“Walled prison, Walled Garden – or both”? The GDR and Images of Education: Film Media’s relationship to history and memory of the German Democratic Republic in the post-Wende Period

by

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Abstract

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This paper first examines the broad context of German historiography, then moves on to specific recollections of educational life in the GDR. The paper then attempts to link issues of education in the German Democratic Republic to larger forces of media, history and memory, arguing that both film makers and historians have viewed the nature of repression in German Democratic Republic in the post unification period in several limited ways. The latter part of the paper examines the several films of the post unification period, linking them to changes in the historiographical perceptions in GDR history, offering a model which suggests that while the German Democratic Republic was oppressive, it was also a nation where “normal life” was possible, that the whole GDR was as a metaphor, a kind of dysfunctional, educative state. It concludes with a caution for educators in their use of film as history.
Acknowledgements

For Krishpa – who always says I can – with love and thanks.
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Introduction

My paper began with a reading of a biography on a period of history about which I knew very little about – the post-World war Two German period and the role Konrad Adenauer played in the rehabilitation of Germany from pariah Nazi state, to resurrected Liberal state. Why and how did the most vicious state in Europe-arguably the world – Germany in 1945 – transition after 1949 in the western half into a modern democratic state anchored to the western alliance, and in the east, to a “democratic socialist state”? I had been taught to think of the GDR as a totalitarian state and so I initially began looking at the part educational structures and schools played in this resurrection of the two different states. The questions began to change, as there was so much written on the “democratization” process, that it did not seem very new or interesting to pursue this angle. Instead, I began to focus on the “Wende” or “turning point” period and German-German relations, perceptions of the GDR by historians, educators and even filmmakers. As I continued to read, I began to look more closely at the process of how historical perceptions of the nature of the GDR changed, of how German-German relations were centered on “identity constructions” and began thinking about the students experiences of school life, and how films produced just after the fall of the wall in Germany have altered our understanding of that place called the GDR – especially the GDR of the 1970’s 1980’s. One important problem that has arisen during the paper’s evolution is: “What is the relationship between film, identity, memory and history?”
However, as I read about the implementation of curricular and structural educational reforms, I discovered that although valuable, I did not much like reading about curriculum documents, and found many topics in educational curriculum documents preachy and dull – besides my German was not good enough to wade through them as primary sources. The record seemed pretty clear – in education the GDR after Wende, adopted Western educational structures and models and even administrative talent very widely, and the reasons were not much in dispute. The GDR was bankrupt financially, administratively and morally. So again my reading shifted to looking at rather broad Rankean questions such as: “What was the experience of life in GDR like?” The intersection of Cold War issues in the post war period, and my curiosity about the nature of oral history and hearing what the passage of time had done different people’s understanding of what they had gone through was piqued. As I read more about the GDR and education this paper has become a paper which is more about the intersection of how education is depicted in film, how film intersects with oral history, memory, and the process of how films in this period, shaped identity construction on the post Wende period.

Therefore in the first part of this paper, Part I, the larger historical forces at play in the post war period, are examined along with a few of the broader outlines of German history that contextualize the experiences and changes in the post World War Two period and the division of Germany into the FRG and GDR up to 1989. In a short article about shifts in Germans’ connections to their burdensome past, Geoffrey Eley writes brilliantly about the issues that arise just before, during and
after the integration of the two Germanys. If once can forgive the long quote, he
sums up many of the threads we shall examine when the two Germanys were
“united”.

Despite the exhilarating qualities of the civic revolution that brought the GDR to an
dez, and the exciting prospects 1989 offered of a democratic renewal, the imputed
demoralization of the population of the East quickly became a commonplace.
However we choose to conceptualize the process of state-making that ensued,
Easterners themselves experienced this as profoundly disempowering. It deprived
them of agency and shoveled them into a mold of political development and
institutional practices already established in the West German state. The experience
erased their separate identity in any positive or valued sense, leaving Easterners
with the newly acquired status of a marginal and backward population, a mere
adjunct to a dynamic and powerful existing state. Before 1989 the existence of two
distinct and mutually independent Germanys had often been voiced in a manner
acknowledging the already constituted forms of an East German identity. Yet the
option of treating the East as a genuine partner in the process of unification, in a
way that kept some place for the autonomies and separate histories of East German
development, was very quickly lost. Any genuine ‘third way’ may never have been
realistically available on some national-political or social scale, despite the hopes of
the revolutionary months and the Round Table discussions. But a large space
nonetheless remained between that maximalist possibility and the complete
obliteration of the GDR’s distinctive history. The universities and the educational
system more generally certainly constituted one of the many institutional sites
through which some negotiated transition respecting the space of the East Germans
might have occurred, but patently did not. ¹

What one begins to see is that East Germans were over run not just by Western
technical superiority, experiencing imposed institutional reforms, economic
dislocations, and a major shift in in diverse cultural institutions (like education, film
production and distribution and consumption) but the East Germans’ very
memories and identities of themselves were re-shaped by Westerners in historical
interpretations via literature and film.

Other key texts upon which this paper is based include, Gary Bruce’s excellent look at the Stasi, The Firm. I also valued the much more personal examination of how the Ministry for State Security (Mfs) or now more popularly known as the Stasi, influenced “everyday life” in Timothy Gorton Ash’s personal book, The File, where he interviews people who were often volunteers, victims (or both) recruited as “IM’s” to inform on him. Anna Funder’s look at similar accounts in her moving interviews was an interesting balance with her more emotionally charged work, Stasiland. Finally, this paper draws quite heavily on Mary Fulbrook’s excellent social history, The People’s State (although this work is less anecdotal and more of a seminal broad social history which helps “re-balance” of interpretations of the GDR).

While using these works as context, the process of examining how different films depict issues about German education and the experience of living in the GDR, this paper also tries to link Paul Betts’ very interesting essay, “Remembrance of Things Past: Nostalgia in West and East Germany, 1980-2000” to film and uses an examination of the role “objects” play in film, as well as historical thinking and memory. I have tried with this approach, to focus on how “education” and “educators” are depicted in films, while at the same time, tying my own and film “experts” interpretations, to the broader historical themes in German history of the GDR, to education via depictions of school life and teachers in film. Finally, I also try to demonstrate the link between how many of the post-Wende film’s use of objects-as-memory-markers, to link Paul Betts’ comments to the films, by drawing on his essay.
Perhaps one of the most vital things that developed over the course of the paper was how people “recalled” their times in the GDR. While this “oral recollection” in works like Garton Ash and Funder are important, I examine how schools and educators are portrayed in films and how does this link to concepts of identity construction or “Westalgie” and Ostalgie in German-German relations after the fall of the wall? How does film function to alter the intersection between history, identity and memory of the GDR? In a sense I thought about considering the entire GDR as itself a kind of gigantic secondary school – albeit a very dystopian and authoritarian one, one that functioned on the basis of shame, guilt, fear – with a healthy dose of self-interest and that this might be an interesting metaphor to reconsider the way in which to understand the history of the GDR. So again I shall first look first at the broad historical context of forces shaping the “two Germanys” and some of the larger historiographical trends in German history. Then an examination of how films in the Wende and post Wende period begin to re-work memories of the GDR and pick out several key films and how they became “battlegrounds” for GDR identity. To make an original contribution, I have tried to examine several films not just in term of broad “kultur” wars of German-German identity, but look at how each of these films deals with ideas about education and how each depicts educators in the GDR. In a sense I am haunted by a number of things that I explore in this paper. First, perhaps I was inspired by Michel Foucault who in my memory at least, broadly compares schools and prisons and their functions as similar since both value control and both develop similar techniques of regimenting behavior in modern society. Secondly, in what sense was the GDR continuous or discontinuous in terms of its
relation to a specifically German, “oppressive” totalitarian past? When the GDR ended, what happened to the people (in this case students and former teachers) in this “failed system? Thirdly, what is film’s relationship with the construction of history? How did film become an integral battleground in historical constructs about peoples’ personal recollections of the past? In a sense, with the increasing ability of the GDR state and its ability to monitor and “control” and thus bend its populace to its socialist mandate, in what sense did the GDR state film, particularly the STASI with its connections to educational and cultural organizations, contribute to a state control where the methods of control, while widespread and powerful, were less dependent on brutality and physical force, and more dependent on a kind of psychological coercion? While my aim to examine the experiences of changes in German education, and changes in the German-German relationship and how this is a process of the interaction between memory, history and film media, I shall try to touch on looking at the GDR as a kind of school. While I recognize that I am more of an educator than a “proper” historian, and I am chastened by Mark Twain’s adage which Gary Bruce uses at the conclusion to The Firm: “To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Perhaps because I have spent my life in schools I see the GDR not as a “progressive if misguided walled-in socialist paradise” nor as an “oppressive walled Stasi prison” but more as an oppressive dysfunctional school. However, this might offer an interesting way to think about identity issues in Germany in the Wende period, and German-German relations in the GDR just after the Wende, if we conduct this “thought experiment” and consider the GDR-as-dysfunctional school. But perhaps the essential question is: How have the films
produced in the 1990-2006 period been a part of the German identity construction debate, called “ostalgie”?

**Part I: After the wall: A “Sonderweg” German special path or normalization of German History?**

One of the difficulties in writing about German history, and about the Wende in particular, is that one’s view of the GDR is so loaded by geographical, and ideological considerations, that it is difficult to overcome one’s own ideological baggage of the GDR. In a lovely essay on the construction of Germany’s historical narratives, Sigrid Rossteutscher, a German sociologist and political scientist identifies six “competing narratives” in the transition of the GDR from a socialist to a part of western democratic world in the 1989-94 FRG/GDR period. What is salient about her work is how one sees some of these “narratives” as reflected in the changes wrought upon GDR. It is particularly interesting too, how she draws from another sociologist, Anthony Giddens, and suggests that history, as a social construct, “attempts to narrate a convincing story which binds the present to the past and the present to the future.”

She writes rather too confidently and too practically for an historian perhaps, when she suggests, “the construction of the past is the best predictor of the conception of the future.” While I may not agree with her certainty here, she makes a useful contribution by identifying a series of frameworks that mark interpretations for the transition period (Wende) and more particularly a set of narrative frameworks for the for sudden changes in GDR’s structures and policies,

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(the GDR’s abandonment of ideology and importation of western structures and expertise) when she suggests that a historical narrative’s success or failure is “determined largely by the social standing of its protagonists and consumers.”

While I find her use of the word “consumers” interesting (as I shall explore in relation to Betts, later) she does not reject the usefulness, or credibility of objective historical “evidence” entirely. Instead, she has a rather nice metaphor for historical research, calling it a “huge quarry providing empirical proof for highly diverging [narrative] accounts.” Where things get interesting is in her contention that certain narratives are accepted while others are marginalized when the narrative’s “life course” is determined by other non-academic criteria – political circumstances, social standing of its major protagonists, its resonance with politicians and the population in general. This merely puts historical arguments into a context whereby they are tied to the “receivers” who judge the validity of narratives. While I am not trained in the field of sociology, I do find the treatment of history as a kind of “consumer” object interesting. Perhaps the most interesting point she makes, however, is to suggest that the speed of the CDU’s desire for unification (led by Helmut Kohl), allowed some narratives to grow while others withered.

Rossteutscher’s six “narratives” of the GDR’s collapse and its relatively fast absorption into the Federal Republic are, order: The Cultural Lag, Traces of Socialization – The Socialist Mass Culture; Traces of Socialism – The Socialist Elite; Traces of Socialism – The Alienated Niche Society; Power of Macro Trends and the

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Re-born or nascent Civil Society; and finally, “GDR” Discourse and the Identity of “Despite”. It is worth briefly analyzing each of these “narratives” and this will help inform some of the interpretations of German educational and cultural changes developed in relation to film later in this paper. In narrative one, Cultural Lag, she uses a framework which suggests that cultural differences (and historical ones too) are best explained “with the assumption that Socialist socialization efforts [of which schooling is one] were never successful. The most prominent metaphor of this view is the description of socialism as a freezer that conserved (deep-froze) the political cultures of the pre-Communist period and successfully blocked societal change...Bluntly, protagonists of this narrative claim that present day [as of 2000] Germany is best explained if compared to the Germany of the pre-war and war period and West Germany of the 1950’s, indeed a society which is deeply committed to the authoritarian Prussian and Protestant Heritage. In short, cultures are separated by a development deficit of some four decades of experience on the side of the average East German.”

Her second major “narrative” is Traces of Socialization – The Socialist Mass Culture. This narrative seems to be one that historian Mary Fulbrook more or less adopts. Here, the “citizenry kept silent, adapted to the rules of the Socialist system and

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actively showed loyalty whenever the system demanded it.” In this narrative, the focus is more on how the state, and SED established a very different Germany, and in the eastern one, there was a grudging support or consensus for the GDR, and a kind of acceptance for the state built on a cradle to grave social contract – even if it was not a very good contract. This is the notion that Fulbrook develops that there was “normal life” – even positive “good” about social structures like home life, gender relations, education, or healthcare.

However, it is Rossteutscher’s sixth narrative, which supplies quite a nice theoretical framework for helping us to think about film, memory and history, as well in helping to explain the phenomenon of “ostalgie” which develops for the GDR despite a government, an economy, a state surveillance apparatus and an education system that had some serious difficulties. While there were some similarities in the two Germanys, which existed prior to unification, “the one sided takeover of East Germany by West Germany and the paternalistic treatment of the East German citizenry by Westerners, actually led to the creation of a previously non-existent division of cultures with the result that it provoked and East German form of “developing nationalism” (Einwicklungsnationalismus) and a mystifying Socialist nostalgia that provides “second class” citizens with a certain identity of “despite” A more radical version depicts West Germany as a colonizing power and thus a destroyer of previously intact economic structures, guilty of the exploitation of existing economic resources, the liquidation of political elites, in particular the country’s intelligentsia, in general, and finally guilty of the destruction of the

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identity of a colonized and violated population.”8 In short, the GDR citizens only develop a sense of self identity after the implosion of the state and in reaction to the utter domination of Westerners – almost like a form of identity resistance. In the films that I have selected in parts four to nine, we shall examine how they function as contributing to this sense of identity construction.

As further groundwork for the rest of the paper, I shall examine contributions of Geoffrey Eley on memory and history and some ideas from Gary Bruce on the use and limits of memory and the interpretations of the GDR state and the nature of the GDR regime. In a fascinating article called, “The Past Under Erasure? History, Memory and the Contemporary Author” published in 2011, Eley suggests that there has been a structural transformation in the manner in which history is developed and controlled. We have become, “increasingly bombarded with all manner of citations to history and appeals to the past. These days, for example, it is impossible not to be impressed by the salience of all forms of public memory work, remembrance and commemoration.”9 Eley points to the tidal wave of media essentially over-taking the ability of historians, particularly those interested in the intersection of memory and history, to remain as significant gate-keepers of historical knowledge. “The past is made into history – constructed into analysis, narrated into interpretation, fashioned into stories, made serviceable as assumptions and ideas, which are then released into public circulation – in many different ways, only some of which remain susceptible to the professional historians

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In essence we are, by examining film and “oral memories” of the GDR, wading into territory that Eley cautions us about - the interview - laden “memory-histories” of Funder, Garton Ash and Gary Bruce and the films tackling issues (and in some cases educational issues) of the GDR. While Eley’s paper is not a lament for the “loss” of control by historians, it is more of a suggestion that one must be attentive to the manner in which historical issues and the development of individual and collective memory has played out in a multi-media world. This process means there is a much more complicated construction of the past. With this caution in mind, Gary Bruce contributes a similar point about the nature of conducting his interview work in his book, The Firm, where he both interviewed and conducted extensive archival research of the experiences of Mfs or Stasi officers and victims. On the one hand, Bruce chastises historians like Mary Fulbrook for looking at whether one could live a “normal life” in the GDR as irrelevant. “In many ways, whether East Germans led ‘perfectly normal lives’ is a red herring, more reflective of what East Germans recollect now rather than relevant to a historical investigation of the system of government that existed in the GDR.”

While we have Eley, admitting that the influence of academic historians’ ability to control the nature of history as on the decline- and he cautions us to simply be aware without any incitement as to how one should move forward. We then have Gary Bruce who rightly cautions us that to “really do history” we must look at the historical archives and STASI system, as integral to the system of government. However in this paper, I shall examine film as both a product of particular contexts, and also argue that film

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employs specific object markers, themes and symbols, drawing on widely held assumptions about the German past, particularly in regard to issues of education, all of which alter historical constructs in the collective memory. While Bruce dismisses some aspects of Fulbrook, he also praises Fulbrook for taking a middle road between the extreme positions of GDR as Stasi totalitarian prison versus the early 1980’s more accommodating view of the GDR as the “least bad” or more successful of eastern bloc nations. He cites her coining of the phrase “participatory dictatorship” as a description of the GDR and that her work suggests historians should look away from the political sphere to life at work, in the home and in pursuit of leisure activities. However, in grappling with broader historiographical debates, Bruce is an important inspiration for this paper, too, for in his book, he opens with comments on the success of films like Sonnenallee and Goodbye Lenin! and he makes an interesting point about film and its relations to identity construction and history. “To a certain extent what has happened in the field of popular culture where film and television shows about daily life in East Germany far away from the repression apparatus dominate, has been mirrored in the historiography of East Germany.”12 Bruce then points to the shifting “back and forth” model of “bad GDR” which we shall see is a factor to which all of German historiography is wedded – the “Sonderweg” unique path again, of German history. But under historians like Fulbrook, there is a softening of that notion of the “bad” German past. However what is unclear in what Eley, Bruce or any of the major historians read, is exactly how one “sphere” – academic history – is reacting to the

other “popular” spheres – i.e., film and literary culture. Bruce sums up his “corrective” to historians like Fulbrook when he says, “Because East Germans recall living a ‘normal life’ does not mean that the regime must therefore have been benign, ordinary and normal, but rather suggests that the passage of time alters our memory of what once was, especially in Germany where many unfulfilled post-unification aspirations have certainly affected views of the GDR.” In addition, Bruce offers a couple of concrete additional points about how subversive this memory lens can be. In his section of The Firm, the chapter called, “The Stasi in Everyday Life,” he reminds us that prior to the opening of the Stasi archives under Joachim Gauck, East Germans themselves, and certainly West German historians had underestimated the extent and power of Stasi surveillance, and points to how subliminally language, even the use of one word, can change without our being aware of it.

“One of the challenges of oral history is that human memory is not a still photograph of a by-gone era but a never ending collage of images, constantly tweaked by circumstances of the present. East Germans are not the people of Pompeii; they were not preserved for the rest of time for future study but continue to be influenced by what has happened since the demise of East Germany, which, in this case, can be a politically stable but oftentimes tumultuous and very public reckoning with the past. For our topic in particular, oral history is tricky in that the Stasi has been such a news item in Germany that East Germans themselves have become unsure about what they knew about the Stasi at the time, compared with what they

have learned since.” Bruce goes on to point out how “words” like IM or Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter, meaning unofficial co-worker, did not even exist in popular parlance during the GDR, and the word Spitzel was far more common in popular usage to denounce someone working for the security apparatus. Thus, the language change is an important marker of the “unreliability” of memory.

Perhaps without directly intending to do so, Bruce also refers to oral history and memory as a “series” of images. Perhaps the reason film-as-history is both so effective to a wider audience (and so dangerous) is that it is essentially both confirms and re-shapes our own “images” via the films controlled selections of its own moving images.

On a different note, Gary Bruce places the historiographical controversy of the GDR (with the GDR as totalitarian dictatorship) as reaching a high point in the early 1990’s. Yet, what is curious about this, is that in popular culture of film, this is a time when films were often “comedies” about life in the GDR and which dominated the “historical narrative” until the release of Lives of Others in 2006. Does this mean that film-makers were reacting to, or in a sort of time lag, or were out of sync with the academic “historical interpretations”?

Part II: “But what was it really like?” Oral history and accounts of life and education in the GDR.

What was life like in the GDR in years prior to, during and just after the Wende?

Were schools a closely controlled extension of the goals and aims of the SED? Did

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students feel a sense of being controlled, and/or restricted? Did they have a particular political awareness of the nature the government, of their society, which had in such an extensive informant culture? Did that extend to schools? In addressing the questions above, it is not yet clear what active role secondary teachers, for example, played in the efforts to control and monitor the student population.

