

INSTITUTE OF GERMANIC AND ROMANCE STUDIES  
MA CULTURAL MEMORY

‘To what extent does the nostalgic tone of some German film post-1989 facilitate a 'coming-to-terms' with the subject of the GDR past and provide the basis for a new form of cultural memory in the unified Germany? Discuss with reference to Good Bye, Lenin! and Sonnenallee.’

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## 1. Introduction

The critic Gerd Gemünden states that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent unification between East and West Germany “have had a paradoxical effect on Germans, instilling [...] a euphoric sense of pride but also triggering a deep crisis about precisely what it is that one ought to be proud of”.<sup>1</sup> These polarised sentiments echo a country reborn and united, yet also in cultural and societal disarray. The amalgamation proved not to be as simple as the celebrations provoked by the fall of the Berlin Wall would lead one to believe.

The newly unified ‘Berlin Republic’ that rose from the ashes of a demolished wall was not a natural unifier of the people. The former division between the two countries and the surrounding atmosphere is perhaps best summarised by Rudolf Thome’s description of a normal day in West Berlin: “Vor meinem Fenster in einer Kreuzberger Zweizimmer-Wohnung ist eine unverputzte, graubraune Brandmauer. Das ist alles, was ich sehe.”<sup>2</sup> The fall of the Wall represented greater freedom in every sense for inhabitants either side of it, and a brighter future promising unity and collective development.

However, as Ulrike Zitzlsperger states, “[a]s a result of unification the city itself had to be redefined”.<sup>3</sup> Svetlana Boym claims that “Berliners are not quite sure how to speak of German ‘unity’. The word *reunification* struck many as fundamentally nostalgic; it expresses a longing for some kind of *Heimat* that will provide a link between the future and the past”.<sup>4</sup> In Andreas Huyssen’s view unification brought about not only “the happy conclusion of an unhappy national division, but rather the sharpening of the national question, the opening up of new fissures and

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd Gemünden, ‘Epilogue: National Identity and Americanization in the Unified Germany’ in Gerd Gemünden (ed.), *Framed Visions: Popular Culture, Americanisation, and the Contemporary German and Austrian Imagination*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998). p.195.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Thome, ‘Das Kino, von dem ich träume’ in Hans Helmut Prinzler and Eric Rentschler (eds.), *Augenzeugen: 100 Texte neuer Deutscher Filmemacher*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag der Autoren, 1988). p.134.

<sup>3</sup> Ulrike Zitzlsperger, ‘Filling the Blanks: Berlin as a Public Showcase’ in Stuart Taberner and Frank Finlay (eds.), *Recasting German Identity: Culture, Politics and Literature in the Berlin Republic*. (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002). p.39.

<sup>4</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001). p.177.

faultlines in the problematic of nation”.<sup>5</sup> This shift in identity and cultural memory is precisely what was difficult for a great many ex-GDR citizens to come to terms with; for many, unification came to represent more of an unwelcome beginning than a happy and grateful end to the GDR. Indeed, what Zitzlsperger calls the “‘*Übergangszeit*’ – the transitional period between [...] ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet’ – a period of open identities”,<sup>6</sup> is what people had to confront. They experienced a perpetually restrictive present, in which the state narratives on GDR cultural memory highlighted the old as inadequate and the new as uncertain and foreign.

The East Germans’ feeling of being unable to integrate seamlessly into modern society was the result of the social, economic and cultural climate of the unified state. The aim was to integrate the ex-GDR citizens into the democratic, capitalistic system of the ex-Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), its ideologies and ways of life. As a result of this many East Germans were sharply prompted to adapt their left-wing oriented ideas into a consumerist, capitalist cultural framework almost overnight. A number of ex-GDR artists encountered difficulties in continuing to write, paint or direct films: the dominant subject matter changed from that of the ‘cult of the socialist nation’, and the competitive environment and process one had to undergo to gain prestige and recognition was foreign to many. Some simply had not adapted to the new way of life, or as Alex aptly puts it in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, “nicht alle sind für die Ellbogengesellschaft geeignet”.<sup>7</sup> This is a clear example of how cultural issues are directly influenced by the political ones.

Furthermore, it was not just the transition from a ‘socialist state’ to a fast-paced, individualistic approach to work and success that prompted a sense of disunity within the ex-GDR community. Many people became unemployed. Instead of a change from a spartan life of hardship in East Germany, unemployment became an entirely new phenomenon, with East Germans increasingly falling behind in the 1990s.

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<sup>5</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. (New York/London: Routledge, 1995). p.74.

<sup>6</sup> Ulrike Zitzlsperger, ‘A Worm’s Eye View and a Bird’s Eye View: Culture and Politics in Berlin since 1989’ in William Niven and James Jordan (eds.), *Politics and Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany*. (Rochester, NY: Camden House, c2003). p.186.

<sup>7</sup> *Good Bye, Lenin!*, 2003. [Film] Directed by Wolfgang Becker. Germany: X-Filme Creative Pool.

Finally, in the cultural and political sphere, ex-FRG products replaced ex-GDR ones, adverts became glossier and new TV channels were introduced. Clearly all these changes were a result of the capitalistic transformation of social and cultural aspects in modern German society, thereby positing the Berlin Republic *de facto* as a successor state to the FRG.

For East Germans, however, it signified something much deeper. Due to the fact that the Berlin Republic could be seen as a larger continuation of the FRG and its ideologies, whilst negating and confining to the realms of history textbooks the GDR regime and its legacy, it left many East Germans questioning their identity and position within it. Gone was their sense of national identity – regardless of whether or not the individual identified with GDR policies and ideologies – and thus gone was the sense of self-identity. Once the GDR citizens’ apparently seamless transition from one societal framework into another was called into doubt, self-reflection and critical analysis of one’s position within the collective quickly emerged. As Seán Allan puts it, “the more rapidly change occurs, the stronger the desire becomes to cling to the memories of the past”,<sup>8</sup> be these memories real or fabricated. Boym emphasises that “[o]nly false memories can be totally recalled [...] One becomes aware of the collective frameworks of memories when one distances oneself from one’s community or when that community itself enters the moment of twilight”.<sup>9</sup> If we consider the feeling of alienation among the East German collective from their own society to be their ‘moment of twilight’, then this is precisely when they recall memories – real or otherwise – of a happier, more secure period in their lives. Indeed, Charity Scribner even likens this feeling of nostalgia to one of mourning by stating that “some have begun to ask whether the death of Europe’s second world has been mourned properly”.<sup>10</sup>

This feeling of difference and lack of affinity is exemplified no more clearly than in the name given to the fall of the Wall and the subsequent reunification: *Wende*. Meaning ‘turning point’, it

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<sup>8</sup> Seán Allan, ‘*Ostalgie*, fantasy and the normalization of east-west relations in post-unification comedy’ in David Clarke (ed.), *German Cinema Since Unification: The New Germany in Context*. (London: Continuum, 2006). p.121

<sup>9</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.54.

<sup>10</sup> Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003). p.89.

does not have either positive or negative connotations. It is merely a politically correct term for change - be it in the West German sentiment of the expansion of their country and resultant self-identity, not to mention the resultant dramatic shift in GDR memory narratives - or the East German feeling of displacement and eradication of their respective identity of the self. The general view endorsed by the Berlin Republic of Germany becoming a 'normal', unified European country resulted in the fact that "[t]here is probably no other country in the world that is so willing and even eager to give up its singularity".<sup>11</sup> Not only had East Germans lost their country, they were expected to become part of an ever-expanding capitalistic union. Without probing too much into discourses of the coloniser and the colonised, Bhabha's ideas on hybridity and mimicry are clearly at play. Here "the colonized are forced to inhabit the space allocated them by the colonizer"<sup>12</sup> – the East Germans had no choice but to adapt to the ways of their successor state: to normalise.

