

***Good Bye Lenin!:* Transcript**

Hi, I'm Verena from the University of York and I will be discussing how the film *Good Bye Lenin!* represents East Germany and German reunification.

Good Bye Lenin! is a German film from 2003, directed by Wolfgang Becker and co-written by Becker and Bernd Lichtenberg. The film is set Berlin in 1989 and it focuses on a young man named Alex, played by Daniel Brühl, who keeps East Germany alive for his bed-ridden mother, played by Katrin Sass. She was in a coma when the Berlin Wall came down and the doctors fear that her hearing of German reunification would bring on another, fatal heart attack. Alex puts together fake news reports for his mother, in which he pictures an ideal version of East Germany that offers a promising alternative to the greedy and depraved capitalist West Germany. But soon Alex struggles to maintain his utopian vision of East Germany as Berlin begins to rapidly change around him.

Good Bye Lenin! centres on the experiences of East Germans immediately after the fall of the Wall. It captures their feelings of loss and alienation after the dissolution of their country and it demonstrates how the German Democratic Republic and its ideology shaped the life experience of 16 million East Germans for four decades.

When the film begins, the German Democratic Republic or GDR, which you know as East Germany, had existed for forty years. It was founded in 1949, same as the Federal Republic of Germany, which was then West Germany. Originating from the Soviet occupation zone put in place after World War II, the GDR was a socialist state ruled by a single political party, the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany or SED. The economic system was a centrally planned economy as opposed to market economy. So, capitalist economies rely on competition between privately owned companies and supply and

demand determine the prices of goods and services .East Germany's economy on the other hand, was steered and controlled by the state planning agency, the *Staatliche Plankommission*, they decided which goods are produced using which materials, how they are distributed and what they cost. Companies were largely state-owned and goods were produced according to five year plans drafted by the party. By 1961, 3.5 million GDR citizens had already emigrated to West Germany. GDR leaders decided to close the country's Western borders to stop this emigration and shield the country from Western influence.

The building of the Berlin Wall started on 13 August 1961. The border with West Berlin was closed and East German troops and workers began to tear up streets running alongside the border to make them impassable to most vehicles and they installed barbed wire fences. Between 1961 and 1989, around 5000 people attempted to escape over the Wall. Border guards had orders to shoot at anyone trying to cross the border without permission, and so at least 136 people got killed trying to escape.

The GDR also had a very comprehensive secret service, the Ministry for State Security, the *Staatssicherheit* or Stasi for short. It was in charge of the surveillance, arrest, torture and psychological harassment of people who were suspected to be critical of the political regime or of trying to escape to the West. By 1989, the Stasi had over 91,000 full-time employees, some 174,000 informants, and over 180 km of observation files. So, 174,000 informants in a state with a population of 16 million, that means that more than ten percent of the population were spies for the Secret Service. Historian Christoph Kleßmann explains that 'when the observation files were opened after reunification, the unfathomably large scale of the observation of the East German public became clear'. And the categories of victim and perpetrator are often very blurred in GDR history because many people both spied on others and were spied upon.

And you probably know another German film which is about this dark side of the GDR, which is of course, *The Lives of Others* from 2006, which won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. *Good Bye Lenin!* offers a much more light-hearted and positive representation of the GDR than *The Lives of Others*, although it does not try to brush over the country's problems, either.

The film begins with Alex' mother being interrogated by two Stasi agents in her own home about why her husband left the country and if she intends to follow him. This scene is a flashback to the year 1978, when Alex was still a child. Later on in the film, the mother admits to Alex and his sister that their father did not abandon her for another woman, as she had always claimed. Rather, his departure had been planned with the intention of having the family follow him as soon as possible. But the mother did not dare to apply for an exit visa for fear of being arrested and having her children taken away from her. She then devoted herself to the socialist project, by becoming involved with the *Junge Pioniere*, a GDR youth organisation, and by writing petitions regarding practical matters of everyday life to mayors or party leaders. Alex says in his voiceover that she got 'married to our socialist fatherland', which was her way of coping with the loss of her husband.

