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## Berlin is in Germany and good bye Lenin!

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**BERLIN IS IN GERMANY  
AND  
GOOD BYE LENIN!**

**Taking leave of the GDR?**

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**NICK HODGIN**

*Über kurz, fürchte ich, verkäme das Land meiner Herkunft zur Senioren-Residenz für Ostalgiker und DDR-Vernichter. Diese würden jene mit Sentimentalitäten traktieren, jene diese mit Stasi-Akten. Noch ein Weilchen und wir hätten nie gelebt.<sup>1</sup>*

(I worry that my country will shortly deteriorate into a rest home for nostalgic east Germans and those who wish to wreck the GDR. The former would torment the latter with sentimentalities; the latter would torment the former with Stasi files. A little longer and it will seem as though we had never lived at all)

In the years since the dissolution of the East German state, German cinema has witnessed the release of a relatively large number of films that respond directly to issues related to unification. Despite their topicality, few of these films have succeeded in stimulating both commercial *and* critical interest. Nevertheless, the wide media coverage that the films have generated hints at the high expectations accorded German filmmakers to offer a definitive response to unification,

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Dieckmann, 2002. *Die Liebe in den Zeiten des Landfilms. Eigens erlebte Geschichten*. Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 22. Except where indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

expectations that resemble the earlier equally disputatious clamour to find *the* novel about it (*Wenderoman*). Analysed closer, it becomes clear that despite their varying box-office success and critical attention none of the films has truly secured complete unanimity. In amongst the enthusiastic reviews and noisy marketing there are dissenting voices, offering thoughtful criticism of the individual films. The responses often reflect complex opinions and attitudes to the GDR and to the *Wende*, which are as diverse inter-regionally as they are trans-regionally. At times the tone of some reviews has revealed partisan regional antagonisms and prejudices that go beyond simple film criticism. *Die Welt*, for instance, could hardly contain its delight in highlighting what it considered a great irony of the phenomenally successful *Good Bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), namely the filmmakers' western origins: "Bemerkenswert übrigens, dass es wieder mal eines Wessis (Regisseur Wolfgang Becker) bedurfte, um dem Ossi glaubhaft zu erzählen, wie es so war in der DDR" (*It is notable that it has again taken a Wessi (Wolfgang Becker) to explain to the Ossi what it was really like in the GDR*).<sup>2</sup> The competing perceptions of life in the GDR and of life afterwards, "wie es so war", have been the source of a fierce debate, with frequent accusations of amnesia, revisionism and reductionism. Contributions to the discussion have come from all sides, with authors, cultural commentators and politicians all willing to engage in the debate. Nor have filmmakers shied away from these issues: two recent films, *Berlin is in Germany* (Hannes Stöhr, 2001) and *Good Bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), have demonstrated a continued interest in analysing the transition process and the role of memory in post-unification discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Hannes Stöhr's graduation film revisits the "stranger in a strange land" concept, which had characterized the first *Wendefilme*, though its mood is more contemplative, the comedy gentler than the high jinks of those earlier films. Actually a low-budget television co-production, it was a surprise (though minor) hit on the international festival circuit and enjoyed favourable reviews at home, with one critic even going so far as to suggest that this film "könnte die endgültige Ost-

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<sup>2</sup> Oliver Michaelisky, "Da musste erst ein Wessi kommen...", *Die Welt*, 18.02.2003. Other reviews were similarly concerned with the backgrounds of the cast and crew. The script-writer's right to script a film about an East Berlin family coming to terms with the *Wende* meanwhile, appears to have been vindicated by the year he spent living in Berlin and his experience of the *Wende*, albeit from the western side. Similarly, Daniel Brühl's sensitive and convincing performance (as Alex) has garnered additional kudos because of his west German origin, whilst actress Katrin Sass's eastern pedigree apparently lends the film sufficient authenticity (in the role of Frau Kerner). Such observations reveal the asymmetrical prejudices that continue to feature in post-GDR discourse (one cannot imagine a similar discussion in the case of an east German director turning his/her attention to west German history).

<sup>3</sup> Audience figures: *Berlin is in Germany* (Hannes Stöhr) 160,681; *Good Bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003): 6,282,123 (all figures found at: <http://www.insidekino.com/>)[accessed 21.7.2003].

West-Geschichte sein” (“could be the definitive East-West story”).<sup>4</sup> Similar claims have been made for Wolfgang Becker’s new film, which has been playing to packed cinema theatres since its release in February. *Good Bye Lenin!*’s astonishing success suggests that, despite fourteen years of *Trabi* jokes and *Ossi/Wessi* jousting, a (tragic)comic re-evaluation of the *Wende* continues to be both a viable commercial prospect in German cinema and a potent source of critical discussion. The potential for drama, comedy and tragedy that the *Wende* and the post-unification period offer has been recognized by filmmakers and numerous interpretations of these events have been presented since 1989. Yet, however often the period is revisited, the *Wende* as a chronological and thematic co-ordinate is not alone a guarantee of commercial success. Indeed, of the fifty or so films that have been produced, barely a half dozen could be considered genuine box-office successes.<sup>5</sup> This is not altogether surprising. Representing the post-*Wende* period has proven a problematic issue, one that has been further complicated by the uneasy and uncertain relationship between populations east and west of the former border. Few dispute the fragility of relations between the two, though there are doubts too that the relationship is quite as discordant as it is typically represented to be in the media.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the antagonisms and occasional open hostility that have evolved have equally been grist to the dramatic mill. By staging their narratives in the east, filmmakers are able to draw upon the abundance of dramatic potential that the region appears to offer, and a succession of films has repeatedly made reference to a series of related issues – from the tensions thrown up by social and economic challenges, to the difficulties in adjusting to the new system and the emotive issues involved in re-addressing the (east German) past.

The different modes of representation have given rise to a diverse range of filmic responses, from the satirical cabaret of the GDR’s favourite subversive clowns (Steffen Mensching and Hans-Eckhart Wenzel) in *Letzes aus der DaDaeR* (Jörg Foth, 1990) to the gloomy existential drama of *Wege in die Nacht* (Andreas Kleinert, 1999). Despite the critical acclaim that the films often attract, they have

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<sup>4</sup> Phillip Bühler, “Wiedergänger von Franz Biberkopf”. *Berliner Zeitung*, 1.11.2001. The director, however, has denied any such claims: “Berlin is in Germany ist kein Film über Ost-West, sondern ein Film über Berlin heute, ein Film über die Leute vor meiner Haustür” (*Berlin is in Germany is not a story about East-West, but rather a story about Berlin today, a film about the people outside my doorstep*) (<http://www.berlinisingermany.de/Pages/Bgnotizen.html>) [accessed 19.2.2003].

