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Goodbye Lenin (2003): History in the Subjunctive

Roger Hillman

Wolfgang Becker's film Goodbye Lenin (2003) has been popular far beyond Germany. It provokes questions not found in standard debates about film and history. Feature films and documentary representations frequently 'adjust' history, governed by criteria of narrative economy and audience expectations that are quite different from those of historians. A counter-current within the discipline has pleaded for acknowledging the capacity of film to represent different aspects of history, and potentially to explore dimensions which are beyond written history. In Becker's film, an East Berlin mother suffers amnesia at the historical moment of the fall of the Wall, and during the transition process to German unification. Her son's response is to stage-manage a transfigured version of the past, thereby creating a time warp between her consciousness and the post-Wall 'reality' beyond her walls. The historical reflection that emerges relates to history as it might have been, but wasn't: history, in short, in the subjunctive mood. Set in an East German context, the issues raised by this film look very different from contemporary debates about Germany's right/ability to mourn her own dead, the meaning today of Dresden, etc. Approaching history in the subjunctive mood might well open out the discipline of history itself. The film's treatment emerges as not just defensible, but as signally apt for subject matter as surreal as the demise of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Keywords: Film; History; Counterfactuals; German Unification

Plot Summary

In Wolfgang Becker's film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003), a mother, an apparently confirmed communist named Christiane, suffers a heart attack and falls into a coma when her son Alex is attacked by police at a demonstration

(on 7 October 1989—the fortieth birthday of the GDR, the German Democratic Republic). She only awakes eight months later. Her fragile state would be further endangered by any form of excitement, so Alex installs her in her own bed at home and scripts an ongoing version of her former life, as if the Wall had not fallen. In fact, the various stages of unification are being enacted, and registered by the film, such as the currency conversion which eliminated the Ostmark as legal tender (in July 1990). Alex's strategy involves ruses such as collecting empty jars and labels of her former favorite gherkins,¹ no longer available in post-Wall food-chains, and bottling Western products as if they were in fact the old ones. This is one of many images that are more than just humorous—the feigned preservation of Eastern cucumbers parallels the 'pickling' of a whole State, such as Alex's elaborate anti-historical pageant enacts. His ever more fantastic inventions generate a life of their own, right up till the final observance of the State's birthday, in October 1990. He is abetted by his enterprising Wessi friend Denis, a wannabe filmmaker, who acts as newsreader over familiar images, interpreting them in bold new directions and hence undermining the 'authenticity' of the images. One final fake newsreel is made, showing Honecker being succeeded by Sigmund Jähn, the first German—and he was East German—launched into space, in August 1978. After a brief reunion with her husband, who had left for the West at the same time as Jähn's famed space trip, Christiane dies. Her ashes are also launched into the cosmos, witnessed by her extended family, in a Germany whose reunification has just been historically sealed.

Introduction

In the centerpiece Forum Essay in a recent issue of the *American Historical Review*, philosopher Martin Bunzl defended the value of 'counterfactual history', as a way of understanding the past (Bunzl 2004). Consciously falsifying the past, in order to stimulate debate and thereby better approach the past—the discipline of history seems to be flexible as never before. Bunzl's is not an isolated voice (Ferguson 1999; Rosenfeld 2005), nor one specific to his discipline. He draws on a range of historians, and his key example is the causes of the American Civil War. Without exception, he claims, historians have gone beyond the causes to speculate on how a different course of events might have affected the actual course of slavery. Niall Ferguson (1999, p. 81) defends counterfactuals as essential touchstones for determining more grounded hypotheses. Once historians have narrowed the potentially infinite number of possibilities to plausible cases, the value of such scenarios is heightened, he claims, 'when the

outcome is one which no one expected—which was not actually thought about until it happened' (1999, p. 87). The fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the former German Democratic Republic qualify for the last category, and hence provide fertile ground for a counterfactual approach.

Such a history of the GDR would seem to be a taller order than one of the American Civil War, certainly in written form. This is due not least to the indecent haste of the unification process itself, which ruled out any reflectiveness and longer historical perspective. But *Goodbye Lenin*—whose director comes from the former West Germany—essays a counterfactual slice of history, creating an alternative chronology for the GDR in the last year of its existence. In 'real time', most of that year was occupied with its assimilation into the Federal Republic. Rather than the tacit basis of comparison present in written counterfactual history, the film is able by montage to juxtapose counterfactual with 'real' history (as filtered through the film's fictional story, firmly located in the context of 1989–90 Berlin). And by presenting the counterfactual version with images as concrete as shots of the streets of Berlin, the film achieves a simultaneity of 'reality' levels that is denied the linearity of writing, independently of the memory processes that written and filmed history might convey.