In an interesting, if idiosyncratic, book which examines “unlearning” in East German education, and the “unlearning” after unification called, Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse, Orwell scholar, John Rodden makes a salient point in his acknowledgements for those historians (like me) aspiring to understand the history of totalitarian society before the Wende. Initially, some western historians approached the study of the GDR for its initial “strangeness”. They only viewed it through the lens of the GDR as a repressive totalitarian state. (Birzea makes a similar claim) essentially saying that those of us in “the West” underestimate how diverse the “communist bloc” actually was, and this blindness makes for some difficulties in treating the history of places like the GDR as unique, and with a sense of balance or fairness. (One can note this as well in the work of Stephanie Wilde.) As he states in his introduction, “I was much taken with the German media’s portrayal of the “Wild East” as they called the formerly closed society of the DDR. My own spirited desire to do pioneering research on the frontiers of the Cold War was made all the more challenging by the black-hat caricatures of the DDR still alive to my older relatives at home, for whom ‘East Germany’ crudely symbolized by the
impenetrable ‘Wall’) evoked the terrible totalitarian images of ‘Nazi Germany’ and ‘Communist Germany’ combined....The actual experience of visiting East German schools and interviewing their students and staff proved both more temperate and less alien than my safari fantasies had conjured. And above all my conversations demystified and humanized the Otherness of the DDR, attuning me to the familiar within the un-familiar.”  

I have to confess that my initial impressions of the GDR and of its educational structures were similar in that I began with the assumption that with the end of the GDR there could not have been much worth preserving in that “old” repressive society its schools, its films and its culture. In short it was a way of life “fated” to die out. Indeed as Rodden makes the point, the school systems of the GDR displayed differences yes, but also “near-universal experience of formal schooling in modern industrialized nations [which] constitute a common, cross-cultural heritage.”

While Rodden tends to write history in a rather “literary” and intensely personal manner, and often makes large claims comparing, for example the post-unification practice of “vetting” GDR teachers to a similar process after the Second World War, much of the literature suggests that the two processes were significantly different. So while I take some of Rodden’s “historical” claims and arguments rather carefully, I did find his interviews with students and teachers illustrative of both the “normalcy” of GDR education from many of the former students interviewed- with the exception of elite athletes. What Rodden does do well, is paint “school life” as one in which “banned” books like Orwell’s 1984 were dangerous, but at the same

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time suggesting the similarities to “western education, that marked some of the progressive policies of GDR education; such as the single stream POS or “comprehensive” schools and how most of students he cited recalled their school experiences fondly. While there is repression, Rodden focuses on the sheer normalcy while commenting on the curricular “unlearning” and occasionally subversive nature of a few marginal groups, like literary purists in search of “banned” western books or music.

Mary Fulbrook in her work the People’s State offers a caution on the nature of this kind of “marginalized youthful rebellion or subversive “youthful activity”. While in the 1960’s “West” there was a significant, active sense of university aged young adults engaging in generational conflict in the United States, perhaps as result of the civil rights struggle, Vietnam, and rejection of authority, she reminds us that in this repressive GDR state, only a very small minority of young people in the 1980’s were actively engaging in anything remotely connected to “subversive” activity. Indeed, long hair and blue jeans which had previously been symbols of anti-social, un-socialist moral degeneration, with the SED taking a slightly more tolerant view of fashion choices, most young adolescents were decidedly NON-political. She writes that: “Most importantly in the present context, it is worth underlining the fact that the vast majority of young people, aged between their mid-teens and mid-twenties were barely involved in activities arousing significant political attention, let alone oppositional or confrontational behavior.”17 Fulbrook later makes the point that in persecuted groups, like the “punk” music movement which ramped up in the 1980’s,

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this group attracts a lot of attention from the authorities, and later from academics. While that attention may overstate what the nature of life was like for many millions of youth, it serves to reinforce historical notions of the GDR as a repressive state, and skews the picture of life for many youth. As she concludes, in a much later segment of the book, that to, “write the history of mundane activities and experiences of young people in these clubs is more difficult than to focus on the moments of conflict and protest. But it is worth gaining at least a sense of the less eventful hinterland beyond the clashes that have so far hit the historical headlines.”

But in tackling the notion of the development of Ostalgie, Rodden finds it as “residing in disgruntled teachers. Nevertheless, after interviewing dozens of educators, cultural officials, students, former students, and parents of students in eastern Germany, I have learned that the deepest roots of DDR society were indeed located in the institution that molded the youth of its citizens, and that some of the most searching questions about East German identity and the repression of the political past are in fact to be found there: eastern educators have been one of the largest, most articulate, most traumatized segments of the population affected by events since 1989.” While on the one hand, Rodden often despises the former Marxist Leninist teachers as peddlers of a failed ideology, on the other, he finds sympathy for them in their anger, and pins the construction of a peculiar Ostalgie on these same teachers.

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“Every teacher I interviewed during the fall of 1990 mulled in anger the same question: Are there no good features of the DDR system to save? Nothing worth keeping in education? Their answers were various: the generous program of paid kindergartens and after school day care; the polytechnic principle, which established firm connections between classroom and the world; the single unified school system of the ten year POS. But virtually nothing would survive.”

However what Rodden does not address is that this “rejection” of all GDR models of education, is not necessarily because the GDR education system was as tainted as Rodden suggests. He cites how the advancement to the EOS for the Abitur (and hence university entrance) required a dependent student’s political “suitability” but much of the GDR education model was cast off, simply because the GDR systems were financially bankrupt. This particular section is of interest in that it seems that of the two groups Rodden interviews, students and teachers, it is the teachers who are more nostalgic – not because they were dismissed en masse, but for the dismissal of the entire GDR system of education.


In this section of the paper, I explore the manner in which films play a role in altering the manner in which historians, the wider public, and more narrowly how

people from the GDR, living through the Wende, have seen their own school experiences recaptured on film. This section of the paper, is a bit of a funhouse of mirrors and tries to consider the relationship between film, history, identity and memory. More broadly, I wish to examine how film has been part of the shifting historical discussions on what “everyday life” was like in the GDR. Secondly I examine how the debates around the films reveal quite contradictory perspectives on the views the German public had in relation to the Wende. Thirdly, I ask how the film industry both altered the wider German public’s perceptions about what life had been like in the GDR. The films that have been selected and examined are drawn from a variety of film “traditions” over a period of nearly sixteen years. While earlier in the paper, we have seen how the broader public of the GDR has displayed quite dramatically different views on life in the GDR, the intention here is to examine how film has contributed to a re-consideration of “life in the GDR”. To this end we shall examine how The Architects, Go Trabi Go!, Sonnennallee, Goodbye Lenin! and The Lives of Others in particular, provoked a furious debate about sentimentalizing the past and misrepresenting the manner in which Stasi officers operated. But all of these films provoked lively debate around issues as to whether they contributed to what “life was like” in the GDR. Secondly, the debate for several of them was focused on the issue of who had the “right” to make films about a period in which there was so much repression. Was it valid to tell stories of how life was “good” in the GDR, or were these stories (and ultimately these are fictional stories, one has to remember) part of a process of altering the historical record, inventing a new sense of Eastern Germans’ Ossies' sense of identity? Or do these films
downplay, or trivialize the repression, the surveillance, in favor of a bourgeois, commercialized sentimental exploitation of a collective memory, of a past “that never was”? One key question that comes up in Mary Fulbrook and that relates to the films concerns the nature of family life – was it essentially the same in the GDR versus the FRG, or was it significantly different and damaged by surveillance and repression? Given the interests of time and space, I do not feel this question has been sufficiently addressed in this paper. Another key question that comes up frequently and which links back to a key broad theme in German history as a whole is, “to what extent do these films help contribute to a “normalizing” of German history – as opposed to commenting on how the GDR/FRG divisions were part of the “abnormal” or “special path” of German history, which in turn goes back to the Holocaust and Third Reich? As I continued my exploration I realized that there are dozens of other films that have unfortunately been excluded and which have equally important things to say about how film can shape public perception but I have excluded them since they are hard to find. Sometimes, they are too much in the “art-film” category and while they may be stylistically valuable, they reached too small an audience and have not generated much critical comment. Films like, Da Da Er, Jana und Jan, The Land Beyond the Rainbow, Banale Tage and Heiden wie Wir are now regarded as seminal, but for the moment I have chosen samples of Wende films, Ostalgie films and seemingly apolitical post Wende comedies which have some commentary. One other issue which I have not effectively wrestled with is: How does one balance the importance of less popularly watched “art” films (like some of those listed above) versus commercially successful but critically snubbed “popular”
films? Since much of what I read comes through the lens of media, film and cultural critics, there is a pervasive “snobbism” that some of the commercially successful films must not have very much to say because they are popular! Nor have I been able to delve into the numerous television shows that emerged to tap into Ostalgie. Finally – one must ask, why bother to look at film at all in relation to this central question of what was life like for people in the GDR? In this analysis I shall draw some inspiration from Paul Betts who writes about the development of nostalgia in German history, and suggests that in modern consumer-oriented societies (of which the GDR was a failed Socialist consumer society) that one must consider the way in which consumer objects and goods (like films) act as memory markers.

Betts points out that the history of Germany has also been a particularly difficult field for historians, loaded as it is with legacy of debates about Sonderweg, the Third Reich and Holocaust as well as being shaped by context of post war division and the Cold War, suggesting that for all these reasons German history has faced a shift in methodology. As he asserts in his opening, “...scholars have devoted considerable attention to studying the very incongruity of history and memory during the Cold War. Often this has meant peeling back the layers of political propaganda and Cold War clichés in order to explore how individual and collective identities were shaped by post war experiences. New oral histories together with a batch of innovative case studies of public commemorations, everyday cultures and private recollections of the post war era have sharply exposed the artifice and platitudes of the old. ...It owes its inspiration to the decades old work of West Germany’s pioneering historians of ‘everyday life’ who were the first to troll the netherworld of private
German memories (usually through oral history) beneath the faceless generations of everyday life. ...But in the view of growing scholarly interface of German history and memory, it is curious that the subject of nostalgia has curried relatively scant attention.\textsuperscript{21} Here Betts' points out how little academic work has been done on nostalgia and memory in German history, if one recalls that in the context of German film, “Ostalgia” had been beginning to thrive in period of mid-1990's and perhaps reaches a highpoint with the release of Goodbye Lenin! in 2003.

In his essay he reviews the ebb and flow of “nostalgia” in German history suggesting that the “nineteenth century was the real crucible for modern nostalgia; it provided a natural compass for many Europeans ravaged by the twin forces of the French and Industrial Revolutions.”\textsuperscript{22} At this point, Betts' grappling with nostalgia sounds simply like a kind of historical Romanticism. And indeed he suggests that a cultural strain of “nostalgia” runs through German cultural attitudes and politics right into the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. What is most interesting (if one accepts the broad, somewhat slippery definition of “nostalgia” is that he points out the relative disappearance of “nostalgia” after the trauma of the Second World War, and bi-furcation of Germany in the late 1940's, only to see it re-surfacing in the late 1980's.

If we turn back to our educational history context, however, there is still a somewhat backward looking “return to Weimar” movement in education as a corrective to the Third Reich's compromised educational past, and a similar attempt


to revive German humanism in the GDR in both education and political discourse along with the language of “always forward” socialist ideology. Betts comments that although “nostalgia” ebbs and flows in all German history since the 1800’s, “Nevertheless, there is no denying that the post-1945 production of German nostalgia paled markedly in comparison to that of the first half of the 20th century... One obvious explanation lies in the Nazi legacy itself. The hardships, trauma, and subsequent revelations about the unparalleled atrocities of the Third Reich certainly killed off sentimental recuperation of Germany’s immediate past; the overriding concern for both states (to say nothing of its citizens) was to establish as much distance as possible from the Nazi years.”23 Even though post-war polls still showed some persistence of Nazi attitudes, and some measure of popularity for the Nazis, “nostalgia enjoyed no real collective expression; indeed it was precisely such nostalgia that was targeted for “re-education” in both Germanys. As Charles Maier suggestively puts it, “the point is that until 1989 German history had to be a process of learning how not to long.... Nation and nostalgia were officially divorced.”24 However, as a force in German history, and I would argue, in post-unification Germany, German identity construction and German culture, nostalgia, like some kind of undead, Nosferatu, refuses to die and “there were two important popular manifestations of post-war German nostalgia: the West German longing for the ‘Golden 1950’s’ during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s and East Germany’s post 1989 Ostalgie for the comforts and security of the old German Democratic

Republic.”\textsuperscript{25} So while the type of nostalgia differs in East and West, it is still a major factor in both “Germanys”. Betts goes on to make the point that, these waves of nostalgia, have been repressed in both West and East, albeit for slightly different reasons. Yet when they re-surface in the FRG in the early to mid-eighties, and in the GDR in the post Wende period, “Even more striking is the way that these nostalgia waves tended to center on pop culture relics from their respective “economic miracles”. In this they afforded a far-reaching negotiation of the dialectic of memory and materialism undergirding each county’s cultural identity.”\textsuperscript{26} Here is the crux of Betts’ argument as pertains to this paper. While he writes about the “actual” pop culture relics by studying newspapers, memoirs and personal journals in which people recall the importance of particular objects, in this paper, I see them used as key markers in film.

Before moving on to examine the films themselves, it is important to contextualize the importance and significance of films as products and to film’s purpose in the GDR, as this affects how one can view post-unification films. Leonie Naughton in her text on East German film’s legacy, \textit{That was the Wild East}, makes a key point about the importance of film in general, and film’s relationship to the GDR state’s role as establishing the centrality of education in both the state and more specifically with film as having an educational basis. While we are not looking directly at GDR films, some of the films pay homage to traditions, techniques and cultural “practices” of GDR film-making, as well attending to “western” filmic traditions and narrative styles. Naughton writes of the GDR: “In accordance with communist cultural policy,
in the GDR film was considered a medium through which audiences should be educated and enlightened. Party functionaries and members of the Central Committee placed great importance upon the medium, which was granted official status as one of the arts. The cultural prestige attributed to film was supposed to be in contradistinction to its function under capitalism, where it was assumed to have operated predominantly as popular entertainment made for profit and mass audiences. The socialist party and those working at DEFA, accepted that film was a medium designed to edify. Although they were not always successful, they sought to produce films that struck a balance between pedagogy and entertainment. ‘Socialist cultural policy inhibited the production of films that merely [sought]...to entertain”27 Filmmakers in the GDR had to embrace this objective and accept what was viewed as a political responsibility to contribute to the construction and advancement of a socialist society. Like any other member of GDR society, those who were employed to make films at DEFA sought compromise rather than conflict within the state.”28 One of the key tensions in films that deal with historical topics and eras (in our case the depiction of education and life in the GDR) in general is the balance between what one might call “authenticity” which lends the film an “educative function” and entertainment. Out of the DEFA legacy, Daniela Berghan also makes some key observations about the legacy of DEFA and the GDR style of socialist film-making. Firstly, the GDR and DEFA, the controlling state organization arm which funded, approved of scripts marketed and distributed GDR films was shut down, like a lot of

GDR state enterprises in 1992 when its assets were sold. However the actual office which “approved” Central Film Office (Hauptverwaltung Film) an arm of the Ministry of Culture “ceased to operate effectively when the GDR’s last Film Minister, Horst Pehnert, relinquished his post alongside many other cultural functionaries in November, 1989.”29 State funded films through the arm of DEFA, while it lasted for 46 years, had several key “styles”. The general style of “approved” filmmaking has been labeled “socialist realism”. Within that style there were several sub-categories of films that one would expect. However, at the core were Gegenwartsfilmes - films about “normal people in everyday life situations, and another key sub-genre were the “anti-fascist films. Both of these sub-genres were built on the premise that film had an important educative function. According to Naughton, anti-Fascist film made up a significant percentage of DEFA approved films and socialist realism works making up the rest.

**Part IV: Generational frustration: training for a disappearing state in Peter Kahane’s, The Architects.**

The Architects, had its production, and cinematic release literally at the end of the GDR with the opening of the Wall and beginning of the Wende period. Indeed the film’s location shooting began in Berlin, on October 2nd 1989, just as serious demonstrations calling for internal reform of the GDR were beginning in Berlin, Leipzig and other major cities. During the evening of November 9th 1989, the actors and crew were working on location in a part of Berlin, and had no idea that the wall had “fallen” and that people were streaming into West Berlin, until an American

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29 Daniela Berghahn. 2006 ."East German Cinema After Unification." From German Cinema Since Unification. Editor, David Clarke. University of Birmingham Press. P.8
television film crew rushed over to them to ask their “opinions” on the evening’s events! In the film itself, the key metaphor is the inability of a “youthful” professional group to make any significant contribution to society. At every turn the idealistic young architects are interviewed, by, and ultimately over-ridden by petty party members who dislike their visionary utopian plans, or by petty apparatchiks who hound the group of six into abandoning their project – with some seeking refuge in the West. As a life parallel, Kahane’s screenplay was subject to numerous corrections, changes and alterations before being fully approved for funding in 1988. However, what is germane to this paper, is the manner in which the subjects of the film’s drama, while not youths, are young people who want to contribute their skills to society, who believe in socialism, but for whom the socialist system is broken and stacked against them by aging party hacks. In short, the generational conflict at play in the GDR, as referenced by the film is interesting. The young-old nature of the conflict mirrored the same kinds of situations in which the GDR’s young people; particularly well-educated urban professionals (doctors, teachers, artists) were often initially seeking to reform, not destroy the GDR even up to November 1989. Many people therefore, wanted to reform the GDR and find a place within it. If that personal goal was not satisfied, despite the oppressiveness of the state, emigration to the West was, even in the most oppressive years of the GDR, still an option – even if the application process was long and often frightening. This “youthful frustration” is mirrored by Kahane’s own career experiences. He himself had to wait until he was 36 years old, having graduated from film school years earlier, before being given his “own” film to direct. In Marco Bohr’s excellent
analysis of The Architects, he makes several pointed observations about the importance of this film. In assessing the nature of “life” in the GDR for professionals like film-makers (and by extension other professionals like teachers) Bohr, along with others like Daniela Berghan, Sean Allan and Stephen Brockman, makes clear that one of the unique features about the GDR was not just its overt use of censorship, but the manner in which the SED-led, Mfs/Stasi monitored system, forced “self-censorship” and changes to peoples’ thinking before a cultural object like a film ever made it to the theatres. With extensive, heavy handed and constant intervention by DEFA studio executives, changes were imposed on film-makers to ensure that films were not “too critical” or too far from a socialist “aesthetic”. As Bohr notes, “The director of the Architects, Peter Kahane thus had to carefully navigate the explicit and less explicit rules superimposed on DEFA by the Party. Yet as research has shown, throughout its history DEFA also defied the restrictions of the government by producing, at times, films that can be read as a critique against an overbearing and rigid socialist system.”

Thus, some of the central themes in the film lay bare the bureaucratic machinery that pitted a kind of youthful protagonist (Daniel, the lead architect) against aging party members and bureaucrats. For much of his life, the main character’s “talent is wasted in designing mind-numbing projects like bus stations and power projects...Like him, many have become disillusioned and cynical about working as architects. Some have completely withdrawn from society, some have given up their practice all together, some have gone ‘over there’ (nach

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As Kahane himself pointed out, the film represents his own lived experience since, “in August 1988 Kahane gave an interview in which he attacked DEFA for failing to support film-makers of his generation. “We were treated as the new generation, as little apprentices. In truth we’re really not wanted.”  Boehr continues Kahane’s stressing the “generational conflict further citing Kahane as stating that the aging party membership was stifling new ideas and changes in East German film-making.

With the film’s critical stance pitting itself against the Socialist Unity Party or SED regime, with its poor timing arriving as it did in German theatres in May 1990, and burdened with the nature of its critique of youthful professionals against an “aging” regime, the film could not have been released at a worse time. The regime against which it was pushing, disappeared and the wider audience wanted “hopeful” optimistic and forward-looking films, rather than ones the depicted a frustrated, cynical youthful rebellion against a regime that no longer existed. Despite all these factors making the film a commercial failure, Boehr makes several good points about the importance of the film. First, the film fits squarely in the tradition of a history of films which passed censorship by subtly critique the living conditions of the GDR.