Indeed, the topic of normalisation generated debate and controversy, mainly due to its indefinite and malleable meaning. In the 1990s, normalisation within the unified state enabled a shaping of a new man-made national identity, built on the desire to amalgamate two different German societies into one cohesive Berlin Republic identity. Based on a Western model, as the direct descendant of the FRG, it preceded individual and collective memories in favour of 'official' narratives of history and redemption. In 2005 Gerhard Schröder stated that Germany "ist ein geachteter und verantwortungsbewusster Partner in der Welt, weil es sich seiner Vergangenheit gestellt hat".<sup>13</sup> According to him, Germany was a normalised country precisely because it was aware of its history and "has learnt from its past and successfully aligned itself with liberal, democratic values".<sup>14</sup> He was referring explicitly to the state's National Socialist past, yet it is a concept that is quite relevant to perceptions of the GDR regime as well. Similarly, Helmut Kohl claimed that "things

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Brockmann, "Normalization": Has Helmut Kohl's Vision Been Realized?' in Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke (eds.), *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization*. (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006). p.25.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany Since Unification*. (Oxford: Berg, 2005). p.17.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke, "Introduction" in *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

will normalize [...] the most important thing for us [is] that we simply don't stick out."<sup>15</sup> Through these statements it is clear, therefore, that the GDR is not only posited as 'Other' to the Berlin Republic's clearly Western outlook on history, politics and society, but that its political legitimacy, cultural legacy, and individual and collective memories are compromised in the streamlining of the various sections of German society post-1989. As Taberner claims: "normality is defined mainly by reference to the success of the old FRG and [...] the failure of the GDR".<sup>16</sup>

These two concepts of normalisation clash with each other: on one hand the idea that it should attempt to streamline the new German state with that of other Western countries prevails, marking a clear antinomy of right and wrong within the capitalist framework of the Berlin Republic. This is in stark contrast with the second concept, which suggests that the normalisation of a newly unified society "demands the absence of any hegemonic insistence on the concept of normality".<sup>17</sup> It cannot have a preconceived, strict set of rules. For Frank Brunssen this is an unattainable ideal, as "[t]he division of the nation [...] never permitted the formation of an identity that could be shared by all Germans".<sup>18</sup> For him, the division of the German people post-World War II forever gave Germans both sides of the wall separate identities. I disagree with this, as identity and cultural memory are such malleable concepts that, like normalisation, can constantly evolve and shape themselves around their present. Mary Fullbrook further emphasises that "[t]here is no such thing as an 'essential' national identity",<sup>19</sup> but rather that identity and memory are works in progress. Huyssen makes a similar claim in saying that "the forms memory will take are invariably contingent and subject to change".<sup>20</sup> For him, memory is about "*recherche* rather than recuperation"<sup>21</sup> – in other words, memory mainly works in seeking out identity, rather than recovering it. Homi Bhabha

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<sup>15</sup> Brockmann, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.17.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Taberner, 'Introduction' in *Recasting German Identity*. p.3.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Saunders, "'Normalizing' the Past: East German Culture and *Ostalgie*" in *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.102.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Brunssen, 'The New Self-Understanding of the Berlin Republic: Readings of Contemporary German History' in *Recasting German Identity*. p.24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.27.

<sup>20</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*. p.2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

supports this by remarking that “[c]ultural identity [...] is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past”.<sup>22</sup> Just as Schröder put forth regarding the National Socialist past that “[e]inen Schlußstrich unter die deutsche Geschichte kann niemand ziehen”,<sup>23</sup> similarly one should not draw a line under the GDR past either. This *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or the individual’s and collective’s ‘coming to terms with the past’, is a constant work in progress.

To what extent has this normalisation been successful, and are there still social and cultural frictions between East and West Germans? For East Germans normalisation had to be “a way of compromise, beyond the opposition of memory and forgetting, toward a ‘grown-up’ attitude about the past”<sup>24</sup> – it is “not merely a slogan of forgetting”.<sup>25</sup> Referencing Fullbrook’s and Huyssen’s ideas on identity, true and equal normalisation can only take place when both backgrounds are acknowledged and treated as valid, avoiding patterns of dominance and colonisation, to form a unified state in terms of identity and belonging. One could argue that only recently has there been normalisation in the egalitarian sense of the word, especially in the form of films, websites and TV shows that take a less vicious approach towards the GDR. This emergence of media and culture less dominated by statal narratives is called *Ostalgie* – or ‘Eastalgia’ – that is, nostalgia for the former East German way of life.

How is *Ostalgie* viewed in German society today? For many *Ostalgie* is a destructive, backward-looking phenomenon, with nostalgic reminiscences as an antithesis to normalisation. It glorifies a past that needs to be represented in stark, realist terms. The remembering of events in a more positive light to that in which they actually happened is just a form of disowning the present in order to focus on the more homely and safe socialist past. This especially angers some critics who believe that it almost naively denies or dismisses more serious issues that often impinged on, for example, human rights issues, such as the daily involvement of the *Stasi*. For them these

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<sup>22</sup> Cooke, *Representing East Germany*. p.18.

<sup>23</sup> Caroline Gay, ‘Remembering for the Future, Engaging with the Present: National Memory Management and the Dialectic of Normality in the ‘Berlin Republic’” in *Politics and Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany*. p.201.

<sup>24</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.216.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



reminiscences could pose a danger to factual recollections and records of events, the East German portrayal of a “Kuschel-DDR”<sup>26</sup> eventually even delegitimizing the culture of the Berlin Republic. An explanation for such a portrayal is that it provides an outlet for those East Germans unsatisfied with their current lives, disillusioned with the failed capitalist promise of instant money and success. They turn to the only other way of life they know – their memories of life under socialism, when they harboured an independent sense of identity. *Ostalgie* is presented here as especially dangerous: by displaying the GDR as a favourable alternative through false, rosy memories of the past, the Berlin Republic is branded as a failed concept that has been incapable of integrating East Germans into the Western model.

For others, *Ostalgie* is nothing more than a sulky act on behalf of the East Germans. This defiant sentiment of a “Trotzidentität”<sup>27</sup> simply serves to posit the West Germans as a ‘bully’, thereby undermining true appraisals of past events and being counter-productive to a normalisation of the German people. This view sees the ex-GDR citizens as displaying merely a selective memory born out of a semi-amnesiac approach. I disagree with this view strongly, as it clearly places the West Germans as victims in a role unbecoming them, and also ignores the fact that the Berlin Republic is portrayed as more righteous and desirable. It can conveniently attribute blame to the GDR and present unification as redemptive.<sup>28</sup> It furthermore “present[ed] unification as a uniquely east German affair [and] the GDR past as one that must be ‘overcome’”,<sup>29</sup> rather than as a mutual event.

Simultaneously, such a perception of *Ostalgie* unwittingly pictures the East Germans as victims of colonisation. Dahn emphasises this by claiming that East Germans “became nothing more than colonial vassals”.<sup>30</sup> Edward Said theorizes that “[t]he Orient [...] is always in the position of both

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<sup>26</sup> Saunders, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.91.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.90.

<sup>28</sup> Cooke, *Representing East Germany*. p.43.

<sup>29</sup> Saunders, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.91.

<sup>30</sup> Cooke, *Representing East Germany*. p.3.

outsider and of incorporated weak partner for the West”.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, some West Germans exhibit “colonialist feelings of superiority”<sup>32</sup> showing no interest in visiting the *Länder* of the ex-GDR. As Brockmann suggests, “[m]any and perhaps most West Germans did not really *want* East Germany; they were satisfied with their own existence as a separate, successful state”.<sup>33</sup> For many the GDR existed in collective cultural memory as a failed concept, and the resultant unification brought societal friction, unemployment and increased costs for West German tax-payers. Despite the dissatisfaction and mutual cluelessness on both sides, one could argue that ex-FRG citizens hold an important advantage, claiming the successor state. Thus, it may be unfair to call East Germans ‘spoilt’ for being dissatisfied with a state that has ultimately colonised them, their memories and experiences.

The accusation that the East Germans exhibit childishly defiant tendencies when they hark back to ‘better times’ also bases itself on the assumption that *Ostalgie* is simply a reaction to the taboo outlook of the GDR. If we take Halbwachs’ theory of memory as “never purely individual but shaped in relation to the collective [whereby] the individual then relies on the collective to acquire, localize and recall memories”,<sup>34</sup> we could bring it one step further and say that the individual is also influenced by contemporary opinions of the collective on the past. In this light, the East German collective attempt to answer GDR critiques with rosier images of the past is understandable, purely to balance the memory equilibrium.

Yet, many a West German draws parallels to *Ostalgie*’s distortion of the truth with the elusive actions of the GDR regime. However, as we will discover, the portrayal of truth – Lara herself voices it in *Good Bye, Lenin!* when fretting over Alex hiding the truth from his mother – is never as simple as it may seem. Allan says: “there are circumstances when the integrity of people’s memories [...] should be preserved and legitimized so that the individual can come to terms with

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>33</sup> Brockmann, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.21.

<sup>34</sup> Gay, *Politics and Culture*. p.219.

what they have lost”.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, some appreciate *Ostalgie* purely as a way of either bidding farewell to the former life in the GDR, or a necessary reappraisal of a past that they have not been able to revisit or mourn. In a very condensed time a lot of East Germans had to change their ideologies and ways of life extremely quickly; some were joyous at unification but lost their jobs as a result of this transition, whereas others were unhappy at losing a part of their identity yet adapted well. There were a great many factions within the German population, but one thing remained the same: they were not given the opportunity to come to terms with their past, which remained condemned and presented as illegitimate.

