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Goodbye Lenin!, Wolfgang Becker (2003)

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the subject of mass-produced housing than through Keaton, then the same could be said for vaudeville (*The Playhouse*, 1921), the electrification of the domestic interior (*The Electric House*, 1922), the luxury yacht (*The Navigator*, 1924), civil war-era trains (*The General*, 1927), and even the physicality of film itself (*Sherlock Jr.*, 1924). It's no wonder that he was among the Surrealists' favorite moviemakers. Operating in a quintessentially modern medium, the unassuming Keaton gave us the most concise statements of the absurdity that modernity itself brings about. Walter Benjamin said it best: these films are works of art for an age of mechanical reproduction.

***Goodbye Lenin!*, Wolfgang Becker (2003)**

Reviewed by Jeremy Aynsley

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The paradoxes, sensitivities and difficulties of the lives of ordinary people in a newly reunified Germany were captured in the film *Goodbye Lenin!* The film follows a small East Berlin family from 1989, which saw both the celebration of forty years of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the fall of the Berlin Wall, to the subsequent reunification in October 2000. With the critical distance of at least ten years since that momentous political change, *Goodbye Lenin!* still broaches subjects both poignant and controversial. While the film provoked debate among German historians on its political position, for anyone interested in the place of the home as a site of individual and collective identity it remains particularly fascinating. However, even more crucial, *Goodbye Lenin!* explored consumption practices, often with much wry commentary on the nature of objects of design, as a way to define the cultural and political differences between the two Germanys.

When Christiane Kerner witnesses her son Alex's arrest at a protest march to open the Wall, she suffers a heart attack and falls into a coma during this crucial period of political transformation. Upon her gradual awakening, Christiane faces a new challenge; her past, both as a staunch Socialist Unity Party (SED) supporter and enthusiastic adult leader in the Young Pioneers is upended. Prior to her coma, Christiane's life had been defined by her moral attitude toward consumer and household goods. She had written "constructive criticism" on behalf of fellow citizens in letters addressed to the Party about shortcomings in the standards of GDR goods, as gleaned through conversations with her neighbors. Her comments referred to the State's inability to serve the population with adequate products for the home or suitable designs for clothes that could compare

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with the fashionable ideals of the West, while also conforming to the production targets and the economic goals of a socialist State. The interior of the apartment, with its monotony of traditionally modest furniture, highly patterned wallpapers and hard-won television and radio set, acts as a metaphor for the entire GDR, in which loyal citizenship became associated with stoic resourcefulness in the face of relative material shortage: what political commentator Timothy Garton Ash has coined “the uses of adversity” (Garton Ash 1989).

Come *die Wende* (the political change), used-car lots, Western banks and street markets selling second-hand goods proliferate beyond the Kerner’s apartment, as advertisements and graffiti signal an encroachment of Western values. To prevent his mother from experiencing another heart attack, however, Alex attempts to convince her that Communism has not been overthrown by replicating the patterns of East German consumption and its practices. He reconstructs the apartment’s interior to its pre-1989 state. As the mother recuperates in her bedroom, the pictures of political heroes hung alongside reproductions of pastoral landscapes proffer a semblance of continuity. Through the window, however, a vast *Trink Coca-Cola* banner replaces the earlier red SED banners, and Alex must divert Christine from seeing a balloon drifting across the East Berlin skyline as it announces *West* cigarettes.¹

The safe yet claustrophobic atmosphere of a standard State apartment is contrasted with the dilapidated nineteenth-century apartment which Alex and his girlfriend Lara use as an impromptu squat. Here, the combination of run-down, stuccoed interior and makeshift, eclectic furniture forms the backdrop to their new, informal and liberated relationship. Comic contrast ensues when the family retreats to their summer *dacha*, its rural calm and sense of stasis providing a foil for the difficult human situation confronting them. But director Becker offers the strongest contrast of interiors and respective attitudes toward consumption when Alex traces his father, who has chosen to remain in West Berlin to start a new life following an official visit there. He now lives in an opulent villa with a private garden in Wannsee, its excess of open-plan rooms equipped with the latest electronic gadgets and modern furnishings leading on to a large private garden. Alex’s visit jolts the viewer into recognizing the West’s easy materialism as experienced through the eyes of an outsider; yet it also becomes clear that Alex will not succumb to this worldliness.

