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**GOOD BYE, SOCIALIST PARADISE: REPRESENTATIONS OF POST-
REUNIFICATION NOSTALGIA IN *SONNENALLEE* AND *GOOD BYE, LENIN!***

by

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts
German Studies**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful for the opportunity I had to take on this project - especially during this chaotic semester of spring 2020. Never could I have imagined I would be completing my manuscript in self-quarantine and having a virtual thesis defense!

I would like to thank my committee chair Dr. Katrin Schröter for her guidance in my research and writing process, especially since I was undertaking a topic I did not experience first-hand but nevertheless was interested in since beginning my undergraduate studies in German. This thesis would not have been possible without her knowledge and direction. I would also like to thank Dr. Susanne Baackmann and Dr. Jason Wilby for their helpful commentary and suggestions.

To the students I have had the pleasure of teaching during these past few years: a few of you expressed interest in reading my thesis, so I appreciate the motivation you provided me to complete this manuscript! I would also like to thank my other colleagues in the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department who I have been able to work alongside for these past few years, especially Anna Adams, David Barnes, Marie Bellec, Cole Carvour, Christine Ellis, Ryan Gomez, and John Reinert.

A huge thank you to Andrew Leeth Holterhoff - I love feeling nostalgic with you and reminiscing on all the great memories we had meeting at the 2016 *Deutsche Sommerschule von Neumexiko* so many years ago. Thanks for all the love and support.

Lastly, thank you to my mom and dad for their unending support and help by reading over drafts of my manuscript. I could not have done it without you.

GOOD BYE, SOCIALIST PARADISE: REPRESENTATIONS OF POST-REUNIFICATION NOSTALGIA IN *SONNENALLEE* AND *GOOD BYE, LENIN!*

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the experiences constituting the protagonists' adolescence in East Germany as portrayed in Thomas Brussig's book *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*, Leander Haußmann's film *Sonnenallee*, and Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye, Lenin!* These narratives challenge assumptions that the phenomenon *Ostalgie* indicates a desire to return to the actual conditions of life in the former East. Using Svetlana Boym's work on post-communist nostalgia as theoretical framework, I argue that life in the East as presented in these texts exists as the protagonists' reinterpretations of their pasts. The protagonists develop nostalgia for their youth only after the country's dissolution. This alludes to actual difficulties faced by East Germans following the Reunification, including the lack of acknowledgement towards the East's socialist values, as well as the perception that the Eastern experience differed greatly from that of the West.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I will examine how the German post-Reunification films *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!* and novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* represent the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* and issues such as adolescence and filial love. In the novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and film *Sonnenallee*, the experiences of teenage protagonist Micha are characterized as positive and worthy of nostalgic recollection in spite of the various difficulties arising during life under authoritarian East Germany. While protagonist Alex in *Good Bye, Lenin!* is initially critical of the GDR and accepting of Westernization, he comes to associate life in the former East with the stability provided by his mother, a dedicated socialist. In this thesis, I will also explore how the films' and text's representations of *Ostalgie* contribute to a more thorough understanding of the reasons for this phenomenon's emergence.

I will begin by analyzing the concept of "nostalgia" based primarily upon Svetlana Boym's (1959 – 2015) study of post-communist nostalgia in her text *The Future of Nostalgia*. A former Harvard professor of Slavic and Comparative Literatures, Boym emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1981 (xiv) and considered sentimental feelings for her former home to be useless, since at that time, returning was out of the question. A decade later, after finally revisiting the former Soviet Union, she made the realization that nostalgia is not longing to return to a place, but rather a longing for a point in time. She writes, "...nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time...refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (xv). She believes it to be a part of the human condition, as it is a way of mourning "displacement and temporal irreversibility" (xvi) from a perceived point in time.

Nostalgia is a form of remembering¹ and an act of longing for the past based on an idealized reinterpretation of it. Being nostalgic is distinguishable from remembering or reminiscing because it is emotionally charged and dependent on the context of what someone experiences in the present. Nostalgia is caused by the temporal distance between present and past, thereby allowing for a feeling of loss and inability to return: “[i]n a psychoanalytic context, the meaning of nostalgia changes to become a variant of depression...a saddening farewell to childhood, a defense against mourning, or a longing for a past forever lost” (H. Kaplan 466). Boym describes it as an attempt to repeat the unrepeatable or materialize the immaterial (xvii); that is, a kind of futile longing. Nostalgia’s version of the past is evoked because it appears ideal in comparison to the present²; safe and removed from someone’s current anxieties. Triggered by negative or even distressing experiences, nostalgia offers a feeling of comfort to the individual when facing such difficulties (Baldwin, Biernat, and Landau 128-129). Specifically, an individual experiencing less-than-ideal circumstances is likely to become nostalgic for an earlier time in life since it allows for the ability to reorient oneself during periods of

¹ While “remembering” is a broad term that can imply the recollection of both positive and negative memories, it is far from an objective act. Astrid Erll writes that memories “...are not objective images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled. *Re*-remembering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present. Versions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation. Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of a person or group doing the remembering in the present” (8). As such, remnants of the past are recollected in a way that is meaningful to the individual.

² The term derives from the Greek words *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (suffering). The concept of *nostos* was introduced in Homer’s *Odyssey*, but the term was not coined until 1688, when Swiss University of Basel medical student Johannes Hofer wrote his thesis on the condition of homesickness (Boym xiii – vix; Sedikides and Wildschut 48; Schlipphacke 16).

instability. It is a “reaction to stimuli, primarily, loss of the familiar, presence of the new or strange, and secondarily, restricted liberty and significant lifestyle change” (Kline 80). From this idea, the phenomenon is not an avoidance of the present, but rather a coping mechanism³ in reaction to feelings of subjugation. Nostalgia for the East therefore functions as a form of counter-memory⁴ that challenges dominant and official discourses of life in the GDR.

Ostalgie, a term first coined by East German stand-up comic Bernd Lutz Lange (quoted in Blum 230), refers to a phenomenon that arose in reunited Germany during the mid-1990s following the East’s abrupt merge with the Federal Republic of Germany.

There was, as was expected, an initial inclination towards products of the West, since,

[i]n the ensuing euphoria over the unification of both German states it seemed as if the GDR...was destined for the rubbish heap of history...with the traumatic transformation of the East German socialist economy into West German capitalism, most of these products stood no chance of surviving the competition from their better-made, better-marketed, and snazzier Western counterparts and thus had vanished practically overnight from the shelves. (Blum 229)

³ Because of research on nostalgia such as Hofer’s, it was considered in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries to be a medical or psychiatric disorder and was noted in individuals such as soldiers and immigrants (Sedikides and Wildschut 48).

⁴ French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) describes the reaction to mainstream discourse as “counter-memory,” which refers to the perspectives of groups excluded from the dominant narrative. Foucault writes, “[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” (*The History of Sexuality*, 95). Counter-memory arises with the intent to focus “...on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives” (Lipsitz 213).

However, in the aftermath of the socioeconomic changes and subsequent need to integrate into a capitalist market (230), a need for familiarity took the form of a sudden consumer preference for items produced in the GDR⁵. Boym's work is especially useful in this analysis of *Ostalgie*, as a significant portion of her text considers the advent of nostalgia as it occurred in former Eastern Bloc countries during the 1990s. She seeks to answer questions regarding the role Westernization played in the sudden wish to "return" to the harmonious life as it was believed to have been prior to the transition to a new and unfamiliar economic system⁶. As will be discussed in this thesis, nostalgic preference for Eastern products does not imply a longing to return to life as it was under the political system of the GDR⁷. Nostalgia as represented within these films closely resembles what Boym designates as "reflective nostalgia" (49). Reflective nostalgia, which is often associated with an individual's memories of the past, is not above critical evaluation of the time and place so fondly evoked, suggesting that the nostalgic themselves is conflicted with this sentimental outlook of the past. One is aware that the "home" so affectionately longed for is far from ideal and their own memories of it are "ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary" (Boym 50). Boym's critical evaluation of reflective nostalgic sentiment is

⁵ Blum mentions in his text that in addition to the markets of Eastern origin more prominently displaying their recognizable brands from the GDR, Western manufacturers, too, have "(re)introduced" (229) such brands in an attempt to draw in Eastern consumers.

⁶ Boym describes the East German *Ampelmann*, or traffic light figure, as being a prime example of *Ostalgie*. Although barely noticed before the onset of Westernization, subsequent homogenization following the *Wende* caused a disappearance of the familiar figure. The *Ampelmann* "made the memory of the GDR everyday life homey and humane" (196) and began appearing thereafter on numerous East-related merchandise.

⁷ Boym categorizes this type of nostalgia as restorative; that is, it is a nostalgia evoked to further the idea of "restoration of [a country or culture's] origins" (43). Restorative nostalgia is apparent in nationalist rhetoric, as Boym lists notable examples of violent events in the twentieth century, including Nazism, as such an example. It "evokes national past and future...and takes itself dead seriously" (49).

crucial in the analysis of *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*, as they refrain from portraying life in the East as completely idealized.

I have chosen to focus on these two films due to the similarities in how they present everyday life in the East from the perspectives of the young male protagonists. Both films appear on the surface to be lightweight comedic films meant to pay tribute to the material artifacts of the East as noted in their *ostalgisch* product placement (Cooke 164). They were also the target of criticism claiming that their positive representation of life in the East erases the state's history of brutality, discrediting those who experienced the often-difficult reality of life in the authoritarian GDR. However, it should be noted that the films themselves are not *ostalgisch* products intended to further the notion that life in the GDR was an idyllic socialist state. *Ostalgie* as represented in the films is far more complex than mere post-*Mauerfall* idealization of the East based on its cultural artifacts. The narratives instead aim to lessen the phenomenon's association with aspects exclusively related to the GDR. The official and historical aspects of life under the authoritarian state is significantly reduced, but only to allow for a greater emphasis on that which is not limited to an East German experience. The films therefore seek to disentangle *Ostalgie* from its associations with GDR-specific elements, instead emphasizing that which is identifiable to people outside the East.

I intend for this thesis to contribute to academic research made on the *Ostalgie* phenomenon in relation to these works. Previous analysis made on the *Sonnenallee* adaptations and *Good Bye, Lenin!* has recognized them to be essential to post-*Wende* discourse, since they represent life in the East from a more personalized perspective. For this thesis, I have chosen to focus specifically on how these works intend to highlight the

similarities between East and West with their coming-of-age narratives comprising familial love, friendship, romance, and rebellion. In the process, *Ostalgie* is essentially distanced from aspects specific to the GDR.

The first chapter focuses on the ways in which the 1999 novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and film *Sonnenallee* represent the *Ostalgie* phenomenon, as well as how this representation contributes to a clearer understanding of its positive bias. The narratives appear as the nostalgic recollections of the protagonist, thereby allowing novel and film the ability to address misconceptions relating to *Ostalgie*, including the notion that nostalgia for life in the GDR signals a trivialization of the brutality that occurred there. This criticism arises from the *Ostalgie* industry's emphasis on eastern artifacts' novelty (Berdahl 192) and tendency to focus on that which was desirable – the socialist aspirations the country attempted to achieve (Berdahl 203). Boym affirms that the inclination to idealize the past is a feature of nostalgia (13), but also reminds her readers that this positive reinterpretation does not imply life was actually perfect. The *Sonnenallee* novel and film are examples of this, since common features of life in the East such as the restriction on items from the West and conflicts with corrupt state authorities are significant factors in Micha's experiences, often driving the narratives. But rather than allowing for the protagonist's life to be defined entirely by victimization and oppression from the higher powers of the state, these conflicts are similar to the general trials and tribulations experienced in adolescence. As mentioned in press material for the film, "[e]s wird Zeit, daß man darüber spricht, was die DDR noch war außer Mauer, Stasi und Zentralkomitee" (Cafferty 253). The positive aspects of Micha's youth take

precedence and Brussig and Haußmann thereby characterize *Ostalgie* as a nostalgia hardly different from that experienced by the East Germans' western counterparts.

The second chapter explores the role that post-*Mauerfall* westernization of the East played in the advent of *ostalgisch* preference. This alludes to the fact that nostalgia is often evoked in response to present-day needs (Boym xvi). Wolfgang Fritz Haug's text *Kritik der Warenästhetik* examines common tactics employed in a capitalist market, such as the importance of brand recognition amid an overabundance of choice. Such strategies would have initially allured East German consumers (178), but ultimately backfired and resulted in their return to trusted brands. The sudden preference for eastern goods serves as proof that the chaos and uncertainty in a newly reunified Germany (Staab 148) resulted in a sudden desire to return to the predictability of the "good old days." It has been shown that nostalgic preference is often caused by perceptions of unfamiliarity or a fear of the unknown (Routledge 2012, 453) and is considered an attempt to regain a sense of stability and continuity (Baldwin 129, Routledge 2010, Routledge & Juhl 2012). *Good Bye, Lenin!* makes reference to this phenomenon of nostalgic preference, albeit in a sentimental way.

Good Bye, Lenin! benefits from its narrative taking place both before and after the *Mauerfall*, as it more accurately represents the phenomenon's emergence in comparison to *Sonnenallee*. But similar to those works, *Good Bye, Lenin!* succeeds in characterizing *ostalgisch* longing for the past with a theme recognizable to audiences on a larger scale: filial love. The film alludes to *Ostalgie* with the protagonist's (re)use of discarded East German artifacts; Alex Kerner inadvertently recreates an *ostalgisch* GDR, but only to maintain a sense of continuity, as he believes it protects his mother's life from the chaotic

post-*Mauerfall* Germany. This suggests that the GDR regime is not *Ostalgie*'s object of desire. I argue that the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* characterizes *Ostalgie* as being less about an actual desire to return to life in the GDR, and more as a phenomenon that arose in reaction to the difficulties faced by East Germans during their transition to an unfamiliar Germany. This highlights the fact that it is common for one to experience longings to return to an earlier time in life, as it is often perceived as more desirable in contrast to the present.

