely held counternarrative to that assertion: the specific border the Wall sealed off was accidental, temporary, and in the interior of the country rather than around it. Closer to the Wall's conflicted purpose are two of its descendants: the wall constructed by Israel to contain the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and the wall being erected on the border between the United States and Mexico.[3] These walls share the myth that the two peoples they are dividing have nothing to do with each other; in these examples, however, the debate is far more nuanced than it was in Berlin. Put another way, the Wall unambiguously impressed its definition of space in a way that perhaps no other modern construction has done. Its image—and the symbolization of reality expressed through that image—continues in retrospect to define the second

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 38–39.
2. Fletcher Knebel, *Crossing in Berlin* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 119, quoted in Ernst Schürer, Manfred Keune, and Philip Jenkins, eds., *The Berlin Wall: Representations and Perspectives* (New York: Lang, 1996), 58.
3. These are only the best known. The Wikipedia article on "separation walls" listed thirty-two "separation barriers" as of August 25, 2009.

Figure 1. The Wall as the barrier between life and death. DVD frame enlargement from
Der Tunnel

half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the date most associated with the Wall, and the image of it that has come to define it in "world history," is the unforeseen and extraordinarily sudden moment of its collapse and disappearance, as if it suddenly imploded under the weight of its own contradictions, the weak point of the entire Soviet edifice precisely because it had been its most visible symbol.

What role did tunnels play in this symbolic history? The underground has always functioned as the negative image of the world above, both as its subversion and as the repository of whatever has no place anywhere else. The Wall in one sense transformed the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the empire behind it into an underworld—the nine circles, to adapt Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's metaphor, of a modern hell. Or, expressed from the other side, a socialist paradise opposed to a devil's realm of empty illusions. The ideological split between the borders was so stark that it could be represented only in terms of two opposed worlds, and only death, it was suggested, could allow one to cross over (fig. 1). The Wall thus asserted the blockage of any passage between worlds; the thirty-odd escape tunnels dug (partly or completely) beneath it in the ten years after its construction maintained instead that relations were more fluid than they appeared, that common ground continued between the two spaces, and that it was impossible to seal them off completely from one another. In other words, the underground opposed a praxis of connections to a metaphysics of divisions. This is a consequence of spatializing ideology: the contradictions in that ideology also become able to manifest

themselves spatially, to become tangible and thus to be tangibly resisted. Yet opposition to the Wall could respond only in terms of the spatial metaphorics determined by it, and so it is with great difficulty that tunnel fictions diverge from the simple opposition of oppression and freedom, hell and heaven. No wonder, then, that relatively few Germans actually represented the Wall directly in fiction, even though it was a commonplace in espionage novels of that era. In many ways, the metaphorics were better suited to writers and filmmakers slightly removed from the actual experience of the space. As far as I can determine, the primary German representations of the tunnels came only after 1989, and when they did, they came in something of a flood.

Espionage Tunnels

> We should have looked deeper than the grave.
> —Major Calloway (Trevor Howard) in *The Third Man*

Anglos began using spatial metaphorics to challenge the Manichaean metaphysical division of Cold War ideology as early as Carol Reed's 1949 thriller, *The Third Man*, based on a screenplay by Graham Greene composed with firsthand experience not only of the intelligence community but also of conditions in postwar Vienna. In addition to the corruption of nearly all concerned and the ideological flexibility of the rest in the face of the need to survive via bargaining, what Greene took from Vienna and translated into a metaphor of postwar life was the use of the Vienna sewers as a spatial network that made a mockery of the careful four-part division of the city above. Greene and Reed's Mephistophelian black marketeer Harry Lime (Orson Welles) is a sewer rat, bound like the space he inhabits to no constraints of morality or ideology; at the same time, he is also sublimely beyond good and evil, perfect representative of a fallen world, and the only one aware that the world above in fact differs only cosmetically from the one he inhabits (fig. 2).

Greene's existentialist metaphysics used the world beneath Vienna to refuse the legitimacy of any political ideology or divisions in the face of individual morality; however, his exploration of the city itself had turned up the opposite assertion. There existed at the time in Vienna, garbed in impeccably white uniforms, a highly organized corps of tunnel police whose duty was to patrol the sewers, monitoring their boundaries according to those of the world above. This was the public side of the early Cold War, disseminated in newsreels of the time; nevertheless, spies and agents continued to use the

Figure 2. Harry Lime in the sewers, perfect representative of a fallen world. DVD frame enlargement from *The Third Man*

sewers for the same purposes as Harry Lime had used them.[4] It was also in Vienna during these years that the Allies constructed their first spy tunnel, taking advantage of the fact that the telephone and telegraph cables, like the sewers, did not observe the arbitrary boundaries above ground. Because it had been an imperial capital, Vienna, like Berlin, was not only a local source for signal traffic but also a switchboard for communications all over Europe; as in contemporary airport hubs, all lines were routed through the former imperial centers even when heading toward a different destination; consequently, tapping these cables held enormous strategic potential. The British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) began work on the Vienna tunnel in 1948; the last of several tunnels was still in operation when British and Russian forces left the city in 1950.[5]

4. See the newsreel included as an extra on *The Third Man*, dir. Carol Reed, screenplay by Graham Greene, Criterion DVD, 2007.
5. David Stafford, *Spies beneath Berlin* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2003), 24–25.

