

Philipp Scherzer

Is German Film moving towards a `New Patriotism`?

*An Analysis of Sönke Wortmann's The Miracle of Bern
based on the Prototype of the American Sports Film
of the 1980s*



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Introduction

The 4th of July 1954 marks a crucial event in German history. With a 3:2 victory over a Hungarian team that had not been beaten for four whole years West Germany had won the F.I.F.A. World Cup for the first time. Helmut Rahn's winning goal instantly revived the spirit of an entire country that not even a decade before had experienced huge devastation in the Second World War. A general sentiment that 'we are somebody again'¹ began to overlie the whole population and furthermore helped rebuild a confidence that had been tainted by the twelve years under the Nazi regime. Since the final took place at Wankdorf Stadium in the capital of Switzerland, this triumph went on to be remembered in people's minds as the 'Miracle of Bern'. Only one year later the West German *Wirtschaftswunder* (engl: 'economic miracle')² began and even nowadays Germany's Ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder counts this success towards the most important post-war events in the country's history (Seitz, 2004).³

In 2003 then, German director Sönke Wortmann, in collaboration with the German Football Association (D.F.B.), was the first to attempt a full reconstruction of this event in the extent of a feature film. His movie, conveniently called *The Miracle of Bern*, tells the story of eleven-year old Matthias ('Mattes') Lubanski (Louis Klamroth) and his by the war emotionally devastated father Richard (Peter Lohmeyer), who are brought together by West Germany's unexpected World Cup victory.

While there had been a certain fear that Wortmann might destroy what had already become a myth in the minds of many Germans, he himself believed that the film was necessary in order to keep the legend alive for a younger generation, who had no direct connection to or never even heard of this renowned event (Wortmann, 2006, pp.18/19).⁴ In the end, Wortmann's film became a huge success in Germany drawing more than three million people to the box office and thus making it one of the most successful films of the year over the whole of Europe.⁵ One has to say, however, that some critical voices emerged as well. In his review, Helmke (2003), for example, claims *The Miracle of Bern* to be the 'most American German film of all time'. He also states that in contrast to other German films about football such as *Fußball ist unser Leben* (Wigand, Germany, 2000) and *Nordkurve* (Winkelmann, Germany, 1993), which primarily intend to depict the milieu and life of the teams' supporters, Wortmann's predominant concern is to enhance the sporting triumph of the West German national team into a myth. According to Helmke, this has never been attempted before in German cinema, but of which there are plenty examples in the United States.⁶ As Briley (2005b, p.18) explains:

While objective class, racial, and gender (...) divisions were growing in America during the 1980s, [nostalgic sports films] emphasized a longing for a mythical past – usually in the 1950s – in which Americans were united in a consensus based upon sustained economic growth and whose security was threatened by the evil Soviet Union.

Still, whilst Helmke remains rather vague with regard to his comparison of *The Miracle of Bern* to what might be called the 'classic' American sports film, I would like to provide a closer analysis of the subject matter.⁷ The aim of