Tragedy, Surrogation and the Significance of African-American Culture in Postunification Germany

An Interpretation of *Schultze Gets the Blues*¹

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The Blues are, perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy.

Ralph Ellison²

I.

*Schultze Gets the Blues* (2003), the critically acclaimed first feature film and box office hit from German director Michael Schorr, who also wrote the screenplay, tells the story of a taciturn, rotund, middle-aged bachelor and mineworker living in the small town of Teutschenthal in the eastern German province of Saxony-Anhalt who is sent into early retirement. For Schultze, the end of mining work does not disrupt his life of routine: solitary meals, meeting his pals, Jürgen and Manfred, over beers at the local pub or fishing with them from a bridge, and playing accordion (as his father had before him) for the town band. While turning the radio dial one evening, he perks up at the unfamiliar sound of Zydeco-style accordion playing. Getting hold of his instrument, he replays the tune from memory. In the following days and weeks, Schultze begins to evince, in his own low key way, an interest in things Cajun—preparing a Jambalaya dinner for his friends, performing his Zydeco tune to uncomprehending audiences at a seniors’ home and at the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the town band, eyeing the latest fare specials to New Orleans advertised at a...
local travel agency. As he stolidly presses against the limits of his musical-cultural imagination, Schultze increasingly finds his daily life populated by offbeat characters including Frau Lorant, a theatrically-mannered, hard-drinking resident of his mother’s old age home and Lisa, a flamboyant, flamenco-dancing pub waitress.

Schultze’s friends and band colleagues arrange for him to represent the town at a German-American folk festival in New Braunfels, Texas—Teutschenthal’s sister city. Once there, Schultze abandons the festivities and, in a stolen boat, makes his way to the mouth of the Mississippi and thence upriver to the bayou. During his pilgrimage, he encounters people of all backgrounds, among them, bar locals playing dominos, members of a Czech-American polka band, a Cajun fiddler at a backwoods dance club, and the crew of a police patrol boat. Ending up the unexpected guest of an African-American woman and her daughter on their houseboat, he accompanies them to a local club where the band happens to be playing his trademark Zydeco tune. He dances until a coughing spasm forces him to stop. That night, seated under the stars on the deck of the houseboat, he dreams of people dancing in silhouette and breathes his last breath. (Periodic episodes of labored breathing and coughing depicted throughout the film suggest the cause of death is congestive heart failure.) In the film’s final scene, a funeral procession delivers his ashes to the Teutschenthal cemetery, after which, Schultze’s bandmates, striking up his trademark Zydeco tune, festively lead the funeral party back to town.

In its attention to the details of everyday life, *Schultze* invites consideration in terms of the Heimat films of 1950s German cinema, in which domestic routine and local dialect are prominently on display, and the homespun values of rural life find affirmation. Unlike those films, *Schultze*’s embrace of homespun values is multicultural, not provincial, extending to a foreign place and people. In this regard, it is noteworthy that members of his adopted African-American family are conspicuously in attendance at his funeral. As they are integrated into Schultze’s community as participants in its rituals of mourning, so the music associated with them—or, better, through them to one of its sources, the Blues—is incorporated into the repertoire of that community’s musical life. At the same time, Schorr’s somewhat depreciating take on provincial life in eastern Germany lacks the censorious
edge of “the critical Heimatfilm of the early seventies, which presented country life as a false idyll, a breeding ground for private and collective neuroses.”

In terms of traditional cinematic genres, Schultze’s skillful blending of funny and forlorn moments also resists easy definition. The many understated comic moments of the film do not add up to the sort of accessible comedy upon which the unexpected international box office success of German cinema was based in the decade after the fall of the Wall. If Schultze invites consideration alongside those German films featuring “male protagonists [who] confront their diminished social or economic status … through the affirmation … of their class-based otherness in the context of job activities, hobbies, sports and other recreational activities,” the downward arc of its plot and its moments of quiet melancholy resist categorization in terms of these “petty-bourgeois comedies of the 1990s,” whose higher profile cousins, romantic comedies such as Abgeschminkt! (1993) and Keiner liebt mich (1994), garnered the lion’s share of international attention.

If anything, Schorr’s multifaceted involvement as writer and director of Schultze and his use of a small film crew seem a throwback to the Autorenfilm associated with the New German Cinema of the 1970s. In a recent consideration of the Autorenfilm tradition, Ian Garwood has listed, besides the employment of an “artisanal’ aesthetic,” “involvement of the filmic with ‘higher,’ or more established, art forms,” and “engagement with nationally specific themes” as major characteristics. While Schultze’s incorporation of Zydeco music as both plot element and musical accompaniment arguably fits the second criterion, the film’s engagement with nationally specific themes is less immediately obvious. In the program notes, the director has suggested that the performance of Horst Krause, who plays the title role, “pays homage to life and actually celebrates it.”

