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Deconstructing Ostalgia - the National Past between Commodity and Simulacrum

in Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003)

Introduction

The spirit of the 1789 French Revolution enjoyed a spectacular celebration in the fall of 1989, when at breath-taking speed the Eastern Bloc revolutions reshaped the face of Europe, signaling the failure of the socialist experiment and the apparent victory of Western democratic liberalism. This dismantling of an entire ideology and of the world built upon it was hailed by historians, academics, politicians and the public alike as a renaissance of civil society, the rebirth of Eastern Europe, the rebirth of history, or even, in Francis Fukuyama's words, the "end of history." In Germany, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the most powerful symbol of the Cold War, was part of a bigger saga of reunification. In the enthusiasm that accompanied the destruction of the Wall, the East Germans overwhelmingly approved of the incorporation in the Federal Republic eager to be part of the mythical West that had beckoned them for so many years. However, rather than a merger of two equal entities, 1989 marked the beginning of the absorption of the eastern provinces into the FRG. From this point of view the reunification and its aftermath—collectively labeled the *Wende*—can be read as a form of colonization of the East by the West, where the Easterners had to adapt to new realities and to new rules of social interaction, and saw their original culture either ignored, disparaged, or relegated to the realm of the margin, of the forgotten, of obsolescence.

The struggle against this erasure of the past took many forms. One of its best-known cultural by-products was *Goodbye Lenin!*, which in the summer of 2003 took the movie theatres in Germany and elsewhere in Europe by storm, infused new life in the phenomenon of Ostalgia, and became the subject of intense academic investigation on both sides of the Atlantic. Ostalgia—nostalgia for the East—is by now a household name within and without the discipline of German Studies, as it is beginning to be ‘exported’ into the discourse of post-communist studies in other countries of Eastern Europe. In this new geographical context, as a phenomenon rooted in an experience of acculturation and assimilation, Ostalgia is used to articulate the resistance to present cultural and economic dominance while looking nostalgically at the dismantled world of the socialist East. However, in its original, German interpretation, Ostalgia’s evocation of the East German past functions as a marker of the larger process of differentiation of the East German community from the Western one, through the self-conscious consumption and display of GDR products and brands.¹

Thus Ostalgia emerges as a culture-specific phenomenon. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as a form of resistance to progress and an attempt to escape and recapture time (Boym xiv). Applying this definition to the phenomenon of Ostalgia, we can argue that the personal and collective mythologies of this form of nostalgia are less about a return to a past (socialist or communist) status-quo, than a longing, a form of desire for a past that is fragmented and impermanent, and fulfilling in ways in which the present is not. “*Ostalgie* can be seen as the psychosocial expression of melancholy caused by prolonged absence. It may be an expression of longing for ‘home’ as well as an effort to partially reclaim what has been lost or taken away” (Jozwiak and Mermann 783). If nostalgia as a social phenomenon in general relates to problems of identity, nation, memory and myth-making in a constant interplay between

the present and the past, then the Ostalgie backward gaze is more about “the production of a present rather than the reproduction of past” in a specific cultural and historical context—that of Eastern Germany and its demise in the wake of 1989 (Berdahl 202).

Critiques of the phenomenon usually revolved around objections to the minimization of the painful legacy of the police state in East Germany, of the rule of the Stasi—the German Secret Police—in everyday life, of the brutal political persecutions. From this perspective, Ostalgia seems to look back at East German life through rose-tinted spectacles, idealizing the socialist system, while neglecting its privations and brutality and embracing the communist kitsch as a way of bringing back that past (Berdahl 205). Other scholars of the phenomenon, however, interpret these public displays of affection for GDR brands, doubled by the idealization and beautification of the communist past, as the consequence of a pervasive feeling of irrelevance of East German life, values, and worldview in the post-Wende world. From this latter perspective, as a form of nostalgia, Ostalgia serves as a coping mechanism, and as a form of linking the present to a past that is perceived to be irretrievably lost.²

While Ostalgia as a cultural phenomenon has been discussed extensively by scholars in the context of its role in the understanding of contemporary German identity, this article attempts an analysis of Ostalgia itself less as a form of nostalgia, and more as an exercise in producing alternative histories. It argues that, far from being a straightforward product of nostalgia for the GDR past, Becker’s film offers a subtle and convincing deconstruction of Ostalgia as a general phenomenon, which can be used to further investigate the ambivalences and ambiguities of the nostalgic trends that are sweeping across Eastern Europe. Using the case study of Wolfgang Becker’s film, we will foreground the complex processes at work behind the creation of these alternative histories, interpreting Ostalgia’s use of the GDR past through the lenses of Jean

Baudrillard's theories on simulation and simulacra. From this point of view, the GDR past is not accurately represented in the film, nor is it accurately remembered by the hero of the story. It is simulated, as from behind the images used history does not emerge as it really was, but as the hero chooses to remember it. Thus, the simulacrum that supplants representation in *Goodbye Lenin!* functions as a blank screen on which the hero and the audiences can nostalgically project their own frustrations with the present.

First the article will discuss the film's manipulation of reality and of the GDR past, and will explore the ways in which Ostalgia projects personal pasts upon the official past of the country, blurring the lines between personal memory and collective memory, and creating a simulated version of reality. Then it will examine the extent to which the GDR emerges from this process of remembering not as an authentic representation of the past, but rather as a simulacrum, recreated with the help of everyday objects as social signifiers and as props in the act of remembering. And lastly, the article argues that in *Goodbye Lenin!* Ostalgia functions not only as a form of mourning for the past and for the lost potentialities of that past; it also represents a way of coming to terms with the present and the changes it brought about. From this perspective, the film emerges as a powerful argument in favor of the healing potential behind the phenomenon of Ostalgia, which can benefit both East and West in their search for a common national identity and a common understanding of recent history.

