

Really-Existing Nostalgia? Remembering East Germany in Film

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This article uses three German films—The Lives of Others, Good Bye Lenin! and Sonnenallee—to point toward multiple phases in the relations between Germans since unification. What these films afford is a way into thinking about the uneasy peace between East and West Germans—the roughly sutured underbelly of this newly ‘imagined community’ in unified Germany. Ostalgie, nostalgia for East Germany, is a central concern. The article argues for a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon than is often invoked—that is, an understanding taking into consideration the role of media and political discourse, institutions and dominant capitalist norms.

A man in a grey coat sits with headphones wrapped over his balding pate. He eavesdrops on the conversations of others, transcribing every plainspoken utterance.

A passionate woman exerts herself in the name of communism, investing in ideological conscientiousness after her husband absconds into the arms of capitalism. In poor health, the news of communism's downfall needs to be kept from her.

An adolescent falls deeply in love with his neighbourhood crush. In a bid to win her affection, he fabricates a dramatic diary—putting himself at the centre of political and social unrest.

The man. The woman. The adolescent. These three characters are the narrative centres of three films set in the German Democratic Republic (or GDR): *The Lives of Others*, *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*, respectively.¹ Each of these films reflects and has also, through domestic box office success, played a role in debates around the history and memory of this former communist state. In this sense, these characters each embody circulating ideas of the GDR citizenry: the sullen yet stoic face of bureaucratic repression (the Stasi); the once gleaming and hopeful, now fragile face of communist ideology; the nostalgic dreamer, conflating the political and the personal. Each of these stereotypes embodies what has been a dominant representation of the GDR at some stage over the past two decades—in the past nineteen years, the GDR and its former citizens have been understood in differently emphasised manners.²

Consequently, what these films afford us is a way into thinking about the uneasy peace between East (*Ost*) and West Germans—the roughly sutured underbelly of this newly 'imagined community'. In this essay, then, I wish to discuss the topic of East German remembrance, but with an eye to contemporary political conditions. I argue that the East German experience in cinema is part of a discursive production—embedded in a set of ideas about East Germany held by the West—but also one that falls outside the cinematic frame. I choose to discuss three films³ popular both in Germany and internationally, specifically for their value in ruminating on various doxa about East Germany. All three of these films critically intervene in the broader

debate about remembering East Germany—and intervene in the observed and labelled phenomenon of *ostalgie* (that is, nostalgia for East Germany).⁴ I will take the films chronologically—largely because they narrate a series of action-reaction events in Germany. Before I do that, however, I wish to discuss nostalgia, in order to problematise the general concept and its specific attachments to *ostalgie*.

NOSTALGIA/OSTALGIE

It is reported by Edward S Casey that a piece of graffiti in Paris reads: 'Nostalgia is not what it used to be.' This says a lot and opens a few gaps for thinking about the topic. One of the questions rarely asked by cultural analysis of *ostalgie* is a simple one: what is nostalgia? Is it: a state of being, that is an ontological homesickness; is it a kind of pathology or recurring error; is it a form or phase of mourning; is it a transient disposition due to circumstances; is it a mere passing mood, encountered at about three o'clock each Sunday afternoon? The common, everyday response, of course, is pejorative. Nostalgia is a longing for the past which buffs away rough edges, a kind of soft-focus history. It is, at best, diversionary and pleasant; at worst, wrongheaded and dangerous.

To complicate this with some more precise terms and reflection, we can propose that nostalgia is a feeling at the interface of individual and collective remembrance. It is often a personal mode of remembrance populated by items belonging to the 'collective'—that is, circulating goods and specific locations. It is often a compression of time and place, biography and history. As Casey writes: 'this paradoxical interplay of the definite and the indefinite in space as well as in time... gives rise to nostalgia's baffling combination of the sweet and the bitter, the personal and the impersonal, distance and proximity, presence and absence, place and no-place, imagination and memory, memory and nonmemory.'⁵ This is one of the chief reasons for its conceptual difficulty.

However, in discussing cultural forms—films or otherwise—we gain access to one juncture of the individual-collective interaction, be it set up in distinction or compliance with the common understandings of particular plots of collective memory. Refining further, we could say that nostalgia represents a mode of orientation to the past, an act of remembrance calling on social cues and individual biography.

To say this, though, is to open up another question elided by much discussion of *ostalgie*: where does nostalgia reside? Often, films and other cultural forms are invoked as ‘ostalgic’—but is it possible that a reel of celluloid or a book alone can be nostalgic? I will not answer this question here, but it forms a kind of background thought throughout much of this essay. I will return to it in closing.

