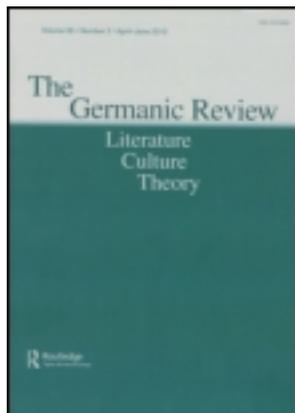


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### Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in Berlin Is in Germany and Good Bye, Lenin!

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# Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in *Berlin Is in Germany* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*

JENNIFER M. KAPCZYNSKI

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the representation of the GDR past and the treatment of *Ostalgie* in Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!* and Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin Is in Germany*, arguing that the films evidence a split in recent German fiction films between nostalgic constructions of the past, on the one hand, and postnational views of the present, on the other. Close readings demonstrate that these investments play out on an aesthetic as well as narrative plane. The article concludes that these two works articulate divergent conceptions of post-Wall identity, and relates them to larger trends in contemporary German cinema.

**Key words:** *Wolfgang Becker*, *Berlin Is in Germany*, *GDR*, *German cinema*, *Good Bye, Lenin!*, *identity*, *nostalgia*, *Ostalgie*, *postnational*, *post-Wall*, *Hannes Stöhr*

In 2000, reflecting on the state of post-Wall film culture, Eric Rentschler wrote mournfully of the industry's drive toward "consensus cinema." According to Rentschler, contemporary German filmmaking was characterized by its rejection of the confrontational mode of earlier art cinema, most notably in the works of New German Cinema, in favor of a style that sought first and foremost to appeal to mass audiences. Although pessimistic about this turn away from a critically engaged cinema, Rentschler saw some positive potential in the works of "marginal" filmmakers such as Fatih Akin and Tom Tykwer. Just a few years later, it seems that those seeds of an alternative cinema have, indeed, borne some fruit. Although German filmmakers continue to produce the sort of "Genusskino" of which Rentschler is critical, Akin and Tykwer can no longer be termed marginal, and the nation's

art cinema continues to grow, earning respectable box office returns and on occasion, at least, faring well in the international market.

Almost two decades after the *Wende*, it is perhaps harder than ever to speak conclusively about the state of post-Wall cinema, however. Looking at the feature films that have emerged in these years, two broad trends emerge: on the one hand, toward historical dramas that revel in capturing the nation's past and past aesthetics, preoccupied with situating their characters in a precise and recognizable temporal, geographic, and stylistic landscape; and on the other, toward postnational films that problematize the very notion of German-ness and employ aesthetic strategies that underscore the dislocation of their (post)modern subjects.

This first group unites such diverse and yet kindred films as *Stalingrad* (Vilsmaier 1993), *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (Link 2001), *Das Wunder von Bern* (Wortmann 2003), *Der Untergang* (Hirschbiegel 2004), and *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* (Rothmund 2005). They are "heritage films," to borrow Lutz Koepnick's terminology. United by their interest in mining German history for useful and usable material, they "present the texture of the past as a source of visual attractions and aural pleasures" ("Reframing the Past" 48). They share a unifying aesthetic that is best described as nostalgic. Consumed with creating an "authentic" rendering of bygone eras, these works not only reproduce the paraphernalia of the past, paying careful attention to period-appropriate props and costumes, but also adopt an historical style that, through choices in lighting, set design, and cinematography, gives the films an antiquated look. As such, they epitomize what Fredric Jameson identifies as the key characteristic of postmodern nostalgia films: they render the past as a "consumable set of images," composed of objects and surfaces (129).

If it is more challenging to group those movies that present an alternative to this "historical turn," certainly Tykwer's and Akin's films offer good examples. Whether played out through Lola and Manny's repeat journeys through a jumbled Berlin cityscape in *Lola rennt* (Tykwer 1998) or Daniel's bumbling border crossing in *Im Juli* (Akin 2000), their films share a skepticism about the constraints of geographic and temporal boundaries, and employ aesthetic strategies that confound viewers' attempts to locate themselves in the cinematic landscape. As Kristin Kopp demonstrates in her contribution to this issue, Hans-Christian Schmid's eloquent examination of life in the gray zone of the German-Polish borderlands, *Lichter* (2003), represents another instance of a recent postnational production. Each of these films—and these three are

simply representative examples—functions both on the level of its narrative and visual presentation to call into question the solidity of national identity, national style, and indeed, a national cinema, opting instead to present worlds governed by economies of transnationalism and globalization (see Koepnick's article in this issue).

This article proceeds from a curiosity about the emergence of these concurrent yet seemingly contradictory tendencies in contemporary German filmmaking, polarized, as the theme of this issue suggests, between nostalgia and nowhere. My inquiry centers on two films—Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) and Hannes Stöhr's *Berlin Is in Germany* (2001)—that are quite literally post-Wall, focusing on the demise of the East German republic and the transition to a united Germany. But I begin from the assumption that these GDR-and-after works are best understood in their larger film historical context and that we can glean something new from them if we understand how they operate in relationship to the greater aesthetic agendas being played out in German cinema today—that is, whether they render the fall of the Wall and its aftermath by means of a nostalgic and nation-centered aesthetics, or whether they couple their tales with an aesthetics of dislocation that troubles the very idea of a fixed national identity or history.