Probably a significant part of the film’s appeal to critics and popular audiences is the understated way in which it affirms life by depicting how a chance encounter with music impels an ordinary guy on a quest for fulfillment. That this fulfillment is preceded by a personal crisis and culminates in the main character’s death lends a degree of dramatic gravity to the story and indirectly gestures to its possible political significance as a vehicle for enacting individual and collective quests for integration into community.
Community or, to put it more precisely, the rich associational life of Teutschenthal, seems to be a background theme of no small importance in the film. From one of the earliest scenes, when the mineworkers express their workplace solidarity in song at Schultze’s retirement ceremony, images of fellowship and collaborative effort predominate. Among the gatherings or meetings depicted in an unobtrusive documentary-like style are those of the organizing committee for the band’s fiftieth anniversary celebration, the local chess club, the town band, a local chorus, celebrants at the anniversary celebration, and Schultze’s friends and band colleagues at a surprise party thrown for him before his trip to the U.S. The impression one gets (and the director’s decision to enlist the local inhabitants and their institutions—for example the band and the chorus—in the making of the film reinforces this impression) is of a community richly and densely populated with voluntary associations whose members are woven together, so to speak, by ties of friendship and joint participation in longstanding practices of common interest.

This backdrop of associational fellowship and collective involvement sets the stage for Schultze’s quest for meaning since it is prompted by problems he has integrating himself in a viable community. Expelled from his community of work at the start of the film, he falls back on his friends, who, having also lost jobs at the mine, fall to bickering with each other. It is while he is cut off from his work colleagues and friendship circle that Schultze chances upon the Zydeco tune. Ironically, his passion for the music isolates him all the more as demonstrated by the indifference of the audience of seniors and the outright hostility ("Scheissnegermusik!") of at least one listener at the town band’s fiftieth anniversary celebration. The crucial, if unremarked upon, backdrop of Schultze’s failure to integrate himself into a viable community is the unification of Germany and the dissolution of the East German nation of which he formerly had been part. One German reviewer characterized Schultze as the “first German film, that isn’t conceivable without reunification, the consequences of which it describes indirectly.” Considered against the backdrop of a new and (for some former East Germans) problematic German national identity, Schultze’s decision to leave his native country and pursue his quest in the United States seems especially noteworthy. His life finds its fulfillment and meets its unexpected
end outside of Germany. Just as noteworthy is the fact that his interment on native ground at the film’s end becomes an occasion both for the integration of outsiders into the ritual life of his community and his community’s integration of an outsider form of music into its cultural repertoire.

In and of itself, the two-way transfer of a German character’s quest for fulfillment to American shores and an American cultural legacy to German shores is not unusual in the history of German film. Eric Rentschler—in for example “How American Is It: The U.S. As Image and Imaginary in German Film” (1984)—and, more recently, Gerd Gemünden—Framed Visions: Popular Culture, Americanization, and the Contemporary German and Austrian Imagination (1998)—have noted how intense and highly ambivalent attitudes toward U.S. military, political, and cultural influence in Germany have left their mark on German cinematic treatments of America in such films as Luis Trenker’s The Prodigal Son (1934), Werner Herzog’s Stroszek (1977), Wim Wenders’ Alice in the Cities (1973), and Monika Treut’s My Father Is Coming (1991). The United States, Rentschler writes in specific reference to the first three of these films, has played “the role of an imaginary (in the Lacanian sense), a set of possibilities one contemplates and toys with … as a hall of mirrors one passes through while self-reflecting.”

In the decade after the fall of the Wall, as German filmmakers embraced a more genre-oriented and popular cinema and came to rely more on private sources of funding, America’s role as cinematic touchstone arguably shifted. Where it had earlier often functioned for West German cinema as a convenient plot destination for “confused, inexperienced, and incomplete” German characters seeking to “gain wisdom and insight,” it increasingly came to stand as a viable production model (i.e., Hollywood) for how Germans might successfully make and market their films in a privatizing global media economy. Also, in terms of plot preferences, the Hollywood model seemed more in evidence in the 1990s as entertainment values and a disposition to follow genre conventions took precedence over political messages and avant garde artistic gestures. As observed by Sabine Hake, the high profile German films of the 1990s “fostered a new Erlebniskultur (culture of diversion),” in which the values of “commercialism,” “individual ambition, and self-interest” found powerful
expression and validation. These films “sought to accommodate the audience’s contradictory desire both for less complicated narratives of Germanness—including in terms of national identity—and for more optimistic visions of a multiethnic, multicultural society.”

Paying close attention to significant elements of Schultze’s avowal of the relevance of an American folk music style to an ex-miner living in the economic backwaters of eastern Germany, I suggest here how the film, picking up an earlier cinematic trope of West German encounter with America and incorporating postunification cinema’s embrace of multicultural themes, offers a vision of German identity that navigates between the extremes of a global ideology of consumer individualism associated with the United States and, to a somewhat lesser degree, West Germany, on the one hand, and an inward-turned particularism associated with the economically depressed former East, on the other. Of particular help in delineating this vision will be the concept of surrogation proposed by Joseph Roach in Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (1996), as well as Cornel West’s theorization of an African-American tendency toward tragic expression.

II.