The Berlin initiative known as Operation Gold (aka Operation Stop-watch), which began in the early 1950s as a rare collaboration between the SIS and the Berlin Operations Base of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was far more ambitious, expensive, and technically sophisticated, tunneling some eighteen hundred meters beneath the border and far into the Russian sector, once again to tap phone lines.[6] Completed in early 1955, the tunnel remained in operation just over eleven months, although it did produce so much material that it took until 1958 to process all of it. Cold War historians and participants still debate the utility of the information, especially after it emerged in 1961 that the double agent George Blake had betrayed the tunnel's existence to the Kremlin even before CIA head Allen Dulles had given the final approval for its construction. The debate provides a fascinating reminder of the heyday of Cold War spy culture: one extreme argues that the tunnel was nearly exclusively used by the Soviets' Committee for State Security (KGB) to pass false and misleading information to the West; the other extreme argues that the KGB was so concerned about preserving Blake's position that it made no attempt to control the information at all, and that vital secrets were passed on as a blind for the even more vital double agent.[7] The Kremlin apparently decided to expose the tunnel in a carefully staged reality show, acted by unsus-pecting utility workers and Vopos (*Volkspolizei*) and filmed for posterity by the local news.

The impossibility of knowing the true status of the information passed through it and the mutual dependency endemic to Cold War spying allow the tunnel to function as an image for the subterranean connections between the two powers whose overt relationship was represented as absolutely severed by the iron curtain and its later physical manifestation in the Wall. Khrushchev was in fact in London when the tunnel was exposed; it is generally assumed that the timing was intentional. The Russians publicly blamed only the Americans (even though British equipment was all over the tunnel); the Americans denied any knowledge, even as the CIA basked in the positive propaganda of a rare

6. Between the extensive excavations and the sophisticated listening, amplification, and record-ing equipment, the tunnel cost between six million and thirty million dollars, notwithstanding that it was built under the assumption that it would not remain secret for long. Stafford gives the conser-vative number (*Spies*, 79); David C. Martin proffers the high estimate in *Wilderness of Mirrors* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 89.

7. See Joseph C. Evans, "Berlin Tunnel Intelligence: A Bumbling KGB," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 9 (1996): 43–50; David E. Murphy, Sergei A. Kondrashev, and George Bailey, *Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 205–37; Stafford, *Spies*; and George Feifer, "The Berlin Tunnel," in *The Cold War: A Military History*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: Random House, 2005), 189–208.

instance of success against a Soviet spy network that had consistently made the agency look foolish (and would again when Blake was exposed). The Russians invited Western news media to view the tunnel, and it became a popular tourist attraction until the KGB felt that it had outlived whatever positive publicity it could have provided, and sealed it up. A fifteen-meter section of the tunnel was excavated and restored in 1990 as part of the Allied Museum and was given a special exhibit in 2006 to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary, but the CIA tunnel is primarily remembered today by spy buffs and scholars.

Its confusion of motivation does complicate the straightforward post-1961 metaphorics of Wall versus tunnel, since, rather than the personal motivation of escape, it was used for the abstract and highly illegal purpose of crossing an international border to steal confidential information. Indeed, we find a trace of the same complications in the insistence by GDR authorities that later escape tunnels were funded by and dug for the CIA to introduce spies surreptitiously into the East.[8] (There may have been some grounds for this assertion; certainly the sealing of the border and erection of the Wall had in fact turned the espionage world upside down by severely limiting cross-border communications.) This claim was the basis of the GDR writer Hans-Joachim Franke's 1967 story "Tunnel 62," in which Western plans are foiled just in time by efficient border guards.[9] The Munich-based Austrian novelist Johannes Mario Simmel turned the espionage claim on its head in his pulpy 1965 thriller, *Lieb Vaterland magst ruhig sein*, published under various titles in English, including *The Berlin Connection* and *Dear Fatherland*. The final twist of Simmel's novel is that the KGB has been using the tunnels to smuggle spies into the West, undercutting the protagonists' heroic endeavors with the cynical machinations of power. Simmel reinforces this espionage novel staple by contrasting practical and ideological conceptions of the space of Berlin. Characters discuss the 238 bunkers possessed by the Border Command of the National People's Army, many with tunnels leading to sealed exits in West Berlin for the purpose of kidnapping to the East.[10] Moreover, we are reminded that the criminal justice system spans the entire city, since crime, like espionage, has no regard either for abstract conceptions of borders or for sentimentality. As in *The Third Man*,

8. See, e.g., "Berlin Tunnel Plot Brings Red Arrests," *New York Times*, February 25, 1962, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, 1851–2003 (hereafter cited as ProQuest).

9. Bernhard Decker, "The Wall as Seen through the Eyes of Border Guards: The Border as a Literary Topos within the Framework of Socialist Defense Readiness Education," in Schürer, Keune, and Jenkins, *Berlin Wall*, 121.

10. Johannes Mario Simmel, *Dear Fatherland*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Random House, 1969), 236.

the hidden meaning of the espionage plot complicates the stark divisions of the world of appearances.

In his survey of the Berlin Wall in the espionage novel, Siegfried Mews singles out Simmel's novel as one of the very few German examples; its anomalous existence is perhaps explained by the fact that it is not a Wall novel, strictly speaking, but a tunnel novel. Espionage is present in every tunnel fiction I have read or screened; there is always at least one tunnel digger or potential escapee being blackmailed by the Stasi or suspected of betrayal; there is nearly always a need to double-cross the border police and the Stasi to complete the escape, usually just under their noses. But the tunnel escape is a different genre than the espionage thriller. Its opposition to the Wall necessarily places moral certainty, personal heroism, and belief in autonomy and freedom above all other values. So we should not be surprised that the only novelistic treatment of the CIA tunnel is an existential thriller in the tradition of *The Third Man.* Closely based on the historical record, Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* (1990) tells the tale of a callow English postal employee sent to Berlin to set up recording apparatus in the tunnel. The master agent Blake has a cameo as a consummate adult; like the Wall, which also plays a secondary but essential role, he is brutally direct. In contrast, young Leonard Marnham is unaware of his motives, confused by his emotions, and animalistic in his passions.