Goodbye Lenin!’s tragicomic plot captured varied reactions to the dilemma of the material world and the challenges of consumption posed by the Cold War and its aftermath. In many respects, the film summarized debates that had taken place since the fall of the Wall in a number of academic disciplines and cultural arenas, including museums. For instance, attention on the GDR’s recent past continued in the 1990s, in part, a legacy of the Marxist-Leninist tradition of materialism which encouraged planners and citizens

alike to attend to questions of lifestyle, communal relations and social interactions, treating seriously everyday life (see Childs 1988; Aynsley 2009).

Through various exhibitions, a gradual coming to terms with the past forty years of the regime took place. In Eisenhüttenstadt, for example, the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (Documentation Centre of Everyday Life of the GDR), a collection of over 70,000 everyday objects was drawn on to make exhibitions that combined social, political and aesthetic topics.²

One curatorial motivation was to correct the view that the history of East German design was simply one of cheap, poor-quality goods, that merely imitated those available in the West. As curators from one of Germany's most important institutions, the Deutsches Historisches Museum, wrote in 2007, "The GDR belongs in the Museum" (Deutsches Historisches Museum 2007). Immediately after the political change of 1989, a call was made for objects and reminiscences to be collected to prevent the history of the GDR from disappearing. These collections, ranging across all media of design and combining the possessions of leading political figures with those of ordinary citizens, have been interpreted in subsequent exhibitions on East German cultural and political life in the Museum's program. Another curatorial impulse was to counter the prevailing popular nostalgia for the GDR period, or "*Ostalgie*" as it became known, which risked masking by sentiment a more complete understanding of people's actual relations to the material world. This attitude was also a significant criticism charged at *Goodbye Lenin!* But, even more than these museum exhibits, the film reminds us that the GDR was more than an assemblage of products. Through its light-hearted reenactment, the film presented an archaeology of a political regime as manifested in the domestic interior and beyond, but also reminds us of a bygone world in which consumption was a morally inflected choice.

Notes

1. A further aspect of the film's impact came with the computer game "*79 sq meters of the GDR.*" The title referred to the size of a standardized apartment. The game involved visiting the Kerner's apartment with an animated 'Alex' to make choices about which room to enter and how to arrange it.
2. Exhibitions included "*Das Kollektiv bin ich*" – *Utopien und Alltag in der DDR* and *abc des Ostens. 26 Objektgeschichten*. See also the catalog, *KONSUM. Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*, Böhlau-Verlag, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna, 2006.

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Manifesto, Keren Kaplan (2000)

Available on YouTube:

<http://il.youtube.com/watch?v=kBoEDQzccT0>

Reviewed by Ido Bruno

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A young woman wakes up to the sound of a digital alarm clock. She is in the heart of an unremarkable city. It is her home. She turns on the radio, brushes her teeth, and applies some face cream (with a movement so precise it must have been done thousands of times before). She dresses, combs her hair, organizes her handbag; she puts on earrings, a bit of perfume, checks her handbag again, remembers some more makeup articles, a pocketbook; she goes out of the apartment, takes down the garbage on her way to work.

So far, a totally unremarkable movie.

The next six minutes are a thrilling one-shot documentation of a total makeup procedure, done in transit while driving through the unremarkable streets of that unremarkable city.

There is nothing dramatic about it, the cinematography is not very good, the soundtrack is the same radio station, only now it's playing Frank Sinatra's "I did it my way." Under other circumstances, the song might suggest a terrible misstep on the part of the filmmaker.

But the movie is perfect, and it was made by a designer. Like a good filmmaker, a designer needs to balance between being close, maybe even intimate with his or her subject, while retaining a clear-headed, focused outlook. Holding these two positions at the same time may be the most challenging of designers' roles. While this series of articles suggests films "that every design professional should see," this ten-minute short manages to do more than this. It isn't a film that every designer should see, but rather the film that every designer should make.

The year is 2000, and I have asked my students to prepare a 1.5–3-minute movie, a personal design Manifesto. It is part of an assignment that I call "TmmT" (This makes me Tick) and they are required to answer a series of mundane questions such as: