

In the Eye of the Beholder: Identity and Nostalgia  
in Post-Unification German Cinema

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## Abstract

In this study, I wish to examine several films produced in the decades after German Unification (*die Wende*) to show their relation to themes of identity, historical memory, and nostalgia in the culture of former East Germans. The prevailing subject I seek to research in this context of cinema and historical memory is “osatalgia” (German: “ost” [east] + “nostalgie” [nostalgia]), a pop culture movement dedicated to celebrating and reclaiming aspects (usually material) from the East German past.

It's a day in 1990. East Berlin still lies on one side of the epicenter of the Cold War ideological stand-off, and as Erich Honecker, chairman of East Germany's sole political party, steps down and as he is replaced with former cosmonaut and socialist hero, Sigmund Jähn, the borders of East Germany are opened. Thousands of West Germans, tired of their meaningless lives in the decadent, corrupt Federal Republic of Germany, flood into the East. Eventually, West Germans begin to break apart the Berlin Wall, that concrete seam of the Iron Curtain, in order to join the socialist utopia of the German Democratic Republic. In his small, government-provided flat, Alex Kerner and his family watch joyously as the state news program, Aktuelle Kamera, announces the fall of the West. Fireworks burst into clouds of colorful light in the distance.

And all of it is a lie.

It's a lie created by Alex to keep the GDR, in reality swallowed up whole by the capitalist West, alive. At first, keeping the communist regime he bristled at alive was an act to keep his mother, an ardent, devout socialist, from being shocked, quite literally, to death, but over the months Alex spent in creating and perfecting his perfidy, it became an exercise in his own nostalgia. Adrift and uncertain in a country and world that had seemingly shifted overnight, Alex had fabricated a version of his former homeland. His elaborate coping mechanism, though truly a product of cinematic imagining, represents a real, important current in German discourse about representations of the past.

Alex's story belongs to *Good Bye Lenin!* – a 2003 film that is perhaps one of the best examples of the nuanced nature of historical memory. The reunification of Germany led to the fall of a harsh, sometimes brutal regime in East Germany, but it also

radically, sometimes traumatically, altered the lives of nearly 20 million people, who, within the space of a year, had gone from being citizens of their own country to being a quasi-ethnic minority in a foreign country. Using film as a gateway to explore trends in thought and expression, an analysis of cinematic titles from the past two decades since Unification can help explicate the complexities of the memories and experiences of Germans during and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as to examine ideas of identity and nostalgia for former East Germans in the new Germany.

In order to understand the events that will be explored in this paper, background knowledge of German history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is necessary. After the end of the Second World War, a defeated Nazi Germany lay in ruins. A nation that had come together from a patchwork of middle-ages kingdoms, duchies, and merchant city-states was now, again, in pieces. Divided in four by the conquering Allied powers, towards the beginning of the Cold War, 4 became 2, mirroring the global ideological conflict driving it: East and West. The eastern half, formed from the Soviet occupation zone, became a soviet-style socialist state, replete with centrally-planned economics and political repression<sup>1</sup>. Its sibling in the West coalesced into a capitalist state under the guidance of what would become the NATO powers, led by the United States, and form a vibrant “social market” economy lush in Western goods and services<sup>2</sup>. For the first decade of each country’s existence, Germans, specifically those in eastern Germany or in Berlin, enjoyed an amicable, if cool, relationship between their respective nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Hagen Schulze, *Germany: A New History*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 297.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 309.

Many East Germans simply lived in the east and worked in the West (this was especially true of Berliners), and the borders stood open. Realizing, however, that a large portion of their population (1.65 million), especially skilled and educated workers, were fleeing the country for the West, on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1961, the government of East Germany suddenly shut down the border<sup>3</sup>. Overnight, the beginnings of the Berlin Wall, the “anti-fascist protection rampart”, were laid, ushering in nearly 30 more years of isolation for the citizens of East Germany<sup>4</sup>. Running like an ugly, barbed wire scar through the heart of Berlin and Germany, the Wall enforced a separation between East and West that would foster an evolution in both sides into very different worlds.

However, as the Soviet Union began to enter a state of decline, its resolve to aid its satellite states in their fight to maintain control over their populations faded. These populations were becoming ever more restless with their political situations as the Cold War marched on, including the East German public’s frustration with election fraud in the capitol, Berlin. In Moscow, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, unenthusiastic with the ruling party of East Germany, decided to pull back the Soviet Forces in Germany, a military unit that had acted as the proverbial “stick” to keep the masses in control throughout the Cold War era. Without their Soviet allies to back them up, the SED (East Germany’s sole, ruling party) lost the necessary power to keep East Germany from politically unravelling. Hungary announced it would open its borders, letting thousands of East Germans flee into it and away from the GDR, using Hungary as a transit stop to get to capitalist Austria, and from there, to the West. Unpopular party chairman Erich Honecker

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>4</sup> British Broadcasting Company, “History: the Berlin Wall.”  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/places/berlin\\_wall](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/places/berlin_wall)

resigned, and a more moderate regime replaces him. With thousands already fleeing, the decision to open limited sections of the border with West Germany is made, but after a party member misspeaks at a news conference, masses gather at the Wall, demanding to be allowed through to the West. Unwilling to use force to deal with the situation the East German regime relents, and this frontier of the Iron Curtain, and the ideological battle between East and West, collapses<sup>5</sup>.

Within a year, the Germanies are unified, as the new, democratically-elected East German government and that of the West faced immense popular pressure to conjoin East and West, and former East Germans are thrown into a strange, new existence. This is new existence and the complexities it and the East German past hold, and the way Germans of every background envision and perceive them, is where our study begins.

As the new, unified Germany formed, we see that the initial enthusiasm that brought thousands to march in protests or to storm the border crossings had waned. Though the West poured a lot of money into the East (with citizens of the reunified Germany paying a solidarity tax to help rebuild the Eastern portion's subpar infrastructure), unemployment in the areas of the former GDR were extremely high, following into the mid 00's<sup>6</sup>. East Germans were faced with living in a society that lacked benefits that they had enjoyed in the GDR, such as "guaranteed employment, childcare in the workplace, being considered an equal member of society."<sup>7</sup> The GDR also had an abundance of social benefits for women, such as mandatory paid maternity leave for

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<sup>5</sup> Schulze, 331.

<sup>6</sup> Claudia Bracholdt. "Why the former East Germany is still lagging 24 years after the Berlin Wall came down," *Quartz*, March 8, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Erin Johnson, "East German Nostalgia after the Fall of the Berlin Wall," *Confluence: the Journal of Graduate Liberal Studies*, Fall 2009: 128.

mothers (during which being able to return to their position was guaranteed), and monetary incentives from the government for women who chose to have large families. In addition, due to the GDR's centrally-planned economy, in theory, all citizens had access to commercial goods, such as automobiles (like the state-manufactured Trabant, which has come to be a symbol for East German material culture since Unification). Due to the high rate of unemployment after Unification, access to the consumer goods that East Germans had essentially fetishized before the Wall came down was limited. Furthermore, socially, many East Germans felt ostracized in the years after Unification, feeling resentment from their Western neighbors.

As compensation for these post-Unification troubles, several authors have argued, former East Germans have engaged in a pop culture movement known as Ostalgia (German "Ost" [east] + nostalgia). Erin Johnson in *Confluence: the Journal of Graduate Liberal Studies* writes that, "If East Germans had been able to see more of themselves in this new country – their laws, their values – or if the process had been more gradual, they would not have had to retreat into their memories to find these things." She argues that this lack of self-visibility in the new Germany is the reason for ostalgia. Authors Joseph F. Jozwiak and Elisabeth Mermann concur with this in *the Journal of Pop Culture*, arguing that nostalgic depictions of the East German nostalgia is the result of how they, "experience the pressures of assimilation in conflict with their desire to retain parts of their social and cultural identity," comparing East Germans and Unification through their piece to "immigrants and colonized peoples," and, "colonization" of the GDR by West Germany,

respectively<sup>8</sup>. (This author bristles at this comparison, noting the violent, borderline genocidal and inherently involuntary nature of colonization throughout history, and the bloodless nature of Unification, which was done through the acquiescence of East Germans.)

Ostalgia has seen many different forms in German culture (and in the culture of other former Soviet bloc countries), from the rebirth and remarketing of certain GDR foodstuffs<sup>9</sup>; the evolution of the state-made Trabant from pre-Unification joke to post-Unification kitsch collector's item<sup>10</sup>; to the use of the *Ampelmännchen*, a GDR-era pedestrian signal that has been kept on the traffic lights of many eastern cities, as well as having found a role as another visual symbol of ostalgia<sup>11</sup>. Oana Godaenu-Kenworthy in the *Journal of European Studies* labels this a, "self-conscious consumption and display of GDR products and brands," which she further writes is, "a form of resistance to progress and an attempt to escape and recapture time."<sup>12</sup>

The creation and marketing of these new old products became, "a lucrative industry (for retailers and television and film producers alike) in which enterprising individuals provided nostalgic East Germans with material objects of their past," according to Nick Hodgkin in *Screening the East*. In the opinion of this author the greatest medium for viewing ostalgia, as well as the one that is the most accessible for non-Germans, is film. To view how

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph F. Jozwiak and Elisabeth Mermann, "The Wall in Our Minds? Colonization, Integration, and Nostalgia," *Journal of Popular Culture* 39 (October 2006): 783.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Shockey. "In Former East Germany, a Search for Lost Foods," *the Atlantic*, April 14, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> British Broadcasting Company. "Germany: Trabants 'becoming collectors' items," *BBC News*, July 2, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Gray Faust. "East Berlin Ostalgie: Ampelmännchen," *USA Today*, October 14, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, "Deconstructing Ostalgia: the national past between commodity and simulacrum in Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!*," *Journal of European Studies* 41 (2011): 162.

the complexities of Unification and its effect on former East Germans intermingle with movements like ostalgie in film, this author believes best place to start is with Wolfgang Becker's 2003 comedy, *Good Bye, Lenin!*

Alex Kerner is a twenty-something East German man on the eve of his country's end. He lives in a government-supplied flat with his devout, dyed-in-the-wool socialist mother (whose husband, and Alex and Ariane's father, had escaped the GDR when they were children, leaving her in a catatonic depression that only a recommitment to socialism cured), Christiane, his older sister, Ariane, a university student pursuing a degree in Marxist economics, and her young daughter, Paula. He works at a run-down television repair store, and has few aspirations. Neither idealist nor staunch party supporter, he joins a group of protestors on the streets of Berlin one night out curiosity, and as the government troops come, is arrested. His mother, a teacher being honored by the party for her work, is on her way to an awards ceremony when her taxi is stopped by the government trucks that have come to capture the protestors. She watches in dismay as the dissenters are struck with batons and tackled, and as she sees her son arrested, collapses in the street.

Christiane remains in a coma for the next 8 months, during which the Wall and her seemingly beloved GDR collapse. Alex loses his job at the tv repair shop, and is hired as a satellite television salesman, working with a West German partner, Dennis. Ariane quits her studies, which in a capitalist society are now useless, and becomes a manager at a Burger King, starting a relationship with a West German, Rainer. The siblings quickly adjust to their new lives in a market economy, ditching their drab furniture and clothing and adopting new habits of consumption. As time marches on, Unification arrives,

and suddenly, Christiane awakens. Told by her doctor to not shock her in any way, lest her heart should fail, Alex embarks on a desperate mission to create the illusion of a fully functioning and existing GDR in their small flat.

The now-passé clothing and furniture suddenly return, and with the aid of his amateur film-making work partner, Dennis, so does the East German state-run nightly news program, Aktuelle Kamera, with fictionalized news reports intended to help with the ruse. Because her recovery process leaves her in states of mental foggiess, the seams in Alex's plot go unnoticed, but as time and Christiane's recovery progress, she begins to ask for things she enjoyed before her illness, when unbeknownst to her, the GDR still existed, such as certain GDR state-manufactured consumer brands. Because of the influx of 'exotic' Western products, goods from the GDR are no longer found (as a local bodega clerk tells him, "Why do you want that crap? We've got Western money now!"), and Alex is reduced to dumpster-diving for old containers with GDR labels, which he sanitizes and fills with Western products.

However, despite Alex's best efforts, including organizing a birthday party filled with his mother's now-unemployed friends and a gift basket made of old GDR products he had found at an abandoned apartment with his Russian girlfriend, his plans to keep his mother in the proverbial dark face many challenges. One day, on the side of the flats across the street from theirs, a giant banner for Coca Cola unfurls, much to the shock of Christiane. Alex quickly parries this complication, fabricating a news report where it is 'discovered' that Coca Cola was a 50s-era socialist invention stolen by the West. Eventually, Christiane becomes strong enough to venture out of the apartment, sneaking out as Alex is

sleeping, and going down to the street, sees the piles of old GDR-era furniture, clothing, and goods that her neighbors have abandoned for the trash. Men in clearly non-GDR fashions are moving into the building, and when she asks them where they're from, they reply Stuttgart, a city deep in West Germany. And finally, a helicopter flies by, a large statue of Vladimir Lenin being pulled away from its home in a nearby park.

Alex's scheme is seemingly torn asunder, but he quickly takes the deception further. In yet another fake news cast, it is 'revealed' to Christiane that history as the viewer knows it has been reversed – Westerners clamoring to escape the repression of their capitalist society have sought refuge in the GDR (explaining her experiences on the street with the men from Stuttgart, as well as the large influx of Western automobiles she can see from her window). To celebrate, the family travels to their dacha, where it is revealed Christiane had intended to follow Alex and Ariane's father to the West with them, but hesitated and stayed, secretly hiding all the letters he had written them over the year. Alex ventures into West Germany and finds his father, who has remarried and lives with his new family in an upper-middle class neighborhood in the suburbs of West Berlin.

Sadly, Christiane's health fails again, and she is hospitalized. As she recuperates, Alex takes his grand act of geopolitical theatre to a higher level, finding a taxi driver he encountered during his trip to meet his father, who resembled his childhood hero, cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn, and creating a news report showing the (real-life and here repurposed) resignation of Erich Honecker, and the inauguration of the faux Sigmund Jähn as party chairman. This 'new' party chairman promises reforms in the GDR, as well as the full opening of the borders for 'refugees' from the West, as well as the destruction of the

Berlin Wall. As the fireworks go off over Berlin for the fake celebration of the East's triumph (and the celebration of the real unification of the two Germanies), Christiane passes away, knowing full well the truth about Alex's scheme, told to her by his girlfriend Lara. As the newly-born unified Germany experiences its first days of life, Alex and his family spread Christiane's ashes over Berlin with a childhood rocket he had built. Christiane had outlived her beloved GDR by three days.

*Good Bye Lenin!* is an excellent piece to examine when discussing depictions of the GDR and of the Unification period. In particular, this author believes the film is in touch with the feelings of inadequacy and of uselessness experienced by East Germans after the initial euphoria of Unification. For instance, we see how many background characters, especially Christiane's older friends, have lost their livelihoods in the new market economy, their age and GDR work experience not sufficing to find them continued employment in the new Germany. This is partially treated with humor, as can be seen when Alex is dumpster-diving for empty jars of GDR foodstuffs and asks an elderly label if he might have some – the neighbor misinterprets Alex's request and angrily replies, "I'm jobless, too!".

