# *Good Bye, Lenin!*: Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism

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In the years immediately following the unification of Germany, mainstream German cinema portrayed the assimilation of former East Germans into a capitalist society as primarily an eastern matter. Following the successes of the New German Comedy of the 1980s, western German filmmakers concocted a mix of the newly popular *Beziehungskomödien* and cinematic *Heimat* humour to produce a series of successful films that presented the eastern German struggles to "catch up" with the West as an entertaining comedy of errors – Peter Timm's *Go Trabi Go* (1991), Wolfgang Büld's *Das war der wilde Osten* (1992), and Detlev Buck's *Wir können auch anders* (1993). A few eastern German filmmakers who had been trained by the now defunct GDR state film company DEFA made films in an *auteur* tradition that depicted the social despair facing many eastern Germans in the 1990s. Lacking experience working within a film industry geared for commercial success, even the most successful of these filmmakers were not able to break into the mainstream cinema track – Andreas Dresen (*Nachtgestalten*, 1999; *Halbe Treppe*, 2002), Andreas Kleinert (*Verlorene Landschaft*, 1992; *Wege in die Nacht*, 1999), and Olaf Kaiser (*Drei Stern Rot*, 2001), to name a few (see Cooke 103–10).

It was not until the end of the first decade of unification that German filmmakers were able to bridge this divide between escapist comedy and dark social pessimism to produce box office hits that also address the economic and psychic pressures bearing on unification. Two films in particular, Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999) and Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), find a common formula for overcoming the "wall in the head" between eastern and western Germans. Both take a nostalgic and fondly humorous look back at the GDR to address questions about the lingering problem of German identity. If nothing else, the success of these two films has shown that the lure of nostalgia for the culture of divided Germany is by no means limited to eastern Germans. *Sonnenallee*, whose writers (Thomas Brussig and Detlev Buck) and director (Haußmann) grew up in the GDR, drew strong attacks from some, mainly western critics who saw it as the product of a romanticized eastern German nostalgia for aspects of everyday life in the GDR that had disappeared after the *Wende* (*Ostalgie*). The film's detractors claim that it glosses over the oppression and atrocities of the GDR state (e.g. Buch), and there was even a lawsuit filed against Haußmann claiming insult against victims of the DDR (Cafferty 255). In an opposite vein, more attentive critics have argued that, along with its fetching portrayal of everyday life of GDR citizens, the film provides a critical perspective on the dangers that accompany such

nostalgia (Cafferty 257–58; Cooke 111–19). As several scholars have shown with regard to *Ostalgie* in general, the kind of nostalgic look back at happier moments in the GDR in Sonnenallee plays an important role in helping shore up a fragile eastern German sense of identity in unified Germany (Berghahn 249–50; Saunders 93–94). It is, on the other hand, not so readily clear why *Sonnenallee*'s nostalgic depiction of an admittedly naive, unsophisticated GDR cultural milieu would appeal to western Germans as well.

More recently, *Good Bye, Lenin!* has had a far greater success stirring western German participation in *Ostalgie* (Berghahn 251–53). Made by the western German director Wolfgang Becker, who coauthored the script with Bernd Lichtenberg, also a western German, the film displays prominently many of the products and lifestyles popular among *Ostalgie* enthusiasts. Its appeal, however, has reached far beyond what one might expect to be its target audience of former GDR citizens. The biggest German box-office hit since the *Wende*, Becker's film, according to film critics, touched Germans in both East and West on a visceral level, even prompting a feeling of community between them (Göttler). Or, as a popular phrase from a review of the Berlin premiere has it, the film generated a "gesamtdeutsches Geflüster" (Göttler; Mommert and Kerkmann). In contrast to *Sonnenallee*, Becker's film was also a major international hit, playing successfully in seventy countries and easily outdrawing other recent international hits *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (2001) and *Lola rennt* (1998). When asked about its popularity outside Germany, Becker attributed it to the family drama, calling it "a very human story, a story which can be easily understood by everybody" ("'Goodbye, Lenin!' Charms US Audiences").