Among recent post-*Wende* works, we find those—such as Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999) or Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!*—that devote themselves to capturing the atmosphere of a receding world: of life before the disappearance of the Wall, old alliances, and “Spree-waldgurken.” For these films, the places of the East—such as the *Plattenbau* apartment and the dacha—take on a paramount importance, as indices for the life that was lost or, at the very least, permanently altered with reunification. They partake in *Ostalgie*, exploring the post-*Wende* attachment to GDR culture, and particularly GDR products, that swept through Germany in the decade following reunification. They do so by attempting to conjure up the patina of that past, constructing a decidedly retro aesthetic that is, by design, just as dated as the republic's discontinued consumer items. As Vera Dika has pointed out in her analysis of American nostalgia cinema, these sort of backward-looking films are reliant on audience response—on a moment of shared memory triggered by the reencounter with the past onscreen (103). In these GDR-and-after films, this nostalgia functions frequently through brand recognition, so that the former socialist republic becomes an imagined consumer community, bound together by the goods that the culture once both produced and used.<sup>1</sup>

The second group of post-*Wende* narrative films depicts a Germany that is decidedly “un-unified” and cannot be rendered in the warm light of national nostalgia. Like their more wistful counterparts, they catalog the disintegration of GDR culture after the fall of the Wall. In contrast, however, these films—among them *Lichter*, *Schultze Gets the Blues* (Schorr 2003), and *Berlin Is in Germany*—refuse to look backwards and instead situate their central characters as adrift within newly accessible Western territories. Perhaps not surprisingly, these films are particularly preoccupied with the motif of *Reisefreiheit*. Unlike *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*—which seem, if anything, consumed with capturing the very situatedness of their central characters—they show the citizens of the “new” *Bundesländer* as they explore the possibilities and pitfalls of their new freedom of movement. In the process, the story of the *Wende* becomes a postmodern travel tale.

In contrast to earlier postunification road movies (cf. Mittmann), however, these newer films make clear that there is no home to which their travelers might return. They present visions of a world in which fixed spatial identifications are ever receding, and with them, the possibility of a cohesive and coherent national culture. Against the backdrop of debates about the continuing processes of reunification, as well as contemporaneous discussions of such issues as immigration, *Leitkultur*, and globalization, these *Wende*-films employ spatial discontinuity as a cipher for the destabilization of national and cultural identities. The resulting works are deeply skeptical about the potential for renewed German unity and marked by a sense of radical displacement, in which national identity crumbles under the weight of global pressures and the “local” has become a moving point in the larger current of intra- and international circulation. If the nostalgic post-Wall films are about the commodification of the past, about a certain fixity, then these postnational films offer an alternative view of a world in which it is impossible to find solid footing. This divide is borne out in the films’ aesthetic choices: whereas nostalgic films operate by delving ever deeper into the textures of bygone eras, postnational films employ strategies that keep the viewer permanently unsettled.

### THE OSTALGIA OF GOOD BYE, LENIN!

Wolfgang Becker’s smash hit *Good Bye, Lenin!* is not the sort of film one immediately identifies as an example of heritage cinema;

although it does partake in the “production of usable and consumable pasts, of history as a site of comfort and orientation,” the film takes place in the relatively recent past (Koeppnick, “Reframing the Past” 51). It begins in the waning days of the GDR and ends shortly after reunification, and constitutes a “period piece” of sorts. Further, it is a film about the making of a period piece: through the exploits of its protagonist, Alex Kerner (Daniel Brühl), *Good Bye, Lenin!* explicitly thematizes the creation of historical narrative. Alex’s mother, Christiane (played by the well-known GDR actress Katrin Sass), a longtime servant of the state, suffers a heart attack just before the fall of the Wall and falls into a coma, only awaking when reunification is imminent. When doctors insist that she must avoid excitement, Alex hatches a plan to have her recuperate at home, where he can shield her (he thinks) from recent historical developments. He sets out to re-create the GDR *en miniature* in their apartment, so that Christiane need never learn of the socialist system’s collapse. Thus ensues an elaborate ruse that transforms the family apartment into an East German island amid the sea changes of the *Wende*. As the film’s tagline boasts: “Die DDR lebt weiter—auf 79 qm!”

Becker makes clear that his hero’s proposition is doomed. The powerful tide of Westernization forces Alex to go to increasingly absurd lengths to maintain the illusion of an intact East Germany. As GDR products disappear from grocery store shelves, Alex turns to the recycling bins to track down old containers, which he then cleans and reuses, refilling them with Western contents. When Christiane accidentally encounters evidence of the *Wende*—a nearby building now sports a gigantic banner advertising Coca-Cola, and her newest neighbors hail from Wiesbaden—Alex enlists a video-savvy friend to create false news reports that recode these signs as markers of East German political triumph. But Alex’s gambit finally fails, although he never realizes it. When it becomes clear that Christiane is dying, Alex’s girlfriend, Lara (Chulpan Khamatova), goes behind his back and fills her in on all that she has missed.

*Good Bye, Lenin!* concludes with a conflation of personal and national history: on the evening of reunification, Christiane dies in her hospital room, and the film’s final scene takes place three days later, as Alex leads a small memorial service for his mother (cf. Hodgkin). When he launches her ashes into the night aboard a toy rocket, its starry explosions echo the fireworks that illuminated the sky on the

eve of her death. In the closing sequence, Alex's voice-over narration accompanies a visual flashback, first to archival footage of East Berlin streets and then a home movie featuring Christiane:

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. Ein Land, das in meiner Erinnerung immer mit meiner Mutter verbunden sein wird.

The voice-over pinpoints the central concern of *Good Bye, Lenin!* as the intersection of personal and national memory, staging the attachment to nation as a complex psychic bond. Alex and Christiane's relationship serves as a metaphor for the love of motherland and foregrounds the commemoration of a disappearing GDR culture.

In a series of self-reflexive gestures, *Good Bye, Lenin!* highlights the role that visual technologies play in the construction and preservation of personal and national history. Becker bookends his film with home movie footage from Alex's childhood, and flashback sequences incorporate excerpts of public broadcasts. Most important, we see Alex creating new material: he shoots a series of mock newscasts that blend recycled segments of old GDR programs with original stories meant to allay Christiane's suspicions about the periodic signs of West German life that infiltrate her cocoonlike apartment. In imitating official channels of discourse, Alex also reshapes the memory of the East, dreaming up, as he reflects, a "DDR, die ich mir gewünscht hätte." Alex's post-*Wende* job stands as a further reminder of the centrality of visual technologies in imagining Germany's past and future: after his GDR employer, a television repair shop, closes its doors, Alex begins selling satellite dishes door-to-door, becoming part of the larger effort to usher in a new regime of representation.