In its very title, Schultze Gets the Blues announces its ambition to cross national-cultural boundaries. Blues music enjoyed a privileged place in German officials’ early postwar evaluations of American music, according to Uta Poiger’s study of East and West German Cold War perceptions of African-American music styles and their political significance. In the early 1950s, official concerns about the reputedly pernicious influence of contemporary American music and dance on the sexual mores and social attitudes of German youth led to condemnations of “African American-influenced musical and dance styles, like boogie-woogie and rock ‘n’ roll, that East and West German adolescents copied from American films.” As anxious as East and West German officials were about the influence of African-American forms of musical expression upon the behavior of German youth, they did not take a position of blanket rejection, attempting instead to distinguish between music that was acceptable and that
which was not. In the resulting assessments recounted by Poiger, blues invariably won praise for being “authentic.” So, for example, in 1949, “at the height of Soviet attacks on jazz,” no less an authority than Paul Robeson had argued, in a Soviet music journal, “that spirituals and blues were the only true Negro music in the United States.”

Expanding upon Robeson’s argument in a 1952 article published in the German Democratic Republic, an East German musicologist “contrasted what he called ‘authentic’ jazz, like blues and Dixieland, with those musical forms, like swing, sweet, and rebop, that the American music industry allegedly produced as part of an American imperialist strategy.” It was no small irony, according to Poiger, that many of the early attacks on “degenerate” forms of jazz carried over rhetorical tropes from the Nazi era, including implicitly anti-Semitic charges against the “cosmopolitan’ culture industry and ‘cosmopolitan’ hits.” In the contemporary context in which *Schultze* is set, the terminological flashpoint for disagreements over the desirability of outsider presence and influence would more likely be “Multikulti” rather than “Kosmopolit.” The differences between multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism as objects of scholarly discourse—for example, the former tending to occasion reflection on the nature of relations between individual citizens or groups of citizens of different races or ethnicities within the nation-state, the latter tending to invite consideration of the nation-state in relation to the global order—are not immediately relevant to my discussion in this article.

Poiger notes a liberalizing trend toward the end of the 1950s in West German officialdom’s attitude toward jazz, which turned on its head prior assumptions about jazz’s influence on the young. In line with the rhetoric of political pluralism and consumer choice that an emerging generation of Cold War liberals increasingly favored, jazz came to be considered a means for sublimating and depoliticizing the rebellious impulses of the young. Tolerance for jazz in all its forms also became a way for the liberal democratic West to promote its ideological commitment to cultural freedom. In line with this newfound view of jazz as a “messenger for liberal democracy,” an influential West German jazz expert and radio host praised the music, in a 1958 article, for its proven record at overcoming “differences in status and education … race, religious denomination, political conviction, and even [nationality].”
The story Poiger relates about the evolution of official East and West German attitudes toward jazz as a catchall category of African-American music provides one historical backdrop against which to assess the political meaning of Schultze’s ultimately successful importation of Zydeco into the musical life of his hometown. One could see his townspeople’s performance of Zydeco as marking their belated post Cold War acceptance of the pluralist-consumerist version of American-style liberalism with which their new compatriots in the former West Germany had already become aligned starting in the late 1950s. From this perspective, the political meaning of the film’s use of blues music would mainly derive from its serving as an oblique commentary on (and symptom of) Germany’s adjustment to an emerging post Soviet world order of neoliberal pluralism and consumerism in which the programmatic embrace of difference or otherness is mainly meant to serve the corporate drive for global sales (i.e., “the United Colors of Benetton”). The theme of multicultural acceptance of an outsider music and people to which the film devotes its final scenes would, taking this view, appear more as a contrivance or instrumentality, an “ersatz multiculturalism,” to use a term that Amy Robinson, writing in the early post Cold War years, uses to denigrate the “virtual industry of black authenticity ranging from Madonna to *White Men Can’t Jump* to Vanilla Ice to Bill Clinton.”

For Robinson, proponents of ersatz multiculturalism affirm the perspectives and forms of cultural expression of outsider or marginalized groups while ignoring the structural disadvantages under which members of these groups continue to struggle. “Such appropriations [of the cultural cachet of outsider groups] have earned these authors the liberal profit of … defin[ing] America as a place where (to quote Madonna) ‘it makes no difference if you’re black or white.’” Sabine Hake also alludes to this problematic phenomenon in her account of a “narcissistic” trend in German filmmaking of the 1990s, according to which “retrograde fantasies of family and community” were “combin[ed] with (superficially) liberal attitudes towards alternative sexualities and hybrid identities.” Robinson’s discussion suggests that one of the criteria for distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate forms of multicultural engagement is whether some acknowledgement of continuing structural inequities accompanies the “call for communities of common interest.” Another, related criterion would
be the degree to which the nod to multicultural values is exclusively or mostly motivated by self aggrandizement rather than by concern for a larger or common good.

In support of a view that discounts Schultze’s gestures of multicultural tolerance, one might cite the curious way in which the film neglects the Blues as a plot element at the same time that it hypes the Blues in its title and in its program notes:

With a title like *Schultze Gets the Blues* and with a storyline about a laid-off mineworker, audiences might think they’re in for a melancholy movie. Yet the fact is that this extraordinary little film packs a big inspirational punch. For Schultze doesn’t ever really get blue; he actually gets—or understands—‘The Blues’ and all the power and passion of music.