Secondly, there is a great deal of symbolic elegance in the film. For example the Wall itself in the film and the architecture of the gray Berlin with its decaying streets, gritty streets, decaying factories make the film a visual time capsule of the GDR near its end. But the mere omnipresence of the Wall itself in the film becomes a problematic symbol. The Wall functions in the film as a symbol of division and

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disunity. But by the time the film was released, the Wall becomes a symbol of unity of the German people - by the joy felt by both “sides” with its destruction. Indeed, the film is vital in its depiction of generational friction, with its narrative of preventing constructive criticism of the GDR. Even more importantly, it is the complex production history of the film itself which ultimately resulted, or was at least partially due to a new generation of filmmakers such as Peter Kahane. As Bohr points out in his interviews with Kahane in 1988, it was his [Kahane’s] generation which, “began in a change in regime at DEFA even before the first crowds gathered in Leipzig. In other words, not necessarily the film as such, but the production of the film is in itself an active force in the dismantling of ideology.”

In his conclusion, Bohr over-reaches a bit perhaps by suggesting that the process of Kahane’s active agitation against DEFA restrictions, was a force in helping dismantle the SED regime. This point is intriguing but seems overly optimistic and is not sufficiently developed in his analysis. However, he does develop the interpretation of “generational conflict” within DEFA clearly, and by extension ties this generational conflict to the aging SED-led leadership who failed to react to wider glasnost-driven changes initiated by Gorbachev, swirling about in the Eastern Bloc in the late 1980’s and which were regarded with suspicion in the GDR. But again, although this youthful disenfranchisement is an interesting lens it is not the most salient point. Rather it is the notion that one must think about the film-as-production-process, that it is the very production of a film which can contribute to changes in the wider public’s thinking. Perhaps the act of film-making can

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contribute to the “dismantling of an ideology”. The final point that we may take away from looking at this film is although the film was trying to keep up with events, “Any criticism that film was belatedly trying to catch up with ideological shifts in the latter stages of the GDR fails to recognize that the film itself is encapsulating a process of deep reflection and political debate that was repeated all over the country and culminated in the demise of the GDR.”\textsuperscript{34} In essence, the film captures the “zeitgeist” of GDR’s people’s grumbling for reform.

\textbf{Part V: Go Trabi Go!: Comedy as therapy in German unification identity politics.}

In addressing the next film as memory maker and film as process, we would do well to recall that in his article, “Remembrance of Things Past”, Paul Betts makes some original comments about the nature of history which link to some key points in many of the next films which I shall examine in this paper, particularly Go Trabi Go! as well as both Sonnenallee and Goodbye Lenin!. In each of these films there is a kind of celebrated “fetishism” of objects and with particular brands of foodstuffs, which would have been very familiar to a person growing up in the GDR. Betts makes the case that in all modern, commercial consumer-driven societies the act of “remembering” one’s past history, in contrast to “pre-consumer” societies, is now intimately tied to objects themselves. He draws a fascinating parallel commenting on how the FRG and GDR had the need to “repress” memory by citizens since these were invariably linked to the “forbidden” and rejected Nazi past. In the FRG, the

\textsuperscript{34} Marco Bohr. 2013. “The Collapse of Ideology in Peter Kahane’s The Architects.” P. 41
success of the “economic miracle” and rise in consumer affluence of the 1950’s later gives way in the eighties and nineties to a more “normal” yet nostalgic ability to celebrate the past but that it was a memory linked to economic and material success. He calls this in the West, a kind of “Nierentisch” (nightstand) nostalgia since it is tied to the rise of a of popular Bauhaus style nightstand that was popular in the 1950’s. In the 1980’s it is now “permissible” for Germans to abandon their denial or avoidance of the “bad” past in favor of a celebration of a successful one albeit one that is linked to a lack of “kultur”. In the “East” so goes Bett’s argument, Party leader Eric Honecker’s attempt to create a “consumer socialism” which was really started after the 5th Party Congress (called refrigerator socialism) generates the same kind of consumer culture object tied to memory. Thus what I find fascinating (Betts does not address this) is that we see this affectionate celebration of objects in many of the post Wende/Ostalgie films like the tiny Trabant car in Go Trabi Go!, Goodbye Lenin! and Sonnenallee.

In Go Trabi Go! the story revolves around a German literature teacher, his wife and daughter who leave their east German home for a family trip to Italy, all while following the literary travels of Goethe in a beat up old Trabant car. The intrepid little car (one is reminded of the Disney Love Bug films of the 1960’s) is known to the father as “Schorsch”. This car-object is also developed as a central “character” in the film and the Trabi endures as many adventures as its human co-stars. In much of the critical literature, Go Trabi go! is generally dismissed as “light” on politics and certainly for some critics, does not offer much in terms of any film-making technique that is innovative. Certainly, it is rather conventional. However, the film is of interest
due to the timing of its production and release. In terms of German “filmography” it was a part of the emergence of a wave of “light” East German comedies of the early 1990’s, and as a reaction to the serious “autorenfilm” or “auteur” films by West German film directors of the 1970’s and 80’s who tackled “important” topics in ways that pushed the boundaries of film narrative. This film’s strength and interest lie in its development of “identity politics” or German-German relations which develop after unification. It is the film’s depiction of West Germans who will on occasion be referred to as Wessies and the East Germans as “Ossies” and its initial commentary on German-German relations after the fall of the GDR. On one level the film is in fact the car-as-character. There are a few other minor kitschy objects like a tent, which goes on the roof. But the film is important since it starts the process of “remembering the good things of GDR” via the broad character stereotypes, themes and selection of key objects as memory markers. While there is little in the film that has a direct or overtly critical commentary on life in the GDR, or GDR state school education, on a symbolic level the film addresses some interesting “educational issues” since many of the characters are on learning journey, as they travel beyond the borders of the GDR. The world for these characters is literally opening up and the film functions as a commentary on “foreign lands” like Italy and the western part of the now unified Federal Republic of Germany.

The film was a commercial success, in all of Germany (but not abroad). Thus, on one level, we have a commercial “product” - a film as a memory product - sold back to the citizens of the former GDR/FRG. For the former GDR residents it is “their” story, the story of people who lived in a run-down rump state. But in the early 1990’s the
stories of these “fellow” Germans were generally (and to my surprise) ignored by western film-makers. Go Trabi Go! is one of the early “feel good” comedies of the 1990’s and it was directed by Peter Timm, a West German director, was produced by a (Bavarian consortium) film company and was released to theatres in 1991. As piece of trivia, the film was shot on location in the GDR, Bavaria, and later on, in Italy in early October of 1990. As IMdb notes: two of the three central cast members left for the shoot in Italy, as citizens of the GDR and returned as citizens of a unified Germany (Wolfgang Stumpf and Claudia Schmutzler). As for why Go Trabi, Go! is worthy of consideration and pertains to this paper, it has some key points on German-German relations, for the depictions of “educators” and certainly how it is one of the first post-Wende films to use “cultural objects” like the Trabant car, as an important symbol and cultural marker of German-German relations. While in some ways it is a childish, even silly little film, it has a charm, as well as a cult-like following to this day. The film’s success produced several knock offs and two successor films with the same cast were made in the mid 1990’s. More culturally refined, sophisticated critics panned the film as rather “light” on any kind of issues of the Wende, or on how it depicted life and in the immediate aftermath of the GDR. However, the film sold 1.5 million tickets across the “unified” Germany and there are elements to it that have an interesting role in helping the film act as both a mirror and even a cultural product which shaped post Wende German-German relations. On one level it is a kind of silly, but optimistic comedy. The feeling that it develops is based on a familiar “western” trope: the naïve backwater provincial man and his family leave a sheltered existence for the “wider world” and overcome the
unkindness of the wider world despite their trusting, naive provincialism. Certainly the choice of the main character Udo as a “teacher” is an inspired one. This puts the main character in a sort of “respectable middle class” station. Go Trabi Go! is on the surface, a very “apolitical” film – there are no hints in this film of the oppressive Stasi, or GDR “threats” of any kind. Instead the film depicts the travels of a “typical” GDR family or a post GDR family. The film succeeds since it allows Ossis to laugh at some aspects of their past (and present) displaying a kind of “open” door. Now the family has the ability to travel freely, a right now available to all Germans. Secondly, the film has a car as a character in its own right, the car that GDR citizens seemed to both love and hate – the maligned and beloved Trabant, or fondly Trabi. The film also confirms a kind of moral superiority of the Ossis as they face (most) “western” German Republic characters who are greedy, devious and money-grubbing. While this is not absolutely true and they meet a few kind people in Germany, and some generous people in Italy, the film works in broad strokes and allows the Ossi audience to laugh at stereotypes of “uncaring” mean-spirited Wessis, thus helping foster a GDR identity centered on a kind of moral, educational virtue, in a post GDR milieu.

The film opens with shots of an ugly East German town Bitterfeld with its pan shots of ugly smokestack industries, a steam locomotive, and two women waiting. The mother, Rita (actress Marie Gruber who also appears in Lives of Others) and the shapely daughter Jacqueline, are shown waiting for Udo Struutz, the husband/father in a run-down neighborhood, where everyone in the background is repairing their cars. Udo arrives in a smoke-belching, sky-blue Trabi, showing off his borrowed
“western” grandpa’s Japanese camera. Udo faces his Ossi buddies who make fun of his Trabi car and his major goal – to travel with his family to Italy in his beloved car. Thus, with the opening of the film we see the industrial past of the GDR, the images of semi destroyed buildings and an ugly industrial wasteland.

Udo, is depicted on some levels as a typical Ossi. While film-critic Sean Allan, describes the father as “exotic” in his dress, which rather overstates things. “Udo, the father, is portrayed as an exotic figure, a point that is underlined in his adherence to unmistakably East German fashions and his total loyalty to his faithful Trabant, ‘Schorsch’.”35 Udo has a blind devotion to his disaster of a car despite the fact that this automobile is such piece of junk and that in the film it often breaks down which serves as central to the comedy in the film. This aspect of the car-as-symbol of GDR life, not the clothing, speaks more to a kind of developing GDR identity, a kind of cultural attachment objects from the past –even when those objects were so obviously inferior, and frankly displays the material “poverty” of the Ossies who can only afford this kind of GDR “junk” car. While Allan’s analysis is correct in noting that the car is central, he overstates the exoticism of “the other” in Udo’s clothing as a point. While the exoticism works for the car as memory object, the shabby dress, is just that, shabby dress. However, the “exoticism” of the GDR to which Allan points develops in other interpretations conjuring the GDR as a totalitarian state and was certainly part of the developing historical viewpoint in

post-unification world. The “dress” of characters in this film, rather than the father’s
dress as a kind of GDR “exoticism” needs comment. Udo dresses badly in baggy
shorts and constantly wears a tan colored fishing hat or sun-hat. But this badly
dressed dad as a fashion gag is a trope to which both East German and West German
audiences can relate. Teachers, especially “dad” teachers are generally not noted for
their exemplary fashion consciousness, but that hardly makes Udo “exotic”. Rather
this makes him more universally accessible to a unified audience, as a bit dotty,
loveable and a tad eccentric and a fashion schlep – in short a classic symbol of the
teacher. Further to this point of the father as an “exotic” there is a more significant
point to be made about German-German relations. Udo is German literature teacher,
devoted to the writings of Goethe. While this point is also again, hardly “exotic” it is
worth pursuing. In some writing about “claiming the German past” (Betts) we have
seen that in dealing with issues of German identity and history, in both the GDR and
FRG post-war period, there was a common interest in “claiming” the older tradition
of German educational “humanism” that skirted the corrosive, tainted history and
politics of the 20th century. Although Udo, is a kind of goofy figure, a teacher – figure
of oddball fun, with his shabby dress and his ridiculously naïve out-of-his-element
rustic nature, with his obsession with his disaster of a car “Schorsch” – he is also a
man of high culture of German kultur. This quality of setting him up as an idealistic
man of letters is highlighted at the start of the film where Udo’s dialogue sets up a
central motif of the film – that the family is “travelling” in the steps of Goethe. At
6:45 minutes into the film, Udo quotes Goethe’s book, Italian Journey, “I confess my
journey was actually an escape from what I had suffered on the 51st parallel. I was
hopeful, however, of finding heaven on the 48th.” While the quote is in Goethe’s 1786 travelling biographical reflection, Udo’s citing it here as the family sets out on the road, sets up a nice motif in the film – following in the footsteps of a humanistic “master” – and that is something that surely even Ossis and Wessis can agree upon? In short the appeal to Goethe acts as a vehicle for unity of “both Germanys”. The other level on which the quote works is more contextual. For an East-German audience, given the recent fall of the wall and end of the travel restrictions in the GDR, the whole notion of “escape” has a very different, more powerful context and out of country travel is now an option that is legal for Udo and family – as it was for all Germans. During the GDR period, travel to the eastern bloc was permitted, and while travel to the West was possible, it was subject to much greater degree of restriction and control. Indeed as Funder, Garton Ash and Bruce noted in their works examining how the Stasi worked to recruit people, “travel permission” was often a significant tool in recruiting Stasi informers or “IM’s”. So it is powerful symbolically that Udo chooses to frequently cite Goethe’s travel text as the film progresses, and that he uses it as a “modern travel guide”. Initially both his wife and especially his rebellious, sexually-charged daughter snigger at the eccentricity of “travelling by Goethe”. As the family drives down a GDR highway, all crammed into the car which is about to cross into Bavaria, Udo has his wife pull the Goethe book out of the Trabi’s glove box and says about Goethe’s Italian Journeys: “That’s our compass. It is better than any map. It’s 200 years old but still topical.” So this devotion to Goethe sets in motion the modern relevance of Goethe even if it is still

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36 Go Trabi Go! 1991. Film. Six minutes thirty seconds.
37 Go Trabi Go! 1991. Film. Seven minute mark.
“laughable” to his own family. Despite his own family’s “skepticism” this reclaiming the “good” in the German past, respect for education and the role of “humanistic” teacher is tested again when the family Struutz arrives at the mother, Rita’s sister’s home in “the west” specifically in Regensburg, Bavaria. The Wessi family is headed by an exceptionally fat father, shown sitting with an equally obese, fat, pale, somewhat menacing computer geek son, and a preening mother painted with excessive cosmetics. As the family sits at a dining table, stuffing themselves with Black Forest cake, the Trabant pulls up to their home. The Wessi family looks out the window, and there is a sense that the Wessi family is about to be plundered by “invading” Saxons - so they hide the cake in a wall-unit. After some awkward greeting at the door by the two sisters, the family sits down and the Struutz family is offered stale chips as a welcome. At this point the enormously fat, Bavarian father who has been vacuuming the crumbs from the fallen chip pieces, begins bragging about how much different items in the house cost. He turns off the vacuum, turns to Udo and says, [at minute12:32] “Are you still the diligent German teacher, following in the footsteps of Goethe?” Udo opens his book and says, “Yes, we are following him to Italy.” The fat Wessi asks, “Did he [Goethe] travel to Regensburg?” and Udo once again, quotes Goethe - to the general boredom and discomfort of the Wessi family. While one should not overstate things too much, it is very clear the scene here is about the teasing out key differences in German-German relations and in the state German culture (and by extension politics and identity attitudes). This arrival scene sets up the less wealthy Ossi “provincials” naively following Goethe, as oddballs but elevates them as much more likeable and as “culturally” superior to the fat, greedy,
Wessis who are so dismissive of "book learning". There is a weird kind of confirmation of Ossis as “bearers of culture” versus the crass Wessis interested only in stuffing their faces, bragging about their wealth, and dismissive of ‘kultur’. The scene is topped off by both the Wessi father and son leering at the very well-developed Ossi daughter, Jacqueline. While there isn’t space here to analyze the entire film there are a few more points on which to address the “development of a GDR identity” and German-German relations.

In returning to the car-as-character motif and how this object assists in creating GDR "nostalgic" identity, there is an extended scene where the beloved car, Schorsch breaks down and the father is unable to pay the Bavarian mechanic, after repairs are complete. So Udo stages a Trabi peep show, allowing people to drive his car for five Deutschmarks a ride. Naturally there are ridiculous stunts, but the car as object memory marker is revealed in one exchange with an old couple who return the car and say to Udo, [at 23:09]: “Simply marvelous. We used to have one. Remember when we drove to the mountains? A red one...we use to call it Fritz.” He then overpays Udo with what seems to be around five-hundred DM more than enough to pay the car repair bill and says in parting: “Keep it – you’ll need it!” From their generosity, it is not clear if he, Udo, will need the additional money for car repairs or for living in the expensive West. But the car clearly is an object of comfortable memory. The Trabi peep show scene later has Germans of all ages wanting a “taste” of the past, with a couple of rich, stylish obviously West-German young men who “torment” Schorsch” by putting him through some crazy stunts, and of course there
is the nostalgic old couple quoted above who had obviously fled the GDR to make their fortune, only to be reminded of their “happy” past in the GDR via the Trabi. While the car continues to be a central symbolic object to which the family is all attached, the Goethe travel parallel narrative continues. As the family approaches the Alps and realizes they must cross the Swiss Alps to enter Italy, the mother and daughter meet a scrap truck driver who disparages their car saying it will never make it up and through the Brenner Pass. So as a joke and solution, the girls allow the driver to hoist Schorsch onto his truck of other scrap cars and to catch a lift. The scene is paralleled in the Goethe text, by the father who returns from the autobahn bathroom, and then quotes a paragraph on Goethe’s “coach” driver, obviously meant to be the modern scrap truck driver. At 43:50, Udo reads Goethe, as the scrap truck bearing Schorsch and the family, a passage about Goethe’s coach man and the Swiss mountain pass: “Sept 8th 1786. The coach man drove so fast it took my breath away.” At this point, the mother, Rita, begins to listen more respectfully and asks him to read more Goethe, while the daughter still scoffs. The scene then progresses with the driver who turns out to be a “real character” and embarks on a series of non-stop Trabi jokes. As an example, the driver torments Udo with Trabi jokes like the following. Driver: “How do you double the value of a Trabi?” Udo: “Fill it up with petrol.” What is striking about the scene is how many Trabi jokes there are since the scene goes on for approximately six minutes of continuous jokes by the driver tormenting Udo. Secondly, as the scene progresses, Udo too begins to learn to laugh at the jokes and by extension at himself as well. Initially the driver is the only one laughing, but by the scene’s end everyone is. While the content displays the ridicule
of Wessis and imagined superiority of the Wessi driver, it shows how the humour binds East and West together, and that Udo is aware his love for the car, and by extension for the GDR. He knows this is all a bit ridiculous. Yet, in a short scene it addresses German-German relations, and helps the audience navigate and reconcile its attachment to the past, via humour.

There is one final quote from the film that illustrates some interesting things about German-German identity. At the 1:02:00 the family arrives in Italy. Udo reads: “Lake Garda: Sept 12 1786. Here, I really am in a new country. The doors have no locks. The innkeeper assures me that my belongings will be safe even if all my belongings were made of diamonds.” Here what is interesting is how the Goethe quote is threaded by sense of wonder for a foreign land. By extension for the East Germans as they have travelled outside the confines of Bitterfeld, and from their perspective as citizens of the former GDR, it is as if the viewing audience is also shaped by a kind of wonder. This is not the exotic East, but rather the exotic West, which was initially part of the post-unification afterglow when former citizens travelled to see the wealth and marvels of “the West” which they assumed, they would also share – a kind of reverse “exoticism”.