The capacity of the medium of film to approach history has long been assailable, dictated by its selective editing, point of view technique, dramatization of events, etc. More recently, however, historians such as Robert Rosenstone (1995a, 1995b) have sought to show how film can distinctively approach history, without its performative aspects being a priori suspect. Performance relates both to film's enactment—its concretization of abstract concepts—and to its refusal to accept a finalized script for historical events. Film's strength in historical mythmaking need not make for weak history. Indeed, with an eye to *Goodbye Lenin*, the utopian elements of communist ideology ensure that the medium of film may well have much to reveal about the implied, but never realized outcomes of history (as an Enlightenment progression) from an East Bloc perspective.

The following case study explores challenges presented by the terrain of the subjunctive for both history and film. The transformation of the body politic of the GDR was barely less drastic and immediate than one of the central literary metaphors of the twentieth century in Franz Kafka's celebrated story *Metamorphosis*. If historians are constantly aware that approaches to the past radiate back to the present, then the fall of the Berlin Wall was a case of the present becoming the past almost without transition. It seems irrefutable that 'when we speculate about what might have

happened if certain events had or had not occurred in our past, we are really expressing our feelings about the present' (Rosenfeld 2005, p. 10). Less than a decade and a half after the events themselves, Becker's film indicates the ongoing tumultuous flux of unification, and the aim here is to relate the film's success to the aptness of its approach to this particular historical subject matter.

With the history of the GDR, where myth and reality were so intertwined, and where cultural memory survives and is transfigured by the difficulties of the unification process, Becker's film has ideal material. Its main timeframe is positioned in the no-man's land between pre-fall-of-the-Wall certainties and the sealing of unification. This proves a fertile breeding ground for speculation on how alternatives to the 'real', often surreal history, might have played out. The transition within an identity that was ideologically antagonistic to the very entity into which it came to be subsumed creates a flux that spawns the main character's elaborate project of historical charades. The film wisely operates with myths and fantasy as central narrative elements, playfully and self-reflexively intercuts newsreel clips with fabricated footage, and otherwise uses conventions of narrative fiction film rather than contrived documentary. It nonetheless yields melancholy humor and historical insights, and is one of relatively few German films even to treat the fall of the Wall. Becker's elements of comedy stand out strongly against the German film industry's comedy wave of the mid-1990s, geared to entertainment without the shadow of history.² Becker's history as it wasn't is more convincing than the body of films that succeeded and ignored the fall of the Wall, as if history had never been.

The swansong for the 'real existierender Sozialismus'³ of the GDR has become history in the subjunctive mood,⁴ socialism contrary to fact, and even socialism in surreal mode. This new version is one the State might have chosen for itself, in order to gain more credence for its core values. The construction devised by Alex and Denis would have a stronger propaganda value than what the German Democratic Republic had espoused, if only the Republic still existed. The mismatch between a belated rewrite of history, only possible in the time capsule of the mother's amnesia, and a historical interim between the dismantling of the old and the crystallization of the new, is what makes this historical conceit so arresting. Dual narratives move in synch, both the dominant level that corresponds to developments in Germany, 1990, and the historical throwback strand, the inbuilt time-lag of eight months in the consciousness of Alex's mother. The latter opens up forays into the past as it never was, flashbacks into a non-existent history. This rescripting attempts to recuperate the utopian elements of the State's original aspirations. That

this reckoning should take place on German soil adds a further twist to the film's issues, via the 'Historikerstreit' and other more global comparisons of totalitarian systems. Slavoj Žižek, for one, feels that 'till now, to put it straightforwardly, Stalinism hasn't been rejected in the same way as Nazism'.⁵

History in the Subjunctive Mood

The opening sequence of the film has a palpably home movie feel. It depicts the young Alex and his sister happily clowning around at what we later realize is the dacha. The weekend in the country is the sole example of the intact family. Shortly afterwards, the family's collective scheme to cross to the West is only partially realized, with Alex's father alone making the break. Once his 'flight' is established, the childhood past becomes unreclaimable, and transfigured childhood memories enter the domain of nostalgia. But, in relation to broader history, this film deviates from more standard cinematic approaches, in which 'nostalgia plays on the gap between representations of the past and actual past events, and the desire to overcome that gap' (Cook 2005, p. 4). Here, 'actual past events' are taken as a given, while 'representations of the past' do not even feign to be reenactments. Instead, they self-reflexively stage a version known to be false to all but the mother (and by the end, even she knows). Such slippage is possible because of the mother's amnesia and the narrative trajectory it creates, a vestige of the past (eight months ago) as a time warp in the present.