As well fashioned as the basic plot is, *Good Bye, Lenin!* owes its remarkable success to more than just the enjoyable story of its winsome protagonist, Alex (Daniel Brühl,) and his valiant efforts to protect his mother. Above all, the synchronized correlation between the personal drama and the epoch-making events that led to German unification gives the film's story a historical dimension that reverberates with audiences outside Germany as well, and in both the East and the West. In the climactic moment of his rewriting of the East German *Wende*, Alex imagines a much different motivation for German unification. To explain to his mother the presence of West Germans in East Berlin, he has the GDR government admit its mistakes and open up the wall. In his inverted historical account West Germans pour into the GDR. Using actual footage and a spatial rule of thumb, Becker produces a mirror image of the flow of the masses through the wall from East to West. He shows actual news clips of the crowds moving from left to right, that is, footage shot from the north looking south. This simple trick works – for Alex's mother as well as for the viewer – because the natural inclination is to orient oneself as if looking at a map with north at the top. Thus the viewer is naturally inclined to assume that the people are coming into East Germany.

As the reversal of this decisive event suggests, the film offers its alternative to the actual Berlin Republic strictly in the realm of the imaginary. Still, the film does not come across as a *Märchen*, but rather engages the desire of the spectator in a fictional narrative that holds open the possibility of realization in the social realm of unified

Germany. The activation of nostalgia in itself hedges against the story devolving into pure fantasy. In particular, nostalgia for two aspects of life in the GDR drives the spectator's emotional involvement with the film. In both cases the nostalgia affects primarily the former residents of the GDR, but has the potential to draw in western Germans as well. Indeed, as early film reviewers suggested, the film's fashioning of an imaginary social construct that spurs desires in both eastern and western German viewers tends to extend across the "wall in the head" between them. This article's critical reading of how these two modes of nostalgia conjoin in the narrative to produce a post-*Wende* sense of community uncovers a subtext that serves, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, a decidedly western agenda.

In the first instance, *Good Bye, Lenin!* rides the wave of nostalgia for the everyday culture of the GDR and works these elements into a narrative in which its East German characters find the resiliency to withstand the impact of "western colonization" (compare Cooke 1–26). For this, the film draws less on GDR material culture than on a form of social interaction that stirs nostalgic impulses among many eastern Germans. Its look back at life in the GDR recalls the possibility of living an idyllic life together with friends and family within the oppressive, but also in many ways protective confines of the socialist state. In a society where speech and actions were closely monitored by the communist government and personal advancement depended on collusion with the authorities, many East Germans decided to invest their energies in quiet domestic pursuits. This common choice led to the sense of an unofficial shared way of life that became widely known as a *Nischengesellschaft*. The film's opening shots, filmed to simulate a grainy home movie, clearly evoke this idea of a more fulfilling life in private niches. They show the family enjoying happy moments together at their *datscha* not long before Alex's father escapes to the West. As one of the few places where East Germans could feel sheltered from the eyes and ears of the Stasi, the *datscha* came to symbolize life in a private niche. The unprofessional quality of the home movie of Alex's family at their weekend retreat situates it as part of the society of niches that was sheltered from the official, controlled public sphere in the GDR. It also imbues the scene with a sense of genuineness that distinguishes it from similar situations in the Federal Republic, where visual entertainment and advertising depict personal relationships in a slick, professional way and transform even the most intimate forms of human interaction.

The film's central narrative event produces an allegorical representation of this alternative community that formed outside of public life in the GDR. Alex creates a microcosm of the society of niches in the "79qm DDR" (as the German tagline for the film calls it) he produces within his mother's apartment. As he sits and looks after his mother with the sole purpose of guarding against her finding out what had transpired while she was unconscious, he discovers that he too can find refuge there in isolation from the outside world. He falls asleep on the job, while his voiceover offers a comment that is certain to stir longing in some eastern Germans: "Das Leben in unserem kleinen Land wurde immer schneller. [...] Doch weitab von der Hektik der neuen Zeit lag ein Ort der Stille, der Ruhe und der Beschaulichkeit, in dem ich mich endlich ausschlafen

konnte." Even the film's romantic subplot kindles nostalgia for the more idyllic moments of private retreat within the *Nischengesellschaft*. Lara, the Russian nurse intern who becomes Alex's love interest, helps in his search for the GDR products he needs to make his ruse work. She hears from coworkers about a Berlin apartment abandoned by East Germans who had fled through Hungary into the West in summer 1989. She and Alex visit the apartment, which is in an elegant older building replete with an old-fashioned tiled stove, a vine-shrouded balcony, period furniture, modernist nude paintings, and a full stock of GDR food products – including Tempo-Bohnen, Globus grüne Erbsen, and Mocha-Fix Gold Kaffee. Once the home of privileged party members who had used their travel privileges to flee to the West, the apartment now becomes the site for the film's main romantic interlude. Resembling the classical literary trope of a *locus amoenus*, this scene harks back to happier moments in the GDR when work and financial pressures did not intrude into every aspect of life.