Chapter 1

Ostalgie and Brussig and Haußmann's *Sonnenallee*

Introduction

This chapter aims to examine the experiences constituting protagonist Micha's youth in the GDR as portrayed in both Thomas Brussig's novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and Leander Haußmann's film *Sonnenallee*. This will allow me to consider how the novel and film engage with the concept of *Ostalgie*, as they were the first to do so (Allan 112, Saunders 92). In turn, this will disprove that the phenomenon advocates for the erasure of negativity and characterizes the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany, as an idyllic socialist paradise. I intend to argue against the idea that *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and *Sonnenallee* are mere products of *Ostalgie* that trivialize the experiences of those who lived in the East. They instead characterize everyday life in East Germany as relatable and worthy of fond recollection.

The narratives allude to aspects of life in the East likely familiar to those who grew up there. However, the plots remain accessible to readers and audiences on a larger scale, since many of these events are common to a typical coming-of-age story. This “present[s] an opening for East Germans to inject an Eastern perspective into mainstream cinema's narrative about the GDR” (Cook 525), therefore offering a nuanced understanding of what nostalgia for life in East Germany comprises without indulging in narratives of oppression and hardship. The main questions guiding this chapter include: i) How do the novel and film represent the phenomenon? ii) How does this contribute to the general understanding of *Ostalgie*?

Nostalgia and *Ostalgie*

As a form of remembering, nostalgia is a reinterpretation, not an objective or authentic recollection. Nostalgia “is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time...The object of romantic nostalgia must be beyond the present space of experience, somewhere in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped” (Boym 13). Along with the linear passage of time, it is important to note that the place evoked by nostalgia cannot be returned to because it did not exist as imagined in the present. Nostalgia evokes a reconstruction or reinterpretation of the past in such a way that it becomes completely idealized. Despite the past being reflected on fondly, it is not entirely authentic because it is longed for “...with tenderness and rose-colored glasses, yearns for that time or relationship, and may even wish to return to it” (Sedikides and Wildshut 49). The idyllic nature of nostalgia reveals its selectivity: “[a]dmittedly, the longing may be for a past that did not necessarily exist” (Wilson 303). Reconstruction and reinterpretation do not imply that the phenomenon is based entirely on fantasy; rather, this idealization of the past places only positive aspects in the foreground. Nostalgia for an earlier point in time would seem to cause feelings of melancholy, but the phenomenon actually serves to lessen feelings of loss or distance from the past⁸ through “psychologically comforting experiences” (Baldwin, Biernat, and Landau 129), thereby assisting the individual in coping with the present.

Ostalgie, which is the combination of the German words *Nostalgie* (nostalgia) and *Osten* (east), refers to a specific industry of post-Reunification nostalgia for aspects of

⁸ Nostalgia “takes the sting out of loss...[t]ime is irreversible, but the goodness that was serves as incentive for aspiration” (L.J. Kaplan 151).

life in the former GDR, most notably responsible for the revival of East-specific brands and other everyday household items⁹. This nostalgia has resulted in the revival and commercialization of GDR products (Berdahl 193). Unlike a museum's display, which is a more "'historical' (i.e. 'authentic') ... [practice] of collecting, displaying, or cataloguing" (Berdahl 193) artifacts, *Ostalgie* reinterprets GDR history by placing emphasis on the positive and novel. One such example is the "*Ossi parties*," often "featuring East German rock music, party propaganda songs (frequently remixed to a techno beat), and a double of the former Communist Party leader Erich Honecker" (Berdahl 192). *Ostalgie* is one of the more accepted forms of nostalgia in modern German culture¹⁰, but this does not mean the phenomenon is without problems. With *Ostalgie*, "East German products have taken on [a] new meaning...[n]ow stripped of their original context of an economy of scarcity and an oppressive regime, these products largely recall an East Germany that never existed" (Berdahl 198). In terms of GDR ideology, *Ostalgie* is associated with a greater emphasis on belonging and solidarity (Berdahl 203). This emphasis on the country's socialist aspirations characterizes the phenomenon as nothing more than a kind of selective amnesia (Cooke 134) at the expense of those who suffered under the regime. *Ostalgie* does not signify a longing to return to the conditions of life as they were in the GDR, but still has the potential to idealize life in the East. *Ostalgie's* focus on positive aspects relating to the GDR has left the phenomenon open to criticism that it "results in the trivialization of GDR

⁹ Such examples include the East German laundry detergent *Spee* and soft drink *Vita Cola* (Berdahl 197).

¹⁰ In German and Austrian cultures, nostalgia is often taboo because of its inclination to romanticize the past. In contrast, sites such as the Holocaust Memorial feature the mandate, "never forget" (Schlippacke 15).

history...which neither recognizes the dictatorial nature of the regime nor allows for its accurate historical appraisal..." (Saunders 91).

However, as nostalgia, *Ostalgie* can only be evoked through distancing from the past. This is the result of the GDR's dissolution and subsequent massive changes brought about by the Reunification and subsequent assimilation into West Germany¹¹. It is a phenomenon that is evoked following a loss of identity: "[i]n a society where productive labor was a key aspect of state ideology and where the workplace was a central site for social life, the high incidence of unemployment throughout eastern Germany has profoundly undermined many peoples' sense of self and identity" (Berdahl 198 – 199). Since nostalgia relies on the context of present-day circumstances, *Ostalgie* "tells us more about the present [with regard to relations between the East and West] than the past" (Berdahl 206). This re-evaluation of the East can be understood as a coping mechanism for East Germans in reaction to the aftermath of Reunification rendering much of their culture to be irrelevant or inferior: "westernization effectively made...[many East Germans] second-class citizens in a new state where many institutions and traditions simply vanished" (Bondebjerg 30). Therefore, only after the onset of perceived Western superiority did sudden interest in their former culture emerge, which implies that this nostalgia was not triggered by temporal distancing alone, but more importantly because of the difficulties arising from ideological and social differences between East and West. In the following, I will examine how the literary and filmic versions of *Sonnenallee* portray the protagonist's teenage years in the former East. These representations, in turn, allow the narratives to function as examples of why

¹¹ I will explore this further in the second chapter.

Ostalgie is similar to any other kind of nostalgia those outside the East would have for their youth. When analyzing *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and *Sonnenallee*, it is important to consider the aspects of life they seek to legitimize.

Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee and Sonnenallee

The novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* by Thomas Brussig and the film *Sonnenallee*, directed by Leander Haußmann, were released in 1999¹². *Sonnenallee* became the highest grossing German film of that year, drawing in 1.8 million viewers (Cooke, “Performing” 157). Both film and novel detail the experiences of teenage¹³ Michael “Micha” living in East Germany during the 1970s. Despite some slight variations, the novel and film both consist of multiple loosely connected plotlines that revolve around Micha, his family, and friends as they go about their lives in the often-restrictive GDR. Such plotlines include Micha and his friends sharing an interest in banned rock and roll music from the West; from this forbidden interest arises the climactic moment in both versions during which Micha’s friend Wuschel¹⁴ is accidentally shot by border police, only to be saved from the bullet by his cherished Rolling Stones album *Exile on Main Street*. Micha is also romantically interested in Miriam, who has a West German boyfriend. The Kuppisch/Ehrenreich family is often visited by Uncle Heinz, who is from the West but only smuggles items that are legal and already available

¹² The date of the film’s premiere, October 7th, was a conscious choice and marketing strategy since it would have marked the 50th anniversary of the GDR’s establishment (Cafferty 253).

¹³ In the novel, Micha Kuppisch is fifteen; in the film, Micha Ehrenreich is seventeen.

¹⁴ The character of Wuschel is introduced to readers as having been named so because “er aussah wie Jimi Hendrix” (Brussig 12). He is described as having no interest in anything other than music, specifically the Rolling Stones (51) and being moved to tears upon briefly hearing *Exile on Main Street* (55).

in the GDR. Micha also faces the prospect of serving in the *Nationale Volksarmee* longer than mandatory to study in Moscow.

Criticism directed at *Sonnenallee* following the film's release insinuated it was a mere *ostalgisch* product made to overlook the hardships of those who lived in the GDR. Reviews of *Sonnenallee* stated that the film is nothing more than an "Ostalgie orgy" (Dale 162) and "'wurde die DDR zum Musical stilisiert mit Erich Honecker als 'Fiddler on the Roof'" in which the 'reale Widersprüche' of life in the east have been covered up 'mit billiger Ostalgie'¹⁵" (Cooke, "Performing" 157). *Sonnenallee* even "famously provoked the organization *Help e.V.*¹⁶, dedicated to obtaining restitution for victims of political violence, to file a lawsuit against Haußmann for ['insulting'] those who had been persecuted by the regime¹⁷" (Allan 112, Saunders 92). Additionally, author Thomas Brussig stated, "[i]ch habe ja immer gesagt, das soll ein Film werden, bei dem die Westler neidisch werden, daß sie nicht im Osten leben durften" (Maischberger 22). Regardless of Brussig's own intention, it is important to disregard this and consider how the novel and film alone represent life in the GDR as experienced by Micha.

I intend to argue against the claims made in these criticisms. It is true that they allude to the phenomenon through their use of *ostalgisch* product placement¹⁸ (Cooke,

¹⁵ Hans Christoph Buch, 'Schönen Gruß von Charlie Chaplin', *Tagesspiegel*, 9 November 1999, 28. Cited in Cooke 157.

¹⁶ *Help – Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe e.V.* is a German humanitarian organization that aids groups victimized by political violence (Cook 157).

¹⁷ The suit was later dropped, but the organization maintained their criticism that "die Verbrechen der DDR-Diktatur bagatellisiert werden" (Cafferty 255).

¹⁸ The most obvious example is the appearance of the *Multifunktionstisch* in the family's living room. Micha's mother "asks the father to open up the 'Mufuti', to which [he] responds with confusion. She then repeats 'Du sollst den Multifunktionstisch herrichten!', thus drawing the audience's attention to this now strange East German [artifact]" (Cooke 163 - 164). Cook goes on to say that the film undermines

“Performing” 163), but *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and *Sonnenallee* are far more than mere products of *Ostalgie* and do not trivialize the difficulties Micha and his friends face. They describe Micha’s life in the East as mostly positive, but far from utopian. Any desirable qualities of life in the GDR derive from the protagonist’s relatable experiences. What forms the basis of his eventual nostalgic remembrance as an adult is likely familiar to those who grew up outside the East, such as anti-authoritarian rock and roll music, rebellious youth, and teenage romance. Various episodes present Micha’s life in the GDR as “normal” despite the extraordinary circumstances. Therefore, both novel and film compel their readers and viewers to realize that life in the GDR was comprised of more than struggles against the authoritarian political system. Aspects of the historical and political are relevant but incorporated only when affecting the citizens of *Sonnenallee* on a personal level. The author’s and director’s relegation of historical and political elements to the background in favor of emphasizing the private sphere provides audiences with an alternate perspective on life in East Germany. Therefore, I will argue that they provide readers and viewers with an understanding of life in East Germany not typically recognized in official and historical narratives.

The Role of Official Narratives in the Representation of *Ostalgie*

In this section, I will examine how the novel and film represent large-scale historical and political aspects of the GDR, as well as how they set the stage for *Ostalgie* to be understood as a phenomenon associated more with the personal and less with the

Ostalgie’s tendency to idealize, as Micha’s father humorously struggles to open the table correctly. Saunders adds to this idea, “[a]lthough eastern viewers will identify with these and similar items for their personal associations, their presentation only underlines the technological inadequacy and material shortages of the GDR” (93).

political. That is, the teenage protagonist's often-humorous interpretations of the historical and political are a strategy employed to de-emphasize the dominance of the official narrative. Emphasis on personal narratives allows for the recognition of commonalities between East and West, so both the novel and film "can be considered a plea for sameness" (Schroeter 137) despite the stark contrast of political backgrounds. Representing the historical and political in this way refutes the idea that the protagonist's experiences are completely defined by the fact that he lives in the GDR.

The first such example of how an experience with personal significance reduces an official historical milestone to a smaller scale occurs at the beginning of the novel. In this scene, Micha considers the events that resulted in his being born on the eastern end of Sonnenallee. He laments the fact that he could have been born in the West but is ultimately born an "Ossi" because of an insignificant interaction between "The Big Three" at the Potsdam Conference. He imagines the street Sonnenallee as a source of conflict during this negotiation: "[er] konnte sich gut vorstellen, daß auch auf der Potsdamer Konferenz im Sommer 1945...die Erwähnung der Sonnenallee etwas bewirkte...[d]ie Straße mit dem schönen Namen Sonnenallee wollte Stalin nicht den Amerikanern überlassen" (Brussig 7). He guesses that if Churchill had not let his cigar go out, Stalin would not have re-lit it for him and would not have received the shorter end of Sonnenallee in return for this small favor:

"So muß es gewesen sein, dachte Michael Kuppisch. Wie sonst konnte eine so lange Straße so kurz vor dem Ende noch geteilt sein? Und manchmal dachte er auch: Wenn der blöde Churchill auf seine Zigarre aufgepasst hätte, würden wir heute im Westen leben." (8)

Micha envisions that such an insignificant gesture at the Potsdam Conference directly resulted in the GDR's ownership of the avenue. This scene reveals how Micha understands his life on the East side of Sonnenallee in relation to the higher powers who decided his fate. The opening pages demonstrate that although the division of Germany is undoubtedly a prominent historical event necessary in providing context, it is only relevant to the narrative because of the effect it has on the protagonist's own life. Through this speculation, the official narrative of the Potsdam conference is personalized. Micha's speculation about the events at the Potsdam Conference is a strategy by which Brussig illustrates how Micha, still only a teenager, understands the political aspects of the GDR only insofar as they relate to his life trapped within the East.