The second key theme of *Good Bye Lenin!* is the power of the media, and specifically, television, in our lives, how it shapes our worldview, how it can manipulate us and how important a part it plays in our making sense of the world. As Alex says in his voiceover, 'it soon became clear to me that the truth was only a dubious affair, which I could easily adapt to mother's accustomed experience. I just needed to study the language of the *Aktuelle Kamera* and inspire Denis' ambition as a filmmaker.'

In the course of the film, Alex and his friend Denis produce three fake editions of the *Aktuelle*

Kamera, the East German daily news broadcast. State-run and state-controlled, the *Aktuelle Kamera* was a propaganda tool that reported favourably about the party and portrayed the West in a negative manner. Alex uses the news reports to provide an explanation for the western cars and adverts for consumer products such as Coca Cola and Ikea furniture that the mother suddenly sees from her bedroom window. While she is initially somewhat sceptical about the news report insisting that the formula for Coca Cola is actually an East German invention, the fact that she ultimately accepts it suggests how ready we are to believe anything told to us in an official-looking TV news broadcast.

In the final edition, Alex offers an account of the fall of the Wall in which it is not East Germans taking down the border, but West Germans seeking refuge in the East from the struggle for survival under capitalism, its mindless consumerism, unemployment and drug abuse. This version of events of course fits nicely with the *Aktuelle Kamera*'s anti-western rhetoric. This final news report is significant because it encapsulates the film's agenda, which is to highlight the ideals of the GDR's socialist project and pay respects to the people who believed in it and worked for it like Alex's mother. The report envisions an alternative, dignified ending for the socialist state. In reality, Head of State Erich Honecker was forced to resign on 18 October 1989 after he had been unable to control mass protestations against the government. The official explanation for his resignation was that he suffered from 'health problems', and he was replaced by Egon Krenz.

In Alex' report, the new Head of State is not Krenz but astronaut Sigmund Jähn, the first German to fly into space and Alex' childhood hero. In his inaugural address, Jähn, or rather his taxi-driving lookalike, proclaims that 'Socialism is not about walling yourself in. It's about reaching out to others and living with them. It means not only dreaming about a better world but making it happen. I therefore decided to open the borders of the German Democratic Republic'.

The fake Jähn is presented as a benevolent and wise political leader able to recognise the citizens' wishes, unlike the real political elite of the GDR, which attempted to suppress and ignore the discontent and protestations of the citizens as long as they could. Jähn's speech, together with Alex's admission that 'the GDR I envisioned for my mother became more and more the GDR I would have wished for myself' draws attention to the values of socialism such as equal opportunities and a strong sense of community which were largely lost as the GDR was dissolved and joined West Germany.

A key element of the film's address to the audience is Alex's voiceover. It is used to advance the story and to explain or counteract the images. It also works to integrate the documentary footage and the flashbacks into the main narrative. TV footage of key events relating to the Wende – which is the German term commonly used for the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the GDR –, such as Honecker's resignation or the images of people climbing over the Berlin Wall, are not only remembered by those who witnessed them. They have also entered the collective consciousness of the population, including those who were somewhere else at the time or had not been born yet.

Good Bye Lenin! uses this footage to bring this important period in German history to life once more and at the same time questions the course of history by giving the images a new meaning.

Alex's voiceover is key to the film's representation of the tumultuous period of German reunification. It is packed with irony, and invites the viewer to reflect on how history could have turned out differently. For example, Alex refers to the military parade that was part of the GDR's Fortieth Anniversary celebrations on 7 October 1989 as follows: 'it was a time smelling of change, while an overblown shooting club was giving its last performance.' This suggests that he does not take the party's display of power seriously. He also comments on

the demonstrations for freedom of press, freedom of expression and freedom to travel, which had begun on the 4th of September in Leipzig with the so-called *Montagsdemonstrationen*, during which 1000 people gathered after a prayer in front of the cathedral, the Nikolaikirche. By October 2nd, 20,000 protesters had gathered after the prayer, and on 16th October, 120,000 people were protesting.

There were also demonstrations and uproars in East Berlin, one of which Alex attends in the film. He explains from the off that ‘on the evening of October 7th, 1989 several hundred people got together for some evening exercise and marched for the right to go for walks without the Berlin Wall getting in their way.’ Calling the demonstration an ‘evening exercise’ creates an ironic distance to the events and functions as an interesting counterpoint to the images we see, which show police brutality and Alex’ mother collapsing without him being able to help her.