One matter which recurs in the broader literature on nostalgia is the feeling of a deepening in its presence over the past thirty years in the West. To provide only a quick catalogue of the reasons given for this: we are embedded an overarching ‘postmodern’ epoch; we have seen the rise of visual, screen culture as well as the decline of long-running personal and institutional attachments through the individuation of ‘second modernity’; there is an amnesia in contemporary culture, despite ever greater digital archives. In many senses, then, according to these accounts, all three of the films analysed here are films of their time. For one, they fit within a broader movement of nostalgia films seen over the past three decades, a cultural mood about which Pam Cook’s writings on British and Hollywood nostalgia films makes us aware.⁶ And *all three* are undeniably postmodern nostalgia films in Jameson’s sense, rendering the past in a ‘consumable set of images’, ticking all the boxes he offers: ‘music, fashion, hairstyles and vehicles.’⁷ They carry within them an inventory not of ‘facts or historical realities (although [such a film’s] items are not invented and are in some sense “authentic”), but rather a list of stereotypes, *of ideas of facts and historical realities*.’⁸ In Jameson, of course, this links up to a broader denigration of postmodern nostalgia culture—denigrated for its purported lack of depth and its association with a crass commercial culture. This is a position which I do not wish to take up and which has already been widely critiqued. I would briefly note here, though, that both *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!* derive much of their comic value from dealing ironically and subversively with the very stereotypes they show on screen.

Thus, if Jameson’s description of the ‘nostalgia film’ on one level rings true but can be seen as problematised by at least two of the films discussed here, those films also underscore a problem with the negative cast nostalgia generally receives in the critical corpus. For one, these po-faced theories are inadequate in the face of comedic and ironic deployments of nostalgia. Yet perhaps the bigger problem with the dominant denigration is its paralysis on questions of the losses

to which nostalgia may be a response—even as it is laughing. At its worst, such a negative characterisation of nostalgia does not admit the pleasures nostalgia can offer—therein foreclosing a genuine understanding of the feeling, disregarding the phenomenology of the nostalgic. This confusion is understandable, as I have noted. Nostalgia is notoriously hard to pin down: ‘nostalgia remains unsystematic and unsynthesizable,’ Boym writes: ‘it seduces rather than convinces.’⁹ Across the diversity of understandings and interpretations, across its manifold attachments to the present and politics, nostalgia culture is saddled with a paradox, as Radstone has outlined: ‘While [on the one hand] nostalgia is criticised for its commodification of the past—for its transforming of the past into a publicly traded commodity—it is also [on the other] conversely criticised for turning social change into private affect.’¹⁰

So if nostalgia is thus swatted every which way it turns, how can we turn it into a productive concept? A number of theorists—from Linda Hutcheon to Foucault to a handful of lesser-known psychoanalysts—have offered relatively nuanced takes on the phenomenon. Psychoanalysis directs us to the essential basis of nostalgia: another version of the ‘grass is always greener’ modality, nostalgia functions as a necessary psychic buttress, a sunny counterpart to the ongoing disappointments in failing to achieve contentment. This is psychoanalysis in its anti-utopian mode.¹¹ Beyond such a psychoanalytic account, Russian-born US-based academic Svetlana Boym has given us a useful schematic for post-communist nostalgia in the characterisation offered in her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*. This dyadic scheme disarticulates divergent responses to the same impulse, to the seeking of comfort in the past—one of them unaware of its nostalgic gloss, one playfully aware of its daydreaming. Such a characterisation fits with the two dominant yet divergent critical accounts of nostalgia, but Boym valorises them in a way different from other writers: at one end, the consumerist and playful version of nostalgia, usually derided, is offered as a positive, or at least amiable and harmless, style of remembrance; at the other, a bracingly serious, politically valenced embrace of what we might sometimes call ‘invented traditions’ is held to be dangerous. To explain this distinction further: *restorative nostalgia*, for Boym, defies a linear conception of history in the quest to reconstruct a lost home, understanding itself as seeking truth and tradition. Dead serious, it reconstructs ‘emblems and rituals of home

and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialise time.¹² This is the type of nostalgia at the heart of much nationalism. *Reflective nostalgia*, on the other hand, circles the past in a wistful and ironic fashion. It dwells, ambivalently, on longing and belonging. It has no singular plot, ranging across dispersed places at once; ensconced in details, not symbols. Reflective nostalgia in this mode is ‘not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias’—it is more creative and useful than the common caricature of nostalgia would allow.¹³