Following the film's opening credits, a scene directs the audience's perspective on life behind the Wall away from an official narrative and shifts it towards a personalized narrative. Viewers are provided a brief glimpse of a heavily guarded point of entry into the East before the camera moves upwards, revealing a West German-built observation platform directly overlooking the East¹⁹. Micha describes this platform in a voiceover: "die Westler hatten Hochstände gebaut, um uns zu demütigen." West German teenagers on the platform notice Micha walking down Sonnenallee and begin to harass him, shouting, "Guck mal, ein Ossi!...Uns geht's gut! Und dir?" He barely acknowledges the "Wessis" and his diegetic voiceover narrates, "mir geht es nicht *so* schlecht," and continues on his way, pointing out positive aspects of living in East Germany, such as the

¹⁹ This set up between the East and West occurs in **both adaptations** for comedic effect, but was not the case in reality, as there existed a "no man's land" between the Wall and actual East. This strip was under heavy surveillance and served to block any means of access to the West.

absence of homelessness or hunger. Brussig's novel contains a similar depiction of events in its introduction: Micha lives "gleich neben der Mauer. Wenn er aus der Haustür tritt, hört er die Rufe westlicher Schulklassen vom Aussichtspodest. "Guck mal, 'n echter Zoni!" The narrator of the novel comments, "Doch Micha macht sich nichts daraus, er hat eine andere Sorge: Miriam" (2). Both versions characterize the Wall as a minor annoyance; Micha is only briefly reminded of the Wall's presence because of the West Germans on the platform. This interaction is relatable to audiences in its allusions to taunts made among adolescents.

The comical exaggeration of the Wall's division between East and West is not a dismissal of the violence and deaths resulting from attempts to escape. Rather, the one-sided interactions these "Wessis" have with Micha is an example of the kind of stereotypes West Germans might have held about their Eastern counterparts; that they were, for example, deprived under the GDR and ignorant of the outside world. These scenes satirize "[t]he centrality of the 'Otherness' of the East to the West.... [by the] construction of the GDR as a zoo. On [several] occasions, we are shown West Germans on observation platforms treating the Easterners they look down [upon] like animals trapped behind bars for Western amusement" (Cooke, "Performing" 161). The Wall and fictional observation platform thus exist to symbolize perceived feelings of inferiority many Easterners felt following Westernization (Cooke "Performing" 160).

Music in *Sonnenallee* as a Representation of the East German Experience

Both versions of *Sonnenallee* detail the importance of music for Micha and his friends. The role music plays, especially regarding inclusion (or exclusion) of East German artists, functions in creating a relatable picture of adolescence. Being a commentary on

Ostalgie, both the novel and film assert through their use of music that nostalgia for the East does not always comprise “state-approved” propaganda. The novel and film’s inclusion of specific musical artists, regardless of whether they are from the East or West, reveals the shared commonality of rock and roll music as a form of rebellion and means of subverting higher authority. This characterization provides evidence that much of what Micha experiences in his youth is similar to adolescents in the West.

Sonnenallee opens with the camera moving along a wall of Micha’s room. There are certainly reminder that the film takes place in the GDR: on the wall hangs a poster featuring a Native American and a horse, which is a reference to the GDR DEFA *Indianerfilme*.²⁰ However, the other possessions featured in this scene indicate he shares much in common with teenagers outside the Wall: another poster is that of the Beatles and one with star-shaped American-flags reading “rock and pop.” Micha sits on his bed and copies music from a reel-to-reel player to a cassette player. During this moment, he is simultaneously heard in a voiceover: “Ich wollte immer ein Popstar sein, einer der was bewegt, obwohl Brian Jones starb mit 27, Elvis mit 42, und John Lennon wurde auch nicht sehr alt²¹. Das Land indem ich lebe ist jedenfalls noch sehr jung. Ich lebe in der

²⁰ *Indianerfilme* were East German westerns by the state-run film studio *Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft* (DEFA) that were popular the 1960s and 70s. They alluded to the conflict between socialism and capitalism. Unlike the typical US “westerns” or “cowboy films,” which placed emphasis on westward expansion from the white settlers’ perspective, *Indianerfilme* derived from the perspective of the Native Americans, whose values seemed to align with parts of socialist ideology. The white settlers’ poor treatment of the Native Americans was symbolic of “capitalist exploitation” (Casad 333-334).

²¹ The inclusion of John Lennon, who was assassinated in 1980, seems to imply that Micha narrates from the future. However, there is no other evidence to indicate this (as will be discussed later, Micha does narrate from the future during the film’s final scene). The inclusion of Lennon might have been done to simply emphasize how many well-known British and US musicians he idolized.

DDR. Ansonsten habe ich keine Probleme...” This opening scene introduces viewers to the protagonist by drawing attention to the fact that he is passionate about a genre of music recognizable on a nearly-universal scale. The novel similarity emphasizes the importance of western rock and roll to Micha and his friends, as it is their way of rebelling against the state: “[d]ann hörten sie Musik, am liebsten das, was verboten war...[e]in Song wurde ungeheuer aufgewertet...am verbotensten von allem war *Moscow, Moscow* von Wonderland” (Brussig 11). Here, the social status associated with music is significant since its designation as forbidden and banned is part of its overall appeal. Despite Western music’s appeal based on its illegality in the East, rebellion of this sort would not have greatly differed elsewhere. An interest in bands such as the Rolling Stones symbolizes “the potential to unite...[and] music that crosses the border between East and West” (Jozwiak and Mermann 792). This is not to say that “growing up in the East was the same as growing up in the West” (Cooke 163), but “[i]n pointing out the importance of groups like the Rolling Stones to this generation in the East, the film evokes the sounds and styles of the 1970s as experienced on both sides of the Wall” (163). These records were legally available in the West, but the music’s “anti-authoritarian elements” produced the same effect in the East. Behind the Wall, identification with this music provided adolescents with a means to challenge the dominant imagery of the American dream (Legg 105). A shared interest among youth in the East and West is evidence of *Sonnenallee*’s relatable coming-of-age narrative since rebellion through identification with subversive music is not a uniquely East German trait.

East German popular music in the novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* is characterized as negative. One might presume this music would be the object of *ostalgisch* longing, but it is instead ridiculed. Micha's attitude towards popular East German music is an example of how he, although born in the East, is critical of the state-approved media and has more in common with West German teenagers. The only East German song that plays a role in the novel remains unnamed because of its supposed subpar quality and embarrassment for the protagonist. When Micha asks Miriam to dance with him at the school dance, the moment is ruined by an East German song:

[i]n der Pause, bevor ein neuer Titel begann, stand er auf und legte den ganzen endlosen Weg quer durch die Disco zurück. Sowie die erste Note zu hören war, fragte er Miriam: [,]Tanzenwa?['] ...Aber plötzlich fuhr Micha ein Schreck in die Knochen, und er wußte, dass er sich auf das erbärmlichste blamiert hatte – der Song war ein Ostsong der übelsten Sorte. (Brussig 24)

It can be assumed that the state-approved song is unconvincing in its attempts to appeal to young listeners. The East German song becomes a source of embarrassment in the novel and is contrasted with the appealing rock and roll of the West. Unlike western music, which shapes his identity as a rebel, the *Ostsong* affects his credibility when approaching Miriam. Both versions of this event illustrate that even East German teenagers themselves had a dismissive attitude towards the media permitted within the GDR. It is implied there exists no willingness to conform to the standards of state authority.

The novel contains no further mention of East German music after the school dance. The film's soundtrack, however, appears to validate the artistic merits of some Eastern artists, as the inclusion of *Ostroek*²² evidences the similarities between East and West. Whereas the novel's use of an *Ostsong* at the school dance only warrants a mention because it is inferior to western music, the soundtrack of the film strives to refute the notion that all music from the East was subpar. The addition of *Ostroek* provides a sense of legitimacy to the East, as it illustrates popular music released there was not always the product of mindless conformity to ideology. The film's addition of one track in particular, the 1974 Nina Hagen²³ song, "Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen" is one such example of the rebellion and subversion against the state that existed there. In the GDR, the "repression of rock transformed it into a medium of resistance which was more or less impossible to control...[East German] musicians developed skill in encoding political discussion of society within metaphorical lyrics that the audiences could then decode" (Street 124-125). "Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen" has generally been interpreted as hidden criticism against the monotony (as symbolized through black and white film) experienced by those growing up in the GDR (Neu 2; Nijdam 126). The subversive qualities of eastern rock and roll provide proof that, despite being confined within an authoritarian country, rebellion remains largely the same.

²² "Das Projektil" by Keimzeit, "Geh zu ihr" by the Puhdys, and "Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen" by Nina Hagen.

²³ Nina Hagen (b. 1955) is a German punk singer who was born and raised in the GDR. She and her band Automobil achieved success in the East with "Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen." However, Hagen and her mother, East German actress Eva-Maria Hagen (b. 1934) were expatriated to the West after her stepfather, musician Wolf Biermann (b. 1936) was denied re-entry because of his efforts to resist the corrupt authoritarian system (Nijdam 129).

The film's use of Nina Hagen's "Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen" is also indicative of the possibility to have fond memories of the GDR despite the ever-present state control. At the end of the film, Micha and Wuschel dance past the camera towards the Wall, thus symbolically crossing the border with the other citizens of *Sonnenallee*. The color fades to black and white and the camera tracks back away from a deserted street. This scene symbolizes the future dissolution of the GDR, but also hints at ways in which the GDR is often remembered. Hagen sings, "du hast den Farbfilm vergessen, mein Michael / nun glaubt uns kein Mensch, wie schön's hier war." The song continues that no one will believe how beautiful the beach of *Hiddensee* is because their film is in black and white, "[m]uch like the girl's concern that her holiday might turn into shades of gray, the film's transition from colour to black and white represents ways of remembering the GDR" (Nijdam 130). The film's inclusion of "Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen" as used at the end of *Sonnenallee* is an example of the contrasting official and personal memory in East Germany. The entire film "...challenges the grey, stereotypical image of the state by offering a glimpse of an alternative (and more colourful) GDR ...[this is] reinforced by the lyrics of the Nina Hagen song" (Allan 116). The final shot fades to black to symbolize the extent that fond memories such as Micha's would be overlooked: East Germany becomes "...black and white in the record of [']official history[']" (Nijdam 130). The "color," which symbolizes the positive memories, is not seen by others, but that does not imply that the "black and white" elements should be disregarded. East Germans certainly did face hardships in the GDR, but this did not comprise their entire existence.

Counter-evidence to Accusations of Trivialization

In this section, I will discuss examples in the works pertaining to the handling of conflicts with state authority. In doing so, I attempt to argue that accusations of trivialization are unfounded. Criticism of the humorous situations and characterizations of authority figures in *Sonnenallee* derives from the perception that they supposedly downplay the oppression under the state. Cooke writes,

[t]he film's [*ostalgisch*] credentials would also seem to be evident in its presentation of many figures of authority as child-like buffoons, whose blind allegiance to the GDR's Marxist-Leninist philosophy is constantly ridiculed. By constructing state apparatchiks in this way, Haußmann would seem to confirm...that he is trivializing the oppressive realities of living under the SED regime ("Performing" 159)

The insinuation that difficulties relating to life under the regime are trivialized would imply that these characters are not affected by figures of authority in their respective narratives. *Sonnenallee*, in contrast, does not avoid addressing the challenges faced living in an oppressive country. It is true that Brussig and Haußmann "make little or no attempt to address conventional political issues on the wider stage" (Allan 113), but these issues are significant to the narratives. Saunders writes, "[c]riticisms that the film presents a historically flawed version of life in the GDR are accurate, yet the accusation that it fails to examine East German's complex relationship to the state are less convincing. It does, after all, include elements of the GDR's repressive nature" (92). Both works present these issues in a way that is relevant to adolescents but avoid characterizing these figures as victims oppressed by the regime in which they live.

The plot regarding a conflict with the *Abschnittsbevollmächtigte* (*ABV*), a community police officer, is an example of the citizens of Sonnenallee, far from naïve, being able to navigate the various challenges of life under state control. In both versions of *Sonnenallee*, Micha and his friends gather to hear the banned song “Moscow” at a playground. The *ABV* overhears them describing the song as *verboten* (forbidden). When asked for clarification, they convince him that *verboten* is slang for “cool” (12). In the film, Wuschel feigns ignorance and claims that they do not understand the song’s English lyrics, as they have only learned Russian in school²⁴ (to which the other all proclaim, “Gott sei Dank!”). Cooke comments on this scene, “we see the film’s central protagonists self-consciously play the role of the naïve child in order to outwit the authorities, thereby showing the ingenuity of Easterners, which in turn suggests that their ostensible unworldliness might not be all that it seems” (“Performing” 160). The *ABV* confiscates Micha’s cassette, tells them that he is a DJ in his spare time and proclaims, “Na, Jungs, so ein Hobby hättet ihr mir bestimmt nicht zugetraut, oder?” (15). The novel describes Micha imagining the *ABV* playing “Moscow” for his colleagues and subsequently being punished by the outraged chief of police (15-16). The film goes a step further and depicts this scene: a higher-up, enraged at what he hears, fires a gun at the speakers and proceeds to strip the *ABV* of his badges. He is subsequently demoted to *Meister* and harasses Micha by continually demanding to see his identification. This cartoonish portrayal of authority figures in this plot does not imply life in the GDR was free from trouble. After all, the officer ultimately hounds Micha from this point on. This conflict is nevertheless a

²⁴ This is a factual error, as East German students were taught English starting in the seventh grade.

source of amusement for readers, as it reveals Micha is occasionally able to outwit figures of authority. This counters the idea that the experiences of all East Germans entailed victimization and oppression under the system.

