

## The politics of *Ostalgie*: post-socialist nostalgia in recent German film

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The word *Ostalgie* – a combination of the German words for ‘nostalgia’ and ‘east’ – has emerged in Germany over the last few years to describe a new and widespread cultural fascination with the former German Democratic Republic. Critics often dismiss or simply overlook the significance of *Ostalgie* due to the fact that this term is normally associated with popular culture and ludicrous products such as ‘The DDR in a box’, a novelty item that includes mundane souvenirs from the former GDR such as worthless currency or plastic egg cups, and sells for roughly twenty euros. Travel agencies have also begun to offer *Ostalgie* tours, and an *Ostalgie* theme park has been proposed for the Berlin suburb of Köpenick. Instead of representing a renewed interest in, or even a mournful sympathy for, socialism, *Ostalgie* more often appears to be nothing more than a passing fad or a means of commercializing and commodifying the last remnants of an anticapitalist regime.

Thomas Elsaesser points out that the *Ostalgie* phenomenon is also frequently associated with television, which shows how the former GDR has become a ‘media construction’ following the dissolution of the country:

It is also to television that one has to turn if one wants to know what has happened to the ex-GDR and its cinema. At first glance it looks as if it has disappeared without much of a trace. . . . But in another sense it is perhaps precisely the black hole into which the representations and representatives of the GDR have disappeared that obliges one to take a

1 Thomas Elsaesser, *The BFI Companion to German Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 14.

2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 21.

3 Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, nostalgia, and the postmodern', in Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor (eds), *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 195.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

somewhat different approach to the whole issue of German cinema/national cinema. . . . If ex-DEFA directors have found a livelihood on television, they have also inherited a task: to provide a kind of 'shelter' for their audiences' own sense of difference (from the West Germans). Which is why it is possible to speak of a new cultural artifact in the making: the former GDR as a 'nostalgic' media construction. The regional TV channels set up in the so-called *Neue Bundesländer* to present the ex-GDR citizens to themselves, often via in-jokes and self-mockery, are helping to preserve the memory of certain gestures and familiar objects, habits and locations, brand-names and household goods from Communist times. As social and psychic dislocation continues after nearly a decade of unification, the need for these constructions appears to become greater rather than to diminish.<sup>1</sup>

The close connection between the emergence of *Ostalgie* and the rise of new television programming in the former GDR is perhaps one of the primary reasons why this phenomenon has not been taken seriously. When Katarina Witt became the host of RTL's *The DDR Show*, for example, her appearance in a young pioneers' uniform (the youth division of the socialist party) confirmed the show as an apolitical celebration of the innocent face of the GDR. Rather than offering a serious political critique of the ways in which the GDR has been historicized, in other words, these programmes simply seem to revel in communist kitsch.

Because it is most often associated with popular culture and commercial products, *Ostalgie* would appear to provide a perfect illustration of what critics such as Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon have described as nostalgia's inherent failure to engage with history. Jameson argues, for example, that nostalgia represents 'an elaborate symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way'.<sup>2</sup> Hutcheon also suggests that nostalgia prevents people from engaging with history because it idealizes the past:

Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power. . . . This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire.<sup>3</sup>

Hutcheon thus concludes that 'nostalgia is less about the past than about the present' because 'the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past'.<sup>4</sup> Although Hutcheon's argument ultimately suggests that irony might provide the intellectual distance 'necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past',<sup>5</sup> Jameson and Hutcheon both condemn nostalgia itself as essentially regressive and naive, as a failure to engage with the actual, lived experience of history. *Ostalgie*

could similarly be interpreted as a sentimental whitewashing of the harsh realities of living under a totalitarian regime or, following Jameson, it may represent nothing more than Germany's inability to 'identify its own present'.

What these critics fail to acknowledge, however, is that despite the fact that nostalgia does not provide any critical distance from the past, it still retains the potential to foster a critical distance from the present. Indeed, this argument is already implicit in Hutcheon's own characterization of nostalgia as the projection of an idealized past that reveals a profound disappointment with the present:

Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed . . . in conjunction with the present – which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe . . . in other words, making it so very unlike the present. The aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present.<sup>6</sup>

6 Ibid.

At the same time that nostalgia brings 'the imagined past near', therefore, it also 'exiles us from the present', thus creating the kind of critical distance necessary to reflect on current conditions. It is this critique of the present, according to Hutcheon, that turns nostalgia into a force for imagining new social possibilities, as 'nostalgic and utopian impulses share a common rejection of the here and now'.<sup>7</sup>

7 Ibid., p. 204.

Hutcheon's argument echoes the work of several other critics and theorists, such as James G. Hart, who similarly claims that nostalgia represents 'an imaginative re-constitution of the past',<sup>8</sup> in which 'the hopes of the past as well as those of the actual present find a form of realization'.<sup>9</sup> Like Hutcheon, Hart also concludes that the nostalgic impulse 'presupposes a hope with respect to the present future',<sup>10</sup> and it is 'Precisely because the nostalgic world is the fulfillment of our present hopes' that 'we return and undergo its unique suffering'.<sup>11</sup> In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym similarly describes the potential threat that nostalgia poses to critical thinking:

8 James G. Hart, 'Toward a phenomenology of nostalgia', *Man and World*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1973), p. 402.