<sup>5</sup> My focus here is on feature films, rather than documentaries, though it should be noted that many documentary filmmakers, Andreas Voigt, Jürgen Böttcher, *inter alia*, have also turned their attention to the GDR and to post-unification Germany, resulting in a number of excellent portraits of a society in transition.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans Matthias Kepplinger, 1993. “Wie sehen sich die Deutschen?” In: Eduard J. M. Kroker, Bruno Dechamps, eds, *Die Deutschen auf der Suche nach ihrer neuen Identität?* Königisches Forum: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung GmbH, 45-61.

generally performed badly at the box office. These sombre takes on unification have made little impact on audiences disinclined to see familiar problems dramatized on screen. In exploring these issues, filmmakers have invariably drawn upon a series of east/west stereotypes that have prevailed since 1989, though it is the *Ossis*, often given as victims/villains of the former state, who are typically the focus of attention. Films such as *Go Trabi Go II – Das war der wilde Osten* (Wolfgang Büld and Reinhard Kloos, 1992), *Herzprung* (Helke Misselwitz, 1992), and *Der Brocken* (Vadim Glowna, 1992) have variously offered the east Germans as right-wing extremists, left-wing apologists, revisionists or provincial simpletons, who rarely display any understanding or knowledge of the sophisticated details of a modern pluralist society. The habitual reliance on such characterizations in post-unification film reflects the overarching problems related to unification, but also has worrying implications for ongoing attempts at social integration.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the inaccuracy of these representations, the various stereotypes have proven popular and enduring targets of derision and as such are especially prevalent within the comedy genre; more than just generic convention, they are becoming a pre-requisite.

A comic reading of the *Wende* and of life in the new Germany has typically been the necessary ingredient for success. The treatments vary, but generally the focus has been on the east rather than the west Germans as strangers in a strange land, with their maladjustment less a prompt for critical social inquiry – these serious investigations being the domain of those critically acclaimed and commercially underachieving films – and more a source of comedic potential. Early unification comedies, which include such films as *Go Trabi Go* (Peter Timm, 1990) and *Wir können auch anders* (Detlev Buck, 1993), were considerable box-office hits. The narratives, charting their protagonists' journey through "foreign" lands (in the former, a family from Bitterfeld on their travels through southern Germany and into Italy; in the latter, two west Germans' road trip through the eastern *Länder*), proved a hit with audiences, who responded enthusiastically to the encounters with new compatriots and new environments that these films portrayed. These comedies quickly established the east Germans as members of a quaint, if in-dominatable, regional group, occasionally gaining the upper hand over the *westdeutsche Glücksritter* ("west German prospectors") and their kind, through the application of their earthy, regional common sense and solidarity of purpose.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Manuela Glaab, 2002. "Viewing 'the Other': how East sees West and West sees East". In: Jonathan Grix, Paul Cooke, eds, *East German Distinctiveness in a Unified Germany*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 75-97.

<sup>8</sup> Rolf Reißig, 1999. "Die Ostdeutschen – zehn Jahre nach der *Wende*. Einstellungen, Wertemuster, Identitätsbildungen" [http://www.bissonline.de/download/Die\\_Ostdeutschen\\_zehn\\_Jahre\\_nach\\_der\\_Wende.PDF](http://www.bissonline.de/download/Die_Ostdeutschen_zehn_Jahre_nach_der_Wende.PDF). [accessed 13.2.2002]. However, as Leonie Naughton has observed, this tends more to be the case with productions from the west; east German productions are less optimistic about the region post-*Wende*.

This apparently inveterate provincial quality simultaneously draws on the instincts and reputation of the *Nischengesellschaft*, together with a sprinkling of corruption learned through observation and reception of western business practises.<sup>9</sup>

The success of more recent films such as *Sonnenallee* (Leander Haußmann, 1999) and, to a lesser extent, *Helden wie Wir* (Sebastian Peterson, 2000) reflected a shift in mood within the new Germany that coincided with a pronounced post-unification east German identity, or, as Rolf Reißig prefers, a “Wir-Gefühl”, or “Wir-Bewußtsein” (“us-feeling” or an “us-consciousness”).<sup>10</sup> In presenting an image of the GDR that debunked and ironized contemporary representations of the former state these films offered a lifeline to GDR biographies. Both films (based on scripts by Thomas Brussig) challenge the reductive view of the GDR that Thomas Koch once summed up as a “Land Von Stasiagenten, Stalinisten, Privilegierten, Mitläufern” (“a country of Stasi agents, Stalinists, the privileged, fellow-travellers”).<sup>11</sup> Although the authorities feature in both films, indeed are central to Peterson’s film, they effectively challenge the narrative co-ordinates typically associated with films about the GDR, specifically the *Stasi*, the IMS (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter – unofficial agents*), and the failing economy in all its manifestations. These key features are not wholly absent from the films but, interestingly, their function is subordinated within the narratives, which offer more personalized (and in *Sonnenallee* a wildly exuberant and colourful) accounts of the GDR *Alltag* (*everyday*). This inevitably gave rise to accusations of moral expediency and of revisionism. The indignation of some reviewers was again revealing, since it implied certain prescriptive attitudes when it came to engaging with the GDR. The films’ apparent irreverence provoked some hostile reactions. Several commentators questioned the appropriateness of comedy when it came to discussing the GDR, an objection that recalled other arguments in film discourse, notably those surrounding Roberto Benigni’s concentration camp tragicomedy, *Life is Beautiful* (1997), criticized for its apparent trivialization of the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup>

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“Wiedervereinigung als Siegengeschichte. Beobachtungen einer Australierin” 242-253 *apropos: Film 2000 Das Jahrbuch der DEFA-Stiftung*. Redaktion: Ralf Schenk/Erika Richter. DEFA Stiftung/Verglag Das Neue Berlin: Berlin, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> *Der Brocken* (1992), which follows a widow’s attempts to fend off devious western parties and corrupt locals interested in her idyllic island property, is perhaps the best example of this genre.

<sup>10</sup> Reißig.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Koch, 1991. “Deutsch-deutsche Einigung als Kulturproblem: Wird die Bundesrepublik in Deutschland aufgehen?”. In: R.Reißig and G-J Glaebner, eds. *Das Ende eines Experiments. Umbruch in der DDR und deutsche Einheit*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 317-339: 329-330.

<sup>12</sup> For an interesting discussion of the critical reception to *Life is Beautiful* see Carlo Celli, “The Representation of Evil in Roberto Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful*”, *Journal of Popular Film and Televi-*

While its record in human rights was undoubtedly poor, and corruption and abuse of its power were endemic, the authoritarianism of the GDR could hardly be compared with the tyrannical practices and genocidal policies of the NS dictatorship. Nevertheless, comparisons between the two regimes have been made, to the endless frustration of many east Germans.<sup>13</sup> The huge interest in the GDR, which has been encouraged by sensationalist media reporting and facilitated by access to its many archives, has resulted in an approach that typically focuses on the awfulness of the GDR, the GDR as *Unrechtsstaat*.<sup>14</sup> This, in turn, has created difficulties in the act of remembering the GDR for east Germans. As a consequence, any reference to the former state that does not draw upon the post-unification profile of the GDR risks accusations of amnesia, or, worse, of *misremembering* the GDR.<sup>15</sup>

### BERLIN IS IN GERMANY: *VORWÄRTS UND VERGESSEN*

Although set more than ten years after the GDR's disintegration, Hannes Stöhr's film, *Berlin is in Germany*, offers a novel approach to re-engaging with the GDR.<sup>16</sup> The eleven-year prison sentence from which Martin Schulz, the film's protagonist, emerges at the beginning of the narrative is assumed to have been a period

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*sion*, 28 (2), Summer 2000. 74-79. Also: Maurizio Viano, "Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter", *Film Quarterly*, Fall, 53 (1), Fall 1999, 26-34.