For Joseph Jozwiak and Elisabeth Mermann this poses a problematic scenario, where “this particular form of nostalgic resistance uncritically and problematically returns to *another* state of colonization as the status quo ante and is in danger of glorifying a repressive regime.”<sup>36</sup> I disagree with this and emphasise Huyssen’s statement that these nostalgic feelings simply “mourn the loss of a former security without wanting the old system back [...] It is a nostalgia of despair.”<sup>37</sup> Through these nostalgic feelings a balance to cultural memory is restored: by showcasing the socialist way of life in a more positive light, the East Germans can re-adjust more effectively and curtail the prevalent sentiments of inadequacy and despair.

It is on this last point that I wish to focus this dissertation. I would argue that *Ostalgie* is a valid, but also a crucial way of reconceptualising past memories and experiences, and making sense of the vast political, social and cultural changes inherent in unification. It is essential to the need for a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a term usually applied to the National Socialists, yet perfectly applicable to discourses regarding the GDR. In this case it is a need for the East Germans to be able to see their past not only as inherently evil and inhumane, as it is frequently portrayed.

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<sup>35</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.123.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph F. Jozwiak and Elisabeth Mermann, “‘The Wall in Our Minds?’ Colonization, Integration, and Nostalgia’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 39 (2006). p.783.

<sup>37</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*. p.47.

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is additionally “a process that is never to be completed”.<sup>38</sup> It “keeps the memory of the victims alive...increasing our knowledge of all ‘sides’ of the historical record both public and private”.<sup>39</sup> Davidson claims that it “generat[es] an impact in the present that goes beyond an empathy with those who suffered atrocities”<sup>40</sup> – I take this to mean that it goes beyond the borders of simple empathy to actual awareness and understanding of the former, colonised culture, uncovering cultural memories previously hidden under official state narratives.

My belief is that instead of needlessly glorifying the past or using it as a weapon of political resistance, *Ostalgie* simply brings it out of the realm of the taboo and the condemned. It allows a more reminiscent approach to the past, based strictly within subjective memories and experiences. I believe that this nostalgic and rose-tinted view is, as Boym so succinctly puts it, “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed”.<sup>41</sup> The feeling of loss is simultaneously “a romance with one’s own fantasy”<sup>42</sup>. Regardless of whether the nostalgic memories are real or not, they allow a readdressing of former lives, identities, emotions and memories, partly “with[in] one’s own fantasy”.<sup>43</sup> Boym claims that “[t]he object of nostalgia is further away than it appears. Nostalgia is never literal, but lateral.”<sup>44</sup> By revisiting past events and memories in one’s own way, one can ultimately come to terms with one’s past. This enables acceptance of what has been, the conditions of the present and the uncertainties of the future. Thus a normalisation not exactly envisaged by the State – yet just as productive – can be attained. Therefore, these feelings of nostalgia for both real and fabricated memories and experiences are necessary in order to construct and unite oneself with one’s identity.

My main focus will be on German film post-1989, as it is a very clear example of how *Ostalgie* is used as a tool of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The two films I will look at are *Good Bye,*

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<sup>38</sup> John E. Davidson, ‘Shades of Grey: Coming to Terms with German Film Since Unification’ in *German Cinema*. p.43.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.XIII.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p.354.

*Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*. They both have very clear thematic and stylistic-aesthetic elements that sometimes complement and on occasion work at odds with each other. As Boym states, “[t]echnology is not a goal in itself but an enabling medium. While nostalgia mourns distances [...] technology offers solutions and builds bridges”,<sup>45</sup> and I will look to explore these stylistic elements further, with an emphasis on to what extent they facilitate a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, as opposed to glorifying or trivialising it. I will also attempt to show through the films’ subject matter and the way they are presented that a nostalgic reflection on the past is exactly what is sometimes needed to draw a curtain on a previous era, or at least welcome other discourses on it. I hope to show that the films play their part in mutually integrating both German societal groups, and in contributing to the better understanding of the East as well. Finally, I shall try to prove all this through the framework of Boym’s idea of nostalgia as being necessary as a tool of integration, regardless of whether it is based on real or fake memories, and to what extent it can be transposed on the films. Similarly, I hope to show that instead of being a trigger for mindless revelling in memories, nostalgia is actually a tool of overcoming this past. Through this, there may ultimately be hope of a new cultural memory emerging, striving for the goal of a complete normalisation of the German people.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.346.

## 2.1 Sonnenallee & Good Bye, Lenin!

One factor that makes both *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* instantly accessible to the audience is their distinct lack of direct focus on politics, with subtle, indirect hints of political themes. As Cooke states, “[c]inematic normalization [...] could be defined as a shift towards Hollywood-style aesthetics and apolitical topics, providing the spectator with moments of escapism that affirmed the social order of postunification German society”.<sup>46</sup> In affirmation of this, the films concentrate on the GDR’s *Alltagsgeschichte*, everyday history. They focus on the habitual, allowing the audience to identify with the storyline. The characters are homely and represent the ‘average East German’. Elements in the films’ storylines may at times seem slightly outlandish – for example, *Sonnenallee*’s final scene where the pedestrians all dance towards the border guards places tongue firmly in cheek – yet familiar themes pop up in the films regarding GDR culture, such as the importance of the family unit, themes of work and the ideology of the East versus that of the West. After all, as Roger Cook indicates, “[a] collective eastern German narrative about life in the GDR that excludes the world of work would remain fragmentary”.<sup>47</sup>

The main protagonists in both films are teenagers or young adults. The GDR experience is put into immediate correlation with the various stages of growing up, something everyone has experienced and can identify with. Firstly, it gives legitimacy to the memories and experiences of the former GDR citizens. Secondly, it makes the viewer “[n]ostalgic for a prenostalgic state of being”,<sup>48</sup> or a time when they did not have to be nostalgic or even knew what it meant. To quote Boym again: “[t]he object of longing [is] that imaginary moment when we had time and didn’t know the temptation of nostalgia”.<sup>49</sup> Boym draws parallels between nostalgia for the past and nostalgia for childhood when she references Starobinski’s and Roth’s historical research on nostalgia being “not

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Cooke, ‘Abnormal Consensus? The New Internationalism of German Cinema’ in *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.224.

<sup>47</sup> Roger F. Cook, ‘Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism’, *Seminar* 43 (2). May 2007. p.209.

<sup>48</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p.251.

so much a maladjustment to progress as a ‘maladjustment to the adult life’<sup>50</sup>. In other words, this willingness to withdraw into a phase of pre-adulthood is as much dissatisfaction with one’s present as it is a desire to revisit the past. The teen narratives reflect this, and I hope to show that the films very much try to reunite the audience not only with their past, but also with their present.

## **2.2 Sonnenallee: Thematic**

Sonnenallee was released on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999, on the would-be 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GDR, which – marketing strategies aside – coupled with the film’s images and plot, makes for a nice representation of what the GDR could have really been like and what it could have meant for all Germans. Upon its release a few critics saw the portraying of the GDR “zum Musical stilisiert mit Erich Honeker als ‘Fiddler on the Roof’<sup>51</sup>. However, I would argue that the film in fact displays a near mockery of *Ostalgie* and its processes. It uses methods of the phenomenon to convey specific messages of unification and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, but always with a comic, self-mocking distance.

Its setting in the 1970s is not coincidental. The director, Leander Haußmann, and the scriptwriter, Thomas Brussig “were able to tap into the vogue for retro-culture that was so widespread in the late 1990s”.<sup>52</sup> However, the cultural importance of the 1970s extends beyond fashion. It is both a distant time, depicting a summery childhood, far removed from the beginnings of social unrest in the 80s or the Berlin Republic reality of the 1990s. Yet, it is still near enough to reach out to a relatively young population considered part of the country’s labour force. This demographic is, however, simultaneously old enough to seek its formative years in the ‘saccharine’,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p.53.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Cooke, ‘Performing Ostalgie: Leander Haußmann’s Sonnenallee’, *German Life and Letters*, 56 (2003). p.157.

<sup>52</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.113.

secure era of the GDR. Haußmann states that “[t]he GDR was always stuck in the 1970s”,<sup>53</sup> so this is a conscious decision by the authors to play on the pictorial stereotype the GDR conveys in popular culture as a ‘retro’, outdated and distant era. It also enhances the message of a ‘coming of age’. They are no longer children, and their former lives are framed in a cultural memory imbued with hazy images of a sunny past. This is an example of how cultural memory can be instilled within the setting of the film, situating it clearly in the past, hence highlighting the importance of the audience’s present.