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In the years that followed the 1990 celebrations of German reunification, as the euphoria subsided and the actual process of bringing the two Germanies together turned out not to be the smooth, natural reconciliation hoped for, both westerners and easterners gradually became aware of the unequal balance of power between the two German republics. At the same time, it became

clear that beyond the assumed commonalities of a shared *ethnos* loomed a large cultural gap. The foundational narratives that articulated the identities of these two groups were shaped by a forty-five year-long process of socialization and ritual reenactment (Jozwiak and Mermann 786). They supported a stable paradigm of imagining the Other through the lenses of political distinctions, thus downplaying the imaginary construction of the nation along ethnic lines in favor of the idea of a more contractual view of the nation, where the contract was with an ideology rooted in a different worldview, a different set of values, and ultimately a radically different understanding of modernity and of history.

After four decades anchored in the ideology of the West, the FRG emerged firmly rooted in a particular teleology in which modernization was synonymous with the transition to capitalism and with the process of westernization of the entire Europe. By contrast, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, East Germany had a quite a different reading of the future, one where the official trajectory of the promised modernity rejected the myth of westernization as the pinnacle of civilization, and where western consumerism and capitalism were signifiers of decadence and decay, rather than of unquestionable progress. These two competing versions of modernity and progress came face to face, albeit on unequal terms, as during the year that the film covers, the possibility of an alternative history seemed open, rooted in the interplay of these two distinct readings of modernity. However, as reunification approached, it became clear that the utopian socialist project of equality, communality, and state-sponsored welfare was to be replaced by the triumphant western liberal capitalism and its philosophy of consumerism, individualism, and self-reliance. Like elsewhere in the post-communist world, the mirage of a West imperfectly known and exoticized by years of underexposure and thwarted curiosity prevailed.

Assimilation is essentially a unidirectional process, devoid of a full cross-cultural exchange or of cultural diffusion. It is instead driven by the desire for unity and homogeneity, for these are the indispensable ingredients in the creation of a coherent nation-state. Postcolonial theory provides a useful conceptual tool for understanding the new relationship between East and West Germany, as well as Western cultural attitudes towards the former.³ While all of the countries of the former Soviet block experienced to a certain degree the shock of the transition to capitalism, the case of East Germany is particularly interesting because of the double process of colonization and assimilation it had undergone in less than a century: first, through sovietization, which virtually created the GDR, colonized it, and brought it into the Russian sphere of influence, then through Westernization, by being subsumed to the larger West-German political and cultural sphere, and literally eliminated as an independent political entity.⁴

Goodbye Lenin!

The films produced in post 1990 Germany range from productions which embrace the nationalistic project and retrieve the past as consumable images, to postmodern road movies, whose rootless characters are driven by an unstoppable wanderlust, and whose plots seem to elude the problem of national identity altogether. As a general trend, the motif of these post-reunification films seems to be the constant dilemma posed by the choice between 'nostalgia' and 'rootlessness' as dominant modes (Kapczynski 97). Another category is represented by those films made in the West after reunification, and which choose to portray the East not as a hostile Other, but rather as a lost part of the Self, an authentic old fashioned repository of Germanness,

a new German *heimat*, a pre-industrial fantasy world, ultimately an early example of the orientalizing of the East in Western-produced films (Cooke 107).

Somewhere in between the two, *Goodbye Lenin!* emerges as a successful representative of the host of post-reunification films that try to come to terms with the upheavals of the Reunification. The films *Sonnenallee* (Leander Haußmann 1999) and *Berlin Is in Germany* (Hannes Stöhr 2001) are the best-known examples of this new trend. Unlike its predecessors, however, *Goodbye Lenin!* does not strive to capture a restorative form of nostalgia, but rather focuses on a reflective one. It does not try to recreate the past in detail, but instead cherishes its fragments in the context of the present (Boym xviii). And if, as Svetlana Boym puts it, nostalgia is a form of mourning not only the past, but also the loss of alternative futures, then *Goodbye Lenin!* offers a compelling example of the reflective energies at work within the phenomenon of nostalgia, and a powerful articulation of those squandered alternative futures. Wolfgang Becker's 2003 creation received critical accolades worldwide and gave new impetus to the phenomenon of Ostalgia. It was garnered with prizes ranging from the Blue Angel Award for Best European Film, Berlin 2003 to the prestigious Prix César for the Best European Film in 2004. Not surprisingly, it enjoyed tremendous success in Germany: within one year from its release, it grossed 37,817,307 Euros, had an audience of over six million people in Germany alone and was Germany's entry for the Foreign Oscars in 2004 (IMDB).

At a first glance, the film might be included in the category of 'nostalgic' films, yet the GDR it depicts is neither pre-industrial, nor a treasure of long-lost Germanness. If anything, the film offers an alternative ideal of German national identity in the contemporary world, fraught with postmodern contradictions. Throughout the film, the director's use of the past remains multifaceted and multilayered. *Goodbye Lenin!* revisits the pre-Wende age to find answers to

present questions, and refuses to orientalize the East by projecting upon it Western ideals of true Germanness, or by exoticizing its communist past and shaping it as a utopia of communality and social harmony. At the same time, the film is an example of the manner in which the East German past can be emplotted and consumed by Western audiences. Written and directed by a West German, with a West German actor (Daniel Brühl) and an East German actress (Katrin Sass) in the leading roles, *Goodbye Lenin!* articulates a complex form of longing which does not shirk from depicting the somber aspects of life in socialist GDR, while offering a subtle critique of globalization and imperialism, and rejecting an unproblematic glorification of the West.

What is perhaps even more important, *Goodbye Lenin!* has the merit of starting an honest dialogue about the GDR's communist legacy. Dominik Graf, the director of *The Red Cockatoo* (2005), another film about the communist past of the GDR that came out two years after *Goodbye Lenin!* comments: "Before that the whole topic of the GDR was covered only in television dramas about the Stasi. And then came *Goodbye Lenin!* and everyone was quite ready to turn things around and look at how cute and sweet the GDR was as well. But that is also not the whole story. Compared to 15 years ago, people are much more ready now to look in more detail at what East Germany originally wanted to achieve, and why things went wrong" (McGuinness). This new, anti-Ostalgic trend announced by Graf culminated in recent years with the film *The Lives of Others* which explores the dark side of GDR's socialist legacy, and which won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 2006.