Another excellent example is with Alex's sister, Ariane, whose studies in Marxist economics suddenly became worthless in a society that was ideologically opposed to Marxism and whose economics were completely different than that of a Marxist economy (like the GDRs). She quickly adapts however, gaining employment with Burger King, one of the many Western companies that soon floods into the GDR. In fact, of the characters portrayed, the only one who achieves a successful economic transition during Unification is Alex himself. Furthermore, a scene that acutely serves a microcosm for the East German

post-Unification economic experience is the scene at the bank, where Alex and Ariane, having just found their mother's hidden cache of East German marks, attempt to exchange it for Deutsch Marks, only to find out that they were days late, and the banks would no longer process the exchange. Enraged, Alex screams, "this was our money for 40 years!" before throwing the money, literally, to the wind.

*Good Bye Lenin!* is also interesting in that, unlike other films depicting the GDR, such as *Sonnenallee* or *Kleinruppin forever*, *Good Bye...* isn't just a vehicle for an ostalgie view of the GDR. As viewers, we are shown Alex's story as an East German who is lost in the chaos of Unification and has to literally engage in ostalgie. We are then treated to a 'meta' depiction of ostalgie, one that helps to inform us further about the imperfection of Unification. It is ostalgie that depicts the construction of ostalgie. One of the greatest things viewers can glean from this film is how it captures the sadness of the post-Unification era, and the intrinsic melancholy of the movements like ostalgie: the past is gone, and as much as filmmakers and entrepreneurs and the everyday German might try, the GDR and the things they enjoyed about it are gone, too. Though *Good Bye...* is ostalgie, it's also critical of ostalgie, making its main character, Alex, a microcosm for all former East Germans participating in ostalgie, showing the inherently futile, almost schizophrenic nature of trying to hold onto history gone by.

Whereas *Good Bye Lenin!* offers this dual vision of ostalgie, *Sonnenallee* is much more straightforward with its nostalgia. *Sonnenallee* is a comedy focusing on a group of teens in East Berlin who live on the titular Sonnenallee (Sun Alley), a road that was cut in two by the Berlin Wall. The film follows the characters as they interact with the society

they live in (shown in rather rosy, tongue-in-cheek terms as being run-down, but seemingly a nice place to live) and with the West Germans that come into their lives (such as a West German love interest for the female lead, who visits her in western cars that impress her, but it turns out he is simply a hotel valet showing off the vehicles entrusted to him in order to impress – something that we can read a lot into in the context of post-*Wende* East/West relations).

*Sonnenallee* participates in the ostalgie sugar-coating of the difficulties of life in East Germany, with regime interference in the daily lives of citizens depicted as being little more than small annoyances that got in the way of seemingly an otherwise enjoyable time. It also pushes back on the idea of West Germans being generous quasi-saviors; in fact, the first scene of the film depicts West German children gleefully watching the daily comings and goings of East Germans from across the wall, like visitors to some exotic zoo.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from films like *Good Bye Lenin!* are films like *the Lives of Others*, a 2005 film by director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, which, unlike sunny, poppy *Sonnenallee* or *Kleinruppin forever!*, are dark and gritty, and depict a starkly different view of the German Democratic Republic.

Gerd Wiesler is excellent at what he does. As a member of East Germany's *Ministerium für Staatsicherheit* (Ministry of State Security, commonly known in Germany and elsewhere by the acronym 'the Stasi'), he is in charge of helping continue the SED's dominance over the GDR, and to amass intelligence on dissenters and enemies of the state. He teaches new generations of Stasi agents, weeding out the students who express alarm at the harshness of Stasi interrogation methods. One day, he's approached by his old friend

and fellow, though less competent, agent, Grubitz, who invites him to the theatre. There, they see a new play by (fictional) playwright Georg Dreyman, whose work is immensely popular within and outside of the GDR. His girlfriend, Christa-Maria, becomes the focus of the Minister of Culture, with whom Grubitz is eager to ingratiate himself. To do so, he assigns Wiesler to commence surveillance on Dreyman. Wiesler agrees, suspicious that this particular artist had previously escaped Stasi surveillance, while a majority of the country's other artists were targets of it in some way or another.