The plot involving Wuschel and his obsession with finding a copy of the Rolling Stones album *Exile on Main Street*²⁵ represents that nostalgia for a place and time can exist despite these unresolved conflicts. Both narratives end on a positive note, but ultimately conclude without Wuschel ever owning the album. Because the conflict in this plotline addresses difficulties arising from GDR restriction on western products, life in East Germany as experienced by Wuschel is not completely ideal. In the narrative, Wuschel initially does not have enough money to pay the high price asked by the *Plattendealer*, who smuggles albums across the border (Brussig 55-56). After Miriam's West German boyfriend (the "*Scheich von Berlin*"²⁶) accidentally hits Wuschel with his car, he provides compensation to him on the spot. The money covers the album's cost. On his way home, a power outage causes panic at the border and Wuschel is shot by a border guard, who believes him to be escaping amid the confusion and panic. His copy of *Exile on Main Street*, a double album, is shattered by the bullet, but saves his life. This moment is significant, as it implies the presence of the regime cannot be completely erased. An often-violent system has impeded upon the life of Wuschel. Cooke writes,

²⁵ "Und für Musik interessierte er sich nur dann, wenn sie von den Rolling Stones war. Während die anderen vom Platz zur Tanzschule gingen, versuchte er, die *Exile on Main Street*, das 72er Doppelalbum der Rolling Stones aufzutreiben" (Brussig 51).

²⁶ Whenever Miriam's West German boyfriend visits her, he always arrives in a different car. This leads Micha and Wuschel to believe he is the "Sheik of Berlin." It is revealed shortly after that he is a parking valet who takes rides to the East in the cars of guests. On one trip to the East, machine guns are found in the trunk of his current car, which belongs to the mafia. Miriam's boyfriend is thereafter arrested (Brussig 134 – 137).

...the nostalgic façade of the film is ruptured as we see the boy lying motionless in the street. Although the harshness of this sequence is ultimately softened when it transpires that Wuschel has been saved, the bullet having been blocked by his prized record, a rose-tinted impression of the GDR can never be fully restored. Although Wuschel is not dead, his youthful dreams, embodied in the Rolling Stones album, have been shattered by the state.” (165 - 166)

Despite the devastating loss of his album and inability to buy another copy, *Exile on Main Street* has saved his life, thereby characterizing music from the West as his way of surviving the state. The film’s account comprising Wuschel and *Exile on Main Street* differs from the novel in that he purchases a second copy of the album, but the outcome remains mostly unchanged. When he and Micha play the record, they quickly realize that the album is a fraud; the record bears the *Exile on Main Street* label but plays low-quality German rock music. Wuschel is devastated at having been sold a fake album, but Micha convinces him that what they are hearing is, in fact, unreleased Rolling Stones music. He and Wuschel air-guitar to “The Letter” by the Box Tops on their balcony overlooking *Sonnenallee*. A group of fellow East Germans gather to watch and begin to dance, much to the confusion and uncertainty of border police. Wuschel’s inability to find a copy of the album in either version of *Sonnenallee* is an example of the less-than-ideal circumstances experienced while living there, but he and Micha nevertheless manage to find happiness. The accusation that *Ostalgie* “forgets” East Germany as “an economy of scarcity or an oppressive regime” (Berdahl 198) is not outright refuted in these narrative,

but the idea challenged, since these figures are represented as being content despite the circumstances.

These plotlines suggest that these figures have generally positive experiences in youth despite the often-overwhelming presence of the state. As stated by the narrator in the novel's conclusion, "[g]lückliche Menschen haben ein schlechtes Gedächtnis und reiche Erinnerungen" (157). This quote provides evidence that despite Brussig's original intention of making West Germans envious of not having lived in the GDR, the text does not actually achieve this. The desirable qualities of life on Sonnenallee do not derive from living in the East, but rather because of the teenagers' abilities in overcoming the difficult circumstances. Like their Western counterparts, they too experience friendship, love, and rebellion. *Sonnenallee* does not dispute widely held perceptions of the GDR; they "present other images and myths of the GDR and reunification, posing another [‘]reality[‘]" (Jozwiak and Mermann 793). The author's and director's representations of life in East Germany do not trivialize life under the state but represent the citizens of Sonnenallee as able to maintain a sense of authority over their lives.

Adolescence as the Protagonist's Nostalgic Remembrance

The majority of *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and *Sonnenallee* takes place within the 1970s, but both designate their narratives as being past events. The novel does so with the use of a framing device that is often barely noticeable. This positions the narrative proper as Micha's nostalgic reflections of his teenage years. Readers learn on the first page of *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* that the remainder of the novel refers to events remembered by an older Michael "Micha" Kuppisch.

Micha²⁷, “der in Berlin in der Sonnenallee wohnte, erlebt immer wieder, daß die Sonnenallee friedfertige, ja sogar sentimentale Regungen auszulösen vermochte. Nach Michael Kuppischs Erfahrung wirkt Sonnenallee gerade in unsicheren Momenten und sogar in gespannten Situationen” (7). The narrator later describes on the final page that these nostalgic reflections of youth in *Sonnenallee* create “peace with the past,” “[d]enn die Erinnerung kann mehr, viel mehr: Sie vollbringt beharrlich das Wunder, einen Frieden mit der Vergangenheit zu schließen, in dem sich jeder Groll verflüchtigt und der weiche Schleier der Nostalgie über alles legt, was mal scharf und schneidend empfunden wurde” (157). This statement defends nostalgia by explaining that selective remembering is likely to occur with the passing of time. As previously stated in Boym’s text, the inability to return to this point in time allows for emphasis to be placed upon positive aspects of life in the past (13). The final quote suggests that “present-day” Micha recounts memories of life on *Sonnenallee* fondly because the “veil of nostalgia” has allowed him to reflect on the positive experiences of his youth rather than his conflicts with state authority.

The filmic version of *Sonnenallee*, in contrast, does not contain a framing device. However, Micha’s diegetic voice-over as narrator switches temporal planes at the very end of the film, to insinuate that, like the novel, he is remembering his adolescence in the East. Micha’s voice-over comments on the narrative events from a future perspective and explains the reasons for his nostalgic recollections of youth. The citizens of *Sonnenallee*, having watched Micha and Wuschel playing air guitar from their balcony to “The Letter,”

²⁷ The novel features an omniscient third-person narrator; the film is narrated by Micha in a diegetic voice-over.

turn to dance towards the border and to the other side of the Wall. Micha and Wuschel jump from the balcony to join the crowd making their way across the border. They dance out of view from the camera and leave the audience viewing an abandoned and littered street. The film fades to black and white as Nina Hagen's "Farbfilm" plays and Micha, as narrator, tells the audiences, "[e]s war einmal ein Land und ich hab' dort gelebt. Und wenn man mich fragt, wie es dort war, kann ich nur sagen, es war die schönste Zeit meines Lebens, denn ich war jung und verliebt." This statement is evidence that the film intends for its artificiality to be apparent. The word "einmal," which is comparable to saying "once" or "once upon a time," distances Micha's *Sonnenallee* from reality. Bondebjerg argues, "[t]hese words virtually turn life and culture in the former GDR into a distant fairytale" (36) rendering the narrative to be a space that is safe from the present day and linear passage of time (Boym 13). Micha as the narrator is characterized as fondly remembering his youth in the East because he re-interprets it as a significant time in his life that consisted of romance, friendship, and rebellion. This disproves the notion that *Ostalgie* pertains to characteristics unfamiliar to those outside the GDR. With this final quote, the film: "kommentiert sich hier indirekt selbst, und zwar als künstlerisch stilisiertes Relikt einer Zeit, die es so nicht gab, in dem aber dennoch ein Funken Wahrheit steckt - insbesondere in Bezug auf die Erinnerung daran" (Ziegengeist 133). *Sonnenallee*'s self-reflexivity is also apparent in the exaggerated and hyper-realistic²⁸ nature of the entire film set, which serves as a reminder to audiences that the narrative is framed as Micha's nostalgic reimagining of his life there. The closing scene of

²⁸ Haußmann stated of this stylistic choice, "Wenn man genauer hinguckt, wird man sehen, daß der Film vollkommen unrealistisch ist. Das Dekor, die Straße – das sieht alles gebaut aus. So soll es sein" (Quoted in Rinke 33).

Sonnenallee makes one last reference to this artificiality with "...a final shot of tumbleweed²⁹ rolling across a now deserted Sonnenallee...remind[ing] us that we are still in the realm of fantasy" (Tate 100). Regarding the film's portrayal of nostalgia, *Sonnenallee*'s conspicuous artificiality indicates that the entire narrative is intended to appear as Micha's reinterpretation of his youth in the East. Aspects of reality exist within this reinterpretation, but ultimately create a version of the GDR unique to the protagonist and how he experienced it. Based on this, *Sonnenallee* characterizes nostalgia as experiences that truly are "re-membered" and reinterpreted to emphasize personal significance.

Conclusion

Although a characteristic of nostalgic remembrance is that of "selective remembering and selective forgetting" (Wilson 296), the protagonist's recollections of his youth do not exist at the expense of those oppressed by the regime, since he faces his own set of challenges. The novel and film characterize *Ostalgie* as fond recollections of youth in the East, *in spite of* the state's often negative influence. It is unlikely that readers and viewers of *Sonnenallee* will feel envious of those who lived in the GDR, but Brussig's and Haußmann's adaptations of *Sonnenallee* acknowledge that Micha and his friends' experiences are not unlike any other teenager's. The protagonist's coming-of-age story is a means of helping readers and viewers recognize the normalcy of life there: "[i]ndem Menschen gezeigt werden, die trotz zum Teil absurder Bedingungen — hier sei die räumliche Nähe zum Todesstreifen der Mauer genannt - ein normales Leben führten,

²⁹ The tumbleweed first appears at the beginning of the film with the subtitle "Once Upon a Time in the East," which alludes to the 1968 spaghetti western *Once Upon a Time in the West*, an Italian film set in the American Old West.

liebten und feierten wie du und ich, wird eine Normalisierung jener Perspektive angestrebt” (Ziegengeist 132). These narratives allow “the creators of *Sonnenallee* [to] lay claim to a certain universality of experience. Whilst certain references in the film...can only be understood by those with first-hand knowledge of the GDR, the experiences that Micha...Wuschel, and the rest of his friends undergo are the kind with which audiences from both East and West can easily identify” (Allan 114). By avoiding any trivialization of life in the East, *Sonnenallee* succeeds in “de-exoticizing” and normalizing the eastern experience (Cooke, “Performing” 161), thus representing *Ostalgie* as fond remembrance of personal, not political aspects.

Chapter 2

Good Bye Lenin! and the Representation of *Ostalgie*

Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine how *Good Bye, Lenin!* portrays *Ostalgie* within its narrative and provides the viewer with a more accurate understanding of the phenomenon beyond the notion that it idealizes an oppressive regime. Additionally, I will argue that the film highlights the ways in which this nostalgia assisted East Germans with their country's often uncertain and chaotic merge with the West. I will first consider how the *ostalgisch* recreation of the GDR serves the protagonist and his family in regard to the socioeconomic upheavals brought about by reunification. As previously discussed, nostalgia functions as a coping mechanism in times of perceived feelings of uncertainty, which in turn provides a basis for the understanding of why the phenomenon emerged following Reunification. With reference to the negative reviews of the film, I will discuss filmic examples that show why the *ostalgisch* portrayal of the GDR within the narrative is not simply a strategy for the protagonist to overlook the difficulties experienced by his family in favor of recreating an idyllic version of the country. The representation of *Ostalgie* within the film is instead much more complex than the simple post-*Mauerfall* admiration of GDR artifacts. Rather, it allows for *Ostalgie* to be represented as a phenomenon more closely associated with familial elements than political and ideological agendas. I will also argue that the film does not advocate for the erasure of an unfavorable GDR history and the romanization of a socialist paradise that never truly existed. The idealistic socialist paradise is shown as having been the way Christiane Kerner protected her children from the reality of life in the GDR; this is later on adapted by Alex as a similar strategy of protecting his mother. The film is far from a simple

practice in *ostalgtisch* indulgence. I intend to provide evidence that the film allows for a more accessible understanding of *Ostalgie* for those unacquainted with aspects of life in the East. *Good Bye, Lenin!* provides viewers with an embodiment of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon through its narrative of a family affected by both divided and reunited Germany. In reference to the research on nostalgia's beneficial effects on perception of stability, I will analyze how the protagonist's *ostalgtisch* reinterpretation of the East provides a means of coping with the loss of familiarity caused by the simultaneous threat of his mother's death, along with the merge into an unfamiliar culture. The narrative of the Kerner family provides a depiction of the phenomenon not limited to an idealistic image of the East. Alex's façade of a GDR that *lebt weiter* represents an attempt to maintain the perception of continuity on the basis of a need for stability, a motif not limited to those from the East. The two questions that guide this chapter are: i) How does the film effectively portray *Ostalgie* as a phenomenon that is not solely based in ideology, and ii) What does the film assert about the actual phenomenon of *Ostalgie*?