The plot of *Goodbye Lenin!* conflates personal and national history, thus drawing a parallel between individual and social, between biography and histories. It focuses on the life of a German teenager, Alex, living in East Berlin during the last years of the communist era. On 7 October 1989, his mother, Christiane, who in the first part of the film is portrayed somewhat

schematically as a devout and active socialist, is on her way to a party festivity. As she leaves her cab because of the demonstration, Christiane sees her son arrested among the protesters, and falls into a coma that lasts eight months. During her coma, the Berlin Wall comes down, Germany reunifies, and their entire old lifestyle becomes obsolete. Practically overnight the ideological Other beyond the Iron Curtain is converted from foe into friend, and a new nation-building process begins. Christiane's passing out at the moment that marks the beginning of the dismantling of the socialist republic conveniently spares her a direct confrontation with a series of traumatic changes. When she regains consciousness, because of her precarious state, Christiane's physician informs the family that the slightest shock could kill her. Ignoring the protests of his older sister, Ariane, Alex decides to keep his mother from knowing the truth about the fall of the Berlin Wall. With the reluctant help of his family, friends and neighbors, he embarks upon a Don Quixote-like crusade against a reality that will stubbornly poke its head into the miniature GDR he creates in his mother's room.

The straightforward structure of the plot enables Wolfgang Becker to construct the film's central narrative by addressing the inconsistencies from the polarizing juxtaposition of two GDR attitudes towards the West German republic—the undeniable attraction towards the West in the years before 1989, with the undeniable nostalgia for the East, after 1990, epitomized in the concepts of *Republikflucht*⁵ and Ostalgia. As the story progresses, we discover that Alex's father defected to the West, tired of political persecutions at work. Even Christiane's persona as devout socialist and party zealot turns out to be more nuanced than expected when we find out that she too was going to follow her husband in the West. Although she did not have the courage to go through with the original plan, the attraction was nevertheless there. From this point of view, the paradox of the very existence of Ostalgia in a society that for forty-five years pined to be part of

the world beyond the Wall is hinted at early in the story, and developed in different ways throughout the plot. While early in the film, the father's departure for the West is labeled by Alex's narrative voice as 'treason,' in a later scene, Alex expresses his disgust with the hypocrisy of the regime and is chastised by his mother: "What do you want to do? Emigrate? Nothing will change if everyone emigrates." As the story unfolds, however, we notice the change in Alex. He becomes more open to a nostalgic remembering of the GDR, while creatively dealing with the collective changes that the Wende brought about, but also with the truths he discovers about his own family—about his father's flight West, his own mother's plans to follow, and the broken family bond.

In *Goodbye Lenin!* longing for the past has the function of creating a communal national identity which serves as a mode of resistance to the western takeover. At the same time, the plot strives to capture the reactions of the citizens of the former GDR to the Wende through the stories of the entire family, who in this context comes to symbolize the very GDR nation: Christiane's coma evokes the four decades of GDR past, eradicated, rendered illegitimate, by the rewriting of history (Hillman 227). Alex's sister, Ariane, reacts to the change in a pragmatic, realistic fashion. She accepts and embraces the new order, replaces the old furniture and abandons her studies for a job at Burger King. In the bigger economy of the film, her attraction to the West mirrors that of those who rejected the old regime and fled west on the wake of the reunification. Alex's approach is the idealistic reaction, desperately trying to salvage—and beautify—the past in a bubble in his mother's room. His longing for the East is articulated at the level of the plot by his continuous search for GDR memorabilia. It reflects his neighbors', as well as his old teacher's pessimistic attitude about the West, hinted at through the constant references to "the republic in ruins," and to "the west wind" that "whirled Mother's eastern

money around” (Jozwiack and Mermannn 791). Even the private lives of the two siblings symbolically hint at two diametrically opposed poles of attraction: Ariane’s new boyfriend is Rainer, a Wessie, while Alex is smitten with Lara, the beautiful Russian nurse whom he meets during the ill-fated march of October 7, and with whom he fortuitously meets again in the hospital where his mother is taken.

Alex is the focalizer of the story and the narrator of what amounts to a personal take on an event that shaped the history of two countries. In his narrative, the past lives into the present by shaping the way the characters see themselves and the world around them. The past in *Goodbye Lenin!* is negotiated in the present by means of stereotypical images and elements that used to be part of the old collective self-definitions, and which are now recuperated and reworked into a new image. “The transition within an identity that was ideologically antagonistic to the very entity into which it came to be subsumed creates a flux that spawns the main character’s elaborate project of historical charades” (Hillman 4). Thus, *Goodbye Lenin!* dramatizes the story of Alex’s attempt to cope with the aggressive otherness of the West suddenly taking over his and his mother’s lives, and showcases the GDR’s collective use of Ostalgia as an attempt to negotiate the cultural and political subservience of the post-Wende world.

The film subtly captures the ambivalent relationship of the East to its Western counterpart early in the story: on the one hand, the West was the realm of the ideological Other, enemy of the class, corrupt, decadent embodiment of bourgeois values. On the other, it was the mythical land of freedom but also of affluence, home of foreign products that represented the embodiment of consumer desires. Both readings were rooted in the exoticization of the Western Other, in the lack of proper information about daily life in the West, other than the TV shows

illegally viewed, and the advertisements for coveted products that those very shows brought in the socialist homes of GDR. Before the fall of the Wall, the Otherness of West Germany was both threatening and appealing. At the official level, the Western Other was portrayed as a negative counterpart of the Eastern Self, whereas at the level of the private lives of the individuals, the West represented a utopian Other, a cornucopia of consumerism, luring more and more people with its promise of unfettered individualism and freedom. *Goodbye Lenin!* masterfully captures the radical reversal of this reading of the West on the wake of 1989.