Through its narrative construct *Good Bye, Lenin!* is able to resolve potentially destructive self-contradictions in its revival of the GDR *Nischengesellschaft*. As an alternative social sphere that rejected the state vision of "real existing socialism," it tends to confirm the western German idea that the forty years of life in the GDR can simply be discarded. However, eastern Germans need a more positive historical account of public life in the GDR to shore up a sense of identity threatened by the erasure of the social and cultural world that had shaped their existence. Individual identities are constructed from a life-long continuum of personal experiences. Shared memories of the material culture in the GDR can help fill the breach opened up by the *Wende*, but narrative is needed to form a continuous, meaningful whole out of these diverse, isolated memories. The narratives of self on which individual identity is constructed are also always interconnected with collective narratives that define a nation or culture. In a society where productivity and labour were celebrated constantly as essential elements of a meaningful existence, a job and career were also integral pieces of individual identity (Berdahl 198–99). A collective eastern German narrative about life in the GDR that excludes the world of work would remain fragmentary and impede the eastern Germans' ability to forge a stable identity in post-*Wende* Germany.

*Good Bye, Lenin!* provides a narrative framework through which the audience can participate in the restoration of an East German "tissue binding self and society" (Betts 207). With the dual story of Alex and his mother the film crafts a narrative of individual and family life in the GDR that suggests how active participation in the East German socialist state may still be seen as meaningful. First, the film establishes Alex's rejection of the official communist vision, perhaps the only stance that would not risk alienating a large portion of the audience from the outset. In fact, the film suggests that his actual experiences working in the GDR system led to his cynicism about its official goals. As a boy, Alex watches the 1979 televised launch of the first German cosmonaut into space, while two Stasi agents interrogate his mother about the father's visits to the West. When his mother loses her temper and shouts at them to get out and leave her alone, Alex glances over at her with a worried expression, but he is too young to understand the significance of their visit. Inspired by his country's success in space,

Alex joins the *Junge Raketenbauer* club. During the last shot of the opening sequence, Alex's voiceover tells of his dream of a career as a rocket scientist who would advance space exploration for the benefit of all humankind. The film cuts from this shot, one of Alex's model rocket spiralling successfully skyward, to a point ten years later on the fortieth anniversary of the GDR. Alex, who has the holiday off from his television repair company, sits alone on a park bench, now cynical and disencumbered from the idealistic dreams of his youth. The sarcastic voiceover – "Die DDR wurde vierzig. Ich hatte arbeitsfrei bei der PGH Fernsehreparatur Adolf Hennecke und fühlte mich auf dem Höhepunkt meiner männlichen Ausstrahlungskraft" – shows his disillusionment with a corrupt system based on party favouritism and supported by police control.

The events surrounding his mother's collapse and his efforts to protect her provide Alex with a different way of understanding participation in the GDR socialist project. While Alex has become disillusioned with the GDR, his mother has continued to work tirelessly to improve in small ways the life of her fellow citizens. As the government is staging a grand fortieth anniversary celebration, she is writing a letter to draw attention to the fact that East German industry manufactures only a single style of female underwear, one designed for the bodies of slim, younger women. As she dictates the letter, Alex makes cynical remarks about her involvement. But later, when he creates the fictional GDR for the sake of his mother's health, he begins to understand that she had fashioned her own "middle way" between the contradictory extremes of the GDR. She had been content to remain on the margins, working on relatively minor, concrete issues while eschewing involvement in high-profile projects and the status or privilege that comes with it. On the fateful anniversary of the GDR, the same day she collapses into a coma, the state recognizes her as a socialist "hero of labour." However, she is not the typical "hero of labour," but rather a fictional figure that represents what this hollow propaganda phrase could have meant. She believed in the principles of "real existing socialism" and worked for positive change within the institutions of the state, but against the grain of their actual *modus operandi*. She neither reaped the benefits usually granted those who played along with the system for personal advantage, nor did she believe blindly in the GDR propaganda about its achievements.