Dreyman begins his work, wiring every room of Dreyman and Christa-Maria's apartment, and setting up the headquarters of their operation in the very attic above the apartment. Soon, it becomes clear to Wiesler that there is no reason to watch Dreyman, and eventually discovers that the surveillance had been authorized by the Minister of Culture to try and find something incriminating on the playwright in order to gain some leverage in his pursuit of Christa-Maria, for whom the Minister lusts. Meanwhile, Dreyman, who had previously been a loyal, if silently critical citizen of the GDR, begins to question the system under which he lives and creates when an old friend and fellow artist is blacklisted. The friend eventually commits suicide, and Dreyman, along with other dissenting artists, devise a way to publish a story about their friend's suicide, as well as all the other suicides in East Germany, which the regime actively tried to conceal from the rest of the world. Utilizing a contact at *der Spiegel*, a popular and influential West German news magazine, the trio writes their seditious exposé and publishes it.

The regime, furious that the suicides they had hidden away from the public in order to avoid tarnishing the image of the GDR, order the Stasi to find out the identity of the

article's authors. Suspicious eventually falls on Dreyman, whose girlfriend, a prescription drug abuser, is made a Stasi informer when she's caught buying from her dealer. She informs on Dreyman, telling the Stasi where to find the illegal, non-registered typewriter he had been using to anonymously write for the West. However Wiesler, who over the course of his surveillance of the infatuated artists had grown to question the authorities whose dominance he was tasked with defending, hears of the incoming Stasi sting on Dreyman and quickly finds and removes the typewriter from the apartment, saving Dreyman.

Suspecting Wiesler of being complicit in Dreyman's close-call with the Stasi, Grubitz strips Wiesler of his rank and relegates the brilliant officer to the Stasi mailroom, steam-opening envelopes of suspected enemies of state for inspection. Years pass, and the Wall falls. Dreyman discovers the wiring from the surveillance he believed he had never been the target of, and goes to the Stasi headquarters, now a historical archive, and finds the transcripts of his life while under the eye of state security. Curious about the mysterious HGW XX/7 who had observed him, Dreyman discovers Wiesler's identity and tracks him down, ironically engaging in his own moment of surveillance as he watches the former Stasi agent work his new job as a mailman. Another year goes by, and Dreyman publishes a novel about his life in the GDR and the surveillance he had learned about, dedicating it to HGW XX/7. Wiesler finds the novel in a bookstore and purchases it – the cashier asks if he'd like to gift wrap it for someone, to which Wiesler replies, "No, it's for me."

Films like *the Lives of Others* are fascinating, because they fulfill the role of a cultural response to movements like ostalgia. Unlike in *Sonnenallee* or *Good Bye Lenin!*,

where the GDR is shown as a quaint, yet generally happy place, *the Lives of Others* chooses instead to show the 'dark side' of actually existing socialism, which many both during the Cold War and after have popularly represented through the *Ministerium für Staatsicherheit*, or Stasi, the GDR's state security agency. The Stasi was created in 1950, and for the next for years, used an extensive network of agents and informants to spy on the populace of the GDR and eliminate dissent to the regime<sup>13</sup>. Though the Stasi were quite effective, writers since the film's release in 2006 have pointed out that the film is somewhat inaccurate in the way it portrays the Stasi, while at the same time, other viewers of the film have praised it for showing the harsh nature of the GDR government<sup>14</sup>.