Nostalgia and *Ostalgie*

As discussed in the previous chapter, nostalgia was initially considered a psychological disorder³⁰ and "a doomed state of mind...an escapist reaction to the demands of the present and an anxiety toward the future" (Cheung 1484). The accusation of it functioning as a means of escape implies that the nostalgic individual would evoke such fond memories so as to detach from current circumstances presenting hardship. The

³⁰ In the 1600s, physician Johannes Hofer described nostalgia in terms of the physical symptoms that accompanied homesickness (Batcho 166). With the emergence of psychiatry in the 18th and 19th centuries, subsequent research on nostalgia transformed it into a form of psychosis (Baldwin 128-129).

second half of the 20th century, however, saw nostalgia's benefits being taken into consideration³¹. Specifically, the individuals' relationship to the present was taken into account, as well as nostalgia's manifestation in response to one's current needs (Batcho 170). While nostalgia exists as a phenomenon that conjures up comforting memories of the past specific to an individual, according to Boym's definition in *The Future of Nostalgia*, it is also a "prospective" phenomenon. It is "coeval with modernity itself... Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present [that] have a direct impact on realities of the future" (xvi). Undoubtedly an internal emotion, the nostalgic longing of an individual corresponds to emotional needs in relation to one's external circumstances in the present. As such, it can be argued that nostalgia allows for the retention of a sense of authority within situations of drastic change. Far from simply being a psychological disorder that promotes avoidance of the present, nostalgic memories function as a coping mechanism³² in light of the present's uncertainty.

The various psychological studies conducted on nostalgia's benefits in this chapter agree that it allows for an individual to retain a sense of meaning (Baldwin 129, Routledge 2010, Routledge & Juhl 2012). That is, nostalgia serves as a reminder of

³¹ During this time period, research on nostalgia transitioned from viewing the term as the source of the problem or an "illness to be treated" (Batcho 170) into an understanding of how it functions in the process of adaptation to a new environment.

³² Following up on her father Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) work on psychoanalysis, Anna Freud (1895-1982) detailed coping mechanism more extensively. She argues that humans possess unconscious internal defense mechanisms that serve to protect their self-perception (the ego in particular) from anxiety-inducing situations arising in the outside world (Freud 70). The most noteworthy example of *Ostalgie* functioning as a coping mechanism in *Good Bye, Lenin!* is the protagonist's recreation of the GDR as a strategy of "returning" to an earlier time in life that he perceives as stable in relation to the present.

moments and events that have meaningful significance to the individual and provides a sense of continued purpose in life. Experiences characterized as being negative, including those that induce feelings of anxiety, insecurity, or isolation, can often lead to a sense of unease in individuals that they are not quite themselves (Baldwin 129-130). One such kind of anxiety described as a potential “threat to meaning” (Baldwin 129) and useful for the purpose of this chapter’s analysis of *Good Bye, Lenin!* is that of “heightened death awareness” (Routledge 2012, 453), or the fear experienced by those reminded “that life is finite” (Routledge and Juhl 2010, 852). Nostalgia functions as an assurance against such detrimental reminders by placing emphasis upon significant moments in one’s life, which in turn allows for a sense of stability and continuity. The idea of having lived a meaningful life will continue to provide a sense of purpose and lessen apprehensions regarding uncertain present circumstances. Based on the results of these studies, nostalgic evocation of the past exists as an internal defense. The nostalgic individuals will, in turn, perceive themselves as more capable to face the present and future. Modern research considers nostalgia beneficial in developing a positive outlook on life based on a renewed feeling of continued self-worth and purpose by providing a feeling of stability when facing new experiences. It “reminds people of what they [‘]truly[’] are...and [‘]frees[’] people to explore and grow...without experiencing anxiety associated with the need for extrinsic security” (Baldwin 144). Far from allowing for regression or permanent avoidance of situations faced in life, feeling nostalgic is a phenomenon that prepares one for these events.

Of utmost importance in this chapter is the fact that the *Ostalgie*³³ phenomenon came into existence only after the fall of the Berlin Wall that brought about significant socioeconomic changes and an overall westernization of the East (Ziegengeist 142). Prior to 1989, however, West German products were generally preferred by those in the GDR in contrast to Eastern brands, as the latter were considered less appealing on the basis of their perceived aesthetic simplicity (Castillo 766) and because of the notorious shortages, a common situation in the GDR. Wolfgang Fritz Haug³⁴ describes this indifference towards GDR brands in his 1971 text *Kritik der Warenästhetik* and explains why West German commodities would have been attractive to the East German consumer. Firstly, the economic conditions of the East never allowed for an abundance of choice in regard to consumer products. In contrast to the West, “...kam die DDR insgesamt nie über den Zustand einer Mangelwirtschaft hinaus, sodass schon allein deshalb aggressives

³³ Paul Cooke’s “*Ostalgie’s Not What it Used to Be: The Television GDR Craze of 2003*” notes that Eastern brands achieved popularity in the West (139). Mary-Elizabeth O’Brien describes in *Post-Wall German Cinema and National History* that the post-*Wende* “*Ostalgie Party*” is one such example of *Ostalgie* attracting the interest of younger generations who likely did not experience life in the GDR (26-27). For this thesis, however, I have chosen to remain focused on the circumstances surrounding *Ostalgie*’s emergence for those who experienced life in the former GDR.

³⁴ Haug details the factors necessary to produce commodities in a capitalist market economy successfully. *Warenästhetik*, or commodity aesthetics, is the necessity for a product to possess an attractive outward appearance, as the capitalist consumer is inclined to associate this superficial aspect as a measure of its actual use and functionality. He writes, “Nur zum Schein verfolgen die Individuen jetzt ihren eigenen Zweck. Doch wird dieser Schein zum Festesten, das in der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft besteht. Darüber aber erhebt sich ein Dunstbau scheinhafter Befriedigung der Sinnbedürfnisse” (Haug 186). This *Schein* of a commodity is based not only upon the actual appearance of an item, but the specific brand as well. As a result, a brand’s recognizability in a capitalist market economy is of heightened importance.

Marketing keine Funktion hatte” (Haug 178). Competition was unnecessary in the East, resulting in the commodities being relatively straightforward in appearance: “[d]ie Gläser oder Büchsen, in denen Lebensmittel konserviert sind, zeigen auf den ersten Blick, dass sie sparsam, nach Zweckmäßigkeit Gesichtspunkten hergestellt sind; ein Schild trägt die Sachbezeichnung für den Inhalt” (Haug 178). East Germans with access to the West – either through friends or family, would have had, in contrast, a higher social status through the ownership of the more aesthetically-pleasing West German brands (Staab 142). As would be expected, the fall of the Wall in 1989 and subsequent unrestricted access to the West initially caused a “collective shopping frenzy” (Godeanu-Kenworthy 172), whereby East German brands “hardly stood a chance against their Western rivals. They were stigmatized as representatives of an inefficient economy of short supply: outdated, unaesthetic [,] and unattractive” (Staab 145). However, initial East German preference for Western items was short-lived, as unrestricted access to goods led to unanticipated difficulties. Ironically, an overabundance of West German products often resulted in “sheer helplessness when confronted with the new-found choice and diversity” (Staab 145). Sudden access to commodities of the West following the *Mauerfall* would have allowed for many in the East to experience, as described in *Kritik der Warenäthetik*, capitalism’s illusory perception of satisfaction. This perception derives from the capitalist market’s overabundance of choice in regard to the seemingly limitless brands and variations (although the actual items are above all similar). The consumers’ ability to purchase a commodity deemed by them to be the most aesthetically pleasing results in the belief of having satisfied one’s own individual needs and desires (Haug 186), although such feelings of fulfillment are considered by Haug to be largely fictional

(189), as a large portion of this satisfaction derives from the product's superficial aesthetic qualities, not its actual usability. The sudden shift to a competitive capitalist society also proved difficult because of overpriced goods and services, adding to the ever-increasing financial instability former citizens of the GDR faced³⁵. Economic instability experienced by those in the East after reunification resulted in a sudden preference for the old East German brands and products³⁶.

Like any type of nostalgia, it is important to distinguish the *ostalgisch* artifacts themselves from what they are meant to evoke. Preference for Eastern products and artifacts does not imply a "pining for days under totalitarian regimes in the face of rocky transitions to democratization" (Barney 132). Rather, nostalgic longing in the form of *ostalgisch* preference signifies a fond recollection of certain aspects of life that existed before the dismantling of socialism caused by aggressive westernization. The "hopes of a literal unification, of merging Eastern and Western assets to establish a better society were crushed and gave way to the realization [of]...superimposition of Western norms and standards" (Staab 147). East German artifacts held a special significance in that they served as reminders of a time that, especially when viewed through nostalgia's rose-tinted hue, seemed to have "offered more stability, more security[,] and more harmony...when life was not subject to such colossal changes" (Staab 148). When faced with perceptions of isolation in a competitive capitalist society that West Germans were accustomed to, recognition of these now-outdated artifacts had the potential to evoke

³⁵ Staab also lists credit sharks and disproportionate insurance policies as examples of other capitalistic elements that would have been unfamiliar to East Germans (145).

³⁶ According to data on the change in consumer preferences, almost 75% of former East Germans favored GDR brands by the end of 1991. By the end of 1993, that number rose to 82% (Staab 145).

strong feelings of familiarity. *Ostalgie*, as it appears in the film, is much more complex than a simple post-*Mauerfall* admiration of GDR artifacts. Instead, the narrative of the Kerner family provides a depiction of the phenomenon not limited to an idealistic image of the East. Alex's façade of a GDR that *lebt weiter*³⁷ represents an attempt to maintain the perception of external continuity on the basis of a need for familial stability, a theme relatable to those outside the East. *Ostalgtisch* preference as presented in this film avoids any implication of an outright desire to return to pre-*Mauerfall* life in the East. The resulting narrative in *Good Bye, Lenin!* provides a depiction of *ostalgtisch* longing that references the idealized socialist values and ideals of the country, albeit in a manner that avoids limiting the plot's relevancy to the East German demographic.

***Good Bye, Lenin!* Summary**

Good Bye, Lenin! is a 2003 German "tragicomedy" (O'Brien 65, Ziegengeist 125) by West German director Wolfgang Becker³⁸ and screenwriter Bernd Lichtenberg. The film's narrative details the final days of the GDR and the events following the fall of the Berlin Wall up until German Reunification in October 1990 from the perspective of 21-year-old Alexander "Alex" Kerner (played by German-Spanish actor Daniel Brühl). Alex lives in East Berlin with his mother, Christiane, and his sister, Ariane. Christiane has become a staunch believer³⁹ in socialism and has dedicated her life to the betterment of

³⁷ The German DVD cover humorously reads, "die DDR lebt weiter – auf 79 qm!"

³⁸ Regarding his status as a West German, Becker claimed that despite being an outsider, he ultimately developed insight into everyday life within the GDR that he believed many West Germans lacked. He was led to "conclude that, contrary to popular belief, not everyone hated life under state socialism" (Jordanova 27). Other academic analyses argue that the predominantly East German casting is sufficient proof of the film's authenticity, but often overlooked (Hodgin 26).

³⁹ As is revealed early in the film, this is only the case following the abandonment of her husband Robert Kerner.

the GDR. After witnessing Alex being arrested by the Volkspolizei at an anti-government demonstration, she suffers a heart attack and falls into a coma for eight months. During this period of time, the Berlin Wall is torn down, East Germans are allowed to venture into the West, the East faces significant westernization in the form of consumerism, and the two countries prepare for unification. Christiane eventually awakens and is allowed to return home – but her life remains in danger, as a second heart attack would be fatal so that she must avoid any excitement or shock. Alex fears that, if his mother realizes the country she loves and dedicated herself to is on the verge of disappearance, she would be unable to process the drastic changes during the past eight months. As a result, he creates the illusion that nothing has changed by keeping the “GDR” in existence within the family’s home. He initially preserves remnants of the GDR by replacing the labels of Western products with those of the East. However, the invading Westernization taking hold of the East requires more elaborate explanations in the form of fabricated newscasts: for example, an advertisement for Coca Cola within sight of Christiane’s room is explained as having suddenly appeared because the drink was an East German invention stolen by the West. West Germans moving into the apartment building are presented as refugees who are fleeing capitalism. The film itself is not outright a product of *Ostalgie*; it is a commentary on the phenomenon (Kapczynski 83), since “Alex’s quest is [ostalgisch]...designed to retain the material traces of the GDR and sustain its idealistic potential...his recycling recalls the larger cultural fascination with East German products so prevalent after reunification” (83-84). The idealistic and artificial nature of the GDR Alex creates is also very evident; After all, Christiane’s own loyalty to the GDR did not derive from pure devotion to the country, as it is revealed to be the way in which she

attempted to “replace” her absent husband. *Good Bye, Lenin!* makes reference to the *Ostalgie* phenomenon through Alex’s reconstruction of the GDR: through these various escapades in keeping his mother ignorant of the real-life changes taking place, Alex’s “GDR” transforms into an idealized –or *ostalgisch* – version of itself, based on the socialist state not so much known as imagined by Christiane. This eventually allows him to develop an appreciation for the country he was previously disillusioned with while it existed. Christiane eventually reveals the truth to her children regarding the circumstances of their lives in the GDR, thereby calling into question her relationship to the country. With her health rapidly deteriorating on the eve of the German *Einheitstag*, Alex creates one last fabrication so that his mother would die with the belief that socialism would live in the newly-unified Germany.