By contrast, in the post-*Wende* period, overexposure to life in the West, combined with the disappearance of old institutions, products, social networks and lifestyles, helped the memory of past life in the East to acquire utopian features. The disenchanted Easterners, confronted with the hardships of everyday life in the West started to look back and idealize the East they had and lost. While before 1989 the utopian Western Other had a tangible existence, separated from the realm of the Self by the physical reality of the Wall, after the Reunification, the GDR past acquired the same halo of perfection that used to accompany evocations of life in the West. We are dealing with two symmetrical constructions of the Other: on the one hand, during communism, the mythical West that was merely glimpsed at, invented, beautified and longed for, and yet that had a very tangible existence across the border. On the other, after the *Wende*, the mythical East is longed for, remembered, but no longer has a signified. Thus, in a way, following the absorption of East Germany into West Germany, as the GDR past has become a signifier without a signified, the same past consequently became open to invention and to remembering, according to the compensatory needs of the present, thus paving the way to the simulacrum. On the wake of the dismantling of the ideological boundary between East and West Germany, the relationship between the Eastern Self and the Western Other necessarily entails a process of

domestication of (Western) otherness, in the attempt to recapture the ‘sameness’ within the former ‘enemy of the class.’

At this point, dealing with otherness brings us to the second element of the film’s deconstruction of Ostalgia. *Goodbye Lenin!* captures two levels of the new national identity: by converting the otherness of the West into a more palatable form of difference, and by remembering the GDR past (n)ostalgically—that is, by embellishing it. Thus, the past as simulacrum represents a crucial element in the dilemma of post-1989 national identity. In the world of *Goodbye Lenin!*, Alex’s narrative offers a counterfactual segment of history, creating an alternative chronology for the GDR. The medium of film and the centrality of television to the plot enable the director to successfully juxtapose this counterfactual history with the characters’ ‘real’ history. As a result, the simulated nature of the events to which Christiane is exposed is contrasted to the viewer’s knowledge and expectations. In *Simulation and Simulacra* (1994), Jean Baudrillard outlines four types of relationships between image or representation and reality. At a first level, the image is a reflection of a profound reality; at a second, it masks and denatures a profound reality, then it masks the absence of a profound reality, until, ultimately, there is no relationship to reality whatsoever. In this last case, the image or the representation has become a pure simulacrum. In Baudrillard’s words, “representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real...Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference.” Furthermore, Baudrillard noted the tendency of simulation to take over reality: “Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6). *Goodbye Lenin!* constructs an elaborate simulacrum of the

past throughout the story, which takes over Christiane's (and Alex's) reality. Thus, early in the film, when planning to bring his mother home from the hospital, Alex breaks the radio antenna, announcing the absolute control that he exerts throughout the film over the news his mother gets from the outside. Then, with the help of Dennis, he gets hold of old tapes of news from the GDR news show *Aktuelle Kamera*, which he plays on a VCR hidden in the adjoining room. It is debatable whether these old newscasts would qualify as accurate representations of reality, since, as Dennis ironically points out when he suggests Alex to use them, "it was always the same old crap"—the voice of the party shaping the reality of the citizens. However, when Alex shows them to Christiane, this old news projected on the TV screen masks the absence of the past reality, the dismantling of Christiane's world, while at the same time recycling old information that stands in for a disappearing referent.

The domestication of the otherness of the West corresponds to the film's total reworking of reality. The shows Christiane watches every night are no longer simply anachronistic news from a different moment in time; they become original creations. The beginning of this stage in the movie is marked by Christiane's birthday party, organized by Alex in the most traditional communist style, with pioneer songs, speeches and applause, yet which is disrupted unexpectedly by the unfolding of a huge Coca Cola banner on the block of flats outside Christiane's window. Coca Cola, an obvious symbol of the capitalist West, emerges unexpectedly in Alex's simulacrum. Yet the illusion he creates for his mother is not disrupted, as an explanation for this intrusion is provided by Alex and Dennis's 'evening news'—the first original creation where the two use the format and the language of the old newscasts to explain contemporary (and unexplainable) details that Christiane is confronted to. The story about the recent opening of a Coca Cola factory in East Germany announces the "discovery" of the fact

that the popular American drink had been in fact a socialist invention all along. Coca Cola as a symbol of the West is reclaimed and incorporated in the Ostalgic socialist universe. This episode announces a new level in the film's manipulation of reality, which corresponds to Baudrillard's second stage in the production of the simulacrum—the stage where the image masks and denatures the existing reality.

Goodbye Lenin! successfully foregrounds the centrality of visual technologies in imagining Germany's past and future, in a new country that itself was "a new regime of representation" (Kapczynski 83). From Alex's job at a TV repair shop, to his second job, as installer of satellite dishes and harbinger of globalization and modernity to the drab apartment buildings of East Berlin, all the way to his and Dennis's fake newscasts, the film abounds in episodes that testify to the power of images in shaping the way the characters understand the world surrounding them. Christiane's case is therefore merely a more radical version of a process that was ongoing throughout the old GDR. Gradually, the doctored newscasts she watches every day lose all relationship with reality, and they became part of Alex's unwitting utopian project of creating a GDR that never existed. The culminating point of this stage in the film is the moment when simulation and reality come face to face, and the simulacrum has to undergo the test of unmediated experience outside the confines of the apartment. As Christiane gets up from her bed and leaves the building, she finds herself facing an unrecognizable Berlin: West Berliners moving in their block of flats, billboards lining the streets, new Western cars parked around, and an ominous bust of Lenin looming in the sunset, carried away by a helicopter. At this point in the story everything seems to contradict the reassuring illusion of continuity that Alex created, and the audience might expect a revelation of the truth, and an end to the charade. Yet Becker takes the simulacrum one step further, and, in Baudrillard's terms, the simulation of a utopian GDR

envelops the act of representation as a whole. Meaning is imposed externally on Christiane's unmediated experience of reality, just as it was imposed on images selected from old newscasts. In the evening, the newscast announces the growing numbers of western refugees seeking asylum in the east, trying to free themselves from the dehumanizing world of capitalism. In Becker's postmodern world, reality can be emplotted into whatever his hero wants.