McEwan reinforces this depiction through the imagery he uses. Where historical writing about the CIA tunnel stresses its technical expertise, McEwan stresses its organic identity as an underground space. We read, for example, regarding Marnham's first impression of the excavation, "This was the smell that rose up through the hole—not altogether unpleasant, except in summer. It was earth, and a lurid dampness, and shit not quite neutralized by chemicals."[11] The (apocryphal) fact that excavations burst the building's own cesspool gives rise to the repeated joke "Digging through your own shit, that just about sums the business up."[12] McEwan broadens the scatological context not only to contrast with Marnham's innocence but also to contextualize it. Marnham associates the tunnel with his childhood, "the secret camps, the tunnels through the undergrowth he used to make with friends in a scrap of woodland near his house" and the "safe world" of the "gigantic train set at Hamley's" (London's biggest toy shop).[13] This tunnel world is mirrored in Marnham's torrid love affair with the world-weary Berliner Maria: he burrows under the heaped covers of the bed in her freezing apartment, rooting through

11. Ian McEwan, *The Innocent* (New York: Anchor, 1999), 21.
12. Ibid., 79.
13. Ibid., 80.

the orifices of her body; later he attempts to rape her in a primal explosion of male aggression; when the plot takes a hard-boiled turn, the pair bands together to kill her abusive and alcoholic ex-husband and cut his body to pieces for disposal. McEwan neatly (perhaps a bit too neatly) joins the personal and the political plot as Marnham hides the bags containing the body parts in the tunnel, pretending that they contain top-secret decoding equipment. Marnham manages to escape to England, only to discover many years later that, in fact, his American superior had covered up the murder, married Maria, and settled with her in Kansas in a suburban home with lots of kids. A brief coda finds an aging Marnham standing on the site of the tunnel in 1987, musing on the soon-to-be-demolished Wall. Not unlike the destructive naïveté of Holly Martins in *The Third Man*, "innocence" provides a metaphor for all the terrible things one does because one has no choice and persuades oneself that they are necessary.

There is something startling in watching the history of the Cold War yoked to pop-psychological melodrama; however, it is also true that the tension between innocent individuals and worldly apparatchiks, bureaucrats, and spies is a consistent feature of Berlin tunnel fictions. The difference is that McEwan collapses the ontological and the epistemological, whereas tunnel escape narratives keep them firmly separated. In tunnel escapes, the underground may be dangerous, but it is always authentic and always just what it appears to be; only the world above is compromised. The values espoused by tunnel escape fiction are consistent with the escape genre in general, but the tropes are manipulated differently at different moments in the genre's trajectory with relation to the Wall. I want to look at three fiction films that focus directly on the topic—Siodmak's *Escape from East Berlin*, Richard Michaels's *Berlin Tunnel 21* (1981, based on the novel by Donald Lundquist), and Richter's *Der Tunnel*—and one, Margarethe von Trotta's *Das Versprechen* (*The Promise*, 1994), that uses it in a more piecemeal fashion.

Escape Tunnels and the Movies

> At least they can't divide the shit.
> —Escaping student in *Das Versprechen*

Rushed into production after a news story about a January 1962 tunnel dug by East Berliners, *Escape from East Berlin* (released as *Tunnel 28* in the United Kingdom) was filmed at the Universum Film AG's Tempelhof studios, as well as in Berlin locations. Hired for his B-movie pedigree and Berlin past, Siodmak had a 150-meter replica of the Wall constructed in the Tiergarten, with a
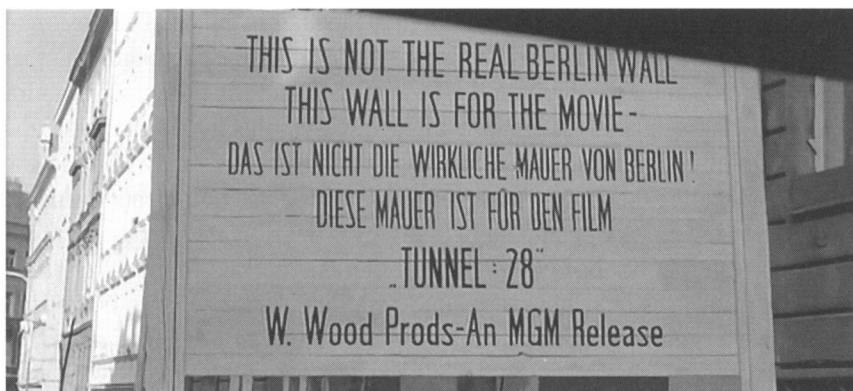
Figure 3. The disclaimer as self-promotion. DVD frame enlargement from *Der Tunnel* re-creating the production of *Escape from East Berlin*

self-promoting placard warning that "This is not the real Berlin Wall" (fig. 3). Half commercial opportunism and half Western propaganda (Metro-Gold-wyn-Mayer agreed to distribute the German-American coproduction if the government guaranteed that it would open on ten thousand screens), *Escape from East Berlin* stars the all-American cowboy actor Don Murray as Kurt Schröder, the Berlin chauffeur hero, and Christine Kaufmann (the German wife of Tony Curtis) as Erika Jurgens, his principal love interest, supported by a host of German character actors.[14] While the screenplay deals exclusively in Cold War clichés and early 1960s sexual innuendo, Siodmak's direction introduces a powerful sense of everyday life along with unrealistic but effective suspense. Siodmak was a friend and roommate of Billy Wilder in Weimar Berlin, and his first film had been the landmark cinema verité drama *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, 1929), a summer slice of working-class Berlin life in which almost nothing happens, shot wholly on location on a shoe-string budget, with nonprofessional actors.