What is salient about this particular film then, is that is depicts the divisions between East and West, while using humour to heal “wounds” that derive from these identity differences. This makes the film interesting as a snapshot of the post-unification optimism. It displays the real differences in German-German identity with the film’s use of the parallel Goethe storyline, and with the car as object
memory marker, this all also offers the audience a sense that Ostalgie is created for the “lost” GDR.
In his work, Critical History of German Film, in the chapter, “German Film After Re-unification" Brockman takes us through some key points about German film in the 1990’s the period in which Go Trabi Go!! and similar “silly” comedies were popular. Brockman points out that with the end of the GDR and DEFA, the state studio that produced all GDR films, during this period there was an obvious decapitation of the DEFA film pool of GDR’s directorial and acting talent. All but a few directors and stars struggled to find meaningful work in the newly commercialized world with the end of the DEFA state supported film system – with all of its flaws as a censor. Essentially this gives West German film production the opportunity to fill a void – perhaps at the expense of East German film-makers. Secondly, he points out that for “western” German filmmakers there was a similarly significant shift in the structure of film production. However in the western part of Germany, this shift was away from influential “auteur” New German Cinema directors like Wenders or Herzog with their “serious” high-art, intensely “issues-oriented” and personal style films, to more “commercial” popular “Americanized” films by directors working in a more” team” environment. Initially this meant a complete absence of films about and by “East Germans”. As Brockman states, “Throughout much of the 1990’s, the experience of East Germans going through a radical historical change found virtually no voice in the established German cinema...However, the mainstream German cinema, of the mid-1990’s, with its upbeat sex comedies, looked as if it had been produced in a historical vacuum, as if East Germany, nor the re-unification of East
and West had ever occurred." Brockman then hints at a kind of “loss of voice” by East German film-makers, which is filled by West German film production albeit of a very different kind from that in previous decade. He discusses how there was a “craze” for light comedies, which then morphed later into films like Leander Haussman’s Sonnenallee, and still later Becker’s Goodbye Lenin, along with Dani Levy and Tom Twyker’s Run, Lola, Run. The success of Becker and Twyker as directors helped them found the X-Filme Creative Pool GmbH, to cooperate and make films in German, with the slogan, “together we are stronger.” But essentially, after the Wende, there was a tie to the “silly comedies” of the early nineties (Go Trabi Go!) and to a developing nostalgia (Ostalgie) for the lost material and socialist culture of the GDR. Sonnenallee’s “humorous” approach to life in the East German dictatorship and its sexual comedy...connected East German history to the comedy craze of the 1990’s. Moreover, its loving attention to East German material culture made it a prime example of what Germans called Ostalgie – nostalgia for the now vanished East-Germany or German Democratic Republic, including its entire panoply of drab consumer products like Spree laundry detergent, Trabant automobiles, and Prick cola.”

What is important here is the manner in which both Haussmann and Becker fill the void, by creating films, which squarely address the GDR experience after a period of being ignored in “mainstream” films. Secondly, I find it fascinating that both these films (along with others) carefully and strategically and more fully use GDR objects as signposts for memory. But in using these objects, they seem to create a greater positive emotional bond to the lost

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world of the GDR even if it was in other interpretations, a lost world of repression and state surveillance. So while objects have always served as markers for memory (hence our filling museums with old shoes as in Toronto’s Bata Shoe Museum) the interesting thing here is how the objects “shift” the historical dialogue and allow the “remembering” of what was good – even if it was shabby and ill-made. This is a very tricky knife-edge to this kind of historical/memory fetishism. Thirdly, both films use youthful protagonists for the prism of remembering. Older people are depicted as being unable to adapt to the “new” reality although this is more muted in some cases, as we shall see. Fourth, both films caused an enormous stir for “misrepresenting history”. Yet that is to miss the point since film (and as Betts points out in his writing on the object relation) object memory is essentially an emotionally laden process. Fifth, what Haussmann and Becker do so brilliantly (with obvious ties to Betts) is that both of the films give “permission” to the audience (West and East German) to remember their past without shame, fear or guilt. Both films begin to “normalize” the FRG/GDR past, both films “normalize” the past without needing to make ties to the past as tainted – whether it was “fascist” or “communist”. Neither Becker nor Haussmann would argue that their films were “realistic” but both had elements in the film which they were proud of that were “real”. Even though both are comedies, and Sonnenallee works better as a straight up comedy, both films have enormously complex attitudes embedded in their story lines about youth, family relations, education, identity, memory and history.
Part VI: Sonnenallee: The “walled garden” of growing up in the GDR and comedy as criticism of identity politics.

In addressing Sonnenallee, one way to deconstruct it, is first to begin by examining comments from the directors. Secondly I shall examine some of the critical comment surrounding the films and link these ideas to some historical academic sources to illuminate some the key ideas and the nature of the debates surrounding these films. Thirdly, I will look at some specific scenes; particularly those that involved figures of youth, authority, and educational institutions. In the chapter of Brockman’s text called, “German Film After Re-unification” he cites an often-cited line from Haussmann, the director of the film, who grew up in the GDR. Haussmann’s central vision of the film is revealed when he says, “We wanted to create a movie that would make people envious that they hadn’t lived there [in the GDR]. Since politicians like to compare the GDR to a concentration camp, in order to preen themselves with their historical mission. And that is what GDR citizens can’t stand: they are always supposed to have been either camp commanders or camp inmates – but what was in between was people’s daily life.” 40 Haussmann’s approach is interesting since he says is that he is essentially taking the same stance as GDR historian Mary Fulbrook. Unlike the exculpatory “leftist historians” or more rightist historians who focused on the repressive aspects of the political structures, Haussman, like Fulbrook suggests that one can acknowledge that the GDR was a difficult, oppressive frustrating and occasionally (for some) a terrifying place. But it was also more than a “communist dictatorship”. In periods it was less benign, and in other years a more benign

dictatorship, where people lived “whole” lives. In her seminal work, The People’s State, she takes a “middle path” neither excusing nor condemning the political and economic failures of the GDR. In her book’s introduction, Fulbrook describes how she was inspired to understand the GDR, on a tour of Germany in the early nineties. While travelling she met a GDR-born and raised tour guide who asserted that one could lead a perfectly ordinary life in the GDR. Fulbrook’s work is an attempt to enrich and balance the often opposite visions of life in the GDR. “The history books that have focused primarily on the institutions and practices of coercion are not necessarily wrong; but they are to some degree incomplete, and are predicated on an over-simplistic model of the ways in which the GDR system worked, and the ways it changed over time. In exploring the people’s paradox in more detail, we can come to a far more complex and historically adequate picture of life in the GDR, beyond the mere condemnation of dictatorial political structures….it is important to notice just how many people never had occasion to hit against these boundaries and genuinely felt they were able to lead perfectly ordinary lives.”41 Yet just as Fulbrook was trying to reconcile two opposing views of the GDR historically, so too did the film, Sonnenallee. After its release, the film drew outrage as well as praise. This outrage was despite the script’s being written and directed by two “Ossis”. As Sean Allen points out in his essay, “East West Relations in Post-Unification Comedy” both men possessed the birth credentials and GDR life experiences. Although these birth credentials should have given the film credibility, “this did not prevent the film being sharply criticized for trivializing the suffering of those who had fallen foul of

the SED regime.”\textsuperscript{42} Despite the film’s focus on youthful adventures of everyday life, Haussmann, the director, points out that “the whole film is political; in almost every scene the characters are confronted with political issues.”\textsuperscript{43} In addition to examining the film’s ties to larger historical debates, let us also examine the stock characters, some of the film’s key moments, and the symbolic object elements used in the film. Here, I will draw on my own observations as well as from critical commentary about the film. Let us examine some of the ways in which the “stock characters” in the film, function. As in any universal coming of age story familiar to western audiences, this film depicts the plucky adolescents overcoming all manner of ridiculous authority figures. The stock character authority figures whom the central character, Misha must overcome include parents, teachers and police. Misha’s parents are typical figures of authority, like parents anywhere. But they have so little power over their children as to be comically irrelevant. While this may be a universal trope anywhere, in this film it has some specifically GDR twists. The father basically fills his time either drinking or talking nonsense. Early in the movie is one of the funniest scenes in the film. It is a scene that is especially rich in “Ostalgie” since at its heart, it is a scene involving the whole family and a visitor sitting around a “GDR table”. In addition to destroying the father figure’s authority, this scene, at the ten-minute mark in the film, also displays a GDR object, a product of pride, called a “mufuti” or Multifunktionstisch or multi-functioning table. As the local policeman, Vopo (Volkspolizei) or “people’s policeman” enters the small flat of

\textsuperscript{42} Sean Allan. 2006. “East West Relations in Post Unification Comedy” Editor, David Clarke. German Cinema Since Unification. Continuum. P. 244
\textsuperscript{43} Sean Allan. 2006. “East West Relations in Post Unification Comedy” Editor, David Clarke. German Cinema Since Unification. Continuum. P. 250
Misha’s family, he is immediately invited to sit around the “Table” which he identifies with sense of awe and incredulity due to the family’s great fortune. Just prior to this, it is important to note that the Sergeant Major, has awkwardly dropped in, just as the mother has hidden a stolen western passport. In the exchange of pleasantries the policeman is constantly and comically correcting everyone about his recently improved rank from sergeant to Sergeant Major. However, in an awed voice the sergeant pauses, looks and says in awe, “Is that….a mufuti..?!” At this point the father who is trying to “expand” the table, by mistake, causes its adjustable legs to rocket upward, and nearly smashes the table top into all those family members around the table. This is the point where he curses it as “East German crap” in front of the Vopo. Listening to all this, is another guest, a card carrying Communist boyfriend of the daughter. The actor playing the father handles this physical comedy with such skill and flair that it works really well – regardless of whether one gets the specifically GDR table reference. As Paul Cooke describes the scene, at this point in the film, the table in the room is vital since, “As in contemporary ‘ostalgic’ GDR theme parks, the film fetishizes certain GDR artifacts. In fact, at times the focus on a particular item seems almost to become a form of ‘ostalgic’ product placement, advertising certain prized exhibits in the filmic museum and allowing the East German audience a celebratory moment of jouissance as they recognize a now forgotten object.”

This is an excellent example of how the film places nostalgic longing for objects as memory items in the forefront of a scene, and which creates a comically “feel-good” moment. On the one hand the made-in-GDR table’s design

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potential was terrific but its manufacture was completely inadequate. Yet this memory presumably warms the hearts of the Ossi-film watching audience members, who remember having had one. For the Wessi-film watching audience members it works since it confirms for them a sense of superiority of “Western” products. However, given the nature of the surveillance state, with informers in families and especially in the ranks of police, it is historically unlikely that the father would be so brazen with the “truth” by cursing the table so forcefully. While this works “comically” it certainly has no part in establishing the “realism” of the GDR family life, or with the surveillance in families later revealed by the opening of the Stasi archives. So even with the single example of object placement, one can see how the “battle lines” of post-unification German cultural “otherness” are laid out and then handled deftly by the filmmakers.

As for the destruction of the father as “authority figure” there is a key scene following the Table scene involving the policeman. The father causes another moment of awkwardness in misidentifying the policemen’s rank. Depicting the useless and insensitive nature of the father, the father then lectures the young Volkspolizei Sergeant Major on the nature of military rank. To lighten the mood, the father chimes in with a long lecture about rank - first army and then navy ranks - to the absolute comic silence of his listeners until his wife tells him to, “Stop talking crap”. For the rest of the film the father basically staggers about harmlessly with the visiting West Berliner Uncle Heinz, in a state of advanced, but pleasantly, harmless inebriation. The uncle from the West, drunkenly and comically comments that all
the walls – in every room – everywhere – have “asbestos!” and that they will all die of cancer in their polluted GDR apartment.

As for the father, later in the film, his wife is preparing to flee the GDR, by posing as a senior. His wife is busy applying mountains of make-up in an effort to age her appearance, so she can pose as a senior citizen matching the passport she has stolen. However, the husband is too drunk – and the rest of the family too self-absorbed - to notice. So much for the pater-familias.

The strength of the mother figure is tested however, when she does not have the courage and or moral strength to pass through the checkpoint, and she returns to her family. One particular interpretation of mother as a figure of contrast in East versus West German films, makes clear that this focus on family remaining together is a peculiarly *West-German* filmic tradition. Whereas a key question about family life in the GDR is posed by Fulbrook, who asks if family life was significantly different or more or less the same in the GDR. At the risk of diverging here, my sense is that there were significant differences that films reveal. Rates of divorce, childcare placement, and status of women did seem significantly different in the GDR and that the GDR film tradition is part of this. One critic points out, for example, that Sonnenallee basically confirms heterosexual couples and family structures and that women are either sex-objects (Miriam) or housewives (the mother). So while the historical jury may still be undecided the *image* of women in filmic traditions differs. Even the treatment of female figures in Sonnenallee tends to depict women as sex-objects or mothers, thus following a more “western” tradition. Film historian Andrea Rinke notes:
“Ever since 1945, mainstream cinema in the Federal Republic has been dominated by Hollywood and its female stereotypes: the housewife, the glamorous sex symbol and demonized temptress. By contrast, an initial overview of DEFA films reveals an altogether different variety of female protagonists [...] Films in the GDR tended to portray their heroines at the workplace, as ordinary average people, avoiding glamorous extremes.”  

Rinke goes on to suggest that in fact most GDR female film protagonists were often single mothers. While it is difficult and one should be cautious about making over-generalizations here (and perhaps Rinke does, since one of the most popular GDR films does depict a very “glamorous” woman – Paula in The Legend of Paul and Paula although she is seen “happily singing in her workplace in a key scene) I do find the comment Rinke makes about “single mothers-as-heroines” and family structure interesting, since it points to a very different “everyday life” in the GDR, and also displays Sonnenallee as “correcting” the ideal family dynamic and depiction of women. I find the essential tension in the question, of whether life in the GDR was similar to that as in the FRG is a complicated one. 

Fulbrook comments on domestic life on pages 117-120 and examines the basis of family structure, similarities and difference to “western” families. How then does Sonnenallee’s depiction of a family’s everyday life, compare to what one social historian says on the “normalizing” and enriching views of everyday life in the GDR? Fulbrook suggests that, “The family in the GDR was officially seen as the smallest unit or “cell” of the collective, socialist whole, rather than (as in prevalent Western ideals of the late 20th century, if not always in practice) merely a ‘private sphere’ of

mutual love, protection, and retreat from the pressures of outside life, an arena for ‘authentic relationships and the transmission of independent moral traditions. [my italics]...The family was held to be the primary instance of socialization of the ‘socialist personality’ for the formation of which education in the family, in the state educational institutions, in the FDJ and its pioneer organization, “Ernst Thälman” are of the utmost importance.”46 What Fulbrook goes on to assess in these pages is the extent to which the GDR family structure was significantly different from western ones. With divorce rates reaching 38% in the 1980’s and with the creation of daycare as more widespread in the West, and with the notion of the family as the starting point for “socialist education” while the family unit was not exactly “falling apart”, “with the extension of crèche and kindergarten provision, more and more children were socialized within a wider context than that of the ‘conventional housewife at home.”47 She continues by pointing out the division amongst some psychologists that the GDR produced a “deformed” family situation with the state over-reaching its control over the family, while others maintained the GDR was, despite the higher divorce rate, more stable in that it had less generational conflict within the family, and that youthful rebellion took its place more in the “outside” political realm.

This does place an interesting shadow on Sonnenallee, which would seem to suggest it is projecting a “new” western model of idealized women on the mother and on Misha’s object of desire - Miriam. The ideal mother of family is projected onto an

47 Mary Fulbrook. 2005. The People’s State: East German Society From Hitler to Honecker. Yale University Press. London. Pages p. 120
“eastern” audience, perhaps hungry for a new image of themselves, while confirming more traditional “western film-stock images of woman and family. Indeed Helen Cafferty who writes about the nature of comedy in Sonnenallee in a seminal essay, argues that indeed the mother figure is part of an image of marriage as an ideal state, since the mother, in Sonnenallee, is “only ever seen in a domestic role, abandoning her one attempt to escape to the West in favor of returning to her family. “48

As figures of authority, teachers and educators rightly come up as figures of fun, but oddly there is more menace to them (or some of them) than there is for border guards, soldiers and Vopos depicted in the film. In a classic teenage coming of age movie set up, a scene in the classroom, has one of the boys changing the slogan above the classroom chalk board from” The Party: protector of the people” via a quick re-arranging of the letters, to a new slogan which reads: “The Party: foreskin of the people”. Naturally, the teacher arrives in class, without knowing the gag behind the board, and the teacher as usual, feigning good-humour, pulls aside the covered slogan and the moment turns a bit more serious. She assumes it is the “usual” troublemaker, Mario, who in fact did commit the deed, and who is acting as the “class-enemy”. However, Misha “confesses instead on Mario’s behalf to being a class-enemy, and suggests that as his punishment, that he deliver a “self-critical lecture” to the FDJ, after school (which all students were “required” to attend). He does so, only due to the fact that the object of his desire, Miriam, has also committed a transgression by kissing a visiting a class enemy – a boy from West Berlin. What is

universal in this scene is the prank committed by students, and the deadpan
seriousness of the righteous teacher. The only thing that differs is the language of
transgression. Instead of framing the transgression as rude, or an immoral act
disrespectful anti-feminist, sexist issue of wording etc....with which we might be
familiar in the West we see instead the act as a threat to the collective good and to
the goodness of the state via the use of language as “class enemy” that is, the
language of the GDR. However, the school structure is universal in its use of shame,
guilt and a little fear. Misha however, manages to “redeem” himself in a self-critical
speech to his FSJ after-school group, essentially which is all about “love” for the
party, and which everyone in the audience – except the naïve and foolish FDJ
instructors - knows is really a thinly disguised rapturous rant about his love for
Miriam. It is a nice moment, which suggests the way in which differing motives may
have colored activities like “self-critical speeches”.

This idea of menace in the GDR continues in another scene about “school” quite
early on in the film, while the lads are hanging out in the playground the characters
are all discussing their futures, resigning themselves to three years in the army, in
order to be able to move onto university. In a rather fast jump to the next scene, a
rather poignant one, Misha is then found in some kind of interview room, sitting
alone at a table, removed by a vast distance from a panel of his teacher and FDJ
leaders and the school director who basically ask, in threatening, yet weirdly
smiling, encouraging manner: “Are you ready to serve the GDR and the army?”
Misha sits for a long time, looking down, resigned, before muttering a very reluctant,
“yes” and slouches out of the room in a depressed state resigned to what is to come. Clearly this is a moment where his needs as an individual are waived in favor of what he must do to serve the state.

While this scene is followed by one of the funniest “drug” scenes where Mario, Micha’s best friend, throws a “drogen” party (herbs mixed with Prick cola) which results in some significant hallucinations for Misha in front of Miriam. However, later on as the party ramps up, unfortunately for the two friends, they are caught urinating drunkenly off the balcony, in the direction of the border guard’s station, by a STASI employee. While the situation is ridiculous and is more in line with Western style youthful rebellion movies like Fast Times at Ridgemount High, the punishment takes a very “GDR” and decidedly non-Ostalgic turn. In a scene with the teacher/school director, the STASI man presents the photo of boys urinating off the balcony “towards the wall” and for this crime, Mario is kicked out of school, and Misha is placed on probation with no prospect of attending university - while still having to honor his three years of military service. This is one of the few scenes (there are a few more) where the film taps into the rather draconian side of the GDR. The final scene, which is perhaps the “darkest” and least ostalgic is where Misha learns that his good friend Mario, kicked out school and now paired with a recently impregnated girlfriend, is un-employed and so turns to work for the STASI. While this may be an inaccurate shorthand of why people joined the STASI (or were recruited) and the film might be rather slipshod here, what the film does try to capture, albeit imperfectly, is the emotional betrayal Misha feels for his friend even though they are reconciled later in the film, and all is forgiven. What the film
captures here for a wider audience both Western and Eastern, is the threat of
conformity that GDR institutions demanded, and the loss of future prospects that
resulted from young people’s perceived transgressions against the state. But the
notion of schools as vehicles for punishment (not to sound too much like Michel
Foucault) is also universally understood, since arguably all schools run on some
kind of framework employing shame, guilt, fear along with a healthy dose of self-
interest.