While helpfully moving us away from commonplaces about nostalgia, this bifurcated scheme is limited in what it can proffer for the analysis of *ostalgie*. Boym is upfront in admitting that these two forms are endpoints on a continuum of nostalgia types. She also offers some illuminating examples of cases she sees fitting these types of nostalgia. Nevertheless, such clear-cut binary categories ultimately offer an all-too-easy checklist, a kind of shortcut to analysis. If we follow her model, the meanings and significance of these nostalgias—what might be called their politics—go unnoticed. As Radstone reminds us: ‘debates concerning the politics of nostalgia require analyses of nostalgia culture that differentiate between its varieties, and that attend to the specificities of nostalgia culture’s representations of the past, its strategies of address and its appeal.’¹⁴ That is to say, an analysis that merely noticed *ostalgic* phenomena and shifted them into one of Boym’s two categories would be deeply flawed—one must draw apart this simplistic ‘ostalgic’ concept, to name its parts, to precisely call it by different names, to notice different species, different attenuations, different imperatives. The journalistic tendency to conflate *ostalgie* pays little attention to these qualitative differences. German reportage on this score does, of course, vary from the warmly dismissive to the tabloid panic styles, but in some ways this just alerts us to the need to avoid the temptation to come up with similarly neat categorisations in an academic context. This requires reflection on the very status of nostalgia. One of the questions we should ask of these films, for example, is a complex one: what makes a film about memory and not history? These two terms—memory and history—form a binary which has structured much recent academic analysis. This is literature which I do not wish to navigate here, but the distinction remains worth keeping in mind: why have these films been classified as nostalgic? Are the films—as texts—nostalgic? Or

do they merely *depict* nostalgia? Are they not just more in a line of German historical dramas? If not, how are they different?

As I have already implied, *ostalgie* could be both of Boym’s forms at the same time. It can be postmodern capitalism’s ‘playful reappropriation of the everyday objects of East German culture’, be it the market in GDR pedestrian traffic lights or the Trabant car; or *ostalgie* ‘may be a reclamation of one’s own biography, recalling happy times that are excluded from those discourses that reduce life in the GDR to the experience of oppression’; or, perhaps in a more fundamentally political way, it can represent ‘an insistence upon a distinct set of East German values born out of the GDR past, such as a solidarity that challenges the supposed ‘Ellbogenmentalität’ [elbowing-out mentality—i.e. single minded pursuit of one’s own interests] of Western capitalism.’¹⁵ These three types—and there are more—interleave in manifold ways. Radstone alerts us to this complicated tenor of any nostalgia—the manner in which affect, politics, biography and time blur in a text or set of texts that might all too easily be cast as nostalgic. The question must always be: nostalgic for what, for when, for whom? And, if it seems relevant, to what end? In analysing these films, then, we need to be awake, all at once, to the textual specificities of film—that is, its address, its appeal, its narrative choices—as well as to the historical and political specificities of production and reception.

SONNENALLEE

A popular film about East Germany written and directed by East Germans, *Sonnenallee* is a singular work for this helmsmanship alone. The wholesale marketisation of the Eastern film industry during reunification had marginalised those GDR directors previously under the institutional guidance of East Germany’s official film production arm, DEFA. This meant a paucity of Eastern voices addressing topics of unification and life in the GDR. Both writer Thomas Brussig and director Leander Haußmann have engaged in filling-out the record of GDR experience. Brussig notably wrote the screenplay and novel versions of *Sonnenallee* and *Heroes Like Us*. He has been a forthright critic of reducing the GDR to simplistic portraits of despair, Stasi surveillance and boredom.¹⁶ Directing us some way to the position of *Sonnenallee* in the scheme of post-unification German history, the film’s screenwriter has said of the production: ‘I always said that it

was supposed to be a film which would make westerners jealous that they weren't allowed to live in the East.¹⁷

While we may debate the value of this ironic invitation to jealousy and envy, what is more salient here is that the invitation was taken up. *Sonnenallee* was a successful film by the language spoken in the marketised environment: the film sold over 1.8 million tickets in Germany in 1999. This put it in third place for grossing sales in its first year, lodged behind two Hollywood blockbusters.¹⁸ Part of the reason for this was its superficial fit within the foremost domestic genre of the era—the New German Comedy—plus a lineage reaching back to 1950s' Hollywood teen films (e.g. *Rebel Without A Cause*) and early DEFA productions (*Berlin Schoenhauser Corner* and *The Legend of Paul and Paula*).¹⁹

So what tale, then, does *Sonnenallee* narrate? Set around the eponymous boulevard in East Berlin—pressed right up against the Wall—it is the story of Micha and his high school friends. Ostensibly a tale of adolescent love, it plays this narrative for all its generic value—the stop-in-the-street beauty of its female love interest (Miriam), the pimple-on-the-forehead anxiety of its leading man. Running alongside this universal narrative are a series of only-in-the-East set-ups, all revelling in an anti-realist slapstick and absurdity. Wessis peer over the Berlin Wall. Tourists tsk-tsk at the poverty and deprecation. Rolling Stones records attract black-market sales. Trabis putter along the grey streets.