Here it is not the case that 'past and present are conflated' (Cook 2005, p. 11), as they are for instance in the historical phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, an impossible desire to retain the past in the present. Past and present are held separate for as long as possible in this film, while the intervening months' events are carnivalistically inverted through Denis's fanciful commentary to TV images (in one version, we 'witness' the discovery of Coca-Cola in the East in the 1950s). Pressing the 'pause' button in Christiane's historical consciousness of course cannot return to the original narrative once the freeze-frame has been reactivated. It is that disparity which those around her seek to redress by projecting themselves backwards, the alternative of projecting her forwards being deemed too risky for her health. This alone is arresting in relation to the known course of unification, where it was the latter alternative that prevailed (in the dismantling or takeover of Eastern industry, for instance), regardless of the inherent dangers. It is timely to be reminded that 'German unification put an end not only to the GDR, but also in a certain way to the old FRG' (Böhn 2005, p. 257). In that sense it is

possible to see the film not as *Ostalgie*, but as the director's (Western) projection of a version of the GDR that might have been worth preserving, one whose claims to contributing something to the new Germany could not have been ignored. In analysing *Goodbye Lenin*, film's capacity to render history—in particular counterfactual history—is one issue; the exceptional history of the last year of the GDR is another. But a third crucial aspect of the fascination of Becker's creation was the fact that 'the end of the cold war and the collapse of communism in the late 1980s prompted the belief among liberals that humankind had reached the end point of its ideological evolution and, indeed, had reached 'the end of history' itself' (Rosenfeld 2005, p. 6). In that climate, counterfactual history, and film's capacity to approach history from unusual angles, both gain added relevance.

If in retrospect the survival of the East Bloc till 1989 seems barely credible, the actual fall of the Wall defied all historical pundits and narratives (Wenders's *Wings of Desire*, from 1987, does now seem to prophesy events in its specifically filmic approach to history, with the porousness of the Wall—the angels simply walk through it—and its vanishing when viewed from aerial long shots). But the fantastic elements of this turning point of history, not just European history, are pre-empted in *Goodbye Lenin* by brief reference to the space expedition accompanied by Sigmund Jähn. Viewed from the film's vantage point of our century, this inverts the triumphalism of the West, while signaling a crucial symbolic victory on the battleground of the Cold War. For the East, at least, this event carried immense weight in the rivalry between the two Germanies. At the end of the film a Jähn look-alike, a cab driver, acts out the hero whom history could have celebrated as new leader in the wake of Honecker, at a stage when the whole film's historical prognosis is in the subjunctive mood. In no sense does the film's speculative aspect appeal to the so-called 'dritter Weg' (third path) of internal self-reform, such as the unfulfilled aspirations of the Neues Forum movement, nor is there a reactionary sense of *Ostalgie*, such as some critics have found in the film. History so fantastic that it defied comprehension has to be filtered for Christiane, a faithful subject of the former State. Reinforcing the element of fantasy, she is cast as a Sleeping Beauty, but one for whom the kiss of reality would be deadly, not redemptive.

The sense of Christiane's coma is of 40 years of one's existence being eradicated, rendered illegitimate, by the rewriting of history. Emergence cannot be liberating for Christiane, because it is as if she has now forcibly woken up to a reality overthrowing everything that preceded her collapse. Alex fosters this defense mechanism, ultimately shown to be a façade by Christiane's confession that she should have followed her husband. Alex's

mounting of history in the subjunctive is a salvage operation to trawl the effaced 40 years from oblivion. It is based on the false premise that his actions correspond to his mother's deepest desires, whereas in fact these have been strenuously suppressed for decades. The double bind at the level of fiction alone serves to defend the director from accusations of *Ostalgie*. That said, it was a fact that in the years immediately preceding this film's release, i.e. well after its time setting, the vast majority of citizens in the newly incorporated States, the 'neuen Bundesländer', considered themselves to be East Germans.⁶