It is fascinating to watch Siodmak combine the radical realism of his Berlin days with his Hollywood specialty, the crime melodrama. He would later disparage *Escape from East Berlin* as pablum for the petit bourgeois Midwest (where it was, in fact, extremely popular). But there is no disguising how his mise-en-scène undercuts the script's stark political division between East

14. Hervé Dumont, *Robert Siodmak: Le maître du film noir* (Lausanne: Editions l'Age d'Homme, 1981), 302–3.

and West, drawing out the class conflict that inheres as much in the putatively socialist East as it surely will in the free West. Rather than the clash of two abstract representations of space divided by the Wall, Siodmak gives us the tunnel as an extension of the lived space of the Schröder family and their neighbors, part of the confined domestic setting in which nearly all of the film takes place. As the family members prepare to flee the Vopos through the tunnel, for example, they have to interrupt the mother, who is busy packing her dishes, as if they were simply moving from their derelict building to someplace better. It is not accidental that the tunnel emerges out of the private space of the father's basement workroom or that the major obstacle the diggers encounter is another basement, the last trace of a building from the 1920s, buried by the Wall as whatever had remained of *das rote Berlin* had been buried by the decades of history during which Siodmak had lived in Hollywood exile.

The tunnel also paints, without explicit comment, a society just as corrupt and full of consumer goods as the West. In other words, the culprit could just as well be capitalism as socialism. Even the hero, a chauffeur, is having an affair with the elegant and sophisticated wife of his boss, an army colonel, at the same time that he is romancing the naive Erika, letting her think that her brother, killed crashing a truck through the Wall in the opening sequence, actually arrived safely in West Berlin, where he is waiting for her. When Kurt pulls Erika from under the barbed-wire fence she is trying to squeeze through in a suicidal bid to join her brother, he pretends that they are lovers; not fooled in the least, the Vopos find a snatch of her dress in the wire, give it to a guard dog, and track her to Kurt's apartment, where she holes up for the rest of the film. By the time Erika's father betrays the tunnel to the colonel, we are in no doubt as to the truth of the slogan hanging on the wall behind his desk (subtly enough for a Hollywood film, in untranslated German): "Wer die DDR angreift, wird vernichtet" (Whoever attacks the GDR will be destroyed).

Nevertheless, the film is chiefly a close study of the extended Schröder family, which scarcely leaves the confines of its apartment in a building just off the Wall. The tunnel doesn't even enter the plot until midway through, when the hard-boiled chauffeur is finally persuaded to dig it in the cellar, all the while claiming that he will stay behind when it is done. "I'll give you your tunnel and you'll go over," he promises, warning them, "It's not a paradise over there." Especially in comparison with the heroic tough-guy posturings more typical of the prison escape film, Siodmak's version is low-key and domestic; Kurt digs the tunnel with the help of Erika, his younger brother, his glamorous sister, the grandfather, and a neighbor woman with a young baby. Communication with friends on the other side of the Wall occurs via young Helmut's

rubber-band-powered model airplane. The final number of twenty-eight persons who make it through the tunnel includes the entirety of the grandfather's brass marching band, whose rehearsals supposedly mask the noise of the excavations. Granted, there is a race to the finish, as the Vopos surround the house and Kurt heroically bars the door before being shot as he caves in the tunnel entrance. But then there is a bravura noirish long shot of Kurt crawling through the starkly lit tunnel. As Erika returns to look for him, the camera tracks through the empty tunnel, past a dropped trumpet, to the light, then up and out to pass over the escapees. Finally, shooting from the West Berlin point of view for the first time in the film, the camera turns to let us see Erika emerging from the tunnel with the wounded but still-breathing Kurt.

In prison escape films, the tunnel is always identified with lived space, but as a conduit back to the world of normality from which the prisoners have been severed. When it is a war movie, the barrier is purely physical: the prisoners are everyday heroes unjustly held in an alien environment. When it is a prison movie, the barrier is moral as well: the prisoners must gain our trust, proving to us that they deserve to escape to rejoin the world of the just. The tunnel thus joins two inimical worlds, and the climactic passage through it often takes on the resonance of a rebirth—explicitly so, for example, in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), where Tim Robbins's unjustly imprisoned and tormented protagonist emerges from the waste matter of a sewage tunnel cleansed and renewed. Rebirth is such a familiar topos of the genre that the Coen brothers could parody it in *Raising Arizona* (1987). The sewer escape has echoed the parable of the prodigal son since Jean Valjean's flight beneath Paris in Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* (1867); the spatial metaphorics echo in episodes of sewer escape that characterized the early days of the border's closing in Berlin. It is during a sewer escape that Sophie and Konrad become tragically separated in von Trotta's *Das Versprechen* and during a sewer escape that Matthis is separated from Carola in Richter's *Der Tunnel* (fig. 4). In both cases, separation via the sewer leads to accusations of betrayal, moral confusion, and despair.

The moral trajectory of the sewer is no less pressing for being historically accurate. The sewer escape was the mode of choice until the authorities placed steel grids in all seventy-five of the drainage tunnels that crossed beneath the border.[15] A student group calling itself the Reisebüro (Travel

15. Dietmar Arnold and Ingmar Arnold, *Dunkle Welten: Bunker, Tunnel und Gewölbe unter Berlin* (Berlin: Links, 2002), 169–70. See also Ellen Sesta, *Der Tunnel in die Freiheit: Berlin, Bernauer Strasse* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2001), 23–24.