From a readjusting of reality to incorporate the isolated symbols whose otherness thus gets tamed, the film turns into a rewriting of history itself. After assimilating these symbols of the West, Alex's simulated GDR will assimilate the West altogether. As a result the film becomes the story of a readjustment, not only of the Self to the Other, but of the Self to a reality that is no longer its own. In the miniature GDR created in her apartment, which is at the same time a miniature replica of the media and consumer society the East has entered after 1989, Christiane is caught up in the play of images, spectacles, and simulacra that have less and less relationship to an outside, to the external, German "reality." Significantly, even for Alex the very concepts of the social, the political, or even the "reality" no longer seem to have any meaning: "I realized that truth was a rather dubious concept, easily adapted to how Mother saw the world," confesses Alex on the wake of his first success at manipulating images. His observation, confirmed several times during the film, hints at the narcotized and mesmerized (as Baudrillard would put it) media-saturated collective consciousness on both sides of the Wall, fascinated and dependent on images. The ambivalent role of the (socialist) *Aktuelle Kamera* as gospel of truth is particularly clear. In the totalitarian world of the communist past, the Party controlled information, shaped events and put a spin on stories, enjoying a genuine "monopoly on opinion" by controlling radio, publishing houses and television. As elsewhere in the communist world, the news was "reformulated, censored, extended, or shortened by party executives" (Staab 106). Those that

lived these times learned how to decode the message, to read between the lines, and ultimately to adapt to a hegemonic language of power that made it that the very authenticity of images was doubtful, and truth became at best a relative concept. In this historical context, it is at least curious that Christiane never questions the veracity of the news, nor does she mention the possible bias that it may have. At the same time, in a strange translation of former socialist realities into the new post-Wende environment, Becker positions Christiane in a profoundly postmodern situation. The referent of her world, the outside reality, disappears; at the same time, it is Alex that now holds the monopoly on opinion that the party had. As simulations and simulacra proliferate in Alex's story, events come to refer only to themselves: a play of mirrors reflecting images projected from other mirrors onto the television screen and ultimately onto Christiane's mind, because, even when confronted with reality, she refers back to the previous set of images (and meanings) provided by the newscasts.

Through Becker's story we are witnessing the enactment of Marshal McLuhan's famous dictum 'the medium is the message.' The medium, in this case the TV newscasts, literally creates the events: Christiane's frame of reference is constantly constructed and validated by television. In Alex and Dennis's fake newscasts, images lose their referent. The Other remains stereotyped and recognizable, strangely familiar. In the painful transition from the past to the present, its presence grants coherence, not only to a threatening West, but also to the set of references that help Alex and his mother struggle to find their way in the maze of a history that overwhelmed them. Nevertheless, as Baudrillard's reading of McLuhan correctly notes, there is always the potential for manipulation of this event by the medium. In his essay "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" Baudrillard commented on the relationship between simulacra and media: "...there is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is ...the implosion of the medium

itself in the real, the implosion *of the medium and of the real* in a sort of hyperreal nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined” (Baudrillard 82). In Becker’s film, the medium is indeed manipulated, and the real is transformed by using the impact of the medium as form.

As events develop, the story follows the transition from signs that dissimulate something (not telling Christiane the truth about the fall of the Wall), to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing (no more party, no more country, no more GDR money). The first stage of the transformation evokes a “theology of truth and secrecy” (Baudrillard 6), when all those involved in Christiane’s life plot to keep the truth away from her. With the second stage, marked by the unfolding of the Coca-Cola flag on the building in front of Christiane’s window, we enter the stage of simulacra and simulation, when there is no way to separate the false from the true. Alex himself is experiencing the transition from an ideology of power, to a rewriting of a scenario of power: as the story progresses, the viewer sees him both wielding power over his mother’s understanding of reality, and simulating the former structure of power that held her world into place. If ideology camouflages reality by signs, Alex’s simulation of a network of power relations that no longer exist corresponds to a short-circuit of reality and to its reduplication by signs—a simulacrum already announced by a symbolic process of labeling new products by old labels. This process will be continued and expanded throughout the film, including new levels and acquiring a larger scope, to the extent that for Christiane, the GDR socialist past becomes a label used to render palatable a brand new product—the post-Wende Germany.

The grand finale is represented by an inverted story of the unification. A seemingly bewildered Christiane watches on TV images of the invasion of westerners flocking into East Germany followed by the resignation of Erich Honecker and the instatement of Sigmund Jähn,

Alex's childhood hero, as the president of an East Germany that was finally opened to the west. This tour de force of simulation includes the full range of image manipulations used in the film so far: from the imposition of a different reading on the actual footage of the fall of the Berlin (it is the Westerners that are desperate to move East), to recycling old news, such as the scene where Honecker is shown stepping down, to a staged speech by Jähn. The simulacrum envelops reality itself. The festivities celebrating the reunification and the one-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall become, in Alex's interpretation, the anniversary of the GDR republic and a collective celebration of the opening of the borders. This rewriting of history, in which past and present are forcibly made to overlap, is paralleled by a manipulation of time itself, symbolically rendered by Alex's gesture of tearing off pages from the calendar in his mother's hospital room. In one of the last scenes, bathed in a red glow and resonating with the bells tolling outside, Christiane watches from her bed the firework displays, whereby Alex's fictional world is wrought into the real world. The director denies Alex, as well as his audience, any glimpse into Christiane's real state of mind, although we are aware that Lara had told her the truth. Three days later, Christiane dies. In a final scene, framed by Alex's retelling of the story, her ashes are sent in space, in another gesture that evokes the fireworks of the earlier celebration. The occasion brings together all the actors in Alex's charade, willing to be present for the ceremony which defies the rules of both East and West Germany, perhaps hinting at a commonality of rebellion that transcends borders and nostalgias. However, as the film draws to a close, the viewers realize that Alex's simulacrum has caught up with him as, from Alex's voiceover, it becomes clear that he ignores that his mother died knowing the truth.