Sonnenallee plays to several basic themes: the tension between escaping and romanticising everyday life; teenage hormones; and maintaining personal—be it collective or individual—space free from party, Stasi and Free German Youth surveillance.²⁰ This last theme is where *Sonnenallee* derives much of its value as a critique of prior representations of life in the East. For many Western observers, perhaps one of the foremost battles for GDR citizens was that over the psychological and physical intrusion of the state apparatus. In dealing with this thematic, *Sonnenallee* humorously reinscribes negotiation and playfulness: pissing on the Berlin Wall, smuggling goods, or rewriting 'Die Partei ist die Vorhut der Arbeiterklasse' ('The party is the vanguard of the working class') as 'Die Partei ist die Vorhaut der Arbeiterklasse' ('The party is the foreskin of the working class') on a classroom banner.²¹ Its reality is less defined by oppression and fear than many other accounts.

Consequently, at the levels of both its depictions and its place in the discursive field, *Sonnenallee* is undoubtedly a reclamation of *life* in the GDR—although it carries moments of incisive commentary critiquing both the naïve reappropriation at the heart of some *ostalgie* and the hegemonic set of Western (German) capitalist norms presumed to trump those of the East. Its outwardly 'authentic' mise en scène—befitting Jameson's 'postmodern nostalgia film'—is pure surface, a purposively tacky cardboard set redolent of the cheap consumables associated with 'playful reappropriation' in consumerist *ostalgie*.²² Many of these items malfunction or barely function. This operates to circumvent the simple view of the past carried by so much *ostalgic* consumption—although some of this consumption, as I argue below, is not without its social import.

Sonnenallee thus occupies an ambiguous position within the field of *ostalgie*—a definitively reactive film, its existence is predicated on injecting life into a grim image of the East. It very much comes out of an *ostalgie* industry—it is a part of this field of commercialised, aestheticised renderings of an Eastern past. Yet *Sonnenallee* comes into being as a celebration of East German quotidian culture, precisely denying it as a space for grand statements about (East) Germany and Germanness. It judiciously—or perhaps cynically—weaves anti-Wessi and thus anti-unification critique into an ambiguous text. Drawing on their position, Brussig and Haußmann can appealingly recreate an East at once half-remembered and over-determined by the hegemonic discourse following unification—an East where *Ossis* mock the past and present preconceptions of Western tourists (by acting out the role of citizens under *privation* as a tourist bus drives through), where the security forces are embodied by a humorously misguided and gentle-hearted officer. The film, then, deploys a *subversive* critique of unification triumphalism by echoing the form and appeal of New German Comedy in a politicised space. One sees this with clarity in the scenes where those on the Western side of the Wall clamber aboard a viewing platform overlooking the favoured playground hang-out area of the teens. In these scenes, which imply but undermine an East-West dynamic of incarceration/freedom, the immured Other talks back: the *Ossis* jeer at and offend those standing on the platform. We can say of *Sonnenallee*, then, that it complexly blends familiar collective reference points for *Ossis*; common male adolescent experiences, and over-determined post-unification

Ossi clichés. All of this is done in aid of precisely challenging the attempt to establish a ‘plot of national identity’ based upon the West’s annexation of the East.

Sonnenallee, I argue then, is a *reactive* film in the sense of talking back to the context of its production—the dominant representations of *Ossis* in film and the media. *Sonnenallee* is an overdetermined corrective to the fundamental misunderstandings of the GDR in the first stage of unification. This pre-corrective moment can be considered the first stage of post-*Wende* life for GDR citizens, as Dominic Boyer puts it, entailing ‘the wholesale public discrediting of the social, cultural and political legacies of state socialism as criminal, totalitarian, and destructive of human integrity.’ During this stage—and persistently up to today, as we will see with the discussion of *The Lives of Others*—‘West Germans are often unable to imagine the GDR as normal life in any respect, and their imagery for the GDR tends to revolve around enclosure, privation, and bareness... East German life is construed in terms akin to what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life”.’²³ The response of a film like *Sonnenallee* may carry its share of *ostalgic* moments, but it ultimately seeks to redress this crude picture of penury and denial of life, to paint in some colour where a bleak grey had come to dominate. In light of the lost and rapidly de-legitimated GDR public realm, film—which so often creates and stages itself in distinctive worlds, historically anchored or wholly imagined—becomes a place to reinstate lost symbols and material existence or to re-enact lost community. Nostalgia latches onto such ‘memory traces’—whether on-screen or at a flea market—as markers of time’s passage and remnants of time passed.

GOOD BYE LENIN!

With *Good Bye Lenin!*, however, we get something else. In *Good Bye Lenin!*, an East German family is rattled by their mother’s (Christiane) collapse into a coma as the GDR itself heads for collapse. She is comatose during the Wall’s fall, emerging from the hospital into what is no longer the familiar GDR. Her doctor warns that she rests precariously on the edge of good health. The son, whose arrest at an anti-GDR rally precipitated her coma, is aware of his mother’s critical yet devoted attachment to the GDR ideology and goes to ever-greater lengths to keep her from realising that the country has crumbled.