Success and Controversy

Good Bye, Lenin! was able to surpass *Sonnenallee* in terms of national and international success⁴⁰. But like the latter, *Good Bye, Lenin!* experienced its own share of criticism regarding the idyllic nature of the GDR Alex creates during the course of the film.

Although it is clear within the narrative that the Kerner family does, in fact, experience difficulties as a result of the country’s authoritarian nature, many critics took issue with Alex's choice of reimagining his former country so optimistically, as scenes taking place prior to the *Mauerfall* show an often-difficult reality. His eventual nostalgia for his childhood in the GDR has been considered problematic by various critics, as they believe

⁴⁰ By the end of 2003, *Good Bye Lenin!* became Germany’s biggest box-office success since Reunification attracting more than six million viewers in Germany alone, as well as winning six awards from the European Film Academy (Barney 134, Cook 207, Finger 44)

it results in the erasure of the hardships not only experienced by the fictional Kerner family within the film, but by the actual citizens of the GDR as well. Although these film reviews are not academic analyses, they provide a perspective of how the *ostalisch* elements within *Good Bye, Lenin!* have the potential to be interpreted as a glorification of the GDR.

In a review preceding its release in the United States, *Good Bye Lenin!* is described by author and critic Anna Funder⁴¹ as “deeply flawed.” She spends roughly half of her review detailing historical information pertaining to the Stasi, as she considers it problematic that, aside from the brief scene comprising Christiane’s interrogation by the Stasi, they are never mentioned again. She writes in *Prospect Magazine*,

...[W]hen a polity forgets its past and victims, the issue is not one of health but of justice. There are too many people waiting to find out about what happened to their loved ones from the Stasi files, or waiting for compensation for injuries suffered during detention...to feel comfortable with a film that deals with everything about the GDR except its defining feature: the Stasi. (2003)

According to Funder, *Ostalgie* is a means by which all brutality is meant to be forgotten at the expense of the regime’s victims. The basis for her critique stems from her interviews with former East Germans for *Stasiland*. For these people, the constant

⁴¹ Anna Funder (1966), an author, international lawyer, and documentary filmmaker, was working at a television station in West Berlin in the mid-1990s when she developed an interest in the Stasi and the East Germans affected by them. She wished to collect the stories of both the ex-Stasi men and those who had resisted the regime. She recounts, “[I] set off looking for some of the stories from this land gone wrong” (9). The resulting book was called *Stasiland* and details the experiences of these former East Germans.

reminders of life in the GDR include a seemingly futile investigation of a loved one's apparent "suicide" in Stasi custody (44 – 45), and another followed home by an ex-Stasi man for her participation in an organization campaigning for the compensation for victims of the ministry (254 – 255). *Ostalgie* is described in *Stasiland* as markedly biased and characterizing the GDR "as if it had all been a harmless welfare state that looked after people's needs" (275). From Funder's perspective, *Ostalgie* is primarily based upon a utopian version of the GDR, expressing a "longing for things – equality, liberty, [and] safety – that did not exist there, but were supposed to" (*Prospect Magazine*). *Ostalgie's* object of longing is reduced to a "dream of the past," which implies any utopian elements are purely fictional. This review therefore dismisses the film's *ostalgisch* elements as a regressive return to the past, with the potential erasure of history. In her interpretation, *Ostalgie* is a phenomenon that fixates entirely on a GDR that could have been, not the actual aspects of the East worthy of nostalgic recollection.

Roger Ebert took similar issue with the film, implying that Christiane's commitment to socialism and Alex's attempt to revive this "GDR" is based entirely on ideology and therefore a complete fabrication. He writes, "[w]e all feel nostalgia for the environs of our past...[o]ur pasts may be flawed, but they are ours and we are attached to them. What [the film] never quite deals with is the wrong-headedness of its heroine. 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" but adds, "[t]he 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?" Although Ebert acknowledges the protagonist's well-meant

intentions, the startling comparison between the Third Reich and the GDR⁴² and Christiane's apparent "wrong-headedness" argues that *Good Bye, Lenin!* falters as a result of its seemingly accepting view towards a romanticized GDR. A review of the film in *The New York Times* following its 2004 US release likewise remarks in its opening statement that *Good Bye, Lenin!* is a "soft hearted tribute to - of all things - Communism." Film critic Elvis Mitchell does not find the film explicitly problematic, and even acknowledges that the protagonist's charade "adds direction to his existence" in a chaotic post-*Mauerfall* world. However, Mitchell focuses his critique upon Alex's sudden appreciation of GDR ideology with little explanation why, stating, "he and his pals become the kind of propagandists that disappeared when the Berlin Wall came down." Here, the narrative is interpreted by Mitchell as ultimately concerning itself with the protagonist's reevaluation of his former country; the actual reasons for his newfound appreciation are not taken into account.

Also criticizing the film's missed opportunity to provide more direct critical commentary on the increasingly fictionalized nature of Alex's GDR recreation, Ekkehard Knörner writes:

Diese Drehbuchidee hat beträchtliches Potenzial, sollte man meinen. Die Konstellation könnte zum Gleichnis taugen für ostalgische Sehnsucht...zum Ausgangspunkt für höchst komische Verwicklungen...Wolfgang Becker...verschenkt all das an eine halbherzige Komödie mit melancholischer Grundierung und

⁴² Such a comparison is also problematic, as the ideals of fascism are based upon supremacy in regard to nationalism and race, whereas socialism's emphasis lies on equality and community.

melodramatischen Familienwicklungen...[n]irgends hat man den Eindruck, dass die Klischeehaftigkeit des DDR-Bilds hier eine bewusste Sache ist, also Reflexion aufs eigene Treiben. Der Film glaubt durchaus an das, was er zeigt, gerade in den im schlechtesten Sinne fantastischen Umkehrungen, die er am Ende vornimmt. (Knörner)

In other words, *Good Bye, Lenin!* falters by making no assertion about the contradictions regarding the protagonist's attempt at preserving the GDR after the *Mauerfall*. This criticism implies that *Ostalgie* derives from an idea of the past that never actually existed. In summary, what all these criticisms have in common is that they believe the film's conclusion is insufficient, as it is not critical of the *ostalgie* GDR Alex Kerner chooses to remember at the end. According to these critiques, the film is a missed opportunity because of its preoccupation with a sentimental storyline regarding familial love, apparently abandoning any discussion of whether or not *ostalgie* longing is an "irresponsible" glorification of the country. Serious discourse pertaining to life under the GDR regime and the potential difficulties that occurred when East Germans transitioned to life in an unfamiliar culture are only addressed through the melodramatic familial plotline⁴³ of a son attempting to save his mother's life.

⁴³ In his essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," Thomas Elsaesser defines melodrama as a mode of cinematic expression intended to "make stones weep" (43) or resonate with audiences on an emotional level. Although external social and political circumstances are factors within the narrative, these aspects are not directly addressed. The protagonists are instead characterized as being affected by these conditions only through a personal or familial conflict (47). The resulting narrative's *mise en scène* relies upon elements such as music to emphasize emotional hardships (55).

Origins and Emergence of Alex's Reimagined East

First, it is important to consider particular aspects of the Kerner's lives that occurred during the pre-*Mauerfall* period of the narrative, as they later reemerge in Alex's own *ostalgisch* version of the country. Namely, these include familial love and stability, which are not limited to an East German experience. Various academic analyses have identified this theme of a son's love for his mother as a reason why the film would resonate with audiences unfamiliar with life in the GDR (Ziegengeist 134, Downing 14, Hodgin 43). Daniel Brühl himself stated in interviews following the film's release that the subject matter provided a means for him to empathize with the character of Alexander Kerner. A fact that is especially significant considering that he is the only actor (aside from Burghart Klaußner, who portrays Robert Kerner) in a main role not of East German origin⁴⁴. The theme of familial love is most clearly emphasized in the tagline of the film's US DVD cover, which reads, "In Berlin, the crazed city where West confronts East, a son will do anything to protect his mother." This tagline alludes to the sociopolitical circumstances present in the narrative, but the protagonist is certainly not described as, for instance, protecting a disappearing East as he knows it. The main conflict of the film is concerned with the struggles of a family to remain united. Initially, these were the hardships experienced by Christiane after losing her husband, but later, it is Alex's attempt to keep Christiane alive that is of central importance.

⁴⁴ In an interview detailing the making of the film, Brühl recounts his initial concerns regarding his casting as the protagonist, "Ich habe schnell gemerkt, dass es eigentlich...gar nicht so tragisch war, dass ich das nicht miterlebt habe, weil es eigentlich...eine sehr emotionale Geschichte ist; eine Geschichte zwischen einer Mutter und einem Sohn und da war's doch irgendwann egal, ob ich aus dem Westen oder aus dem Osten bin. Also viele der Dinge, die ich da spielen muss, die konnte ich mir auch so denken..."

The film's prologue, consisting of scenes taking place from 1978 through 1979, is necessary to provide viewers with an understanding of how and why certain experiences in the protagonist's childhood would later be evoked following the *Mauerfall*. This prologue is evidence that fond memories of life in the GDR did, at certain points in time, exist for the family to some extent. *Good Bye, Lenin!* opens with grainy footage of the family's home movies, capturing the Kerner's summer at their *Datsche* in 1978, filmed by the later absent father Robert Kerner. Interspersed in these scenes are credits that appear on still images of postcards featuring "recognizable East Berlin landmarks" (Hodgin 36)⁴⁵. The contrast between familial life at the *Datsche* and the public and political sphere in these scenes serves to emphasize that the country's socialist ideology is not very significant to Christiane or Alex at this point in the narrative.

Following the opening credits is the aftermath of Robert Kerner's alleged abandonment. Alex's diegetic voice-over recounts that his father left the family and fled to the West to live with a *Klassenfeind*, i.e. a West German girlfriend. The corresponding scene depicts Christiane's interrogation by two Stasi officers. The next shot shows a young Alex, who remains focused on a television broadcast of East German cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn's ascent into space. Parallel editing is utilized in this scene to present the two extremes of the GDR: the surveillance state (the Stasi) and the ideological source of pride (Jähn). Christiane is questioned by the Stasi men regarding her knowledge of Robert Kerner's intention to leave the country, but she either cannot or will not respond. Her silence can be interpreted at this early point in the film as shock and an inability to

⁴⁵ Using the images on these postcards is described by Becker as being a necessary strategy, as "the East Berlin landscape had changed too much to permit location shooting" (Kapczynski 87).

understand her husband's sudden defection. She abruptly shouts at the officers, "Haut ab! Lasst mich in Ruhe!" The camera cuts to a close-up of Alex, who distracts himself with the broadcast of Jähn, thereby removing himself from the difficult family situation. Alex's denial of what is occurring also provides evidence that, "he is too young to understand the significance of their visit" (Cook 208) and believes his mother's distress to be caused by disbelief that his father left the family. Certainly, those familiar with the GDR might interpret Christiane's institutionalization as having been caused by "the invasive tactics of the Stasi" (Barney 142), but here the GDR does not appear to have caused her breakdown, thereby allowing for Christiane's eventual devotion to the country to seem believable.

Alex narrates that shortly following this incident, his mother became so distraught that she suffered a nervous breakdown, refusing to speak. The only scene depicting this period of time is Alex's and Ariane's brief visit with an institutionalized Christiane, where he tries to embrace her, but she remains seemingly unaware or unwilling to acknowledge her children's presence. The lack of any other scene depicting Christiane's eight weeks of institutionalization implies that Alex would likely keep remembrance of this time in his childhood to a minimum, as it is associated with an unstable family life. Christiane is physically and mentally absent, resulting in Alex and Ariane having lost both parents within a brief amount of time. Christiane's recovery and return to her children marks the beginning of her newfound dedication to socialism, which serves as a diversion from the true circumstances regarding Robert's abandonment. Alex's voice-over describes his mother's optimistic indulgence of socialism as being a replacement for her absent husband: "Meine Mutter war sich von dieser Zeit an mit unserem

sozialistischen Vaterland verheiratet.” The home movies featured in the first part of the film, beginning with the Kerner’s trip to a *Jungpioniere* camp in the spring of 1979 (5:38), are a striking contrast to those filmed at the *Datsche*. Christiane’s “marriage” to the GDR implies that Alex and Ariane are, in turn, raised by this paternal but benevolent state. The GDR’s socialist ideology is shown to be very much a part of Alex’s childhood from this point onward. Christiane leads a group of *Jungpioniere* in singing “Unsere Heimat,” and Alex, who aspires to be the second German cosmonaut in space, is a member of the *Junge Raketenbauer* club and launches a model rocket into the sky. These scenes provide evidence that, following the end of 1978, Christiane’s devotion to socialism and active role in her community allowed for a renewed sense of familial stability that was temporarily threatened following Robert Kerner’s sudden defection from the East. Although fully committed to the socialist cause, she is never an official member of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*), the GDR’s ruling party. This creates ideological distance between herself and the state and promotes the idea of a fictionalized socialist paradise where she is preoccupied with “a kind of [folksy] socialism – singing songs and helping neighbors” (Hodgin 37). As a result, Christiane is no longer seen as victimized or at odds with the state. Alex describes his mother’s new role as a “Förderin des gesellschaftlichen Fortschritts, eine leidenschaftliche Aktivistin für die einfachen Bedürfnisse der Bevölkerung und gegen die kleinen Ungerechtigkeiten des Lebens.” Christiane, for example, dictates a letter of complaint for a woman wearing garishly colored maternity wear (6:30). The fond memories of life in the GDR as remembered by Alex from 1979 onward are based upon his mother’s socialist aspirations, which ironically arose or

intensified only as a means to replace her husband in his absence. Another such example of this idealistic version of the country providing Alex with the perception of renewed familial contentment occurs when they gather to watch Christiane's brief appearance on television showing the official ceremony during which she received recognition for her contributions to society. It is of note that she initially pays no attention to the broadcast and only acknowledges her appearance when Alex prompts her to look up from her newspaper. In contrast to her son, she appears less interested. These scenes provide evidence that life did, in fact, return to normal and the family was content. However, the film avoids presenting this idyllic GDR as actual. For the Kerners, this version of the GDR clearly only comes into existence in response to the threat of instability within the family unit.

