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# Disgrace, Weakness, Rubbish?

## Material Culture of the GDR in Selected German Films After 1990

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on the material culture of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as portrayed in selected German films made after 1990 and set in the GDR. The objects that are used in the films serve as a special kind of artefacts, symbolizing the reality of the GDR and defining it as imperfect, below expectations, and inefficient in meeting consumer demand. An important point of reference in the article is the context of post-communist nostalgia, which is a source of interesting symbolic redefinitions.

**Keywords:** GDR; material culture; film; nostalgia; everyday life

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A significant number of diverse films about the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were made after the reunification of Germany. To date, many feature films (including genre films), documentaries, and even television series have been produced<sup>1</sup> which are either set during the GDR's existence or indirectly connected to that period – portraying the transformative events of 1989 or the situation of federal states of the former GDR after 1990.

What seems significant in these productions is the conscious attempt to interpret the realities of East German life focusing on the country's material culture. This is a kind of authentication, a catalyst for cinematic authenticity, and a reflection of a broader trend associated with the popularity and “discovery” of the material culture of the GDR, manifested in collections and museums created after its collapse (cf. Zündorf, 2012). It is estimated that there are several hundred such sites commemorating and storing artefacts in Germany.

After the collapse of the GDR, some things from it drew particular interest, including typical plastic goods such as the “Sonja” egg cup, which is still produced today and is a “GDR cult object” (*Ostkult-Objekt*; Höhne, 2013, p. 85). The collection of artefacts like the plastic egg cup is much broader, of course, and features not only specific, recognizable designs, but also trademarks, symbols, and signs. The walking figure on East German pedestrian traffic lights (*Ampelmännchen*) not only survived the abolition of the

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1 One of them is *Weissensee. Eine berliner Liebesgeschichte*, dir. F. Fromm. The first episode of the miniseries was broadcast in 2010. It was also released on DVD and broadcast in Poland (Polish title: *Jezioro Weissensee*). The second production is *Deutschland 83*, dir. A. Winger, J. Winger – premiered in 2015 (Polish title: *Szpieg D'83*).



Egg cup – an East German gadget for tourists (photo from the author's own collection)

GDR, but has become one of the more prominent symbols of contemporary Berlin and a commercial brand (Boym, 2001).

### **From Nostalgia to *Ostalgie***

One cannot analyze collecting objects and elements of East German culture and their popularity in the context of cinema without taking into account the nostalgia for communism observed (to a varying extent) in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. In Germany, the problem of nostalgia for the GDR after reunification is an aspect of the internal debate on the role and assessment of the country's past (Sabrow, 2010).

Nostalgia for the GDR is most often referred to as *Ostalgie*, a neologism formed by combining the German word for east (*Ost*, also colloquially *Ostdeutschland*, "East Germany") and "nostalgia". As Michael Braun summarizes, it "means remembering without pain" (Braun, 2013, p. 122).<sup>2</sup> This type of nostalgia manifests itself especially in forms that

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<sup>2</sup> This and subsequent quotes were translated by the translator of this article, Kate Sotejeff-Wilson. The neologism is considered to have been coined by the Dresden-based comedian Uwe Steimle.

attach particular value to material culture, notably through contemporary commercial exploitation (and more broadly, within popular culture) and practices established in reunified Germany, such as popular GDR-themed events or specific products (Neller, 2006).<sup>3</sup> This positive, accepting post-unification perception of East German culture (and identity) becomes a wider phenomenon, researchers argue, because unlike “GDR nostalgia” (*DDR-Nostalgie*), it is not only accessible and attractive to former GDR citizens. Both forms – the popular, commodified, ubiquitous in the media, and fashionable *Ostalgie* and the GDR nostalgia observed as a social attitude – can be interpreted as complementary expressions of the same phenomenon (Neller, 2006).

This nostalgic perspective on the defunct Republic is an important context of German cinema, both as a cinematic trend (and one route by which *Ostalgie* emerged) and as a research orientation (within the broader framework of memory studies). Many scholars have turned their attention to the concepts of GDR nostalgia and *Ostalgie*, as these issues are extremely complex and involve different contexts.<sup>4</sup> Some authors see these terms as used synonymously due to the lack of a clear distinction between them (Bartl et al., 2013). For this article, I only outline a nostalgic view of the GDR as relevant to material culture from a cinematic perspective. Film productions within or related to the *Ostalgie* phenomenon (as a popular, fashionable trend) meet this basic criterion: positive portrayal of the reality of the GDR that homes in on popularizing certain aspects of East German culture and lifestyle (everyday life).