More widely seen than *Sonnenallee*, *Good Bye Lenin!* is an important site of analysis for its popularity and the role it has subsequently come to play in propagating a history of the GDR: it had some 6.5 million viewers in its first year, was subsequently put on the German curriculum to teach schoolchildren about the GDR, and inspired a glut of GDR television shows.²⁴ Its very success had an impact in spurring another rash of *ostalgie*—although with different characteristics, as I will outline below. Central to both films’ popularity is what Kapczynski recognises in *Good Bye Lenin!* as ‘a conflation of personal and national history’.²⁵ This, as I have been saying, is precisely the juncture at which so much nostalgia is legible: the interface of individual stories and historic national settings.

What I want to draw some attention to, here, is the manner in which both *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!* alert viewers to each film’s position as a reconstruction of that past. In *Sonnenallee*, this takes the form of a fabricated diary and anachronistic language—where contemporary slang (talk of ‘Wessis’ and ‘Ossis’) is spoken in a historical moment prior to its coinage. In *Good Bye Lenin!*, Alex is reworking the entirety of the late- and post-GDR experience for the benefit of his ailing mother, Christiane. In a manner formally similar to *Forrest Gump*,²⁶ *Good Bye Lenin!* shifts between film stocks and interjects mediations to underline the *constructedness* of this world. It does this in early scenes of holiday footage, but more centrally in the falsified news reports produced by Alex. These news reports, made for an audience of one, are used to interpret current affairs through a fancifully cheerful GDR worldview—the fall of the Wall, for instance, being the triumph of communism over a failed capitalism in the West. *Good Bye Lenin!* here melds its fictional material to a template from really-existing GDR television (news program ‘Aktuelle Kamera’) and footage of people from the GDR’s past (astronaut Sigmund Jähn). *Good Bye Lenin!* ‘foregrounds the processes of reconstruction,’ as Pam Cook has written of *Gump*, ‘creating an amalgamation of past and present, documentary footage and fiction, which acknowledges the way history and myth are elided in national memory.’²⁷ Both these German films, then, are critically aware of their position as interventions into the construction of a national past, of their status as sites of memory and remembrance, of creating a GDR ‘*en miniature*’²⁸. Their ready conflation of personal narrative and mediatised history ought to alert us to this.

Moreover, *Good Bye Lenin!* comes into a world where *ostalgie* is an established and widely discussed phenomenon. If *Sonnenallee* responds to the first stage of unification, *Good Bye Lenin!*, I want to say, corresponds to the second. If through the first stage the former citizens of the GDR were denied agency as historical actors and were marginalised by the crude public disavowal of their ‘previous’ lives, in the second stage material culture purportedly came to domestically normalise them.²⁹ With this normalisation came some measure of retrospective humility from the West, but also a raft of (continuing) assumptions and power relations arranged around the East/West divide. After the Wall falls in the film, Alex tries to find former GDR goods to aid the fantasy world he is constructing to cosset his mother back to health. The film thereby positions its GDR characters as consumers foremost—Alex may *labour* for his mother’s benefit, but we see him do no other work—searching for the lost authenticity of GDR goods. After stitching East Germans into the position of consumers, the film is ultimately dismissive of, and jocular about, GDR goods; the positive critique (of materialistic *ostalgie*) is undermined by being framed in Western terms which necessarily require that GDR goods be dismissed for failing to meet Western standards.

Nevertheless, despite the comic tone of *Good Bye Lenin!*, which led to an easy assumption of political naïvety, it is perhaps the most politically engaged film of the three under discussion here. It is, for instance, more engaged in the political dimension of *ostalgie* than the emotive, affective and visceral characterisation of GDR daily life shown in *Sonnenallee*. Alex, in his attempt to nurse his convalescing mother back to health, goes to further and further lengths to keep her ignorant about the political changes which have erased her beloved GDR. This allows *Good Bye Lenin!* to foreground processes of political ideology and belief, as in the cited example of (re-)interpreting the fall of the Wall as the failure of the West. It also allows him to fall in love with the ideals of the GDR; he authors a GDR more harmonious and positive than it was, more in line with the on-paper ideals of socialism than their repressive reality.³⁰ Alex creates the GDR he would have *wished for*, he says in voice-over narration, the GDR described in its banners and slogans. He’s valorising what Lefort would call its ‘ideological enunciation’ over its ‘ideological rule’.³¹ What is in the film the overtly politicised space of the East, then, affords a particular engagement with politics which a popular film shot in the West

simply could not sustain. As Cooke writes, the East here becomes a ‘discursive space where [the film] can explore aspects of [political] nostalgia’.³² This is perhaps a localised and particular version of the ‘eternal return of the same’ suggested by Nietzsche and re-interpreted by Žižek: not the one-dimensional ‘past as it was’, but the past with all redemptive potentialities intact.³³