<sup>13</sup> Detlef Pollack (no date) gives some indication of the complex attitudes that those in the east have towards their former state, when he writes, "Obwohl die DDR eine totalitäre Diktatur mit einer ineffizienten Mangelwirtschaft und einem unbarmherzigen Repressionsapparat war, halten viele der Ostdeutschen die DDR für das menschlichere System". ("Although the GDR was a totalitarian dictatorship with an inefficient economy and apparatus of merciless repression, many east Germans consider it to have been the more human system") "Die Entwicklung der politischen Kultur in Ostdeutschland 1990-1998. Untersucht anhand der Einstellungen zur sozialen Ungleichheit und zur Demokratie". At: <http://www.kuwi.euv-frankfurt-o.de/~vgkulsoz/Lehrstuhl/Pollack/IDENTIT4.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> A Cold War term, *Unrechtsstaat* implies a state without justice, or one that lacks legitimacy by the rule of law. *DER SPIEGEL* regularly features articles documenting *Stasi* activities. A recent issue (No. 36/1.9.03), for instance, contains two such reports.

<sup>15</sup> Ulrike Meinhof has observed how the calendrical coincidence of the anniversary of unification and *Kristallnacht* has resulted in media coverage that indirectly links the GDR with the NS regime. See U.M. Meinhof, 2000. "The New Germany on the screen: Conflicting Discourses on German Television?". In: P. Stevenson, and J. Theobald, eds, *Relocating Germanness. Discursive Unity in Unified Germany*. London: Macmillan, 23-43.

<sup>16</sup> Though the film has several antecedents, mainly from the science-fiction genre. Films such as Woody Allen's *Sleeper* (1973), Vincent Ward's *Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* (1988), Jean-Marc Poiré's *Les Visiteurs* (1991) and Steve Miner's *Forever Young* (1992) similarly cast their protagonist forward into an unfamiliar future.

outside time, beyond the experiential of historical process. The GDR thus continues as his frame of reference, existing as a virtual sphere in tandem with the new Germany. His release from prison offers him the double freedoms of life beyond prison and life beyond the GDR. Negotiating and readjusting to this new life serves as a premise for a journey of discovery, a small-scale Prussian odyssey, that traces his progress through a city which is simultaneously recognisable and unfamiliar to him. His rehabilitation depends on him withstanding the numerous trials and dangers that the city poses and successfully mastering the new values and codes of a different system and society.

The film's basic premise thus established, Stöhr is able to revisit and address the problems and challenges of the immediate post-unification period, bundling a host of topical issues into its narrative. These include, in varying degrees, the difficulties of adapting to the changes brought about by unification, the role of the GDR in east German memory, the fragile east/west relationship, right-wing extremism in the east, and the east's introduction to the seedier side of capitalism (pornography and prostitution – linked here, rather problematically, to Eastern Europeans in Berlin in the form of the likeable pimp and pornographer, Victor, and the sympathetic prostitute, Ludmilla).<sup>17</sup> However the issue with which Stöhr's film is primarily engaged is the challenge of psychological and geographical reorientation. Martin Schulz belatedly experiences the difficulties of many of his compatriots as he oscillates between the two worlds, the actual and the one remembered. His delayed arrival in the New Germany is, despite initial complications, not necessarily a disadvantage, for he is able to learn from others' mistakes and successes. He soon realizes that this new society operates according to different rules. His friend, Peter, informs him of the new governing maxims – "haste nischt, biste nischt" ("you got nothin', you are nothin'") - and reports a new hierarchical order, in which the *Zoni* is considered the lowest of the low. Motivated principally by the desire to bond with his young son, Martin struggles to gain acceptance by improving his status, a scheme that is not without its difficulties. As with many other *Wendefilme*, it is the Mercedes that offers such immediate status, symbolising superiority and success; in short, arrival in the west<sup>18</sup>. And while other members of Martin's social circle have moved on to the Mercedes, it is notable that the only character to continue driving a *Trabant* is Peter, the film's least sympathetic and most self-pitying character. The Mercedes, then, acts as the arbiter of Martin's dreams, not in terms of base materialist

<sup>17</sup> For David Clarke, however, Stöhr's film is primarily concerned with the "dislodging of men from their traditional masculine role". "Representations of East German Masculinity in Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin is in Germany* and Andreas Kleinert's *Wege in die Nacht*", *German Life and Letters*, 55:4, October 2002, 434-449 (434-435).

<sup>18</sup> In fact, as Patricia Hogwood has noted, the Mercedes does not enjoy quite the same kudos in the east as it does in the west "because of its associations with a "capitalist class" in the former FRG". In: "'Red is for Love...': Citizens as consumers in East Germany". In: Grix and Cooke, 45-60 (54)



desire, but as a literal and metaphorical vehicle to acquiring status – as a taxi driver in the new Berlin. But herein lies the essential problem: Martin’s desire for future stability lies in negotiating his way through the present, and, crucially, in forgetting the co-ordinates of the past. The past is only available to him as a mental map, an anachronistic frame of reference, which no longer corresponds with the Berlin around him. During his absence Berlin has undergone a radical and controversial urban makeover, with statues removed and streets renamed (Dimitroffstrasse having become Danziger Strasse, Greifswalder Strasse replaced by Ernst-Thälmann-Park).<sup>19</sup> But the GDR has not disappeared entirely; its last few vestiges are here antithetically arranged. Thus, the grey *Plattenbau* (*pre-fabricated tower blocks*), which still serve as home for the moribund Peter, contrast with the smart, modern Pankow apartment in which Martin’s wife lives; the old GDR currency he offers to a prostitute is briefly glimpsed before it is quickly substituted for legal tender. Other episodes offer further comparisons between the remnants of the past and the symbols of the present. The unfashionable denims that he wears appear all the more shabby compared with the smart-casual outfits worn by his wife and her friends; and the ubiquitous *Trabi* is still visible, no longer able to hold a starring role as in Timm’s film, its presence is now reduced to a mere cameo as a sputtering sidekick to the gleaming Mercedes.