*Good Bye, Lenin!* also reads as a commentary on *Ostalgie*: at its essence, Alex's quest is "ostalgic," designed as it is to retain the material traces of the GDR and sustain its idealistic potential. *Ostalgie*, although frequently maligned in (particularly West) German popular culture, as one critic observes, as a "useless sentiment for an irretrievable temporality and/or a longing to return to a totalitarian system," has been granted more serious attention in scholarly accounts that frame it as a form of oppositional memory for East Germans who feel that their personal history has been delegitimized in the course of reunification (Sadowski-Smith 1). Critics point out that *Ostalgie* goes beyond simple sentimental revivalism and instead represents part of a larger, post-*Wende* discursive battle to represent national identity

after reunification. Martin Blum argues that the distinct “biographies” of GDR goods make them available as potential “sites of resistance,” disrupting “the illusion of a united capitalist consumer society” (244). Claudia Sadowski-Smith similarly reads *Ostalgie* as a form of East German rejection of “assimilation to a unified national identity,” in favor of a common bond with other former East bloc citizens (5). Daphne Berdahl counters the idea of *ostalgie* as “‘mere’ nostalgia,” instead relating it to other “socially sanctioned commemorative practices” and insisting that it represents an “interplay between hegemonic and oppositional memories,” as it “both contests and affirms a new order” (192–93). Although *Ostalgie* represents “an ‘attempt to reclaim a kind of *Heimat*, albeit a romanticized and hazily glorified one, [. . . it] does not entail an identification with the former GDR state, but rather an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and collective memory” (202–03). There are limits to the oppositional power of *Ostalgie*, however. With its successful commodification (perhaps most clearly expressed by the fact that some West German companies now produce popular “GDR” products [Blum 229]), as Berdahl observes, “consumers of *Ostalgie* may escape the dominant order without leaving it” (206).

*Good Bye, Lenin!* offers a contradictory reading of *Ostalgie*. On the one hand, the film takes seriously the emotional attachment to nation and presents the mourning for East Germany’s lost culture with some sympathy—for example, showing several former GDR citizens who are worse off after the *Wende*. Its portrayal of Christiane is particularly wistful: her hobby of “meckern,” encapsulated in her humorous letters bemoaning the substandard quality of East German goods, aligns her with the best traditions of GDR culture while differentiating her from the sort of “Party hack” represented by the figure of the former school director.<sup>2</sup> Further, the film points toward *Ostalgie* as a *gesamtdeutsch* phenomenon: although Alex is alone in his efforts to salvage the material remains of the GDR, his recycling recalls the larger cultural fascination with East German products so prevalent after reunification. This comes into particular focus in the scene in which Alex goes west to find his father and encounters his two half-siblings, who are parked before a television watching the East German version of the *Sandmann* cartoon. Ironizing the manner in which both East and West “consume” the GDR past, Becker points to the success of *Ostalgie* not only as an outgrowth of East German mourning but also a product of Western, capitalist marketing strategies.

Through the figure of Alex, on the other hand, the film portrays *Ostalgie* as a childish attachment, grounded in myth and destined to be outgrown. The only authentic aspect of the GDR products that Alex so patiently collects is their labels, and Christiane never seems to notice any change in her favorite foods; the packaging becomes, quite literally, an empty symbol—"all form and no content" (Cooke 134). Further, however much Alex's portrait of the GDR may invoke a political idealism with all-German appeal, it remains a fake—an idealized version that celebrates East German potential while excising its darker side (like the brutal crackdown against demonstrators that precipitated Christiane's collapse). Alex's mock broadcasts craft a GDR that is open, rather than repressive, that incorporates the multiplicity afforded by Western capitalism, but not at the expense of East German experiences. The film's final voiceover, too, emphasizes the euphemistic nature of Alex's recollections. As the attentive viewer will notice, Alex's narration is inaccurate: Alex claims that his mother died without ever knowing the truth about her beloved country. He speaks of her as a true believer, even as the film suggests that her reasons for state loyalty were largely personal: before her death, she confesses that she stayed not out of ideological devotion, but rather for fear that she would lose her children if she applied for an exit visa. Alex's errors suggest a disconnect between history and memory: neither his mother nor his mother's country existed quite as he remembers them. Becker presents us with a final sequence that is at once nostalgic for a time and place of lost promise and that calls into question the validity of that nostalgia, based as it is on faulty recollections.

Yet even as the film reveals the painful aspects of transitioning to a Western economy, it pokes fun at the forces of global consumerism and makes light of their post-*Wende* impact. Alex's sister, Ariane (Maria Simon), abandons her studies to work at Burger King. There she meets her hapless "Wessi" boyfriend, Rainer (Alexander Beyer), who is drawn to the east for its bargain prices and who proceeds to transform the remainder of the Kerners' apartment into a bizarre paradise, replete with love beads and a personal tanning bed. Sped-up sequences give comical visual expression to the "Hektik der neuen Zeit." And although the film uses language that codes the *Wende* as a violent transformation (referring, albeit jokingly, to the "Siegeszug des Kapitalismus") it also represents it as a natural occurrence. Channeling Willy Brandt, Alex describes the march toward reunification as an organic process, in which "das zusammenwächst, was zusammengehörte," a notion that

the film supports through the detail of Ariane's second pregnancy: as Alex notes, she and Rainer are expecting a "gesamtdeutsches" baby. Following the official German discourse on reunification, *Good Bye, Lenin!* "takes nation and national unity for granted as if Germany had just been returned to a natural state of things" (Huysen 74). In concluding with double burial services for Christiane and the GDR state, the film parallels reunification with Alex's own coming-of-age: having outgrown his attachment to both of his former idols, he will move on to a new future with Lara in a reunited Germany.<sup>3</sup> Becker codes *Ostalgie* an immature attachment, but does not reject the national model per se, instead simply exchanging one national romance for another. As Alex abandons the East in favor of the new, Westernized Germany, he embraces a unified nation—one doubly construed as a fatherland, because the West is firmly associated with the absent father.