The cinematic image of the GDR after 1990 is varied and changing over time. The nostalgic films, in contrast, invariably demonstrate an exceptional appreciation of material culture, but they also show the transformations introduced in this area. Through these films, East German everyday life comes to the fore, not as a detailed reconstruction, but rather as a commentary on the East German reality, a play with meanings.<sup>5</sup>

## The International Career of East German Products

Various elements of everyday life and the material culture of the GDR are used humorously in film, with a commentary on their value. An interesting illustration of this is Jan Hřebejk’s film *Cosy Dens (Pelišky)*; Hřebejk, 1999), set at the turn of 1967 and 1968 in Czechoslovakia, where socialist everyday life is seen through the eyes of a teenage boy. One of the scenes involves plastic spoons from the GDR. They are supposed to be an expression of modernity and excellence in tableware production, but they dissolve

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3 One author who has written about the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* and the problem of “East German” identity is Thomas Ahbe (cf. Ahbe, 2015).

4 A very useful study of this issue (and summary of previous voices) is the book by Katja Neller mentioned above.

5 It is also worth mentioning the entertaining TV shows in which a humorous and rather amiable GDR is the main attraction. Such representations are judged differently (e.g. as false), and their acceptability is also debated.



Melted plastic spoons from East Germany in Jan Hřebejk's film *Cosy Dens* (*Pelišky*; Hřebejk, 1999)

in the hot coffee sipped by the characters. The funny scene does not play much of a role in the context of the whole film; it is just one of several humorous episodes starring objects from various Eastern Bloc countries. The funny side of various socialist artefacts (objects of everyday use, toys, and decorations from the USSR, GDR, or PRL, the People's Republic of Poland) is exposed by emphasizing their essentially peculiar and tacky face; they turn out to be imperfect, bizarre, clumsy, or just plain ugly.

It is worth emphasizing that Hřebejk's film recognizes and makes humorous use of the (dubious) fame of East German plastic, although this aspects of material culture is much more clearly marked by German directors. The most important (and well-known, also outside Germany) films of the nostalgic current in German cinema after 1990 are *Sonnenallee* (named after a major thoroughfare in Berlin) by Leander Haußmann (Haußmann, 1999) and *Good Bye, Lenin!* by Wolfgang Becker (Becker, 2003). They highlight various aspects of the material culture of the GDR, including its imperfections. Much like in *Cosy Dens*, the actual shoddiness of products is demonstrated (in action), as are the attitude that West German objects are better, and practices of material culture in everyday life of the GDR.



Problems unfolding the multifunctional table – still from the film *Sonnenallee* (Haußmann, 1999)

## A Culture of Scarcity

*Sonnenallee* is set in Berlin, on the East German side of the Wall. Its protagonist, a teenager called Michael, leads a pretty ordinary life – he is happy, in love, has a close-knit group of friends, nice parents, and his great passion is rock music. Importantly, the work is saturated with political and historical issues, making it more than a film about growing up. It is also an interesting interpretation of the East German reality and a commentary on German-German relations.

The film is a comedy; by definition, the everyday life depicted in it is full of funny situations (even tragic or dangerous situations usually end happily), so references to GDR products generally serve to make the whole thing comical. An interesting object in this film is a multifunctional table (German *Multifunktionstisch*, abbreviated to *Mufu-ti*), a symbol of East German technical advancement. The workmanship is far from perfect, making it difficult to use; it is also a non-functional object (when unfolded it is too big, when folded it is too small).

Everyday life in East Germany is filled with the struggle with artefacts and with scarcity – especially of goods and living space. Haußmann's piece can be seen as an interesting commentary on the real problems of the East German economy – the lack of technology and lack of high-quality raw materials. The young protagonist's uncle, who lives in West Germany, constantly crosses the border to "smuggle" various Western goods for his family, such as tights, because the ones available in East Germany are made in the wrong sizes. The protagonist's uncle is one (though not the only) character through whom the filmmakers can highlight the absurdity of everyday life in the GDR

(shortages of goods, unsatisfactory housing construction, political reality, etc.) and the relationship of its consumer culture to that of West Germany and the wider West. These references are exploited in a value-laden way: GDR products and everyday life do not conform to Western standards (a situation compounded by the technological lag and the scarcity of often the most ordinary basic goods, which further emphasizes the differences between the German states). Interestingly, Poles living in the PRL perceived goods from the GDR as attractive, especially when bought locally, because they were much cheaper there than when they were available in Poland. This became a pretext for shopper tourism, which contributed to exacerbating GDR market deficiencies (Mazurek, 2010).

