

Berlin is in Germany: Transcript

Hello everyone. My name is Anna White and I am based at Swansea University. My research looks at how Hollywood and German films and literature engage with fascism. I will be discussing how the film *Berlin is in Germany* represents East Germany and the identity issues that arose with German reunification.

After a decade of unification, escapist comedy and social pessimism were united to produce the box office hit, *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) which was successful both in Germany and in English language countries.¹ This film is considered to be ‘communist kitsch’ and addressed the continuing problems about German identity. Although this film is one of the most successful films that attempts to present the overcoming of the ‘Wall in the head’ between East and West Germans’, it is pre-dated by a lesser-known film entitled *Berlin is in Germany* (2001), which I will discuss today. *Berlin is in Germany* is a 2001 film which won the Audience Award at the 2001 *Berlinale*. Directed by a West German, Hannes Stöhr, it features Jörg Schüttauf as the lead protagonist, Martin Schulz. Today I will be using *Berlin is in Germany* to explore the *Wende* and the importance of these events. This can be seen by how it is portrayed in the film, the plot, key themes of the film as well as the relationships between the characters and the actions of Martin.

This film can also be used to explore the conflict between young people and other family members; changing models of family and parenting; changing attitudes towards marriage or cohabitation; and separation and divorce. It can also be used to look at racism, integration, criminal and anti-social behaviour. The film also serves as a counterpoint to the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* and provides an alternative perspective on the *Wende*. The *Wende*, or ‘the change’

or 'the turn', is the process in which Germany reunified. It is marked by several key events, some of which are portrayed and referenced in the film *Berlin is in Germany*.

In 1989, Martin was imprisoned under the charge of murder for reportedly bludgeoning a Stasi informant, his neighbour, to death. This neighbour was one of the ten percent of the population who acted as a part of the Stasi informant network. He had found items in Martin and Manuela's (Martin's then pregnant wife) cellar that indicated their planned defection to the West. Whilst incarcerated, Martin witnesses the unification of Germany on television. For Martin, he actually does experience the Fall of the Wall through television and through that medium he is also made aware of the aftermath of unification. Having Martin learn about the Fall of the Wall on TV reflects the same experience many people around the world would have had rather than first-hand experience of being there while the Wall fell. The TV for Martin has been the medium for him to connect to the world as it has made him aware of technological changes, capitalist advertising, and documentaries from which he learns about the world around him. By having Martin imprisoned, it has allowed for the film to present how much has changed in the decade since reunification.

In 2000, he is released from prison after serving eleven years. His charge was changed to manslaughter and he now has to integrate himself to a life outside of prison and in an unrecognisable united Germany. The film follows his attempt to rebuild his life and former relationship with his ex-wife, Manuela, and his son, Rokko. The rebuilding of Germany, and in particular of the former East Berlin, is allegorical and this landscape becomes symbolic of the rebuilding of Martin and his personal relationships. The movement of the government back to Berlin is also featured in the film as the building of the government offices is watched by Martin. This also represents the massive political changes that Martin is soon to experience. The strangeness of the city is also emphasised in the film as it highlights the technological changes that Martin, who although he has seen them on television, has yet to

experience. This includes his attempts to buy a modern toy for his son and the sounds of mobile phones that are also alien to him. By having these mobile phone noises surround him as he walks past the East German TV tower in Alexanderplatz, it emphasises the changes that have occurred in the East German state and that capitalism appears to have taken over. This is reinforced by the adverts that are scattered around for consumer goods and branded items such as coca-cola. The focus on coca-cola adverts was also in the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* And is used as a shorthand for unification.

Good Bye, Lenin! and *Berlin is in Germany* use similar symbolism and references to *Ostalgie*. *Ostalgie* is a German term which refers to nostalgia for life in East Germany. It is derived from the German words *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia). It is also known as 'Communist Kitsch' and 'Soviet Chic'. This is often achieved by referencing former East German consumer goods or the previous way of life, usually in regards to employment. The symbolic takeover of capitalism, as well as the takeover of East Germany by the West, is also referenced in both films in the form of paper planes made out of the Ostmark or the East Mark. This currency was quickly made worthless as the East and West economies merged leaving many families with redundant money. While Alex in *Good Bye, Lenin!* frantically throws the worthless currency from a tall building, Martin is more reflective and keeps the money as a reminder of his past.