On the 9th of October 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. It was a peaceful revolution brought about by a change in GDR law and the people’s claim for its reinforcement. During an evening press conference, SED party official Günter Schabowski had announced a change in travel regulations agreed upon by the party leadership. With this reform, the GDR acknowledged that tens of thousands of citizens has already left the country via Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic, which had opened their borders for them. Schabowski announced that ‘Private trips abroad can be applied for without proof of eligibility’. Since Schabowski had not been informed that the regulation was only to come into effect on the following day, he said in reply to a journalist’s question that ‘as far as he knew, they’d be effective immediately’. The West German national television channels showed parts of the press conference in their evening news reports at 7.15pm and 8 pm; and this meant that the news was broadcast to nearly all of East Germany as well and thousands of Berliners had started to gather at the border crossings.

The first border crossing that was breached was the one at the Bornholmerstraße. It was next to a bridge crossing a railway line, with the actual border running along the railway lines. Due to the premature announcement of the new travel regulations, the border guards hadn't received clear instructions. At first they first try to put off the people until the morning. But as the crowd got bigger and louder, they let some people pass on presentation of ID. Half an hour before midnight, the officials decided to cease the controls and open the border. People were cheering, thousands ran across the bridge to West Berlin, where they were greeted enthusiastically.

Good Bye Lenin! shows images of people climbing over the Wall, as well as footage showing the German chancellor Helmut Kohl singing the (West) German national anthem in front of the Schöneberg town hall in West Berlin on 10th November after giving a speech. In his voiceover, Alex mockingly refers to this very tuneless rendition of the anthem as 'a classical concert', thereby relativising once more what to many people, including Kohl himself, may have seemed to be momentous, moving and symbolical at the time. Alex' ironic comments reinforce a view held by some East Germans, who see Kohl's singing as a symbol of the arrogance and lack of sensitivity exhibited by some West German politicians in the way they dealt with the dissolution of the GDR and its incorporation into the Federal Republic.

East Germany and West Germany became officially reunified on 3rd October 1990. The GDR ceased to exist and it gave way to five new federal states, the *neue Bundesländer*, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Thüringen. Kohl later famously declared he was confident that the five new German states would soon transform into 'blossoming landscapes', a promise that would be invoked sarcastically in the 1990s and early 2000s, when it became apparent that the economic integration of the former East Germany proved to be much more difficult than he had hoped. Lacking a business

infrastructure like West Germany, the five new *Länder* still had an unemployment rate twice as high as western Germany in 2008.

In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, Alex explains in the voiceover how he had his ‘first cultural encounters with a new land’ in the winter of 1989, which is a ‘sarcastic description of his wide-eyed encounters with pornography, [...] crass materialism and advertising’, as film scholar Nick Hodgin explains. So, the voiceover commentary as a whole works to de-dramatise political events, which means it presents them in a less melodramatic and spectacular way than many other films and documentaries, and it also suggests that GDR socialism and West German capitalism are equally flawed. While the film’s account of political events is quite distanced and unemotional, the experiences of the fictional protagonists are presented in such a way that viewers gain an insight into their conflicted feelings and sympathise with them.

Director Wolfgang Becker insisted in interviews that it was his intention to tell first and foremost a family’s private history, not to critically examine the GDR and its collapse. The scriptwriter’s and director’s decision to focus on one family’s fate and draw on the universal themes of family relationships and conflicts is likely to be a key reason for the film’s appeal with viewers in Germany and abroad: *Good Bye Lenin!* was unusually successful for a German film, it attracted 6.5 million viewers in Germany its first year, where it became the biggest hit of 2003, eclipsing Hollywood blockbusters such as *Gangs of New York* and a *Harry Potter* film.