The harshness of the GDR is often remembered in the West, and is prevalent in other films, such as *Barbara*, a 2012 film detailing the struggle of titular doctor Barbara to cope with the harassment she experiences from the GDR government and the Stasi after she applies for and is denied an emigration request (though, interestingly enough, West Germans are portrayed rather poorly here as well).

Other films, such as those that dramatize escape attempts from the GDR, such as 2001's *the Tunnel*, are predicated directly on the inability of the average citizen to live in the GDR. The negative portrayal of East Germany even finds itself in American film, such as the LGBT cult film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, where conditions in the GDR are portrayed as being bad enough that the main character, Hedwig, undergoes a (botched) sex-reassignment surgery in order to marry an American GI and escape to the West. Indeed, the memory of the GDR as a surveillance state has worked itself into the discourse of American

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<sup>13</sup> Schulze, 313.

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Westphal. "'Truer than the Real Thing': 'Real' and 'Hyperreal' Representations of the Past in *Das Leben Der Anderen*," *German Studies Review* 35 (1) (February 2012): 98-99.

NSA contractor Edward Snowden, who illegally leaked classified documents in 2013 onto the internet and subsequently fled to Russia. Retired military analyst and fellow 'leaker' Daniel Ellsberg, in an interview published on Salon, suggested that the public become interested in *the Lives of Others* in light of the revelations from Snowden on the extent of the National Security Agency's surveillance programs, saying, "It should be reissued now. Preferably. It has subtitles. In German. But I'd like to see it dubbed so it had a wider audience. What that shows is what life can be with a government that knew as much as the Stasi did then. But if they know --- and one thing they can do with that information right now --- is to turn people into informants, so that the government has not only the information that people say on electronic devices, they have what they say in the bedroom, because their wife or their whoever --- spouse --- is an informant. As happened in the movie. That is what did happen in East Germany. And if we were to get that here, and there's the infrastructure for it right now, we will become a democratic republic in the same sense as the East German Democratic Republic."<sup>15</sup>

Newer film *Barbara* also engages in a harsher depiction of the East. Titular character Barbara, a physician from Berlin, is reassigned by the government to a small village on the North Sea after she attempts to legally emigrate from East to West. There, she's supplied a dingy, small apartment, and put to work at a run-down hospital, where she bristles at the attempts of the local doctors to befriend her. Barbara is watched by the Stasi, to whom her supervisor at the hospital reports about her. They regularly harass her about the times during the day they cannot find her, searching her apartment, and forcing her to undergo cavity searches. It's revealed Barbara has contacts in the West – a lover, who with a partner

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<sup>15</sup> Brad Friedman. "Daniel Ellsberg: Edward Snowden is a patriot," *Salon*, June 14, 2013.

visits her in the East, bring contraband Western goods, and money and a plan with which she can escape the country. Sick of her controlled, dingy life, Barbara actively prepares to flee, but gets drawn into the life of a young woman at the hospital, a patient with meningitis who is a runaway from a labor camp. Ultimately, wanting to save the life of the young woman, and because of the small pleasures she has found in her existence in the village, Barbara gives up her chance to flee to the labor camp girl, and stays at the hospital.

*Barbara*, like *the Lives of Others*, does not shy away from portraying harsh, dark depiction East Germany. Our main character undergoes considerable harassment from the government and its agents, from being punished for expressing a desire to leave the country, to routinely having her privacy and person violated in order to continue state dominance over her. We also see the dilapidated nature of infrastructure in the GDR, which is treated with contempt, rather than with humor, as in *Good Bye Lenin!* or *Sonnenallee*, which used this to create a form of 'down-to-earth'-ness. The harshest part of *Barbara* comes from its plotline involving the young woman with meningitis: her story serves to subvert ostalgie ideas about the benevolence and equality that the actually-existing socialism of the GDR is supposed to show to its citizens.