In a documentary self-representation of the GDR early in *Goodbye Lenin*, media representations of fantasy and of history are located on a continuous spectrum. During the space probe, the cosmonaut watched by countless TV viewers celebrates the cosmic wedding of the Sandman, a politicized figure in the reality of the two Germanies,⁷ and Mascha, a Soviet doll. To seal socialist brotherhood in the realm of the stars, only children's projection figures are adequate. But both documented and representative human history are equally fantastic. As Alex and his sister watch the space probe on TV, their mother is interrogated by two Stasi types about her husband's third trip to the West in recent times. On one and the same day, the State applauds a chosen citizen making the ultimate trip away from the State (space travel), while persecuting the earthbound version of defying gravity ('Republikflucht', 'abandoning the republic'). Christiane's subsequent fate is anticipated when she falls silent for eight weeks, her shock only being fully explained when it emerges she has opted not to follow her husband with the children, as they had planned. Instead, the father is supposed to have abandoned his family for some Western fleshpot, whereas in fact his vain wait for news extended for three years, letters to his children never reaching them (Christiane's behavior here to protect her own position embodies the GDR practice of severing family communication links). Christiane survives by 'marrying the socialist fatherland', as Alex terms it, a neat blending of the sacred and the secular. But here the iconography of the nun proves to be dedication to a false savior.

One of the most interesting phenomena in the film is the way that Alex becomes the emotionally captive puppeteer, caught up in his own creation. He acknowledges that the GDR he creates becomes more and more the one he might have wished for, at the point in the film where his own attitudes approach those of a renegade Ossi. But that distinction is always drawn—he creates the GDR he might have wished for, not a transfigured version of the one his memory would prefer to embellish.

The fall of the Wall, and with it the Eastern Bloc, was an event that from a retrospective vantage point lent itself particularly well to a sense of history in

the subjunctive mood, and to film's potential for tackling history that challenges written documentation. The end of the Cold War saw a body blow to deterministic worldviews, creating more openendedness in historical speculation and its fictional representation. Approaching history in the subjunctive mood also avoids many of the pitfalls traditionally associated with more standard historical films. More than written history—but, let us not forget, on a continuous spectrum—historical films are limited to extreme selectivity of events, but also to the innate impossibility of re-creating the past via visual mimesis. History in the subjunctive mood, on film, can suspend these reality checks on surface accuracy, while activating what Alexander Kluge called 'the film in the viewer's head'. It does not stand or fall by whether the profilmic event is convincingly portrayed, since there is no historical profilmic event to be extracted from the film. That can of course simply be irresponsible, if purporting to show a version of history that accords with the known evidence,⁸ but it can be a creative catalyst to historical reflection, if the blend of fact and fiction is not insidious.

The Kevin Brownlow/Andrew Mollo film *It Happened Here* (first released in 1964, though in production since the 1950s) proceeds from the historical conceit that Hitler's invasion of Britain had been successful. The film's faux documentary style makes images of German soldiers fraternizing with English girls in front of icons like Big Ben or Trafalgar Square seem plausible, and hence confrontational. It prods our awareness that this historical alternative was barely averted, and that the behavior of England under 'occupation' was likely to simulate that of historically occupied Europe (see too Rosenfeld 2005, pp. 67–68). The gentler, often humorous tone of *Goodbye Lenin* indirectly reflects its subject matter in its more fanciful flights: the utopia of communism, the perpetual delaying of rewards, getting bogged down in trivia (Christiane's protest letters about wrong-sized garments), or sustaining a vision through ever emptier slogans.

The film's technique is all the more persuasive, and wittier, through the montage of actual famous quotes and slogans, as when we briefly see Alex's deserted workplace and he comments: 'I was the last to leave and turned off the light.' The ideological transition is cemented elsewhere when a red banner unfurled on a building opposite Christiane's bed no longer proclaims a socialist parade, but treacherously advertises Coca-Cola, threatening to undo Alex's whole charade. Other words become historically charged, as we witness the changing of the guard ('ablösen') at the Neue Wache, eclipsed by the blur of a Coca-Cola truck in the foreground. An image of the Neue Wache in the year 1990 creates an effect for Becker's cinema audience that is tantamount to Alex's reenactments for his mother. The building was already steeped in historical archaeology in 1990.

Originally erected for the fallen in the Napoleonic Wars, and later functioning as a ‘Memorial for those who fell in the Great War’, it became the GDR’s ‘Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism’ in 1960. However, beyond the timeframe of Becker’s film, but intrinsic to his audience’s awareness, it became in 1993 the ‘Central Memorial of the [new] Federal Republic of Germany to the Victims of War and Tyranny’. While taking very different directions, the real process of unification has transformed and in some cases eclipsed memory in a fashion not at all remote from Alex’s private transformation of reality. The city of Berlin is a coup for the medium of film in the evocation of synchronous layers of history permeating so many of its buildings. This and the resulting sense of historical flux are givens, ahead of narrative development in individual films that are set in Berlin.