9 Ibid., p. 404.

10 Ibid., p. 410.

11 Ibid., p. 408.

It is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters.<sup>12</sup>

12 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), p. xvi.

Yet Bohm also describes an alternative type of nostalgia called 'reflective nostalgia', which 'reveals that longing and critical thinking

13 Ibid., pp. 49–50.

14 Ibid., p. 55.

15 Elsaesser, *The BFI Companion to German Cinema*, p. 14.

16 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 54.

17 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 296.

18 Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film', in Lester Friedman (ed.), *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 109.

are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection'.<sup>13</sup> Boym also argues that 'reflective nostalgia . . . has some connection to the loss of collective frameworks of memory', and it is thus 'a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future'.<sup>14</sup> Unlike 'restorative' or 'regressive' nostalgia, in other words, 'reflective nostalgia' stresses the importance of critical thinking and is fundamentally oriented towards the future.

Boym's concept of 'reflective nostalgia' provides an ideal description of East German *Ostalgie*. Despite its association with communist kitsch, this phenomenon also represents a form of mourning for what has been lost in the past and an implicit desire for political change in the present. In Elsaesser's words, *Ostalgie* represents a genuine response to the 'social and psychic dislocation' experienced by many East Germans,<sup>15</sup> and Boym even discusses the struggles of East Germans to preserve their traffic lights, or *Ampelmännchen*, as a primary example of 'reflective nostalgia'. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the government of the newly unified city attempted to replace these lights with new, western-style traffic lights. Although these lights possessed little to no significance prior to reunification, they have since become the single most recognizable icon of GDR culture: 'In exile or in historic transition, the signposts from the former homeland themselves acquire emotional significance. . . . Nobody paid much attention to Ampelmann before, but once he vanished from the street signs, he suddenly became a beloved of the whole nation.'<sup>16</sup> While such icons are often commodified in the form of kitsch (there are even stores in the former GDR that exclusively sell *Ampelmännchen* clothing and accessories), they continue to represent a very real need among a large segment of the German population to keep the history of the GDR alive. Rather than dehistoricizing and depoliticizing the GDR's past, therefore, the *Ostalgie* phenomenon seems to employ nostalgia more often as a critical tool to promote and enable an active engagement with the present.

Contemporary debates concerning the nature and function of nostalgia often focus on filmic representations. Jameson's argument, for example, was largely based on his critique of 'nostalgia films', which represent the past as a chain of empty stereotypes. According to Jameson, these 'films can be read as dual symptoms: they show a collective unconscious in the process of trying to identify its own present at the same time that they illuminate the failure of this attempt, which seems to reduce itself to the recombination of various stereotypes of the past'.<sup>17</sup> This claim was highly influential among critics of the British 'heritage' films in the 1990s, as these films also seemed to represent a false sense of national identity based on stereotypes of the past. Andrew Higson argues, for example, that these films display the past 'as visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films'.<sup>18</sup> While Higson admits that 'the nostalgic perspective always involves a dialogue

19 Ibid., p. 118.

20 Ibid., p. 119.

21 Claire Monk, 'The British "heritage film" and its critics', *Critical Survey*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1995), p. 122.

22 Pam Cook, 'Neither here nor there: national identity and Gainsborough costume drama', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 65.

23 Andrew Higson, 'The heritage film and British cinema', in Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 238–9.

24 Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: the Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 94.

25 Amelia DeFalco, 'A double-edged longing: nostalgia, melodrama, and Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven*', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 5 (2004), p. 27.

between the imagined past and a vision of the present',<sup>19</sup> he dismisses the possibility that these films might be capable of social commentary because 'The strength of the pastiche in effect imprisons the qualities of the past, holding them in place as something to be gazed at from a reverential distance, and refusing the possibility of a dialogue or confrontation with the present'.<sup>20</sup> These films were also championed, however, precisely because they raised important political issues concerning class, gender and sexuality. Claire Monk argues, for example, that these films are 'spaces in which identities (whether those of characters and nations within the film or the spectators viewing it) are shifting, fluid and heterogeneous',<sup>21</sup> and Pam Cook argues that the popularity of costume romances in general 'implies that the formation of class, gender and nation should be perceived in terms of a constant process of oscillation between identities rather than the achievement of coherence, unity and settlement'.<sup>22</sup> Higson himself later revised his own argument by adding that

several of the bourgeois heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s can be read as liberal-humanist critiques of the Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite present. Not flights from the present, but a return to a version of the past in order to comment on the present, to contrast the individualist and materialist values of Thatcherism with the values of the liberal consensus, making connections across social boundaries of class, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc.<sup>23</sup>

Subsequent critics have similarly begun to revisit American nostalgia films as potential sites of resistance. Vera Dika argues, for example, that *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) may appear to be nothing more than a nostalgic fantasy of what life was like in the 1960s, but it actually employs obvious stereotypes in order 'to reference the effects of the Vietnam War on a generation, with the enforced gaiety of the film set against this historical loss'.<sup>24</sup> Amelia DeFalco similarly points out that the 'self-conscious simulacral qualities' of *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002) 'eschew representations of verisimilitude and disperse textuality, casting doubt on any possibility of "real" history outside the film world', and the film thus presents 'a seemingly contradictory nostalgia, a double-edged longing that realizes and embraces the illusion of its own object'.<sup>25</sup>