Despite Becker's efforts to problematize *Ostalgie* as both a childish bond and a "canned" product of Western marketing, he undermines his own critique through a decidedly *ostalgic* mode of filmmaking. In representing the GDR past, Becker adopts a style that engages in the very fetishization of history that his film questions. Like Alex, who hunts obsessively for props for his elaborate historical reenactment, the film is consumed with conjuring authentic details, and from the outset, Becker takes great pains to imitate the look of GDR life. Although retro sequences are intercut with uptempo segments set in the film's present, the overarching ethos of *Good Bye, Lenin!* is directed at resurrecting the visual imaginary of the lost socialist republic. In a series of flashback sequences, the film exhibits nostalgia not only for the objects of the GDR but also its aesthetic conventions.

As Becker explains in the audio commentary for the DVD release, he consciously attempted to imitate the practices of GDR visual culture. Some scenes, as when Christiane briefly appears on television in a state awards ceremony, seamlessly blend archival footage with new material made to look old (accomplished by filming with period-appropriate cameras). For the sequences of Alex's childhood that bookend the film, Becker adopts the washed-out colors and handheld shakiness of old home movies and "documents" iconic images of a GDR youth: visits to the family dacha, a tour of Berlin's sights, and Young Pioneer events. Becker also reports watching hours of GDR programming to perfect the look of Alex's mock newscasts. Although this last conceit serves the diegetic logic of the film—because Christiane would presumably detect a fake broad-

cast—these references to GDR visual styles are wedded to the film's larger preoccupation with authenticity. The quest to render a realistic portrait of life in the socialist republic must have grown, at least in part, out of a sense that the GDR experience should be represented faithfully, so as not to arouse the ire of an Eastern public already inclined to feel misunderstood and misrepresented. Becker's style also aims to produce nostalgia for a bygone era. Steeped in the muted tones of outdated color technologies, the film's flickering flashback sequences and "found footage" evoke the ephemeral and fading nature of GDR memory.

The film's opening moments exemplify this tendency toward a nostalgic aesthetics. Production credits flash onto a black screen, followed by a home movie that is dwarfed by the dark expanse surrounding it. The screen within a screen is diminutive, its edges rounded, colors faded. These visual cues, along with the heading, "unsere Datsche, Sommer '78," make clear that we are viewing a little piece of the GDR past. The somber, sentimental strains of Yann Tiersen's score accompany this opening, adding to the emotionalism evoked by these "old" images, while a gentle whirring identifies the footage as both a literal and figurative product of projection. As the home movie fills the full screen, we see a young Alex and his sister playing in the garden of their former country retreat—an East German Eden. Their father's voice is audible in the background, providing another clue that this sequence captures an innocence gradually dismantled over the course of the film, first when the father defects, then when the Wall falls, and lastly when Christiane admits her lie. A subsequent shot similarly recalls a moment of GDR idealism. A youthful Alex, wearing a T-shirt that celebrates the Soviet space program, stands and poses proudly before the *Fernsehturm*, built in the 1960s to signify the lofty technological and ideological achievements of the socialist state. The film then cuts to a series of 1978 postcards depicting the Kerner family's Berlin neighborhood (see figure 1). As Becker remarks in the audio commentary, this was a cost-effective means to represent an area that could no longer be captured on film—twelve years after reunification, the East Berlin landscape had changed too much to permit location shooting. At the same time, this postcard presentation of the former capital contributes to the kitschification of East German history: the images are obviously "collectible," just as so many other relics of GDR life that have disappeared from production only to return to circulation as representations (Blum 299–300).<sup>4</sup>