Goodbye Lenin is also an instructive case in the fabrication of a persuasive mise-en-scène, a standard marker of historical film conventions. This function is subverted here, since it is precisely the ‘right’ look of the reestablished GDR flat that makes it stand out as more artificial in the retro strand of the film. This is because of the film’s structure in both time and space, of the ‘real’ present coexisting with an imaginary world that is unaware of the passing of the last eight months: history as a split-screen technique. Through the incompatibility of both worlds, and their simultaneity via cross-cutting, the film makes the point more tellingly than any amount of words that the intervening historical chasm has been vast. And the rendering of 1990 Berlin life in the film’s fictional strand is relatively thin, with a preponderance of indoor shots. But it sustains comparison with the ‘actual’ events. For it is primarily the yardstick of reliability whereby we measure the subjunctive quality of the alternative vision, the view from the room preserved from an era pre-dating November ’89.

If this film’s historical verdict were confined to Germany, its international resonance would be harder to comprehend. But its rearrangement of domestic events has been invested with a far broader significance by the editor of the Italian journal *Ideazione*, for one. He parallels the contemporary retreat of the Franco-German axis into Cold War thinking with ‘the *papier-mâché* world of *Goodbye Lenin*’, and describes Schröder’s Germany as a state that ‘rejects the harshness of contemporary challenges, metaphorically locks itself into an old apartment in East Berlin, building around itself *papier-mâché* sceneries reminiscent of the good old times, while everything else around changes drastically. Thus, this German metaphor becomes the European metaphor, and ... *Goodbye Lenin* becomes the model of a *Europe in decline*’ (Mennitti 2004, pp. 177–178). This contentious verdict is itself a vindication of Becker’s particular approach to

history, as it is difficult to conceive of more mainstream versions encompassing a comparable speculative scope. The metaphor behind the sum of pieces of evidence is more available to film—without *Goodbye Lenin*, Mennitti's verdict above would be hard to sustain. Filmed history in the subjunctive then attains a sovereign perspective, one able to focus on the metaphorical, which is less available to more grounded accounts. The central image of an airborne statue of Lenin may yet be a valediction to the disciplinary statuary of history when approaching this kind of subject matter.

Intertextuality

The child's fantasy figure of the Sandman reappears at the end of the film, when Alex reunites with his father in his villa at the Wannsee. Alex finds he has two new siblings, who invite him to join them in the TV room. Thus a link is established between people 'from a different country', as Alex terms it. The taxi trip to the Wannsee, with a spaceman-look-alike at the wheel, is paralleled with the trip through the cosmos—that Alex should be able to travel to the far west of West Berlin is just as incredible as the space odyssey.

Becker extends the link to the fantastic to different media of representation, above all the films of Stanley Kubrick. Alex's name already embodies the hub of former East Berlin, as the common abbreviation of 'Alexanderplatz'. Via clear allusions in *Goodbye Lenin* to *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex also evokes the central figure of Kubrick's film. It reflects Burgess's novel when Nadsat, an idiosyncratic variation of Russian, is imposed on a Western European society, another reversal of triumphalism on Becker's part. The world of the Sandman is then linked to the adult's fantasy world in *2001, A Space Odyssey* (see below), and, via this technological fable, to the real and the look-alike Sigmund Jähn figures. Jähn's space travel in turn foreshadows Christiane's ashes being launched into the cosmos, a fulfillment of her personal wishes that contravenes the laws of both East and West Germany, as the voiceover tells us.

The sole acknowledged Kubrick reference comes in one of Denis's ingenious concoctions, a wedding home movie that precedes his newsreels made to nourish Christiane's illusion. At one point a bridal bouquet is hurled into the air, and the camera dwells on its outline against a blue sky, a motif reminiscent, according to Denis, of one of the most famous scenes in cinema history (as is the music which Denis retains, the *Blue Danube* waltz). In *2001* the opening episodes, set successively in a prehistoric era and the distant future, are bridged by an image of an airborne bone which maintains its basic shape but transforms into a spacecraft.