However, the setting has its darker elements. The film takes place in the eponymous street, famous for being long in West Berlin, yet only reaching a hundred or so metres in its eastern counterpart. It appears that the filmmakers used *Sonnenallee* as a symbol of division, and also of having been sold short in the separation of the city in 1945.<sup>54</sup> The film, then, uses that as a springboard to portray the GDR inhabitants as making the most of what they have been given.

Strictly thematically speaking, *Sonnenallee* is a bittersweet coming-of-age story, depicting quite ordinary and universal pains of puberty. The entire plot is rooted in teenage problems of love, music, drugs and gentle rebellion. All events reference girls, falling in love for the first time and trying to find oneself. Political orientations aside, it is not really presented as altogether different from any other teenage experience in the world. *Sonnenallee* can be seen as a love story, a rites of passage narrative that allows for nostalgic indulging of “a romanticized vision of the GDR [...] for everyone has fond memories of their own childhood”.<sup>55</sup> It is precisely through the film’s “heroism of the ordinary”<sup>56</sup> that the film can provoke a “universality of experience”<sup>57</sup>.

Although the film is set in the GDR, both East and West Germans can easily identify with the feelings and experiences of the protagonists. At the same time, with a universally identifiable plot, presented within the framework of the GDR, it offers the West Germans the possibility of accepting

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Reinhard K. Zachau, ‘Wie Amerika der DDR die Freiheit gab: Thomas Brussigs *Helden wie wir* und *Sonnenallee*’. Available at: <http://www.dickinson.edu/glossen/heft19/zachau.html> [Accessed 12 June 2009].

<sup>55</sup> Saunders, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.94.

<sup>56</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.113.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.114.



the film's message and even appreciating GDR culture. *Sonnenallee* also allows East Germans to attain their own sense of identity, enabling a proliferation of a new cultural memory through its plot and characters, in their legitimising the past. As Micha's final remarks state, "*Es war die schönste Zeit meines Lebens, denn ich war jung und verliebt*"<sup>58</sup> and socialism or capitalism aside, this is something to which everyone can relate.

*Sonnenallee's* plot is but one aspect of Haußmann's feature that contributes to a nostalgic reworking of the past. The characters are another facilitator of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Jozwiak and Mermann are quick to claim that the "[c]haracters attain static qualities"<sup>59</sup> within the film. This may be a rather brash statement, as they display more than just two-dimensional personalities, functioning not only as decorative tools. In my opinion they are prime harbingers of a more subtle engagement in Bakhtin's idea of the 'carnavalesque'<sup>60</sup>, in which Micha and his friends' eternally optimistic outlook inject positivity and joyful exuberance into the GDR past. It serves as the first building block to a new cultural memory. The film is much less brutal than the later novelisation by Thomas Brussig, where the main character directly addresses the standard of life in the GDR when he says, "*Es war von vorn bis hinten zum Kotzen, aber wir haben uns prächtig amüsiert*".<sup>61</sup> In the film the characters show hints of acknowledgement that some sides of life under radical socialist rule were 'vomit inducing', but they display a much greater tendency to have fun and always make the best out of every situation.

Micha, for instance, does not defend the GDR regime and its practices, but he certainly respects "the validity of youthful memories".<sup>62</sup> Along with Alex in *Good Bye, Lenin!* he is not a propagator in the blind glorification of the regime, but simply strikes a balance between its positives and negatives. The teenagers as a whole consistently call on "fantasy and imagination...[to] play a

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<sup>58</sup> *Sonnenallee*, 1999. [Film] Directed by Leander Haußmann. Germany: Boje Buck Produktion.

<sup>59</sup> Jozwiak and Mermann, 'The Wall in Our Minds?', p.788.

<sup>60</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Bakhtin's theory, see: John Fiske, *Television Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2001). p.241.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Brussig, *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002). p.153.

<sup>62</sup> Saunders, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.94.

crucial role in how they explore and define their sense of self-identity”.<sup>63</sup> They echo the viewer’s propensity to use fantasy to provoke personal nostalgia for events and a past that never existed. This approach also indicates a certain self-aware artificiality: in every scene involving the whole group of friends there is a couple kissing, which is “a continual reminder of the film’s romantic credentials.”<sup>64</sup> Such an exaggerated portrayal of 1970s free love serves as an ironic, self-deprecating reminder that what we are seeing is a fake, exacerbated image of the GDR, definitely distancing the film from accusations of glorifying the past.

It is not only free love that is lightly mocked within *Sonnenallee*. Micha’s attitude towards the *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (FDJ) also plays with stereotypes. Instead of treating the FDJ with the utmost respect and discipline, Micha in fact pokes fun at the self-proclaimed importance of political youth speeches by preparing his piece with the same degree of theatricality as his sister’s preparations for drama school.<sup>65</sup> Even more amusing is the fact that he is only doing this in order to woo Miriam. In other words, his enthusiasm for party politics is merely a mask for more universal themes that every teenager went through: the teenage crush.

Micha’s family is not typical of the socialist era. Far from being a prime socialist worker, his father lazes about in front of the television. The mother is overly paranoid and fussy, more into gossiping whether her neighbours are informers. Micha’s uncle, Hans, insists on smuggling goods that are perfectly legal in East Germany, such as tights and underwear. Micha’s sister brings back a new boyfriend every week, unlike the GDR’s typical image of a hardworking young female. The mother’s character nevertheless reflects the importance of the family unit in the GDR. For example, when she is about to defect from the GDR, she experiences a change of heart and turns back to her family. In a similar way to *Good Bye, Lenin!* this emphasises the concept that the family unit is key: it shows that some things are stronger than party politics and – perhaps even more poignantly – the alluring West. However, this depiction is more complex when we think about what the typical

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<sup>63</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.115.

<sup>64</sup> Cooke, ‘Performing Ostalgie’. p.164.

<sup>65</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.115.

woman would be like as shown in DEFA films of the time.<sup>66</sup> Micha's mother reflects the film's razor-sharp dichotomy of mocking life in the GDR whilst portraying some of its more humane qualities, in order to foster greater understanding in West Germans. The positive aspects of the GDR are enhanced through an unexpected portrayal of the characters, activating nostalgia for a past that could have been. Simultaneously, this message is encased within an ironic framework, criticising party politics, showing that life sometimes was not all that rosy.

This duality between the film's thematic elements and the social critique that is intrinsic to its plot is further exemplified in *Sonnenallee's* depiction of authority. Despite the film's artificial, comic representations of some of its characters, there is a hint of realism in the plot. Whenever politics comes into play it is mocked; for example the local policeman is portrayed as absurd and out of touch with the people. *Sonnenallee* toys with the notion that the guards were to be respected and feared, diminishing their significance in everyday GDR life by presenting them as absurd, incapable figures. Nevertheless, one cannot underestimate politics' sinister omnipresence. Wuschel becomes increasingly desperate in tracking down the Rolling Stones LP 'Exile on Main Street'. Although banned, it circulates the black market. However, obtaining it may result in imprisonment, or in Wuschel's case, near death. The episode where he gets shot, only to have his life saved by and at the expense of the vinyl, is a nod to the fact that once the state really does intercede into his life, "his youthful dreams [...] have been shattered by the state."<sup>67</sup>

The sinister presence of authority is further highlighted with a glimpse of Micha's diary entries. Just like his involvement in the FDJ speech, Micha writes the diaries to impress and astound Miriam. Micha becomes the hero and figure of resistance in them. The scenes also show that Micha entertains a level of awareness about himself and his surroundings, which is not always credited to the East Germans. Once again the film sets out to change the particular cultural narratives and memories by subtly challenging the idea that East Germans were intrinsically passive and weak. Writing one's thoughts down in a diary – no matter how minuscule an act – was often the most

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<sup>66</sup> Cooke, 'Performing Ostalgie'. p.162.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p.166.

powerful form of rebellion. Micha's diary reflects the creation of his own vision of the GDR and his own identity too, just like Alex in *Good Bye, Lenin!*.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, *Sonnenallee* might also ironically be referencing its own methodology here: just as Micha is embellishing certain facts in order to activate Miriam's feelings, so the film embellishes certain scenes to reach out to the viewer and activate their memories and affections for a life that was liveable. It reinforces Allan's point that "memory and the construction of personal and political histories are conditioned by the needs and desires of the present".<sup>69</sup>

Finally, the film explores the relationship between the East and West. At various points we see the West Germans watching their Eastern counterparts as if they were animals in a zoo. They do this more out of curiosity than out of a desire to be united. One possible interpretation would be that it serves as a metaphor for today's Germany, where for some there is still an "'Otherness' of the East to the West".<sup>70</sup> Yet the film refuses to pigeonhole its East German subjects as the observed. For example, Micha and his cohorts are clearly playing on Western preconceptions of life in the GDR when they run after the West German tourist bus pretending to be hungry. Bhabha's idea on mimicry – "the turning of the tables on the colonizing Western gaze"<sup>71</sup> – is very much at play here. This entire setting is given a more contemporary turn by the fact that the two sides call each other *Ossi* and *Wessi* respectively, terms which did not exist in the 1970s. Therefore what we have is a mocking of perceptions, within the context of what Cooke calls "post-unification stereotyping"<sup>72</sup>. Such comparisons may highlight the incompatibility between the two sides, yet they also hint at universal experiences. Differences between the two existed before and they will continue to do so. But by positioning a small part of *Sonnenallee* within the present the fact that true unification and normalisation is still to be attained is stressed.