Figure 4. The sewer escape: Matthis and Carolat, soon to be tragically separated. DVD frame enlargement from *Der Tunnel*

Bureau) escorted about 100 persons through the sewers to Wedding in West Berlin in September and October 1961; another 150 escaped through a drainage tunnel between Mitte and Kreuzberg before the Vopos flushed them out with tear gas.[16] Unlike specially excavated tunnels, which permitted a straight sprint from entrance to exit, the sewers required expert knowledge to negotiate the subterranean labyrinth. The student leader in *Das Versprechen* paints the sewer map on the palms of his hands. When the Vopos interrogate Konrad, what they most want to know is who provided that map—a reproducible underground potentially far more damaging than a specific tunnel. Recent films tend to stress the filth factor endemic to tunneling; this stress reflects the current cultural fascination in the West with waste and the grotesque, but it also provides a pungent metaphor for a moral cynicism and a sense of the degradation to which historical events have reduced basically decent individuals. A dry tunnel means an unconflicted passage; a wet, muddy, and smelly tunnel is a space with moral issues. The grates excluded would-be escapees, but they still let the waste through. In underground space, the metaphor asserts that everyone is equal—even if the principle of equality could be asserted only negatively, with everyone equally compromised.

The ancient moral connotations of sewage filth invariably trope the invasion of water episodes that are a fact of tunnel digging and a staple of tunnel fictions, as if any natural complication must be freighted with a moral message,

16. Arnold and Arnold, *Dunkle Welten*, 169.

punishment for intruding in a realm beyond the well-policed borders above ground. It is not surprising that water plays the smallest role in *Escape from East Berlin*, for within the plot there is not the least contribution from the West; Siodmak's characters are not even open to the accusation of spying or encroaching on the sovereignty of East Berlin. It is in the moral complications of the other films that the conventions of a third genre enter the picture: the heist film, in which a crack team of criminals tunnels beneath a bank vault to rob it of all its riches without even a trace of their theft being discovered until it is too late. Most tunnel escapes were engineered from the West, where there were greater resources and the tunnelers could work unmolested until the time came to emerge in the East; from the viewpoint of the latter, of course, the tunnel diggers were indeed intent on robbing precious resources. Moreover, funding for the tunnel is always a plot point within the films, whether it is National Broadcasting Company (NBC) television in *Der Tunnel*, a fashion designer aunt in *Das Versprechen*, or an art-collecting philanthropist industrialist in Michaels's *Berlin Tunnel 21*.

The reason we find traces of the conventions of so many underground genres in tunnel fictions is that even the most propagandistic of them feel obliged somehow to account for both sides of the conflict, much more than we find in the standard tunnel escape or heist film. There are always relatives, usually fathers of the older generation, who either refuse or must be persuaded to leave and who in the end often attempt to betray the escape. Young mothers, too, can be blackmailed into making deals with the Stasi, torn between betrayal and custody of their children. The key difference with the genres mentioned above is that family loyalties rather than greed underlie these actions; even when ideologically justified, every decision is motivated by an emotional relationship. Where prison and heist films often introduce a sympathetic authority figure, they do so to explore homosocial issues of bonding and machismo, and codes of honor and respect even between enemies. In contrast, tunnel fictions tend toward melodrama, foregrounding the characters' emotional investment, and their difficult and often tragic choices forced on them by historical circumstances.

This trend is clearest in *Das Versprechen*, where it neatly coincides with von Trotta's longtime investment in emotional identification as a mode of politicized discourse. Although it looks at the beginning like a conventional tunnel escape film, *Das Versprechen* quickly shows its hand when it suggests that we doubt the innocence of Konrad's unfortunate stumbling over untied shoelaces that prevents his joining the sewer escape. Von Trotta never fully resolves the ambiguity of her protagonist's motivation, as Konrad goes on to live a materi-

ally comfortable life in the GDR as a prominent astrophysicist, haunted only by his adolescent attachment to Sophie and by the ever-more-complicated moral compromises he must make to retain his hard-won privileges—for example, access to his son in the West. This is not to say that von Trotta is more subtle in her argument than in her other films, but she does, especially in the later segments, produce a powerful sense of the existence of two genuinely different yet also intricately interdependent ways of life and presents reasons that various of her characters may have been better suited for one way of life over the other. She also, for the most part, eschews attaching ideological motivations to specific actions. In one of the film's most emotionally effective moments, Konrad's brother-in-law, Harold, a leader of the peace movement in East Berlin, is forcibly expatriated to the West after symbolically crucifying himself on the twentieth anniversary of the Wall. Unable to face life without his partner, Barbara, a pastor in East Berlin, Harold commits suicide by trying to cross the Wall back into East Berlin. The irony is all the more pointed in that this is the only crossing attempt von Trotta has shown since the film's opening segment. Just as Konrad manages to miss out on the initial sewer escape as well as a subsequent tunnel escape also engineered by Sophie, so von Trotta suggests that Wall and tunnel, barriers and escape, are nothing but spatial distractions from the business of life, which goes on despite them both, no matter the undeniably material influence they may have had on that business.