The attempt to build an independent, original consumer culture in the GDR from the 1960s on (i.e. to produce some sort of models for modern socialist everyday life) was fraught; in practice, it failed to live up to the idea of competition with the West. The GDR was not a self-sufficient, independent state. A lot was imported, especially raw materials and machinery, and particularly from the West, to meet demand for products of good or sufficient quality (Stitzel, 2007).

It is worth noting that plastics (collectively referred to with the specifically East German term *Plast*) became a very important element of economic policy in the GDR from the late 1950s, with propaganda and ideological dimensions. The chemical industry (factories and plants in Saxony), which has a long German tradition, became a potent symbol of the pursuit of modernity and the dream of socialist technology – providing work and prosperity.

Importantly (also for later cinematic representations of the GDR), the chemical industry becomes visible in public space (Rubin, 2008): on posters or advertising signs, in mosaics and other decoration on buildings, referring to laboratory artefacts and figures of scientists (e.g. chemists). In response to the shortage of raw materials in the GDR in the 1950s (and as an experiment riding the global wave of enthusiasm for using plastics), the Zwickau factory produced the P70 car; its body consisted of a shell made of Duroplast on a wooden frame (Rubin, 2008).

Apart from plastic, the other important element of socialist everyday life (and of East German iconography in films made after 1990) is prefabricated housing estates, or *Plattenbau* (cf. Rubin, 2003; Saldern, 2009). Both elements, ideologically fused, based on traditions (in construction and plastics production), and characterized by ambivalence, did not epitomize a socialist utopia – but neither did they have enough flaws to be seen as a complete fiasco.

The father of the protagonist of the film *Sonnenallee* sums up his ordeal succinctly: “Damn table. I’ll file a complaint”. Grievances and complaints appear relatively often in the film; this should be interpreted as a joke with the audience, as a complaint was a well-known, official procedure in the GDR that also served as a way of sounding out

opinion. This interesting practice is given more space in *Good Bye, Lenin!* by Wolfgang Becker. The piece follows the path set by *Sonnenallee*, building on the popularity of media representations of East Germany and a kind of sentimental fashion. Like the earlier film, it narrates the young protagonist's coming of age. This time, however, the story is treated in a more complex way.

## **A Perfect Reconstruction from Imperfect Things**

*Good Bye, Lenin!* tells the story of an East German boy. After the transformation of 1989, in order to protect his sick mother from the emotional shock (she went into a coma and woke up after the fall of the Berlin Wall), he tries to recreate the reality of East Germany. It is an extremely interesting film; its aim is not to portray the East German reality, but to describe an attempt to restore it, consciously, in an altered reality and in a context conditioned by the mother's illness. The son, who is critical of the GDR, builds for his socialist activist mother a kind of folk museum of the former Republic in their own apartment. This set-up creates a series of tensions between the past and its reconstruction on a micro scale, and naturally becomes the pretext for many humorous – but not only humorous – situations.

One important device is that the GDR is created anew by virtue of, as it were, the main character's individual memory. The East German "folk museum" is built on material culture. The filmmakers announce this in a scene at the very beginning, even before the events of November 1989; the protagonist's mother writes to the authorities pointing out the inadequacy of women's underwear sizes. In a later scene (set in the new political situation), the complaint is about a sweater sewn so badly that it is impossible to wear.

Written requests, complaints and petitions could be sent to various state institutions, including magazines, trade union organizations, and the television magazine *Prisma*,<sup>6</sup> which was basically a political programme produced between 1963 and 1991. The letters often addressed not only the shortage of goods or their defects but also the lack of spare parts for equipment, which was the acute shortcoming of plastic products. These petitions and letters constituted a manifesto of discontent, full of irony and rhetorical devices; very often, they were published (Stitzel, 2007). In *Good Bye, Lenin!* the mother of the film's protagonist consciously uses an arsenal of socialist newspeak and irony: "It simply won't do for our sturdier female workers and farmers to be punished in this way by our fashion combines in this 40th year of our republic. With socialist greetings..." or in another scene:

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6 The full name of the programme is: *Prisma. Probleme-Prozesse-Personen*.



I am puzzled as to how your staff has arrived at these dimensions. In Berlin, at least, we are not as short and square as you seem to think. Should it be our fault that our physical measurements stand in the way of your achieving planned production targets? Please accept our apologies or we will do everything in our power to become shorter and squarer in the future.

Excessive uniformity and clothing shortages, ridiculed in *Sonnenallee* (the protagonist's uncle smuggles something as ordinary as tights), are commented on in an equally amusing fashion here, yet this original cinematic device is not new: problems obtaining textiles became the subject of caricatures and open jokes in the GDR. The textile industry was underfunded and limited to old technologies, which resulted in inefficient production.