Stöhr’s film is, on the whole, sympathetic to Martin’s circumstances. Despite his determination and efforts his prospects are initially poor, and the film hints at a critique of the probation authority and an inquiry into recidivism. Martin’s unique situation allows Stöhr to focus on other aspects of the rehabilitation process, specifically the adjustment from one socio-cultural experience to another, from east to west. But the narrative appears reluctant to commit itself fully to such inquiry, and the film’s sensitive portrayal of its protagonist is not extended to other characters. Moreover, the east’s negative reputation as a location of questionable politics and doubtful commitment to integration is confirmed by a number of characterizations. Among them, Peter, the *Jammer-Ossi* (moaning East German) personified, who is first seen on top of the *Plattenbau* in which he lives, considering suicide, a fate from which Martin rescues him. He brings Martin up to date with his failures since unification, a sorry litany of lost jobs, hostile working environments (because of west German attitudes) and the difficulties of transferring and marketing his skills in the new economy. Despite the plausibility of his account – similar east German grievances have been well-documented – the tone of the monologue is self-pitying. Indeed the details he offers suggest that he alone is at fault for his own professional shortcomings: “Dann wollte ick mich selbstständig machen, wa’. Aber es war alles zu kompliziert” (“I wanted to make meself independent, you know. But it was all too complicated”). Even his suicidal posturing can be seen as evidence of his inaction and incompetence.

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<sup>19</sup> For more on this issue, see Walsh, Pickel and Rosenberg, 1997. “East And West German Identities. United and Divided?” In: Konrad H. Jarausch, ed. *After Unity. Reconfiguring German Identities*. Providence; Oxford: Berghahn, 103-137: 129-134.

Given Peter's rather wretched demeanour and the implication that Martin might endure similar misfortunes, it comes as no surprise that Martin declines his friend's offer of accommodation, preferring to stay in the back-room of Victor's sleazy pornography business. Peter's neighbours, a group of right-wing bullies, offer further evidence that all is not well in the east Berlin *Plattenbau* estates, and although these later get their come-uppance at the hands of Martin and his Cuban friend, Enrique, they attest to post-unification fears about the east's reputation for extremism.

If Peter counts as one of the east German losers, Martin's wife represents one of the region's successes and as such may be regarded the film's true ambassador for integration. Her bijou apartment, a Mercedes, a partner from Swabia, dinner parties of paella and French wine signify both her escape from the past and her arrival in the New Germany. The advice she offers Martin on the eve of his taxi-driver exams best reveals her attitude: "im Osten bist du fit. Mußt bloß die ganzen alten Namen vergessen" ("you're fine as far as the East goes. You just have to forget all the old names"). That she has never explained the circumstances of Martin's absence to either her new partner or to her son may be due to a sense of bourgeois propriety – few people willingly broadcast relatives' misdemeanours – but her reticence may equally be explained as an attempt to have done with the past, for fear of the threat it poses to the comforts of her present life. It is significant, too, that her only real demonstration of affection comes at a time when Martin appears to be facing a second term of imprisonment (on a wrongful charge of distributing child pornography, as it turns out). Martin may not aspire to quite this level of bourgeois domesticity – his wife's rather repellent new partner, Wolfgang, functions as a negative feature of this particular milieu – but he clearly recognizes it as preferable to Peter's situation. The *Besser-Wessi* (*know-it-all West German*) to Peter's *Jammer-Ossi*, Wolfgang conforms to the stereotypical *Wessi* behaviour established in other east/west narratives, being both hostile and duplicitous. However, as a negative representative of his background he at least brings some balance to Peter's *Ossi* characterization.

Whatever the specifics of his desires, it is in Martin's *umlernen* (*relearning*) that the key to his success lies; mental miscegenation is offered as a guiding principle for success in modern Germany. Accordingly, Martin is apparently ready to mix with friends from the old days, even if the old days as such are only cursorily mentioned, while recognising the need to learn the values and codes of the new system, something Peter has clearly failed to do. Integration, then, would appear to be the key message in Stöhr's film. If, like Martin, the east Germans can show themselves ready to adapt to the challenges of the new society, then they too can hope for the kind of material benefits awarded his wife and promotion from their status of "Bürger zweiter Klasse" ("second-class citizen"). Those who show themselves unwilling to adapt to or master the new rules cannot but fail in this society, as is clear in Peter's case. Though his reasons for self-pity seem justified – unemployment, social inferiority and a diminished sense of self-worth –

his general demeanour strikes a wholly negative note, which corresponds with (principally western) stereotypes of the *Ossi*. There is no mutuality in the integration that is on display here since it is only the east Germans who are expected to adapt and to conform to the new society. Thus the message is less a call for tolerance and mutual respect but rather a strategy for survival: only a complete departure from the past and self-assimilation into the greater west German body can then ensure a happy ending.

## GOOD BYE LENIN! BURYING THE GDR?

While arrival in the New Germany is the problem facing the protagonist in Stöhr's film, it is taking leave of the GDR that is the principal challenge offered in Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!*. Though its narrative leapfrogs from 1978 to 1989 and through to 1990, the majority of the film's action takes place during the *Wende*. This itself is something of a novelty, since surprisingly few films have chosen to dramatize this emotional and eventful period.<sup>20</sup> Earlier films tended to situate their narratives at specific chronological points, usually some time after unification, occasionally during. Often they centred on individuals' responses to the events of that time. These reactions often provided a platform for comedy, whether the broad farce of a film such as *Go Trabi Go*, or the frenzied satire found in films like *Das deutsche Kettensägenmassaker* (Christoph Schlingensiefel, 1992). At other times they provided a thematic conceit for a more serious inquiry, with marginalized protagonists shown adrift in the new society, as in *Ostkreuz* (Michael Klier, 1991) and *Abschied von Agnes* (Michael Gwisdeck, 1993). Indeed, it is perhaps surprising, given the drama of the events in the autumn of 1989, that so few directors chose to situate their films during the *Wende* itself, though Frank Beyer's epic *Nikolaikirche* (1995) focused on events leading up to it, and Helmut Dziuba's social drama, *Jan und Jana* (1992), made tangential reference to those events.

Now, after three commercially, if not productively, fallow years, comes *Good Bye Lenin!*, which, having already secured positive reviews in the international press coverage of the 2003 *Berlinale* and, crucially, international distribution, is now even performing well abroad.<sup>21</sup> This is highly unusual. Regardless of their critical recommendation, German films seldom travel well, with Tom Tykwer's *Lola*

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<sup>20</sup> Leonie Naughton (2002) has observed that, "events leading up to 1989 are highlighted in eastern productions: the opening of the Berlin Wall provides a point of closure for their films rather than a point of departure" *That Was The Wild East. Film culture, Unification, and the "New" Germany*. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 210.

<sup>21</sup> The film's distributors in the UK quoted the UK box-office figure at 930,000 (and expected to reach the million mark), making it the most successful German film ever been shown in Britain (from a telephone interview with UGC Films UK Ltd.).

