

Heimat, 'Ostalgie', and the Stasi: The GDR in German cinema, 1999-2006

Gareth Dale, draft

German cinema is experiencing something of a renaissance, with an assortment of remarkable films having appeared in recent years. Some, such as *Gegen die Wand* ('Against the Wall'), focus on the experience of immigrants. Others are set in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Of the latter, *Das Leben der Anderen* (The Lives of Others) and *Good Bye Lenin!* are the best known, both domestically and abroad, although *Sonnenallee* also received a mass audience in Germany. This article reviews *Das Leben der Anderen* and asks why it is so often presented as a fearlessly critical response to *Good Bye Lenin!* It explores the claim that *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee* are exemplars of 'Ostalgie' (nostalgia for the former GDR), before presenting a critical analysis of that phenomenon itself.

Das Leben der Anderen: good, true, and brave?

Set in 1984, the plot of *Das Leben der Anderen* revolves around personal-political dilemmas faced by three individuals. Georg Dreyman is a gifted and celebrated playwright, and GDR patriot. His partner, Christa-Maria Sieland, is a talented and ambitious actress, and drug addict. For her, misfortune arrives in the form of sexual interest from a villainous government Minister. He charges the Stasi with surveillance of the couple, an operation that is entrusted to Captain Gerd Wiesler. First appearing as a teacher of interrogation techniques at a Stasi training college, Wiesler is an honest but rigidly conformist regime loyalist; he is also a lonely man living a vacant life. A morality tale unfolds, in the guise of a conspiracy thriller. Each of the three is confronted with a series of moral-political choices. How should Dreyman react when his friend, a theatre director and critic of the regime, is driven to suicide after years of being blacklisted by the government? How should Sieland respond when the Minister and the Stasi attempt to intimidate her into betraying her husband? Should Wiesler allow his empathy with the couple to influence him in the performance of his duty? Two of the three make admirable decisions. The third does not, and tragedy ensues.

According to the publicity materials, the script emanated from its director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's reflections upon a famous comment of Lenin's, on listening to Beethoven sonatas. "I don't know of anything better than the 'Appassionata', I can listen to it every day. Amazing, superhuman music! I always think with a pride that may be naïve: look what miracles people can perform!" Yet this activity was now almost painful, the Bolshevik leader confided to his friend Maxim Gorky; it made him want to whisper "sweet nothings" to all and sundry – even to "pat their heads". Such balmy feelings represented a wickedly seductive distraction, for revolution and civil war demand harsh decisions and a tough mind-set. In the grim circumstances of the present, Lenin sighs, "we cannot pat anyone on the head or we'll get our hand bitten off; we've got to hit them on the heads ... though in the ideal we are against doing any violence to people.

Hm-hm – it's a hellishly difficult office!"¹ For von Donnersmarck, this quote shows the menacing logic of ideologically-driven behaviour. Ideologues first sacrifice feelings to principles, then people to their cause. In Captain Wiesler, he demonstrates how listening to 'feelings' can humanise them.

Das Leben der Anderen has been showered with plaudits, not least when it won an Academy Award in 2007.² In the media, it has been unfailingly presented as good, true, and brave. The first of these commendations, in my view, stands on solid ground. It is a wonderful, an unforgettable movie. In particular, Ulrich Mühe's performance of the Captain's progress from robotic, committed communist to citizen and human being – even his body movements gradually soften –, via his twin discovery of the humanity of his objects of surveillance (the lives of others) and of the corruption inherent in the GDR regime, is mesmerising.

But what of its 'truth' and 'bravery'? For some, this is the film's outstanding quality. Misha Glenny, for instance, comments that in terms of recreating the atmosphere of East Germany its "authenticity is mind-blowing".³ In the publicity materials, von Donnersmarck pushes this message too, arguing that post-unification German movies generally depict the GDR in a cosy glow, accompanied by songs and smiles. Nostalgic comedies like *Sonnenallee* (1999) or *Good Bye Lenin* (2002) are "dangerous". They "re-wrote history" by "portraying the GDR as a place of humour and humanity." His aim, von Donnersmarck writes, was to set history aright. *Das Leben der Anderen* presents the real GDR: venal SED (Communist) leaders deploying their ruthless secret service to subdue society through creating a pervasive climate of fear. It shows East Germany "as it really was." Although fiction, it "is truer than a true story".

When the established order resists the truth, moreover, those who bear its sword require courage. His film, von Donnersmarck declares, cuts through East Germans' complacent nostalgia; it is pioneering, mould-breaking, defiant. Others have mirrored the director's view. A contributor to a BBC radio discussion described it as "one of the first attempts, since unification, to be serious about East Germany in film".⁴ *The Independent* editorialised that *Das Leben der Anderen* "deals with the still contentious and for many still taboo subject of the Stasi ... This has not made it acceptable to many East Germans, who see the Stasi as a shameful episode in the country's history best not talked about".⁵

Some critics have objected to descriptions of *Das Leben der Anderen* as true. That a Stasi-man like Wiesler would empathise with his quarry, they suggest, is ridiculous. Anna Funder, author of *Stasiland*, expresses her scepticism on this count.

Joachim Gauck, the former head of the Stasi File Authority, has said that the records of the Stasi show that such a thing never, ever happened. The reason it never happened goes right to the heart of the East German system itself, and it needs to be understood, so that one can try to grasp the moral weirdness at the heart of this movie.

¹ See Lenin, (270).

² Some publicity, however, was less positive. In an extraordinary case of life imitating art, Ulrich Mühe, the actor who plays Wiesler, revealed that he himself had been under surveillance by the Stasi. His wife was listed as a Stasi informant, although she insisted upon her innocence. Mühe, convinced that his accusation was correct, pursued her in the courts, even as she lay dying from cancer. The documentary evidence was not as solid as Mühe claimed, and he lost the case. See 'Das Leben neben dem anderen', *Der Spiegel* 10/2007, (178-184).

³ Saturday Review, BBC Radio 4, 14 April 2007.

⁴ Saturday Review, BBC Radio 4, 14 April 2007.

⁵ *The Independent*, 14 April 2007, (36).

