

Response Paper #1 *A Berlin Romance*: Western Lies and a Call East

A Berlin Romance, produced in 1956 in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), opens with cheerful, jazzy music as the narrator relates the story of a normal couple in love, featuring a girl who “lives in East Berlin” and a boy from “what’s called the West sector”. Immediately, the narration subtly raises East Berlin above the West by giving it a name while denying West Berlin a legitimate name and thus existence—the narrator says it is *called* the Western sector, not that it *is* West Berlin. This denial of Western superiority (as read through West Berlin) is the underlying theme and driving force of the movie, as the audience watches the breakdown of the West’s glitzy façade through the character of the poor West Berliner Hans, and the comparison drawn to the relatively wealthier East German Uschi. Thus, *A Berlin Romance* both fights against Western narratives of Eastern poverty and goes further to claim that the proletariat *belongs* in the East, thus pointing to Eastern anxieties about Western propaganda and losing parts of their population.

The question of belonging, or place, as phrased in the movie, is an important part of fighting against this narrative of Eastern poverty. Place is both something that you choose, and somewhere you inherently belong, with the idea being that one should recognize, and choose, the place they ‘belong’; however, this then brings up questions of where the right place for you is. By undermining propaganda about Western prosperity, *A Berlin Romance* tries to argue that, at least for the proletariat, the ‘right place’ is in East Germany.

At the beginning of the movie, Uschi is a young girl who dreams of the glitz and glam of Western capitalism. She imagines her place is in West Berlin as a model, and is attracted by the image and lifestyle portrayed by the shops and beauty parlors that line the streets near the (West Berlin) movie theatre she and her friends frequent. Her attraction to Western richness is

embodied in the form of her initial attraction to Lord, the suave, worldly, wealthy man who Uschi first dates before Hans. It's not until she visits Hans' true home—thus seeing what the audience has already known—that the spell is broken and she learns her true place is in the East.

These Western lies that so enrapture Uschi are embodied in Hans, who is a poor working-class boy trying to keep up the façade of wealth and modernity that the West likes to put up. Unlike what the stores and magazines would suggest of West German prosperity, Hans lives in an obviously poor neighborhood, in a tiny studio apartment that is right outside a set of train tracks. Uschi, on the other hand, lives in a house that boasts multiple separate rooms—enough for Uschi to have her own despite living with her parents and at least one brother. Thus, through Hans, and particularly his comparison with Uschi, we see the struggles of the proletariat in the West, such as the lack of jobs and the unfeelingness of big employers for their employees' working conditions. Although working conditions in the East are never shown, the wealth disparity between Uschi and Hans suggests that in reality, the East is the better place to live.

And, ultimately, Hans does ends up turning to the East (albeit not necessarily permanently), following an invitation to dinner at Uschi's home. Much of the movie had previously taken place in West Berlin, which, in Uschi's own words, was "more interesting. [Had] more opportunities." But, by going with Uschi to the East for dinner with her family (a much longer and more emotionally important affair than dropping someone off at their doorstep), Hans, and therefore the audience, finally recognizes Eastern prosperity and its potential. Thus, by ending the movie with Uschi and Hans' reconciliation via an invitation for Hans to come East, director Gerhard Klein combats Western stereotypes and propaganda, and invites the audience to think of the benefits of living in East Germany—a call home for the suffering poor in the West.