

**»The Big Lift«: Image and Identity in Blockaded Berlin  
by Ralph Stern**

**Introduction:**

In less than fifteen years, Berlin traversed the path from Weimar Germany's great metropolis through the National Socialist dream of *Germania* to that of a post-war *Trümmerlandschaft* marked by destruction and occupation as well as cultural and economic isolation. Lying well within the Soviet zone of occupation, Berlin was further isolated by the policies of the western Allies, who insisted on decentralization as one of the five post-war »d's« to which Germany was subjected.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, this isolation increased in direct proportion to Berlin's rising geopolitical significance as a cold war flashpoint with politicians and military strategists on both sides of the »iron curtain« believing that Berlin's future would determine not only the future of Germany, but of all of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Intent on driving the western Allies from Berlin, the Soviets had since 1945 repeatedly placed restrictions on the manner and amount of supplies allowed into the western sectors. The total blockade of 1948-49 by the Soviets brought this situation to a point of crisis; decisively splitting »west« from »east« and inaugurating Berlin's forty-year history as a divided city.<sup>3</sup>

*The Big Lift* (1950) is George Seaton's semi-documentary film about the Berlin Airlift (*Operation Vittles*) undertaken by the western Allies for the relief of the blockaded city. Written and directed by Seaton in Berlin, the *The Big Lift* was intended for American audiences and provides a uniquely American perspective on this brief period in Berlin's often tumultuous urban history. At times superficially propagandist, the film gains depth as it negotiates a complex terrain of urban imagery and political representation. True to its semi-documentary character, it has a supporting cast of military servicemen rather than professional actors. But by emphasizing the perspective of those in the lower ranks, the film avoids heroism and is at times critical of military bureaucracy. By combining documentary accounts of the organizational and technical issues of the airlift with a fictional narrative illustrative of America's changing attitudes towards the German population, *The Big Lift* shifts the »German« from the arena of a powerful fascist adversary to that of a weak Cold War ally in urgent need of assistance.

In terms of genres, *The Big Lift* is closely related to the German post-war *Trümmerfilme* (ruin-films) depicting vast urban destruction often coupled with accounts of

National Socialist culpability. In a broad sense, its focus on the everyday and depictions of the urban milieu also links it with the tradition of the German »city-film« associated with the *neue Sachlichkeit* of the Weimar period. And, in terms of its depiction of the sufferings caused by war, it incorporates elements of neo-realism; the Italian contribution to post-war cinema that at mid-century was at the height of its influence. Although *The Big Lift* does not rank with post-war »city« films such as Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* or *Germania anno zero*, it is equal to many of the German *Trümmerfilme* as well as to the early post-war forays into German cities by such respected directors as Billy Wilder, Anatole Litvak, Carol Reed and Fred Zinnemann.

Considered on its own merits, *The Big Lift* is a valuable document of Berlin's rapidly shifting identities during this critical phase of the city's history and it gives us varying perspectives on the city's infrastructure, the everyday, monuments and tourism as well as economic hardship. Seaton's rôle as both scriptwriter and director give the film an intentional coherence that, together with Seaton's familiarity with Berlin, allow for a close reading of the film in regard to issues of urban representation and identity construction.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the abstract tools of planners and architects, cinema is closely related to popular culture and the »lived social realities« of urban culture.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, underlying the discussion of this specific film is the more general question concerning the effectiveness of cinema in constructing urban identities and, as a circulating medium, transporting them across international boundaries. As such, the paper is concerned with bridging the still unnecessarily great divide between urban and film studies.

For clarity of presentation and argument, the paper is divided into five sections with varying perspectives on *The Big Lift*; the first three examining the film in terms of its internal organization and the last two placing it in a larger context of urban representation. The opening section »narrative construction and spatial organization« is followed by »the politics of vision and blindness«, which examines a recent argument concerning the film and Cold War identity construction together with the self-reflexive attitude of the film towards image construction. The short section »Berlin snapshots« examines the rôle of the single »photograph« within the film, including postcard views of Berlin. »Cinematic visions and *Movietone News*« places the film in the context of mid-century accommodation of and reaction to propaganda films including the use of urban locations to underscore a »realist« or documentary truth in post-war cinema. Finally, »tourists versus "islanders"« addresses the gaze of the tourist and the dystopian / utopian associations with the »island« of blockaded Berlin.