The film reinforces this response through other narrative elements as well. The theme of space exploration addresses the issue of socialism's worthy goals in a way that gives validity to certain ideas and actions of East Germans. Even though Alex's youthful dreams about the GDR space program fade when he comes of age and enters the work world, he returns to them when he begins to understand his mother's involvement in the socialist project and wants to show his support for it. In his last act of benign deception, Alex has a taxi driver who looks like Sigmund Jähn (the first German cosmonaut) play the role of Erich Honnecker's replacement in the post-*Wende* GDR he creates for his mother. Having the Jähn *Doppelgänger* assume this role weaves a thread back to the young Alex's belief in a socialist society that lives up to its core principles. But it also alludes to the utopian ideals that were part of its downfall. Space exploration represents in this context the absolute goals that steered East Germany theoretically towards a socialist workers' state, while the political

and social reality resembled more an Orwellian nightmare. The film plays out this space-exploration/socialist-utopian fantasy allegorically to its own dissolution. In his voiceover introduction to the final birthday celebration for the GDR, Alex says that, in contrast to the real one a year earlier (that is, 7 October 1989), they will now give the GDR the farewell it deserves: "Ein letztes Mal noch sollen wir den Geburtstag unseres sozialistischen Vaterlands feiern, aber im Gegensatz zur Wirklichkeit als einen würdigen Abschied." Being laid to rest are the ideal visions of what a socialist state could or would be, but not the well-meaning efforts of individuals who worked conscientiously towards those goals.

The film story ends in a ritual act of myth creation that gives meaning to his mother's work and to that of eastern Germans viewing the film. Alex moved up his staged forty-first anniversary celebration of the GDR to the evening of October 2 so that his mother would think that the fireworks actually celebrating the birth of a unified Federal Republic were meant for the GDR. A few days later, presumably on what would have been the eve of the actual East German anniversary, he takes up his old hobby of rocket building once more. From the rooftop of their apartment he fires his mother's ashes into the air and explodes them into the nighttime sky above a now united Berlin. The film's final voiceover accompanies them: "Das Land, das meine Mutter verließ, war ein Land, an das sie geglaubt hatte und das wir bis zu ihrer letzten Sekunde überleben ließen. Ein Land, das es in Wirklichkeit nie so gegeben hat." Through this ritual act of release and enshrinement, her ideal visions are both laid to rest and yet retain a formative power. As symbolized by the dissemination of his mother's ashes over both halves of Berlin, these principles of socialism are to become part of a founding myth that can unite Germans in the new Federal Republic into an imagined community. The rocket that carries the mother's ashes skyward also marks the end of Alex's own life in a socialist state both inspired and doomed to failure by overly idealistic aims. In his "worthy farewell" to a fatherland that had never lived up to its lofty goals, these founding principles and the efforts on their behalf are not simply degraded and discarded along with the forty years of the GDR. Paul Cooke also reads this funeral scene as a laying to rest of the utopian ideals of the GDR and claims that the film recuperates them in a way that allows links between the socialist vision of the GDR and that of western Germans in the Berlin Republic. While he sees more a connection to a continued project of left-wing intellectuals, the reading offered here stresses that the eulogy for divided Germany feeds into a broader German desire for withdrawal from conflict in an expanding public sphere (134–36).

In his feigned television address to the East German people the newly appointed party leader, played by the Jähn imposter, describes the socialist state he has been chosen to head. As he announces the opening of the Wall to West Germans, he also re-affirms the basic principles of its socialist vision: "Unser Land ist nicht perfekt. Aber das, woran wir glauben, begeistert immer wieder viele Menschen aus aller Welt." In this fictional GDR created by Alex the East attracts those from the West who want to trade the affluence of high-powered capitalism for the more measured pace of pragmatic socialism. Through the narrative ploy of Alex's need to explain why West

Germans are now in East Berlin, *Good Bye, Lenin!* reverses the directional course of the *Wende* and reenacts unification as a successful merging of East and West Germans. His fictional GDR is not only one that took the "middle way," but also one that, on an imaginary plane, suggests some fifteen years after the *Wende* that this course would have offered an attractive alternative to many West Germans as well.

The second mode of nostalgia generated by the film draws from the *Ostalgie* revival of everyday material culture of the GDR. Alex's dilemma provides an unlikely, yet feasible context for recreating the material world of the GDR within the culture of post-*Wende* Germany. Every aspect, from style of clothing to the apartment furnishings, from the cuisine choices to the brand of consumer goods, must be correct down to the finest detail so that Alex's simulated GDR will work. This fictional reproduction of the GDR in miniature evokes for eastern Germans an imaginary sense of continuity that goes beyond the purely material. The loss of their material culture entails a corresponding absence of knowledge about the material and social world they now inhabit. Particularly in the first years of unified Germany many eastern Germans lacked the knowledge to participate as equals in important areas of social practice in the Federal Republic. As one might expect, this relegation to the margins of material culture and social practice evoked some of the strongest reactions from the residents of the New Federal States. The instructions to *Ferner Osten*, an *Ostalgie* game that tests knowledge of GDR culture, explain that "around 50 percent of the knowledge [East Germans] acquired during the course of a lifetime was rendered useless through sudden and unforeseeable events" (Berdahl 204).