The objects

Another significant level at which Becker's deconstruction of Ostalgia is performed is that of the use of everyday objects. They are used to evoke a past which, as we saw earlier, is not necessarily accurately remembered, but rather reconstructed in an idealized form—which is congruent with Ostalgia. Ordinary products and artifacts play a crucial role in the invocation of a distinct, East German past, in the asymmetrical context of remembering of the new Germany. The craze for East German brands paralleled the unequal balance of power in contemporary Germany. Immediately after 1990, the drab socialist products could not face competition with their western counterparts and became obsolete. GDR citizens fell prey to a collective shopping frenzy which was common to all former communist countries. By consuming western products, these societies were also appropriating the idea of the West, the freedom and capitalism that had been denied them for half a century. This form of consumption, dubbed by sociologist Peter Berger 'sacramental consumption.' had two results. On the one hand, it led to the rapid disappearance of local, eastern products for which there was no demand. It also triggered a discourse of socialist backwardness, illustrated by East German inadequate products and the seemingly insatiable appetite for Western products and mores, a discourse which originated in the West and which was part of the more general devaluing of the GDR (Berdahl 1995). On the other hand, in the long run, the frenzy of sacramental consumerism contributed to the erosion of the myth of the West, and was replaced by non-sacramental consumption. The Ostalgie valorization of the East German past, and implicitly of the old GDR products and brands, grew as a challenge to the constant undermining of the very foundation of Easterners' identity. It dramatically affected the symbolic value of GDR products in the new cultural context,

converting those who used them into active members of “an imagined consumer community” (Kapczynski 80).

By the mid 1990s, the fetishization of eastern products had become a widespread and profitable industry. Ironically, Western companies started marketing Eastern brands, due to their profitability and to the increased demand. Now the old GDR products were the ones consumed sacramentally: they stood for the entire East, now lost and relegated to the dustbin of history. In this process, the old brands took on new meanings because of the different context they were placed in. “They thus illustrate not only the way in which memories are an interactive, malleable, and highly contested phenomenon, but also the processes through which things become informed with a remembering—and forgetting—capacity” (Berdahl 198). At the same time, the process reversed the pre-*Wende* relationship between the ideal of quality and the products associated with it, turning upside down the assumptions about that which was ‘real’ and what was ‘inauthentic,’ simulated or imitated. Before the reunification, western products were invariably considered to be the real ones, the authentic, as opposed to the ‘fake,’ ‘simulated’ socialist ones. After the reunification the relationship changed, and the disappeared Ossi, (East German), products started to bear the halo of authenticity (Bach 549). Ultimately, “the products from the old GDR context became associated with a form of symbolic capital once reserved for the seemingly superior products of the West insofar as they were thought to express an authentic, unalienated relation of self to product” (Bach 551). This illusion of authenticity that moved from the West and the products associated with the West, onto the realm of the Eastern past can be said to have contributed to the Ostalgie fascination with GDR objects and hides behind the ostentatious consumption of old GDR brands.

Jean Baudrillard deconstructs the empiricist and Marxist notions that ascribe a product value based on its usefulness or on the value of labor invested in it. By replacing 'labor' with 'consumption,' Baudrillard places the object within the context of production and exchange, by emphasizing its sign-exchange value, rather than its labor-exchange value. Thus, the value of a product is not established based on needs and their satisfaction, but upon the ideas of social presentations and signification—what the objects signify within that particular sign system represented by society. Consumption becomes one of the determining factors of our society, because it creates its own code, which, in turn, regulates social relations (Bloom 233). In *Goodbye Lenin!*, everyday objects function as cultural markers in the complex semiotic landscape of post-*Wende* Germany. The personal connections that members of the imagined community of GDR consumers forged with their products in the past helps to evoke both an individual bond with the group identity being reactivated, and allows for a subjective remembering of the past. In the Ostalgie environment of Alex's world, objects are used and displayed as much for their sign-value as for their use-value, re-working in a subversive way the former's crucial role in the contemporary consumer society. Alex feeds his mother and keeps alive the memory of the motherland in the same gesture, thus emphasizing the deep symbolic—and real—purpose of the use of Eastern products for the Ossi community.

The invasion of western products and brands, and the virtual disappearance of old products from the shelves of supermarkets in East Germany, signal the shift in the sign value of the lost brands. For instance, the value of the pickles Alex frantically searches for is no longer established based on actual needs and their satisfaction, but upon the ideas of social presentations and signification. In the new sign system represented by the post-*Wende* society, the continuous use of the same brands preserves a certain level of reassuring continuity, and helps to maintain

the illusion for Christiane. Significantly, where the authentic product is missing, the labels and empty jars will do. Part of Alex's daily routine involves repackaging western products into eastern containers. In fact, by the end of the film, the only authentic aspect of the former GDR that Alex collects are the labels. They become signifiers, floating on a sea of signifieds, acquiring new meanings as they go along. For Christiane, they represent the props for maintaining a reassuring illusion of continuity up until the final moments of the film. For Alex, they are the stable elements beyond which he can go on embellishing the memory of his defunct GDR, while for the more pragmatic Ariane and Lara, they are useless masks, merely camouflaging an elaborate lie.

Brands and consumer products therefore help to construct symbolic borders between the Self and the Other, in the absence of the old political borders, now dismantled. At the same time, the West German takeover of the GDR is synonymous with globalization. The victory of the West is symbolically illustrated by the succession of Coca Cola trucks obscuring from view the changing of the guard at the War Memorial in Berlin, while the first encounter of Alex with a 'foreign culture' is represented by his purchase of a hamburger and a visit to an adult video store. Affluence and consumerism are trademarks of a West that is creeping inside the cocoon Alex has built for his mother, and the GDR products are the bulwark against this invasion. Ultimately, the fact that Christiane does not notice the difference between the old east German products (present in the film only through their labels), and what she consumes suggests that the contemporary fetishization of consumer products from the GDR is empty of content, being more about form than about content (Cooke 134).