From today's perspective, complaints and grievances seem particularly valuable precisely because of their potential to be read in the context of the relationship between the state and its citizens in the period of real socialism – especially as an example of how complainants used socialist rhetoric (e.g. highlighting the unavailability and inadequacy of products). This was a conventional formula for expressing dissatisfaction characteristic of permitted criticism. Perhaps we can assume that the form of both the complaint and the response were founded on an agreement between the authorities and citizens to keep up appearances, a kind of imitation of dialogue – conventionalized and based on a fictitious, at least rhetorical, understanding. This aspect of GDR consumer culture is interesting because of its politicization and relatively permanent character.

Production in the GDR was very uneven in quality: if one product was successful, another was deficient. At some point, the frustration level could not be regulated with complaints and responses. Perhaps this is what the grievance scene conveys in *Good Bye, Lenin!* – it is a commentary on the inefficiency, subsequent loss of control, and collapse of the GDR, almost its foreshadowing. This takes place in its anniversary year – in 1989 the GDR turned forty – a fact which the film clearly emphasizes.

Everyday objects from the GDR are treated in an extremely interesting way in *Good Bye, Lenin!* After the transformation of 1989, East German goods were discarded and disappeared from shops and homes. The protagonist of the film, who has to recreate everyday life in the GDR at home, literally “acquires” the missing artefacts<sup>7</sup> – in one of the scenes he searches for jars with original labels in a waste container. The brand of pickled cucumbers his mother liked is obviously no longer available in shops, so the boy puts new cucumbers into an old jar and reuses the old labels.

The film re-evaluates East German objects: what used to be ordinary and imperfect, then dismissed as something unacceptable after 1989, becomes precious. The sister of the film's protagonist, who participates in this particular performance of period recon-

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7 “Acquire” is also a term people used before 1989 to describe getting hold of scarce goods and materials through personal contacts. Interestingly, a Polish reviewer of the film uses the term “entertainment junk heap” (*rozrywkowa rupieciarnia*) in this context (Rosnowski, 2003, p. 72).





Searching for remnants of the GDR in a rubbish bin in *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Becker, 2003)

struction in her own apartment, looking at the old, discarded clothes she has to wear again, says (addressing her daughter): “Look at the crap we used to wear”.

In the film, the (multiple) mystification and manipulation of objects from the past has a double character – the East German objects are “fake” because sometimes artefacts from the West are manipulated to imitate them; but they are also in and of themselves a mystification. The self-reflexivity of the cinematic reconstruction is a commentary on the GDR, in which everyday consumption was based on imitation, façade, and conventionality. This is similar to the plastic aesthetic discussed above, where plastic articles were, in a sense, imitations, substitutes for more expensive, inaccessible products and materials (Stitzel, 2007).

By using banal objects, creating a clear symbolism of socialism in the GDR, and emphasizing the relation between fiction and truth, the producers of *Good Bye, Lenin!* succeed in pointing out the links and rifts between desire and everyday life in East Germany, with its difficulties that revealed – as Thomas Lindenberger puts it – “the inner dynamics that characterized life under socialism, based as it was on the entanglement of reality and fiction” (Lindenberger, 2006, p. 365). In both films, the GDR is performed – and doubly so – in both the meanings associated with everyday life at the time and in recollections and reconstructions after 1990.<sup>8</sup>

The transformation of 1989 changed the value of objects – once important artefacts of everyday life (e.g. Trabant cars) ceased to be needed and were thrown away, abandoned, or sold for a small fraction of their original value. They became rubbish, but in

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8 Performative readings are proposed in a study by Matthias Uecker (2013).

the early 1990s<sup>9</sup> they changed status again; by end of the decade a real fashion for the GDR arose. Sales of ex-GDR products, particularly foodstuffs, rocketed. These included the coffee brand Rondo or Halloren-Kugeln chocolates from Halle, one of the leading confectionery brands in united Germany (Ahbe, 2001). This shift is metaphorically represented in the film – objects regain significance, are sought after, and become collector’s items.<sup>10</sup> Products or regular commodity brands that did not fascinate because they were ordinary, poor-quality or just not as good as those from the West (which in the films are often obvious objects of desire), become, for the protagonist of Becker’s film, downright indispensable.

The obvious imperfection of objects and their specific design becomes a key element of their rediscovered value, their asset. Indeed, the way everyday life and material culture are highlighted in these films transforms the GDR itself into an object of consumption – images of artefacts and their essential details (texture, colour, etc.) make them tempting commodities.