As a young *Raketenbauer* in 1979, Alex launches his model rocket while Christiane proudly looks on. The camera momentarily follows the rocket upwards before lowering to the film's second temporality, that of 1989. Now 21, Alex is characterized as disillusioned with the country. Having been given a day off work due to celebrations for the GDR's 40th anniversary, he sits alone on a park bench in an isolated public square and drinks alcohol. He sarcastically narrates, "[d]ie DDR wurde vierzig. Ich hatte arbeitsfrei bei der PGH Fernsehreparatur Adolf Hennecke und fühlte mich auf dem Höhepunkt meiner männlichen Ausstrahlungskraft." Regardless of his current attitude, there is a continued sense of stability for the family. This is represented by Christiane's attempts at furthering the cause of socialism in the GDR through her role as a dedicated activist who, in a socialist fashion, helps her neighbors by writing letters to complain about the substandard goods produced by government-operated companies. Despite

Alex's disillusion, "life in the GDR...[is portrayed] as simple, harmonious, and orderly, if a bit boring, whereas the rapid transition of 1990 is frequently associated with a sense of bewilderment and chaos" (Uecker 191). In this way, the basis of Alex's recreation of the GDR is never presented as a desire to return to an authoritarian way of life, but a general longing for the pre-*Mauerfall* stability based on the state of his family: "hardly any East Germans wanted to return to totalitarian rule, [but] certain routines and life styles of the GDR era were now treasured" (Staab 148). These early scenes serve as evidence that it is not the GDR itself that would become the focus of *Ostalgie* within the film, but rather Christiane's socialist aspirations and replacement of the absent father with the paternal state. Alex's pre-*Mauerfall* life and the eventual threat of its disappearance provide an idea of how losing one's perception of stability can allow for nostalgic longing despite prior indifference.

***Ostalgie's* Reemergence as Christiane's Awakening**

The film characterizes the events following the Wall's demolition as mainly positive for Alex and Ariane in comparison with their lives before the *Mauerfall*. On a practical level, Christiane's awakening marks the onset of Alex's subsequent (although often comical) struggle to keep her ignorant to the political and socioeconomic changes. Alex's staged recreation of the past emerges only out of obligation to protect his mother's life (Hodgin 43), not a desire for a return to conditions as they existed within the GDR. The resulting perception of continuity and stability of a reimagined and *ostalgisch* GDR is therefore much more likely to resonate with audiences not entirely familiar with aspects regarding Reunification and dissolution of the GDR.

Upon visiting Christiane, who has fallen into a coma⁴⁶, Alex looks out from the balcony of her hospital room and, in an accompanying voice-over, describes that his mother “kreiste...wie ein Satellit um das menschliche Treiben auf unserem kleinen Planeten und in unserer noch kleineren Republik.” It is at this point during her eight-month hospitalization that the massive historic events take place, shown in a rapid montage sequence. The fast-paced nature of this montage serves as a representation of the high point of the post-*Mauerfall* consumer frenzy⁴⁷, during which East German consumer preference was generally oriented towards products from the West (Staab 145). The montage presents these changes as thoroughly welcomed by Alex and Ariane. In reaction to the broadcast announcing General Secretary Erich Honecker’s resignation, Alex immediately removes Honecker’s framed photograph from the wall and discards it in the rain. Various news publications throughout the world announce the *Mauerfall*, and archival footage of the Berlin Wall’s destruction is sarcastically described by Alex as “der Beginn einer gigantischen und einzigartigen Rohstoffsammlung.” Additional archival footage used features East German citizens chanting, “Stasi raus!” while in the process of storming the headquarters and casting files out the windows onto the protestors below⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Intending to make an appearance at a state function to receive recognition for her contributions to socialism, Christiane’s taxi driver advises her to travel the rest of the way on foot because of a large and violent anti-government protest blocking traffic. Alex, while present at this demonstration, is merely a passive participant. His “voice-over gives an ironic account of that event, referring to the spontaneous “Abendspaziergang” (“evening stroll”)...his manner is more suggestive of an apathetic teenager, sauntering along in the crowd...” (Hodgin 37). Regardless of his apparent indifference, he is arrested within view of Christiane, which triggers her heart attack.

⁴⁷ Haug 186.

⁴⁸ As mentioned earlier, author Anna Funder was critical of the film’s handling of this scene, as she believes it implies a lack of acknowledgement of how both the Stasi’s

Aside from these scenes of large-scale historical significance, Alex's and Ariane's introduction to life outside the GDR reveals their willingness to embrace Westernization. Alex crosses the now meaningless border for the first time, where his "kulturelle Entdeckungen in einem neuen Land" entail a visit to a pornography shop, while Ariane quits her study of economic theory to gain, in Alex's words, her first practical experience with monetary circulation. This "experience" is revealed to be employment at Burger King and romantic involvement with coworker and *Klassenfeind* Rainer. Westernization of the East culminates for the Kerners in the total refurbishment of their *Plattenbau* apartment. Christiane is "absent" through these various changes (although visited daily by Alex, who is romantically involved with a young nurse, Lara). He can therefore take part in the initial frenzy of westernization without his mother's loyalty to socialism affecting his enjoyment. Only Christiane's awakening "threatens... [her children's] happy dalliance with capitalism" (Hodgin 38). Alex's initial willingness to adapt to the increasing Westernization shows that the GDR he later attempts to recreate is not based on his own sentimental feelings towards the country, as his *ostaligisch* version does not derive from an actual desire to return to the authoritarian regime.

Christiane's sudden awakening does not subside fears pertaining to her survival or the stability of the Kerner family, rather, it creates unanticipated difficulties. The moment in which she regains consciousness with Alex and Lara by her bedside is brief. Following this reunion, Alex and Ariane are informed by the doctor about their mother's dire health condition and her chance of survival. Alex is presented with the task of protecting his

infiltrative tactics and learning of one's Stasi files would affect East Germans following the GDR's dissolution. However, as I have argued in this chapter, Christiane's breakdown was likely to have been caused by the Stasi's infiltrative tactics.

mother from the onset of a second – and fatal – heart attack. He is strongly discouraged from taking Christiane home, as she would receive greater protection hospitalized. However, Alex notices two objects on the desk – a small fragment of the Berlin Wall bearing an inscription with the dates of its creation and destruction, as well as an issue of the West German newspaper *Bild* proclaiming, “*Mach’s gut, Deutschland.*” Alex refutes the doctor’s suggestion and places the issue of *Bild* in front of him, remarking, “und das hier? Ist das kein Grund zur Aufregung?” in reference to Christiane’s unconscious state during the past eight months. Having been a source of much excitement up to this moment, the massive changes having taken place are now a source of anxiety for Alex and a reminder of his mother’s seemingly fatal circumstances.

The reimplementation of the family’s previously discarded East German furniture and other items is the film’s allusion to the emerging preference for East German products following Reunification. Recreating the “GDR” emerges as an arduous task for Alex. Christiane’s request and Alex’s subsequent search for the East German *Spreewald Gurken* reveals the extent to which East Germany’s newly discovered consumerism removed all traces of life in the GDR. While walking through an aisle of empty shelves, Alex narrates that supermarkets in the socialist fatherland were emptied in preparation for the transition to West German currency. As with the scene portraying the events of the *Mauerfall*, the depiction of West German currency’s introduction into the East is comprised of archival footage. The *Wert- und Sicherheitstransport* rushes the *Deutsche Mark* across the border into the East, which is followed by the midnight celebrations of East Germans in the process of exchanging their worthless *Ostmark* for the new currency. Interspersed among these archival clips is Alex’s and Ariane’s desperate attempt to find

Christiane's checkbook, represented as a frantic search through sped-up footage. Upon returning to the same (albeit Westernized market), he realizes it is now a "bright, shining Western-style chain supermarket. An employee responds to his request for *Mocca-Fix*, *Filinchen*, and *Spreewald Gurkin*, with, "Mensch, Junge, wo lebst du denn? Wir haben jetzt die D-Mark, und da kommst du mit Mocca-Fix und Filinchen?" Surveying the newly available items, including a jar of pickles imported from Holland, Alex narrates wryly that, indeed, "I, the customer, was king!" (Barney 144). To remedy the problem, Alex rummages in a bin of waste outside his apartment. In a tongue and cheek scene, neighbor Herr Ganske interprets Alex's actions as being a desperate attempt to rummage for food because of unemployment: "Es tut mir leid, junger Mann, ich bin selbst arbeitslos!" This often-comical forage for GDR brands arises as a means to protect Christiane from knowledge of the true events taking place in the GDR. In this way, Westernization shifts from providing new and exciting experiences for the East Germans to suddenly erasing their way of life and allowing for a feeling of uncertainty to take hold. For Alex, the changes brought on by the *Mauerfall* are problematic within the narrative in relation to the complications arising from his need to maintain the façade of continuity.

The turning point of Alex's changing perception towards his pre-*Mauerfall* life derives from moments during which his mother's weakened state parallels her 1978 breakdown. This results in his increased dependence on creating the illusion that life is unchanged, to avoid the present circumstances that threaten Christiane's life. The first reminder of Christiane's weakened condition occurs when she is confined to her bed in the *Plattenbau* and reminisces her past recovery. She recounts that after her husband left, she was unsure of her ability to survive on her own, leading her to contemplate suicide.

She tells her son that his daily visits ultimately gave her the will to live and confides to him, "...[du] hast mich jeden Tag besucht, du hast von der Schule erzählt, und von Sigmund Jähn..." But Christiane has yet to reveal the entire truth of her complex relationship to the GDR. This brief confession only serves to further Alex's association of his mother's recovery with devotion to her country. The most significant realization of the extent of Christiane's vulnerability occurs when prompted by Alex and Ariane to remember the location of her money, as she has forgotten where it is hidden. She pauses before stating, "Vater kommt heute spät nach Hause, findet ihr nicht?" which can be interpreted as the first mention of Robert Kerner since his "abandonment"⁴⁹. Her sudden incoherence recalls her 1978 breakdown and institutionalization, which Alex still believes to have been caused by his father. His mother's display of vulnerability provides a reminder that losing his mother would also signal the loss of the stability that existed for the family since 1979. Alex and Ariane attempt to reassure her that she will recover, to which Alex adds that they will celebrate her upcoming birthday as always. As he says this, the camera's focus on Christiane reveals her visibly uplifted mood from her son's assurance. Unbeknownst to Alex, however, his mother takes comfort in his words not because of the promise of return, but rather from seeing her son exhibit the distance he is willing to go in order to improve her wellbeing.

⁴⁹ The scene immediately following Christiane's return from her eight-week psychiatric stay in the 1970s details her removal of any remaining traces of her husband. She discards the bedding on his side, while his clothing is placed into a sack reading *Solidarität mit Mosambik*. Alex's voice-over in the closing moments of this scene reaffirms Robert Kerner's total erasure from the family with, "Wir sprachen nie mehr von Vater."

Just as Christiane rapidly became a devoted socialist to move on from the distressing events of 1978, Alex becomes reliant upon this façade in order to return life to its previous stability. He believes this *ostalgisch* version of home protects his mother from the chaos of the outside world. To an extent, life seemingly returns to his notion of pre-*Mauerfall* normality, as his mother was getting better. Returning to the normalcy of the past, Christiane resumes her duty assisting neighbors. As she writes letters of complaint to production facilities, the neighbors gladly play along by outfitting themselves once more in their outdated Eastern clothing. One of whom, Frau Schäfer, appears to be experiencing *Ostalgie* for pre-*Mauerfall* life, remarking to Alex that speaking with Christiane brings back fond memories of the good old days. In the small *Plattenbau* apartment, the GDR truly does appear to live on for the benefit of the family.

In a similar vein, Alex believes his mother's life to be threatened by any potential change. One such situation arises in a scene where Ariane informs Alex of her intention to move out with Rainer and infant daughter Paula, as she is expecting her second child with him. From Alex's point of view, this announcement undermines the stability that the GDR has provided for Christiane. It is also implied that despite his tireless efforts to keep the country alive, the simple passing of time, as symbolized with the birth of a child in post-unified Germany, poses the greatest threat to his entire illusion. Ariane is at this point frustrated with Alex's insistence of continuing the charade, ridiculing him that he will eventually need to redecorate the entire city. After accusing her of wishing for their mother's death, she once more relents and continues to play along with the illusion: "und so war die Einheit zumindest in unserer kleinen Familie wiederhergestellt." Alex's

reliance upon this artificial GDR is now undeniable, as his mother's recovery and his notion of familial stability are associated with this idealistic version of socialism.

Conclusion –Closure for Family and Country as *Ostalgie*

Evoked in response to needs of the present, nostalgic “escape” does not function as a permanent removal from current circumstances. Thus, Alex must eventually outgrow the dependence he develops for this *ostalgisch* façade (Kapczynski 85). Despite his success in shielding his mother and himself from the chaos of the outside world, “...the film portrays *Ostalgie* as a childish attachment” (Kapczynski 85), as his ploy to extend the GDR's lifespan appears to be aimless and a futile attempt to suspend time in the face of increasing Westernization. This “immature” (86) avoidance is ultimately undermined by an unexpected revelation from Christiane at the family's *Datsche*. It is unclear as to how long Alex would have kept his mother unaware of the current political and social climate⁵⁰. Regardless of his intent, the revelation pertaining to his father's escape to the West forces him to accept the illusory nature of the GDR that he and his mother became dependent upon in times of hardship. Christiane's failing health and the approaching *Einheitsag* prompt him to find a means for both his mother and the country to obtain a sense of closure before their ultimate deaths.