The one set of figures that film does not really tackle with anything more than
humour is the police and border guards who generally are depicted as fools. It might
be that these figures were best treated only with humour, which dilutes their
menace over time. As discussed earlier in this paper, the GDR was a surveillance
state, with enormous resources to listen, learn, and “correct” its citizens from
straying from the SED line. The character of the Vopo gets his “just reward” for his
constant surveillance on the street and his persistence in asking Misha for his
“papers” even though he knows very well who he is – which by the way somewhat
contradicts some arguments that Sonnenallee paints a picture of GDR’s community
life as close, communal, and where “everyone knew everyone else” against the
selfish individualism of the West, in which people were estranged from their
neighbors. This kind of surveillance is an annoyance but in few instances in the film
does it deal with what some argue is the GDR as prison model where all social
relations are tainted. The cop is a bumbling annoyance, easily fooled as is evident
when the group of lads is listening to “forbidden” music – they simply plead
ignorance that they cannot understand the lyrics as they are in English, not Russian.
The end of the film reduces the policeman to the role of street sweeper. While the end of the GDR certainly saw its share of full-time employees of the state in the STASI reduced, most of the members of the Volkspolizei maintained their jobs. Here the film seems to project more of an adolescent fantasy to see all police style "enforcers" punished.

The other potentially threatening figure, the border guard who searches Uncle Heinz, is a rather jolly if supremely confident, supporter of the SED and GDR who in an often-cited scene, is shown comparing the "superior" GDR radio to the overly complex Japanese multi-functioning ghetto tape deck and radio. His hectoring the uncle is always humorous and designed to show the irony of his good-natured confidence in the superiority of the regime. Thus, in a sense the filmmakers use humour to defuse the terror of the formerly powerful figures such as border guards, police, party officials and even parents and teachers.

In turning to the historical object ostalgic "fetishism" that Sonnenallee displays, it is very obvious in several other key items. While it is important, this process of Ostalgie via objects is much more pronounced in the film Goodbye Lenin!; a film released six years later, and which I shall also examine in more detail later in the paper. In Sonnenallee, there is a major object which is pursued by one of the main character's younger friends, Wuschel, who is obsessed with obtaining a forbidden copy of the Rolling Stones album, Exile on Main Street. Much of this character's role in the film is spent talking about the item; meeting "dealers" at flea markets to strike a bargain to obtain it. When he finally does get a copy of it, in a pivotal scene near
the end of the film, he runs happily across the village square. Unfortunately at the same instant there is a power failure, and with the heightened sense of security, since the whole film takes place in the shadow of the Wall, he is shot by the previously mentioned Sergeant-Major policeman, who thinks Wuschel is trying to flee the GDR. However, Wuschel is saved from death with the bullet lodged in the record. When Wuschel realizes he has been shot, the tragedy is not in the shattering of the local community’s harmony, of some community-minded Ostalgic view. The tragedy is not the violence of the Vopo’s actions, but rather in the smashing of the desired “western” forbidden object – an LP for which he has worked so hard and long to obtain. In the original treatment of the script the character was to die at the hands of the police, but Haussmann, the director, felt the moment was stronger and more tragic, by having the character lose his long-desired western item. In thinking about Betts’ academic treatment of nostalgia/Ostalgie, he points out that it is via these kinds of consumer goods, that one sees in modern post-war history, the establishment of emotional bonds with objects – and with memories of the objects. In this scene, Haussmann has delivered exactly that. One commentary on the function of the objects in relation to Ostalgie is again, offered by Paul Cooke.

“Through such moments of over the top comic ‘ostalgic’ product placement the East German spectator begins to sense that s/he is not being presented with a straightforwardly mimetic representation of life in the East, but rather a hyper-real simulation, through which his/her sense of nostalgia is indulged, but at the same time challenged.”

49 Certainly there are moments which belie the use of objects-as-

nostalgic vehicles as comic. There is an odd tension running through the film. Indeed an argument can be made that the film channels a depiction of “everyday life” that is a kind of nod to DEFA-style socialist realism. This is even supported by the fact that the film stock used has a particularly “GDR” look to it. Yet the aesthetic is so emotional, and based in western-style stock characters, youth-as-rebel comedy traditions and family relations, with a shamelessly emotional sensibility as to be unrecognizable as a GDR-inspired film.

However, the most important object in the film, which has an ambiguously nostalgic function, is the film’s use of diaries. While not an example of “commercial” Ostalgie object placement, the use of these diaries as objects is the most interesting and certainly the most complex. In a way it is due to the film’s treatment of the diaries that Sonnenallee is as rich and complex a film on the nature of Ostlagie, memory and history of the GDR. While Goodbye Lenin! seems to have been regarded as the more important of the two films critically, the use of diaries as a comic-serious device in Sonnenallee is inspired. Essentially the main character, Misha, in order to attain the object of his desire, Miriam, must respond to Miriam’s demands that he display a rebellious, critical attitude to the GDR, and display this in diary form. She demands a display of how he has suffered in the GDR. Of course, his “suffering” is completely fictional and he manufactures a diary-based “confession” which she receives but does not read. This object will confirm that he is, like her, carelessly, youthfully, dangerously, disdainful of everything in the GDR. Misha essentially sits down over a period of days and “invents” or reverse engineers a progression of diary entries which outline his suffering under an unjust regime, his growing abhorrence to the
whole GDR state. He then presents the diaries as a token of love to Miriam at the film’s end. She accepts the validity of them and rewards him with the ultimate act of submission – sex with Misha! While contextually, this is a complex commentary on the nature of historical documentation and validation, one is reminded particularly of the Hitler diaries forgery that consumed West Germany in the early 1980’s. The diaries’ use is also a fascinating commentary on the manner in which we “invent” the past. While Micha’s motives are transparent and “primal” as he writes, he really begins to enjoy the process, and enjoys recording his own (mostly imaginary) disdain for the State. While at the same time he is living his day to day life, he gives almost no attention to any political implications around him at all unless they involve girls or music. As Cooke suggests, “Firstly, although the individual events of the diary are made up, the overall image of life in the GDR is actually far more hard-hitting than in the rest of the film. Thus ironically, the writing of a fictionalized version of his life actually becomes a mechanism though which the film escapes its direct theme of “Ostalgie” to explore the negative aspects of life in the East in a more realistic, less romantic, way than they are treated in the rest of the film.”

While Cooke is right to illustrate the duplicity at work in the diaries, here he overstates the diaries’ role as anti-nostalgic by ignoring and or/understating some of the other, less “romantic” episodes in the film. However, the filmmakers take us through a fun house of mirrors helping us to think about the relationship of memory, history and writing, via the diaries. While suggesting there is a “truth” in them, it was essentially a manufactured one in which the present considerations were projected.

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“backwards” - exactly mirroring in some senses, why historians must be cautious!
The brilliance of what this film does is revealed in these diary scenes. It is a non-
realistic depiction which through exaggeration and fantasy, “re-stores” the right of
people to value their own memories and history as positive in a time and place that
was essentially depicted as only negative- and that while the document/diaries are
entirely fictional, they capture both a specific critique of the GDR, as well as a
universal, “emotional” truth. We all recall our youthfulness with some modicum of
nostalgia and the GDR’s former residents are really no different. It is interesting too,
to note that the diaries are completely ignored by Miriam, but accepted by her as
“valid” rather uncritically. Perhaps this is a commentary on the written record?
What prompts memory and historical reflection here are objects as object memory
markers not the messages in them. Of course the film also ties music into its scenes
to enhance the emotionally laden contexts. Reason, or the written historical record
and in conjunction with reasoned argument, therefore superficially have little place
in the film.
There is a return to the object-as symbol of memory at the conclusion of the film.
Misha’s friend Wuschel finally gets the desired Stones album, but once more
Wuschel is in despair since he has paid more money for a fake. When Misha tries to
comfort him after saying it is “just as good as the Stones”, the film takes a decidedly
non-realistic turn. In an attempt to mollify Wuschel, who faces double tragedy upon
discovering after being shot, losing his first record to the violence of the police, then
being duped by paying for a fake, (the record was not by the Rolling Stones at all,
but another western rock band) Misha puts the record on and the film moves into a
surreal music-as-healing period, as he and Wuschel perform air-guitar on Misha’s balcony right near the Berlin wall, in full view of the border guards and the now demoted Vopo who is reduced to a street-sweeper for his role in shooting Wuschel as punishment for his poor actions. Weirdly, the whole street community joins in, and all the community begins dancing, then all begin to slowly move towards a disappearing border crossing which opens and the guards even join in. While this is clearly not “realism” what most of the critical commentaries on the goodness or flaws in the “historical accuracy” of Haussmann’s film miss (and there are so many strong opinions on what the film does well or misrepresents) is that he is trying to establish the emotional state of the people living GDR and playing to its survivors on the screen fifteen years on. Not only is it fantasy beyond ostalgie, but a weird longing, a wishful what-might-have-been-state of imagined perfect “socialist community”. But it is so obviously fantasy that I find it rather spoils the rest of the film.

Ultimately what is instructive in Sonnenallee, is how film is so clearly a battleground for historical “memory” and identity and perhaps is worth paying attention to since film can reach millions of people, and this film sold 1.8 million tickets in its first year of release in Germany alone. Yet historical works like Fulbrook’s reach, perhaps only thousands of people. But in a way both filmmaker Haussmann and historian Fulbrook have a similar grasp of the nature of family and society in the GDR. While Fulbrook is not interested in “ostalgie” and in fact is trying to demolish it by examining “normal life” in the GDR, clearly ostalgie is at the heart of the film. As Paul
Cooke describes Sonnenallee, it is a film which “deliberately highlights competing tensions at work within contemporary nostalgia for the East German State. On the one hand, Sonnenallee constructs ostalgie as a response to fears among many East Germans that the true nature of their everyday existence is being elided from the historical record....On the other hand, and seeming to contradict this project, the film also challenges simplistically rose-tinted views of the East. Consequently, the film forces the East German spectator to reflect on, and ultimately reject, any manifestations of ostalgie which would ostensibly call for a return to the GDR.”

While this quote perhaps over-praises what Sonnenallee does for East German audiences, Cooke makes a valid point that the film-maker’s attempt to be “balanced” in the self-aware construct of ostalgie, with the use of comedy for authority figures. Yet that validity is weakened when at the conclusion of the film, it devolves into complete fantasy, and any semblance of realism, or balanced assessment of ostalgie is lost. Unlike in the academic historical writings of Fulford and others, what film can offer for both East and West Germans, is a sort of emotional “healing” process when it comes to reconciling East/West German “identities” allowing former GDR citizens to begin “normalizing” some aspects of their daily lives. But if one looks at the films through, say, a DEFA tradition lens, can one say that the film fulfills an educative function? My answer here is a qualified ‘sort of’. Since it is aesthetically so far from focusing on the collective issues and problems of everyday life, even though it uses some technique that are similar to DEFA style films (color) and makes references respectfully to DFEA films (the moment of acknowledging The Legend of

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Paul and Paula, its depiction of the family, of school, of police, of border guards so much is fantasy projection, that it is, as one critic described, it is like saying that Fiddler on the Roof is a film which sensitizes us to life in shtetl. However, Sonnenallee does succeed in the larger German-German culture/identity wars of enabling an acknowledgment that there was life worth living and “normal” aspects to GDR social life and culture. The film also paves the way for more films, some serious some not, about the GDR and German-German culture and issues of identity. So, to what extent did films like Sonnenallee create or respond to the “emergent” need by people formerly and still living in “the East”? In the case of Sonnenallee, it seems to have been the case that it made being from the GDR “okay” and as Haussmann has said even “cool”.

Part VII: Goodbye Lenin! Destroying the GDR, creating a “good” GDR identity or object fetishism as identity construction?

In Goodbye Lenin!, another ostaglie film which uses humour as well as a sweet kind of pathos about a son’s love for his mother, which is what the film’s narrative is on one level. However in this film we have a very different construction of life in the GDR. In summary, Alex’s life is torn asunder when his father leaves for the West leaving his mother alone to raise two children in the GDR in the seventies and eighties. By 1989, events of the GDR find Alex participating in a demonstration against the GDR regime, on the same night (in October 7th 1989) when his mother is to be rewarded for years of faithful service by the government. She sees Alex and is either overcome by the sight of her son protesting or begins to realize the true state
of repression in her socialist motherland. When the police at the protest turn violent, she has a heart attack, falls into a coma and wakes after the end of the GDR. To prevent further shock to her heart (which doctors assert will kill her) Alex attempts to construct a mini-version of the GDR in his mother's bedroom, going to comically extra-ordinary lengths to preserve the illusion that the GDR is not only still in existence but is in fact the now better half of the two German states.

The plot involves Alex, enlisting his family and friends help in creating and maintaining the lie, that during the eight months his mother lay in coma between Oct 1989 and the summer of 1990, the GDR does not disappear. The fiction Alex tries to build is that GDR is not only in existence, but progressing. All this is done in order to spare his invalid mother the shock that knowing of the GSR's demise might cause her death. Certainly the differing time period in which the film is set is a crucial difference. Taking Betts as our guide, let us first examine the "objects as memory" in these objects develop the emotional memory and ostalgie. In Goodbye Lenin! the product placement is much more pronounced and is much more central as part of the plot. Everything from the furniture, to the constant search for Mocha Fixe Gold coffee, to Spreewald pickles and the jars with the right labels, and the "purchasing of a Trabant, all serve as part of the "fiction" or web of lies which the main character Alex is trying to maintain. There is less a sense of reconciliation with the GDR, and more of a sense of loss, and an emotional separation as the title of the film implies: Goodbye Lenin! Of the ostalgie films, Goodbye Lenin! was a much more popular film selling over 5.5 million tickets. Despite being billed in much of the
literature as a tragi-comedy, the film seems less “hilarious” than other films. Perhaps this is because many of the object references are specific to a German audience, and serve as vehicles for much of the comic set up. Or perhaps it is because the film plays on the idea of history and identity as constructs so much more subtly.

Daniela Berghan dismisses the impact of both Goodbye Lenin! and Sonnenallee calling the them “reconciliation” nostalgia films but she does anchor them as products of their times.

Perhaps more than Sonnenallee, Goodbye Lenin! is much more of a “love story” of memory and a “saying goodbye” to the GDR. This makes some sense aesthetically since by the time of its release in 2003, the events of the Wende were fourteen years in the past. The average viewer may well have been ready to move on from the initial “anger” at issues such as loss of career, economic dislocation of re-unification, a confrontation of the repression of the Stasi through the opening of state-controlled archives. One thing to note about the film, is that apart from the opening of the film in a scene which has the mother hosting a visit from the Stasi, whom mother shouts at and then dismisses (something which was quite unlikely) and in a later scene with Alex’s arrest at an October 1989 protest, there is an almost total absence of direct commentary of state run apparatus of repression. The film does get at more personal kinds of monitoring and personal nature of these betrayals.

As many historians have pointed out while the physical “separation” of German-German relations had symbolically ended with the opening of the wall, with the demise of the GDR in 1990, and with the “absorption” of the GDR into five new
Lander within the FRG, the “walls of the mind” were still very much standing. One of the puzzles is whether ostalgie films serve to reinforce those cultural divisions or if they serve to “normalize” and lessen the identity issue between Wessis and Ossis.

Much of the historical debate seems to suggest that after the fall of the GDR, with its apparatus of surveillance and repression, and with the “disappearance” of the GDR way of life, after progress through the collapse of the GDR, that this process actually allowed a “flowering” and in fact strengthened a uniquely “GDR” identity, albeit one built after the state had existed and is in this sense, from its onset going to be a construction based on ostalgie. With Goodbye Lenin! its title makes clear that the film is going to be more a matter of reconciling the viewer to a failed state while offering “ostalgic” glimpses of what the good qualities of that state might have been and even what still could be possible.

In the film’s opening scenes we experience Alex’s memories as, the son in a happy GDR childhood, which is shot in recollection style, via grainy super-8 style footage. With an eye to examining the film in terms of education and family structure let us begin with some cited and personal analysis of the symbolic role of each of the family members, again looking at key scenes, examining the role of “objects” and then tying the film to the larger debate about this film’s role in both reflecting as well as shaping debates on personal identity, history and memory as a product of the early 2000’s in Germany.

As one critic has pointed out the whole film is predicated on lies and then maintaining, recognizing and living with the lies that each family member assembles. Unknown to Alex, his father did not leave his mother and abandon them
for another family in the West, but rather he waited for Christiane (the mother) and the family to follow after defecting at a conference. However, fear of losing her children to the state prompts the mother to remain in the GDR, where she becomes a model, if overly enthusiastically idealistic teacher, FDJ choir leader and reformer of the state as a writer of Eingaben or letters of complaint about GDR products. As Alex says of her in the film at the six minute mark, “After my father left my mother married the GDR”. In the construct of the film the mother Christiane, becomes a symbol for what is “good” in the GDR, while the father, initially thought to be selfish and motivated by personal gain, abandons his family for a new more materially satisfying life, is a symbol for the FRG. The mother Christiane admits near the end of her life that she has lied to her children, and there are some brief days of reunification between the mother and father before the mother dies. So, as one can see, the symbolic level of parental relationship mirrors that of the FRG/GDR. It is based on miscommunication, abandonment (of sorts), fear and lies. In terms of the symbolic role of other family members, Alex’s sister, of all the family members, wants to abandon her former GDR identity. She quits her university study of economics to work at Burger King and dates her “western” boss/boyfriend. While she does not want her mother to die (of shock) she alone is most grudging in her participation in Alex’s schemes to keep his mother in the belief that the GDR still exists.

Another figure, Denis, befriends Alex. In contrast to earlier kinds of depictions of West Germans, the “Wessi” with whom Alex is partnered in his new job selling satellite dishes, is not the typical aggressive selfish Wessi that one sees in earlier
films like Go Trabi Go! or Sonnenallee. Denis is a good friend who helps Alex construct his “lies” – especially with his skills as a film editor for the “fake” news stories the two boys concoct.

Also of note, is the film’s depiction of how older people adapt to the “new” Germany. The mother’s elderly friends, whom she helps earlier in the film, are basically on the scrap-heap of history, bitter about their lot in life and, pining for the “old days”, more willing participants in the charades Alex creates inside the bedroom of Christiane, which maintains the fiction that the GDR still exists.

One older figure is, for purposes of this paper, the former school principal, Herr Klapproth. He is now an out and out drunk – presumably either dismissed or has lost his job due to a school closure. This kind of depiction gives the film a feeling of historical verisimilitude since after the Wende, as we have seen, the GDR’s new landers responsible for schools, did face a combination of bankruptcy, tainted officialdom (teachers, administrators) declining enrolment, and social science curriculum in a kind of free-fall. So this interaction between Alex and Herr Klapproth is an historical instance that is backed up by some historical evidence. Of all the teachers “sacked” after re-unification, it was only the most die-hard ideologues or those most intimately connected to the security apparatus. So in this sense the film addresses an interesting historical point. Before meeting the former school principal who was his mother’s boss, in a scene at about the 53:30 minute mark, Alex is seen recruiting his mother’s former students in front of POS Werner Selenbinder. The school name is a direct reference to specifically GDR style comprehensive school. However, the idealism of the former students, who are
former Young Pioneers is criticized since the capitalist bug has obviously bitten these youngsters and they only agree to wear the flea-market sourced Young Pioneer scarves, and to sing – for 20 Deutschmarks in cash – while insisting that they be paid up front!

In the following scene, at around the 54-minute mark, Alex visits Herr Klapproth, who lives in a smoky book-lined, bottle-strewn flat now obviously retired. Before the visit to his mother’s former principal begins, Alex makes the point, in his often-cheeky subversive voice-over narration, that “so many of my mother’s former fellow teachers had ‘retired’”. Coupled with his sarcasm and irony earlier in the film, this suggests that retirement was forced, and ties in a post-unification defection from the profession. Here the historical accuracy is a bit mixed since in only a few states, were there significant dismissals due to political taint of excessive GDR ideology. After unification, membership of the party alone was not enough for dismissal, but relations with the Stasi were. Although the aggregate statistics are there, and individual stories are in the historical record, there is as yet, no really good source that pieces together the role students, teachers, principals, civil service personnel and administrators a played in connecting the Stasi surveillance mechanism to schools – except anecdotally and indirectly. However, the manner in which Alex narrates the “fate” of teachers suggests a confirmation in western audience that teachers were often tainted and dismissed, when in fact this was not the case en masse. From the eastern viewing audience members’ viewpoints, in fact, their demands for dismissals particularly in the social sciences, were ultimately, and
frustratingly not met. So the audience perception here in relation to the educational dismissals, is at best a mixed one.