It is, after all, Zydeco music, not blues music, that captures Schultze’s imagination and propels him on his life-changing odyssey.

Associated with the Cajun people of Louisiana, whose New World French forbearers, the Acadians, had been brutally expelled from Canada by the British, Zydeco supposedly got its name from a French expression, *Les haricots sont pas sales*, which folklorist Barry Jean Ancelet has interpreted as referring to those difficult times when the salted meat one normally used to season bean dishes was not available. Musically, Zydeco was formed when Creole music from south-central and southwest Louisiana was crossed with rhythm and blues in the years after World War II. If this genealogy puts Zydeco in an ancestral line traceable back to the Blues, their kinship remains somewhat remote, a fact acknowledged by Schorr. In his commentary on the film made available on the DVD release, he explained his need for an American music “basically connected to the kind of polka accordion music Schultze plays” and his discovery that Zydeco, like polka, has “the accordion as the lead instrument.” In a sketchy account of the sources of Zydeco, Schorr mentions, besides blues music, musette, two step, and polka, which link Zydeco to Old World (e.g., French and German immigrant musical traditions) as well as New World origins: “the accordion is an instrument that represents the great German migration to America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many people took their accordions overseas with them … and it then became established in the American states, the classic example being Louisiana.” Schorr goes on in his commentary to trace his
Robert Pirro

first encounters with Zydeco to a trip he took to Louisiana where he attended impromptu dance gatherings whose vitality and family ambience left a lasting impression upon him.26

In spite of his decision to make Zydeco the musical impetus for key plot developments, Schorr chooses not to make Cajuns the cultural interlocutors of his film. That role is reserved for African-Americans who occupy strategic places in the film narrative. Notable, in this regard, is the fact that the Zydeco band playing Schultze’s tune in one of the film’s concluding Louisiana scenes, is composed of African-American players. While the music that accompanies the first American location shot is a Cajun song (one of the first to be mechanically recorded, according to Schorr), the first scene in which Schultze encounters an American is one in which he unexpectedly meets an African-American woman in a parking lot hot tub at the Edelweiss Inn in New Braunfels. When he hesitates to join her, she successfully persuades him to share the hotel’s amenity. In the Louisiana houseboat encounter, Schultze arrives unannounced as the African-American houseboat resident is cooking dinner. Asking for a glass of water, he is invited by her to stay and eat. After the visit to the dance club and while Schultze sleeps on the houseboat deck, she tucks a blanket around him. These arguably maternal gestures on the part of African-American women characters raise the possibility that notions of the nurturing and caregiving “mammy,”27 broadly circulating among privileged whites of the United States and implicitly supporting ideas of unconditional black service to white needs, may have, in some measure, been at play in Schultze’s making. Of course, the relevant scenes invite other, less politically-questionable, readings. The hot tub encounter, for example, can be read as an implicit repudiation of a system of racial segregation in the American South that, in the not-so-distant past, strictly prohibited racial mixing in public swimming pools.

It may be that the strategic presence of African-American women reflects an inadvertent appropriation of politically suspect notions of black service from American culture. It may also be that the film’s substitution of African-Americans as agents of cultural exchange and the avowal of African-American music in the film’s title despite the absence of blues music in the film’s plot merely reflect the long-standing authority in postwar German culture of the Blues as an
“authentic” American folk music. There is, however, another way to read the branding of *Schultze* as a film about the Blues and its seemingly suspect privileging of African-American characters. On this, more generous, reading, the film will be interpreted as reflecting a substantive agenda of transcultural engagement and multicultural affirmation, one of whose significant effects is the promotion of a postunification German identity that recognizes the distinctive social-cultural virtues of the inhabitants of each of the former German states, namely, East Germans’ appreciation of the advantages of community and West Germans’ willingness to engage with, and incorporate, outsider cultures.

III.

In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure … survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates.

Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*

A student of the encounters and exchanges of the “many peoples along the Atlantic rim … [including the] Bambara, Iroquois, Spanish, English, Aztec, Yoruba, and French,” Joseph Roach has developed the notion of surrogation in order to describe the hybridity and fluidity of cultural meanings and practices. Holding that a “fixed and unified culture exists only as a convenient but dangerous fiction,” Roach’s work opens a theoretical space for better understanding how marginalized or oppressed groups maintain a sense of corporate identity, exercise agency, and refashion social meaning through engaging in performance practices. New Orleans serves Roach as a particularly resonant case study of surrogation not only because of its rich traditions of popularly enacted performance traditions, including Mardi Gras float parades and jazz funerals, but also because of Louisiana creole culture’s role as “the most significant source of Africanization of the entire culture of the United States.”