Why did it never happen? Because the Stasi, she argues, was an all-encompassing institution, and fuelled by fear – the fear it elicited in the public at large and the fear of reprisals within its ranks. Stasi officers, as a result, seldom displayed pity for their victims. Captain Wiesler is simply not credible.⁶

This criticism, however, does not hold water. In reality, some Stasi officers were indeed critical of aspects of their work and were capable of empathy. Most, moreover, belonged to the SED, the cadre of which were losing faith in their cause. In the mid-1980s, opinion surveys indicated a sharp drop in support for their own party amongst SED members.⁷ Reports prepared by the Stasi frequently referred to communists sympathising with Gorbachev's 'new thinking' (especially where it addressed problems "which we have in East Germany too", such as "varnishing of the truth").⁸ From 1987, one SED member told me, "it was striking how many party meetings expressed views that were pro-Gorbachev."⁹ Stasi employees will have been more resistant than most to these trends, but not immune, and this became clear in 1989. Already before the fall of the Wall, Stasi reports had expressed alarm at the mounting signs of disobedience on the part of its officers and informants, including "the disappearance of 'our best forces', the informal agents" and, worse, that "The [Stasi's] ability to function is in question." After the fall, signs of indiscipline multiplied. From mid-November, numerous officers and informants emigrated to West Germany. Disgruntled officers sent petitions to SED leaders complaining of deception on the part of the Stasi leadership. As regards informants, although a majority (perhaps eighty per cent) continued to co-operate with their guiding officers, others were deemed unreliable. Some renounced their role or even crossed sides to become convinced supporters of the opposition groups upon which they had been spying.¹⁰ Wiesler's fictional case is certainly unusual, but is not preposterous – unless, of course, one's yardstick for plausible characterisation draws upon the methods of statistics, validating only the mean, the median, or the typical.

A more convincing criticism of the film's verisimilitude would be that its central premise was built upon an insecure foundation. No GDR minister did or ever would have commissioned a Stasi surveillance operation to advance his sexual goals. The official sexual ethics of the East German regime were prudish, and for a Minister to behave in this way would have gifted a trump card to his rivals. In addition, the Stasi would not have spied systematically upon an author who so clearly supported the regime, and especially not in the 1980s, when so many authors had contacts with westerners. Yet these are minor points. Overall the film impressed me with its authentic feel. Of superficial matters such as production design, this was meticulously so. (Coincidentally, I used to teach in the very classrooms of the Stasi training college in which the film opens – in early 1990, I hasten to add, immediately after Wiesler's organisation had vacated it). More importantly, the film captures the paranoid ways of the Stasi, and the webs of suspicion and angst it would weave – the psychological war it waged against dissidents, and the inducements and

⁶ "The Lives Of Others: Out of the shadows" Geoffrey Macnab; <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/film/features/article2124929.ece> Published: 05 January 2007

⁷ See Friedrich, (29).

⁸ BStU, ZAIG, 4205.

⁹ Mario Kessler, interview.

¹⁰ See Menge, (236); *die tageszeitung*, 9 December, 1994, (12); Richter, (47); *Telegraph*, no. 10; Mitter and Wolle, 1990, (230); Mitter and Wolle, 1993, (533).

threats used to keep citizens in line. One dissident, Wolf Biermann, has praised it for its plausible portrayal of Stasi officers at work. What drove him crazy, he writes, was that whereas Stasi employees knew everything about him – whether he had doubts about a poem, whom he slept with, for how long he would brush his teeth – he did not even have a face to put to them. *Das Leben der Anderen* remedied that: it gave a face to the machinery of surveillance.¹¹

But the ‘truth’ of the film goes further; it transcends its setting. Although its Oscar-clinching appeal to Los Angeles’ Academy members may have resided in what film critic Jonathan Romney describes as its “contrived, and even dishonest ... redemptive ending”, other audiences in western states and elsewhere can readily identify with its situations and characters. The species of official who is loyal to a structure the rationale of which is nothing but its own power is not indigenous only to Communist Eastern Europe. Nor indeed are secret service officers teaching ‘soft’ torture techniques such as sleep deprivation. A number of reviewers have been struck by the resonances with our world today. In the *Observer*, Phillip French writes that

Das Leben der Anderen subtly evokes a vindictive society that exists by turning citizens against each other in the interests of national unity and collective security. It serves as a major warning to ourselves and our elected leaders about where overzealousness and a lack of respect for individuals and their liberties can lead.

One American critic draws parallels with “the culture of fear that has prevailed here since 9/11”. In *Time Out*, Geoff Andrew remarks upon its “relevance to a world where fundamental civil liberties are increasingly at risk of being undermined.”¹² Others mention state intrusion into our private lives, corrupt bosses who seem untouchable thanks to their connections and power, and the system-inherent encouragement of careerism over solidarity that pushes the ambitious or fearful to even to the point of denouncing colleagues.

Das Leben der Anderen is excellent, and, arguably, ‘true’, but what of the third bouquet of critical plaudits, its courage? Two claims are involved here. One is that East Germans have been renitent in facing up to their past (‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’). This was already noted above, in the *Independent’s* allegation that the Stasi is a taboo subject amongst Easterners. The same editorial also hails the timing of Donnersmarck’s film, coming as it does “at a time when Germany is still trying to come to terms with its complicity in Nazism and, in the case of East Germany, with internal repression.”¹³ The second is that contemporary German cinema has tended to film the East (Ost) through a rose-tinted, or ‘ostalgic’ lens, a trend against which *Das Leben der Anderen* defiantly stands out. For Jonathan Romney of the *Independent*, it “indulges in none of the kitsch ‘Ostalgie’, that fond hankering for the old East, that affected Wolfgang Becker’s glib 2003 comedy hit *Good Bye Lenin!*” For Geoff Andrews, it “paints an altogether darker picture of life under East Germany’s Communist regime than the almost cosy existence nostalgically evoked by the likes of *Good Bye Lenin!*”¹⁴ For Mark Rice, it “is a bold film” in that, in contrast to mainstream German cinema which has portrayed the GDR sympathetically “nostalgically

¹¹ See <http://www.signandsight.com/features/682.html>

¹² *Time Out* Issue 1912: April 11-17 2007.

¹³ *The Independent*, 14 April 2007 (36).

¹⁴ *Time Out* Issue 1912: April 11-17 2007.

remembering government-sponsored food programs and Trabant cars”, *Das Leben der Anderen* “has the courage to take a strong position in condemning the culture of fear that dominated the GDR.”¹⁵

Before turning to Becker’s film itself, I note in passing the echoes, in these critical barbs, of those that, a generation before, were fired at Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat* and Wolfgang Petersen’s *Das Boot*. These were charged with attempting to normalise the Nazi past by portraying Germans of the time as “decent, normal citizens and sometimes even as victims”, and by bracketing out the malign aspects of Hitler’s ‘Reich’.¹⁶ Yet, one cannot help but wonder whether the critical eye should not be more watchful of the cinematic ‘normalisation’ of Nazi Germany than that of the GDR. Is it really justifiable to speak of the complicity of Germans with Nazism in the same breath as that of East Germans with ‘internal repression’, as in the *Independent* editorial quoted above? This is not the place to plough this much-churned soil in any detail. Suffice to say, a strong case can be made for the singularly aggressive, tyrannical and genocidal features of Nazi Germany but not for the GDR. Consider, to take one example, the figure for those murdered by the GDR state. Even liberal democracies such as Britain and America were, in the same epoch, responsible for a vastly higher death count than the regimes of Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker (and have, since 1989, shown little sign of reining in their forces). It is noteworthy that numerous ‘frivolous’ films are set within US invasions of foreign countries (Vietnam, for example) without eyebrows being raised at the trivialisation of barbarism.