It would be a shame to write these films off as just *Ostalgie* films as they also tackle the gritty reality of East Germany, especially in regards to the ever present Stasi. In *Berlin is in Germany*, it is the nature of East German society in the form of a network of informants and Stasi interrogations that are referenced as it is the planned defection to the West that is Martin's downfall. It is telling that Martin and Manuela were planning to defect in July 1989 as it reveals that East Germans did not believe that in a few months that they were going to be allowed the freedom to travel to the West, nor that a year later that Germany would be

officially reunified. This is evidenced by the fact that on the 6th February 1989, Chris Gueffroy was the last person to be shot attempting to escape across the Berlin Wall and, even on the 8th March 1989, Winfried Freudenberg died trying to cross the border to West Berlin after crashing a homemade balloon aircraft. In total at least 136 people were killed trying to cross the border. The Wall appears to Martin, as it does historically to the rest of East Germany, to be a permanent fixture.

Whilst also portraying the issues surrounding the Berlin Wall, the film also makes references through Martin and his friend, Peter, to the demonstrations taking place in East Berlin in the lead up to reunification. Peter is a stereotyped character known as a *Jammerossi* or a ‘whinging Eastie’, a man who longs for the security the East German state gave him as he struggles in the reunified country. This character is also in the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* and is embodied in Alex’s neighbour Herr Ganske. Peter recalls to Martin that he was sat in a tank while the wall fell waiting for the order to shoot after the authorities has been troubled by demonstrations such as the famous Alexanderplatz demonstration on the 4th November 1989. This demonstration was organised with the authorities’ consent and was attended by the actor Ulrich Mühe, who later played Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler, the Stasi agent in *The Lives of Others*.

While recalling this event to Martin, Peter is overheard by the other men surrounding them waiting for their turn to be seen in the job centre. One man waiting in particular listens keenly to what Peter is saying. It is unclear if this man is from the former East or West but his interest in the story of ‘Where were you when the Wall fell?’ is continued later in the film. Martin tells Peter’s story to Manuela’s friends and partner Wolfgang rather than tell them that he was in prison when he is asked ‘Where were you when the Wall fell?’.

Whereas Peter was the *Jammerossi*, Manuela’s partner Wolfgang is a stereotype *Besser-Wessi* or ‘arrogant West German’ who feels threatened by Martin as he is quickly accepted by his

friends. This character is also embodied in the character Rainer in *Good Bye, Lenin!*. Martin's negative assessment of Wolfgang is made not because he is a West German, but because he is a teacher and Martin still considers that teachers are the people who will propagate the State's values.

Martin was also asked where he was when the Wall fell by a group of reporters which led to a newspaper article about him being published under the title 'The Final Ossi'. This reoccurring question is one that is still being asked today and has become even more relevant after the 20th anniversary of the Fall of the Wall and will be probably asked again even more this year as the 25th anniversary is commemorated throughout Berlin. This will include special exhibits as well as the building of a new temporary Berlin Wall made out of white balloons that will follow the course of the old one and should be visible from space. While the new Germany is still progressing in its attempts to overcome the 'Wall in the head' that still exists between East and West Germans, the Cold War and its importance in relation to national identity are debatable not only for Germany, but also for how the world perceives the country. By using the film *Berlin is in Germany*, we can see in Martin the identity struggles that are present in the wake of reunification.

Originally the East and West states defined themselves not only in opposition to their past but also to each other, creating an 'us' and 'them' mentality. The East presented itself as automatically anti-fascist due to its communist leanings. This was seen to whitewash the State from any guilt for its participation in the Nazi atrocities. This idea is also furthered in *Berlin is in Germany* as Martin is physically seen to stand up for his friends who are being taunted by what can be assumed to be a neo-Nazi group. The racist behaviour of this group towards his Cuban friend, Enrique, is also challenged by Martin and further propagates the belief that the East was a state of equality. This scene also has the famous East German TV tower in the background which links Martin's actions visually to the nature of the East

German state. It is also indicative of the assumed racism that was harboured of the West in the Eastern state, as they believed them to be a continuation of fascism, as previous Nazi Party members retained high positions in the post-war state.