But Denis' self-reflexive image of a bridal bouquet in turn involves montage on Becker's part. The frames within his film come from episode six of Edgar Reitz's first *Heimat* series, when a daredevil pilot drops the bouquet to a wedding party in a marketplace. The marriage they are celebrating is formalized by a phone link-up between the bride on the home front, and her betrothed on the Eastern front. So where the union between the Sandman and Mascha had bonded the GDR and its Soviet overlord, the *Heimat* reference brings together two German fronts, one in the old/new West (where the wedding takes place), the other in the extended East, the limit of aspirations to *Lebensraum*.

Like so much of *Goodbye Lenin*, this comical detail then has layers of depth and of (film-) historical archaeology. Denis's embellishment of Kubrick's scene shows the latter's imagination fueled by the space race absorbing humanity from the late 1950s into the 1970s, and perception of that race by a great majority as science fiction. Were there such a genre, Becker's own film could be termed a history fiction, by analogy, where again fact hopelessly outstrips fiction in strangeness.

But the glancing reference to *Heimat* in a film about the aftereffects of unification in turn asserts the historical dimensions of the comic situation for national insiders. Where Reitz's film was an attempt to reclaim a German voice for German history in the wake of the US televised *Holocaust* series, his perspective was West German. Becker's film seeks the post-unification significance of *Heimat* from an Eastern point of view, despite the director coming from the West. In this quest for the geographically old/politically new *Heimat*, the wedding bouquet becomes as fantastic and as telling as the cosmic wedding of the Sandman and Mascha. And Denis's homage to Kubrick in a German home movie, itself embedded in a film about the crystallization of a new *Heimat* through the process of unification, achieves something still bolder than Reitz's ambition. Where Reitz reclaimed German history for German representation, this visual in-joke claims US/UK cinema for German (cinema) history. Becker clearly shares Fassbinder's belief, embodied in his films, that cinema history is a constituent part of history, so that intertextual film references take on far more than aesthetic or self-legitimizing significance.

If Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Germany Pale Mother* (1980) and Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979) used female figures to allegorize wartime and immediate postwar Germany, then Christiane functions as an embodiment of all that was potentially decent, but also self-deluding, in the GDR. It is true that Fassbinder's Maria ultimately falls victim to male machinations, and that Alex's mother is exposed to her son as puppeteer. These figures nonetheless provide a less direct answer to the one Andrea Dworkin

implies when, reflecting on a visit to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, she asks whether memory is gendered.⁹ No male counterparts come to mind as allegorical figures, though at the popular level German national identity is still forged on the soccer field, and the Eastern viewers are equally proud of the achievement when the 1990 World Cup is won by a German team that even included a former East German.¹⁰ Long vanished are Fassbinder's resonances of an underdog victory in soccer equaling a dangerously false sense of nationhood.¹¹ The same historical fixture is slanted as national rebuilding in Sönke Wortmann's *Miracle of Bern*, appearing concurrently with Becker's film. Cinema as history reflects not just the events of history but the spectrum of their historical reception. Becker does not share Wortmann's revisionary thrust, but instead sustains the whimsical tone of the script, as Alex muses on the German soccer team exceeding its production target. The constant reminder of such absurdities in former East bloc propaganda, wonderfully inappropriate for the national team after unification, provides a verbal mockumentary on a par with Denis's more inspired creations.

The actual farewell to Lenin in this film, as his bust is transported by helicopter above Christiane on her first walk out of her apartment, owes much to Makavejev's *Gorilla Bathes at Noon* (1993). In this film the quirky Serbian director depicts the last remaining Russian soldier in Berlin, deserted by his regiment which has withdrawn in the wake of unification. Makavejev shows footage of the real removal of the Lenin statue in 1992 from the former Leninplatz, now renamed the Platz der Vereinten Nationen (Square of the United Nations). While both films draw on the same historical event—Becker's anachronistically anticipating it—the more telling detail is Makavejev's blending of his narrative with documentary footage, while Becker's allusion to the event is digitally enhanced.

The already lively debate concerning the potential and pitfalls of film in conveying history must become still more complex through this technological advance. Becker's cityscape first features as digital images in the opening credits, frozen, hyperreal shots of familiar haunts of East Berlin. Such contours anticipate the far more elaborate estrangement of reality in Alex's alternative GDR, the superstructure of fantasy superimposed in the confines of Christiane's bedroom upon the real state of affairs. The non-documentary take on East Berlin in the credits announces a style and a narrative appropriate for the historical subject matter. While this style is decidedly not socialist realism, Alex's concoction is simply the absurd extreme of socialist realism's quest for material that is representative, positively depicted and ultimately idealized.