The standpoint of *Das Versprechen* in many ways echoes that of Peter Schneider's novel, *Der Mauerspringer* (*The Wall Jumper*). (This is not altogether surprising, given that Schneider coauthored the film's screenplay with von Trotta.) Just as in his famous phrase that the Wall in the head would take longer to get rid of than the thing itself, so in the Berlin of Schneider's novel physical escape is not at issue. The Willy brothers simply jump across the Wall to go to the movies in the West (although it is rumored that they actually get across via tunnel). Then there are the "ghost trains." One day while the narrator is visiting his East Berlin friend, Pommerer,

> a rumbling sound approaches under our feet, swells to a thumping and banging as though an elevator were falling down its shaft, then ebbs. "Line 6—it runs right under my former apartment. You know those sealed-off stations down there? I never wanted to go to the West. But sometimes, when the teaspoons in the kitchen started vibrating, I'd think: Just once I'd like to be sitting in that train and riding on through."[17]

17. Peter Schneider, *The Wall Jumper*, trans. Leigh Hafrey (New York: Random House, 1982), 54, 56.

The S- and U-Bahn tunnels passed beneath East Berlin, but only Friedrich-straße station remained open, as there was a border checkpoint in it. The other East Berlin stations were closed, all aboveground traces were completely removed, and transport police permanently manned the stations below as the trains passed through slowly without stopping on their way between different parts of West Berlin. There were, inevitably, various interactions and provo-cations between guards and the "class enemy" passengers.[18] In 1980 a suc-cessful escape through a subway tunnel was organized by an individual with security clearance at Friedrichstraße; back in 1962 a tunnel attempt had spec-tacularly collapsed at the Wollankstraße station, which lay right along and under the Wall.

Since their inauguration in London in 1863, subways have been closely associated with the quotidian aspect of the underground's multiple meanings: the everyday space of "Tube work Tube bed." The power of the image of the ghost stations, which recurs frequently in the Berlin tunnel literature (although with more or less weight given to the metaphor), evokes the buried trace of an everyday connection between all of the citizens of the city, a connection further characterized by its sheer banality: they are united in the ordinariness of their lives, rather than by any ideology or abstract national identity. This is the spatial metaphor evoked by Schneider and von Trotta in *Das Versprechen* as a complement to their refusal of the sublime imagery of Wall and tunnel: a repeated shot of a subway train passing in the distance on elevated tracks. The shot frequently marks the transition between scenes in East and West Ber-lin, thus signaling both that life goes on and also, by evoking the ghost stations, that life goes on only in a subterranean, psychological, or remembered sense. The image's meaning is reinforced by the repeated shot of Konrad waiting for his son to emerge from the Friedrichstraße station; unconcerned with ideol-ogy, Alexander simply wants to see his father (and vice versa).

Fittingly, *Das Versprechen* concludes abruptly on the day the Wall opens in November 1989, set on a new urban space, the Glienecke Bridge between Berlin and Potsdam, swarmed by jubilant inhabitants of both halves of Berlin, physically reclaiming it from its identity as the "bridge of spies." Sophie and Konrad come toward each other from opposite ends of the bridge, joined by their now twenty-year-old son. But von Trotta ends on a close-up of Sophie's face, half-turned toward Konrad, frozen in an ambiguous expression of indeci-sion, as if to say that, yes, things will never be the same. Or, perhaps, that they will be just as they have always been. In either case, the film suggests, the

18. Arnold and Arnold, *Dunkle Welten*, 170–71.

drama has long since passed, and human emotions never quite mirror historical events the way that our cultural products would like us to think that they do.

One could argue that separating the personal and political plots about the Wall became possible only after 1989; that certainly didn't prevent *Der Tunnel* more than a decade later in 2001 from presenting a rip-roaring historical melodrama in which the good struggle and eventually get what they want; the weak crumble, then redeem themselves, but go unrewarded; the evil are satisfyingly foiled; and the viewer can always determine which is which. Harry Melchior (Heino Ferch) is a champion swimmer who retires from the team in disgust over the Wall and looks for a way to get out along with his beloved sister, Lotte. The film is supremely self-reflexive in that rather empty turn-of-the-millennium way: Harry meets his contact in the Zoopalast cinema during a newsreel about the construction of the Wall. Unable to bring Lotte with him, he forms a tunnel troop with his friend Matthis, a refined man of aristocratic descent who wants to get his mother out, and an American, in it for the ideology and the excitement. The typical complications ensue: Lotte's husband doesn't want to leave; Matthis's lover, Carola, is pregnant and in prison, and they are forced to betray the tunnel. Carola sacrifices herself by leading the authorities away from the tunnel, giving her baby to Lotte's husband, who sees the light at the last minute. There is a chase in the tunnel, but Harry, consistent with his humanist values, refuses to kill the colonel, Krüger, who has been leading the hunt.

Loosely based on the history of Tunnel 57, *Der Tunnel* glamorizes the ordinary heroism of the original student group. Ellen Sesta's memoir of the same tunnel, published in 2001, places it in the context of the many failed tunnels of the period, as well as the reality that the Stasi found out about nearly every one of them. Forty-one students were involved in digging Tunnel 57; two are persuaded to betray it, but the diggers outwit the betrayal, pretending to continue the tunnel while opening it in a building they had not planned for. The escape is concluded without bloodshed, and the two compromised diggers are even allowed to bring their loved ones through. Members of the troop read about Siodmak's film and try to get money out of it; they end up getting an NBC film crew to fund their tunnel in return for filming it. Not surprisingly, the escapees are extremely surprised by the cameras and spotlights as they make their way through the tunnel to freedom.

Richter uses both media events as a spectacular backdrop for his film. Harry offers Siodmak his story and gets money from NBC. The film uses bits of the NBC footage as a grainy black-and-white counterpoint to the high-quality color of the rest of the film. They are there in the same way that the film's narrative arc programmatically parallels the rise of the Wall with Harry's

drive to escape. Tunnel and Wall are inseparable because the urge for freedom is insuperable: there is nothing the East could offer, not even inertia, to make any person worthy of consideration feel any differently. The fact that NBC apparently funded a tunnel in violation of international law in return for film rights created quite a controversy when the news broke. The law-abiding Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), meanwhile, was working up a competing docudrama based on the same events. There were fine legal distinctions made between East Germans escaping under their own impetus (as in Siodmak's film) and Westerners aiding and abetting those escapes. NBC eventually admitted to having contributed funds, although the producer, Reuven Frank, insisted that the tunnel would have been dug regardless (Sesta's memoir asserts the opposite). The State Department had apparently already axed a CBS report on tunneling; the *New York Times* later reported that CBS felt "morally justified but professionally outdone" by NBC's plans to broadcast its "90-minute spectacular with subterranean films." The Cuban Missile Crisis forced NBC to postpone the broadcast of the controversial documentary; it was eventually shown in December 1962, to an audience of thirty-five million, and became the only documentary ever to receive an Emmy award for program of the year.[19]