*Rennt* (1999), a rare exception. Domestically, the reviews for Becker's film, based on a script by Bernd Lichtenberg, have generally been positive, though the film has not been without its detractors.<sup>22</sup> Where the film has been praised, it has been applauded for its authenticity, its sincerity, and, not least, for effecting a departure of sorts from the GDR. Oliver Bamgarten, writing in the film journal *Schnitt*, suggests that "*Good Bye, Lenin!* beerdigt das Dasein der DDR mit gebotener Würde" ("Good Bye Lenin buries the GDR's being with due dignity").<sup>23</sup> Similar claims have been made in other reviews: Kerstin Decker for instance argues that, "Die DDR hat ein Recht auf ein ordentliches Begräbnis" ("The GDR has a right to a proper burial"), and that Becker's film goes some way to fulfilling this requirement. Meanwhile, Gunnar Decker, writing in the former SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei – Socialist Unity Party*) organ, *Neues Deutschland*, sees the film as nothing less than a "Versöhnungsangebot an die Deutschen" ("An offer of reconciliation to the Germans"), before going on to explain its thanatological relevance: "man muss die DDR anerkennen, wenn man sie richtig beerdigen will. Beerdigen muss man sie, denn sie ist tatsächlich tot" ("One has to acknowledge the GDR if one wishes to bury it. And it needs to be buried because it really is dead").<sup>24</sup> Nor has the significance of *Good Bye Lenin!* to post-unification discourse been overlooked by the German government's *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, which considered the film of sufficient educational value to warrant publication of an accompanying booklet complete with film summary, background information and a list of suggested discussion topics.<sup>25</sup>

The film has, inevitably, been compared with the other post-*Wende* hit, *Sonnenallee*. But where the appeal of *Sonnenallee* was largely, if erroneously, attributed to *Ostalgie*, *Good Bye Lenin!* is frequently praised for an authenticity that apparently distinguishes it from the memories of the *Ostalgie*er. Becker's film offers an alternative to the remembered GDR of *Sonnenallee* and the absurdist state that forms the backdrop in the other Brussig adaptation, *Helden Wie Wir*. This is not to say that Becker and scriptwriter, Bernd Lichtenberg, have reverted to the standard dramatic template of the GDR as a state of victims and perpetrators, even if these do briefly figure in the narrative. Nor is their film simply an attempt to salvage the East German experience from the discursive wrecking of the GDR *à la* Haußmann's *Sonnenallee*, though its sympathetic representation of the protagonist's family goes some way to normalising the experience. As

<sup>22</sup> See for instance, Daniel Haufler, "Die DDR ist eine Baustelle", *die tageszeitung*, 10.02.03; Ekkehard Knörer, "Wolfgang Becker: Goodbye [sic], Lenin! Berlinale-Kritik", *Jump Cut-Magazin*, <http://www.jump-cut.de/filmkritik-goodbyelenin.html> [accessed 19.06.2003].

<sup>23</sup> Oliver Baumgarten, "Good Bye Lenin!" (review) *Schnitt*, [http://www.schnitt.de/filme/artikel/good\\_bye\\_lenin.html](http://www.schnitt.de/filme/artikel/good_bye_lenin.html) [accessed 19.07.2003].

<sup>24</sup> Kerstin Decker, "Das Wahre Ende der DDR". *Tagesspiegel*, 28.02.03; Gunnar Decker, "Viel-falt statt Einfalt", *Neues Deutschland*, 08./09.03.03.

<sup>25</sup> Cristina Moles Kaupp, 2003. *Good Bye Lenin! Film-Heft*. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

such, it approximates the complex process of remembering the GDR in a way that attempts to validate personal biographies, bringing some balance to the objectivity of official discourse. From the beginning the film seeks to acknowledge the GDR as a location of idealism and even achievement without ever straying too far from its much-publicized iniquities, a dualism that is one of its defining characteristics, and which goes some way to reconciling the dichotomy described by Dieckmann. The opening credit sequence (super8 footage of childhood holidays; picture postcards of recognisable East Berlin landmarks) together with the first scene establish precisely this kind of dichotomy: Alex Kerner, the young protagonist, is seen watching live coverage of the East Germans' successful 1978 co-space mission. Though this mission was of enormous propagandistic value, it was also a source of genuine pride and excitement for many East Germans.<sup>26</sup> But the excitement of this occasion and the sentimentality of the opening credits is immediately ruptured by the appearance of the *Stasi*, who question Alex's mother, Christiane Kerner, as to the disappearance of her husband, an apparent *Republiksflüchtling* (*illegal emigrant*). The GDR is at once defined by its rarely acknowledged accomplishments (in the guise here of folk hero Sigmund Jähn) but also by its agents of repression and abuse. Indeed, the fact that it was the GDR which could boast the first German in space will have come as a surprise to many in the west, who erroneously believe Ulf Merbold, member of the 1983 US Space Shuttle mission, to have been the first. In choosing this event, Lichtenberg and Becker thus touch on a sensitive issue, since it refers back to one of the GDR's proudest moments, one whose value and importance was, until very recently, at risk in the new Germany. Its significance had already been minified in contemporary accounts, as evidenced in the following extract from *Süddeutsche Zeitung*:

Zum erstenmal wird im Weltraum deutsch gesprochen, wenn auch mit sächsischem Akzent ... Der erste richtige Deutsche soll schließlich erst 1980 mit einem amerikanischen Spacelab-Raumschiff in den Weltraum fliegen (*German will be spoken in space for the first time, although*

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<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Jähn's preface to the Armeemuseum der DDR catalogue, notes, "Das Interkosmosprogramm der sozialistischen Länder, die zahlreichen Flüge sowjetischer Kosmonauten, die Erdumkreisung, die mir an der Seite meines Kommandanten ermöglicht wurden sowie die Weltraumflüge der anderen internationalen Raumflugbesatzungen sind ein Triumph der Theorien von Marx, Engels und Lenin und belegen sie in der Praxis" ("The *Intercosmos Programme* of the socialist countries, the many missions flown by Soviet Cosmonauts, the flight around the planet, which I was able to perform at the side of my commander Waleri Bykowsk, as well as the other international space crews are all a triumph of the theories of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and prove that these can be put into practice"). Günter Stephan (Leiter), 1983, *Gemeinsam im Kosmos*, Armeemuseum der DDR, 4.

*with a Saxon accent...After all, the first real German is not due to go into space with an American Spacelab-Rocket until 1980).*<sup>27</sup>

Frau Kerner's experience with the Stasi results in her breakdown and, following her recovery, her (rather perplexing) commitment to the socialist cause. However, her enthusiasm for the state should not be confused with devotion to the Party; indeed, Becker and Lichtenberg's script is keen to divorce the two. So while she involves herself in a kind of folksy socialism – singing songs and helping neighbours – her character is never directly associated with the SED, a lack of involvement at Party level that is not adequately explained. Her attitude, it seems, is one of genuine selfless commitment to the cause – her muted response to receiving an *Urkunde* (*commendation*) offers evidence of an idealism that seeks no reward. However, her beliefs are revealed as unrealistic, her philanthropy as unique and untypical of the GDR. Apparently oblivious to the realities of *real existierender Sozialismus* (*real existing socialism*), she criticizes her son's apathy and disenchantment. That it is she who has little sense of how the GDR actually is (as Becker and Lichtenberg would have it), is made clear in sudden and dramatic fashion on the eve of the GDR's fortieth year anniversary. En route to an awards ceremony she witnesses the *Volkspolizei's* (*People's police*) brutal treatment of the demonstrators, and on seeing that her son is among them, suffers a heart attack. The ensuing eight-month coma absents her from the GDR's most dramatic moment, as the state, into which she has put so much energy and time, is dissolved and preparations for unification are made.