Film scholar Paul Cooke explains that *Good Bye Lenin!* emphasises the ‘normal’, everyday aspects of life in the East, opposing the view of the GDR as a totalitarian surveillance state perpetuated for example by the film *The Lives of Others*. *Good Bye Lenin!* focuses on the private family life behind the official facade of the GDR. As Cooke says, ‘this is suggested quite literally during the GDR’s fortieth birthday celebrations. The camera pans up one of the

huge red flags that hang from [a] block of flats lining the route of the [...] military parade. It slowly zooms in on one of the windows covered by the flag, at which point the film cuts to Alex's bedroom, cast in a deep red shadow by the same flag, which is covering his window.' So, the characters of Alex, his sister Ariane and their elderly neighbours are all representative of how different East Germans dealt with the collapse of the GDR.

Ariane is the most pragmatic of them. She welcomes the Wende by replacing the family's old furniture and clothes with more fashionable items, and since she has a small child and the rest of the family to look after, she drops out of university, where she was studying economics, and starts to work for Burger King instead. Now Burger King, same as McDonald's, is of course a symbol for unbridled US capitalism. Paul Cooke explains that by making Ariane work for this fast food chain immediately after reunification, *Good Bye Lenin!* also comments on the nature of unified German society, subtly criticising globalisation and the dominance of American consumer culture in Germany today.

Alex does not adapt quite so easily to the new Germany. To be sure, his mockery of the Fortieth Anniversary Celebrations and his participation in the demonstration show us that he objected the GDR's oppressive and rigid political system. But his angry outburst at the bank when he learns that the deadline for changing East German into West German currency has passed, shows his emotional ties to his country. He shouts at the bank clerk: 'This was our money ...! For a goddamn forty years! And now you Wessi asshole are telling me it's worth nothing?!' He is not just angry about losing the money, but disappointed and hurt by the fact that the ideology and value system he grew up with disappeared from one day to the other and the country seems to be run by West Germans who have no compassion for the Easterners' situation.

The person in the film that struggles the most with the dissolution of the GDR is Alex' elderly neighbour Herr Ganske. Both he and his daughter lost their jobs after the Wende, as did many former GDR citizens when the companies and factories in which they had worked were overhauled and privatised, and manual labour was replaced by machines to increase efficiency. When Herr Ganske sees Alex searching for empty food jars to serve his mother East German products, he believes Alex scavenges the bins because he's hungry. During the mother's birthday party, Ganske's nostalgia for the GDR becomes a source of comedy, when he says his birthday wish for her is 'for everything to go back to the way it was' – she of course does not know what he means by that, but viewers do.

Alex is also very diligent in bringing things back to the way they were before the Wall fell. Once his mother is back home, he desperately tries to get GDR food products for her, or at least empty jars with the right labels on that he can then fill with western products. East Germans watching the film will instantly recognise the GDR brands such as Spreewald gherkins, Tempo Bohnen – easy cook beans – or Mocca Fix Gold – instant coffee. In the GDR, meeting the basic needs of the population regarding food, furniture and household items was the top priority. Basic foods and everyday consumer goods were very cheap and often of low quality, and they usually had a uniform price. After the Wende, these products disappeared very quickly because the producers could not compete with the more cheaply and efficiently produced foods imported from western Germany and Europe, and eastern Germany was flooded with Western consumer goods.

Alex's frantic search for authentic GDR consumer products as well as the figure of Herr Ganske has caused *Good Bye Lenin!* to be associated with the 'Ostalgie' phenomenon. 'Ostalgie' is a term that plays with the German words for East, Ost and nostalgia, Nostalgie. It describes the feeling of nostalgia for aspects of GDR life, everyday culture and products experienced by many East Germans. 'Ostalgie' manifests itself in the popularity of GDR

memorabilia products such as clothes, furniture and accessories with symbols of GDR culture like the coat of arms, the iconic walking figures on traffic lights (which were different from the ones in West Germany) or das Sandmännchen – the little sandman – a character from a popular GDR children’s TV show, which Alex watches with his step-siblings in *Good Bye, Lenin!*. Ostalgie also motivated two TV shows broadcast in 2003, the *DDR Show* and the *Ostalgie Show*, which looked back fondly at the GDR’s everyday culture, and of course ‘Ostalgie’ runs through *Good Bye Lenin!* and other films about everyday life in the GDR such as *Sun Alley* from 1999, which is about a group of teenagers growing up in East Berlin.