This essay will employ a similar approach by arguing that recent German *Ostalgie* films show how even a seemingly pure, naive nostalgia might also function as a valuable device for critiquing the present. If the GDR has indeed become a 'media construction', as Elsaesser claims, then its representation in contemporary films can be seen as a privileged site where the legacy of the former country is actively contested. Although these films are not so much composed of a pastiche of filmic stereotypes or genres, they remain very similar to the British 'heritage' films in that they present an impossibly nostalgic image of a national identity that perhaps never truly existed, what Boym calls a 'phantom

homeland'. Instead of interpreting these nostalgic representations as politically regressive and conservative, however, I will argue that these films also incorporate a form of 'reflexive' or 'critical' nostalgia by addressing and critiquing cultural stereotypes associated with the history of the GDR and East Germans more generally, and they thus offer a valid criticism of contemporary attitudes towards the GDR and its often neglected socialist past. Rather than interpreting these films as evidence of a widespread failure among contemporary German filmmakers to identify and understand their own present moment, in other words, I will argue for a more productive reading of these films as a potential critique of the socioeconomic-political situation in Germany today. It is certainly more than coincidental, for example, that the *Ostalgie* phenomenon has emerged at a time when Germany is experiencing an economic crisis that has resulted in record-breaking unemployment rates and massive cuts in healthcare and education. This crisis is perhaps partly due to the tremendous cost of revitalizing the economy of the former GDR, yet in recent years the economic disparity between the east and the west has only increased. Seen within this context, *Ostalgie* becomes nothing less than a reexamination – sometimes playful, sometimes serious – of the utopian hopes and expectations surrounding German reunification, as well as their subsequent failure and the resulting disillusionment. The nostalgia for the east expressed in recent German films thus implies the moral bankruptcy of a capitalist system that has failed adequately to address current economic and cultural challenges, and it often reflects a more widespread desire to reevaluate the current state of a country that is still in flux more than fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The first film to depict life in the GDR in a nostalgic way was *Sonnenallee/Sun Alley* (Leander Haußmann, 1999), which was based on Thomas Brussig's novel *Am Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999). Set in East Berlin in the 1970s, the film tells the story of seventeen-year-old Micha (played by Alexander Scheer), a teenager with two driving obsessions: his passion for rock and roll and his crush on a girl named Miriam. Both of these interests entail considerable challenges. The music he covets is banned in the GDR, forcing Micha and his friends to discover creative ways of purchasing illegal records by the Beatles, Rolling Stones, T. Rex, and so on. Miriam remains similarly out of reach, and her relationship with a cocky Casanova from West Berlin is a painful reminder to Micha that he is way out of her league. Haußmann purposefully constructs this film as a universal tale of adolescent growing pains, not unlike *American Graffiti*. Micha eventually overcomes his teen angst and wins Miriam after she snubs her glamorous, wealthy western boyfriend. Micha's neighbours, who include Stasi informers, black marketeers, party administrators, young pioneers and rebellious youth, are also able to overcome their personal and political differences. By the end of the film the entire neighbourhood is miraculously unified through the power of rock and roll, and the climactic scene shows them dancing together in the

street, their movements perfectly choreographed to the pop hit The Letter.

Rather than providing an accurate depiction of life in the GDR, therefore, this light-hearted story represents a pointed attempt to characterize the former GDR in a sunnier fashion. In other words, this is not the way the GDR really was, but rather the way it has been transformed through the narrator's own nostalgic memories of youth. As Immanuel Kant argues in *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), nostalgia does not represent the desire to return to the place where a person spent his childhood, but rather represents the desire to recapture childhood itself.<sup>26</sup> This is clearly emphasized in *Sonnenallee* by the voiceover at the end of the film, presented by the now presumably middle-aged Micha, who characterizes this time, long ago, as the best of his life because 'I was young and in love'. This framing device reminds the audience that Micha's story is being told from the perspective of the present, and the film's levity is clearly licensed by the fact that the political system it describes no longer exists and is thus no longer in need of critique. This is certainly a risky strategy, and it would indeed be easy to accuse the film of promoting a kind of historical amnesia, of failing to make the audience more politically aware by ignoring the harsh realities of life in the GDR. For example, Haußmann's humorous approach deflects the seriousness of Micha's mother's attempts to abandon her family and escape to the west – a very serious issue faced by many East Germans. The problem of smuggling is similarly treated in a comical manner by depicting the regime's control as completely innocuous and ineffectual. For example, Micha's eccentric uncle from West Berlin regularly smuggles western products across the border, such as pantyhose and underwear, yet he appears to be engaged in such illegal activity simply for the thrill of getting away with it. And when Micha's forbidden recording of Wonderland's song Moscow is confiscated, it merely serves to highlight the incompetence of the police, who mistake the song for an authentic Soviet release. The quirky neighbourhood guard (played by Detlev Buck) endures a constant, comical dance of being promoted and demoted in rank from 'Herr Meister' to 'Herr Obermeister', thus mocking the title-obsessed and multi-tiered bureaucracy of the GDR. All of these examples clearly illustrate the director's own assertion that the private moments of peoples' lives are far more important than the political moments they experience.<sup>27</sup>

Several reviewers criticized the film for precisely this reason, arguing that *Sonnenallee* presented life behind the wall as a virtual 'petting zoo', and that the young protagonists were not in touch with the realities of everyday life in the GDR.<sup>28</sup> It was this reality that Brussig so effectively exposed and ridiculed in his novel *Helden wie wir* (1995), which tells the story of a young man growing up in the GDR who becomes a model citizen by joining the young pioneers, spying on his neighbours and eventually joining the Stasi. Like *Sonnenallee*, this novel similarly employs absurdist humour, yet its criticism of the state could not be more

26 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Volume I (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1798), p. xxxii.