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<sup>68</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.115.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Cooke, 'Performing Ostalgie'. p.161.

<sup>71</sup> Jozwiak and Mermann, 'The Wall in Our Minds?' p.783.

<sup>72</sup> Cooke, 'Performing Ostalgie'. p.161.

*Sonnenallee's* thematic elements directly challenge the dominant cultural memory narratives within the Berlin Republic. Through its various thematic devices the film subtly inserts the absurd into the everyday. This works two-fold: through the caricatured characters it helps sow the seeds of alternative memories for East Germans as an antithesis to grey and drab experiences. Simultaneously, the universal storyline bridges the distance between East and West Germans, breaking down the GDR's image as that of the 'Orient' and 'Other', and changing the cultural memory nurtured since unification.

### **2.3. Good Bye, Lenin!: Thematic**

*Good Bye, Lenin!* proved to be the most successful unification comedy to date, garnering a large audience not only in its home countries but also worldwide. However, its effect on the German people was by far the most interesting. *Good Bye, Lenin!* "generated a 'gesamtdeutsches Geflüster'<sup>73</sup>, a preliminary communal feeling between East and West Germans. The title also immediately sets itself against the position of glorifying the past by virtue of the fact that it is a gentle jab at the bad grasp of English that was prevalent in the GDR at the time, '*Good Bye*' written erroneously as two separate words.

Moreover, Cooke points out that the title hints at "the translatability of plot".<sup>74</sup> Like *Sonnenallee*, *Good Bye, Lenin!* is a universal story that transcends ideological boundaries. The film is set in and around Berlin in 1989. Alex's mother, Christiane, is an activist for the GDR party. However, Alex is increasingly disillusioned with life in the GDR and takes part in a protest. Seeing him his mother suffers a stroke, falling into a coma. Upon regaining consciousness some 8 months later, Alex hides the facts regarding the Berlin Republic to avoid distressing her and risking another stroke. What transpires is that Alex keeps the GDR alive within the four walls of her room through a variety

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<sup>73</sup> Cook, 'Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia'. p.207.

<sup>74</sup> Cooke, 'Abnormal Consensus?'. p.230.

of methods – recording his own newsreel of *Aktuelle Kamera* is but one. The simulation of the fake GDR is entirely within his control and his whims, and puts into practice the GDR that he would have wanted for himself, his mother and the rest of the ex-GDR citizens.

Wolfgang Becker, the director, explains that the film is not “about the problems of the GDR but [...] about a close-knit family where history bursts in like an unexpected guest.”<sup>75</sup> However, we can eavesdrop and participate on what life in the GDR really may have been like by having the backdrop of unification present in the film at all times. A section of the film briefly takes place before the fall of the Wall; the majority after. The audience is drawn into reliving the transition once more. Indeed, Alex could represent the average citizen who feels both euphoria and confusion. He is a mould into which every person in the audience can slip.

The beginning of the film serves as a visceral critique of the GDR’s shortcomings as many were dragged into violent protest. The cynical voice-over greeting us clearly displays real frustration with the regime and we see Alex’s dissatisfaction. It is Becker’s cunning tactic to describe the general state of affairs leading up to the fall of the Wall, gently submerging the audience into the plot. Alex’s voiceover deploys sardonic humour, appropriating state terminology to reverse criticism back onto it. However, it is upon seeing the grown-up Alex that the disillusionment fully hits us. As he sits on the bench, a huge poster commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Honecker’s regime is draped over a building behind him. A strong ironic and hypocritical duality is at play here between the communist state’s insistence that socialism starts and ends with the collective, juxtaposed with Honecker’s ‘larger than life’ visage drowning out anything else. It is clear to the audience that Alex finds himself in a stark dystopia, especially contrasting this scene with the home footage of his happy childhood in his summer house, far removed from the city and its politics. As Cook says, he is very much “disencumbered from the idealistic dreams of his youth”.<sup>76</sup>

*Good Bye, Lenin!*’s depiction of the complex relationship between ex-GDR citizens and their former country is displayed through the characters. Alex’s creation of an alternative GDR is simply a

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<sup>75</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.117.

<sup>76</sup> Cook, ‘Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia’. p.210.

result of his love for his mother. The film shows that there was a humane side to the GDR too; not just party politics, socialist ideals and informers. People who lived there were people just like any other.

Later on, the fake recordings Alex uses to construct a virtual reality become increasingly more artificial. At first the actual official *Aktuelle Kamera* footage constructs a storyline. This is a clear example of fake memories blossoming here. He rehashes the same stories to create a new political timeline, which his mother readily accepts, showing that the blindfolded beliefs equal the subjective reality. The film emphasises the fact that the individual memories may very well never have existed, yet they still serve an important purpose. It avoids delving into rose-tinted sentimentality by the simple statement Alex's West German colleague Dennis utters: "War doch immer derselbe Quatsch",<sup>77</sup> indicating that, ultimately, there is no room for such memories.

However, they do still serve an important purpose. Alex is aware that his invented stories are completely detached from actual reality and this gives him artistic freedom to elaborate on storylines of his own concoction. Eventually his imagination leads him to create his own desired version of the GDR. As the newsreels become so fictitious that there are no snippets of real *Aktuelle Kamera* episodes that can be used, Alex realises that he is creating a societal image antithetical to the climate of unified Germany, where in his words "nicht jeder ist für die Ellbogenmentalität geschaffen".<sup>78</sup> It becomes increasingly difficult for him to shake off the place that was his home. Allan says: "the more rapidly change occurs, the stronger the desire becomes to cling to the memories".<sup>79</sup> Indeed, as Alex grows more accustomed to the unified state, he becomes aware of some of the cultural markers that are missing and that he misses. He experiences an inner period of mourning both for his mother's depleted condition and for the GDR, since he equates both entities with each other. The fictional world he creates gives him time to accept this change and say farewell to the only country he knew. *Good Bye, Lenin!* could mean the same thing for East Germans: by

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<sup>77</sup> Becker, *Good Bye, Lenin!*

<sup>78</sup> Saunders, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.95.

<sup>79</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.121.

showing them a more idealised form of the GDR, it depicts what could have been. The audience can then immerse itself into nostalgic memories for the past, breaking down the 'taboo' concept of remembering the GDR favourably, ultimately creating a new cultural memory in the process.

Some critics were displeased that *Good Bye, Lenin!* contained almost no portrayal of the *Stasi* or of border guards outside of the protest scene. In my opinion this only furthers the concept that Alex really does substitute the actual GDR for a created one. In his alternate version there is simply no room for the *Stasi*. All nostalgic moments in the film come from him and this realm of the imaginary balances out the Berlin Republic's portrayal of the GDR as an *Überwachungsstaat* with the taboo idea of defending it. Time and time again, however, it avoids glorifying the past simply by virtue of the fact that its events are plastic and – through today – far-fetched.

This is particularly evident in the final newsreel when Alex chooses his childhood hero, Sigmund Jähn – even though it is not the real Jähn, which again points at a plasticity – as the new Head of State. His sister giggles whilst watching the final news 'installment', acknowledging how ludicrous it all is. Alex's nostalgia for his childhood heroes is intrinsically provoked by his desire to maintain the status quo for his mother. Now that she is approaching the end of her life, he can introduce his final artificial presentation, his magnum opus, his ultimate childhood dream in whose comfort he can revel. One could thus even label Alex a vehicle for the general East German desire to look at their pasts without a sense of remorse or guilt. It also allows the West Germans to observe the proceedings with a mix of humour and understanding. Just like Alex constructs his own idealised, utopian past, the audience is welcome to do the same, playing with real and fake memories to create a new cultural memory.