Among the flamboyant and vibrant performance practices of New Orleans described by Roach are the Mardi Gras Indians, neighbor-
hood-based African-American Indian masqueraders in elaborately-crafted beadwork costume, who engage in unscripted running exercises of one-upmanship that are unsanctioned by city authorities. “[T]he extraordinary artistry and craftsmanship of the costumes, which may take a year to build, taken together with the many-layered protocols of Sunday rehearsals, parade-day tactics and strategy, and music-dance-drama performance, make the honor of ‘masking Indian’ a New Orleanian way of life.”31 While the sources of the practice are not altogether known—but are thought to include West African traditions of musical performance and traditional African mutual assistance societies—Roach takes up the suggestion of some scholars that the visit of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show to New Orleans in 1884-1885 was a key catalyst. Of particular note, in Roach’s view was “the spectacle of costumed and armed Plains warriors, some of them recent victors over Custer, striding proudly through the streets of New Orleans on the days before Christmas 1884.”32

The appearance of Plains Indians inside and outside the Wild West Show’s arena evoked a “theme of frontier space” that, according to Roach, “illuminates the importance of the border skirmishes and alarums enacted by Mardi Gras Indians.”33 In the setting of modern New Orleans, the performative evocation of frontier space by African-American neighborhood residents helped to preserve a sense of collective agency and fellowship: “On Mardi Gras Day, Indian gangs could claim the space through which they move, like a passing renegade band … They perform a rite of territory repossessed to assert not sole ownership, perhaps, but certainly collective entitlement to fair use.”34 The experience further worked to unsettle flattering self images of the dominant political and social authorities: “the truth that Mardi Gras Indians seem to alter by reenacting African-American memory through the surrogation of Native American identities is the infinitude of Anglo-American entitlement.”35 The practice of Mardi Gras Indians thus marks a dynamic by which one group’s history of struggle against oppression can become a resource for another group encountering their own set of challenges through the latter’s creative appropriation and reworking of past performance rites.

Roach concludes his book, *Cities of the Dead*, with a descriptive analysis of a jazz funeral held in 1992 for an acclaimed rhythm and blues musician, who was, as the saying goes, “buried with music.”36
this loosely choreographed event, the musicians, playing in cadenced rhythm, follow in procession after the hearse with family members walking in the lead. When the time comes for “cutting the body loose,” the family members embark in limos to accompany the hearse to a distant cemetery while the band breaks into an “uptempo number” and continues the parade along with other celebrants, “some of whom dance, others of whom add counterrhythmic accompaniment on improvised instruments.” This account of funereal ritual evokes the meaning of surrogation in a particularly powerful way. Death is, after all, one of the more concrete examples of the sort of “vacancy” or “cavity” in the social network that calls forth attempts at repair in the form of communal rituals which mourn loss at the same time that they affirm community.

In any funeral, the body of the deceased performs the limits of the community called into being by the need to mark its passing. United around a corpse that is no longer inside but not yet outside of its boundaries, the members of the community may reflect on its symbolic embodiment of loss and renewal.

To be sure, the notion of funereal ritual as an occasion for participants both to mourn loss and to feel a revitalized sense of community is not new. One need only read Pericles’ Funeral Oration as transmitted in Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War or Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” or recognize their continuing relevance as occasions of political theoretical reflection—for example, Garry Wills’ Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America (1992)—to appreciate the importance of ritual acknowledgment of the dead in shaping collective identity and self understanding.

Still, New Orleans jazz funerals stand out as remarkable examples of ritual mourning, not least because of the central role played in them by music and movement. Other distinctive aspects include the broad and active involvement of participants, and the ritual prominence of celebratory modes of expression. What makes the New Orleans tradition of jazz funerals an especially fitting touchstone of analysis in the particular case of Schultze is the fact that the film’s concluding enactment of the interment of Schultze’s ashes unfolds in the form of a jazz funeral. Thus, one sees the procession of mourners, including the African-American daughter, moving onto the cemetery grounds led by the local clergyman and the urn containing...
Schultze’s mortal remains. Band musicians are also present, playing a mournful tune heard in a previous scene when Schultze performed at Frau Lorant’s interment. After his ashes are laid to rest with due ceremony, lightened by a moment of comic relief, the procession leaves the cemetery grounds to the musical accompaniment of Schultze’s Zydeco tune. In the film’s final shot, we see a repeat of the first shot, a bare countryside with a wind turbine to one side. In the opening scene, Schultze had biked across the expanse. In the closing scene, the funeral band parades by, still playing Schultze’s Zydeco tune, accompanied by the other mourners-turned-celebrants.

Schultze’s mortal end thus becomes the occasion for the transformation and revitalization of public life through the integration of an outsider form of music and people into his provincial eastern German community. Attesting to the benevolent vitality of Schultze’s influence even in death is the comic moment initiated when a cell-phone ring-tone interrupts the graveside ceremony. In some embarrassment, Manfred digs his phone out of a coat pocket and puts it to his ear only to utter “Schultze!?” in mock surprise as though the caller at the other end were the departed himself. To the extent that the cell phone has become one of the icons of globalization, Schultze’s “call” evokes his community’s newfound capacity to manage the intrusive presence of global technologies and even integrate them into local practices. That it is Manfred’s cell phone is no accident. His identification with an American-style self-aggrandizing individualism is indicated in earlier scenes where he encourages his dirt bike-riding son to compete in a U.S.-sponsored motor cross competition with big prize money and attends a motor cross event holding a mini-American flag.