Where his mother showed tacit support for the state, Alex's attitude was one of scepticism and weary disillusionment with the gerontocracy. Despite this, his attendance at one of the demonstrations offers no evidence of political or ideological conviction. Though the voice-over gives an ironic account of that event, referring to the spontaneous "Abendspaziergang" ("evening stroll"), the scene does little to convince the viewer of his commitment to regime change. Instead, his manner is more suggestive of an apathetic teenager, sauntering along in the crowd whilst chanting subversive slogans between bites on his apple.<sup>28</sup> Later,

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Kathrin Bosien's review of Horst Hoffmann's *Der fliegende Vogtländer*. [http://www.luiseberlin.de/Lesezei/Blz00\\_11/text29.htm](http://www.luiseberlin.de/Lesezei/Blz00_11/text29.htm) [accessed 15.07.2003]. Interest in Jähn has coincided with the recent 25<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of his flight. Writing in *Dresdener Neueste Nachrichten*, Philipp v. Wilcke described the Cosmonaut as "unser gesamtdeutscher Weltraumheld" ("our all German space-hero") (26.08.03. "Zu Sigmund Jahn. Erster für alle").

<sup>28</sup> His lackadaisical commitment to the demonstration is significant as it encroaches on the courage and spirit of the original demonstrators. Thomas Ahbe has made the point, "Dass die "Helden-Geschichte" von der demokratischen Revolution der Ostdeutschen, ihre Utopien und Werte nicht in den Mythenbestand des vereinigten Deutschlands aufgenommen werden bedeutet auch, dass die Ostdeutschen als Gruppe nur halb in die politische Kultur des vereinigten Deutschlands aufgenommen sind." ("The fact that the "heroic-story" of the east German revo-

despite the trauma associated with his mother's condition, Alex enthusiastically embraces the recreational opportunities available to him in the now open city. The consequences of the SED's implosion and the GDR's sudden sovereignty crisis are quickly passed over. The few moderately negative features of the *Wende* are only briefly commented on: the closure of the workshop where Alex is employed; his sister's switch from economics student to *Burger King* waitress; later their futile attempt to exchange their East German savings for the new currency. These are more than compensated for by the new freedoms that the changes bring and by the escape that the western market offers from the inelegant clothes and unstylish furniture of the GDR, opportunities his sister is keen to embrace. The *Wende* may not be without its problems according to Becker and Lichtenberg's thesis, but its negative aspects are clearly disproportionate to its many benefits.

It is Frau Kerner's recovery from her coma that in a sense threatens their happy dalliance with capitalism. Her condition – a weak heart but firm ideological convictions – is deemed insufficiently strong to withstand the shock of sudden introduction to this new Germany. In order to protect his mother from a potentially fatal exposure to the reality of events Alex conspires to recreate the GDR “auf 79qm” (“on 79m<sup>2</sup>”) for his mother. How far Alex can succeed in this is the film's central conceit and gives impetus to the narrative that is pursued at a fast pace in a mixture of comic invention and social drama.

### GDR: “MINDESTENS HALTBAR BIS” ..?

Numerous reviews have praised Becker's film for recreating a credible GDR through its attention to detail.<sup>29</sup> Certainly the dated furniture and unfashionable clothes, consumer goods, like *Mocca Fix* coffee and the Bulgarian wine *Kadarka*, later, inevitably, the ubiquitous *Trabant*, all fulfil a visual checklist of the GDR. In part, the film takes the viewer on a journey through the not so distant past, peeking into Christiane's room as if it were in a stately home or museum, with Alex not unlike an exhibition's attendant, carefully ensuring that the display is not disturbed. Again one senses a kind of fascination with the ordinary daily reality of the GDR. The relics of its material and consumer past are summoned up for curious inspection, coinciding with the *mementoization* of the GDR,

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*lution and the East Germans” utopias and values have not been incorporated into unified German myth indicates just how the east Germans as a people have only been half incorporated into the political culture of unified Germany”) “Gruppenbild mit Banana. Aus Dem Kultur Almanach Des Vereinigten Deutschlands” Freitag, 40, 29.09.2000 (<http://www.freitag.de/2000/40/00400401.htm>) [accessed 17.10.2001].*

<sup>29</sup> See, *inter alia*, Bernd Haasis, “Wahrhaftigkeit statt Ostalgie”, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 14.02.2003. At: <http://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/stz/page/detail.php/367795> [accessed 22.4.2003].

a process that may be seen as a combination of the *Ostalgie* trend during the mid nineties and the continued *modish* attraction of the seventies and eighties in current popular culture. *Good Bye Lenin!* is hardly original in its staging of East Germany. Previous films, such as *Sonnenallee* and *Helden wie Wir* were similarly concerned with material accuracy, and even Becker's last film, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle* (1997) offered glimpses into authentically arranged east German homes.<sup>30</sup> Despite these films' similar chronology and their shared fascination for period detail, they each manage to retain an individual look. *Sonnenallee* in particular offers a highly stylized, though not unrecognisable GDR. The director's astute decision to set the narrative during the seventies (and not during the eighties as in the original script) capitalized on the lucrative rehabilitation of that era's fashion in our own – the flared trousers and seventies trainers all corresponding with contemporary youth culture. Hausßmann was keen to justify the intentional artifice of his film, whose *mise-en-scène* bears little relation to reality, claiming instead that he was interested more in creating an impression of adolescent life in East Berlin than in presenting a realistic account:

Der Ausgangspunkt war, dass wir die ersten sein wollten, die etwas über die DDR erzählen, was darüber hinaus geht, dass es Schießbefehle und Opfer gegeben hat. Wir wollten einen Film machen, der Alltagsgeschichten zu einem Kinoerlebnis macht<sup>31</sup>

(*The main point was that we wanted to be the first to talk about the GDR, to talk about something other than the orders to fire and the fact that there were victims. We wanted to make a film that made the everyday into a cinematic experience*).

In resurrecting the GDR as a location of ordinary lives, with its teenage protagonists interested in the familiar pursuits of youth – the usual configuration of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll – their film challenged the strictures established by the post-unification profile of the East German state. Equally, it offered a representation of East German youth that had no real precedent in the DEFA canon. The film's celebration of adolescent experiences in the GDR was misinterpreted by some as mere hagiography. One reviewer considered it nothing more than an "Ostalgie-Organ", even going so far as to compare it with the NS

<sup>30</sup> A couple of scenes make direct reference to *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*: for example, an uncredited Jürgen Vogel, who played the protagonist in the earlier film, is briefly seen among the group of arrested demonstrators.

<sup>31</sup> Kathrin Tiedemann, 1999. "Helden des Alltags" *Freitag*, 1.10.1999. At: <http://www.freitag.de/1999/40/99401501.htm> [accessed 17.3.2001].