Depicting the GDR as an equivalent to, or even inheritor of, the Nazi dictatorship exaggerates the crimes committed in its name, but has become a hackneyed theme in post-unification German historiography. In the early 1990s, demonising the GDR was de rigueur in the political culture of the new Germany. “In rhetoric”, as Andreas Staab has put it, former GDR citizens were “put on trial” over their “alleged collaboration with the totalitarian SED regime.”¹⁷ The Stasi was in many respects the most baleful of GDR institutions but its promotion as a magnet for all criticism belonged to a reductive historiographical agenda that permitted the roles of other actors and structures to be downplayed. There are “worrying parallels between this focus on the *Stasi* and other ‘totalitarian’ aspects of the GDR and the postwar confrontation with the Nazi past”, argue Peter Monteath and Reinhard Alter;

Above all, there is a similar tendency to locate the blame for the existence of a repressive state apparatus in the contribution of a relatively small group of individuals ruling ruthlessly from on high and applying various strategies of terror to bludgeon an innocent population into submission. In short, there has been a kind of witch-hunt, a search for convenient scapegoats [that serves] to consign the experiences of the people in eastern Germany to an unreachable past.¹⁸

This is an appropriate point at which to reconsider the putative courage of *Das Leben der Anderen*. Because the tendency to foreground Stasi oppression in interpretations of the GDR is so pervasive, the capacity of critics to ignore it is nothing short of

¹⁵ <http://cornellsun.com/node/22397>, 2 April 2007.

¹⁶ Interestingly, whereas the criticisms of *Good Bye Lenin* flow from the pens of German, British and American critics alike, those of *Heimat* and *Das Boot* were advanced primarily from the USA, less so from Britain, and barely at all from West Germans. See Kaes, (183).

¹⁷ See Staab, (162).

¹⁸ See Monteath and Alter.

miraculous. Von Donnersmarck's film is, patently, anything but brave: there has been no shortage of denunciations of the Stasi, not in 1990, not today, nor at any point in between. Although it does not join any witch-hunt – its heroes, after all, are both communists – neither is it a trailblazer in highlighting the Stasi's nefarious ways. In this, it follows the mainstream. Nor is its didactic motivation especially courageous: attacking Lenin is unlikely to antagonise establishment opinion, while the substance of the attack, Donnersmarck's advocacy of 'feelings over principles', is simply an affirmation of standard Romantic fare.¹⁹

But what of the second claim, the case that it stands out from contemporary 'ostalgic' German cinema? This, too is largely mistaken. Yet, in this case, I would concede that the argument contains a grain of truth.

The error consists in the proposition that the typical post-unification film set in the GDR was ostalgic. For the first ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall most presented it quite otherwise, as dreich and lacklustre, a jokeless zone. The characters, often either collaborators or persecutors, acted out their dour, parochial lives against dreary, dirty backdrops. Several such films were directed by ex-leftist West Germans, perhaps bitter at having duped themselves into seeing the GDR as an 'alternative'. As to films made by easterners, the tendency was to express anger and resentment against the GDR's paternalistic political system. "A sense of gloom prevails" in them, one critic observes, not least on account of "the number of violent deaths and suicides".²⁰ They are, comments another, "sombre and self-lacerating balance-sheets of the failures of the GDR."²¹ Some, such as *Nikolaikirche* (1995), dealt deliberately and sharply with Stasi brutality, and the omnipresent surveillance, corruption and injustices in the East German system.

Heimat and Ostalgie in *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*

And what of the 'grain of truth'? It is that some post-unification films – such as *Go Trabi Go* – were indeed frivolous, escapist, even inane. Some were comedies of a satirical kind, but which fail to afford a serious critical engagement with the GDR. Some, writes Leonie Naughton, shared a concern "for the recognition and preservation of Heimat."²² An untranslatable term, Heimat refers to harmonious community life, the local, the mundane, the domestic. It is removed from history, from progress, suspended in cyclical time. It may refer to a geographical place of birth but also connotes the landscape, dialect, customs and traditions attached to that locality. Thus it has a strong emotional component, and evokes the sentimental content of one's childhood.

As a genre, the Heimat film dominated West German cinema of the 1950s.²³ Such

¹⁹ It won't attract criticism but it should, for Donnersmarck grossly misrepresents Lenin. In the "sweet nothings" quote, Lenin agonises over his situation and voices his abhorrence of violence. For him, the worlds of 'art' and 'feelings' are essential parts of the humanity that he passionately wishes to see flourish; it is tragic that a humane society could only be achieved via social conflict, even civil war. It is, moreover, absurd to model Wiesler on Lenin, whose principles were antithetical to those of East Germany's 'communist' leaders. The latter, in 1984, were agonising not over the dilemmas of violence in revolution and civil war, but over the soaring price of oil and the ballooning national debt. If their – and Wiesler's – loyalty was to 'principles', then these involved little more than securing the power structure of which they were well-maintained components. See Lenin, (270).

²⁰ See Berghahn, (227, 252); also, Schenk.

²¹ See Thomas Elsaesser.

²² See Naughton, (10).

²³ On East German *Heimat* films, see Blunk.

films expressed utopian yearnings, romanticised recollections of a bygone and non-historical past – simple, rustic, pristine and outside politics. They depicted Germany as a rural, provincial homeland with which all Germans could identify, concentrating on “untainted, politically naïve, and innocent Germans, and on regional dress, customs, speech and music.”²⁴ This no doubt appealed to the collective wish for harmony and security of the 10-14 million German-speaking immigrants who settled in West Germany after the war. It was no secret, writes film historian Anton Kaes, that such movies

tried to impart a new feeling of home, of ‘Heimat,’ to the millions of refugees and exiles who had lost their homelands. These films, which painted an unabashedly idealized, nostalgic picture of Germany, may indeed have helped all those who were made homeless (*heimatlos*) by the war to identify with West Germany and accept it as their new Heimat.²⁵

As in the 1950s, some early 1990s unification comedies offer consolation, compassion, and, in Leonie Naughton’s phrase, “the prospect of reconciliation and inclusion for characters and, by extension, audiences.”²⁶ Bizarrely, some manage to portray the GDR as rural idyll. But the post-unification films that rediscover Heimat in the East have been written, directed and produced by West Germans. Eastern filmmakers tend to eschew this approach. They are more likely to critically assess the consequences of unification. As Naughton observes, “the reclaiming of the east as Heimat is a western initiative and perspective to which eastern filmmakers addressing unification do not subscribe.”²⁷