This, however, is really the central ideological confusion of the film: while arguing *against* a consumerist notion of society—through its implicit critiques of unified Germany and many Ossid’s all-too-easy uptake of Western values—the film is embedded in a dominant Western historicity that derides the GDR for its backwardness and its citizens’ (-as-consumers) unsophisticated lifestyle. In a sense, it is saying to former Easterners: ‘You’re busy buying *Spreewald* gherkins when you should be looking to the ideals of your nation’s founding fathers, using their vision to aid in reconstructing our unified nation.’ What this misses, of course, is that the majority of East Germans aren’t anywhere near the steering wheel, let alone within touching distance of driving their nation toward a left-leaning synthesis of capitalism and socialism.³⁴ (Although some have recently pointed to the new German political party *Die Linke*—or The Left, as it translates—as presenting such a synthesis.) And, what is more, it misses that this situation has been instated through a structural exclusion of Ossid from positions where such change could be effected by them: distrust of East Germans as backward, potentially authoritarian and repressive, seen in the West German obsession with Stasi witchhunts,³⁵ is endemic and prohibitive. *Good Bye Lenin!*, while admirable in other respects, ultimately does little to rattle this belief; its comic *ostalgie* is articulated in a dismissive register.

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

With *The Lives of Others*, director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck wilfully sought to redress a nostalgic consciousness of the GDR. The film—suggestively set in 1984—tells the story of a Stasi officer (Gerd Wiesler), who is assigned to eavesdrop on respected GDR writer (Georg Dreyman) and his partner, iconic actress Christa-Maria Sieland. The culture minister devises this plan to accommodate the ‘elderly hots’ he harbours for Christa-Maria.³⁶ While observing them for long shifts, Wiesler begins to sympathise with the intellectuals.

He leaves out certain aspects of their lives in otherwise thorough typed reports. He overhears their classical music, encounters the intellectual circle's interest in Bertolt Brecht and is slowly seduced by their cultured lifestyle: he sneaks into their apartment to steal a copy of a Brecht book. And so, with the book, begins his fall into a decidedly un-Stasi identification with the observed. He quietly aids their escape from Stasi charges. The end sequence of the film, set four years after unification, sees Wiesler flattered by the dedication to him in Dreyman's latest book, *Sonata for a Good Man*.

The trim, no-nonsense story is defiantly opposed to the two other films discussed here. In the publicity materials, von Donnersmarck consciously addresses himself to *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!*, calling them 'dangerous' and revisionist, 'portraying the GDR as a place of humour and humanity'.³⁷ He was, with *The Lives of Others*, to set memories and history right. The film 'shows East Germany "as it really was" [he said]. Although fiction, it "is truer than a true story"'.³⁸ The problems with this characterisation are discussed below, but it is worth noting that the film was largely received as 'truer than true', especially outside Germany.³⁹ It won the Oscar for Best Foreign-Language Film in 2007. (A US re-make, inevitably, is in production.) The mainstream association of the GDR with the Stasi was, thus, reasserted and reaffirmed with the worldwide success of the film. While the Stasi, the Party's 'shield and sword,' has never really gone away as the GDR's dominant figure in the Western imagination,⁴⁰ with *The Lives of Others* they come again to be the accepted, steely face of the GDR regime. This Oscar-winning film, as Garton Ash has pointed out, aids in adding 'Stasi' to 'Nazi', 'SS' and 'Auschwitz' as synonyms in the global vocabulary for Germany's past. 'Nazi, Stasi: Germany's festering half-rhyme.'⁴¹

As should be clear from the cultural context of *Sonnenallee* I outlined earlier, *The Lives of Others* is actually a *return* to earlier forms of storytelling about the GDR.⁴² Although suppler, more engaging and made with much more notable spark than these early attempts, it is not *courageous* or trailblazing, as was often claimed.⁴³ That many people felt the film to be addressing a lack is itself a telling moment in thinking about how the GDR is to be—and has been—remembered.

There are other problems in the film's make-up which dent its claims to veracity. Von Donnersmarck justifies the 'thickening' of the story as a necessary measure in creating art. Yet the film, widely

vaunted for its judicious depiction of the political apparatus in the GDR, is ultimately an evasion of politics. As Žižek has written, in *The Lives of Others* 'the horror that was inscribed into the very structure of the East German system is relegated to a mere personal whim.'⁴⁴ Biermann: 'there was absolutely no way that the Stasi would have been drawn into exercising their powers on the behest of a cultural functionary'.⁴⁵ Similarly, it is questionable that the Stasi, in the 1980s, would have focused its efforts on an up-standing, relatively loyal author. The prudish sexual ethics of the GDR are also incorrectly characterised.⁴⁶ In other contexts, these would be minor blemishes. Yet the programmatic aim of the film makes them revealing sites of elision and oversight.