Even more telling in regard to Schultze’s role as a benevolent spirit mediating the local and the global, the particular and the multicultural, is the parallel we have drawn between a burial ceremony in a provincial town in former East Germany and the practices associated with New Orleans jazz funerals. This parallel provides an important context for understanding the deeper significance of the strategic presence of African-American characters and the use of the Blues as a brand name for the film. On our interpretation, what Schultze “gets” about the Blues is not merely or primarily a generic sense of the “power and passion of music.” More significantly, what
he gets about (or, more precisely, achieves in the name of) the Blues is transformative contact with a culture of tragic expression that holds out the promise of resisting two sorts of postunification temptation: the universal “end of history” state of consumerist individualism proffered by cheerleaders of globalization, on the one hand, and the resentment-driven particularism to which some former East Germans were initially drawn as they faced conditions of massive economic, social, and political dislocation.

IV.

The tragic view—of Unamuno or Melville or Faulkner or Morrison or Coltrane—is a much more morally mature view of what it is to be human. The triumphant view of good over evil, which is Manichaean, is sophomoric, childish. It has been dominant in America because our civilization has been spoiled.

Cornel West, “On Black-Brown Relations”

It has long been recognized that African-American styles of music, including the Blues, form part of a larger complex of salutary cultural responses to life under the emergency conditions of slavery and Jim Crow. The terrible conditions experienced by enslaved New World Africans and their exposure, even after formal emancipation, to pervasive discrimination and episodes of mob or state violence called forth various forms of cultural resistance and resilience, among which noted public intellectual Cornel West significantly counts a “black sense of the tragic.” As West recounts it, enslaved Africans and their descendants in British North America faced horrendous living conditions with few cultural resources to make sense of their suffering.

During the colonial stage of American culture, Africans were worse than slaves; they were also denuded proto-Americans in search of identity, systematically stripped of their African heritage and effectively and intentionally excluded from American culture and its roots in European modernity.

Suffering that cannot be made sense of fosters despair and hopelessness, states of mind and spirit that undermine solidarity and prevent effective agency. One way that African-Americans as a people managed to save themselves from a, excessively debilitating expo-
sure to despair and hopelessness was to “creatively appropriate a Christian world view and thereby transform a prevailing absurd situation into a persistent and present tragic one, a kind of ‘Good Friday’ state of existence in which one is seemingly forever on the cross ... yet sustained by a hope for a potential and possible triumphant state of affairs.” Folk music forms that developed from within the matrix of African-American Christianity (e.g., Gospel) or outside of it (e.g., blues) conveyed more widely and amplified further the tragic message of endurance and affirmation through which an oppressed people could, in the face of serious setbacks and harsh disappointments, maintain hope in the future advent of a more just state of affairs while remaining open in the present to the joys of existence. In acknowledgment of African-American music’s role as a key transmitter of the tragic sensibility, West designates the tenor saxophonist and jazz composer John Coltrane as a significant disseminator of a tragic sensibility, grouping him with more conventional literary and philosophical figures of tragic reflection and expression, including the novelists William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, as well as the author of *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Miguel de Unamuno.

As West’s analyses of the social and psychological challenges facing contemporary middle class African-Americans and African-American members of the underclass make clear, issues of political agency and solidarity drive his theoretical concern for describing the nature and significance of New World Africa’s tragic sensibility. Members of the black middle class, on his view, are prone to a state of political passivity because the term on which American society grants them economic success is a psychologically demoralizing and politically demobilizing repression of their sense of self. “They must not be too frank and outspoken and must never fail to flatter and be pleasant in order to lessen white unease and discomfort.” Assimilation, the quintessential middle-class goal, therefore poses special challenges to African-Americans. The achievement of middle-class status tends to make them “highly anxiety-ridden, insecure, willing to be co-opted and incorporated into the powers that be.” Collectively speaking, this orientation undermines the basis for political solidarity and the possibility of group action for the purpose of transforming American society. Individually speaking,
this suppression of black rage … backfires in the end. It reinforces a black obsession with the psychic scars, ontological wounds and existential bruises that tend to reduce the tragic to the pathetic. Instead of exercising agency or engaging in action against the odds, one may wallow in self pity, acknowledging the sheer absurdity of it all.45

West’s allusion to “tragic” and “pathetic” states is no mere rhetorical flourish—here, as elsewhere in his writings, loss of the tragic correlates with reduced possibilities of human agency.46 Problems of deficient or defective agency plague the African-American underclass as well, only in this case the costs are more dire. In a 1987 interview, West thus laments the varieties of self-destructive behaviors afflicting the inner city black underclass: drug addiction, alcoholism, homicide, and suicide.47

If it is, in general, the work of tragedy to acknowledge and channel the existential dread or anxiety people feel as they contemplate the fundamental fragility of mortal life, it is no wonder, given the prevailing social conditions in which they have historically found themselves, that African-Americans have evolved a rich culture of tragic expression. In that culture, West sees one important means by which African-American individualities have been fostered and maintained, husbanded for collective deployment during those rare moments in American history when political and social arrangements have been open to major change. If the conditions of social life facing the new eastern citizens of Germany after the fall of the wall were not nearly so drastic, they were challenging enough, especially for a population accustomed to the working of a comprehensive (if increasingly corrupt and inefficient) state system of welfare paternalism.

