

## German Film and Unification: Transcript

Elizabeth: I am here with Luke and Anna, and we are going to be talking about German films and unification. So, what do you think we can learn about unification from the films *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Berlin is in Germany*?

Anna: I think there is a lot that can be said for both films in how they present unification. The good thing about using *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Berlin is in Germany* is that they are quite complementary and yet quite opposing at the same time. They bring out different nuances. You could take things from the rebuilding process to the change of street names, even to identity issues which followed.

Luke: I think that they both, in different ways, develop the idea that East Berlin was changed quite quickly and the [idea of] the westernisation of East Germany in general following unification. They both develop and complement each other within that discussion.

Elizabeth: Why do you think both of these films have English titles?

Luke: The English titles have a dual function. On the one hand, they highlight the alienation these characters feel. Neither Martin nor the mother in *Good Bye, Lenin!* would have learnt English as a foreign language growing up in East Germany, so the fact that the title of a film exploring their experiences is in a language they don't understand is symbolic of this wider alienation they feel by the changes happening during unification. But also, we must not forget that America is the great symbol of capitalism, so films that are about the capitalisation and the westernisation of East Germany are using an English / an American title is important, because that once again emphasises this capitalism point.

Anna: It is also very symbolic. For example, in *Berlin is in Germany* Martin is reading his son's English homework for the first time, saying 'I am from Germany and Berlin is in Germany'. So, it is emphasising once again this united nation and his own disconnect. There is a certain reading you can take of *Good Bye, Lenin!*. There are two possible ways you can read it, especially with the [title's] use of a comma. You often find *Good Bye, Lenin!* as 'Goodbye – comma – Lenin'. You could almost read that as Lenin signing off his end of Communism. Or you could read it as someone shouting, 'Good Bye Lenin!'. So, there are several readings you could interpret from having titles in English.

Elizabeth: You talked about disconnect. One thing that struck me was that terms in the 1990s were introduced such as 'Besser-Wessi' and 'Jammer-Ossi'. 'Besser-Wessi' being the West German who always knew best and the 'Jammer-Ossi' being the Easterner who seemed to refuse to change. I was wondering to what extent do these films actually reinforce that idea of East Germans being unwilling to change to West Germany and West Germany having this better way forward?

Luke: Both films do build on and include that stereotype in their narratives, both on the Eastern side and in terms of the older, in particular, Eastern and Western characters. But I think it is also important to look at the younger characters in both films. Alex and his sister embrace the process of unification and also Alex in particular has Dennis, his friend from the West, and there is no animosity between them. In fact, he actively helps Alex in his covering up of unification for his mum. So, in the younger generation, they challenge this stereotype that everyone in the East was against unification and everyone in the West was also against it, but for different reasons. That also carries on into *Berlin is in Germany* with its younger

characters with Martin's son. He is very much a child of unification and doesn't seem to be affected by the fact he has an East German parent and heritage in the film.

Anna: Just to add to that in *Berlin is in Germany* for example, the lead character Martin is doing his very best to integrate into the new Germany. Perhaps he's not so much old as middle-aged! But again, they have these subsidiary characters like the friend Peter, who could count as the ultimate *Jammer-Ossi* who just does not fit in anywhere and that leads to almost a suicide attempt and they are quite pitiful characters compared to the lead protagonists who stress they are going to integrate. I think they are both quite nuanced in how they show different characters whilst also having some of the stereotypes in just because there were some stereotypes!

Elizabeth: *Good Bye, Lenin!* is arguably a nostalgic film set in the past whereas *Berlin is in Germany* is set in the present. Why might the two films have adopted these quite different approaches?

Luke: I think they do adopt two different approaches, you're right, but I think, interestingly, they do these two different approaches for the same reasons and actually they cover the same sorts of issues. You must not forget that in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, Alex actually tells the story through voice-over and we can presume that this voice-over is happening in the present. So, therefore, his nostalgia is fuelled by the problems he is experiencing in a turn-of-the-millennium Germany which are, of course, the problems that Martin is also experiencing in *Berlin is in Germany*. So, it is almost like the two stories are fuelled by the same issues. It's just that *Good Bye, Lenin!* deals with its issues through a nostalgic point-of-view, whereas *Berlin is in Germany* deals with it in a far more linear, contemporary way and in the same time frame.

Anna: I think one of the main things to bring out is that they actually do have some of the same issues which is the overcoming of the 'Wall in the head' between the characters of East and West, and that is something that is present throughout the two films, whether it's through hindsight or whether they are living through it. There are a lot of complementary themes going through the two films.

Elizabeth: *Good Bye, Lenin!* is definitely one of the best known German films of recent years. *Berlin is in Germany* in Germany is less so. Why do you think the two films had such different receptions, particularly abroad?

Luke: We have got to remember that *Good Bye, Lenin!* is for Germany a reasonably big budget production along the lines of a Hollywood genre film. It definitely adopts symptoms of Hollywood comedy film, and at the core of *Good Bye, Lenin!* is a family drama. It is really about Alex coming to terms with his mum dying which is a very universal theme. So, people all over the world can understand that. Then the *Ostalgie* images and themes come as a secondary thing. It's not confined by its national issues. Whereas we have got to remember that *Berlin is in Germany* was made by a reasonably unknown director as his graduation film, so it definitely had a different aim in its perspective.

Anna: *Berlin is in Germany* didn't indicate what it was going to be about in its title. For example, *Good Bye, Lenin!*, you could imagine it being very much about the fall of Communism. That it also had stars in it who had previously been in *Sonnenallee* indicated what the film was going to be about, whereas *Berlin is in Germany* – what is 'Berlin is in Germany'? Unless you have seen the film, the reference is quite oblique.