Material culture, like language, functions as a sign system, which allows the reader to interpret consumption as a network of symbols rooted in the specificities of a particular society,

and which also enables the reader to infer the ideology of that particular society. The use of specific objects highlights distinctive traits of the ideology of GDR, as it is retrospectively remembered and/or imagined in *Goodbye Lenin!* The nature of consumer culture under socialism was quite different from its western equivalent. In the West, the brand represented a guarantee of certain qualities. In the East, such associations did not exist, and Eastern consumers often had to construct their own product identities through personal experience (Bloom 235–241). The use of GDR products in the film showcases the Ostalgie use of GDR products which decontextualizes them, imposing new meanings and connotations onto old brand names. Alex's extensive recycling of old clothes and furniture, old jars and labels ironically hints at the larger process of recycling of GDR products that Ostalgie triggered: in the post-Wende world, East and West both consume the GDR past, converted overnight into a consumable product, successfully associated with brand recognition. Thus, by creating an idealized past to be cherished, mourned, and consumed by both East and West, *Goodbye Lenin!* offers an ironic comment on how Ostalgie at the same time resists and is complicit in the consumerist mode of production.

Conclusion

Wolfgang Becker's film represents a powerful statement on the healing potential of a redemptive view of the GDR past—hence of the simulacrum created—that emphasizes precisely those values that are deemed worthy of salvaging from elimination and of integration in the new collective German identity. From this point of view, *Goodbye Lenin!* is an example of 'productive' identity formation rooted in reflective nostalgia. It does not seek refuge in the past, but rather tries to use it constructively in order to build a viable new German identity for the future. It "highlights the hybrid status of the very unified state itself, a state which is made up of

two different but interlocked cultural traditions, both of which must be understood and respected, if inner unity is to be achieved” (Cooke 128). The film intentionally uses the trope of Ostalgia to initiate a re-writing of the recent past that includes and assimilates the West German Other into the East German Self, by reversing the dynamics of the historic events that followed 1990. There is a clear symmetry between this particular aspect of the plot and the creation of the film itself as cultural product of 2003 Germany. A West-German (Becker) explains away (and internalizes) a controversial Eastern phenomenon (Ostalgie) by telling the story of his East-German hero (Alex) who explains away (and internalizes) the West in his fictional reworking of history for the benefit of his mother.

The constant core of one’s identity is intrinsically bound to personal memory, but also to the collective past that frames this personal memory. In *Goodbye Lenin!* Alex is telling a personal story, while at the same time narrating the fall of the Wall twice: once, corresponding to the actual occurrence, and a second time, for the benefit of Christiane. By changing the direction of the story line, he assumes the gaze of the West, sidestepping his subordinate role and experiencing vicariously the thrill of being on the colonizer’s side. In this way, Becker’s plot shrewdly turns the tables on history, reversing the contemporary power balance between the East and the West, and displacing the western teleology which places western values and lifestyle at the pinnacle of civilization. Becker’s counterfactual history also enables the viewer to explore history from the vantage point of the Easterner, an exploit even more significant if we remember that the collapse of communism had made the liberal thinkers of the western world proclaim that mankind had reached the end of its ideological development (Hillman 226).

At the same time, *Goodbye Lenin!* showcases the lack of accuracy of past representations of GDR by Ostalgia at multiple levels. Both mother and motherland are changed in the process

of remembering. Although Alex is aware that the GDR he creates for his mother is the GDR he would have liked to have had, rather than the authentic one, against which we see him protesting in the beginning of the film, by the end, the viewers realize that Alex, the narrator and focalizer of the story, does not know a lot about his mother and about the real choices she was forced to make. He also ignores that she dies knowing the truth about the reunification. Christiane emerges as a far more complex character than the passionate activist type that Alex creates in the first part of his story. As the viewer gradually realizes, she did consider joining her husband in the West, but was afraid to do it; she hid her husband's letters for years, and ultimately, she dies knowing that the Wall collapsed, but we cannot know whether she is happy or saddened by the news. In a way, to Alex she is just as invented as his ideal republic is. Her willingness to play along in Alex's charade may indicate that she understood Alex's deeper need to believe that he was able to save and protect his mother and his motherland from the annihilating pressure of western modernity. At the same time, it hints at the extent to which Alex's long farewell to the old country and to a significant part of his life is conditioned by his illusion that his mother was a true believer in the ways of that old country, a devout communist whom the news of the reunification would have killed instantly.

Alex's fairy-tale socialism, as articulated in the last scenes of the film, and particularly in Jähn's speech, lends itself to a critique of both political systems as they existed in reality. It suggests a possible constructive legacy that the defunct GDR can carry through into the reunified Germany – the alternative worldview, a possible surrogate for the alternative futures that the reunification denied GDR. The survival of socialist ideas among East German and West German intellectuals, as well as the idealized view of socialist East Germany as a more communal society, betray the hope that there might be something worth salvaging from the old socialist

project—a possible and useful corrective to Western consumer culture, as well as a potential element of reconciliation and starting point for a common German identity (Cooke 16). The Ostalgie choice of one form of colonization over another goes in parallel with a constant process of re-imagining the past, of excising its negative parts, of re-emplotting East German identity and of rendering it all preferable to the present. In Alex's counterfactual history, the values of the socialist East are desirable and sought after by masses of Westerners disenchanted with capitalism and consumerism. Thus, of the two competing ideologies meeting at the foot of the Berlin Wall, in Alex's alternative master narrative of the German recent past, it is the second trajectory of modernity that wins out in the end – the socialist utopia of communality, frugality and equality. By inverting the triumphalism of the West, by assuming the vantage point of the Western Other and by turning the tables on history, his rewriting of the fall of the Berlin Wall domesticates the otherness of western ideology, and represents a poignant example of productive identity at work.