## **Objects, Identity, and Contemporary Germany**

As represented in the films, the material culture of the German Democratic Republic – once imperfect, outdated, unfashionable – becomes valuable. The appreciation of objects and things from East Germany is associated with a nostalgic perspective. The status attributed in reunified Germany to the GDR, the understanding of its past (as a totalitarian dictatorship), the memory of life in the GDR and the experience of life in reunified Germany all shaped this perspective. But that is not all. Researchers note (Neller, 2006) the emergence of a specific “East German” identity (*Ostidentität*) based on these factors. It is, above all, regional, and somehow double, because it is based on unification but still refers to the GDR. This type of interpretation draws from postcolonial perspectives on the post-1990 GDR (Hodgin, 2013; Jozwiak & Mermann, 2006).

In this understanding, the values and symbols of a reunified Germany are the dominant ones against which the GDR is positioned. From this point of view, the latter is a peripheral country, not modern and technologically backward; one expression of this is the elements of material culture portrayed in the films – they are imperfect, flawed, and at best imitations. The desire to assimilate into the new Germany after 1990 situates East German citizens as aspiring to a better culture; at the same time, nostalgia for the past (beyond an expression of longing) is a form of reaction against the dominant culture (Arnold-de Simone & Radstone, 2013). What was previously judged as weak

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9 Katja Neller (2006) points to the rediscovery of GDR material culture as early as in 1991.

10 I explore this aspect of the objects featured in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, and the parts of the GDR’s material culture that were re-evaluated and changed status, in my earlier publication (Brzezińska, 2014).

and tacky is gaining popularity and relevance. Material culture becomes an interesting medium for this transformation, and trivial, seemingly uninteresting objects from everyday life in East Germany underline the strange, paradoxically lasting (and attractive) presence of the defunct Republic in the landscape of united Germany. In the film, this existence sometimes serves purposes beyond the East German context and – undergoing yet another transformation – appears to be a reactionary gesture.

The GDR material culture – things that are re-evaluated as exceptional – can be interpreted on film in yet another way: their presence alongside elements of Western material culture allows them to be inscribed in the iconographic landscape of reunified Germany. This is especially evident in the film *Sonnenallee*, in which the teenagers constantly refer to Western culture, especially music. Through popular cinematic representations, aspects of GDR culture are accepted and become elements of a common arsenal of meanings and senses, alongside “Western” aspects (Jozwiak & Mermann, 2006). A common German identity can thus be forged, taking into account (discovering) aspects of the East German past. According to Paul Cooke, *Sonnenallee* can be read as an antidote to the exoticization of the GDR. Deploying the patterns and conventions of “Western” cinema to create an “Eastern” story, the filmmakers call into question the appealing uniqueness of East German everyday life; by hyperbolizing material culture (and through many intertextual references), they direct the viewer to reflect on the problem of the past in the present (Cooke, 2005).

Using artefacts from the GDR, *Good Bye, Lenin!* both contests the consumerist dominant order and reinforces its rules – finding use for things from the GDR as stage props to re-enact, play at, or perform the construction of the Republic. Some researchers are therefore extremely ambivalent about the nostalgic potential of this film (Berdahl, 2010). As Cooke points out: “Moreover, the fact that easterners have now turned back to their GDR products in search, perhaps, of a more ‘authentic’ sense of easterner identity is also shown to be a somewhat pointless gesture. [...] the film suggests that the contemporary fetishization of consumer products from GDR is all form and no content [...]” (Cooke, 2005, p. 134).

The critical treatment of *Ostalgie* in these two films serves the stories they tell about a symbolic farewell to the GDR; the experience of the past is supposed to make it easier to accept the present and its new rules. The films fit the nostalgic formula, but only on the surface. Their tone is far from escapist – buried beneath the attractive surface is a critique of nostalgia and its artefacts.

Translated by Kate Sotejeff-Wilson

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**Kompromitacja, słabość, tandeta? Kultura materialna NRD w filmie po 1990 roku na wybranych przykładach**

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł dotyczy problematyki rzeczy codziennego użytku przedstawionych w wybranych filmach niemieckich realizowanych po 1990 roku a rozgrywających się w realiach Niemieckiej Republiki Demokratycznej. Przedmioty, które zostają użyte w filmach, występują w roli szczególnych artefaktów, symbolizujących rzeczywistość NRD i określających ją jako niedoskonałą, niespełniającą oczekiwań, konsumpcyjnie niewydolną. Istotnym punktem odniesienia w artykule jest kontekst nostalgii postkomunistycznej, która jest źródłem interesujących znaczeniowych przewartościowań.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** NRD; kultura materialna; film; nostalgia; życie codzienne

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