Conversely, eastern Germans have their own monopoly on the knowledge needed to participate in the *Ostalgie* discourse. This knowledge unites them as a discourse community with an advantage over western Germans in this one area of nostalgic remembrance. More importantly, it establishes a collectively shared continuity with their previous lives that is missing in the western-dominated culture of unified Germany (Blum 147). This knowledge shared by eastern Germans includes the ingenuity and know-how East Germans had often needed to locate consumer articles. In *Good Bye, Lenin!* the consumer products of the GDR are once again in short supply just as Alex desperately needs them to create his microcosm of GDR culture. His efforts to find these products also mirror those of "ostalgic" eastern Germans as they search for GDR products that had been swept away by western products. Alex's ingenious ability to cope with the disappearance of GDR products is delightfully funny and likely evokes among eastern Germans bittersweet memories of their own successes securing goods in times of scarcity. It must also be self-reflexively ironic for many who in hindsight question their decision to discard all that was the GDR in order to have ready access to an abundance of western products.

Thus material objects have a particularly strong potential for carving out an autonomous sphere shielded from the hegemony of the West. Nostalgia for material culture generates tangible associations that can produce palpable memories and an unshakeable account of past experience. Because of the market dynamics of consumer products in GDR "socialist consumerism" they are well suited to support nostalgic

accounts of the past. In contrast to consumer goods in a capitalist market system, these brands have endured over generations, remaining basically unchanged in their style and packaging. Consequently, they can function as in the case of *Ostalgie* as "transgenerational markers of East German culture and identity" (Betts 201) in ways that western consumer objects cannot. Also, the lack of consumer choice means that cultural memory focussed on GDR goods is not divided among subgroups with differing brand loyalties. As "real existing consumer goods," to paraphrase the GDR's own advertising slogan for its brand of socialism, they fall outside the late-capitalist market dynamic of differentiation. Thus the reinvented objects of the GDR, which had belonged to a socialist economic system that defied consumer choice, have the ability to draw *all* eastern Germans into the nostalgia for material goods.

But rather than marking the nostalgia for these products as something open exclusively to eastern Germans, Becker's film works the eastern German fondness for them into an engaging narrative that makes these objects appealing to western German viewers and also to Western consumers more broadly. As members of an economic system predicated on product innovation, western Germans are naturally drawn to new products. The GDR brands are unfamiliar and thus novel to western consumers, but their novelty also derives from a qualitatively different mode of consumer appeal. The absence of the advertising spin that usually accompanies brand products in competitive free-market economies sets them apart and appeals to the western consumer's dependence on innovative marketing.

Florian Illies's attempt to create a parallel western nostalgia in his book *Generation Golf* highlights this difference. He claims that the Volkswagen Golf is a western product that has an appeal and sense of continuity for his generation comparable to that of the old GDR consumer goods. He chooses the Golf certainly in part because it serves as a West German counterpart to the darling of *Ostalgie*, the Trabi. He limits his address to the relatively narrow generation born 1965–1975, and even then the disposition and way of life he describes would apply to only a certain segment of that group. It is also questionable how many of even this generation would identify any more with the Golf than with other makes of cars. And most importantly, the significance he claims for the Golf is radically different from eastern German nostalgia for the Trabi. Rather than displaying genuine fondness for it, he parodies it as a nondescript product that manifests the vacuous culture of his generation. He gives each of his book's eight chapters as its title a slogan from one of the Golf advertising campaigns (for example, "Zwölf Jahre Garantie gegen Durchrostung? Hätte ich auch gerne" and "Die Suche nach dem Ziel hat sich somit erledigt"). Illies's cynical attitude towards the Golf reflects how nostalgia in a capitalist culture tends to show attachment to the image that was created by advertising and the media rather than to the actual consumer product or memories of it. As Andrew Plowman notes (258), Illies stands out among other writers who focus on consumer brands and products because he emphasizes the "Distanzlosigkeit zur Scheinwelt der Werbung" (Illies 27.).