In returning to the scene with Alex and his mother’s former boss, however, the scene is quite serious as Alex “recruits” for a birthday party. But essentially, Alex cross-examines the former principal. It is sometimes hard to make out the tone, but before the audience sees him on screen, Alex describes him as, “Dr. Klapproth, former principal and highly respected teacher.” It becomes evident in the interview that this is not Alex’s opinion. We see the former principal seated alone, obviously living alone, smoking in a dark, book-lined, vodka bottle-strewn apartment - an obvious cast-off in the new system. Klapproth opens the scene saying: “We were all valuable people, right Alex? I admired your mother. She was an excellent teacher and wonderful human being. “Alex’s quiet, yet forceful, sarcastic response is, “Which is why she was demoted.” This is the kind of scene that redeems Goodbye Lenin! as much more than a feel-good Ostalgie film. By the blunt verbal duel, Alex obviously understands that his mother’s career as a teacher was compromised by the fact that her father was a “class-enemy” who deserted the GDR –and that his mother was left to pay the personal as well as professional price. This is hardly a simple longing for the lost GDR, or an attempt to make the GDR cool that Haussmann delivers. The dialogue, dueling-style back and forth commentary and indeed the whole scene might be lost on most western audiences. However, the scene continues with a defense by Klapproth who essentially confesses, by finding an excuse for Christiane/Alex’s mother’s demotion– despite his so-called respect for her.

Klapproth deflects saying, “Some Comrades in the collective thought she was
too...idealistic...since your father left.” What is well written and well executed about the scene is the ambiguity of the language. It appears Alex’s mother was demoted for being too good a teacher, for being overly enthusiastic - which lands her a demotion. This confirms for western and eastern viewers that an essential flaw that in the GDR power politics was arbitrary, overly politicized and abused by apparatchiks or nomenklatura, or party officials like Klapproth having this power at their disposal.

While it is not clear Klapproth was in the party he obviously had enough sway to get rid of a talented teacher who again may or may not have been a threat to his position. So in this one little scene, one has a neatly executed –if fictional- feel for the kind of arbitrary misuse of power that everyday people might have faced in their jobs. I do find it interesting that the writers choose his mother as a teacher since teaching is a job that is both idealistic, yet sort of representative of the kind of average job. Yet it was also a position that was considered in some subjects, as highly political in the GDR. What works so effectively in the scene, is that of all the figures in the film, Alex's mother is the most dedicated (yet supportively critical), devoted and hard-working person in the community, who even receives an “award of excellence”. Yet she is also broken by the system. For the filmmakers, this helps them to make a very anti-nostalgic point, poignantly, quickly and effectively.

The only other references to “school-related figures” are again in relation to the mother who was too idealistic, and to the Freie Deutsch Jugend or FDJ activities, which she led, and which Alex recalls fondly. There is no mention of any kind of secondary school life- for good or ill. So all of Alex’s learning is outside of the school milieu. However, in terms of depiction of a social life and home life, that is “typical”
GDR household, another thing the film again gets right is having Alex come from a single parent family, raised near the concrete Alexanderplatz Square, in a “Plattenbau” or gray, uniquely GDR, monolithic state apartment-blocs.

Where the movie becomes especially interesting is in how Alex attempts to construct the ideal of a socialist reality for his mother, and how he is essentially caught between worlds. He lives and works in the new capitalist Federal Republic with a job selling satellite dishes, but he creates a vision of the GDR past, which becomes increasingly positive as he constructs it, of a perfected, ideal, mini socialist state in in his invalid mother’s bedroom.

In terms of objects as markers, the search for old GDR objects, becomes central to the “illusion” of the GDR that Alex is trying to construct. He searches endlessly to find, from the rubbish bins and flea markets and abandoned apartments, objects that can serve as convincing items that socialism still survives. For the audience, however, these serve as ostalgic “memory markers”. Perhaps too there is a bit of sly commentary on consumer culture as Alex takes jams and pickles made in the “west” and stuffs the product into jam and pickle jars from the east- a commentary on cultural continuity since although the jams and pickles are new they are basically exactly like the old products and Alex is seen repeatedly spooning new product in to the same old GDR labeled jars, which he has rescued from various places – or simply put he places new wine into old bottles.

In a playful twist, old GDR style furniture is thrown in to the street and replaced by IKEA furniture. And naturally in a western capitalist film, IKEA ads are seen repeatedly –something that would have generated money to finance the film!
As for clothing as objects of memory, at a point before the birthday party, Alex’s sister, Marianne remarks: “I can’t believe we used to wear this crap.”

Of course it would not be an East German film without a Trabant. And so, one scene has the entire family travelling in a recently purchased sky-blue Trabant and they pile in to head for the family’s country house. The “dacha scene” is a return to the earlier scene of Alex’s youthful happiness. But at this point in the film it is the place where the mother, Christiane, admits to constructing lies about the father having left and that she has lied about him her entire life. Despite this betrayal, Alex however, does not cease the GDR paradise “construct” for his mother.

At the conclusion of the film, the “lie” that Alex is trying to maintain is evidence of a kind of “conversion to socialism”. Having started the film making disparaging comments about the 40th anniversary celebrations, and wondering if it wouldn’t be better to emigrate, by the film’s end, Alex has been “educated” to the more positive side of socialism through his efforts to construct a “mini-GDR” in his mother’s bedroom flat. After the dacha confession scene, Alex and his mother “switch places”.

Alex’s mother confesses to lying to her children on a visit the old family “dacha” in the country; admitting that the children’s her husband, Robert, a doctor, did not leave for a woman – he left with the expectation that the family would follow. The mother admits the father wrote often but eventually gave up and started a new life and a new family in the West. The mother’s “confession” is interesting again, since it offers a non-ostalgic look at life in the GDR – even for people wanting to leave. At the one hour thirty minute mark Christiane confesses, “I was terribly scared. You don’t know what it’s like...applying for an exit visa, with two children. They make you
wait. Forever. Sometimes years. They could have taken you away from me – you understand?” What the film points to here is the intensely personal nature of state oppression, and the power the state had over the family. If the family was non-conforming the state felt a duty to rescue “the children” to preserve the children’s socialist prospects. Even after this “betrayal” Alex does not, respond in kind with “honesty” about the fall of the GDR – although before his mother breaks her news about his father, he is about to do so.\s

Perhaps the most moving, strange and ultimately unbelievable scene in the film, which helps the viewer question the nature of belief and identity, comes as Alex and his friend Denis record a program showing GDR astronaut, Sigmund Jahn as the “new” head of the GDR, after the resignation of Eric Honecker. They reverse the tide of history making the images of people swarming over the wall, run in the opposite direction from west to east. The narrative is especially interesting here since unknown to Alex, his girlfriend has revealed that GDR is no more- but Alex is unaware of this and he works to maintain the fiction even coming to love the idealism himself. Is it implied then, that to be a true believer in socialism you need to be able to construct and believe in one’s own lies? Is that also true for educators?\s

Of course the most significant object as memory marker is the film’s use of the partially destroyed Lenin statue. In a scene which has Christiane watching, a helicopter, carrying the partially destroyed statue of Lenin, is carried on a long cable, off screen and into the sunset. [What was unknown to me is that this is a tribute to Fellini film, Dolce Vita, in which there is statue of Jesus, carried away by
Both films use object icons to symbolically suggest the final irrelevance of an ideology.

**Part VIII: Lives of Others: A return to GDR as walled prison and GDR exoticism?**

In a sense, The Lives of Others marks a return to a commentary on German-German identity relations. One interpretation was a “conservative” western historical view of depicting life under the GDR as marked by a sense of “otherness” and “exoticism” under which the people lived deformed and damaged everyday lives at the hands of an oppressive state, whose main organ of oppression was the Stasi. This taps into the kind of construction led by historians like Gary Bruce. The Lives of Others was released in March 2006 in Germany. Unlike previous ostalgie films, it was a huge success in Germany, but also in the United States other western countries. Despite the film theorists classifying the 1990’s and beyond in German cinema as a rejection of 1970’s New German cinema style of auteur or in German “autorenen” style filmmaking, film historians have noted that the late 1990’s was marked by new, cool-Germania film-makers who worked more as collaborative teams in a non-auteur style. However, in my view this film would seem to me to actually conform to more of an “auteur” style analysis, since the director, Florian Henckel von Donnersmack was also the film’s screen writer. His ideas of art, film memory are quite deeply philosophically and technically embedded in the central themes of the film. Even more interestingly, he was a “Wessi” and while his family had roots in eastern Silesian aristocracy, he also had a privileged “western” upper middle class life. His treatment of the topic of Stasi oppression as central to an understanding of the GDR
was for many critics a source of surprise for the film’s “accuracy” of historical
details. His background as a privileged Wessi was at the same time being a source of
resentment. GDR dissident Wolf Bierman was amazed that a Wessi could frame the
narrative with such sensitivity. While films like the German comedies and later the
slightly more political Sonnenallee were popular inside Germany, it is only with
Goodbye Lenin! and with this film that you witness German films addressing post-
Nazi historical, political and cultural issues in a way that appeals to both German
and “foreign” audiences.

In an interesting article outlining the film’s success at the American Oscar
nomination process (where it won best foreign film of 2007) Paul Cooke makes a
valuable contribution to outlining some of the structural reasons for the film’s
success abroad. While noting that German films which focus on the Nazi past had
done quite well in terms of popular reception and critical acclaim, Cooke makes the
case that German “historical” films about the Third Reich are popular because they
are stuck on the “bad” past of Germany. Amid all the controversy of the “exoticism”
of the GDR, it is in way linked to tales of the Third Reich. The Live of Others is an
appeal to that historical sensibility – that German films are successful if they access
the “bad” German past. Film critic Peter Zander, more bluntly states, “Nazi topics
work best at the Oscars.”

Cook goes on to suggest that The Lives of Others was
also successful, not only for tapping into the “bad” German past, that foreign
audiences liked, but it did well in the Oscar category of foreign film nominations

\[52\] Paul Cooke. February 2007: Das Leben der Anderen Follows Blueprint for Foreign Language Oscar Success. In A New
History of German Cinema, editors Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michale D. Richardson Camden House, Rochester New York
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process, due to the structural support that the film received. For a film that cost only two million dollars to make, Cooke notes that “of crucial importance was without a doubt, the extraordinarily well-orchestrated promotion campaign by the film’s US distribution company Sony Pictures Classics. The film opened in Los Angeles for one week in December 2006 in order to qualify for the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards, an important event that often indicates Oscar success. This was followed by special screenings for critics and other key opinion-makers, to create buzz around the film. It did not enter general release until February 2007, in the immediate run-up to the ceremony, at which point von Donnersmarck was travelling from coast to coast, giving up to twenty interviews per day, his confidence with English making him an easy guest for US talk shows.”

Finally Cooke also makes the point that while on the one hand, it would seem that Lives of Others was sort of a “departure” in an historical sense in terms of topic, shifting from the Nazi past to the GDR-as STASI prison past, the film actually follows a kind of “formula” in film known as the British heritage genre. In this transition, films are a kind of “historical museum” and in the German case it puts, as Lutz Koepnick calls it, “the nation’s grisly history in display.” Instead of depicting the German Nazi past, von Donnersmarck and others are given enormous credit for depicting the GDR past as essentially a totalitarian state effectively and accurately in terms of the look and feel of the film, which we shall examine more critically in

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the next paragraphs. This overall feel for the film, for a viewing audience links the totalitarian GDR to the oppressive Nazi past - which always sells.

In returning to Cooke’s point about the film as a formulaic variation on the British heritage film, these kinds of historical films, need to be foreign, but not too foreign, Citing critic Seessen, Cooke reminds us that “a good foreign film is one that shows an exotic, small secluded country...A good foreign film is always like visiting a museum.” And as in any good museum, the focus is on artifacts which evoke “the past” and a kind of historical object fetishism. Other critics see this kind of depiction of the “bad” German past not as a kind of identity reckoning or a battle of German-German identity and cultural relations but more as a kind of commercial cultural branding –that German film is essentially the negative side to the “Made in Germany” brand. The positive side to this “branding” is that there are objects of high status, the carefully branded BMW and Mercedes-Benz but the cultural flip side is that film is just another kind of commercial export, but with a negative brand.

While the film’s look, its costumes, props, clothing, setting details and depiction of many aspects of life in the GDR has been praised as accurate the film set off a lively debate about the inaccuracy of the emotional heart of the film. The basic critique was that nowhere in the millions of pages of Stasi documentation do you have a Stasi senior officer “defecting” in an emotional sense, to take the side of a subject under surveillance. So what The Lives of Others in a broad sense offers is a return to the serious matter of the way in which lives – specifically family lives and friendships were both closer but were also ultimately destroyed by the state. In the
interests of a good story, a good Stasi officer had to be invented. While there is
debate about whether “everyday life” was different in the GDR, Fulbrook comes
down squarely saying that life in the GDR by the 1980’s was both “normal” in many
respects but was structurally and significantly different. There is then the tension
that films like Sonnenallee try to capture – families are families everywhere, but that
the GDR was different. Fulbrook writes that “by the 1980’s, East German society was
very different than that of West Germany. Living conditions, social institutions,
widespread expectations and experiences had all been dramatically transformed by
the forty year experiment in attempting to construct a socialist society as
understood by the SED….Power and political conformity replaced ownership or
non-ownership of the means of production as key determinants of the stratification
system of the new East German society.”\textsuperscript{55} And it is the required conformity which,
The Lives of Others deals with and which is something that all schools require. The
film opens by moving us into the experience of being interrogated and into the mid
of someone running a Stasi school – the epitome of where one would expect and
indeed find, conformity.

As the scenes unfold, the positive object fetishism: is gone. It has morphed into a
more negative object fetish. The Trabants, the shabby housing, the Volvo limos of
party officials, drab color palate are all too accurate and a new kind of “emotional
fetish” is brought back into play. But it is one based on threatening objects like the
audio surveillance equipment, the letter-opening steamers, the grim gray/brown
color palette of homes and offices. Essentially the resurrection of the all-powerful

\textsuperscript{55} Mary Fulbrook. 2005. The People’s State. P 46-47
surveillance state which “deformed” relations is brought back into play via some of these objects.

The opening scene of the film has main character Weisler, as an interrogator of prisoner number 227. And while the film seems to open with this interrogation of a subject, whose friend has defected or escaped to the West, the narrative shifts back and forth in time, and it is revealed to us, that Weisler is instructing a class in the Stasi college, on how to successfully break a “suspect”. While it is not torture in the physical sense, nor is it the kind of Third Reich terror which a viewing audience might at first recall, it is a process of constant psychological terror and sleep deprivation that works to get the suspect to tell the truth. The threat of arresting the prisoner’s spouse and the removal of his children also is employed. At the forty second mark, the opening sequence depicts a suspect being escorted down the hall at the Stasi prison, located in Berlin Hoenschoenhausen. The guard escorts the suspect as one would escort a naughty student hand on one arm. As the guard and prisoner meet another prisoner and guard, seen down the long hallway, he forces the suspect to “stop” and commands him to “Stand still. Eyes to the floor.” This is followed by an approach to the door of the temporary detention centre, where the guard approaches the door, knocks and says “Address him as Captain.” We see the first historical object, even before we see the main character Weisler, in a shot of him turning on a very advanced looking reel-to-reel recorder hidden in his desk. Without looking up, Weisler commands the suspect who has entered the small gray and green room: “Enter. Sit- hands under your thighs, palms down.” We assume this
is to make the subject feel intimidated and compliant. But we learn in a later scene, that this is part of the Stasi method of collecting peoples “scent” for future use. As the interrogation gets under way one is reminded of a recalcitrant student sitting in the principal’s office. After the opening volley of the broad question by Weisler, “Is there anything you’d like to tell us?” meaning, we (the Stasi) already know everything, but want you to incriminate yourself. Weisler reprimands the prisoner, now referred to as prisoner number 227, who confesses he knows nothing. Just following this, at the 1:21 mark, Weisler replies with a shaming comment about why the prisoner needs to cooperate. “You’ve done nothing...know nothing. [pause] You think we imprison people on a whim?” The prisoner responds with a “no” and Weisler finishes the volley: “If you think our humanistic system capable of such a thing that alone would justify your arrest.” The comment reveals Weisler as a true believer. While threatening imprisonment, he underscores the humanistic nature of the whole state system. While this is ironic for us, as viewers who are forced to confront the “nature” of the GDR as a state, and the mindset of its functionaries, it also begins to paint the GDR state as a kind of ideologically warped and misguided system which assumes imprisonment is a key component of the “humanistic” assumptions of the GDR as school metaphor.

So what we begin to see, then is that in The Lives of Others, a key construct of film initially has the main character, Weisler, a Captain in the Stasi, as both a teacher and an active surveillance officer. But the interrogation scene switches at the 2:24 mark, to a perspective using the reel-to-reel tape recorder as the device which links the two scenes. The recorded interrogation of the prisoner we learn, is being used by
Weisler as part of a lesson where Weisler is instructing at a Stasi training college; the Stasi Hocheschule Potsdam-Eiche. In these opening minutes, Weisler, the dedicated servant of the state, is teaching his students about how to break a prisoner during an interrogation. The depiction of the teacher here is not one of the teacher as a tapping into the long tradition of German humanism, as in Udo from Go Trabi Go!, but rather of the model of teacher as Prussian, an authoritarian, a shaper of monitoring and surveillance, and requiring conformity. An interesting episode occurs as Weisler is explaining to the class, the need for constant on-going interrogation, and the effectiveness of sleep deprivation in order to break a suspect. At the 3:12 minute mark, with a slow pan of the attentive students in drab lecture hall, one student, breaking the one way “lecture” flow, pipes up and says “Why keep him awake for so long? It’s inhuman.” This certainly contradicts the earlier comment by Weisler that what is done by the state is based on humanistic principles. In response to the student, Weisler, unnoticed by the class, consults the seating plan, marking an “X” by the student who dares to challenge him or the policy. This leads the viewer to thinking the student is now marked, regarded as “unreliable” – or worse. The student is put in his place by Weisler who ignores the student’s impertinent question. Weisler shifts the lesson to explaining how it is necessary to wear down a prisoner since innocent and guilty interrogation subjects respond differently. At the 5:48 minute mark, Weisler justifies the sleep deprivation as a technique, by explaining that “an innocent prisoner will become angrier by the hour, due to the injustice he has suffered. He will shout and rage. A guilty prisoner becomes more calm and quiet...or he cries.” At this point the camera cuts back to the
“marked” student who has offered the humanistic view, who shifts uncomfortably and the “lecture” continues with Weisler commenting, “He knows he’s there for a reason. The best way to establish guilt or innocence is non-stop interrogation.”

Finally, there is an interesting set of comments during the lecture that speak to the nature of record-keeping and how one establishes what is “true”. Weisler emphasizes that when one is listening to events recounted to an interviewer, he asks, “Do you notice anything about his statement?” The marked/bad student is the one who notices. “It’s the same as at the beginning.” And Weisler replies, “Exactly the same. Word-for-word. People who tell the truth can re-formulate things. And they do. A liar has prepared sentences which he falls back on under pressure.” The interrogation concludes with Weisler after nearly forty hours straight interviewing (where he looks as crisp as when he began) threatening to arrest the wife of prisoner 227, and to remove his children into state care. While for us this is the totalitarian threat, what the film sets up is the activist interventionist state who would “intervene” to correct ant-social behaviors and to prevent the children from being exposed to anti-socialist influences. Weisler states: “If you don’t give us names we’ll have to arrest your wife. Jan and Nadja will be put into state care. Is that what you want?” The use of the passive suggesting the Stasi will be forced to take action is interesting as it suggests a reluctance based on some kind of regret about applying force. Secondly, the use of guilt is key, and Weisler throws the option to the prisoner as if it is his choice. What is clear in the scene is that the prisoner does give up a name. But after forty hours of non-stop questioning, it is not clear if he invents
the name to save himself or if the name mentioned was a person actually “guilty” of
aiding and abetting a person who fled to the West. Indeed one is left by the scene
wondering whether it really matters, since it provides another thread of work for
the Stasi to follow up on. The opening, mirrored past/present, prison
interrogation/school scenes do a good job of depicting the emotional impact that the
GDR-as-Stasi prison state. It reveals the kinds of tactics the Stasi might have
employed.