Having been convinced by the “*Aktuelle Kamera*” broadcasts detailing the West Germans' apparent escape from capitalism, Christiane believes she can provide assistance to the “refugees” from the West by using the family's old summer home as

⁵⁰ The film initially seems to concern itself with the moral dilemma Alex faces: “Is lying to [his mother], for however noble a motive, ultimately the kindest way?” (Dale 165), but this question is not further explored as Alex remains steadfast in his efforts to hide the truth from her.

housing. The family's visit to the *Datsche* results in a startling confession by Christiane revealing that the entire family was supposed to escape to the West. But, fearing that the state would take her children away from her if she applied for an exit visa, Christiane chose to remain in the East, hiding her husband's letters in the space behind the kitchen cabinet. She then describes her decision as the biggest mistake of her life, as well as the wish to see Robert, her husband, again. The drastic measures Alex has taken thus far in maintaining a perception of continuity are seemingly nullified from this brief revelation. Interspersed with the scenes of Christiane's subsequent hospitalization are those of Ariane's devastation upon discovering the multitude of hidden letters written by her father behind the kitchen cupboard. This scene indicates the extent to which a country divided has also irreversibly shattered a family. Alex's "GDR" can at this point no longer serve to provide protection against the threats to his familial stability.

Faced with the realization that Christiane has suffered a second, and predictably soon-to-be fatal, heart attack, his final act of filial love is to fulfill her dying wishes and reunite her with Robert Kerner. However, their meeting at her deathbed remains mostly unseen by both the audience and Alex, who remains outside the hospital with Lara during this moment of reconciliation. The film does not reach its conclusion with this familial reunion, as there must be one final act of closure before Christiane's death. He narrates that with the summer ending, he decides to end the entire charade of the GDR as well, "Ein letztes Mal noch sollten wir den Geburtstag unseres sozialistischen Vaterlandes feiern, aber im Gegensatz zur Wirklichkeit, als einen würdigen Abschied."

Finding his inspiration in a Jähn “lookalike”⁵¹ taxi driver, his intention is to inform Christiane of the *Einheitstag*. This fictional broadcast, with its claim that socialism would live in the new country, also reveals the enduring significance this “GDR” has for Alex. He and Denis spend the following day creating one final broadcast for Christiane. Alex meets with the taxi driver in order to recruit him for this scheme; they purchase items such as a *Volkspolizei* uniform and busts of Lenin and Marx from a street vendor, and film their broadcast in a public library, much to the confusion of onlookers. In Alex’s version of events as presented to Christiane, the newly-appointed “Jähn,” now head of the party as a result of Honecker’s resignation, allows for the borders to be opened, proclaiming to the East Germans that socialism is not about walling oneself in, but rather to reach out and live with others; to not simply dream of a better world, but to make it a reality. Alex’s unification of East and West is “here is a successful merging of East and West Germans. His fictional GDR is not only one that took the [‘]middle way,[‘] but also one that...would have offered an attractive alternative to many West Germans as well” (Cook 212). The GDR’s ideals are recognized in the new Germany, which he believes will allow his mother to die content with the belief socialism would live on.

A brief scene shows Lara revealing the truth to Christiane, repeatedly emphasizing that the borders no longer exist and there is only one country. However, this remains unknown to Alex. As the family gathers in her hospital room to watch the broadcast, Christiane is seated behind Alex, looking “not at the television but at the back

⁵¹ “Jähn’s” current career as a taxi driver implies that many East Germans’ careers became obsolete following reunification: “once a symbol of east German pride, [Jähn] now works as a cab driver in Berlin” (Jozwiak and Mermann 785).

of her son's head. She smiles as Alex turns to look at her, and continues to observe him as he returns to watching his revised history play out on television. We may interpret this as a [']knowing['] look..." (Creech 114) as Christiane now knows the extent of her son's charade. He switches off the television and turns to view his mother's reaction as she states, "Wahnsinn," as a comment "not on the power of socialism but on the beautiful structure that Alex has given to love" (Downing 15). The scene following Christiane's death features, "a cut to archival tracking shots of East Berlin city streets that remind the audiences that this landscape is fast disappearing. Then finally, reaching back to the film's opening moments, home movie footage closes the film - this time showing a youthful Christiane gazing proudly into the camera" (Kapczynski 89) with her son gazing up at her in admiration. Alex narrates "[d]as Land, das meine Mutter verließ, war ein Land, an das sie geglaubt hatte und dass wir bis zu ihrer letzten Sekunde überleben ließen. Ein Land, das es in Wirklichkeit nie so gegeben hat. Ein Land, das in meiner Erinnerung immer mit meiner Mutter verbunden sein wird." His closing narration shows he understands the idyllic nature of the GDR experienced in childhood to have been imagined by his mother, but he is nevertheless able to acknowledge its importance in providing his family with a means to continue on during periods of difficulty. Alex's fond memories of the GDR and his mother's devotion to the country should not be considered problematic or controversial, as he admits that while not outright fictional, his memories were not what they seemed to be. Faced with the inability to escape the GDR, Christiane used the idea of socialism to create an ideal home for her children. What Alex remembers is her "idealism and devotion to GDR [']progress[']...[that was a] personal attempt to champion motherhood above all ...[which] provided the context for

unselfishly raising her children” (Barney 146). Having experienced his mother’s optimism for the GDR during his childhood, Alex, in turn, preserves this “GDR” a decade later, revealing that mother and son have had near-identical means of coping with familial hardships. Alex certainly did not intend to create the illusion for himself, but in keeping the “GDR” alive for his mother, he, in turn, develops the same appreciation and optimism for the country’s socialist ideals, as it allowed his family a shelter from the “crazed city [of Berlin] where West confronts East.”

The death of both Christiane and the GDR shows that while nostalgia for the past is often evoked in times of hardship, it cannot be used as a means to avoid difficulties of the present. The character of Christiane therefore functions as *pars pro toto* for the entire GDR; aware of his mother’s impending death, Alex’s final gesture of love for her is to bury the country and ideals she identified with, therefore implying that they will not survive in this new Germany. By “...concluding with double burial services for Christiane and the GDR state, the film parallels reunification with Alex’s own coming-of-age: having outgrown his attachment to both his former idols, he will move on to a new future with Lara in a reunited Germany” (Kapczynski 86). His ability to reunite his family and create a dignified send-off for the GDR signals that he is no longer dependent upon this idealized version of the country. The film represents nostalgia as an attachment to the past often necessary during times of uncertainty and instability, though not an actual removal from the present.

The film’s recognition of the various difficulties faced by East Germans such as the inability to leave, the separation of families, Stasi interference, lack of consumer goods, and, most importantly the stark contrast between the country’s ideology and the

reality thereby counters the argument that the film glamorizes life in the GDR. *Good Bye, Lenin!* instead provides a more thorough perspective on *Ostalgie* for those not entirely familiar with the challenges faced by East Germans following the reunification. In reference to the film's portrayal of *Ostalgie*, Falcon argues,

Good Bye Lenin could have remained at the level of farce and contented itself with riding the current wave of partly fetishistic [*Ostalgie*]” that achieves no more than celebrating East German consumer products. Instead, the film depicts the phenomenon in a way that recognizes the potential for romanticized nostalgic memories to exist despite the often less-than-ideal experiences that could have surrounded them. Alex's final narration makes this clear, as he “...tells us at the end that his memories are of a land that never really existed and which is, in his mind, completely bound up with his mother, the feeling is one of personal loss with faint echoes of regret for lost ideals. (52)

The evocation of *Ostalgie* does not intend to erase past experiences of negativity, but rather exists as a means to cope with such present hardships: “Alex privileges the utopian dreams at the heart of his personal experience with the GDR without dismissing or contradicting the violence his family experienced in a [‘]country that never existed as such in reality[‘]” (Creech 115). Utopian features of this *ostalgisch* GDR within the film's narrative are not meant to erase certain aspects of history in favor of superficial admiration of eastern artifacts. The function of nostalgia within the film is not to allow for an ideal representation of the country to supersede the oppressive aspects of the regime, but to mourn the GDR as it was intended to be, since this provided a sense of

hope, purpose, and meaning to a family caught between the struggles of a country divided both physically and ideologically.

Conclusion

The book *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*, and the films *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* acknowledge the fact that the *Ostalgie* phenomenon often manifests itself as a fascination with consumer products and artifacts of the GDR. The most obvious example of this in the novel and films is the product placement of East German-specific goods. But with *Sonnenallee* as the most successful German film released in the country that year and *Good Bye, Lenin!* achieving worldwide success, it can be inferred that both resonated with audiences in a way that extends beyond the market of revitalized GDR products. The novel and films are crucial for the discourse on post-Reunification nostalgia in the East and the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* because they dispel the myth that sentimental feelings for life in the East indicate a desire to return. They avoid portraying the protagonists as actively desiring a return to the conditions of life as they were in the country. The three narratives are instead quite aware of the GDR's shortcomings, as the authoritative state adversely affects the protagonists at various points. On the term's ambivalence,

The word itself appears to be contested, sometimes being used as a neutral term meaning a form of nostalgia, a kind of homesickness for a lost era, in this specific case, the GDR or aspects of it, and sometimes as a negative term implying selective amnesia and misplaced sentiment. Critics seem to interpret the word to mean [those experiencing *Ostalgie*] want the GDR back while [they] themselves appear to place emphasis on their right to remember formative experiences and their own past. (Cafferty 256)

Experiences worthy of nostalgic recollection as portrayed in these narratives are, ironically, those used to cope with life under the strict regime. For Micha and his friends in *Sonnenallee*, this consists of discreetly subverting authoritarianism in a way familiar to teenagers outside the East. *Good Bye, Lenin!* represents Alex and Christiane as, at different points in the narrative, relying upon optimism for the potential of a socialist state, despite its failure in the GDR. As portrayed in these works, the nostalgia in *Ostalgie* is not directly associated with the GDR state, but rather with aspects of life in the East relatable on a larger scale.

In an interview leading up to *Sonnenallee*'s release, Haußmann admitted he was critical of the term *Ostalgie*: "Entweder ist man nostalgisch oder nicht. Wie heißt das denn bei den Westlern? Westalgie? [The term *Ostalgie*] ist eine Form der Verächtlichmachung⁵²." By pointing out the term's lack of a West German counterpart, Haußmann implies that *Ostalgie* is incorrectly considered to be an unnatural longing; that it is inferior to so-called "normal" nostalgia (Caffery 256). He refutes this idea in *Sonnenallee* by, ironically, portraying the protagonist's fond experiences in youth as rebellion against the state-enforced ideals. The perception that those living in the GDR were continually subject to the restrictive nature of the regime is likewise challenged. Protagonist Micha Kuppisch/Ehrenreich is ridiculed by West Germans as a "Zoni/Ossi," but the remainder of the narrative reveals that this is not the defining feature of Micha's existence. His adolescence is largely similar to what West German teenagers would have

⁵² From "Im Theater sitzen die Spielverderber." Interview with Leander Haußmann by Peter Zander. <http://archiv.berliner.archiv/1999/991006/feuilleton/story01.html> (Quoted in Cafferty 256)

experienced during this time period, therefore normalizing the experiences of those who grew up in the East (Cooke “Performing” 166) and directing attention away from the official and historical narratives of the GDR.

Good Bye, Lenin! similarly attempts to depict life in the GDR from a personal perspective, albeit in a way that still incorporates the country’s socialist ideology. The film differs from *Sonnenallee*’s handling of *Ostalgie* in that the GDR - or rather, Alexander Kerner’s reinterpretation of it - is characterized as positive. The narrative initially appears to adhere to nostalgia’s tendency of selectively remembering the past. Yet the GDR the protagonist chooses to remember is only of importance to him because of his belief that it keeps his mother alive. Wolfgang Becker claimed in interviews that the so-called “universal” familial storyline in the narrative was how he, a West German, could understand nostalgic sentiment for life in the East (Jordanova 3). The narrative of filial love represents nostalgia’s role of shielding against the uncertainty deriving from Reunification’s turmoil.

The protagonists are characterized as being generally content in the East during their childhood and adolescence. This allows for the implication that *Ostalgie* is less associated with the GDR and more closely tied to features of life that are valued when their existence is threatened. This includes friendship, love, familial stability, and optimism. Recognizing that these aspects are, in fact, part of the East German experience highlights the commonalities between East and West, therefore functioning as a step towards actual reunification (Cooke “Performing” 167). While disapproving of restorative nostalgia’s intention to rebuild or literally return to a homeland, Boym nevertheless concludes in her text, “The dreams of imagined homelands cannot and

should not come to life. They can have a more important impact on improving social and political conditions in the present as ideals...We are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic. But there seems to be no way back” (354 - 355). The idea that nostalgia can be a means of improving social conditions disproves the accusation *Ostalgie* is a regressive phenomenon. It is not a hindrance of the East’s integration into the West. It is instead a strategy of finding common ground at a basic level of the human experience. While *Sonnenallee*, *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*, and *Good Bye, Lenin!* certainly cannot provide solutions to political and economic inequality in the country, they are evidence that social recognition and equality is possible.

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