It was not until a decade after unification – and two years after the script of *Das Leben der Anderen* had been written – that East German filmmakers began to take a more light-hearted approach to the GDR. The breakthrough film – and the first written by an East German to attract a mass audience in unified Germany – was Leander Hausmann’s *Sonnenallee* (1999). It is no Heimat film: its protagonists are Berlin teenagers, they yearn not for rural heritage but urban sophistication – and the music they desire is not homespun but Western rock.²⁸ Alongside *Good Bye Lenin!*, however, it is widely cited as an instance of Ostalgie that trivialises the oppressive reality of life in the GDR. The Berlin listings magazine *Tip* even dubbed it an “Ostalgie orgy” and compared its presentation of the GDR to the ‘nationalist comedies’ made under Nazi rule.²⁹

There are several basic themes woven into *Sonnenallee*. One is the tension between romanticising our everyday world and seeking to escape from it. A second is the world of the teenager, with its emotive encounters with zits and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. A feelgood movie, personal discoveries – Micha and his friends discovering girls, visitors from Dresden discovering West German television – are presented with humour. A third is how people maintain their collective personal space, against the intrusions and supervision of the security forces, and of SED and Free German Youth officials. We admire, or at least snigger at, the bravado or ingenuity shown by various characters, old and young, in defying authority, whether that involves pissing on the Berlin Wall, smuggling goods into the country (or themselves out of it), or inserting an ‘a’ into the word ‘Vorhut’ in the

²⁴ See Kaes, (166).

²⁵ See Kaes, (15).

²⁶ See Naughton, (126).

²⁷ See Naughton, (123).

²⁸ See Naughton, (232).

²⁹ See Hodgin, (39-40).

propaganda slogan 'Die Partei ist die Vorhut der Arbeiterklasse', pasted above a classroom blackboard.

Hausman's film explicitly takes leave of Stasi-obsessed presentations of East Germany, its publicity material declaring that "the time has come to talk of what else the GDR was besides Wall, Stasi and Central Committee." People could have a good time despite their system being run by control freaks, and notwithstanding the out-datedness or scarcity of consumer goods.³⁰ However, as Berghahn and Cooke have argued, this 'normalising' thrust does not make it a "dangerous form of revisionism". Rather, it is a "tongue-in-cheek depiction of life behind the Wall", it attempts to give a voice to the experience of ordinary people who lived in the GDR and, in so doing, it counteracts "the process of historical elision and the devaluation of their life experiences that has been lamented by many East Germans ever since unification."³¹ It also takes cheerful sideswipes at a counterpart of and contributor to that elision, namely the exoticisation of the GDR by patronising West Germans, intimating that it is predicated on profound ignorance.

Sonnenallee does not ignore the GDR's disagreeable sides. There is a uniform in almost every scene. Scarcely five minutes elapse without a police officer or border guard harassing someone. The Stasi appears, in conversation or reality, only a little less frequently than that, and in the film's darkest moment Micha's friend is revealed to be an informant. There is even a shooting of a civilian by a border guard at the Wall – the iconic representation of GDR repression. And throughout, the teenagers resent the restrictions upon them. "This country pinches like tight shoes", Micha writes in his diary. "You're not able to move; only to dream." On censorship, he remarks that "they ban lots of things here, they like banning things."³²

It is, furthermore, a knowing, self-conscious work. The author of the novel upon which *Sonnenallee* is based has emphasised his own interest in Ostalgie as a phenomenon.³³ Ostalgie itself, Silke Simine observes, "is treated ironically by the film, which constantly points out that the memory landscape it depicts is artificial scenery ... Although the set was created with great attention to accurate detail, the film clearly exposes its cardboard cut-out nature and studio-constructedness."³⁴ Absurd elements, such as tumbleweed on the streets of Berlin, added to this effect. Others make similar points with regard to its stylisation of reality. One reviewer describes it as "hyperreal hallucination".³⁵ A second remarks that its attention to detail is too perfect, too constructed to be seen as 'real': it is "over-coded, and therefore ironically draws the spectator's attention to its artificiality."³⁶ A third points out that it abounds in intertextual references to its fictional status – with mischievous allusions to, for example, the GDR classic *Die Legende von Paul und Paula*.³⁷

³⁰ In one sub-plot, a friend of Micha's is sold a fake record by a dealer (who is explicitly identified with consumerism when he utters its mantra, "haste wat, da biste wat"). Yet, as Micha shows with the help of his air guitar skills, when it comes to enjoying life, 'sein' comes before 'haben'.

³¹ See Berghahn, (250); Cooke, (160).

³² That said, as Jozwiak and Mermann point out (789), teenage defiance is "couched in terms that enable viewers to read [it] as the more or less typical rebellion of free-spirited youth against the elders who invented an archaic system that determines their lives." The border guards, police and SED members are depicted as buffoons, making them appear harmless.

³³ See Simine, (267).

³⁴ See Simine, (267).

³⁵ See Hodgin, (40).

³⁶ See Cooke, (164).

³⁷ See Berghahn (248-9)

These observations are also supported by the fact that Micha's diary entries are not authentic history but fantasy, and the voice-over at the end implies that the entire film may be, likewise, an embellished, playful account of the GDR.

Hausman's film, in short, highlights the competing tensions at work within Ostalgie. On the one hand, as Cooke has argued, it "constructs Ostalgie as a response to fears among many East Germans that the true nature of their everyday experience is being elided from the historical record." It attempts to overcome the sense of elision, and in so doing seeks "to normalise their experience of the GDR, placing it, through the film's setting, within the context of a general nostalgia for the 1970s that has recently flourished in both the East and the West." On the other hand, the film simultaneously challenges simplistically rose-tinted views of the East. Its "obsessive attention to detail and ironic over-coding also attempts to distance the East German spectator from his or her history, undermining any reading of the film as nothing more than a piece of self-indulgent 'Ostalgie' which would call for a return to the values of the past."³⁸ Rather than portraying the old East with unalloyed nostalgia, he concludes, "the film actually deconstructs the phenomenon of Ostalgie itself, examining how the GDR period of history is being instrumentalised within the context of 1990s German society."³⁹

The final movie discussed in this essay, *Good Bye Lenin!*, has been treated in this journal before, and I do not intend to dwell on it. Having been re-functioned by so many reviewers of *Das Leben der Anderen* as its ostalgie pendant, however, some thoughts on this aspect of Wolfgang Becker's film are germane.