Historical Markers

Film in general, and this film in particular, are capable of a suggestiveness that is not a postmodern capitulation before history, but rather bears an ambiguity capable of conveying some of history's complexities. While we as cinema audience are being regaled by Alex's passing parade of historical contrivances in the name of devotion to his mother, it is his Russian girlfriend, Lara, who consistently criticizes them. Also functioning as the nurse of his mother, she alone sees clearly the way such invention becomes self-perpetuating, 'once the lies have started', as she puts it. How are we to understand where she is coming from? Just as Gorbachov was historically further down the track than Honecker and his brief successors, is hers meant to be the voice of judgement? Or does her Russian background give her still more reason for disillusionment?

Lara is vindicated by the confession that finally comes not from Alex but from his mother. Christiane admits to having lied about her husband, at the very moment when Alex, prompted by Lara, seemed to be on the verge of his own disclosure. Only by disgracing the fugitive from the Republic could the situation be rationalized at both State and private level, and in this fashion the GDR has lost a whole generation of potentially valuable, because critical, citizens.¹² Her biggest mistake, she now freely concedes, was in not going. In a single blow the substance of Alex's subterfuge is undermined—his mother has secretly longed to leave the homeland he seeks to conserve for her as a historical theme park. Furthermore, a whole lineage is established of false traditions. This means that Alex's pretence of an ongoing heritage and identity is not all that different from the insubstantial existence of the 'real' GDR. His whole enterprise becomes a telling metaphor, and cannot be dismissed as a capricious entertainment. It also parallels his juggling of illusions with the utopian/idealistic aspects of paternalistic GDR socialism. He re-enacts the earlier days as a kind of philanthropic costume drama. Beyond Becker's film, the State's actions had been similar (not least in Berlin's 750th birthday celebrations in 1987; the East observed these with floats portraying an hours-long parade through history). They cast the GDR off from its historical moorings, not least in relation to the other half of the German nation.

At the moment of confession, Christiane's two worlds collapse, the strenuously upheld allegiance to the State, via her choral activities with the Pioneers etc., and the long-sealed inner emigration from that State. The reality of her husband's flight from the GDR, and of her own most secret desire to have done the same, is the final counterblow to *Ostalgie*. Immediately before this moment of insight the two fictional worlds of the

film in turn coincide. By cross-cutting, it had sustained the ongoing existence within a post-Socialist state of a Socialist state, the throwback world conjured for Christiane, who is cocooned from the historical reality that we as viewers and the rest of the film's characters are aware of. The two worlds overlap when Christiane walks out onto the street. After she fails to notice a dirigible advertising 'The Best is West', it is literally Goodbye Lenin when an airborne statue of the man himself shadows her from above. The farewell to a historical icon becomes a farewell to iconic history when Denis's most daring newscast features political asylum being accorded to Western fugitives in GDR embassies, plus a welcome money gesture of 200 East Marks.

The nomadic quality of slogans as free-floating signifiers is something that probably only film could suggest, as a verdict on history. Similar treatment is given to Nazi continuities. When Alex's sister's partner Rainer is struggling to sustain his role in the performance for Christiane's birthday, he casts about for an East German word for 'region' and hits upon 'Gau' with its Nazi overtones. This remains comically inappropriate, but when Christiane first ventures beyond her room and sees swastika graffiti in the lift-well, then not only she, the fictitious figure, is taken aback. Again, film can convey such historical junctures by suggestion, where written history normally has to be so much more direct, and potentially overly explicit. In the immediate wake of the State, which had profiled itself as being anti-Fascist, the long proscribed symbols are both ideologically and geographically floating, certainly not confined to the Fascist West that was perpetuated in Eastern propaganda.

Alex brings down the curtain on his theatre with one final display, a 'newscast' featuring the handover of power to Sigmund Jähn. This is accompanied by the former East German anthem, 'Auferstanden aus Ruinen', but the imagery of Resurrection is undone at all levels. The State itself does not rise again from the ruins. The celebration of its birthday in Alex's film, a send-off in a fashion more befitting its deserts, has to be brought forward from 7 October to 2 October, as neither the State nor its outwardly faithful subject will live to see the later date. In accordance with real history, the State disappears the following day, with the formalization of reunification. The fictional figure Christiane survives for three days, but does not rise on the third (though her physical remains have disappeared). Nor has the GDR itself been the sole source of illusions.