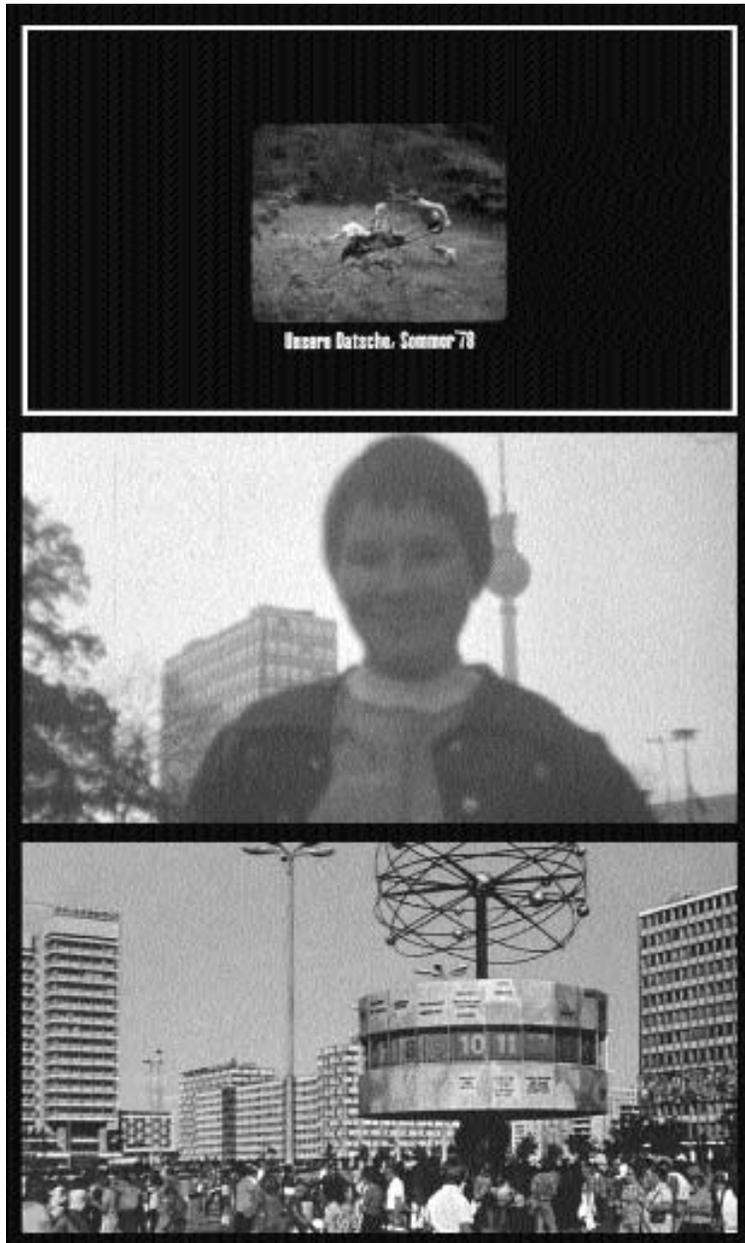


FIGURE 1. *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) presents a visible nostalgia for the bygone GDR.

The film's ending similarly evokes the sense of longing endemic to *Ostalgie* and nostalgia more generally, as the mourning for a lost homeland and an irretrievable history (cf. Betts). Following the solemn ceremony to scatter Christiane's ashes in the skies over Berlin, the film cuts to a brief archival clip of Sigmund Jähn broadcasting from space—a public iteration of erstwhile GDR successes. We hear the same somber score that accompanied the opening credits, returning to the sense of loss and nostalgia with which the film commenced. There is a cut to archival tracking shots of East Berlin city streets that remind the audiences that this landscape is fast disappearing. Then finally, reaching back to the film's opening moments, home movie footage returns—this time showing a youthful Christiane gazing proudly into the camera as she stands surrounded by laughing children, perhaps at a Young Pioneer event.

Thus, despite the various ways in which Becker interrogates the validity or value of ostalgie desire, the sentiment-drenched mood of his film's final sequence suggests a different reading. Following on the heels of the memorial service, these final moments encourage an emotional identification with the past that interferes with any critique of *Ostalgie*—enacting the mourning for the East, even as it shows the central characters preparing themselves to leave the GDR past behind and go boldly into the future promised by reunification. Shifting from public to private celebration (from home movie to telecast and from the pomp of Reunification Day to the small circle of the bereaved at the memorial service), Becker draws a visual connection between the personal and the national that undercuts the very interrogation of historical memory implied by Alex's faulty testimonial. In the end, *Good Bye, Lenin!* perpetuates the very myth that it has worked to discredit—at once sending up and serving up nostalgia.

#### LOST IN SPACE: *BERLIN IS IN GERMANY*

Whereas *Good Bye, Lenin!* ends by affirming the national through an aesthetic nostalgia for the lost GDR and an embrace of a unified fatherland, Hannes Stöhr's 2001 film *Berlin Is in Germany* presents the capital of the new republic as unsettled ground in a state of constant transformation. Stöhr casts doubt on the progress of German unification and in the process calls into question the very solidity of nation. The tragicomedy begins in the year 2000, as the central character, Martin Schulz (Jörg Schuttauf), is released from a Brandenburg

prison, where he served eleven years for the accidental killing of his neighbor. A Stasi informant, the man had threatened to report the discovery of rappelling equipment that Martin and his wife Manuela (Julia Jäger) planned to use to flee the GDR. While Martin is in prison, the GDR collapses and Germany unites. Entering the newly unified nation, he struggles to reconnect with his family (including a son, Rokko [Robin Becker], born after his incarceration) and to find work, while also weathering the newfound liberties and pressures of life after the *Wende*. Martin is, in many respects, a prototypical *Heimkehrer*: like his many counterparts in the German cinematic tradition from Weimar to New German Cinema, he must reintegrate into a society that has become altogether foreign to him. The process is made all the more difficult by the fact that he has been replaced as the head of household: Manuela now has a live-in boyfriend, the decidedly “Wessi” Wolfgang (Robert Lohr). Although the post-*Wende* patriarchal structure has not collapsed, Martin, as an unemployed East German and ex-con, has little place in it.<sup>5</sup>

Along his journey, several friends either help or hinder him: Peter (Thomas Jahn), an old East German pal who, driven by despair over his inability to find solid employment, is contemplating suicide until Martin reappears; Viktor (Valentin Platareanu), a Slavic ex-con who offers Martin work in his shady porn shop; Ludmilla, an erotic dancer and sometime prostitute, who hails from Vienna by way of Macedonia, the Ukraine, Belgrade, and Zagreb; and Enrique (Oscar Martinez), a Cuban-born immigrant to the former GDR now working as a taxi driver. Amid the wonders and wreckage of reunification, Martin’s struggle to resume a civilian existence appears as an extreme yet emblematic example of a broader crisis faced by Germany’s newest citizens. No longer at home in their own homes, the “Ossis” have become the country’s latest “Ausländer,” according to Stöhr’s film. Like his foreign-born friends, Martin seems fated to remain an outsider in his own land.