The subject of *Good Bye Lenin!* is truth and lies. It tells the story of Christiane and her children, Alex and Ariane. Christiane is a socialist and good Samaritan. She is seldom happier than when helping friends and colleagues file petitions to the authorities. (Petitions represented a state-sanctioned right to the expression of discontent in a form that encouraged a focus upon specific complaints as against general political issues.) Her husband had fled the country for another woman, and had failed to maintain contact either with her or his children. In October 1989, following a heart attack, Christiane falls into a coma.

When she awakes eight months later, the doctors inform Alex that her condition remains frail; no "excitement" is permitted. Yet in the meantime, the GDR's borders had been opened, the SED regime had fallen, and the Mark had been replaced by the Deutschmark: her beloved country was about to disappear. Alex protects her from the excitement of contemporary history by restoring her bedroom to its previous condition, complete with picture of Che and novel by Anna Seghers, and by hunting for old labels from GDR products (such as Spreewald gherkins) that had disappeared from supermarket shelves, in order to keep her in the dark as to the sudden transformation of the goods supply. In lovingly restoring the ambience of her previous life he has some success – perhaps most sharply seen when Christiane's old friends express their pleasure at being able to talk together, as in days gone by. Yet one lie breeds the next. Is lying to her, for however noble a motive, ultimately the kindest way? Alex thinks so, his girlfriend disagrees; the film explores the dilemma.

³⁸ See Cooke, (156, 166).

³⁹ See Cooke, (158). Jozwiak and Mermann (793) take issue with Cooke's assertion that it deconstructs Ostalgie. They see it "as more contradictory – the dominant mode is nostalgic, and moments of self-reflection are relatively few."

Good Bye Lenin! commonly figures as an exemplar of Ostalgie, for two reasons. First, Christiane, though not an SED member, is staunchly loyal to the GDR, and a sympathetic character. Second, it contains a Heimat element, in that Alex creates a comforting, comfortable GDR Heimat for his mother. He hires Pioniere to sing for her, and the song they choose is "Unsere Heimat". Interestingly and doubtless intentionally, the film incorporates footage from Reitz's *Heimat*.⁴⁰ Indeed, it can be read as an exploration of the meaning of Heimat; it "seeks the post-unification significance of *Heimat* from an Eastern point of view", according to Roger Hillman, "despite the director coming from the West."⁴¹

It is, however, no Heimat film. For one thing, it is set in a city -- for the Heimat genre the site of rootlessness and decadence. For another, it is explicitly historical and political. Its very subject is political change and sharp disjuncture, history's dialectical linearity. Nor does it romanticise the GDR. It opens with police and Stasi savagery -- not only do they beat protestors, they even prevent Alex from reaching his collapsed mother. It includes all manner of satirical references to the GDR's political system, notably the absurdities of its propaganda and its pervasive paternalism. The ardour with which Alex fakes the GDR's history reminds us of that state's vigour in doing the same. After the Wall falls, the only characters that lament the demise of the GDR -- one of whom utters the ostalgie hope "that everything will return to what it was like before" -- are a few morose old neighbours, while the young people relish the clothes and nightlife that the West has to offer. Lest any hawkish viewer still suspect the film of ostalgie sentimentality, the ending pulls the rug away, with Christiane's revelation: the *entire family's* aim was to cross to the West, she confesses. Her husband had been all but forced to flee, thanks to discrimination at work (he refused to join the SED). The plan had been for her to apply for permission to leave too! Yet, fearing that the authorities would take her children away, she opted to stay. Having come so close to leaving, she felt she had little choice but to cover her back thereafter through ostentatious loyalty to the regime. Her husband had been sending letters after all, which she had been hiding. All along, part of her had been yearning to leave the Heimat that Alex was diligently conserving for her -- a project that is in that instant revealed as built on sand.⁴²

Like *Sonnenallee*, Becker's film *thematizes* Ostalgie. It draws attention to the structuring and nature of nostalgia, engaging viewers "in issues of how and why we retrospectively and uncritically recreate the past".⁴³ Alex acknowledges that the fake GDR he creates is the one he might have wished for, but, Hillman points out, the distinction between reality and recreation is always drawn.⁴⁴ Alex, he himself acknowledges, creates the GDR "he might have wished for", a place of homely tranquillity, "and not a transfigured version of the one his memory would prefer to embellish."⁴⁵ Nowhere is this clearer than in his fictional reversal of the events surrounding the fall of the Wall: it dramatically exposes the entire nostalgic creation of a GDR Heimat as a fantasy.

⁴⁰ See Hillman, (231).

⁴¹ See Hillman, (227).

⁴² See Böhn. It is also of interest that this ending parallels the didactic message of *Das Leben der Anderen*: when Alex makes clear that his memory of the GDR is essentially the memory of his mother, and when his mother's 'marriage' to the state is dissolved, we are witnessing inter-personal relations triumph over the individual's relationship to a state.

⁴³ See Jozwiak and Mermann, (790).

⁴⁴ See Hillman, (227).

⁴⁵ See Hillman, (227).

Despite its ludic self-referentiality, could *Good Bye Lenin!* nevertheless be seen as ostalgie? The case against this notion is that nostalgia is simply backward-looking. The word itself is a compound of 'the return home' and 'pain' or 'sorrow'; nostalgia for the lost GDR, the home to which return is impossible, may be painful but is ultimately a shallow, kitsch response. Its representative expressions – GDR theme parks and consumer brands – are inherently uncritical. They operate by cataloguing "the images, smells, sounds, words, and gestures of the past rather than analyzing the internal contradictions of the GDR [and] the omnipresent Stasi".⁴⁶ *Good Bye Lenin!* is the antithesis of this: it does critically engage with the past, and with the Ostalgie phenomenon itself. On the other hand, as Pam Cook points out in a different context, nostalgia need not necessarily be "a reactionary, regressive condition imbued with sentimentality". Rather, it can be perceived as

a way of coming to terms with the past, as enabling it to be exorcised in order that society, and individuals, can move on. ... nostalgia is predicated on a dialectic between longing for something idealised that has been lost, and an acknowledgement that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality, and can only be accessed through images. This process can be seen as an activity of 'let's pretend', or role-play: past events can be recreated so that the audience can experience them in the present, and connect emotionally with representations of the past.⁴⁷

Good Bye Lenin! is pitched to a playful and critical, more than to a sentimental and backward-looking, audience. It stages an ostalgie fantasy, presenting it as understandable and enjoyable, involving misjudgement, to be sure, but definitely not baleful. The fantasy is bound up with a critique of the colonising intrusion of West German capitalism, exemplified by private corporate censorship (the company that prevents them filming) and the West German bank employee who refuses to let Christiane's life savings be exchanged into Deutschmarks – symbolising the devaluation of labour that East Germans experienced with unification.