27 This comment is taken from an interview with the director featured on the German DVD release of *Herr Lehmann*.

28 Rayk Einax, 'Aufguss', *frame 25*, no. 5 (1999), p. 19.



29 Elke de Wit, 'The sunnier side of East Germany', *Central European Review*, vol. 2, no. 9 (2000). URL: [http://www.ce-review.org/00/9/kinoeye9\\_dewit.html](http://www.ce-review.org/00/9/kinoeye9_dewit.html) [accessed 27 September 2007].

overt; Brussig even describes the fall of the Berlin Wall as simply another example of the East German propensity to conform – a herd mentality that was instilled in them by the state itself. The levity of *Sonnenallee* seems to suggest that Brussig's second novel lacks the political dimension of *Helden wie wir*, or that its use of nostalgia essentially negates any underlying political message, yet other critics have argued that the very notion of representing life in the GDR as 'normal' is in itself political. As Elke de Wit points out, *Sonnenallee* 'pleads for recognition from West Germans that life for young East Germans was just as valid'.<sup>29</sup> Haußmann's personal background would seem to strengthen this argument. Since he was born in 1959 in the eastern city of Quedlinburg, the film also seems to be informed by his own firsthand experience as a teenager growing up in the GDR during the 1970s.

There is certainly some truth to the argument that even the mere depiction of everyday life in the GDR serves a political purpose, as such depictions are indeed quite rare and many East Germans increasingly feel that their experiences are being erased from Germany's collective cultural memory, yet such arguments often ignore or simply overlook more obvious political readings of the film. There is a marked satirical tone in the film, for example, which exposes and criticizes westerners' stereotypes of East Germans and of the former GDR as a whole. Haußmann is particularly drawn to this cut-off section of *Sonnenallee*, for instance, because it lay directly on the border between East and West Berlin, and westerners could observe the eastern section of *Sonnenallee* from observation platforms that were set up on the western side. This neighbourhood was thus constantly under the microscope of western surveillance, and there are several moments in the film when western tour groups come to gaze upon the street's supposedly unfortunate inhabitants. Prompted by jeers from West German adolescents, Micha and his friends at one point angrily play to their stereotypes by threatening the onlookers with violent words and gestures. Micha and his friends also exaggerate the presumed clichés held by western visitors when they run after a tour bus with pleading, outstretched arms. One of the naive western tourists exclaims: 'Look at those boys. They're just like those people we saw in Africa.' 'It's so sad', responds another. This satirical commentary, as well as the sharp contrast between *Sonnenallee* and earlier depictions of life in the GDR, suggests that the roots of *Ostalgie* are not as frivolous or kitschy as they might at first appear.

The film also illustrates aspects of life in the former GDR that make this country actually appear better than contemporary Germany, which further suggests that the film's nostalgia might represent something more complex and potentially more political than Micha's simple recollections of youth. Throughout the narrative Micha not only describes his own experiences but also the GDR itself as a thriving environment where employment rates were high and everyone could afford housing and food. In the closing shot of the film, the camera tracks down the empty



30 Susanne Rost, 'Straße ohne Sonne', *Berliner Zeitung*, 30 April 2003, p. 24.

street and crosses the former border between East and West Berlin, which is now gone. By shifting from colour to black-and-white and eliminating all signs of life, this shot clearly suggests that the sun has finally set on Sonnenallee, and the uncertain future that lies ahead will be nothing more than a bleak and lonely night. This reference to reunification does not carry with it the promise of a better tomorrow, therefore, but rather the film's retrospective look at life in the GDR is clearly informed by the subsequent failure of reunification to meet the nation's hopes and expectations. This failure points to a deeper void in the present, and the reality is that life on Sonnenallee is far bleaker today than it was prior to reunification. As Susanne Rost points out, unemployment and crime have only increased in this part of the city since the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike Haußmann's film, which implicitly criticizes the present by explicitly treating the past in a nostalgic way, films like *Berlin is in Germany* (Hannes Stöhr, 2001) and *Goodbye, Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) address similar issues by examining the dramatic changes that have taken place in Berlin since reunification and the ways in which the past has irrevocably altered present socio-political conditions. *Berlin is in Germany* tells the story of Martin Schulz (played by Jörg Schüttauf), who is released from prison eleven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is revealed at the end of the film that his crime was actually an accident, and thus his imprisonment clearly illustrates the flaws of the GDR's legal system. His prison sentence also seems to function as a metaphor for the GDR itself, as the fall of the Wall effectively allowed easterners to be 'set free'. But the film's main focus is on Berlin and the radical changes that have occurred in that city over the course of the previous decade. Not only have massive construction projects changed the face of the city, but even the streets have been reorganized and renamed. The elimination of places like Stalinallee and Leninplatz, for example, provide obvious illustrations of the ways in which the history of the city has been rewritten to eliminate any trace of its socialist past, and the disorienting effect of these changes is emphasized when Martin applies for a taxi licence and realizes he can no longer navigate his own hometown. Martin is thus forced to study the layout of the new Berlin, but due to his criminal record he is ultimately sacked before he even has a chance to take his final examination. The film thus builds on the prison metaphor of the GDR by suggesting that former East Germans are like ex-cons who are now living in a society where they are treated as second-class citizens, often unable to find work in a free-market economy for which their training and education is considered substandard, even useless. The changes that have taken place in the country also parallel changes in Martin's own family, as his wife now has a new boyfriend and his son Rokko no longer recognizes him. Although these problems are all resolved by the end of the film, viewers are left to ponder the film's more disturbing social and political implications. The film's English title, for example, comes from one of Rokko's homework assignments, which