The narrative arc of *Der Tunnel* links Wall and tunnel from the beginning; its concluding "where they are now" snapshots implicitly extend the parallel through 1989. The parallel suggests that the Cold War was merely a bump when freedom temporarily sought shelter underground and that anything the GDR might have claimed for itself—its Olympic athletes, for example—were all really the property of the free world (and without those athletes having ever taken steroids, naturally). For all its nods to local detail, *Der Tunnel* is a product of globalization. Although the film was originally made for the German cable television channel Sat.1, its high production values (at thirty million deutsche marks, it was at the time the channel's most expensive production ever), slick editing, and tightly woven plot (even over a three-hour running time) made it ready for export to any developed culture in the world, where it was released theatrically, pared down to an efficient 140 minutes. It may

19. Val Adams, "TV Film Records Refugees' Flight," *New York Times*, October 5, 1962, ProQuest; Adams, "N.B.C.-TV Plans Documentary on Berlin Tunnel It Helped Build," *New York Times*, October 12, 1962, ProQuest; Max Frankel, "Cold War Confusion," *New York Times*, October 13, 1962, ProQuest; "U.S. Deplores Plan to Show TV Film of a Berlin Tunnel," *New York Times*, October 17, 1962, ProQuest; "Berlin Tunnel Film Irks East Germans," *New York Times*, October 21, 1962, ProQuest; "Letters to the Times," *New York Times*, October 22, 1962, ProQuest; Richard F. Shepard, "N.B.C. Postpones Tunnel Telecast," *New York Times*, October 24, 1962, ProQuest; "Ulbricht to Free 10,000 by Dec. 20," *New York Times*, October 7, 1964, ProQuest.

have held specifically local meaning for its German audience, but that mean-
ing in no way compromised its ambitions for a global audience. Indeed, the
self-conscious references to the American media presence in 1962 make an
ironic wink toward the very Americanization of that ambition in a post–Cold
War world.

It is instructive to compare *Der Tunnel* to the American version of the
same historical episode, Michaels's *Berlin Tunnel 21*, also made for televi-
sion (Home Box Office in the early days of cable), timed for broadcast on the
twentieth anniversary of the building of the Wall. Sandy (Richard Thomas,
of *The Waltons* fame), a young soldier separated by the Wall from his German
fiancée, rounds up a colorful troop: a male model, an aging painter, a cynical
engineer, and Georg, a suspect young man who escaped when he left his girl-
friend for dead in their wrecked car on the Glienecke Bridge. This troop, too,
digs a tunnel in an abandoned factory; it, too, is betrayed by the weak link in
the group; it, too, succeeds despite the betrayal, with the help once again of a
plucky girlfriend. The primary difference, of course, is that the ringleader is
American, and his Americanness remains an issue throughout the film. Twice
Sandy is forced to be a party to cold-blooded murder: the first time he watches
as an engineer executes a former Nazi who is blackmailing the hapless Georg;
the second time he does the job himself, killing a Vopo who discovered the
plot early on; persuaded Sandy that he wanted out, too; but then, evidently,
betrayed the tunnel. Sandy lures him to his fiancée's apartment, ignores the
Vopo's pleas of innocence, and shoots him. The desire to remain behind is a
powerful factor in both films as well: Georg finally concludes of his parents,
"Maybe they were better off staying there. I think I would have been better off
staying there, too." Portrayed as a decent man who has to make tough choices,
Sandy ends up dying in the tunnel under a mountain of rubble, sacrificing
himself to free the Germans. Rather than inevitable as in the hindsight of *Der
Tunnel*, the desire of *Berlin Tunnel 21* is true to the ethos of the Reagan era that
began as it was being filmed: only the Americans, it argued, were in a practi-
cal and moral position to end the Cold War or even to understand precisely
what it meant.

This ethos is evident especially in changes the film made to its fictional
source, Lindquist's 1978 thriller of the same title. A broad-canvas historical
megadrama on the Leon Uris model, Lindquist's novel treats its subject pri-
marily as the excuse for a lot of technical detail, a good measure of semirisqué
but ultimately conventional sexual shenanigans, and a host of characters treated
fairly equitably by an omniscient, worldly narrator. Michaels's film trimmed
the sex and upped the violence and tragedy. In the novel the Vopo turns out to
have been telling the truth and eventually gets together with Georg's girl in

West Berlin, while the heroic American soldier (with the curiously German name of Josep Bauer) survives handily, having been proved right and in control of the situation at every turn. The novel is also far more realistic about the contingent nature of human relationships, even as many of its subplots also veer into sensationalism (e.g., the male model must choose between prostituting himself to a sadistic film director or completing the tunnel to liberate the parents he would actually prefer to keep in the GDR). There are vague gestures at "big meaning," but for the most part Lindquist is content to leave its backdrop as backdrop. For all its technical detail, the same plot could have been set anywhere in the Cold War world with barely a change in meaning.