“nationalistische Lustspielfilme” (“nationalist comedies”).<sup>32</sup> Others wondered whether the GDR was a subject suitable for comic interpretation at all.<sup>33</sup> The film came under attack from other quarters, too: *Help e.V.*, (the “Hilfsorganisation für die Opfer politischer Gewalt in Europa” - “Aid Organization for the Victims of Political Violence in Europe”), accused Haußmann of insulting the memory of the “Maueropfer” (“victims of the wall”), a charge that was brusquely dismissed by the director, who originally thought it a practical joke.<sup>34</sup> Certainly *Sonnenallee* revels in its assembled GDR artefacts. Cult products are on view throughout: *Club Cola* and the coffee substitute, *ImNu*, are strategically placed; GDR decor is carefully restored, complete with garish patterned wallpaper and clumsy furniture. The arrangement of these GDR signifiers is purposely contrived, creating a recognisable, if compositionally inaccurate GDR.<sup>35</sup> But *Sonnenallee* is not simply concerned with resurrecting the GDR through its material goods. For all the fashionable appeal of the GDR bric-a-brac that is on show throughout the film, the film’s widespread appeal and box-office success could be attributed to its celebration of youth in the GDR rather than the GDR *per se*.

Where Becker’s film differs is in the arrangement of the material goods, the products that have become signifiers of the GDR past. In restoring the GDR, Becker prefers realism to the flamboyance of Haußmann’s film – the “überwirklich re-halluziniert” (“hyperreal hallucination”) GDR as one reviewer described it – and the surreal visual arrangement of Peterson’s.<sup>36</sup> The details are arranged within a subtler composite, less “overcoded” as Paul Cooke finds them to be in Haußmann’s film.<sup>37</sup> Though similar GDR artefacts litter the two earlier films, their inclusion is visual, providing semiotic decoration and contextual authenticity. The author and scriptwriter, Thomas Brussig, admitted that the purpose of these mementoes was to stimulate happy memories. His description of this process as a “Wiedersehensfreude mit dem Inventar, mit dem man aufgewachsen ist” acknowledges a degree of exclusivity within the film, with only the eastern audience expected to respond to each of the GDR artefacts that are on offer.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Claus Löser, “Die Lümmel Aus Dem Spergebiet” *TIP*, 21/99, p 44.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, Kerstin Decker, 1999. “Soviel DDR war nie”, *Tagesspiegel*, 7.10.99.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Brussig, 2000. “Opfer politischer Gewalt haben ein Recht auf Wiedergutmachung”: *der Tagesspiegel* 29.01.00.

Peter Alexander Hussock, director of the organization has recently expressed similar misgivings about Becker’s film. See “Verharmlost der Film “Good Bye Lenin” die DDR?”, *Junge Freiheit*, 11.3.2003. <http://www.jf-archiv.de/archiv03/113yy07.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> The *Tagesspiegel*’s article banner “Soviel DDR war nie.” (Kerstin Decker, 7.10.99) reveals one reaction to this composition.

<sup>36</sup> See David Eniskat’s “Filmtipp Der Woche”, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 9.12.1999

<sup>37</sup> Paul Cooke, “Performing “Ostalgic”: Leander Haußmann’s *Sonnenallee*” *German Life and Letters*. Vol. LVI, No. 2, April 2003. 156-168, 164.

<sup>38</sup> Sandra Maischberger (no date) “Interview mit Thomas Brussig und Leander Haußmann”. [http://www.thomasbrussig.de/filme/helden\\_berliner.htm](http://www.thomasbrussig.de/filme/helden_berliner.htm). Though Paul Cooke has suggested

In *Good Bye Lenin!* the GDR memorabilia fulfils a more significant narrative function, becoming the *objets cherchés* and *trouvés* that occupy Alex, who hopes to provide his mother with tactile proof of the present, which is already the past. *Good Bye Lenin!* approximates the fetishization of GDR goods in Haußmann's film but the products here are not the decorative effects of a lovingly restored GDR but consumer relics of an inferior past, the clumsy packaging and unlovely labels appearing all the more drab next to the rows of shiny, new western products.

Frau Kerner's absence from the last few days of the GDR and her necessary ignorance of events means that the greatest challenge that the *Wende* poses for the Kerner family is not so much in adapting to the FRG, but in maintaining any connection with the East German state. This narrative conceit is elaborated in a number of comic ways, notably in Alex's quest to locate a jar of *Spreenwalder Gurken*, his mother's one request and the one product that eludes him for most of the film. When finally he does track down a jar, now housing paintbrushes, it is used as a nothing more than a vessel for Dutch gherkins, and delivered to his unsuspecting mother. The array of original GDR food products that Alex finds and arranges is not the only means by which he hopes to perpetuate the GDR. Improved biographies are hastily improvised for his sister's new West German boyfriend and for his Russian girlfriend. Even more ambitious are the mock *Aktuelle Kamera* GDR news bulletins that he and a colleague film and compile from old footage, and which seek to explain away various ideological discrepancies in the *Arbeiter-und Bauernstaat* (*workers and peasants state*). Later, his mother's disorientation after venturing out of the carefully monitored flat and into the street results in some surreal encounters. New neighbours from Wuppertal are seen moving their glamorous furniture into the less than glamorous apartment block; in front of the flats a second-hand garage selling BMWs and Mercedes has sprung up; and finally, in the film's most symbolic scene, a helicopter passes overhead, swinging a statue of Lenin through the air. These episodes necessitate even more elaborate explanations, with even the *Wende* becoming embroiled in Alex's scheme. History is inverted as his mother is led to believe that, in a typically humanitarian gesture, Honecker has offered asylum to thousands of west German citizens fleeing the right-wing mentality and repression of the FRG. The hermetic GDR that he has created and monitored as carefully as was the original is, for all the assembled East German relics, too unmanageable a project. In an attempt to put an end to these increasingly complicated schemes, Alex finally contrives to account for the GDR's dissolution, by having a Sigmund Jähn look-alike declared the new General Secretary, who promptly announces his decision to open the border with the west, the fantasist's perfect ending for the GDR: "Die DDR, die ich für meine Mutter schuf, wurde immer mehr die

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that, despite the specifically eastern references, "the film translates the experience of East Germans into a cultural language that West Germans will understand, thereby "normalising" this experience", 156.