Nostalgia in *Good Bye Lenin!*, Jozwiak and Mermann suggest, "is shown to perform the function of creating a communal/national past that functions as a mode of resistance to the Western take-over".⁴⁸ Albeit in lighthearted vein, it continues that rich tradition of German literature and cinema (Goethe, Wagner, Nietzsche, *inter alia*) of designing an imaginary, idealised Germany in order to contrast it with the shortcomings of the real thing. In *Good Bye Lenin*, the 'real thing' is represented by both FRG and GDR, and can in this sense be regarded as 'critical nostalgia'. It is also critical in its foregrounding of the constructed nature of truth, and in its framing of the dilemma at the heart of the film. Whereas *Das Leben der Anderen*, avowedly didactic, projects a definite moral message and leaves no doubt as to which protagonists chose the righteous path, Becker's film presents clashing opinions – represented by Alex and his girlfriend -- on the ethics of charitable deceit, and leaves viewers to mull over the debate themselves.

Ostalgie as western German utopia

What, then, is Ostalgie, and what explains it? The conservative view, which informs those interpretations that see *Das Leben der Anderen* as taking up cudgels against *Sonnenallee* and *Good-Bye Lenin!*, is that it represents the symbolic mobilisation of recalcitrant East Germans

⁴⁶ See Jozwiak and Mermann, (783).

⁴⁷ Cook, (4). Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Jozwiak and Mermann, (790); see also Manghani.

who romanticise their former state, trivialise its repressive nature, and refuse to acknowledge the ethical superiority of the 'open society'. The assumption is that a sentimental engrossment in things East German necessarily involves blindness towards oppression and injustice. How dare they celebrate life in the GDR!

This analysis may have purchase to the extent that East Germans do play down or even deny the oppressive aspects of the GDR. Some ostalgie events, furthermore, are in poor taste – one thinks for example of parties at which guests wear *Kampfgruppe* uniforms. However, relatively few purveyors of Ostalgie fit that category. They, and East Germans generally, are quite capable of differentiating between aspects of the GDR that were superior to the FRG and those that were not. Surveys consistently show East Germans to have preferred, *inter alia*, the high employment rate and certain aspects of the welfare system, but when questioned, in the mid-1990s, about “your personal freedom” only 4-7% (depending on the survey) preferred the GDR.⁴⁹

One analyst, Dominic Boyer, even denies that Ostalgie exists. “That is to say I know few East Germans who have the relationship to the GDR implied by the accusation or celebration of *Ostalgie* ... In hundreds of interviews with former GDR citizens, I have never once heard an East German of any age fantasize the return of the GDR.”⁵⁰ Of course, he adds, “former citizens of the GDR, like other human beings, do indeed fantasize both pasts and futures free of the compromises and trials of contemporary life.” Moreover, “many former GDR citizens, especially older generations, did experience the end of the GDR with a sense of loss and even grief.” But, more often than not, this was grief at the foreclosure of the ideals that were hoisted on its mast and, above all, at the falling away of the institutional coordinates and cultural symbols that had formed the backdrop to life.

Boyer's own thesis is that Ostalgie “is less a symptom of East German nostalgia than of West German utopia.” By utopia he means “a naturalizing fantasy” that creates a “no-place”, in which East Germans' “neurotic entanglement with authoritarian pastness allows those Germans gendered ‘western’ to seize a future away from the burden of history.” To explicate this, it helps to divide the argument into interpretative and empirical statements. Regarding the latter, Boyer's thesis draws upon his study of the magazine *Super Illu*, and of *Good Bye Lenin!*. Both are widely seen as purveyors of Ostalgie – *Super Illu* journalists describe it as a ‘Heimat’ magazine for an eastern audience. Both were conceptualised and engineered by West Germans: *Good Bye Lenin!*'s co-writers and director are from Westphalia and Cologne respectively; *Super Illu* is owned and largely managed by Bavarians (alongside other West Germans), with former GDR citizens employed in marginal positions, to craft the authenticity and ambience of the features.⁵¹ (Even *Sonnenallee*, one could add, was co-produced by eastern and western German production companies – and little wonder, as the East German film industry collapsed / was collapsed in the early 1990s.)⁵²

As to the interpretative side of Boyer's argument, it draws upon a theory of Cold

⁴⁹ Staab, (84).

⁵⁰ Boyer, *Public Culture*.

⁵¹ Boyer, 2001.

⁵² Detlef Rohwedder, head of the Treuhand -- the institution charged with closing down and selling off East German assets -- reportedly said: “Now that we are taking away everything from those in the east, at least we should leave them DEFA, because it is there that the consciousness of East Germany finds its artistic expression”. Soon afterwards, DEFA was shut down, along with much of the rest of East German industry. See Naughton, (60) and, for analysis of the economic history of the period as a whole, Dale, 2004.

War symbolic exchange, whereby each successor state to the 'Third Reich' apportioned the burden of its history to the other. For official West Germany, the GDR symbolised German authoritarianism. For official East Germany, the FRG represented "German cultural qualities of aggression and intolerance honed by the imperialist imperatives of international capitalism." The end of the Cold War necessarily provoked a crisis, as this entrenched symbolic exchange system lost its foundations. The burden of German history then divides in two: the FRG claims the 'history', shoving the 'burden' onto the East. Given the domination of West Germans and FRG social institutions in the new Germany, Boyer continues,

the FRG side of Cold War social imagination has become the inheritance of unified German public culture. Mass media in Germany are virtually exclusively owned and managed by West Germans and continuously project eastern Germany as 'the other Germany' within, depicting East Germans in variously subtle and overt ways as culturally 'the more German Germans' with inclinations toward xenophobic intolerance and authoritarian obedience. It has not been lost on East Germans that such public cultural representations position them to bear the burdens of Germanness and German history into the future.

This, he adds, explains the differential portrayal of the Stasi in political culture; it is present, "front and centre in every West German fantasy of the GDR but much more marginal to East Germans' own social memory".⁵³

Where does Ostalgie fit into this schema? Boyer answers by dividing the phenomenon in two. One exists in the form of "consumer cults that have grown up around GDR-era commodities" such as 'Rotkäppchen' sparkling wine and 'F6' cigarettes. But their transformation into tokens of identity has little to do with nostalgia. Rather, it should be

viewed as a response to the uncompromising campaign since 1990 to erase public symbols and signs of the GDR from the lived environment of the new federal states. As this campaign has succeeded in its severe challenge to East German social memory, certain residual classes of objects like consumer goods (sometimes now manufactured by western German firms) have been seized upon and hypostasized as prosthetics of memory and identification.