Playing on this distinction between the consumer societies in East and West, *Good Bye, Lenin!* presents the emotional bond with the lost consumer products of the GDR

as an attractive alternative to the disaffected allegiance to consumer goods in the West. When this mode of relating to material culture begins to appeal to western Germans it threatens to undermine the logic of consumer demand in a capitalist system. It exposes the emptiness of consumer choice and reveals that the process of constant product innovation is grounded in a circular desire for desire. This double dynamic of stirring the desire for the brands of the GDR and disrupting the logic of Western product appeal suggests resistance to the hegemony of the West. In this regard the film story functions in a manner common to nostalgic forms of remembrance. It provides a selective view of the past in order to relieve fears and anxieties about an uncertain present. But it does so within the very economic order that it is protesting. As Daphne Berdahl has argued, the "framing of eastern German identities and of resistance to western German dominance in terms of product choices and mass merchandising entails [...] practices that both contest and affirm the new order of a consumer market economy" (206). In this sense, the play with East German consumer goods in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, as in the *Ostalgie* wave itself, offers little real resistance to the free-market economy that has engulfed the citizens of the New Federal States. By ratcheting up the desire to participate in a nostalgic discourse on GDR material culture, the film offers an apparent alternative to the pervasiveness of capitalist goods and their marketing hype. The alternative depends, however, on a notion of authentic consumerism that, in effect, validates the market economy of the Federal Republic.

This validation of free-market consumerism through an eastern German nostalgia for material culture has its roots in the economic and political system that produced that culture. As Paul Betts has shown, "East Germany's political destiny was built with the same mortar that has underlain Western social politics for the last half century, namely consumerism as political legitimacy" (202). But the shift in the 1960s towards expanded industrial production in the consumer-goods sector presented the GDR leadership with a paradox in political ideology. As GDR citizens began to invest more of themselves into the economy with the expectation that the reward would come in the form of material goods, they began to measure the success of socialism more in terms of its ability to meet consumer demands, and they began to compare their economic system with the far more successful consumer economy of West Germany. The shift towards "consumer socialism" left the GDR lagging behind the West without a clear-cut moral or ideological distinction that could make up for the difference. These ideological contradictions in GDR socialist consumerism resurface in an *Ostalgie* that focusses on material culture to forge an eastern German sphere of autonomy and a distinct cultural identity.

The eastern German imaginary escape from a capitalist market economy in which the former citizens of the GDR are disadvantaged has a potential western counterpart. Western Germans feel a comparable anxiety with respect to an open and free global market that could flood their economy with less expensive products from developing countries. The Federal Republic had already gone through a preliminary stage in economic globalization with the gradual formation and expansion of first the Common Market and then the European Union. A 1980s wave of nostalgia in the

Federal Republic for the West German material culture of the 1950s may have been in part a reaction to fears about the economic consequences of the European Union. The memoirs, exhibitions, and nostalgia boutiques featuring 1950s goods steered away from the more sophisticated International Style objects of the period, favouring instead inexpensive domestic goods. In more serious design circles the hallmark piece of this nostalgia wave, the three-legged, kidney-bean-shaped night table known as the *Nierentisch*, was considered kitsch (Betts 186–87). The nostalgic return to a time when American modernism exerted a strong influence on German consumer culture focussed on products "Made in Germany."

Rather than reviving nostalgia for consumer culture from an earlier period of the Federal Republic, *Good Bye, Lenin!* invites the western German to share vicariously in the more intense and less conflicted nostalgia of eastern Germans. The film's detailed narrative play with the objects and memories that fuel *Ostalgie* overcomes in part the western German's lack of first-hand lived experience with GDR material culture. Also, the appeal to a new version of the GDR *Nischengesellschaft* in unified Germany resonates with western Germans as well. The longing for a withdrawal into an idyllic, premodern world of simple pleasures goes back at least to the Biedermeier period and has exerted its influence on every subsequent period of German history. Thus western Germans, even though they had not experienced this way of life in the GDR first-hand, are susceptible to a nostalgic desire for retreat from the complications of modern life in complex socioeconomic systems. The film story also offers the western German an imaginary escape into an isolated *German* cultural realm that brackets out the new fears of economic infiltration not merely from the European Union, but primarily from developing countries that are becoming major players in the global economy.