Films like *the Lives of Others* and *Barbara* serve as their own form of nostalgia, in direct opposition to that of works like *Good Bye Lenin!*. Whereas East Germans have created this culture of nostalgia to remember the parts of their GDR experience that are now gone, such as social benefits, or experiences that post-Unification treatment of GDR history has erased, those Germans that remember the GDR less fondly engage in their own creation of memory. Films like this that show the darker side of the GDR – the

repression, the corruption – engage with the propaganda of the Cold War, that Soviet states were bastions of oppression, that there existed nothing noteworthy from their economies. This author believes that, when presented with a cultural force like ostalgia, which seeks to retake the cultural and historical narrative of the GDR back from the West, which, with the case of film has dominated, the West counters with dark form of nostalgia that seeks to reinforce and validate pre-Unification assumptions and ideas about life in the GDR.

Furthermore, through both sets of films, we see how the period after *die Wende* has come to remember East German themselves, not just the state. *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee* depict the average citizen of the GDR as being almost totally separated from the actions of the SED regime; the government and its agents (almost ubiquitously portrayed through a token Stasi agent or agents) are always seen as being quasi-faceless entity that acts on the populace as victimizer. Conversely, *the Lives Others* and *Barbara* heavily subvert this depiction. The *Lives of Others* is essentially about the role of the individual in the GDR regime, and how the regime and its “sword and shield”, the Stasi, could only operate with the efficiency they did with the consent of the populace who denounced and informed on each other, or who became part of the government apparatus itself. These depictions of the individual East German speak further to the post-Unification cultural divide, and the way that the memory of the GDR is so malleable, and variable to the backgrounds and politics of the person doing the remembering.

Ultimately, through films like *the Lives of Others* and *Good Bye Lenin!*, the truly complicated nature of Unification, and of historical memory, can be seen and understood. How the GDR is remembered is determined largely through background,

though this isn't absolute. The director of *Good Bye Lenin!*, Wolfgang Becker, and the lead actors, Daniel Brühl and Katrin Saß, were all born in the West, while the lead actor of *the Lives of Others*, Ulrich Mühe, was born and raised in the East. With the Westerners in *Good Bye Lenin!*, we another interesting aspect of olstalgia – the idea of capitalism driving the production and consumption of goods from or about a communist society. This Western dominance is part of what has caused so much discord since Unification, and is why so many ostalgic works are created by West Germans. The East German film industry collapsed after Unification, and the many, many films it made are only now coming into the limelight in Germany, while the largest archive of them resides not in Germany, but in an American university<sup>16</sup>. The case of actor Ulrich Mühe is also interesting, in that one would assume his status as a former East German would pull him towards ostalgic projects, but this author discovered Mühe was an active member of anti-government protests in East Germany, having helped organized a 1989 protest that gathered over half a million East Germans at Berlin's Alexanderplatz<sup>17</sup>. Thus, a role in a film that is harsh in its treatment of the GDR is not so surprising from an actor like Mühe.

Since the Cold War's end in the early 90s, many populations in the former USSR's satellite states have struggled to find their way. The case of East Germans is unique among them, as instead of remaining an independent nation-state, it was subsumed by its Western sister. East Germans were incorporated into a society and a way of living that they had dreamed about for decades, but, when faced with it in actuality, found themselves lost within. Struggling to find a place in their new culture and society, ostalgia, and the rose-

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<sup>16</sup> David Gordon Smith. "Cinema Across the Wall: East Germany Makes a Comeback at the Berlinale," *der Spiegel*, February 19, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Obituary of Ulrich Mühe, *Guardian*, July 27, 2007.

tinted view of East Germany offered former GDR citizens a coping mechanism, a way of negotiating their new existence as members, for all intents and purposes, of the West. Conversely, anti-ostalgic depiction of the East offered other segments of the German population their own way to deal with a movement, ostalgia, which challenged their notions of what the GDR and actually existing socialism was really like. It's important to understand how historical events can be remembered so differently, especially within the context of Cold War history, for it holds great importance for a part of the world that is still trying to recover from those events.

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