illustrates a shift in curriculum from Russian to English as the primary foreign language taught in the German public school system. This change is not only disorienting for Martin, as it crystallizes the new generation gap between parents and children, but also emphasizes the feeling that he is a foreigner in his own country. While Martin is happy to be out of prison and reunited with his family, the film ultimately suggests that the changes caused by reunification were far greater than anticipated and that they were not necessarily changes for the better, which resulted in the alienation and isolation of many easterners.

The notion that some easterners were disillusioned after reunification is also explored in *Goodbye, Lenin!*, which similarly employs a Rip van Winkle device to emphasize the sudden and overwhelming changes that took place in Berlin following the fall of the Wall. The film begins just prior to this moment, as a loyal GDR citizen named Christiane Kerne (played by Katrin Sass) witnesses her son Alex (played by Daniel Brühl) being beaten by East German police during a demonstration, after which she falls into a coma. She wakes up eight months later, but the doctor informs her son that the slightest shock may kill her. Knowing that his mother would indeed be horribly shocked to discover that the GDR has collapsed, Alex attempts to prevent his mother from learning the truth, and he resurrects the family's old GDR furniture in order to transform his mother's bedroom back to the way it was prior to reunification. As most of the food products manufactured in the GDR are no longer available, Alex also searches for old containers, which he then fills with newly imported foods. This search provides some of the most humorous moments in the film – moments that may be lost on foreign audiences – as the most mundane aspects of daily life in the GDR suddenly take on tremendous significance. In this way, it could be argued that *Goodbye, Lenin!* reflects and even contributes to the current fascination for GDR popular culture, as it reminds people about products like Mocca Fix Gold coffee and Spreewald pickles. Because the fall of the Wall also resulted in an enormous shift in fashion, as easterners quickly discarded their old clothes in favour of new western imports, Alex must search for old clothing for his family to wear. This also becomes a source of humour, as the family ends up modelling some of the most hysterically appalling outfits from the former GDR. Although the film takes place only eight months after reunification, the outdated fashion of these clothes seems to recall a much more distant past. Alex's sister Ariane (played by Maria Simon) expresses disbelief that she ever wore such clothing, even though her current clothes would not have been available in the GDR less than a year earlier. The film thus repeatedly illustrates the differences between east and west as a confrontation between the former GDR and Germany's post-reunification present, and Alex becomes a kind of archeologist sifting through the detritus of a vanished culture and transforming his family home into a kind of time capsule or living museum.

In order to create the illusion that the GDR is still functioning as normal, Alex hires local children to wear young pioneer uniforms and sing traditional songs for his mother, who used to conduct a young pioneer choir. Because the current television news would be too shocking for his mother, Alex also produces his own fake news broadcasts with the help of his friend Denis (played by Florian Lukas). When an advertisement for Coca-Cola goes up directly outside his mother's window, Alex even accommodates this potentially shocking change by faking a news report that claims Coca-Cola was actually invented in the GDR. Alex's broadcasts thus allow him to reinvent the country's history, and as the film goes on this reinvention increasingly diverges from reality. For example, after Christiane unexpectedly leaves the confines of her controlled environment and takes a walk outside, during which she witnesses a large number of westerners living in her neighbourhood, Alex creates another news story, claiming that Erich Honecker has agreed to take in West German refugees disillusioned with capitalism. Through this conscious play of simulation and representation, Alex's idealized depiction of life in the former GDR gradually becomes completely removed from actual, lived reality, and Alex himself begins to realize that he is not recreating the GDR as it was, but rather as he would have liked it to be. By editing the history of the GDR, in other words, Alex is effectively editing his own country's cultural memory, and the sanitized version of the GDR that finally emerges on his television screen represents a pure product of his own nostalgia. At the end of the film, he even reedits the footage of the fall of the Berlin Wall such that the collapse of the GDR represents the ultimate achievement of socialism rather than its last great failure.