Perhaps because the film refuses to offer viewers the comforts of nostalgia, Stöhr’s film never matched the spectacular success of *Good Bye, Lenin!*, although it did garner critical acclaim. A feature-length version of Stöhr’s final degree project for the German Film and Television Academy (DFFB), *Berlin Is in Germany* received generally positive reviews from critics who praised it as “ein deutscher Film [. . . der] Tugenden [zeigt], die deutschen Filmen heute meistens fehlen,” who found in it parallels to such canonical literary works as *Berlin Alexan-*

*derplatz* and *Simplizissimus*, and who generally admired the way in which it treated the East-West divide. As one writer put it, *Berlin Is in Germany* was pleasantly devoid of East German complaint: “Hannes Stöhr’s Film ist aber keine wehleidige Ossi-Klagegeschichte” (Klingemaier). Premiering at the Berlin Film Festival in 2001, *Berlin Is in Germany* captured the Panorama Audience Award and garnered two further prizes in 2002 from the German Film Critics Association, both for best film and best lead actor.

*Berlin Is in Germany* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* share several common topoi: both films address the sense of disorientation experienced by East Germans trying to survive despite the death of their former way of life; both films explore the role that television plays as a medium for social influence and change; and both films draw parallels between the structures of the family and the nation. Whereas *Good Bye, Lenin!* waxes ostalgie about the waning culture of the GDR and celebrates its retro cool, Stöhr’s film refuses all sentimental attachment to the defunct regime and remains rooted firmly in the present, making clear that a return to the past is neither possible nor desirable. *Berlin Is in Germany* at once indicts the GDR system for its injustices—which ultimately led to Martin’s incarceration and the dissolution of his family—and remains skeptical about the promise of reunification. In contrast to *Good Bye, Lenin!*, Stöhr’s film does not embrace the principle of *Wiedervereinigung* and instead employs a series of narrative and stylistic tools that emphasize East Germans’ displacement and detachment, both from the socialist past and from the present society in which they must try to find their place. *Berlin Is in Germany* portrays a land that, despite reunification, consists of two Germanys drifting ever further away from the center of a coherent national identity.

Whether through the motley cast of multinational characters who make up Martin’s community outside of prison or through Martin’s own perpetual motion, *Berlin Is in Germany* presents the “new Europe” as thoroughly uprooted. Stöhr’s editing disrupts all sense of spatial continuity, with the result that Martin seems entirely disconnected from the urban space through which he moves. Following the lead character on his numerous travels through the landscape of Berlin, the film cuts from one journey to another with no clear indication of progression, fostering an impression of directionlessness and detachment. The film further reinforces Martin’s outsider status by framing him with wide-angle shots that suggest he is under surveillance and

encouraging the viewer to adopt a distanced, investigative stance toward the subject under the lens.

Jailed just months before the fall of the Wall, Martin has obtained knowledge of the new nation principally through his television—an object that he totes with him throughout the film's opening scenes, as if to measure the screen images he once encountered against the new and strange outside world in which he must now find his way. In the course of many of his first experiences in this reconfigured world—as when he buys a Game Boy for his son, or when he learns that Manuela's new lover hails from southern Germany—he repeatedly exclaims: "Det kenn' ick nur aus'm Fernsehen." But the appliance to which Martin is so attached also stands in for his complex relationship to national history: the TV, as a leftover from his prison days, literally represents his "baggage," and its frequently blank screen suggests that he is locked out of communication, receiving no signal. When he does plug the machine in and "tune in," we are reminded that the device is thoroughly oriented toward the present, devoted to the transmission of up-to-the-minute programming. Although it can broadcast old material, it cannot broadcast back into the past.

It is no coincidence that one of the few easily recognizable Berlin landmarks to surface repeatedly in the film is the *Fernsehturm*. The tower hovers in the background as a symbol of the radical shifts in the systems of cultural transmission that have taken place since 1989. As in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, the *Fernsehturm* represents the failed utopian promise of the GDR, but in contrast to Becker, who ties the tower to the memory of Alex's childhood and places it squarely in the socialist past, Stöhr continually reminds audiences that the tower still stands in the heart of the unified city. It persists as a nagging reminder of the East German past, but one that no longer symbolizes the republic's greatness. Indeed, in an ironic reversal of Benedict Anderson's insight regarding the community-formative powers of the media, the knowledge of the world that Martin had acquired through his television only seems to compound his sense of estrangement after his release from prison.

Stöhr's camerawork further reinforces the alienating effect of the television. In a brief sequence set just after Martin's release, we see our protagonist watching a program in the cramped quarters of a hotel room where he temporarily resides. Following a scene in which Martin and his friend Peter narrowly avoid a fight, the film cuts to a close up of a TV screen. A nature show is in progress, cued by the image of a partially submerged hippopotamus. A commentator describes the

animal's characteristic behavior, and when the scene cuts to an overhead shot of Martin pacing the room as the TV drones on in the background, the narration continues, serving as a sound bridge that links the events on the small and big screen (cf. figure 2): "Gänzlich untergetaucht, können sie trotzdem atmen, riechen, sehen, und hören. Lautlos lassen sie sich nach unten treiben, die Lungen gefüllt für fünf Minuten Tauchgang. Schwerkraft und Auftrieb halten sich etwa in die Waage." Like the subject of the nature show, Martin is submerged—in his case, in the murky, rough waters of a unified Germany. He, too, must work a delicate balance between sinking and swimming. And like the beasts depicted on the small screen, he, too, harbors a potentially dangerous violence—a fact made clear by the scene preceding this, in which Martin roughs up a bar customer who has been harassing Peter about a debt. Stalking back and forth like a caged animal, Martin's pent-up aggression is palpable.

