

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



*Das Wunder von Bern.* Senator Film / Little Shark Entertainment.

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Published on H-German (March, 2004)

Americans are accustomed to films about sport that carry a social or national message. Baseball, being the “national pastime,” has enabled Hollywood to produce film classics from *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942, with Gary Cooper) to *Field of Dreams* (1989, with Kevin Costner) or *A League of their Own* (1992, with Madonna). Germans like other Europeans have a lesser tendency to use sports as a stand-in for dealing with “serious matters” like heroism or national pride. Wim Wenders’ *Die Angst des Torwarts vor dem Elfmeterschiessen* is the exact opposite of what a typical American sports film stands for, and *Fussball ist unser Leben* (1999, directed by Tomy Wigand) is also a sports film very different from the American model. In the German case, however, treatments of the 1954 victory in the Soccer World Cup Final are an exception to the general rule of “upgrading” sports to deal with patriotic themes. Historians did not have to wait for Soenke Wortmann’s *Das Wunder von Bern* (2003) to discover that the contest at the Swiss Wankdorf Stadium was a milestone in post-war German history, serious history. As early as 1954, many prominent Germans considered the German victory over Hungary (3:2) as the “real birth of the Federal Republic”, five years after the Parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany ratified its constitution. Similarly, German film did not wait until 2003 to take a position on this historical event. For the last 8 minutes of Werner Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979) the audience hears Herbert Zimmermann broadcasting the last 8 minutes of the game in Bern as Maria Braun approaches her tragic end. For Fassbinder those 8 minutes illustrate the history of Germany’s recovery after World War II as much as the person of Maria Braun. “Aus! Aus! Aus!” as exclaimed by Herbert Zimmermann did not only mean the

end of the game or even of the World Championship. It also symbolized the end of the post-war era, an era when Germany was on its knees. “Wir sind wieder Wer” was the general feeling after July 4, 1954. The deification of the national team went to such extremes (Herbert Zimmermann: “Toni [the goalkeeper], Du bist ein Fussballgott!”) that the president of the Federal Republic, Theodor Heuss, had to caution the nation: “We no longer turn people into gods”. Soenke Wortmann and co-author Rochus Hahn have moved a step beyond Fassbinder in creating a film that provides answers to the questions: Was 1945 indeed a *Stunde Null* in German history? Did a “new Germany” emerge immediately after the great fall of the Third Reich? Eight years after the Third Reich’s capitulation Wortmann’s Ruhr province (depicted in on-location scenes) is still a beaten area suffering from the outcome of the war. The Lubanskis—a typical working-class name in the Ruhr valley since nineteenth-century immigration from the East—lead a difficult life, not only because of the prevailing hardship but also because the head of the family, Richard Lubanski (played by Peter Lohmeyer) is still a POW in Soviet captivity. Richard’s youngest child, Matthias (Louis Klamroth), finds a surrogate father in his soccer idol Helmut Rahn (Sascha Goepel) whose aid and talisman he becomes. The real father returns from captivity, but cannot integrate himself into the family he left at the height of the Third Reich. This topic is central in post-war German literature and films: It represents a Wim van Winkel situation: The German man leaves Germany and returns after about 10 years to find a totally changed society. But what had really changed? According to Wortmann, the changes include not only the Americanization of society and the stress on material values, but just as importantly the departure from traditional values, first and foremost discipline and traditional family

hierarchy. The clashes between the homecoming soldier and his two elder children as well as the friction between Lubanski and his wife represent the different aspects of the gap between old and new. The values represented by the returning soldier are a mixture of traditional Prussian and National Socialist cliches, not acceptable any more to the four other family members. <p> Father Lubanski's severest clash is with his youngest son, Matthias. For the sake of a festive dinner he kills Matthias' rabbit. Worst of all: He cuts off his son's contact to Helmut Rahn, so he cannot accompany his idol to Switzerland. But of course, in a film like <cite>Das Wunder von Bern</cite>, soccer must emerge as the bridge between generations. First, father Lubanski uses his soccer expertise to help his son change his position from offense to defense, from a position in which he is incompetent to a position in which his tenacity and stamina bear results. And the happy ending of the story is not only the game, the <cite>Wunder von Bern</cite> itself, but the reconciliation between the generations: Father and son drive together to Bern to arrive just in time to help Rahn to shoot the winning goal. "Tor! Tor! Tor!" Between the reformed father and the forgiving son the <cite>Stunde Null</cite> has been overcome. <p> This strategy is an easy way out of a complex conflict: overcoming the past (<cite>Vergangenheitsbewältigung</cite>) is

dealt with in the narrowest possible way. The highlight of the film is the perfect reconstruction of the familiar scenes from the game itself accompanied by the exact replication of Zimmermann's description of these very scenes. For the sake of the average soccer fan, the film circumvents all relevant questions concerning <cite>Stunde Null</cite> but one: the gap between total defeat and victory. After all: Captain Fritz Walter and especially Coach Sepp Herberger were prominent in German soccer before 1945 and re-emerged with (West) German soccer after the war. This interesting element of continuity goes under in a story dedicated to the "virtues" of German soccer, such as taking advantage of a muddy playground. <p> The film fits well into the mood prevailing lately in Germany: Paying more attention to the suffering of German population before and after the end of World War II, while at the same time paying less attention to the connection between the tragic outcome of the war for the Germans and Germany's conduct during the war. Yet, the film does not deserve an overdose of criticism relating to this aspect. After all it is essentially an attempt to reconstruct one of the finest hours of the Federal Republic of Germany and to create a good and "sellable" story for the general public, not only for soccer fans. <p>

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**Citation:** Moshe Zimmermann. Review of , *Das Wunder von Bern*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.

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