By refusing to address the more serious and disturbing aspects of the GDR, however, Becker's film has been frequently criticized for its apparently apolitical stance. Anna Funder argues, for example, that the film obscures the fact that the GDR was a totalitarian regime employing the most sinister methods of surveillance to control and manipulate its citizens.<sup>31</sup> Becker justifies this oversight by focusing on the universal appeal of the film rather than its specific social and political context, claiming that the film can be 'totally separated from this specific past'.<sup>32</sup> Becker also rejects the idea that this film has anything to do with *Ostalgie* because it is equally as popular in the west as in the east. Katrin Sass, a veteran of the East German DEFA film studio, also claims that 'it is not a film about the fall of the Wall. . . . It's about a mother and a son, a family. It's a story the audience should be able to relate to with or without the historical background'.<sup>33</sup> This interpretation has also been reinforced in the international press, whose reviewers often seem to be both unfamiliar with the film's historical background and oblivious to the *Ostalgie* phenomenon in general. In his review of *Goodbye, Lenin!* in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, for example, Roger Ebert writes: '*Goodbye, Lenin!* . . . never quite addresses the self-deception which causes Christiane to support the communist regime in the first place. Many people backed it through fear,

31 Anna Funder, *Review of Goodbye, Lenin!*, *Prospect*, vol. 89 (2003). URL: [http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?search\\_term=anna+funder&id=5680](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?search_term=anna+funder&id=5680) [accessed 27 September 2007].

32 Dina Iordanova, 'East of Eden', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 13, no. 8 (2003), p. 28.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Roger Ebert, Review of *Goodbye, Lenin!*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 26 March 2004. URL: <http://www.rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040326/REVIEWS/403260304/1023> [accessed 27 September 2007].

35 *Ibid.*

36 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 61.

ambition or prudence, but did anyone actually love it and believe in it? . . . Imagine a film named *Goodbye, Hitler!* in which a loving son tries to protect his cherished mother from news of the fall of the Third Reich.’<sup>34</sup> Ebert’s inability to understand that there were indeed many aspects of life in the GDR that its citizens loved and believed in reveals a profound lack of attention to the film’s specific cultural context, yet he ultimately rescues the film from its allegedly misguided politics by stressing instead its exploration of universal themes concerning parent–child relationships: ‘The underlying poignancy in this comedy is perhaps psychological more than political. How many of us lie to our parents, pretending a world still exists that they believe in but we have long since moved away from?’<sup>35</sup>

It is certainly understandable that the filmmakers would want to distance this film from the more gimmicky overtones of *Ostalgie*. The characterization of the film as the product of pure nostalgia could easily reduce it to nothing more than an empty stereotype of East German culture or leave it open to criticism for being politically irresponsible. By representing young pioneers, Stasi informers and bureaucrats as harmlessly comic and largely ineffectual members of a now defunct state apparatus, the film clearly runs the risk of transforming the former GDR into a safe commodity much like ‘The DDR in a box’. The reading of these films as simply family melodramas with universal appeal thus allows filmmakers and critics to dehistoricize, decontextualize and depoliticize the film, yet this strategy fails to address more complicated questions about the political function of nostalgia itself. For example, Alex’s recreation of the GDR does not simply represent a conservative restoration of the past, but rather it also represents an idealized version of that past. In other words, Alex is also explicitly reassessing the country’s guiding principles and questioning what the GDR could have been had it had the opportunity to be critiqued and improved. *Goodbye, Lenin!* thus clearly illustrates how *Ostalgie* also functions as a form of political engagement, as it integrates a critical or ‘reflective’ nostalgia with the utopian desire to imagine new social possibilities.

This can be most clearly seen in Alex’s fake news reports, which explicitly acknowledge the ways in which the former GDR has been transformed into a media construction. While the news effectively illustrates national identity as a composite of media representations, it simultaneously exposes the malleability of such representations, and the end result is a self-consciously nostalgic version of GDR history that is not actually true but nevertheless speaks to the problems and issues faced by East Germans after reunification. These news reports also provide a perfect example of what Boym calls ‘countermemory’, a phenomenon that emerged in Eastern Europe prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Boym describes it as ‘a prototype of a public sphere that already had emerged under the Communist regime’, in which an ‘alternative vision of the past, present and future . . . was communicated through half words, jokes and doublespeak’.<sup>36</sup> This process involved ‘finding blemishes in

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 62.

the official narrative of history<sup>37</sup> as well as deconstructing the dominant political rhetoric. Countermemory is 'not merely a collection of alternative facts and texts but also an alternative way of reading by using ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, private intonation that challenged the official bureaucratic and political discourse'.<sup>38</sup> Countermemory thus recognizes that history itself consists of nothing more than representations, and it provides people with a humorous and light-hearted way of deconstructing official versions of national identity while simultaneously constructing alternative versions that are more closely connected to their own lived experiences. When Alex realizes that he is constructing an alternative version of GDR history that more closely matches his own personal sense of national identity, as well as that of his immediate community, his light-hearted and well-intentioned prank similarly becomes a countermemory that retains a far greater political significance. By restaging the circumstances surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example, Alex's final news broadcast clearly illustrates a desire to resurrect useful aspects of socialism that have since been buried under the weight of history.