However, *Good Bye, Lenin!*, while at times being ‘unashamedly sentimental’ about the GDR, as Cooke says, deconstructs the ‘Ostalgie’ phenomenon as much as it fuels it: note how the mother fails to notice the difference between Spreewald gherkins and the pickles from Holland which are actually in the jar! This suggests that neither the GDR products, which many eastern Germans feel nostalgic about now, nor the western products, which they embraced so eagerly immediately after the Wende are better than one another – they’re just interchangeable. Another subtle comment on today’s ‘Ostalgie’ phenomenon in *Good Bye Lenin!* occurs when Ariane’s West German boyfriend buys a Trabant car or Trabi for short, East Germany’s most popular car probably one of the last before production ceased in 1991. Ariane mocks him for his desire to possess an authentic East German car – she does not understand why out of all the cars he could buy, he would choose the small, uncomfortable Trabant!

Those people who feel nostalgic about the GDR and for example tuned in to watch the *DDR Show* have been criticised for looking back at the past with rose-tinted glasses, conveniently forgetting about the oppressive political system, the surveillance and the violence against citizens. However, memories are always very personal and selective, and *Good Bye Lenin!* suggests that many East Germans choose to remember the GDR in terms of certain principles

or individual experiences rather remembering the limitations, mismanagement and oppression of the citizens by the regime, as Nick Hodgkin says. Alex has positive memories of the GDR because he associates them with the way he was brought up by his mother, who was kind and affectionate and tried to live according to the socialist principle of building a better society for everyone.

It is also interesting to consider how *Good Bye Lenin!* addresses different groups of viewers. East Germans for example will catch the references to GDR products and everyday culture that I explained earlier. But also international viewers like you, who probably don't know that much about East Germany, can follow the story easily because the film includes newspaper headlines and documentary footage about the fall of the Wall. Film scholar Lutz Koepnick introduced the idea of films functioning as what he calls a 'prosthetic memory'. By this he means that many people nowadays will get their ideas about important moments in history from fictional films and TV programmes, not from factual books or eyewitnesses' accounts. So films like *Good Bye Lenin!* for example give you an idea of what it might have been like to live in East Berlin in 1989 and experience this historical moment, but Koepnick reminds us to always be aware that what we are watching is only one of many possible representations or recreations of the past – and people who actually lived at the time might have experienced it very differently!

But, as we have seen, *Good Bye Lenin!* is a very interesting and insightful representation because it has so many layers: you get the perspectives of different East Germans, sometimes nostalgic, sometimes more forward-looking. You also get the West German characters of Denis, Alex' best friend and Rainer, Ariane's boyfriend and you see how their attitudes sometimes clash. And very importantly, there is the character of Alex' father, an East German who left for the West and suffered just as much as Alex' mother, from being separated from his family because Germany was separated. So, while *Good Bye Lenin!* looks

back lovingly and somewhat wistfully at East Germany, its people and its ideals, it still does not neglect the oppression and suffering of its citizens on the hands of the state. This violence and suffering is represented by the police brutality during the demonstration Alex takes part in, and by the tragic separation of his family.

Good Bye Lenin! strikes a balance between invoking nostalgia by foregrounding GDR culture such as foods, the Trabant car, or the idyllic summer cabin, and deconstructing this nostalgia by reminding viewers of the cruelty of the political system. Through the figure of Alex's idealist mother, the film reminds viewers of the power of socialist ideals such as equality, community and people working together for the benefit of all. Alex' fake news reports envisioning an ideal version of the GDR in which everybody helps each other out and the government respects the citizens' wishes equally reclaim the ideals of socialism, which had been corrupted by the GDR government and the Soviet Union.

Alex's ironic voiceover and his encounter with the unsympathetic bank clerk criticises West Germans' insensitivity during the process of reunification. GDR institutions and everyday culture was unceremoniously abolished yet West German politicians such as Helmut Kohl and the media suggested that reunification was a momentous, solemn event which East Germans should be overjoyed about and grateful for at all times. The film captures East Germans' grief about losing their country and the ideals attached to it almost overnight and contrasts the GDR's socialist ideals with West German capitalism to criticise German consumer culture in 1989 and now.

All this makes *Good Bye Lenin!* a moving and thought-provoking representation of the recent German past.

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