In a key early scene, Schultze and his friends collect their personal belongings from work and go on to attend, in uncomfortable silence, a peremptory ceremony of farewell organized by their workmates. Judging from their state of befuddlement at the tacky retirement gifts, these men did not choose to retire early—they had to accept early retirement from company managers presumably interested in cutting labor costs. The same calculus of economic rationalization had in the early years of unification resulted in the shedding of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the East. These conditions of social disorientation and newfound economic dependence on the financial largesse of West Germany were alienating to many former
citizens of the German Democratic Republic, some of whom likely felt pressure to assimilate on the sort of humiliating psychological terms that, according to West, have long held for middle class African Americans—expressing unconditional and cheerful acceptance of, and attachment to, all of the values and practices of mainstream (in the German context, West German) society. To illustrate, East German novelist and public intellectual Christa Wolf, who had initially hoped that the collapse of the German Democratic Republic might lead to the founding by her eastern co-nationals of a genuinely participatory social democracy, expressed her sense of the psychological toll entailed by West Germany’s assimilation of the East in a parallel way. If the terms of postunification adjustment were to be that “East Germans self-sacrificially devote themselves to trying to fit in, while West Germans act out feelings of superiority and victory,” the likelihood was that her fellow citizens would undergo a “process of estrangement” whereby “East Germany’s history is publicly suppressed … and is driven inside the people who made, experienced, and endured it.”48 For people living in areas of mass unemployment and feeling deep uncertainty about future prospects, the temptation would have been great to retreat to a stance of defensive parochialism and resentment-ridden nostalgia for the old order.

In Schultze, moments when the harsher legacies of unification are felt and expressed are few. Arguably, the dispute between the newly pensioned Manfred and Jürgen over a chess game, which results in the hotheaded Manfred sweeping the pieces off the board and angrily stalking off, is one. The argument is set off when Manfred tries to take back a bad move and Jürgen insists on abiding by the rules, declaring, “This isn’t the Wild West, after all!” The larger, more significant game the two men (and their fellow East German ex-nationals) are arguably engaged in playing is how to adapt to the “Wild West” conditions of the new post Cold War order, in which the expectation increasingly is that individuals will fudge the rules in pursuit of their narrow self interest. (One might think here of the breathtaking financial success of many Communist apparatchiks, who did very well for themselves in the post-Communist transition.) In any case, after Jürgen announces his disgust with the situation and also departs, Schultze is left sitting uncomfortably alone at the table, chess pieces scattered before him. Neither of the responses to postu-
nification pressures enacted by his friends in this scene—Manfred’s aping of neoliberal individualism, Jürgen’s stubborn insistence on sticking by the rules of preunification life—will ultimately determine his path.

Another, more significant reference to postunification social quandaries occurs in the film’s one scene of physical menace. The moment comes after Schultze performs his Zydeco tune at the town band’s fiftieth anniversary celebration. In the lead up to his solo accordion performance, Schultze is uncharacteristically anxious and self-doubting. As it turns out, he has reason to be. For when he finishes, audience members, seated at two long tables in front of the stage, remain mostly silent. His colleagues had been expecting a tried-and-true traditional polka from the stalwart Schultze—instead, they hear something unexpected and unfamiliar and seem stunned by it. As Schultze’s friends at one table begin to applaud supportively, a man from the other table cries out in a tone of aggressive contempt: “Scheissnegermusik!” In response, Manfred, at the other table, stands up as if to intimidate the naysayer into silence. Whereupon, he is, in turn, challenged by someone at the first table who rises menacingly and glowers at Manfred until he backs down. The tension is then broken when Lisa, the flamenco-dancing pub waitress, suggests a toast to “Negermusik,” which is heartily taken up by the rest of Schultze’s friends.

In his film commentary, Schorr makes nothing of this symbolic scene of communal rupture. (He is more interested in describing the complexity of the camera movement in the shot of Schultze’s performance, which stands out in a film whose scenes are mostly filmed with a single stationary camera.) From our perspective, which foregrounds issues surrounding the German reception of African-American music, this scene is a critical one for our understanding of the film’s larger political meaning. Simply put, the confrontation frames Schultze’s idiosyncratic change of musical taste within a larger public context of contention over multiculturalism. That public dispute pits those in Teutschenthal who are willing to welcome foreign influences on local cultural practices against those who are not. And, judging from the flare up of tempers, the disagreement is one that is deeply felt.

87
It is no small irony that even as they disagree in their responses to Schultze’s performance of Zydeco, the two “factions” share a misapprehension about its character—namely that it is an African-American music. Strictly speaking, its ties to blues music are distant and derivative. Yet, if we take the inclusion of African-Americans in key places in the film as reflecting an insistence on their role as U.S.-German cultural interlocutors, this misapprehension can point toward an interpretation of what plausibly is the film’s larger political theoretical meaning. The promise of the film’s title invites us to consider the significance of African-American tragic culture to postunification German social and political challenges.