The latest film that represents the GDR in a more positive light is *Kleinruppin Forever* (Carsten Fiebeler, 2004), which takes place in 1985 and tells the story of twins who grew up on opposite sides of the Wall. Tim, who lives in the western city of Bremen, is an affluent tennis star on the verge of going pro and his twin brother Ronnie, who lives in the fictitious eastern city of Kleinruppin, is a poor factory worker dreaming in vain of one day studying architecture (both characters are played by Tobias Schenke). The two brothers finally meet when Tim's high school goes on a field trip to the GDR and Ronnie's curiosity about the west leads him forcefully to assume Tim's identity and return in his place. The rest of the film chronicles Tim's attempts to return home and his eventual realization that his new life in the east is more complete and meaningful than the empty life he led in the west. While Tim remains critical of the GDR's political and economic systems, the film describes this gradual conversion as the valuing of personal relationships over political allegiances, much like Hausmann's privileging of the personal over the political. While many of the negative aspects of life in the GDR are represented in this film, such as the Stasi agents who constantly spy on Tim and his family or the blatant corruption he witnesses at work, the film focuses more on the positive bonds Tim develops with his new community. Tim's father in the west, for example, is a cold, self-serving and insensitive businessman, who mocks Tim's tennis ambitions and urges him instead to join the family firm, yet Ronnie's father Erwin (played by Michael Gwisdek) is a kind, warm-hearted man, who quickly becomes the caring father Tim never had. Tim's girlfriends conform to the same model. While his girlfriend in the west is depicted as wealthy, superficial and unemotional, his new eastern girlfriend Jana (played by Anna Brüggemann) eventually teaches him the true meaning of love. These personal bonds also have political connotations, as they illustrate

the ways in which interpersonal relationships in the west were created through materialism and the acquisition of capital, while those in the east were strengthened through mutual struggle and interdependence. The importance of personal bonds that override professional and financial security is also the basis for Tim's ultimate decision to reject his tennis scholarship and stay in the GDR instead.

Like Haußmann, director Carsten Fiebeler grew up in the former GDR, and he clearly set out to make a film that would inspire viewers to wish that they too could live in the GDR. His first film, *Die Datsche/Home Truths* (2002), was a far more brutal depiction of the hardships suffered by East Germans after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It tells the story of an eastern couple who are forced to give up their cabin in the country – their most prized possession – and are subsequently robbed during their last night there, in an allegorical representation of the theft of eastern culture following reunification. The fact that Fiebeler's second film is far more light-hearted has encouraged reviewers like Jan Brachmann to conclude that 'according to Fiebeler, the time for licking wounds has passed, and he strives instead to claim the right to view the east in a positive way'.<sup>39</sup> Brachmann also points out, however, that the story is told from a western perspective, which suggests that East German filmmakers are increasingly being deprived of their own voice: 'When a young director can only view the country in which he was born and raised in a partially loving way by adopting a western perspective, it is a sign of . . . dispossession'.<sup>40</sup> This argument certainly has merit, and the nostalgia in this film is tempered to some degree by the fact that it focuses primarily on Tim rather than Ronnie, yet Fiebeler ultimately subverts this western perspective by repeatedly switching back and forth between the east and the west, thus providing a detailed analysis of the many differences between these two cultures. While the GDR functions as an object of critical scrutiny at the beginning of the film, for example, the same can also be said of West Germany at the end of the film, as its negative aspects are similarly exaggerated and contrasted with the GDR's socialist alternatives. This is particularly evident when Tim manages to escape from the GDR and return to his previous home. The presence of his twin brother Ronnie, who has since happily assimilated into Tim's former life, serves as a virtual mirror that allows Tim to see more clearly what he once was. The extremely gaudy and extravagant lifestyles of the westerners – the clothes, the swimming pools and the overabundance of fruity cocktails – now appear as strange and foreign to him as the GDR did when he first arrived. Perhaps the most radical aspect of the film is that this shift in perspective is so subtle and convincing: while Tim's character ostensibly represents an initial point of identification for western viewers, these same viewers are gradually led to identify with an eastern perspective, and by the end of the film they are even asked to view themselves as easterners view them.

Like many of the other films discussed in this paper, therefore, *Kleinruppin Forever* illustrates a direct confrontation between two

39 Jan Brachmann, 'Buddelt euch ein!', *Berliner Zeitung*, 9 September 2004, p. 30.

40 *Ibid.*



opposing ways of life, and it employs nostalgia as a critical tool for evaluating contemporary German society and identifying potentially positive aspects of life in the former GDR that seem to have disappeared since reunification. It seems that this strategy was designed to speak directly to a particular historical moment, as the release of this film coincided with the fifteenth anniversary of the fall of the Wall, an event that generated considerable public debate in Germany about the impact of reunification. This debate allowed many former East Germans to express their dissatisfaction with the western model that had been imposed upon them, which was seen as the solution for all of the GDR's problems but which has only increased the economic disparity between the east and the west. By allowing eastern voices to be heard and explicitly criticizing the effects of reunification, films like *Kleinruppin Forever* clearly employ nostalgia both as a form of mourning for what has been lost and as a means for effecting political change.