Shot from above, the sequence's camerawork serves to "capture" Martin, emphasizing the manner in which he is under surveillance. As a parolee, his movements are of course supervised by the state. But Stöhr makes a stronger point here, drawing a parallel between Martin and the hippo: both are objects of curiosity. In a sense, the television has turned against him—making him an object of the lens, rather than a viewing subject. Held at a remove from viewers, he is subjected to



FIGURE 2. The small screen haunts the protagonist of *Berlin Is in Germany* (2001).

our scrutiny. It is as if the scene directs us to behold “der letzte Ossi.” (Indeed, this is the title of a newspaper article about Martin that appears when two Western reporters locate him and write his story.) Underscoring the alienating effects of reunification, Stöhr shows how Martin has become an outsider and an oddity, not only because he managed, à la Rip van Winkle, to miss reunification but also because his natural “habitat” has disappeared. He is an endangered—and potentially dangerous—species.

As the narrative unfolds, however, it becomes clear that, despite its problematic nature, Martin’s television nevertheless represents his most viable connection to distant places. Stöhr’s emphasis on the apparatus hints at the persistent limitations on East Germans’ *Reisefreiheit*. Martin, like his Eastern counterparts, finds himself financially ill-equipped to enjoy his new freedom of movement. Unlike the Western Europeans he meets, who hail from faraway regions and plan vacations to exotic locales, Martin seems fated to travel only from his armchair. When he visits Manuela at her workplace—a travel agency, of course—he feigns interest in a package trip to Australia, but this merely serves as an excuse to talk to her and to fantasize about a future of shared adventures with Rokko. Stöhr directly thematizes his character’s ambivalence about his ability to move unhindered: at one point in the film, a plane passes overhead, and Martin confesses to Manuela: “Also, wenn’s nach mir ginge, könnten sie den Leuten das Reisen wieder verbieten.” Going nowhere and with nowhere to go, the old days of GDR travel restrictions seem suddenly appealing.

If Martin’s travels are limited to the spaces he can explore on the airwaves, however, within the confines of Berlin he is constantly on the move. This itinerancy appears at the outset of the film: after his release, Martin boards a train that takes him through a bucolic countryside toward his ultimate destination—somewhere near the ubiquitous field of cranes at the capital’s noisy new center. Again, Stöhr’s camerawork and editing reinforce the sense of Martin’s dislocation. There is no obvious logic to his travels, and we never actually see him arrive anywhere. Instead, he remains perpetually in transit on Berlin’s subway, tram and S-Bahn lines. Whether navigating the maze of U-Bahn passageways or making his way through the confusing aboveground landscape of Berlin, with its disorienting din of construction work, cell phones, and handheld video games, Martin speeds through the metropolis without any direction—but always with his television in tow.

When a chance encounter reunites Martin with the taxi driver Enrique, it appears that our protagonist may once again “seize the wheel” and literally and figuratively find some direction. In the scene detailing their first proper meeting, a medium close-up focuses on the two men, sitting in the front seat of Enrique’s cab—the ubiquitous and emphatically West German beige Mercedes. Admiring the vehicle, Martin asks if he can drive. Enrique instructs him on its operation: “Links oben: Handbremse. Unten links: Kupplung. Mitte, Bremse. Rechts, Gas.” Martin replies: “Wie im Osten.” Martin engages the clutch, Enrique slips a cassette into the tape deck, and as the rhythmic sounds of Cuban music take over the soundtrack, the film cuts to a series of shots of the two driving happily through the streets of Berlin—alongside a remnant of the Wall and then toward the distant shimmering silhouette of the *Fernsehturm*.

But although Martin’s first experience driving the taxi appears triumphant, for a moment suggesting he might become the conquering hero after all, his attempts to master his own movement ultimately fail: despite the fact that the car functions “wie im Osten,” the shift to the West has granted Martin no further control over his own mobility. This is most clear when Martin tries to obtain a taxi license. Inspired by Enrique’s example, Martin hatches a plan to take the required test, hoping that he can find gainful employment and thereby present himself as a respectable father figure to Rokko. After studiously memorizing the new landscape of the city and puzzling over the renaming of East Berlin streets, Martin is ultimately dismissed from the exam: as a “Vorbestrafter,” he is ineligible for employment with a taxi service. Following this crushing disappointment, Martin burns his city map, signaling that he has given up any hope of mastering this altered terrain. Although the film ultimately hints that he may be granted a reprieve—under special circumstances, as his parole officer informs him, ex-cons are permitted to take the licensing test—the movie ends before that can happen, and the closing shot shows Martin entering a taxi, a passenger once more.

Like *Good Bye, Lenin!*, *Berlin Is in Germany* links familial and national structures: the division of Germany has separated Martin and Manuela, as it did the Kerners. In contrast to Becker, however, Stöhr does not imagine a post-Wall society that moves forward both literally and figuratively over the body of the mother/land. By some accounts, the conclusion of *Berlin Is in Germany* is even a happy end-

ing: the film suggests that Martin and Manuela may reunite, bringing their family, as the nation, back together.<sup>6</sup> But the film concludes in a fashion that leaves the viewer in suspense about its protagonist's precise fate: after a brush with reincarceration, Martin is released when Victor comes to his aid and admits guilt for the crime with which Martin had been charged. No party awaits him outside the prison gates, however, and Martin walks away alone. A taxi pulls up alongside him—driven by Enrique, perhaps?—and Martin is whisked away back toward the city. To what future, however, remains unclear: Martin is moving once again, but without a clear destination. Although we are left to speculate that Martin and Manuela may resume a romantic relationship, Stöhr stops short of showing this and instead leaves us with a family that comes close to the national state of things: although working toward reconciliation, it remains divided.