The final aspect of the opening ten minutes of the film is the revelation that the
prisoner is asked to sit on his hands to allow contact with a piece of cloth on the
seat. After the interrogation ends, there is a cut as Weisler asks anyone in the Stasi
class if they know what they are hearing. The cut back to the end of the
interrogation reveals Weisler collecting an odor sample; a cloth on which the
suspect had been sitting, we witness Weisler seal the cloth into a mason jar. This
scene certainly hearkens back to the GDR (and the Stasi) as an extremely thorough
surveillance organization where no opportunity to collect “information” is missed –
no matter how small. This fits with the unofficial slogan of the Stasi which was to
“know everything”.

In the film at the 5:45 mark, at the end of the lesson, Weisler concludes with, “Your
subjects are the enemies of socialism. Never forget that. Goodbye.” Unseen in the
initial frame, the camera pans across the room, moving from the listening audience
to focus on a gray-suited listener, standing at the door, who applauds the lesson like
an approving “boss” principal or administrator. While commenting, “that was good,
really good” the class rather reluctantly joins in the applause. There is then a kind of
educational continuity established here, when the new character (who is later revealed to be a Lt. Colonel in the Stasi but who works in the Ministry of Culture) says, “You remember how we sat there 20 years ago? They've offered me a professorship. Life's not about good grades. Though, mine weren't bad, thanks to you.” This establishes Grubitz as the more career climbing of the two men, that he is succeeding above Weisler despite his admission that Weisler is the more able of the two former classmates.

This initial six minutes of the film sets up the character of Weisler as the effective enforcer of GDR values, which although implemented in what we in the West would call a “totalitarian manner”. We can at least see the deluded basis of functionaries who believed they were working to preserve the “humanistic” GDR from arrogant enemies of the state.

In terms of GDR-as-school metaphor, there are several more key scenes that get at both the historical “authenticity” of the film, along with the philosophical underpinnings that reveal the GDR not merely as a kind of GDR-Stasi prison, but rather a kind of dysfunctional, oppressive, super-school. There is a really interesting discussion between two characters which lays out some of the philosophical underpinnings of the film, but more importantly how they represent key conflicts in the GDR. After viewing a play of a suspected playwright, Georg Dreyman, chats at a reception with another character, Minister Hempfe, who is a former STASI senior officer, and who in that former role, “cleaned up the theatre scene”. Hempfe is now a GDR SED Politburo member in charge of “culture”. Weisler
identifies Dreyman as “an arrogant type” who needs watching, and with subsequent a conversation between a minister Hempfe and Lt. Col. Grubitz, it is agreed Dreyman must be monitored. Minister Hempfe and Dreyman have a conversation at a party following the play. If we recall that in the SED and GDR, the authorities conceived of art not as entertainment, but rather art as having an educational function, then the conversation seems especially interesting. Hempfe as a senior cultural bureaucrat would seem to be the most likely candidate to take the viewpoint of the educational potential for “art”. Yet in the scene here, he pointedly derides the restorative, “educative” aspect of art in a number of ways to Dreyman. In this conversation, it is the idealistic writer, Dreyman, who lobbies Hempfe for the restoration of a blacklisted director. Publicly, Hempfe toasts Dreyman, the play’s writer, at the after party by his unknowingly citing Stalin saying that in socialism, ‘writers are engineers of the soul.’ After chastising a friend of Dreyman’s, Paul Hauser, who has pointed out to Hempfe that he has in fact cited the disgraced Stalin, Hempfe says that Dreyman unlike Hauser who makes the Stalin comment, knows how far he can go in criticizing “socialism”. As the conversation moves on Hempfe says, “He [Dreyman] knows that the party needs artists, but that artists need the Party even more.” 14:19 In a revealing exchange, Dreyman points out his blacklisted friend could work for any theatre he wanted to in the West, “But he chooses to work here. Because he believes in socialism and in this country.” (15:27) The “approved” writer, Dreyman asks the Politburo member, Minister Hempfe, to have his friend Jerska re-instated since his plays need Jerska’s touch, and that he Hempfe, has judged him too harshly. Hempfe replies, “Well I don’t. But that’s what we all love
about your plays. Your love for mankind, your belief that people can change. Dreyman, no matter how often you say it in your plays, people do not change!”

(16:14) This reveals the cynical undertone of the character in a dramatic sense. But it is highly ironic that Hempfe, the senior minister of culture thinks so little of culture as tool of the state to educate people on socialism. While this works dramatically, and it certainly sets up a key philosophical debate that runs through the film, the role of “humanistic” arts having a redemptive function. Secondly, it displays a quality of the GDR state as destroying the lives of even those who were in essential agreement, or who thought of themselves as supporters – with no prospect of redemption. Thirdly, this exchange sets up the key theme in the work: that art can move people emotionally from being “bad” men in a bad system to being “good” men in a bad system. This is also interesting since it contravenes what socialist playwrights like Brecht laid out in principles of “epic theatre”. Art or theatre is meant to be detached and un-emotional to allow us as audience members to see issues in objective manner. So what is not historical, or perhaps rational, is that the whole film works on a highly manipulative construct of the emotions – something completely counter to the “socialist realism” or as Brecht called it epic theatre style. Recall that the film is about the importance of theatre as an art and follows the lives of theatre “dissidents”. In socialist theatre, the theory runs that audiences should be moved intellectually not emotionally surrender to losing themselves in the text. Ironically, the film completely over turns that aesthetic. Finally, the opening scenes, sets in motion an emotional transformation of Weisler and focuses on his initially stilted emotional development. This focus on the emotional is again, quite the
opposite of what one would expect from the legacy of GDR-DEFA style films. So while the film might appear to “educate us” a western audience it does so through a philosophical and narrative/filmic construct that is specifically “western”. So, while von Donnersmarck repeatedly defended the film’s “historical accuracy” the whole philosophical basis of the film is distinctly western, liberal democratic and conceives of art as emotionally restorative.

So essentially at the film’s 16:09 mark, the conversation about the optimism in Dreyman’s plays establishes that, for Dreyman, “that people can change” and in a sense Dreyman (rather than Minister Hempfe) is the better socialist, since learning, self-criticism and re-education was a key aspect of Socialist-GDR party philosophy. But on the other hand, the method is un-socialist since it is “emotional”. Partly what makes the scene so “accurate” here, then is that one sees the cynicism of state apparatus, the “Ministry of Culture,” its apparatchiks and former state security officers, telling Dreyman that his plays are too optimistic and that “people don’t change”. In terms of its ties to larger forces of German history, Minster Hempfe and the justification for-repression in GDR was often based on knowing what the people thought before subversion could break out. Then if necessary, allowing emigration, or as a last resort incarceration as a kind of “re-education” as opposed to the kind of murderous racial repression witnessed in the Third Reich.

As a parallel, near the conclusion of the film, there is a final conversation that mirrors and reverses what Hempfe and Dreyman have learned after re-unification, and after the death of his beloved partner. Hempfe is presumably “retired” but un-
repentant in his role as a senior Politburo member. At the two hour mark, having walked out of a new production of the same play at the start of the film, Hempfe says to Dreyman: “Too many memories, huh? I couldn’t stay in either” which is a remarkably insensitive comment since Dreyman’s wife was essentially driven to suicide by the actions of Hempfe and the Stasi. He continues with an impertinent, gloating, analysis of Dreyman: “But what’s this I hear? You’ve not written since the fall of the wall. That’s not good. After all our country invested in you. Although, I understand you Dreyman. What is there to write about in this new Germany? Nothing to believe in. Nothing to rebel against. Life was good in our little republic. Many people only realize that now.” Here the stake is driven through the heart of what one sees as previous decades of “ostalgie” started in films like Go Trabi Go!! Sonnenallee and Goodbye Lenin! The “good” of the regime is recalled by one of its worst oppressors and architects. It is interesting too, how von Donnersmarck, the screenwriter, taps into a kind of “fading” ostalgie by making the positive recollection so callous, and unfeeling in its delivery to a widowed Dreyman. In this sense the film helps shape the historical debate on how German-German relations will continue to function, and how “the past” is re-worked to shock the viewer into rejecting any notions of ostalgie.

I shall examine some of the comments by the director about the historical accuracy of the film by more deeply examining the film’s use of GDR objects, the film’s use of color and how these shape the historical “accuracy” and memory of the film. This will be supplemented by what some “critics” have to say about the film-as-history. There are several comments von Donnersmarck makes in relation to the film that
merit analysis. First is his often quoted summary of the film he says, “The Lives of Others is a human drama about the ability of human beings to do the right thing, no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path.” In promoting the film through his “press kit” von Donnersmarck takes a more nuanced view of his position on the relation on film and history’s relationship. In responding to questions about his film von Donnersmarck recounts the inspiration circulated endlessly in other accounts and writings about the film that: “It wasn’t my intention to make a film ‘about the GDR’. I was in my first year in film school, in late 1997. I was listening to a Beethoven piano sonata, and suddenly I remembered what Lenin had said about “Appasionata to his friend Maxim Gorky. He said it was his favorite piece of music, but in the interest of finishing his revolution, he did not want to listen to it anymore, because it made him want to, ‘tell people sweet stupid things and stroke their heads’ in times when it was necessary to smash in those heads, smash them in without mercy.’ I find that to be a terrifying quote. It shows so clearly how any ideologue has to shut out his feelings altogether in order to pursue his goals. Suddenly in that moment, I understood that this was the true essence of ideology; the total dominance of principle over feeling. It became clear to me that one of the biggest challenges in life is finding the right balance between principle and ideology when confronted with a moral choice. Lenin had chosen one extreme: all principle, but in a way, his statement is also a beautiful testament to the humanizing power of art.”

This is an interesting anecdote about the inspiration for von Donnersmarck, but it does illustrate that he too, is attempting to “educate” his viewing public, but not on a

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specific political or historical point of view, but rather on the humanizing role of the arts – which he then pursues in his film. While his method is “western” and he is in some circles resuscitating the role of German liberal arts and humanism as redemptive, by using Lenin’s quote as a cautionary tale, I find it odd that in way his impetus is as strongly motivated by an educative role as any GDR-DEFA film-making functionary! For von Donnersmarck, the arts can save us – any of us. Oddly too, he seems to have the arrogant belief that the arts, can save history too as we shall examine from his comments and further critical comments from others. In his interview von Donnersmarck shares personal recollections about his family visiting “the East” and feeling the terror that others in the GDR had in simply meeting him and his family, for fear of being reported to the Stasi. He recalls seeing his mother taken away for a strip search since she was on a special list as a former resident of Eastern Germany and for her noble connections. In response to a question about “what is fact and what is fiction?” von Donnersmarck has a rather pithy response.

“The film is historically true in the way that a film like Dr. Zhivago is true about the Russian Revolution and The Deer Hunter is true about the Vietnam War. It is a truthful account, but not a true story...I do believe that fiction can actually be richer in content than fact. But perhaps that is a very German thought. The German word for fiction and poetry is “Dichtung”, which actually means something like “density”. One sees here how von Donnersmarck defends the “accuracy” of his film in number of ways. He stresses the amount of time spent researching, his personal family connections to the East, the insistence on certain “authentic” locations, his

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use of several former GDR victims of oppression as central actors, (Muhe as Weisler) his hiring of a technical team “from the East”, his interviewing former Stasi officers and victims, his reading history, and his consulting with Manfred Wilke for “historical accuracy. What is strongly evident is perhaps most centrally von Donnersmarck’s insistence on the use of actual GDR artifacts and not the use of recreated props. It was all of these broad factors which lend the film its “authenticity.” Yet on the other hand, while he repeats this mantra of historical “accuracy” and the centrality of film as impacting history, he makes quite a humble assessment of the historical legitimacy of his film. When asked how the German Press and East German public responded to the film, he says, “although I spent much time researching this topic, my true passion is films, dramaturgy, actors, psychology, not the STASI or communism. I am not a preacher, nor a historian or politician but a filmmaker, a storyteller.”59 There is no claim by von Donnersmarck that film is history or it being “the most accurate ever” rather a much more slippery notion, that film-as-history has a central truthiness, a kind of “density”. While this may be Germanic word play, it teases out the emotional truth of the psychological repression on the GDR state. With another direct, penetrating question by an interviewer (unknown) von Donnersmarck is asked what he thinks of ostalgie. In a comment that seems aimed directly at Thomas Brussig, Leander Haussman and Wolfgang Becker, von Donnersmarck makes an interesting critique. He replies, “it [ostalgie] is somewhat understandable, but definitely dangerous. Understandable because it is very easy to feel nostalgic for one’s past, and become confused: you

think you’re nostalgic for a country and a system that has vanished, when actually what you’re feeling nostalgic about is your own lost youth...The ostalgie Shows in German television and the nostalgic comedies in our cinema had been too effective in re-writing history, and portraying the GDR as a place of humour and humanity."60 While he may be focused a bit too much on the “humour” and missing some of the more critical elements of previous ostalgie films, he touches a nerve- the focus may be a different kind of remembering. So while he is more critical elements of earlier “ostalgie films” the director here does offer up his own film as an important “corrective”. Secondly with this and a further comment on the nature of the GDR, it puts him much more squarely on the “conservative side” of the historical debate as to the “true” nature of the GDR, with his vision as firmly on the side of GDR-as-Stasi prison camp. He comments further saying that will the film treatment took only three hours to write the basic story, yet it took three years to research before he was happy with the script that was “good enough to shoot.”61 In conclusion he says, “once the facts become known: The psychological torture of dissidents, the merciless killing of people who tried to cross the border, and the fact that so-called “economic stability” was paid for in large part by the selling of political prisoners to the West – it becomes hard to stay ostalgc.”62 Clearly Mr. Donnersmarck has a good grasp on his film as historical and has some credibility in terms of family connections to the “East” – even if they were aristocratic ones, and finally that he

has a good sense as to how the film “fits” in the public identity struggles to come to terms with interpreting German history and identity. I do find it compelling that he believes firmly in the power of television and film to alter historical thinking – even if he is a bit uncritical as to how it actually functions.

Interestingly, he makes several more detailed points about how film is crafted and inadvertently how it creates meaning, when he examines the more technical aspects of his film (and his film-making vision) an interview in Journal of Film and Video in 2010. In a comment about the textured layers of film-making and narrative, von Donnersmarck says: “I always pity artists working in other media because they only get to express themselves once; they only get to tell their story exactly one time. I get to tell it in six different media at the same time: I get to tell it through music, through lights, through words, through shapes and colors and every aspect of sound. A novelist [and one might add a historian] just has words.”63 This is quite striking since he sums up the multi-layered appeal that film-as-history has, since it appeals to so many viewers senses at once, in both a conscious and unconscious manner.

As the interview progresses he makes some comments about the use of color and props (properties) that are worth considering as they have a bearing on the controversy of the film’s historical authenticity, or for some critics, lack of it. In terms of the film’s color palette, it is quite evident for any viewer that the primary colors are gray, brown and green. As the interviewer in this journal summarizes, von Donnersmarck focuses on the psychological impacts of the GDR. “With a clear

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narrative purpose translated into complementary technical choices, von Donnersmarck increases the ideological and emotional impact of Lives of Others. He decided that a pallet of de-saturated browns, grays and greens had to dominate the film, telling cinematographer Hagen Bogdanski that they must ‘create a world where you feel the only warmth comes from the people themselves.”64 This is most notable in the costuming, where Weisler with his rigid posture and nearly motionless positioning in scenes and with his gray, tight fitting clothing, he is shot mostly in shades of gray. Whereas, the protagonist Dreyman is always wearing more “Bohemian” loose fitting clothing of browns and greens. As von Donnersmarck warms to his topic, he says, “So you have to aim for a purity in your images to make sure your production design is just that, design, that it conveys a feeling [my italics] all together and that it not try and enter into competition for the left side of the brain with the main action, with the dialogue, with the plot development. That is why I used a very specific color scheme.”65 He goes on to suggest a limited color palette also helps audience to avoid being shocked from scene to scene and gets them to accept unfamiliar things. This intentional use of color also effectively plays on audience memory and emotion. But his film does reflect the kind of drab gray palette that is associated with life in the GDR. Clearly, von Donnersmarck very carefully taps into that historical “color memory” for narrative effect.

The other aspect of technical film-making worth considering here, is in returning to the role that objects as historical markers have, what I have termed the historical-

object fetishism. Unlike in the earlier ostalgie films however, there is no warmth in
the charming but shabby Trabi, or the delight of finding Spreewald pickles as in
earlier films. In crafting and selecting objects for The Lives of Others, von
Donnersmarck intentionally and carefully selects and frequently highlights the GDR-
as-STASI prison central idea by selecting negative associations with these carefully
selected places and use of props and objects. In turning back to the “press kit” von
Donnersmarck outlines (again essentially defending) the historical accuracy of the
film by summarizing:

“The property master [on the film] Klaus Spielhagen, had been a property master in
East Berlin, too. Around the time our film was set, he officially filed a petition to be
allowed to leave the GDR. As a result, they black-listed him, and finally put him into
a STASI prison for almost two years. He knew all these interrogation techniques first
hand, and found an amazing way of using his experience for the film: When I
described to him what objects I needed – bugs, surveillance equipment, a room full
of machines that steam-open letters etc etc.. – he took it upon himself not to re-
create these objects (as prop masters usually do) but to find the actual original ones!
He found collectors of STASI electronics and convinced them to lend us their
priceless possessions for the film. He even managed to have the STASI museum in
Leipzig give us one of the original machines that steam opened letters (600 per
hour) for the final GDR scene. Even the jar that is used for the odor samples is an
original (disgusting but true!). Of course this was not necessary, but Klaus kept
saying: ‘I don’t want those SOB’s to be able to fault us on anything!’ I honestly think
it helped the very intense atmosphere on the set that we knew we were using the
actual tools of martyrdom. And for Klaus, it was very empowering to be the one wielding them, this time. I always believed that film is a kind of therapy. In this case, it was a therapy even for us the filmmakers.”^66 While there is a lot in this quote, it is a bit curious that the object fetish, while admirable in its drive for authenticity has a quasi-religious quality. That using the objects in the film is somehow akin to how a priest uses a piece of the true cross in a ritual to give that ritual greater emotional significance, to make the emotional connection more authentic.

Wendy Westphal, a German historian of East German literature, films and museums focusing on collective memory, from Marian University in the U.S., captures the essential issue of authenticity quite nicely when she asserts that, “Despite von Donnersmarck’s attempts to faithfully recreate the material world of the GDR, the plot of Das Leben Anderen presents the viewer with a multiplicity of perceived realities, and shows how the protagonist Georg Dreyman’s memories of the period – like so many East Germans – do not match the reality of the past cresting tension between the film’s aesthetic and the plot.”^67 Essentially Westphal remarks on the surface “authenticity” as seducing the viewer into accepting the “reality” of life in the GDR state, while in fact there is a much more complex, layered understanding of the past, and more complex aesthetic of the work which contradicts the seemingly simple surface depiction of the GDR. In simple terms, the GDR obviously had more colors than gray, green and brown. Yet the selective, emotional process of remembering is what Donnersmarck teases out in his past, thus indicating that even

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with its use of color it simplifies, despite the fact that many former residents commented that film “fit their own” color memories of the past.