Martin has an epiphany as he visits his wife, Manuela, and his son, Rokko, when he finds Rokko's English homework book. Inside it reads 'My name is Rokko Schulz. I'm a boy from Berlin. Berlin is in Germany'. At this point Martin realizes how much has changed since he has been in prison and his family are no longer East German but instead German. His son will also have never experienced anything other than a united Germany. This scene is symbolic of a new generational divide, whereas previously there had been a generational divide between the children of parents that had experienced fascism. This is now a divide between those who had experienced the Cold War and those who had not. The language being in English is also indicative of the changes in East Germany. Previously, the second language that would have been taught was Russian, which Martin can speak. Manuela and Rokko being able to speak English is also a signifier of the changes that were culturally taking place in Germany.

Martin's attempt to rebuild his life leads him to train as a taxi driver, there he encounters the changes in names in the East as Lenin Square becomes United Nations Square and he has to familiarise himself with the West. However, because he has a criminal conviction, he is told he is unable to become a driver. In a rage he burns his A-to-Z of Berlin, the page the film focuses on displays the district of Pankow. Pankow being in the former East and where Manuela and Rokko live is symbolic of the rejection he feels and his disappointment as he feels like he has failed to rehabilitate himself and reintegrate into the new Berlin, thus furthering the issues Martin has with identity and the 'Wall in the head' he feels between himself and the new Berlin.

As Martin is re-arrested at the end of the film and processed by a policeman he accuses the policeman of being a former Stasi agent. He is then confused as the policeman is from the

West. The policeman believes that Martin is being deliberately awkward and could not understand that the People's Police treated defectors harshly or would potentially exaggerate their criminal reports. This scene further serves to show the 'Wall in the head' that still exists between the West and East as the policeman (West) will never understand Martin's (East) suspicions of him, let alone how the case notes had been exaggerated by the former state.

As well as the plot of the film presenting ongoing identity issues since unification, the film has a symbolic soundtrack. The soundtrack of this film plays an important role in representing Martin's mood. He is haunted by classical music from his release from prison. This is used to show his East German heritage as there was the belief that East Germany had preserved their cultural heritage. This heritage is also used in *The Lives of Others* to present the moral values of the main character Dreyman. The change in haunting classical music reflects Martin at his happiest and his new sense of freedom as Martin travels and listens to Cuban music in the taxi. Thus, the taxi becomes symbolic of his freedom as he is seen in the film driving in the West alongside the Berlin Wall. Significantly, the other change of music is in a night club with Ludmila where Martin is introduced to trance music for the first time. Martin initially struggles to find himself within the club finding it all strange and new. However by the end of the scene, with help from Ludmila, he lets go and joins in with the revelry and embraces the new environment. The struggle Martin has to relax is indicative of the environment Martin was in before his incarceration.

The end of the film for Martin is ambiguous, he is released from prison just like in the beginning of the film. This time, while the classical music haunts him as before, he is picked up by Enrique in the taxi and the soundtrack merges the classical into Cuban music. This change in music gives the ending a sense of hope, that all for Martin has changed and that he is free not just in body but in mind.

Unlike the comedy of *Good Bye, Lenin!* and the dark drama of *The Lives of Others*, *Berlin is in Germany* can be used to highlight important historical issues and the post-Wall environment be it by referencing unemployment, prejudice, the change of street names, Stasi, defection and the Berlin Wall. However, what it primarily does is present how different the attitudes of East and West Germans were and how they saw each other, thus showing that the unification of Germany is not just a political development but a persistent mental development and that the ‘Wall in the head’ remains.

Thank you for your time and thank you for listening.

ⁱ Cook, R. 2007. ‘*Good Bye, Lenin!*: Free-market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism’. *Journal of Germanic Studies*, Volume 43, Number 2. pp. 206 – 219, 206