The simulation instigated by Alex for his mother shifts gradually into becoming a need for him himself. He claims that "the truth was something that was pretty questionable and could easily be adapted to fit the way my mother saw these things".<sup>80</sup> Through the recordings he begins to understand his mother's way of thinking and sees "a different way of understanding participation in

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<sup>80</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.120.



the GDR socialist project”.<sup>81</sup> It is through the mother that “the film succeeds in providing a corrective to stereotypical notions of the GDR [...] and of socialist activism in particular”.<sup>82</sup> Firstly Alex believes that she is “married to the state”,<sup>83</sup> but gradually we learn that she reflects a more Christa Wolf-type figure, displaying an independence of thought, a powerful sense of ideology and principles. At the same time she has a healthy sense of humour and humanity, far removed from the “doctrinaire party member”<sup>84</sup> the West had created as the GDR symbol. Her qualities do not seem to be limited to any particular political affiliation, such as when she is willing to take – according to Alex’s newsreels – West German refugees into her home. Her humaneness transcends matters of border and nation. However, the film also portrays her as a figure of ‘what could have been’. Cook argues that “she is not the typical ‘hero of labour’, but rather a fictional figure that represents what this hollow propaganda phrase could have meant.”<sup>85</sup>

Christiane’s end is presented ominously in *Good Bye, Lenin!*. Boym remarks that the “[r]estoration of intentional monuments makes a claim to immortality and eternal youth.”<sup>86</sup> If we take this to be correct, then the opposite rings true for the film. Lenin’ statue’s removal by helicopters is literally an indicator of the socialist regime coming to an end, but abstractly it also hints that the mother will die soon. Alex equates his mother with the GDR. Once she does pass away, her death poses the end of an era. However, it also signifies the beginning of a symbiosis between the past memories today’s German citizens hold and Germany as reunited nation. In the final scene of *Good Bye, Lenin!*, her ashes are strewn across the whole of Berlin; the rocket launched into the sky represents the end of Alex’s childhood dreams. I agree with Cook’s analysis that “[b]eing laid to rest are the ideal visions of what a socialist state could or would be, but not the well-meaning efforts of individuals who worked conscientiously towards those goals.”<sup>87</sup> The final scene is “a particularly

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<sup>81</sup> Cook, ‘Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia’. p.210.

<sup>82</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.118.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Cook, ‘Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia’. p.210.

<sup>86</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.78.

<sup>87</sup> Cook, ‘Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia’. p.211.

clear cinematic ‘consensus’<sup>88</sup> where both the characters and the audience acknowledge that the GDR cannot be kept alive artificially. The only way forward is an integration of the two states. This is no better presented than with the interspersing of the World Cup transmission, where a united Germany is making its first bow. The rooftop scene is an end to one universe, and the football footage is the beginning of another. The German victory in that match symbolises that this is the new reality for all. Through such a juxtaposition of images *Good Bye, Lenin!* hopes to create a new cultural memory common to both East and West Germans, challenging the stereotyped memories that have dominated. It is a cultural memory that will take them into the new decade, creating a single, unifying present and future.

Yet the rift between the two cultures is not ignored. It is most clearly displayed through Alex’s sister, Ariane and her boyfriend, Rainer. After unification she abandons her studies, choosing to work at Burger King. This serves as an apt criticism of Western consumerism, displaying through Ariane’s actions the ex-nation’s “Westernization of the family home”.<sup>89</sup> Simultaneously, the West German perceptions of the East are mocked through Rainer’s naivety and ignorance. *Good Bye, Lenin!* pokes fun at the West’s comparison of National Socialism with the GDR and of those who believe the GDR was nothing more than an *Unrechtsstaat* when Rainer confuses *Gruppenratsvorsitzender* with *Gruppenvorstand*, harking back to National Socialist terminology. He is not portrayed maliciously; on the contrary, he is presented as simply oblivious to life in the GDR, just like Uncle Hans in *Sonnenallee*. However, as the film goes on Alex changes, which presents hope for the future and social unity.

The West is also satirised in a short snippet when Alex visualises his estranged father who emigrated to the West guzzling burgers by a swimming pool. The capitalist lifestyle is directly mocked here with grotesque imagery. This scene works two ways – on the one hand it is satirical, but on the other it also showcases Alex’s ignorance – and the East’s as a whole – of what life on the other side of the Wall was like. He is shaken when he meets his father at his house in the West. His

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<sup>88</sup> Cooke, ‘Abnormal Consensus?’. p.230.

<sup>89</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.120.

answer to his father's children's question of where he is from is all the more apt, then, when he states "Ich komme aus einem anderen Land".<sup>90</sup> It is not an argumentative or defiant explanation; instead, it is conciliatory, reflecting his understanding that both sides know as little about each other socially and geographically.

On one hand the story is presented through Alex's frame of vision, so instead of a realism-imbued depiction of history, we are only offered an embellished reality. The scope of the film develops from the actual to the ideological. Just like *Sonnenallee* it sets out not only to correct falsified images by showing them that life was not all that different, it also attempts to depict a GDR that could have been. This then activates nostalgic feelings for a past that indeed never was, but certainly could have existed. On the other hand, the film contains enough quirks that appeal specifically to the East Germans, and thus "offers them the opportunity to draw on the insider knowledge necessary to decode the numerous references to a specifically East German way of life, and thereby affirm a sense of their unique cultural identity".<sup>91</sup> Unlike *Sonnenallee*, the West is not used as a reference culture. There are no in-jokes of the kind we will look at later in *Sonnenallee*. The film is therefore for Becker not necessarily about the problems in the GDR, yet it intrinsically holds enough personality and identity to both draw in outsiders and activate nostalgia in its ex-citizens.

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<sup>90</sup> Becker, *Good Bye, Lenin!*

<sup>91</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.118.

### 3.1 Sonnenallee: Stylistic & Filmic

Even before *Sonnenallee* was released it hinted at a fairy-tale like element. The trailer was stylised, beginning with “Es war einmal im Osten...”. The DVD also contained a music video under its ‘special features’, to capitalise on the film’s success. Therefore it was presented to the public very much like a Hollywood product with its many offshoots.

*Sonnenallee* has a very fast and slick feel to it, with the recording and editing greatly influenced by Western cinematic techniques. The film utilises very bright colours and has a glossy look and artificial mise-en-scène. These bright colours attempt to combat the grey, miserable image of the GDR, injecting much needed sunshine and fluorescence to its portrayal. This ironic presentation of the socialist regime is influenced by the film’s hues as “[c]olour [...] stands for an embellished fictional reality that has little in common with the greyness typically associated with real life under socialism. [There is] [t]he notion that prettification through the colourful medium of film can transfigure the drabness of real life”.<sup>92</sup> It even uses DEFA’s old *Orwo-Color* film to give the picture a slightly vintage look, accentuating the colours and giving it mellowness. What is key here is that the images are – at least on an aesthetic level – obviously exaggerated, thereby once again creating, just like *Sonnenallee*’s more thematic elements, a past that never existed, or that has at least been artificially embellished.

The stylised characters hint at unreal representations of the past. Along with their thematic significance, they also serve as stylistic tools to convey messages that encompass greater issues of cultural memory. For example, Micha and Mario’s jaunty gaits on the street reflect many a happy teenage Hollywood film. The dance scene in the club strongly hints at a ‘Reservoir Dogs’-like coolness. When Miriam’s West German love interest walks in to the same club, his presence reflects Sting’s appearance in ‘Quadrophenia’. Another obvious example is when Miriam first makes an entrance. She leaves her house in slow motion to a backdrop of Elvis Presley-style music, which is

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<sup>92</sup> Daniella Berghahn, ‘East German Cinema After Unification’ in *German Cinema*. p.97.

reminiscent of films like 'Grease'. Not only are these styles instantly recognisable to a Western audience, but they also existed not long before *Sonnenallee* was set, from the film's point of view suggesting that the GDR way of life was not all that removed. A similar parallel scene in *Good Bye, Lenin!* is when Alex ogles the nurses when he visits his mother in hospital. The use of slow motion is yet again used effectively to highlight the same principle. They all "seek [...] to de-exoticise"<sup>93</sup> a way of life that is frequently exotic and 'Other' to Westerners.

*Sonnenallee* also makes prominent use of objects and artefacts from the GDR era, with seemingly trivial things triggering the most profound memories. The opening scene of the film pans to a 180-degree shot of Micha's bedroom. The mise-en-scène is littered with numerous GDR products. As Cooke explains, "[h]is bedroom becomes the spectator's entrance portal to this lost world, and has all the qualities of a living museum"<sup>94</sup> or a modern website selling GDR artefacts. In a way the film fetishises the products, almost bombarding the audience with a "hyper-real simulation"<sup>95</sup> where things were not really as they seem. Couple this with the effect of the *ORWO-Color* film and we really are presented with a film that, in Haußmann's words, "volkommen unrealistisch ist. Das Dekor, die Straße – das sieht alles gebaut aus."<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, other products are also presented through a more Western mindset. The *Multifunktionstisch* – or *Mufu-Tisch* – is very rickety and poorly made. The father even calls it a *Scheiß-Ostding*, acknowledging its uselessness. The telephone the family receives is viewed with reverence, simultaneously mocking the state's policy of putting people in the East on waiting lists for things that were readily available in the West, yet also allowing West Germans to understand life in the GDR better. It also pinpoints the frail nature of the regime, as the father gets it on merit because he suffers from epilepsy, something which is clearly not true: we see here from where Micha gets his propensity to outwit the officials.