However it is interesting that critics like Anna Funder, Timothy Garton Ash and others still fired volleys of fierce criticism at von Donnersmarck, suggesting that he white-washes the “true” effect of the nature of totalitarianism in the SED-led STASI state. While Garton Ash’s review understands the broad sweep of German history, the political cultural context of the GDR and German-German identity crisis that accompanied the fall of the Wall, he too does come down squarely on the GDR-as-STASI-prison. He quite correctly chastens some West German historians and points out that many saw the GDR through the lens of a coming-to-terms with the Nazi past and which makes the GDR its little less threatening. On the other hand, and perhaps even worse, that some western intellectuals acted as apologists for the GDR. He writes that, “This view of East Germany as another evil dictatorship was by no means generally accepted in the west at that time. [late 1970’s] Even to suggest a Nazi-Stasi comparison was regarded in many parts of the western left as outmoded, reactionary cold-war hysteria, harmful to the spirit of détente....Even self-styled ‘realist’ conservatives talked about communist East Germany in tones very different from those they adopt today. Back then the word “Stasi” barely crossed their lips.68 Here, Garton Ash correctly points out that the whole notion of Stasi prison sate does not really arise until the opening of the 100 miles worth of documents after human rights groups and dissidents storm the Stasi offices preventing the complete destruction of the extensive records and protocols of surveillance. Garton Ash

makes references to his own experiences of living in the GDR, of being black-listed, and then goes on to attack the film’s inaccuracies of language, and costume details, while consistently referencing the validity of his own published oral history, The File. None of that is really helpful or surprising. But what Garton Ash does do well, is in his highlighting the film’s intentional misuse of props costumes and color for historical “accuracy”. Citing a conversation he had with the director, he says von Donnersmarck, “while fiercely defending the basic historical accuracy of the film, he immediately agreed that some details were deliberately altered for dramatic effect…He argued that in a movie the reality has to be verdichtet, a word which means thickened, concentrated, intensified, but carries a verbal association with Dichtung, meaning poetry or more broadly, fiction.”\(^69\) It seems that for public promotion, the marketing of the “bad German past” is also what von Donnersmarck has in mind, while the philosophical underpinnings are a bit more complex. When it comes to the film’s authenticity – and this is where Garton Ash’s review shines – “Von Donnersmarck does care about historical facts, but he’s even more concerned not to bore us. And for that we are grateful. It is just because he is not an East German survivor, but a fresh, cosmopolitan child of the Americanized West, a privileged Wessi, down to the carefully unbuttoned tips of his pink button-down shirt, fluent in American-accented English and the universal language of Hollywood that he is able to translate the East German experience into an idiom that catches

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the imagination of the world.”

So while Garton Ash points out that von Donnersmarck knew that he was misusing the use of dress in the scene with STASI students in the classroom as wearing civilian clothes, where they would have worn uniforms, and has the STASI soldiers wear their dress uniforms, with jackboots channeling the look of Nazi soldiers, instead of their more realistically shabby uniforms. These are artistic choices designed to reach a Western audience, reared on a steady diet of dysfunctional German history that was based on the tyranny of the Third Reich. Garton Ash on the one hand chastises von Donnersmarck for making these choices, while understanding they are there to make the film more “palatable” to a Western audience. “The Lives of Others is a film very much intended for others. Like so much else in Germany, it is designed to be exportable... does anything get lost in this translation? The small inaccuracies and implausibles are, on balance, justifiable artistic license, allowing a deeper truth to be conveyed. It does however, lose something important: the sense of what Hannah Arendt famously called the Banality of Evil – and nowhere was evil more banal than in the net-curtained, plastic-wood cabins and caravans of the German Democratic Republic. Yet that is extraordinarily difficult to recreate, certainly for a wider audience, precisely because it was so banal, so unremittingly, mind-numbingly boring.”

While historians do not set out to be boring, it is a cardinal sin for film-makers, whose works will fail critically and at the box office. So Garton Ash makes an indirect summary that film-is-not-history since the intentions and audiences are too

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dis-similar. Historians can be boring, but film-makers? Never. His point about the GDR as an unrelentingly gray, boring, place re-works the idea of GDR as Stasi prison, not just as a place of psychological repression, but the Garton Ash’s elevation of the literal dull, drabness of everyday life, along with the Stasi-state’s surveillance oppression as mind-numbingly dull, does reinforce my playful notion that perhaps it is useful to think of the GDR as a kind of oppressive school. Anecdotally, it is valid to suggest that many Western (and Eastern) people’s experiences of secondary school as a place of un-ending boredom, supports my notion that perhaps a different way of thinking of the GDR is as a kind of repressive “super-school”. Garton Ash takes on the bi-polar approach that people have developed in relation to the GDR, doubting the historical accuracy of any STASI man as having the kind of empathy that is displayed by the protagonist’s “conversion to goodness via art and empathy”, as displayed in the film. But Garton Ash’s main objections seem therefore to be focused on the grounds of philosophical, aesthetic reasons, rather than the up-front historical inaccuracies, and for what these misused details do to the wider Western public’s view of history. He concludes with a rather good assessment that the brilliance (and danger) of von Donnersmarck is really based on film as an exportable commodity, one that elevates the STASI oppression as being worse than other forms of oppressive communism like the Stalinist terror, or the Khmer Rouge killing fields. “In the larger scheme of things, East Germany, unlike Nazi Germany, was but a sideshow. The STASI was modeled on the KGB, and not as many people vaguely imagine, on the Gestapo…Perhaps the STASI was that little bit better because it was, well, German; but there are so many larger horrors in the files of the
KGB.” Garton Ash here suggest that in film one can overplay the importance of the historical event in relation to other, more truly significant historical events. Perhaps this “success” story of the GDR-as-STASI prison narrative that von Donnersmarck tackles in his “translation” of the threads in German history is that as a “story”, The Lives of Others both succeeds with some details, yet re-works the philosophical aesthetic elements just enough so the narrative is just different enough to be foreign, yet not quite so oppressive enough as to be alienating to modern readers and viewers?

Garton Ash seems to accomplish many things in his review and as I continue to critique it myself, my esteem for it grows, despite his somewhat self-assured, grumpy and self-promoting tone. For example, without directly dismissing film as enriching our understanding of history, his focus on the historical objects (used correctly and sometimes deliberately incorrectly) is quite powerful, as it once again supports what Paul Betts observes about the power of objects as part of history, and re-working memory about history. “Cognitive scientists tell us that the repetition of words and images strengthens the synapses connecting the neurons in the neural circuits that compute, in our heads, the meanings of those words and images. With time, these mental associations become electrochemically hard-wired. Take that apparently trivial detail of the STASI officers dress uniforms. Why does it matter? Because the sight of Germans in Prussian gray, along with long, shining leather

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boots, shrieks to our synapses: Nazis.” While Garton Ash writes with a confidence and invokes “scientifically based” short-hand for how we “know”, the comment is intriguing in how film works on a visual basis to both help an audience (whether reading or viewing) make connections and how repetition of images and words helps to re-enforce those previously ingrained images and understanding of them. In this case, it is to imply that von Donnersmarck uses the German-history-as-dysfunctional narrative which always hearkens the reader/viewer back to the evil of the Third Reich with careful object manipulation. In other words, many of the objects used in this film are not about positive association, but rather to anchor the film back in its tradition of German history as a cultural export of evil that sells to a global public that already understands German history as unique and thus we are back to Sonderweg or Germany’s special path in its past historical embrace of oppression and evil.

Perhaps the most devastating, yet interesting part of the critique of the film is how the notion of art as redemption functions in the film ties into this. In referencing von Donnersmarck’s “inspiration” for the film as Lenin’s rejection of the Appassionata, then once again (as others have done) commenting on the centrality of the scene where Dreyman plays Sonata for a Good” man, transforming Weisler into a sympathetic aider and abettor of Dreyman’s “crimes”. The real issue of the film is not so much the historical accuracy or the likelihood of this happening in the GDR, but rather the philosophical problem: “Weisler now spares Dreyman. Surely we

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think too, of the educated Nazi killers who in the evening, listened to the music of Mendelssohn, then went out the next morning to murder more Mendelssohns. Did they not really hear the music? Does high culture humanize? We are back with the deepest twentieth-century German conundrum, conveyed most movingly in music and poetry. Such are the synaptic connections that make the Lives of Others resonate so powerfully in our heads.”

It is worth recalling that in setting out his critique in this way, Garton Ash, along the way also chastises not the film-maker, but the historians of the GDR who equally miss the “true” nature” of the GDR. “A generation of West German contemporary historians trained in the study of Nazism, turned their skilled attentions to the GDR, and especially to the dissection of the Stasi.”

I like here how he suggests that the limitations of West Germans’ focus on the Third Reich, that their training and focus on the legacy of the GDR as successor to the Third Reich, left them ill-prepared to grasp the true nature of the STASI since they were too focused on the STASI as fitting into a Third Reich-based paradigm of understanding.

In a very different response to the accuracy issues of the film, Anna Funder enriches the controversy, by pointing to a significant, yet different basic problem of von Donnersmarck’s film. Her essential concern with the film is about a possible “redemption” of a STASI employee. Funder has a kind of love-hate relationship with the film. Admiring the film and grudgingly admitting it deserves some of its critical

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acclaim, she invokes a set of publicity notes (I was not able to cross check her source since she did not cite it) she says that the film claims, “the greatest authenticity’ and ‘never-before-seen-accuracy’, and cites many prominent historians of the GDR.”

This is a less nuanced critique since, as we have seen in the Garton Ash review and in the press kit itself (released along with the book at the time of release), von Donnersmarck has repeatedly stated in interviews following the critical reception of the film that he makes deliberately “inaccurate” choices to alter historical details for the purpose of making it “hyper-real” or to “translate” the film’s narrative for a wider audience.

Funder’s contributions to the debate about “what the GDR state was really like” are cultured by her interviews with ex-STASI men and victims which she collected and then published in her popular, somewhat literary-styled memoir called “Stasi-land” released in 2002. What is important about her observations of the film is that she asserts that the film fundamentally misrepresents the totalitarian nature of life in the GDR. Her key contribution, and it is a very valid one, is to point out that the film dangerously simplifies in one key area. It misrepresents a key aspect of how an important STASI surveillance operation would be conducted. While the film has essentially a single STASI employee (Weisler) monitoring a serious target around the clock, with only one subordinate, recording all conversations and movements, her analysis is that the nature of the surveillance as depicted in this way, is flat out wrong. First, no STASI employee with the rank of “captain” would ever actually conduct the “listening” or be directly involved in active surveillance. Secondly, an

76 Anna Funder. Tyranny of Terror. The Guardian Newspaper. Saturday May 5 2007. (on line) p. 2
operation on a cultural figure (here one thinks of the experience of targeted dissident artists like Wolf Bierman experienced) where the operation would involve multiple operatives all working separately or in a “silo-ed” manner so that no one of them would have the whole picture. This was to keep the lower ranking officers from having access to too much knowledge and also would allow the STASI to cross check the “validity” of different sources to ensure accuracy of the information collected. This was particularly important for the collection of information from “IM’s.” “Unlike Weisler who runs a nearly solo surveillance operation and can withhold the results from his superior, [Grubitz in the film] totalitarian systems rely on thoroughgoing internal surveillance (terror) and division of tasks. The film doesn’t accurately portray the way totalitarian systems work, because it needs to leave room for its hero to act humanely – something which such systems are designed to prevent.”

Like Gary Bruce or Garton Ash, Funder does put her finger on a key problem: that the GDR-STASI state was a system of oppression. Where she begins to run afoul is in her conclusion that all such employees were “bad” men. This does bring us back to a key thread in German history – that it is a “narrative” of simplistic, dualist “evil” men/regime versus “good” victims and oppressed citizens. So Funder over-states her critique perhaps too much as a moral crusade, but I like that she points out that the former STASI employees are part of the historical revision process. If the STASI’s “crimes” were “unknown” in the late seventies and early eighties, then glossed over by “ostalgic” films like Sonnenallee and Goodbye Lenin! which Funder accuses of choosing to downplay the sense of oppression in

77 Anna Funder. 2007. Tyranny of Terror. The Guardian Newspaper. (on line) p. 2
favor of the “normality” of life in the GDR, then there is a historical “turn” again as the former Stasi are vilified in the GDR-evening talk shows, TV shows, and films several years after the opening of the STASI archives. The historical picture continues to change, according to Funder in the early 2000’s as “Groups of ex-STASI are becoming increasingly belligerent. They write articles and books, and conduct lawsuits against people who speak out against them. As unpleasant as this might be, this would tend to be the case in an open democratic society like modern Germany. Unstated however is that Funder is making a moral link to the “bad” German past that Garton Ash depicts; a kind of moral equivalent is depicted by Funder, since in the FRG, although groups of former SS were organized, there was little public or historical appetite for having them contribute to a “revised” more sympathetic analysis of their collective responsibilities and actions – so why should the record treat the Stasi any better?

What really outrages Funder is how “the ex-STASI are vociferous in their claims of being ‘victims of democracy’. But the truth is that, by and large, they are doing much better in the new Germany than the people they oppressed. They have educations and solid work histories they denied their victims. Many of them were snapped up by security firms and private detective agencies eager for their considerable expertise or they went into business, skilled as they are – to perhaps an unholy degree – in managing people. Surprisingly often, they sold property and insurance, occupations unknown in the Soviet bloc.” Her conclusion then, was that the STASI were essentially all “bad” men, who have done better than the victims in the new

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Germany, and she takes on the tone of a moral zealot, explained perhaps by the fact that she spent most of her time with “unrepentant” ex-STASI men, or with the victims of the STASI, and the people she “selected’ to interview were those with the worst experiences and most extreme treatment at the hands of the STASI.

She concludes then, inadvertently stating why the legacy of historical accuracy or inaccuracy matters, and that how in Germany the battle for the legacy of the GDR continues since: The battle for the reputation of the STASI men currently being waged in the media, the entertainment business, the courts, in personal intimidation of former victims and in demonstrations on the streets of Berlin cannot be understood without understanding that it is being waged with the Third Reich in the back of everyone’s minds. The Stasi men are furiously fighting so as not to go down in history as the second lot of incontestable bogeymen thrown up by 20th century Germany. And many Germans are deeply uncomfortable about recognizing the chilling inhumanity of this, the second dictatorship on their soil.”

Finally, while Funder contributes to the debate by pointing out that as the historical lens turned to examine the actions of former STASI employees (almost all men) she makes her best contributions by pointing to the STASI-as-system of surveillance, and the irony of ex-STASI men as victims vying for a revision of their own historical legacy. But her analysis is ironically, like von Donnersmarck’s too reductionist, too emotional, too moral.

80 Anna Funder. 2007. “Tyranny of Terror.” The Guardian Newspaper. (on line) p. 4
In some final comments on Bruce, he concludes mostly in a kind of agreement with Mary Fulbrook’s style assessment, that while most East Germans did lead ordinary lives, the SED led, STASI-enforced structures of repression led people to “know” and yet “not know” and that they, at the times, could grasp what the implications and extent of STASI power really was. He cites Joachim Gauck’s well-crafted phrase for the “feeling” of the time in the late GDR as a kind of “fear accommodation syndrome” where one collaborated out of latent fear mixed with sincerity. While in his book he does not “vilify” the men – and they were almost all men- working for “the firm”. “There is no doubt that the GDR was maintained by the participation of ordinary people in state and society. Even though the dictatorship was one of pervasive surveillance, denial of basic rights, and widespread suffering of regime opponents, by no means were these all ‘bad’ people. I would not categorize even those involved in the repression apparatus whom I met as ‘sinister’...Indeed, the fact that they today for the most part lead quiet normal lives in pleasant surroundings, with a network of family and friends, should lead our attention away from an inherent or unusual personality trait that caused them to partake in repression, toward the nature of a system that called on them to do so in the first place.81

In a contrast to Anna Funder, Bruce makes a comment that links him in some ways to Funder, although he disagrees about the nature of the STASI employees. In his book’s opening pages, Bruce comments about film, media and specifically about the film The Lives Others. Bruce makes a good point about the limitations of film in

general and its relationship to history. “To see this film as a morality play in which goodness overcomes the dictates of ideology is to miss a much more complex picture about the institutional barriers [my italics] that denied opportunities for good to triumph in the East German dictatorship.”

And ultimately, although it was evident in film, there is very little in the historical record archives, or structures of oppression of the GDR where goodness overcame these forces. Bruce sums up the nature of the people conducting the surveillance and the role of the STASI in GDR in the concluding chapter of The Firm: “They are not the kinds of people who populate the novels of Arthur Koestler, Ayn Rand, or Vassily Aksyonov. Indeed, the fact that they today for the most part lead quiet, normal lives in pleasant surroundings, with a network of family and friends, should lead our attention away from an inherent or unusual personality trait that caused them to partake in repression, toward the nature of the system that called on them to do so in the first place.”

While film may take us to the emotional “truths” of regimes like the GDR, they can never quite capture the processes; the crushingly dull grind of bureaucratic entities of the SED led system which collected, cross-checked and weaponized this massive agglomeration of surveillance data from the every day lives of an entire people, and turned this data into the weight with which to crush them.

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Conclusion

What then, can we say of this interplay between film, history, memory and objects as memory markers in film? What then has all this pondering the GDR wrought? How can film help or erode historical interpretation for educators? Film, as Eley and others point out, is a powerful medium, capable of reaching many more people than might otherwise “read” about an historical topic, and it seems fair to conclude that academic historians, and teachers in the secondary school classroom, certainly face very unfair competition, from non-academic sources. As von Donnersmarck noted, unlike those working in only the print medium, he is capable of telling a “story” in multiple layers – with words, sound, images, movement and color. Perhaps a paper in the next few years might instead address the topic of how accurate, historical computer simulation-games will influence perceptions of history and will become the subject of an OISE paper. At present, however, it does appear that at the very least, films about the GDR and its demise have generated an enormous amount of critical literature in the post-unification discussion of German identity politics.

While it would appear that the phenomenon of ostalgie has abated somewhat since the film Lives of Others, the examination of “what was good” in the GDR will, no doubt continue or ebb and flow. As with any nation, the ongoing discussion of the nature of German identity will change and be picked up in the film culture. Certainly, with the preservation of the one-hundred and ten miles of the STASI archives, this source will continue to be mined by proper academic historians, and this research may in turn, prompt new and different media to offer a rich new vein for historical films offering new interpretations and “historical” stories. One significant weakness
in this whole approach of reviewing the notes of a particular director, or of examining the critical literature about a particular film’s legacy, and in trying to link the films to wider identity politics, is that it is very difficult to measure beyond the small academic discussions as to how deeply one can be said to “know” the extent of film’s reach in shaping perceptions of the past in a wider population. However, from a very pragmatic standpoint, what this paper’s analysis does suggest, is that as educators we must use films very carefully and must “balance the record” by providing alternatives such as multiple interpretations of a film, and or/readings which balance limitations of a particular film’s “accuracy” in order to prevent an “easy” consumption of film-as-history. Secondly, it behooves the “consumer” of a particular film to consider very carefully, very skeptically the timing, and historical context of a film, or to think of a film as the product of its own micro-history. Finally, one needs to caution oneself to think of film not as history, but rather as one more tool in the tool box for educators to provide students with a lively, if flawed, but multi-sensory “text” which can shed light on a particular historical period. Whether film causes a change in “historical thinking” and memory per se, is perhaps, still up for debate and beyond the scope of this paper. But what has been fascinating, is to note how films about the GDR have mirrored some of the very deeply held, passionate, historiographical debates about the “true” nature of the GDR, and to attempt to assess how film has accessed the changes in German identity politics in both ostalgic and non-ostalgic interpretations. Finally, I return to an essential issue: that the process of framing a question, to a large extent determines what one finds. As a risky only partially held notion, I believe that my “thought-experiment” of
considering GDR society as a kind of oppressive, dysfunctional “super-school” has been productive, and is an idea that might merit further examination. If traditional historical debate has centered on the metaphor of GDR-as-totalitarian prison, or as a misunderstood state where one could “lead a perfectly normal life” then why not a metaphor of GDR as school? While the GDR’s worst excesses were for its most unredeemable citizens, imprisonment and execution – unlike a school – for others it was alienation, self-interested submission, cooperation or for still others flight or expulsion. Does this not sound the experiences one might find in the collective memory - or even a bit like experiences of so many in school? Yet as the films studied and historical texts consulted reveal, for some, the GDR’s fundamental purpose varied from incompetent, to benevolent and optimistic – but it’s aim was to build a better world. And like a school the GDR used all of its resources, despite a blindness to its own failings and inability to reform itself, to mold its citizens into a particularly rigid set of ideological and behavioral systems. The comparison becomes alarming (and perhaps untenable) when one thinks of what part of school structures would correspond to the exact role of the Mfs or STASI. But perhaps, like schools, the power of the state-as-school was not in the process of molding citizenry (read teaching them) but as in this paper has addressed in the discussion about films as part of shaping historical memory, the interesting part is in the memory of how one was molded and “taught”. And although the GDR was an extreme example of systematic active and invasive surveillance involving so many people, perhaps the GDR was not such a different state, since surveillance has become, as Edward
Snowden revealed not very long ago, much more invisible since surveillance is less human, but more automated.

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