While the commitments of storytelling to historical veracity are a complex, never-ending source of anxiety in film, these questions are heightened with *The Lives of Others* precisely because of the director's—and media's—claims to brusque courageousness. If the *ostalgie* in the previous two films was predicated, in part, on the gap between present myth and past reality, von Donnersmarck seeks to bridge the gap by being rigorously authentic about aspects of the past presented in the film.⁴⁷ This certainly includes a highly aestheticised, austere *mise en scène*, seemingly infatuated with the way the subdued palette of GDR greys, browns and greens can be lensed. Nevertheless, the *Ossi* majority is left in the place Boyer has suggested it was in the dominant view after the Wall fell: *Ossis* remain as those citizens who had their position as historical subjects dissolved by the unified Germany of the 1990s, abject and mired in their un-free past. What is more, in its prologue, set post-unification, von Donnersmarck presents himself with the possibility of engaging with the position of *Ossis* in unified society, but denies any critique of its manifestation. The absence of this critique, particularly for those outside Germany, may very well suggest a fully successful unification. Might we not be dealing, then, with a nostalgia of another type? A nostalgia based on notions of Western superiority? A return to post-war origins, a dismissive gesture of the East German experience as a grey irrelevance—except, perhaps, as an object lesson in malign oppression?

CONCLUSION

Might this have real effects? The phases and shifts in perspective

around the GDR described in this essay have occurred at the level of cultural representation. But they have a reality at an individual, day-to-day level too—often in response to current or preceding hegemonic representations. This continually unravelling ‘historicality,’ in Jameson’s phrase,⁴⁸ is a series of responses, circling one another, not fitting any neat chronology: Western triumphalism and Eastern consumerism yielded to depression and dismay, which yielded to defiance and resentment, which yielded to blame and resistance which yielded to.... Film figures as a condensation point for these responses, affects and psychical-political processes.

To return to the question I flagged earlier in this essay, where does nostalgia reside? Is it within these films, a kind of transcendental part of their *mise en scène*, lingering but immaterial, a dormant presence or dog whistle? Is it brought to these films by the viewer, activated upon reception? Is it the nostalgic voice of the director we see and hear, speaking back through the text? Or is it the cultural context—the interface of that which is depicted and the everyday world of the viewer? To put this another way: will these films always be nostalgic—are we reading immanent qualities—or is the reading contingent, a conjunctural matter of reception and direction?

There are other productive provocations to be made regarding nostalgia and *ostalgie*. One such question: is *ostalgie* really nostalgia? Has it been utterly misrepresented, misdiagnosed, mischaracterised? Are its claims too specific to be given over to the washes and waves of nostalgia? What if Edward S Casey is correct when he questions whether ‘nostalgia is not often a counterphobic attitude toward the past, masking our own anger or fear in regard to it’? As he goes on to note: ‘this would help to account for its high valorisation at this juncture in history (when we are so ambivalent about our individual and collective pasts) as well as for the ease with which it is exploited commercially.’⁴⁹ These are questions I do not answer here, but they remain challenging ones—and ones that remain all but overlooked in the German Studies literature so far.

It remains true, however, that *ostalgie*—understood in the way it has been historically used—is a matter of empirical concern. While nostalgia for the GDR is not the predominant position for that nation’s former subjects, reputable recent surveys suggest some six percent of the entire German population can be identified as ‘GDR nostalgics’.⁵⁰ This represents some four million people, tenuously

bound by their memories. Cynics may note that this is a sizable film market worth exploiting. Others would point to genuine ongoing structural disadvantage as its basis, a *problem*—both of recognition and redistribution—and an inequality in need of correction. This is a correction not to be found through repeated emphasis on the Stasi and a purported totalitarian socialisation or authoritarian personality. These films, in both useful and troubling ways, speak to such problems of social integration and politics in a unified Germany. ❖

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Leben Der Anderen*, Das, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006, *Good Bye Lenin!*, Wolfgang Becker, 2004, *Sonnenallee*, Leander Haussmann, 1999.
- 2 See Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia*, Berg, Oxford; New York, 2005, David Clarke, ‘Representations of the East German Character since Unification’, *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2002; Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR*, Arnold, London, 2002, ch 1; Dominic Boyer, ‘Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany’, *Public Culture*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2006, 361–381.
- 3 This essay is a necessarily curtailed and provisional response to the huge number of films produced in the past eighteen years—as Kapczynski has recently observed, ‘it is perhaps harder than ever to speak conclusively about the state of post-Wall cinema’. (Jennifer M. Kapczynski, ‘Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in *Berlin Is in Germany* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*’, *Germanic Review*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2007: 79. Nevertheless, these three films are not selected for purely arbitrary reasons, as I go on to illustrate in the remainder of the essay.
- 4 See Martin Blum, ‘Remaking the East German Past: *Ostalgie*, Identity, and Material Culture’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 3, no. 34, 2000: 230 for an account of the history attached to this neologism.
- 5 Edward Casey, ‘The World of Nostalgia,’ *Man and World*, vol. 20, 1987: 379.
- 6 Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, Routledge, London, 2005.
- 7 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, Verso, London, 1998, 129.
- 8 Fredric Jameson, ‘Nostalgia for the Present’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 2, 1989: 517. Emphasis mine.
- 9 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York, 2001, 13.
- 10 Susannah Radstone, *The Sexual Politics of Time: Confession, Nostalgia, Memory*, Routledge, London, 2007, 114.
- 11 See Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 2005, xxviii.