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<sup>93</sup> Cooke, 'Performing Ostalgie'. p.160.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p.163.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p.164.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

The Western product is given its due in *Sonnenallee*. The Japanese stereo system the border guards confiscate is riddled with buttons which the confused officials cannot decipher. This highlights the expected East German naivety about the capitalist product, and also turns the stereotype on its head by parodying West German concepts of primitivism in the East. It mocks the overly complicated and cumbersome nature of products in the West, showcasing the product's ridiculousness. However, just like with *Good Bye, Lenin!*'s presentation of Rainer, the stereotype is not painted maliciously. Instead, the infused humour simply helps the audience laugh at the differences, stressing the importance of still needing to learn about each side's culture.

Music plays an important role in the film. Rock music is its driving force both thematically and aesthetically; indeed, one could almost pitch it in the same camp as 'Grease' or 'Hair'. Zachau underlines its importance by saying that "im Film nun dominiert völlig die amerikanische Rockmusik".<sup>97</sup> The music dictates happenings in many a scene, even contributing to the storyline: like Wuschel's continuous desire to find a copy of the Rolling Stones' 'Exile on Main Street'. The opening song by Woody Guthrie, 'This Land is Your Land', contains the lyrics "You don't know what it's like here" and "different people, different lives", which "point[...] to the film's 'corrective' agenda".<sup>98</sup> The music also jumps from era to era, ranging from the Guthrie song to modern songs played in a faux 1970s style by a band called Voodoo Child, themselves named after a Rolling Stones album. Robert Stadlober, who plays Wuschel, also has a band called Dynamo 5, which appears on the soundtrack with a cover of 'The Letter', by 1960s American act The Box Tops. It is clear to us, therefore, that music in *Sonnenallee* sets out to bridge the social gap between one society and another. The fact that the music sounds like Western-style rock and roll only further enhances the fact that teenagers growing up on the East side of the Wall were just as fascinated with American rock music as West Germans were. The universal element of music and the characters' passion for it shows that the two societies were not all that different from each other.

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<sup>97</sup> Zachau, 'Wie Amerika'.

<sup>98</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.113.

The closing song emphasises this desire for an alternative GDR and alternative memories. Nina Hagen croons “Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen”, at which point the film turns to black and white. *Sonnenallee* really does seem to warn against looking at the past in a ‘black and white’ manner. A similar moral is given when Micha and Mario run towards the bus of tourists, mockingly shouting for food. The colourful exterior is then replaced by the black and white shot of the interior, reminding the audience of the danger of stereotyping and generalising.

The final scene is undoubtedly the most unifying. The ultimate act of bringing together two different sides is symbolised by Western rock music as being the deciding factor in provoking the East Germans into dancing, moving towards the border guards with the intent of breaking down barriers. Zachau states that this shows that “wenn man nur gewollt hätte, dann hätte die DDR mit Hilfe der amerikanischen Rockmusik schon früher verschwinden können”.<sup>99</sup> While this may seem too bold, it does highlight that, not unlike the Berlin Love Parade, music instigates a unity like no other element. The festival-esque atmosphere furthermore insists that the two sides do not differ greatly in their desire to dance in Dionysian fashion to a universal beat. *Sonnenallee* ultimately offers “a self-conscious revisitation of the past through the prism of the present”.<sup>100</sup> We see and reference everything through the present. Through this we can then look at the past with new memories which challenge the status quo cultural memory and legacy of the GDR, changing our perception of the past.

### **3.2 Good Bye, Lenin!: Stylistic & Filmic**

*Good Bye, Lenin!* has very strong stylistic and visual elements; at times it seems to utilise GDR styles and techniques to mock its subject. Cook believes that “the film draws less on GDR material culture

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<sup>99</sup> Zachau, ‘Wie Amerika’.

<sup>100</sup> Cooke, ‘Performing Ostalgie’. p.164.

than on a form of social interaction that stirs nostalgic impulses”.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, it could be said that the aesthetic devices are just as important in the evocation of nostalgia. The GDR products the film uses are not just a thematic tool in the film; they are a statement in their own right. Thus I would like to argue that the stylistic tools in *Good Bye, Lenin!* prevent nostalgia from turning into a full-blown glorification.

The most direct way the film evokes nostalgia is through its visual aspect. All the GDR products, FDJ uniforms and newsreels are authentic, down to the finest detail. We are drawn at this point to Walter Benjamin’s statement that “[h]e who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging”.<sup>102</sup> If we take this to be true, then *Good Bye, Lenin!* reflects this ethos faithfully: its display of *Mocca Fix* coffee, *Tempo Bohnen* beans and *Spreewald Gurken* functions similarly to Micha’s room in *Sonnenallee*. The believable environment activates East German memories through their evocation. It could also cunningly appeal to West Germans because “[a]s members of an economic system predicated on product innovation, western Germans are naturally drawn to new products”<sup>103</sup>, something which has proved to be true in the wake of the film’s success with the emergence of a GDR kitsch souvenir industry. Does this mock the capitalist individual’s pettiness and constant desire for consumption? It could expose the “emptiness of consumer choice”.<sup>104</sup> While this may be true, the film also criticises the East German desire to immediately ditch the old and go for the new, provoking Alex’s increasing difficulty in finding ex-GDR products.

*Good Bye Lenin!*’s dual critique of both political systems is also amusingly explored through the scene where Alex runs out of GDR products and, at a complete loss, simply pours ex-FRG substitutes into the old *Mocca Fix* and *Tempo Bohnen* jars. His mother does not notice the difference and munches happily away. Some important questions are raised: firstly, the film makes us question the value of re-created GDR products today. Are they simply reproduced as fashion statements, or as

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<sup>101</sup> Cook, ‘Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia’. p.208.

<sup>102</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.78.

<sup>103</sup> Cook, ‘Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia’. p.213.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p.214.



cultural markers? Or do some maintain there is a difference in quality? It is important to remember that by fetishising objects in this way, the East German way of life and legacy is equally criticised and put on a pedestal. This interferes greatly with the normalisation of the East German people. The placebo effect breaks down this microscopic focus. Secondly, it also helps shatter the competitive nature of Western production. Lastly, it does away with notions of materialistic desires, helping Westerners to understand a society in which it was not important what you had, but with whom you had it. In other words, it helps foster a healthy nostalgia and understanding for the GDR, taking it away from the realms of the 'taboo' into an altogether more acceptable light.

This is reinforced by the fact that the products are placed strictly within the framework of the past. Not only are they slowly becoming scarcer, when they do appear it is almost as if they have been put on display in a museum. The most important scene is when Alex and Lara find a deserted flat, where there is an abundance of ex-GDR produce. The flat's emptiness, coupled with the fact that it is dusty and its balcony is covered with ivy make the scene quite fairy-tale like. It is as if they are stepping into a realm of the past, conveniently finding all these strongly socialist products all in one place. Therefore the flat serves as a container for the audience's memories and nostalgia, all the time dipping into the past from the lens of the present.

There is indeed evidence to suggest that *Good Bye, Lenin!* led to a commoditisation of GDR products. They could certainly be branded markers of *Ostalgie* culture. Just like *Mocca Fix* coffee and *Spreewald* gherkins are famous symbols of the GDR now, so the *Ampelmann* and *Rottkäppchen* wine have become cultural fetishised objects. These markers tend to be trivial or irrelevant, things which we forget until reminded of much later. This may be one reason why *Good Bye, Lenin!*'s plethora of products are so successful in transmitting messages about the GDR and triggering the memories of life under the regime. They are complemented by the thematic elements of the film to create a narrative and resultant cultural memory, which is "needed to form a continuous, meaningful whole out of these diverse, isolated memories".<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p.209.

Throughout *Good Bye, Lenin!* the documentary reels are used extensively. However, as the film goes on Alex's news end up replacing official episodes of *Aktuelle Kamera*. Through this he alters the news from a more historical – albeit heavily propagandistic – presentation of what was allegedly happening in the GDR, to a nostalgic and idealised view of what the GDR could have been like. Throughout this transition, there seems to be a duality between an alternate reality being presented respectively to the characters and the viewer. On one hand, Christiane believes the news reels are authentic, increasing their respectability within the plot. On the other, the audience is aware that the news reels are fabricated by Alex and Dennis. The newsreels cannot instigate an atmosphere of glorifying the past; however, the message inherent within them is still clear and understandable enough to activate memories. I would therefore argue that the newsreels both feed and comply to a general need for a re-assessment of life in the GDR, provoking a revision of the cultural memory that has been nurtured since the Wall came down.