The need for such an escape has grown as globalization has progressed, but it also became more acute in the Federal Republic after the fall of the Wall. During the years of divided Germany the Federal Republic existed in a state of suspension that sheltered it from some of the responsibilities expected of the western economic powers. As a nation-in-waiting it inhabited a kind of imaginary no-man's land where all its policies and actions assumed a certain contingency. The East served as an imaginary limiting factor to the pursuit of prosperity in the Federal Republic. As long as the status of "Germany" was in limbo, West Germans could work towards economic progress without facing all its ethical or world-political implications. The full consideration of these issues could be put on hold until the imagined unification of the future had occurred. This produced certain contradictions in West Germany's self-image. It saw itself as both "capitalism with a conscience" and the *Ellbogengesellschaft*. But "capitalism with a conscience" functioned only as long as that conscience was confined to its own borders. This was more sustainable within the provisional situation of divided Germany, particularly when the good conscience was bolstered by the world's most liberal immigration clauses for political refugees and exile seekers. With the fall of the Wall the Federal Republic lost this circumscribed national context within which its citizens could pursue economic gain in and for their own sphere (see Cook).

In the postwar period, when the German sense of national identity was most fragile, the stasis of divided Germany enabled a romantic anticapitalist impulse to join forces with Germany's historically recurring desire for a secure domestic realm isolated from the world of political contention. With this form of imaginary escape no longer possible in unified Germany, western Germans are susceptible to new romantic imaginings of their nation's place in the global order. *Good Bye, Lenin!* deftly combines a nostalgic longing for economic isolation with the desire for an idyllic private existence in a secure domestic realm. The film also engages the western desire for relief from the socioeconomic rat race to create a bond between eastern and western Germans. As we see the images purporting to show western Germans flowing through the openings in the Wall into the East, Alex's friend Denis, playing the role of a GDR television reporter, explains: "Nicht jeder möchte bei Karrieresucht und Konsumterror mitmachen. Nicht jeder ist für die Ellbogenmentalität geschaffen."

The nostalgic sense of community invoked in *Good Bye, Lenin!* turns back the clock to a situation where, at least in the film's narrative construct, the possibility of an idyllic existence with a small group of friends and family becomes a national norm again. The space-exploration motif provides a distanced perspective that dismisses the grand socialist goals of the GDR and gives renewed importance to the enjoyment of everyday life in a secure world of Biedermeier domesticity. In the final celebration that serves as a proper wake for the GDR and a founding moment for Alex's vision of life in unified Germany, he has General Secretary Jähn invoke the cosmic perspective he had gained in his space travels: "Wenn man einmal das Wunder erlebt hat, unseren kleinen Planeten aus der Ferne des Kosmos zu betrachten, sieht man die Dinge anders. Dort oben in den Weiten des Weltalls kommt einem das Leben der Menschen klein und unbedeutend vor. Man fragt sich, was die Menschheit erreicht hat. Welche Ziele hat sie sich gestellt und welche hat sie verwirklicht?" Here the insight gained from the GDR's ambitious investment in space exploration turns back against the idealistic vision that had justified its pursuit. And by extension, this same logic applies to the socialist principles of international solidarity that would inhibit withdrawal into an isolated national sphere. With respect to the more worrisome questions facing the Federal Republic in the twenty-first century, Alex's fictional construct offers feel-good narrative relief from the contradictions and problems presented by the new global economy.

The "big picture" Alex presents appeals to a postromantic desire to lead a simple life among friends with modest rewards. Anxious about the prospects of political instability and economic insecurity in the new global order, western Germans are sure to find solace in a nostalgic narrative that offers a vision of such a life in unified Germany. In November 1989 Martin Ahrends, an East German writer who had resettled in the West five years earlier, counselled East Germans about what lies ahead as they push for quick unification with the West. Urging them to consider carefully what they were about to sacrifice willingly for the sake of inclusion in the West German economy, he touts the benefits they had gained from their years of experience in the GDR. His essay explains how their ability to escape harsh realities through imagined scenarios

would serve them well in the capitalist society of unified Germany. Convinced that East Germans would not be able to resist the pull of the Federal Republic, he reassures them that they possess "virtues that will be desperately needed in a postindustrial society, ascetic virtues on the margins of Western civilization" (49). Passive resistance to the totalitarian forces of the GDR, Ahrends argues, yielded new forms of freedom: freedom from all-consuming obsessions with work, from a tyrannical structuring of both work and leisure time, and from the colonization of wishes, desires, and consciousness by the marketing industry. It also yielded freedom to let things take their course, to dream and explore one's subconscious freely, to remain like a child, and "to remain in the Not-Yet, the temporary" (45).