The second, 'true' Ostalgie, exemplified by *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Super Illu*, is a discourse driven from the West; it is "symptomatic of a post-unification West German utopia that East Germans have a natural affinity to the past, thus indicating, in the still animate logic of Cold War identification, that West Germans have a natural affinity to the future." It provides a potent means of stifling dissent in the East – when an easterner criticises the new Germany the dismissive response comes primed by the ready-made imputation of Ostalgie: "Oh, she wants the GDR back."⁵⁴

Yet if that is so, why the success in the East of *Super Illu* (with its estimated readership of 2.2 million) and *Good Bye Lenin!*? Are easterners embracing their oppression? Not at all, says Boyer. Despite its reactionary origins, Ostalgie also has a progressive

⁵³ Boyer, *Public Culture*. Opinion surveys consistently show sharp differences in the interpretation of the GDR by East and West Germans. One, from 2006, asked respondents if the GDR should be classified as a totalitarian dictatorship. 90% of West Berliners replied that it should, as compared to 52.7% of East Berliners. The same survey asked whether, despite the lack of freedoms, life in the GDR also had positive sides. Of West Berliners, 15% replied 'yes', 41% 'partially' and only 16% 'not at all'. For East Berliners the respective figures were 57%, 30% and 2.7%. See Neye.

⁵⁴ In the words of one of Boyer's interviewees. Elsewhere, (2005, 191) Boyer reports on his research in eastern German media organisations in the early 1990s. In the triage of eastern employees, the key term was 'belastet' (burdened, tainted with the old regime). An eastern employee could be deemed belastet because of their: (1) age, (2) lack of enthusiasm for reforms, (3) contentious relationship with the new management, (4) lack of 'competitive spirit', (5) unwillingness to commit to learn new techniques.

aspect, in that it represents a new phase “in the process of postsocialist normalization”. The first stage, in the early 1990s, involved “the wholesale public discreditation of the social, cultural and political legacies of state socialism as criminal, totalitarian and destructive of human integrity.” The GDR was presented as prison camp; its citizens as stunted, dehumanised victims and collaborators, lacking agency and incapable of history.⁵⁵ Then, in the subsequent stage, West Germans gift their Eastern brethren Ostalgie. The benefit for the latter: they regain identity and agency. The benefit for the former: in emphasising the backward-turned and peculiar nature of the East, Ostalgie confirms their own dominant and forward-looking character.

‘We have emigrated without leaving home’

Boyer’s analysis, in my view, has three strengths. It refuses to reduce Ostalgie to a unified phenomenon, insisting instead upon the different discursive constructions and the various purposes to which these are put. It subjects the promotion of Ostalgie by Western businesses to critical inquiry. And it is sensitive to the presence of ‘orientalist’ prejudices in the western discourse of Ostalgie that presents easterners as backward-looking and wary of ‘modernity’. This third point, I would add, applies to Eastern Europe as a whole, where post-1989 western triumphalism has given a new lease of life to the Orientalist mind-set, with its ingrained stereotypes of western progress and eastern atavism (see, for example, Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts*).⁵⁶

However, his bifurcation of the phenomenon into non-nostalgic consumer cults and Western utopia is less convincing. In particular, it obscures the breadth and spontaneity of the movement. In the late 1990s GDR memorabilia sellers prospered, Ostalgie parties were held and the ‘Ampelmännchen’ – that quirky, distinctively East German symbol on pedestrian crossings – became a cult figure, marketed on T-shirts, mugs and various other guises as a symbol of Eastern identity. This can be seen, as Jozwiak and Mermann suggest, “as an expression of longing for ‘home’ as well as an effort to partially reclaim what has been lost or taken away.”⁵⁷ Ostalgie was to this extent – and here Boyer would concur – an expression of resistance. As Leonie Naughton points out, the GDR was erased in the early 1990s: industries, monuments, institutions, welfare provision and all; but then, later in the decade, the “tendency to desubstantiate the GDR’s past underwent a novel inversion as a nostalgia for aspects of life under the old regime emerged in some eastern states.”⁵⁸ Individuals sought emotional bridges to the past – for example through GDR consumer brands or ostalgie card games. These, anthropologist Daphne Berdahl has observed, functioned as mnemonic devices (*Erinnerungstifter*) and in some cases described themselves as such. One ostalgie exhibition she studied explicitly referred to its mnemonic capacity: “Each object [in the exhibit] is connected to everyday experiences, and can serve as an occasion for remembering.”⁵⁹ These phenomena included an element of resistance, in

⁵⁵ Even the revolutionaries of 1989 could be portrayed in these terms. Klaus Bittermann (108) referred to their ‘immaturity’; they acted like ‘little children who hurl their toys into a corner and trample on them, under the thrall of an *idée fixe*,’ while for Thomas Schmid (35), student activist turned conservative publicist, the ‘Leipzig masses’ were ‘infantilised,’ ‘immature,’ and ‘bawling’.

⁵⁶ See Forrester, Zaborowska and Gapova.

⁵⁷ See Jozwiak and Mermann, (783).

⁵⁸ See Naughton, (19).

⁵⁹ See Berdahl, (202).

that the re-imagination of the GDR did not proceed along the dominant Orientalist tracks, in the insistence that life didn't simply start in 1990 but had its worthwhile and memorable aspects before. The designer of an ostalgie card game, 'Kost the Ost', put the point simply: "The East was not only about Stasi files and barbed wire."⁶⁰

GDR citizens in the early 1990s, it may be recalled, felt doubly let down. First, they had overthrown their political system in the hope of gaining that gleaming, smooth-running West German model of capitalist democracy, one that had, it seemed, been 'prepared earlier', but instead they were palmed off with a second hand model, one that was prone to malfunction. Then, they were expected to assimilate, in a unidirectional, asymmetric, identity-erasing process. Against this background, Ostalgie appears, at least in its major expressions, primarily as an expression of defiance – if of a tepid and easily incorporated kind – against the western takeover, the condescension of Wessis, and the perceived demands of assimilation into a foreign country.