Alex has imagined his father as a bloated poolside plutocrat. Beyond a fleeting appearance at his sister's Burger King outlet, this figure is only introduced in the last 10 minutes or so of the film, a vignette seemingly destined for sentimentality or distortion. But in fact he emerges as a

remarkable, because totally ordinary secondary figure. He lives at the Wannsee, which neither carries overtones of the Hitler era¹³ nor of upper-crust Wessis. He agrees to visit his former wife on her deathbed, and hence this minor figure comes to carry the heaviest allegorical weight. The former Easterner, now fully integrated into the West, presides over the passing of the former regime's outwardly staunchest supporter, while his own twin provenance preempts German unification.

Becker's historical conceit has taken on all the complexity of German identity issues. In that sense alone, this is a film whose approach to history is worthy of scrutiny. Once the euphoria of the collapse of the Wall subsided, many Wessis and Ossis longed, semi-seriously, for the Wall's return. Becker's film realizes that desire. It gives a historical rather than a psychological turn to film as the realization of our collective desires.¹⁴ The Wall in the head, often invoked as the major obstacle to effective unification, lives on briefly in the film. Headspace in which the Wall survives is staged here as the four walls of Christiane's apartment. The inversion of history in Alex's subterfuges and Denis's newsreels accords the rites of carnival to the East German State. With the 'normal' portrayal of Alex's father, Alex's idealized valediction to the East extends to images of the Wessis as well. But, as with Bakhtin, carnival here is no mere literary trope. It has strong historical underpinnings, even when we viewers have just witnessed history as it wasn't, and history as it might have been: history in the subjunctive mood.

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Notes

- [1] It is impossible to watch sections of Reitz's *Heimat 3* without mental comparison with *Goodbye Lenin*, e.g. the statue of Lenin careening through the countryside, or Gunnar clearing out a jar of Eastern brand name peas in his former home.
- [2] See Rentschler (2000, pp. 260–277).
- [3] A signature slogan in the former GDR: 'socialism as it exists in fact'.
- [4] In the context of grammar, 'mood' refers to a way of viewing reality, transmitted to the verb form. Hence the indicative mood is used in statements of fact, the imperative to issue a command, the subjunctive to express wishes or hypotheses. With subordination to the State discredited, and the dominant cold war paradigm inadequate to explain the unification phase of German history, the subjunctive (compounded by its use in German with the conditional mood, conveying a lack of certainty) would seem the appropriate way to approach this history.

- [5] Žižek (2005).
- [6] Böhn (2005, p. 256) cites an article that appeared shortly after the release of *Goodbye Lenin*. Questioned about their identity, 74% of citizens in the ‘neuen Bundesländer’ felt they were East Germans to a reasonable or even a strong degree (‘ziemlich’ oder ‘stark’), while this figure actually rose to 80% in 2001. The article is Staud, T. (2003) ‘Ossis sind Türken. 13 Jahre Einheit: In Gesamt-Westdeutschland sind die Ostdeutschen Einwanderer’, *Die Zeit*, vol. 41, 1 October, p. 9.
- [7] With Western television off limits for Eastern viewers, though of course far from being out of range for TV reception, GDR schoolchildren could unwittingly betray their parents’ viewing patterns when answering questions about the previous night’s Sandman program.
- [8] See Rosenstone 2001, p. 63. Referring to *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988), he concludes: ‘the film engages in “false” invention and must be judged as bad history’.
- [9] Andrea Dworkin (1997) ‘The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum: Is Memory Male?’ in *A.D., Life and Death*, Free Press, New York, pp. 240–250.
- [10] In 1989, Olaf Thom transferred from the GDR to Bundesliga team Bayer Leverkusen and was subsequently selected for the 1990 World Cup team. For this information, my thanks to colleague Gaby Schmidt.
- [11] With the broadcast of the 1954 World Cup final, in which Germany beat the highly favored Hungary, an East Bloc rival to boot. See Hillman (1995, pp. 191–192).
- [12] For further representations of the couple divided by the Wall, see Christa Wolf’s novella *Der geteilte Himmel/Divided Heaven* (1963) and Margarete von Trotta’s film *Das Versprechen/The Promise* (1995).
- [13] Just as Turkish director Kutlug Ataman plays on expectations, by denying them, in locating Frau von Seeckt in her Wannsee villa in his film *Lola and Billy the Kid* (1999).
- [14] Cf. the view of film history as ‘a history of collective wishes and repressed desires’ (Kaes 1995, p. 55).

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