Considered from the perspective of Roach’s work, the history of African-American life and struggle reveals a powerful national dynamic of surrogation. Notwithstanding systematic attempts to segregate or close off (“white”) American culture from New World African participation and influence, American culture has been subject to the effects of hybridization as substantial cavities or vacancies in American social relations worked by slavery and Jim Crow invited efforts at compensation. Following West, we would see as one of the more significant results of New World African compensatory efforts to be forms of tragic expression—e.g., the Blues—that had the capacity to challenge major aspects of mainstream American culture, including its dogmatic market-driven individualism.

To the radically individualistic self-perception of mainstream Americans, the African-American tragic sensibility has urged a greater recognition of the limits of individual agency, a finer appreciation for the vulnerability felt by members of marginalized and oppressed groups, and increased sensitivity to the merits of alternative ways of envisioning social life. In short, the African-American tragic sensibility has brought the example of a socially minded, subaltern, self-critical perspective to bear on a dangerously narrow and smug form of individualism. The influence of this example has arguably become all the more urgent in a post Cold War ideological environment in which the institutions of global capitalism have been assiduously promoting a consumerist ethos of American-style individualism as the only worthy or viable goal of societal development.

On a cursory viewing, Schultze’s engagement with outsider music and cultures might appear simply to be a manifestation of “ersatz
multiculturalism,” of Schorr’s knowing or unknowing attempt to cash in on the cachet of the Blues or Zydeco or New Orleans as a travel destination by uncritically and self-interestedly offering appropriations of outsider culture for consumption by German and international movie audiences. A closer look at the film reveals something different and more valuable. In so conspicuously gesturing to the Blues background of Zydeco and choosing African-American characters rather than Cajun as cultural interlocutors, it achieves critical distance on its multicultural sympathies.

_Schultze_ adopts a multicultural message that is specifically responsive to the challenges of provincial life in the economic backwaters of unified Germany. Its response is grounded in real parallels between challenges facing members of postunification eastern German society and middle class African Americans. For members of both groups, assimilation into the mainstream comes at the cost of forgetting or repressing a painful history and foregoing the benefits of solidarity with one’s in-group. The point of the Blues references and the surrogation of African-American identities in this film is not merely to avoid the danger of permitting a _Heimat_-like parochialism to morph, under the disorienting and stressful social conditions of postunification eastern Germany, into a resentment-driven particularism that is reflexively hostile to outsider people and cultures. The point is also to acknowledge the virtues of noninstrumental social ties and devotion to the collective good in a world where the champions of neoliberalism have instrumentalized the rhetoric of multiculturalism in the service of a global ideology of consumer individualism.

In his unexpected encounter and life-changing engagement with Zydeco music, Schultze finds personal compensation for the vacancy opened in his own life by an unwelcome retirement. In presenting Schultze as the subject of a quest for fulfillment that results in his becoming the subject of a communal form of compensation (Teutschenthal’s first jazz funeral), _Schultze_ gestures to the presence of a larger, regional vacancy in post-reunification Germany, a vacancy opened by the German Democratic Republic’s longstanding abuse of the ideals of democratic egalitarianism and social solidarity and held open by western pressure to dismiss the East German political and social experience _in toto_ (including the stated ideals according to which it was officially measured) in favor of a narrow definition of

89

An Interpretation of _Schultze Gets the Blues_
freedom as consumer individualism. *Schultze* also gestures to an African-American culture of tragic expression that remains available for surrogation by Germans interested in maintaining a vision of democracy and freedom that acknowledges the legitimate claims of solidarity as well as individuality, of localism as well as globalization.

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**Notes**

1. The first version of this argument was presented at a June 22, 2004 meeting of a research colloquium at the John F. Kennedy-Institut, Free University Berlin. Thanks to Dr. Thomas Greven for making this presentation possible. Many thanks as well to the anonymous readers and managing editor of this journal for their helpful comments.

9. Ibid.


11. Hake (see note 4), 182, 180.

12. Uta Poiger, Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany (Berkeley, 2000).

13. Ibid., 85.

14. Ibid., 158.

15. Ibid., 153.


18. Poiger (see note 12), 163, 165.


20. Ibid.

21. Hake (see note 4), 182.

22. Robinson (see note 19), 735.


26. Director commentary, Schultze Gets the Blues DVD (Paramount Pictures, 2005).

27. Recent additions to the voluminous literature on cinematic images of “mammy” and their political significance include Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks (New York, 2001) and Patricia Turner Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture (New York, 1994).


29. Ibid., 5.

30. Ibid., 22.

31. Ibid., 194.

32. Ibid., 203.

33. Ibid., 205.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 207.

36. Ibid., 277.

37. Ibid., 278-9.

38. Ibid., 14.

42. Cornel West, “Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King, Jr.” in Ibid., 427.
43. Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization” in Ibid., 105. The specific context of this observation is a discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois’s analysis of the challenges facing educated blacks in the era of Jim Crow, whose main points, West believes, continue to hold at the end of the twentieth century.
44. Cornel West, “The Political Intellectual” in Ibid., 284.
45. Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization” in Ibid., 105
46. For a comprehensive analysis of West’s writings on the tragic, see Robert Pirro, “Remedying Defective or Deficient Political Agency: Cornel West’s Uses of the Tragic,” *New Political Science* 26, no. 2 (2004), 147-170.
47. West (see note 44), 284.