However, this poses a problem. There is a distinct threat of an obliteration of history through a 'skewed' vision of the past presented in the increasingly absurd *Aktuelle Kamera* episodes. The mise-en-scène, introduction music and graphics of the 'newsroom' and the execution of the day's news are carbon copies of the original. The decor is identical right down to the position of the microphone. The language strongly reflects old GDR terminology and linguistic appropriations. Aesthetically and stylistically speaking, the episodes are utterly believable. Is this therefore dangerous to official state narratives, or does this ultimately reflect a triumph of style over substance? In my opinion this depends on whether the storylines are thematically believable, not whether they are stylistically faithful to the original. The artificial *Aktuelle Kamera* reports, such as FRG citizens flooding into the GDR due to their disillusionment with capitalist ideology and borders being opened due to the success of the socialist project are simply hilarious. The dual nature of the reports, and its relationship with the audience and the characters is underlined - Christiane in 'her' past, believing that the GDR still exists, and the audience in the present, aware of the context of these newsreels. For the viewer they are strictly within the confines of the comic and hyperbolic.

### 3.3

I would argue for both *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* that as long as their depictions take root in exaggerated visions of an alternative GDR, the memories evoked therein remain solely in the realm of a nostalgia that does not threaten to break down history. It simply allows the audience to reminisce and romanticise a past, echoing Boym's claim that the evocation of the loss of this past is simply "a romance with one's own fantasy".<sup>106</sup>

Film as a medium is especially suitable for the execution of this message, as its power lies innately within the realm of the image. This image contains intrinsically both thematic and visual elements, which serve as tools to activate a narrative that allows for a proliferation of memories, real or fake. It is these memories which eventually create a quilt of new, unifying cultural memories, thus emphasising film's potential as a uniting, constructive medium.

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<sup>106</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.XIII.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* do not set out to provide a farewell to the past. Neither do they glorify or fetishise it. Instead, they purely present it as a legitimate way of life, where people could have led happy lifestyles. Through both the thematic and stylistic points, the films reference the cult of *Ostalgie*, mocking it in the process and parodying its aspects in order to make their audience laugh and take stock.

These two films question our own interpretations of the past. They both take nostalgia and transform it into the useful mission of integrating GDR citizens into modern society. Scribner explains that “[n]ostalgia is the longing for return to an idealized ‘home’”.<sup>107</sup> While this is true, the films’ projects are about looking towards the past in order to build for a collective, equal future. Brussig proclaims that “[w]hoever wants to preserve accurately what actually happened shouldn’t rely on memory. The function of memory is not simply to fix the past.”<sup>108</sup> He then goes on to say that memory “allows people to make peace with the past by allowing the soft veil of nostalgia to fall over every painful experience”.<sup>109</sup> For Brussig, therefore, nostalgia is both a normal and necessary function of social development. Allan similarly distances the films from a ‘fixing of the past’ by saying that *Good Bye, Lenin!*, in particular, “validates a sense of GDR cultural identity and at the same time presents a critique of sentimental *Ostalgie*”.<sup>110</sup> I agree that the films keep their distance from a total and truthful immersion into the past; the voiceovers, for one, reflect a temporal and ideological distance, recognising the past as purely that.

Despite their similarities, the two films pose a reversal of each other in one small point. In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, Alex’s portrayals create a friendlier country that could have been. This then creates a full circle, in which the constructed ideology liberates the people from the real GDR ideology that prevailed. In *Sonnenallee*, however, the world Micha creates in his diaries is darker and

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<sup>107</sup> Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*. p.64.

<sup>108</sup> Cooke, *Representing East Germany*. p.118.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Allan, *German Cinema*. p.106.

more sinister, bringing questions of veracity into play once more. Boym introduces two different types of nostalgia in her study, the first being restorative nostalgia, which represents a return to the original stasis. What we have here is the second kind: reflective nostalgia. It “is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past”.<sup>111</sup> It is also “more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs”<sup>112</sup>, just like the *Ampelmann*. One could say that media facilitates this celebration of eras past. Boym uses the example of Jurassic Park to exemplify technology as enabling the reconstruction of some part of our past. Regardless of whether it is true to history or not, it is a “techno fairy-tale...[in which] the past come[s] alive”.<sup>113</sup> This ‘Jurassic Park syndrome’ is so named because “[d]inosaurs are ideal animals for the nostalgia industry because nobody remembers them.”<sup>114</sup> Similarly, the GDR past is shrouded in a history that only tells one subjective version of events. Therefore the cultural memory that results from the two films is ultimately a product of our times.

We can further suggest that the looming figure of modernity and the influence of the Berlin Republic can constantly be felt throughout *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*. The films, and especially *Good Bye, Lenin!*'s newsreels, are always presented within that framework. Despite this constant lingering of the present's political and cultural impact, this is not counter-intuitive. On the contrary, it is precisely because of this that figures such as the *Ampelmann* and *Spreewald* gherkins unite people in feeling nostalgia. What we encounter is a series of networks that have one central figure that triggers real or artificial memories. Boym states: “Ampelmann had no inherent political or cultural symbolism and therefore became a perfect screen for nostalgic and critical projections.”<sup>115</sup> This is why topics like authority are either dealt with in highly humorous situations, or not at all, whereas highly trivial objects like the *Mufu-Tisch* became immensely popular and crucial to the films' success.

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<sup>111</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.49.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p.33.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p.196.

In my view the films respect the GDR as a concept, triggering and facilitating a nostalgia and memories for a way of life that could have been but never existed. Both fulfil precisely the function that Boym claims is instigated by nostalgia: they serve as apt carriers for more positive reminiscences of the GDR past. They provide an opportunity for the audience to construct a type of GDR that perhaps only existed in their minds. I believe that a fabricated version of life in the GDR is necessary in order for East Germans to come to terms with their past and not feel pressured by a sense of 'taboo' that still lingers over the socialist state. By accepting who they were – and for many, still are – I would argue that this allows them to gain a sense of identity and equality within society today, ultimately creating a new cultural memory in Germany.

This cannot be done without fully embracing a new form of normalisation. I fully agree with Saunders that “a confident and normalized nation that respects the validity of individual experience should be able to integrate *Ostalgie* as one of a variety of perspectives on the East German past.”<sup>116</sup> The new state should be able to legitimise such a past, and a new cultural identity will follow. However, “[e]xercizing one’s civil rights will always involve cultural properties, traditions, memories, language”,<sup>117</sup> which will make *Ostalgie* simultaneously an attainable goal, yet all the more difficult. For Huyssen, it is a matter of reconciliation with past events, recognizing the crimes of the past whilst acknowledging its legitimacy,<sup>118</sup> making *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* a key goal. There is no danger of glorifying the GDR era; after all, for the vast majority of East Germans it does not represent a utopia. Once again, it is not a case of reinstating the GDR physically or psychologically; what is important is the acceptance of its legitimacy.

True normality, for Zitzlsperger, “will come about only when [one is] able to make do without ‘events’ and constant soul-searching.”<sup>119</sup> There is a distinct need to find a middle ground between a total rejection of the GDR past and its mindless glorification. Both films endorse the demand for East and West Germans’ desire for nostalgic recollections of the past, which is crucial in

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<sup>116</sup> Saunders, *German Culture, Politics, and Literature*. p.91.

<sup>117</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*. p.83.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p.71.

<sup>119</sup> Taberner, *Recasting German Identity*. pp.5-6.

the challenging of old cultural memories and in the construction of the new. Nostalgia could be seen as a mix of the familiar – for the East Germans – and the exotic – for the West – and can also be a refreshing respite from capitalism’s relentless onward march. Whatever the case, *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* bode well for the future. After all, in the films it is the youth who are the smartest and most cunning, instilling reassurance that it is they who will take integration into the future.

For Boym, “the medium is never the message [...] To examine the uses and abuses of nostalgic longing one has to look for mechanisms of a different kind – mechanisms of consciousness.”<sup>120</sup> The individual is not nostalgic for the actual past, but for the way it could have been. One cannot put it any more succinctly than that “[i]t is the past perfect that one strives to realize in the future.”<sup>121</sup> Equally, it cannot be portrayed more truly than when Gunther Emmerlich declares that “[d]uring GDR times we laughed, and now we can laugh more freely...it is through laughter that people can say farewell to their past. I’m often asked “what remains”? Memories will remain.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. p.351.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Cooke, *Representing East Germany*. p.162.

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