This is partly, I think, because the Wall is such a quintessentially visual construction, from its stark beginnings to its graffiti-filled end. Its extraordinary iconicity melds perfectly with the pulp instincts of popular cinema: the meaning is so much on the surface that it doesn't even have to be elaborated. Literature of the Wall seeks ways to complicate the simplicity of this representation of space; film revels in it. Not since the skyscrapers of New York has the aboveground world so perfectly concretized its ideology architecturally. With such a powerful foil, the underground, too, possesses an unusually simplified meaning, a meaning embodied in the trope of the rescued baby, which manifests itself in all four films I have discussed here, as well as in many of the reportages and memoirs. Still, if we unpack the metaphor, we find that the West does need the East; it may leave behind the old generation, set in its ways, but it needs the innocent babes it apparently is unable to produce on its own. Only *Das Versprechen* plays with the image of the rescue of the precious cargo of the future, conceiving the baby in a torrid weekend reunion in Prague and raising it in the West, only to have it insistently travel back and forth until it is finally able to reunite its sundered parents—without benefit, naturally, of the fantastic conduit of the tunnel.

Wall and Tunnel beyond Berlin

> All free men, wherever they live, are Berliners.
> —John F. Kennedy

I conclude with two cinematic images that borrow Cold War symbolism to depict different aspects of Europe as a whole. Rather than an escape tunnel, Emir Kusturica's controversial fable of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, *Underground* (1995), imagines the Cold War as the massive cellar of a Belgrade house, where the opportunistic Marko confines his friend Blackie and
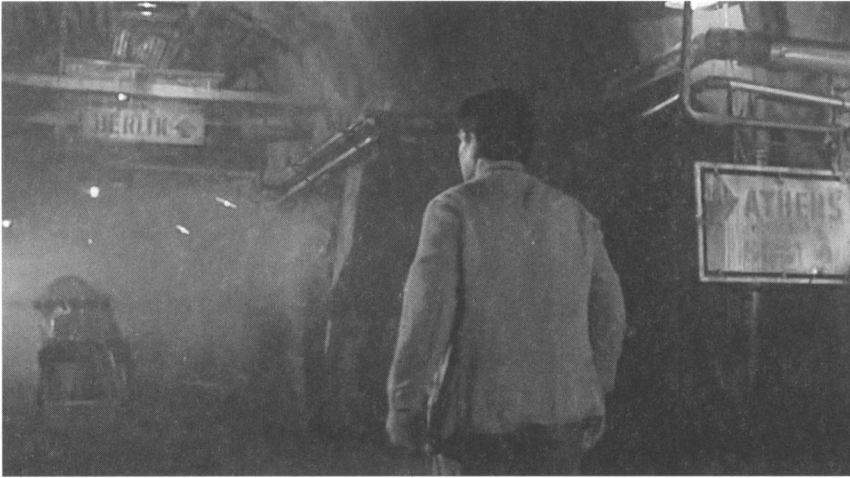
Figure 5. At the subterranean crossroads of Europe: the fantastic tunnels of Kusturica's *Underground*. DVD frame enlargement

a community of resistance fighters for twenty years, persuading them that their country is still occupied by the Germans. The community is both utopian and infernal, idealistically devoting itself to producing arms for the struggle that Marko sells on the black market. When they finally discover the deceit, one character, searching for his best friend, a chimpanzee, stumbles on a tunnel system that provides a subterranean link beneath all of Europe, a sort of clandestine Common Market, with Berlin a major hub (fig. 5). By placing the socialist "alternative" underground, Kusturica brings out both its utopian simplicity and its sheer wrongheadedness and oppression. Confined to a cellar, it is a private (i.e., national) neurosis rather than a universal conflict. The tunnel is reserved for a very different kind of underground, the underbelly of democratic Western Europe, concerned mainly with trafficking in weapons and cheap labor.

We find a very different image of popular Europe in the 1981 prison escape movie, *Victory*, one of John Huston's final efforts. Set during World War II, the film concerns Allied prisoners of war forced to put together a soccer team to challenge a collection of Nazi all-stars in a show match in occupied Paris that they are meant to lose. A rainbow coalition of world democracy led by soccer greats Pelé, Bobby Moore, and Osvaldo Ardiles and held together by Sylvester Stallone's heroic underdog goalkeeper, the team plans to use the occasion to escape during halftime through a tunnel dug into the locker room

Figure 6. In John Huston's *Victory*, the will of popular democracy trumps the planned tunnel escape. DVD frame enlargement

by the French resistance. Inevitably, a halftime deficit inspires Stallone's character instead to lead them back out of the tunnel and onto the field to battle the odds, the crooked referees, and the brutal Nazi midfielders for a thrilling last-second victory. When the deliriously happy crowd charges the field in a spontaneous gesture of rebellion and celebration, you realize that it's another image of Wall and tunnel. International unity and freedom trump the underground mode of tunnel and the wartime need for expediency and sacrifice. The victorious players are spirited off the field, cloaked in civilian garb, by a crowd without even a trace of period costume among them (fig. 6). I have to confess that there is something refreshing about that ending, as there is in von Trotta's refusal of the easy spatial metaphor of the tunnel.

Starting with the CIA in the 1950s, the tunnel's primary identity as a locus of opposition and subversion, of everything that contradicted or no longer existed in the capitalist world above, was taken over as a freedom tunnel. Granted that the tunnel's underground character always produced moments of contradiction and ambiguity, the overpowering image of the Wall locked the tunnel into its shadow. I find this particularly striking in the mythmaking of Richter's *Der Tunnel*; the tunnel, it seems, still serves a mythic function in the unified Germany of the twenty-first century. Rapidly disappearing from the actual cityscape of Berlin, the Wall's symbolic meaning appears, if anything, more firmly established than ever before. What does it mean for this spatial dyad if the Wall has vanished as a physical presence while the tunnels are being excavated, their makeshift excavations brought back to the light? As so often happens with urban spaces, their meaning persists, frozen in time, long after the actual spaces cease to play a role in everyday life.