The success of Becker's film among western Germans substantiates Ahrends's prognosis in certain ways. Alex's dream of a post-GDR community of eastern and western Germans who reject *Konsumterror* fills a shared need in the imaginary. This vision of a *Nischengesellschaft* within unified Germany suggests the ability to live on the margins of a prosperous free-market economy without joining the rat race. In the GDR there were political and economic limits that caused the majority, like Alex, to go through the motions of participation without being driven by the need to achieve more or to accumulate wealth. Finding themselves disadvantaged in a strange and unfamiliar culture, eastern Germans will be able, according to Ahrends, to capitalize on this experience and find on the margins of the *Ellbogengesellschaft* a comparable way of life where romantic imagination compensates for the lack of opportunity. *Good Bye, Lenin!* is itself a product of this imagination that also presents an attractive picture of life in this imagined community on the margins.

But to what extent is this dream of "real existing socialism" founded on ascetic virtues, as Ahrends asserts? Those who gravitated towards the society of niches in the GDR gave up limited material gain for real personal freedoms that more than compensated for the potential loss. The guarantee of basic material needs and human services from the socialist state made choosing life on the margins one of self-interest rather than self-denial. Similarly, in the imaginary GDR Alex creates for his mother the unsanctioned, private society of niches would be the practical product of a socialist economy. This central shift in Alex's understanding of the social function of labour is also expressed in relation to the cosmic perspective gained by putting humans in space. As East Germany is pulled into the economy of the Federal Republic while his mother was lying in a coma, Alex muses in a voiceover: "In ihrem nicht enden wollenden Schlaf kreiste sie wie ein Satellit um das menschliche Treiben auf unserem kleinen Planeten und in unserer noch kleineren Republik." In this orbiting-the-planet metaphor, "das menschliche Treiben" that his mother skirts is the vicious cycle in the West of labour for its own sake, an economy rooted in compulsion that was beginning to consume the former GDR.

This retreat into an isolated world apart appeals as well to many western Germans, who, much like Alex, dream of respite from a competitive free-market economy that promotes the continuous, spiralling growth of production and consumption in and of itself. But just as the promise of abundant material possession had swept aside

any hope for a more measured move to a free-market economy in East Germany in 1989, the middle way of labour proffered to the citizens of unified Germany in *Good Bye, Lenin!* may ultimately result in a coopted narrative that supports the ever-expanding production of abundance. The film's imaginary community of eastern and western Germans joining together to escape the frenzied pressure to increase production dovetails with a fundamental tenet of neoliberalism. The premise that the establishment worldwide of democratically based free-market economies is the necessary and sufficient condition for providing the basic material needs to all the world's inhabitants underlies the neoliberal view of the new global economy. Francis Fukuyama's declaration of the end of history reveals the potential reach of neoliberal ideology not only into historical narratives of national identity but also into imaginary social constructs.

In *Good Bye, Lenin!* these two come together as the persistent German longing for a premodern, Biedermeier-like withdrawal into an idyllic domestic sphere finds a twenty-first-century outlet. The film offers an internal German version of the neoliberalist global vision, one in which an imagined community outside the frenetic economic system serves as a unifying national norm. This fictional community conceived by Alex may indirectly assuage some of the anxieties surrounding the effects of globalization and the *Wende* on the German *soziale Marktwirtschaft*. The film's notion of a new *Nischengesellschaft* outside of the mainstream capitalist work world sidesteps real issues such as the effects of high unemployment. However, on the imaginary plane it transforms trends such as the outsourcing of jobs to developing countries with lower labour costs into a logical piece in Alex's vision of escape from the *Ellbogengesellschaft*. For this internal German version of the neoliberal vision of a postindustrial society, Prometheus, the central figure of Enlightenment nation-building, would no longer be the founding myth. The film's imaginary social vision of a unified people might rather turn to the dreamy German legend of *Schlaraffenland*, the exaggerated land of milk and honey where roasted geese fly directly into one's mouth and cakes rain down from the skies. Thus, on one hand, the film negotiates against the ability of capitalist production to control and shape wishes, desires, and consciousness in ways that promote surplus production. But on the other, it stands as an example of the media industry's ability to incorporate collective desires into narratives of imaginary escape that support the ever-adapting ideologies of capitalism in the age of globalization.

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