Goodbye Lenin! deconstructs Ostalgia as a cultural trend, and rends overt the process whereby the understanding of the past is shaped by present needs, The simulacrum of socialism with a human face, for which Alex longs, attempts to retrieve the utopian socialist project of East German intellectuals. In Paul Cooke's words, "by idealizing the mother's utopian impulses, the film attempts to recuperate these intellectuals' position" (133). Becker however subverts a simplistic reading of these models. On the one hand, as Alex's old teacher explains, Christiane was too idealistic to be acceptable to the school management. On the other, by the end of the film, neither Alex nor the viewers can be certain whether her devotion to the party was a natural reaction to the personal and ideological betrayal represented by the flight of her husband, or merely a clever defense mechanism. Since she and her husband had planned his flight together,

after his departure, retaliation from the state police would have been expected. Christiane's overt commitment to the cause of the party could have been the only way available to protect herself and her children from future persecution by the Stasi. Just as the past is supposed to help illuminate the present, the same past can undergo an entirely radical reading in the light of present revelations and discoveries. Because of the constant parallel between personal and collective memory, the doubt that Becker insinuates in the master narrative that Alex constructs opens the possibility that the very base of the Ostalgic project in general is faulty. Genuinely nostalgic accounts of a GDR past can be tainted by subjectivity, and dramatically influenced by the fact that the whole picture was more complex and more multifaceted than the individual memory can grasp. Thus, the tension between the imagining subject and the imagined object represents the fundamental level at which Wolfgang Becker's film brings into question the validity of Ostalgia as a form of nostalgia based on false assumptions and incomplete recollections.

Looking back nostalgically to the socialist age in reaction to the brutal entry into the global world is a phenomenon common to all the post-Communist countries of the Eastern Bloc, and different versions of Ostalgia are beginning to appear from Russia to Lithuania, Poland or Romania.⁶ Nevertheless, the GDR case remains unique in the problematic combination between nostalgia about the past, and nostalgia about a lost national identity which is inextricably associated with that past. The idealized potential that the film explores is not to be found in the realities of the defunct republic, but in the failed utopian project it never lived to carry through. The image of the socialist past that *Goodbye Lenin!* proposes bears little if any, resemblance to the reality. We are dealing, in Baudrillard's terms, with a pure simulacrum. But this apparent lack of referent is an assumed one. In its simulation of daily news, in the way the past both

explains and domesticates the disturbing and rapid changes in the present, in its use of past artifacts to constantly invoke the reassuring stability of a known environment, Alex's invention of the present for his mother parallels the workings of Ostalgia itself. His creative endeavor showcases the re-invention of the GDR legacy in reaction to the needs of the present, its use of images and objects taken from their original context, and whose current role is to evoke a collective past tinged with personal memories. By foregrounding this process and minutely recording its stages, Wolfgang Becker's film masterfully captures the Ostalgie transformation of the socialist national past—in Germany, but also potentially in other parts of Eastern Europe—into both commodity and simulacrum, laying bare the deep collective needs to which this phenomenon responds, and the healing potential it may have.

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Notes:

¹ Between 1990 and the present, old Ossi (East German) brands have been resuscitated, Ossi games have been invented and marketed, Ossi clubs, even hotels (renamed Ostels), as well as restaurants, have sprung. In 2003, inspired by the success of *Goodbye Lenin!*, a retrospective of GDR art filled the New National Gallery over the summer, soon after followed by other museum exhibitions. West German TV stations unearthed and rebroadcast East German TV shows that became trendy overnight in the fall of 2003, on the wake of the success of *Goodbye Lenin!*; Ostalgic websites are multiplying at a breathtaking pace, and travel agencies have started offering Ostalgia tours in Berlin. http://www.berlin-tourist-information.de/english/sightseeing/e_si_berlinprogramme_ostalgie.php (Retrieved July 30th 2007).

² Svetlana Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia aims to reconstruct the lost home in a new environment. By contrast, reflective nostalgia thrives in the feeling of longing itself, without having a productive goal. Boym argues that restorative nostalgia is at the core of all recent national and religious revivals, while reflective nostalgia is more interested in imagining different alternatives of reality (xviii).

³ In recent years postcolonial theories have begun to be considered a viable method in the study of other forms of dominance, particularly in the study of postcommunist realities. According to Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, the term postcolonial applies to all the culture affected by an imperial process. This reading of postcolonialism supposes the existence of one culture dominated by another culture. Consequently, postcolonial theories can prove relevant to analyzing the dynamics of former communist societies on the aftermath of the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc.

⁴ It is worth remembering that West Germany had its own share of colonial history under Allied occupation on the wake of the World War II. Only in September 1990 did this colonial episode officially end, when the Treaty of the Final Settlement was signed in Moscow, marking the final point in the Allied colonization of Germany. The multilayered colonialism of East and West Germany led in turn to a multilayered postcolonialism, which can explain the intricacies of German identity today.

⁵ *Republikflucht* refers to the flight from East Germany and the escape West, either in West Germany, or in any other Western country.

⁶ See recent publications dealing with the phenomenon: Olena Nikolayenko. "Contextual effects on historical memory: Soviet nostalgia among post-Soviet adolescents." Communist & Post-Communist Studies, Jun2008, Vol. 41 Issue 2, 243-259; Zoltan Barany. "The return of the left in East-Central Europe." Problems of Post-Communism, Jan/Feb95, Vol. 42, Issue 1; Serguei Alex Oushakine. "'We're nostalgic but we're not crazy': Retrofitting the Past in Russia." Russian Review. Jul2007, Vol. 66 Issue 3, 451-482; Zala Volčič. "Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia." Critical Studies in Media Communication. Mar. 2007, Vol. 24 Issue 1, 21-38.