The city of Stöhr's devising represents the fulcrum of two very disparate European cultures: one of the privileged west, like those in Manuela's new circle, and those of the struggling east: Martin, Peter, Victor, Ludmilla, and Enrique. The film emphasizes the difficulties that Germany's new eastern citizens face in succeeding and then holding on to that success: while Enrique dreams of making it big, he also carries a baseball bat in the trunk of his cab, because, as he explains, there are people walking around "wie die Kanonen," ready to explode at any moment. Ultimately, Stöhr suggests that the search for a fixed and unified sense of identity must remain elusive. These parallel worlds meet but are not joined in Berlin. Although equally international, each population experiences a very different side of reunification. For Martin and his friends, the shift to open borders appears to have brought at least as much displacement as freedom. "Berlin Is in Germany," as the film's title (taken from one of Rokko's school essays) informs us. The question remains, however: Which Berlin? And which Germany? Like so many East Berlin streets, "East Germany" no longer exists. Tellingly, Martin's salvation comes in the form of a postnational identity: displaced from Germany, Martin becomes an "Eastern European" like his friends. Adrift in the fluid and often treacherous world of the West, they find support and sustenance in their supranational bond and thereby point the way toward an alternative collectivity. If German unity remains elusive, Stöhr suggests that new, distinctively European identities are emerging to take its place.<sup>7</sup>

## BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND NOWHERE

As Andreas Huyssen noted in 1994, with the fall of the Wall and German reunification, the long-repressed question of nation returned “with a vengeance” (69). Although conservatives maintained their traditional hold on discourses of national identity, the left held on to the belief that “Germans are beyond nation” and instead embraced postnationalism as an alternative course (74). Huyssen wrote critically of this tendency, believing that, because the problem of national identity was unlikely to go away, the democratic left must avoid the tragic error of ceding this territory to conservatives. More than a decade after these remarks, it appears that German cinema still finds itself largely caught up in the polarity that Huyssen identifies—between the nation and the postnational, between nostalgia and nowhere—and unable or unwilling to transcend that divide. Although the films discussed here address the particularities of East Germans’ experience of reunification, they are representative of two broader cinematic trends: toward a historicist preoccupation with reproducing the past that returns repeatedly to the question of German identity, on the one hand, and an unsettled and unsettling aesthetics that strives to emphasize dislocation and points toward the dissolution of national affiliations, on the other. Taken together, they read as different facets of the same cinematic desire—to overcome the present dilemmas of nation, either by revisiting the sites and sights of a cohesive past, or by overcoming the categories of nation altogether.

Seen in this light, *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Berlin Is in Germany* represent two sides of the same aesthetic coin: whereas Becker’s film delves into the material and visual traces of the former GDR, Stöhr presents a space in which such archeological endeavors are neither possible nor desirable. *Good Bye, Lenin!* is categorically nostalgic and national, as it lays to rest the East German past and celebrates the resurgence of a united Germany. On a formal level, it engages in the very memory politics that it intends to critique, employing visual and aural strategies that are distinctly ostalgie, and that ultimately reinforce the notion of GDR history as collectible kitsch.

*Berlin Is in Germany*, in contrast, presents an adamantly postnational, skeptical view of inner-German unity, showing a world in which East and West remain separate entities, and instead points toward the emergence of new, distinctly supranational affiliations. Through camerawork and editing, the film gives visual expression to the uprootedness of its central character, reinforcing the notion that “reunification” has turned East Ger-

mans into a peculiar variety of homegrown foreigner. Yet despite their marked differences, both works circle around the same point: where to turn, in an age in which the question of nation never seemed more pressing and yet obsolete? Whereas Becker directs audiences toward the centrifugal effects of national unity, Stöhr urges viewers to occupy the periphery, to seek and sometimes find a new, European footing.

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### NOTES

1. Berdahl makes the important observation that *Ostalgie* represents a longing not just for old patterns of consumption but also a bygone era of GDR production (199).

2. This sort of affectionate presentation of the GDR's better aspects, along with the film's showcasing of official State products (rather than the Western goods that were so coveted by East German youth), leads Paul Cooke to read the film as emblematic of pan-national leftist longing for the "ostensibly utopian socialist ideals" of the former GDR that "laments the loss of . . . the pre-*Wende* political agenda," even as it ultimately sides with the progress of reunification (135).

3. For an extensive analysis of the notion of maturation in post-*Wende* cinematic narratives, see Barbara Mennel's article in this issue.

4. This marks another aspect of the film's somewhat disingenuous attitude toward *Ostalgie*. Although it portrays the phenomenon critically, it also partook in the larger trend to market GDR memory: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf Verlag, which printed the book accompanying the film, also publishes numerous nostalgic GDR titles, including the 2002 volume *Bild der Heimat. Die Echt-Foto-Postkarten aus der DDR*.

5. Clarke argues that the film foregrounds the loss and recuperation of post-Wall masculine agency.

6. Clarke reads the film along these lines and argues that Stöhr represents the return of Martin's paternal function as a side effect of capitalism: he will regain his job and therewith his position in the family. I depart from Clarke, because I read the film's conclusion as intentionally ambivalent.

7. Stöhr's subsequent film, *One Day in Europe* (2005), illustrates his broader interest in the problem of European identity. As he comments on the film's Web site, "The film's underlying premise is already contained in the title. 'One Day in Europe' can mean the present, today, this one particular day in Europe. But it can also be understood as 'One Day in Europe, there will be . . . ' in the

sense of 'some day, in the future . . .' And this is where one can find Utopia. How is it possible to make a film about Europe, its various mentalities, its people? What cities should one include? What symbols? . . . I was always concerned about the European moment, the meeting of the various European mentalities. *One Day in Europe*: the film is about the here and now, but it tells us about a certain utopia at the same time. Some day, there will be a United States of Europe, with Istanbul in it, and Moscow, too. And how will we communicate among ourselves? In Denglisch or Spanglish, Franglais or Frallemand? I'm placing my bet on European English, peppered with *Leitmotiv* and *kaputt*, with *mise en scène* and *siesta*, with *ciao* and *chill-out area*, with *nasdrovje* and *merhaba*." See the film's Web site: <[http://www.onedayineurope.de/html/directorsnote\\_en.html](http://www.onedayineurope.de/html/directorsnote_en.html)>.

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