It remains unclear, however, whether such utopian hopes will ever be realized or even whether such films will continue to be made. The recent success of *Das Leben der Anderen/The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), for example, suggests that western audiences are far more interested in the darker aspects of the GDR. This film depicts the Stasi's surveillance of a fictional playwright named Georg Dreyman (played by Sebastian Koch). Not that Dreyman is a dissident, but the Cultural Minister Bruno Hempf (played by Thomas Thieme) is in love with Dreyman's girlfriend and is looking for an excuse to place him in prison. At the end of the film, shortly after the collapse of the GDR, Hempf meets Dreyman at the theatre and notes that Dreyman has not been able to write since the fall of the Wall. He concludes that the GDR was not such a bad country, as the suffering endured by artists and intellectuals also served as a source of inspiration by giving them an opponent to fight against: 'What is there to write about in this new Germany? Nothing to believe in, nothing to rebel against. Life was good in our little republic. Many realize that only now.' By allowing the villain of the film to be the only character who voices any nostalgia for the former GDR, and by making it clear that the reasons for his nostalgia are obviously contemptible, Donnersmarck's film clearly represents an overt critique of *Ostalgie* itself. Reviews of the film frequently address this subtext. Reinhard Mohr, for example, claims that '*Das Leben der Anderen* is the first German motion picture to seriously tackle the GDR without expressing nostalgia for Trabis or Spreewaldgurken',<sup>41</sup> and Holger Lodahl similarly claims that 'after the GDR has been all dressed up and nostalgically represented in successful film comedies, *Das Leben der Anderen* finally shows the other side of the GDR. This film begins to fill the historical gap left behind by *Goodbye, Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*.'<sup>42</sup> Tobias Vetter nicely sums up this viewpoint by describing the film as 'an antidote to the *Ostalgie* overdose'.<sup>43</sup> Such reviews would seem to indicate that *Das Leben der Anderen* represents more than simply

41 Reinhard Mohr, 'Stasi ohne Spreewaldgurke', *Spiegel Online*, 15 March 2006. URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/0,1518,406092,00.html> [accessed 27 September 2007].

42 Holger Lodahl, '*Das Leben der Anderen*. Das nächste große Ding?', *kino-zeit*. URL: [http://www.kino-zeit.de/filme/artikel/4463\\_das-leben-der-anderen.html](http://www.kino-zeit.de/filme/artikel/4463_das-leben-der-anderen.html) [accessed 27 September 2007].

43 Tobias Vetter, 'Das Leben der Anderen', *filmrezension*, 21 March 2006. URL: [http://www.filmrezension.de/frame.shtml?filme/das\\_leben\\_der\\_anderen.shtml](http://www.filmrezension.de/frame.shtml?filme/das_leben_der_anderen.shtml) [accessed 27 September 2007].



44 Evelyn Finger, 'Die Bekehrung', *Die Zeit*, 23 March 2006. URL: [http://www.zeit.de/2006/13/Leben\\_der\\_anderen](http://www.zeit.de/2006/13/Leben_der_anderen) [accessed 27 September 2007].

45 This comment is taken from an interview with the director featured on the North American DVD release of *Das Leben der Anderen*.

another version of GDR history, but instead points to a more widespread cultural backlash against the *Ostalgie* phenomenon as a whole.

Evelyn Finger notes, however, that Donnersmarck's film is not a work of realism but rather a work of 'metaphorical hyperrealism' because it 'plays with our clichés [and] depicts images of late-socialist melancholy that seem to come straight from picture books: grey-brown offices, blue-grey interrogation rooms, artist apartments with creaking floorboards and worn out sofas'.<sup>44</sup> Donnersmarck conducted extensive research for the film, and he also cast several famous East German actors, such as Ulrich Mühe, who was previously under Stasi surveillance himself. He was therefore concerned that the story be as authentic as possible. However, in an interview conducted at the 2006 Toronto Film Festival, where the film received its North American premiere, Donnersmarck also discussed the colour scheme he employed in the film, which was designed to highlight and emphasize certain colours that people most often associate with the GDR. His goal was to capture the way the GDR exists in people's memory rather than the way it was in real life, yet he also added that this nostalgic memory of the GDR is more 'true' than the GDR itself:

We created a GDR that is in a way truer than the true thing. When Ulrich and I traveled through the former GDR and presented the film there before it was released, people would come up to us and say, 'Wow, it's incredible. It's exactly how it was, and you have so much managed to recreate that time.' And that's because in our memories things become stronger than they were and so if there was a dominance of certain colours, those other colours we almost forget about. And so in a way we've created a GDR that is truer than the real thing, that is realer than the actual GDR, and I hope more beautiful.<sup>45</sup>

It would be wrong to conclude, therefore, that Donnersmarck's representation of the GDR is more real or authentic than the representations in *Ostalgie* films; rather, Donnersmarck's comments seem to complicate the very notion of 'truth' and 'authenticity' in relation to filmic representations. While Donnersmarck's film does not express a nostalgic vision of GDR culture, in other words, the power of its representations are similarly derived from its ability to appeal to both the memory and the imagination of viewers. The very basis of Donnersmarck's conclusion that films function as imaginative reconstructions of reality would thus seem to strengthen the notion of nostalgia as a potential tool for imagining new social possibilities: just as Donnersmarck's film presents a 'hyperreal' space, in which certain elements of the former GDR are emphasized and others remain forgotten or left out, nostalgic depictions of the GDR similarly exclude or reimagine the more negative aspects of the culture in order to highlight potentially positive social changes that might be introduced in the present. While Donnersmarck's film could be read as a reminder of the dangers of totalitarianism and the critical importance of privacy laws, for example, *Ostalgie* films might also be read as a warning about the

dangers of completely ignoring the more humane aspects of socialism. Debates about the *Ostalgie* phenomenon must therefore move beyond the simple question of whose representation of the GDR is more valid or authentic and try instead to accept a plurality of different versions that speak to the hopes and fears of all East Germans, both those who felt oppressed under the old regime and those who continue to feel disenfranchised today.

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