DDR, die ich mir vielleicht gewünscht hätte.” (“The GDR that I created for my mother increasingly became the GDR that I myself would have wanted.”).<sup>39</sup>

## “ABSCHIED VON GESTERN” – A DIFFICULT FAREWELL

Given the significance of the period in which it is set, *Good Bye Lenin!* cannot but allude to a series of unification and post-unification issues. Yet, though it invokes the problems of adjustment faced by many in the east, it does so without actually engaging with those issues, seemingly unable or unwilling to flesh out the bones of its social critique. Several characters introduce grievances familiar to the transformation process, but their characterization generally slips into *Ossi* caricatures with the issues functioning as thematic banana skins for further gags. Though the caricaturing is reduced to only a handful of minor figures, Becker and Lichtenberg’s film ultimately conforms to an array of stereotypes familiar to the east/west discourse and other earlier *Wendefilme*. One of the most enduring of these, the *Jammerossi*, though not an established and culturally recognisable figure until some years later, is anachronistically in evidence in *Good Bye Lenin!*, as personified by Alex’s neighbours, Herr Ganske and Herr Mehlert. Their dialogue is restricted to nothing more than a few laments about the new situation. “So weit haben sie uns gebracht” (“This is what they’ve reduced us to”) one remarks on seeing Alex rummaging through bins (in search of the elusive *Gurken*). Another will confide to Frau Kerner that he hopes “dass alles so sein werden kann, wie es mal war” (“that everything will be as it once was”), a reference to both her condition and that of the GDR. Despite the significance of these issues to post-unification discourse, the tone of their dialogue, the obvious comic intent of their characterization – Ganske wears the morose expression of a basset hound – diminishes any sympathetic reading. A further example is provided in the form of Herr Klapprath, also a victim of the *Wende*, though it is the untenability of his party membership and position as former school director that is the cause of his downfall and ensuing alcoholism, a condition which is exploited to its full comic potential. He too is press-ganged into Alex’s scheme, resurrecting his former role as dutiful functionary to present Frau Kerner with a hamper of fine GDR delicacies/mementoes on her birthday, which is celebrated with suitably-attired friends and neighbours in a kind of proto-*Ostalgie* party. Unlike those events, which have been popular in the east since the mid-nineties (though the media attention accorded them is arguably disproportionate to either their

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<sup>39</sup> The GDR’s collapse has been subjected to equally strange explanations in other films. Both *Sonnenallee* and *Helden Wie Wir* wrest the state’s collapse from accepted and known historical accounts to provide alternative versions. In the former, its downfall is attributed to a song-and-dance routine across the border, and in the equally surreal and provocative explanation of the latter, the protagonist’s swollen penis distracts the border guards’ vigilance at a crucial moment during the demonstrations.

actual frequency or appeal), Alex's carefully choreographed get-together is prompted not by a sense of ironic celebration and cultural comradeship, but by the need to maintain the charade that he believes essential to his mother's survival. In fact Christiane does eventually learn the real version of events, though the film prefers not to focus on her reaction but instead briefly allows her a knowing role in Alex's fantasy.

The characterizations in Becker's film reveal an oddly ambivalent response to the issues that they represent. Their inclusion hints at broader anxieties aroused in the wake of the demonstrations, and confirmed by the massive infrastructural changes – the closure of many east German businesses and industry, the restructuring of public institutions. Again, the importance of the concerns alluded to is invariably sacrificed to comic interpretation. Only a trio of embittered or drunken old men laments the demise of the GDR; and when Rainer, the film's only *Wessi*, reproaches Alex with "euch Osis kann man auch nichts recht machen. Hauptsache ihr habt immer irgendwas zu meckern" ("it's impossible to do anything right for you Osis. Just so long as you've got something to whine about"), his grievances appear all the more legitimate, given his financial support of the family. By and large the familiar stereotypes are confined to the older generation. The pensioners show little enthusiasm for the future but a genuine commitment to Alex's charade in perpetuating the past. The younger East Berliners meanwhile, are given as eager participants in the *Wende*, keen to seek out and sample the exotic life of the west – we see Alex acquainting himself with sex cinemas, wild nightclubs and drugs – and reluctant to join what Alex's sister archly refers to as the "sozialistische[r] Veteranenclub" ("socialist veterans' club"). By contrast, her commitment to unification and to the future assumes a symbolic significance when she announces that she is pregnant, promising a suprarregional progeny that is unprecedented in post-unification film.<sup>40</sup> Their generation's attachment to the GDR is maintained only out of a sense of filial obligation, or, in the case of the youngsters performing *FDJ* (*Freie Deutsche Jugend* – *Free German Youth*) songs at Frau Kerner's bedside, financial reward. The east's famed solidarity has been quickly forgotten by the ex-*Pioniere*, and hardly missed.

Only Frau Kerner, around whom all the deception is constructed, is accorded a more dignified treatment. Given her multiple victim status, this is only to be expected: first, as the abandoned wife (though this is later revealed to be untrue: she and the children were to follow her husband to the west, but fear of reprisals held her back), who suffers a mental breakdown; second as the committed socialist and mother whose shock at seeing her son in the thick of the

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<sup>40</sup> Post-unification cinema seldom offers any "productive" union between east and west Germans. However a similar attempt at symbolism did conclude *Jan und Jana*, in which one of the young protagonists gives birth at an abandoned border watchtower.

demonstrations induces a massive heart-attack; finally she is a victim of her actual condition – she dies following a second heart-attack shortly after the official unification celebrations. Although the cause of Christiane’s death is clearly her weak heart, this conclusion provides a somewhat pessimistic and rather unsatisfactory metaphor. Her death symbolizes also the death of idealism, and specifically, the end of the socialist dream. That her idealism and convictions did not, could not correspond with everyday reality of the GDR is confirmed halfway through by her erstwhile colleague: “Ihr Idealismus in Ehren, aber im Schulalltag, da kann das manchmal problematisch werden” (“All respect to her idealism, but in everyday school life that can sometimes be problematic”), and finally in Alex’s closing voice-over:

Das Land, das meine Mutter verließ, war ein Land, an das sie geglaubt hatte.

Und das wir bis zu ihrer letzten Sekunde überleben ließen. Ein Land, das es in Wirklichkeit nie so gegeben hat. Ein Land, das in meiner Erinnerung immer mit meiner Mutter verbunden sein wird

*(The country that my mother left was a country that she believed in. And we let her believe in it until her very last seconds. A country which, in reality, was never really like that. A country which, in my memory of it, will always be associated with my mother).*

## CONCLUSION

The two earlier films, *Sonnenallee* and *Helden Wie Wir*, provided an alternative to the established view of East Germany. Both films went some way to rehabilitating the GDR experience, with, as Helen Cafferty has suggested, the “laughter produced by various levels of recognition, from familiar objects to joke-like structures [...] stimulating resilience in the face of a contemporary unification discourse that invalidates memories of the past”.<sup>41</sup> However, this reading of the past, which was both celebratory and irreverent, was a provocation not welcomed by all. The two more recent films by Stöhr and Becker continue the focus on the east German experience and the process of remembering the GDR but, unlike *Sonnenallee* and *Helden Wie Wir*, their films invoke the East German state in

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<sup>41</sup> Helen Cafferty, 2001. “*Sonnenallee*: Taking Comedy seriously in Unified Germany” 253-273: 265. In: Costabile-Heming, Halverson and Foell, eds., *Textual Responses to German Unification. Processing Historical and Social Change in Literature and Film*. Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter.

order to bid it a final farewell. Using Berlin's cartographic alterations as a metaphor, *Berlin is in Germany* illustrates how the east Germans' continued reference to the past will only compromise their chances for future success and the project of integration. In *Good Bye Lenin!* the GDR is perpetuated and accorded some fragile permanence through the obsessive efforts of a son out of love for his mother rather than for the defunct state. Though ostensibly sentimental, Alex's final summation offers a caveat reminding us that the persistent idealism of the GDR cannot be confused with its actuality. The past may be (re)packaged, bottled and preserved, but it cannot be perpetuated.