- 12 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.
- 13 Ibid., xviii.
- 14 Radstone, *The Sexual Politics of Time: Confession, Nostalgia, Memory*, 129.
- 15 David Clarke, 'Introduction', *Seminar—A Journal of Germanic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2004: 187-8. On the latter point see Clarke, 'Representations of the East German Character since Unification',
- 16 For an extended discussion of his work, see the following unpublished thesis manuscript, available online: Elizabeth Nijdam, *Stasi, Sex and Soundtracks: Thomas Brussig's Postalgia MA (Master of Arts)*, University of Victoria, 2007.
- 17 Press interview quoted in Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification*, 111.
- 18 Ibid.,
- 19 *Rebel without a Cause*, Nicholas Ray, 2000, Berlin - Schoenhauser Corner, Gerhard Klein, 1957, *The Legend of Paul and Paula*, Heiner Carow, 1973.
- 20 Gareth Dale, 'Heimat, "Ostalgie" And the Stasi: The GDR in German Cinema, 1999–2006', *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2007: 163.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Boyer, 'Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany',
- 23 Ibid.: 377. Also Andreas Glaeser, *Divided in Unity: Identity, Germany, and the Berlin Police*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000. For more on 'bare life': Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998.
- 24 Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification*, 128, 31, 44-77 44-77.
- 25 Kapczynski, 'Negotiating Nostalgia', 82.
- 26 *Forrest Gump*, Robert Zemeckis, 1994.
- 27 Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, 2.
- 28 Kapczynski, 'Negotiating Nostalgia', 82.
- 29 Boyer, 'Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany', 378.
- 30 Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification*, 132.
- 31 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2006, 10-2.
- 32 Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification*, 128.
- 33 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006, 193. Christiane is, like GDR intellectual and writer Christa Wolf, 'a reform socialist, who, although critical of the [party], has not lost faith in its original ideological project.' By having this utopian socialist figure at the narrative and affective heart of the film, the film idealises her perspective and thus necessarily sympathises with her. Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification*, 132.
- 34 Ingo Schmidt, 'The Left Opposition in Germany', *Monthly Review*, 59, no. 1 (2007)
- 35 Boyer, 'Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany', 374.
- 36 Wolf Biermann. 'Die Gespenster Treten Aus Dem Schatten'. Review of *The Lives of Others*. *Die Welt*, March 22 2006.
- 37 Quoted in Dale, 'Heimat, "Ostalgie" And the Stasi: The GDR in German Cinema, 1999–2006', 157.
- 38 Dale, 157.
- 39 See Dale for an account of the film's reception in mass media reviews. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film was used by conservative intellectuals
- to return to some familiar Cold War territory. William F Buckley, for instance, called it the best film he had ever seen. See J. A. Y. Nordlinger, 'Florian's World', *National Review*, 60, no. 6 (2008).
- 40 Dale, 'Heimat, "Ostalgie" And the Stasi: The GDR in German Cinema', 1999–2006', 161.
- 41 Timothy Garton Ash. 'The Stasi on Our Minds.' Review of *The Lives of Others & Das Leben der anderen: Filmbuch*. *The New York Review of Books*, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20210>, Online, 31st May 2007. One can note, too, that the winner of the Best Foreign-Language Film at the Oscars in 2008 was another German film, *Die Fälscher (The Counterfeiters)* [dir. Stefan Ruzowitzky, 2007]), an account of the Nazi regime. The rhyme repeats.
- 42 For accounts of these earlier films see Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood Behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany*, Manchester U.P., England, 2005, Leonie Naughton, *That Was the Wild East: Film Culture, Unification, and The 'New' Germany*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002, Thomas Elsaesser, review of Leonie Naughton, *That Was the Wild East: Film Culture, Unification and the 'New' Germany, Screening the Past*, (2003)
- 43 Dale, 'Heimat, "Ostalgie" And the Stasi: The GDR in German Cinema, 1999–2006' 161.
- 44 Slavoj Žižek, 'The Dreams of Others'. Review of *The Lives of Others*. *In These Times*, 18th May 2007.
- 45 Biermann, 'Die Gespenster Treten Aus Dem Schatten'.
- 46 Dale, 'Heimat, "Ostalgie" And the Stasi: The GDR in German Cinema', 1999–2006', 158
- 47 For more from the director on this, see Garton Ash, 'The Stasi on Our Minds'.
- 48 Jameson, 'Nostalgia for the Present', 523.
- 49 Casey, 'The World of Nostalgia', 376.
- 50 Sinus survey cited in William Outhwaite and Larry J. Ray, *Social Theory and Postcommunism*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2005, 37.