Into a foreign country? I am referring here to Toralf Staud's thesis, provocatively labelled 'Ossis sind Türken', that he advanced a few years ago in *Die Zeit* and elsewhere.⁶¹ Staud's case is that, like immigrants, East Germans left their Heimat behind and arrived in a strange country, one which they had not participated in shaping. The lifeworld of East Germans, he points out, was transformed in 1990 "to an extent that otherwise only immigrants must undergo." The only unusual thing is that "the East Germans emigrated while rooted to the spot."⁶² Apparently, 'we have emigrated without leaving home' was a popular saying in the East.⁶³

Staud illustrates the point with a scene from *Good Bye Lenin!* in which Alex meets his West Berlin half siblings for the first time. They ask him where he is from, to which he replies "Ich komme aus einem anderen Land". Not "I'm German" or "I'm East German", but "I come from another country". Like the typical immigrant, most East Germans made a clear decision for the land of their destination, by voting for the major West German parties in 1990. Like many an immigrant, their cultural capital (languages, certificates, knowledge etc) was devalued, hope gave way to disappointment, and experiences of disorientation and dislocation were ubiquitous. As with immigrants, feelings of displacement, uprootedness and culture shock contributed to high rates of psychological illness and alcoholism. As with immigrants, East Germans received a grudging, grumbling welcome, and were obliged to assimilate. (If the hijab had been part of an East German sartorial code it would have been banned in 1990 or 1991.) In such circumstances, the perception that one's status is inferior is hard to avoid, and many East Germans – roughly three-quarters -- grew increasingly convinced that the new system was treating them as second-class citizens. A survey in 1999 revealed that 74% of eastern Germans feel "quite" or "strongly" East German, and this rose to 80% in 2001; meanwhile, their professed "attachment" to the FRG slid from 65% 1992 to 44% 2001.⁶⁴ Only one in five now consider the nationalistic slogan of 1989–90 – 'We are *one* people!' – to describe the new German reality.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ See Berdahl (206).

⁶¹ See Staud, 2003.

⁶² See Staud, (267, 269).

⁶³ See Berdahl, (202).

⁶⁴ See Staud, (273).

⁶⁵ See Yoder, 1999, (204).

Staud also draws additional parallels with the typical relationship between natives and incomers, with the former – convinced that they are bearing the costs of the resulting social change -- tending to insist that the latter assimilate (the newcomers having little to offer, culturally or socially). For their part, the incomers, feeling excluded and exploited, tend to cleave to their identity. Some, of course, wish to return home – amongst immigrants, according to the surveys that Staud cites, the figure is generally around ten per cent. Tellingly, that is the same as the percentage of eastern Germans who, opinion surveys suggest, profess a wish for the GDR to return.⁶⁶

Like many an immigrant, I would add, most East Germans in fact adapted rapidly and successfully to the new arrangements – even as they retained warm, sometimes nostalgic, memories of the country to which they could never return. On the basis of eighty in-depth interviews conducted in 1990-1 and again in 1998, Lawrence McFalls has shown that “in terms of values and identity, east Germans today are “not nostalgic complainers resistant to change”. Quite the opposite: they embrace subjective orientations *more in tune with the exigencies of life in a post-industrial consumer capitalist society than do their Western compatriots.*”⁶⁷ If this conclusion appears to be a compliment, it is of the backhanded kind. ‘Attuned to post-industrial capitalism’, for McFalls, means “harried, worried, socially isolated, politically disenchanting, yet eager consumers”.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The one weakness of the ‘Ossis sind Türken’ thesis is that it downplays the differences between the two groups. Integration into German society is considerably more challenging for non-German immigrants whose native language is not German and who suffer institutional discrimination and other forms of racism to a far greater extent than do East Germans. In addition, for East Germans, having ‘emigrated without leaving the spot’, much of their environment and family networks have, so to speak, accompanied them on their journey. That said, it does offer a useful lens through which to view Ostalgie. To the extent that nostalgia for the old GDR exists amongst eastern Germans it is not entirely dissimilar to that of immigrants for their Heimat. Yet, should they express this, they are presumed to be unreconstructed Stalinists. Compare this to immigrants from, say, Pakistan, who voice the desire to return home – would they be suspected of yearning for the iron fist of General Musharraf? Given the aforementioned differences between ‘Ossis’ and ‘Türken’, the parallel should not be drawn too strictly, but it is valid nonetheless.

Not unlike Islamic immigrants in Europe wearing the hijab, some East Germans understandably cleave more strongly to symbols of their past (or ‘original’) identity if it is perceived to be under attack; and this was undoubtedly a contributing factor to the Ostalgie phenomenon. Since the GDR’s demise the focus of popular examinations of this period of history, in Paul Cooke’s words,

has been, almost exclusively, on its insidious structures of control, and in particular the role of the Stasi. The result of representing the GDR as being nothing but a ‘Stasi state’ has been the growing sense of alienation many ordinary East Germans feel, due to their conception that the

⁶⁶ See Staud, (274).

⁶⁷ McFalls, (32). Emphasis added.

⁶⁸ McFalls, (32).

actual experience of everyday life in the East has been devalued and ignored.⁶⁹

One expression of that alienation was Ostalgie, in its range of expressions from sentimental nostalgia to critique of the 'new Germany'. These responses themselves came under fire, not least in the conservative and liberal media, thereby exacerbating the conditions that produced them. Too often, accusations of Ostalgie have served to suppress legitimate expressions of defiance or critique. "Attempts to belittle *Ostalgie*", Daphne Berdahl has argued, "may be viewed as part of a larger hegemonic project to devalue eastern German critiques of the politics of re-unification."⁷⁰

As regards recent German cinema, the fact that nostalgic elements are present in some films should not be interpreted as a sign that the authoritarian personality is alive and well in the 'neue Länder'. After all, nostalgia in cinema has been experiencing a worldwide revival. Pam Cook's book on the subject identifies the last thirty years as being a period in which 'nostalgic memory films' have experienced a renaissance – the same thirty years that, social attitudes surveys show, have been particularly corrosive on social cohesion, welfare provision, and general well being. This wider context should be borne in mind when accusations of Ostalgie are levelled against films such as *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*.

The scourge of those films, it seems, is *Das Leben der Anderen*. But presenting its contrast with *Good Bye Lenin!* as a battle versus Ostalgie, as so many reviewers have done, is unhelpful. On the one hand, *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee* are too 'over-coded', ironic and self-referential to be dismissed as frivolous Ostalgie. On the other, *Das Leben der Anderen*, too, is a complex work. It is forthrightly didactic, challenging the prioritisation of principles over feelings that its director imputes to Lenin (but which could equally apply to Socrates, Aquinas, Kant, and many others). However, whether its intended critique of Lenin is on the mark or not, it is certainly not crude anti-communist propaganda. Its hero, although supportive of the use of torture, is an honest communist, and his turn towards empathy with 'the lives of others' is assisted by his discovery of poetry written by a Leninist, Bert Brecht. As argued above, the film brilliantly portrays one aspect of life in the GDR but also transcends its setting. For me, it stimulates thought on the dynamics of personal moral-political change. On the dilemmas that we repeatedly face: when to accommodate, when to resist. On the manner in which individuals can break from a habituated pattern of collaboration with powerholders and turn to subvert them instead. Above all, on how the machinery of state/corporate power can creak and groan even when just one modest cog in the system ceases to play by the rules.

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⁶⁹ See Cooke, 'Performing "Ostalgie"', (160).

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